

The Story of the IPKO Foundation

ipkofoundation

WRITTEN BY

Elizabeth Coleman

DESIGNED BY

Valon Sopi @ boldUnderline. llc

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Some photos, due to their prolonged shelf life, may not be high in quality, however they do coincide amazingly with the visceral discription of the times.

OVERVIEW

In the summer of 1999, soon after the war ended in Kosovo, two Americans and a Kosovar founded an ambitious project to bring the country online by September. The rest of Europe was in the midst of the dot com revolution and these enterprising techies, all in their twenties, knew that breaking Kosovo's isolation—connecting it to the world—was critical to its successful recovery. With no time to repair or replace the destroyed infrastructure, they improvised a wireless satellite system, and despite a stream of political and technical obstacles, they made the system work. They gave the extraordinary effort an ordinary name: Internet Project Kosovo, or IPKO.

This history follows the evolution of the IPKO Foundation, as it is known today, from its origins in 1999 as IPKO, a pioneering social enterprise. A key transition occurred in March 2001, when IPKO split into two entities. One became IPKO Telecommunications, a business that was able to access the loans and capital investment needed to expand high-quality Internet access across Kosovo. Within a few years, the company had established itself as an indelible brand.

“From the start, none of us looked at it primarily from a business perspective. The social mission was a core value. The social impact was something everybody understood.” —Akan Ismaili

The other entity, the not-for-profit IPKO Institute, was free to focus on its mission to foster technological innovation in society. As the country's first private technology-focused educational institution, it filled a vital need for high-quality technology and management training programs. Graduates of these programs have played a catalytic

role in the nation's economic recovery by applying their know-how and initiative in private enterprises, government and non-profit agencies, and by founding their own successful companies.

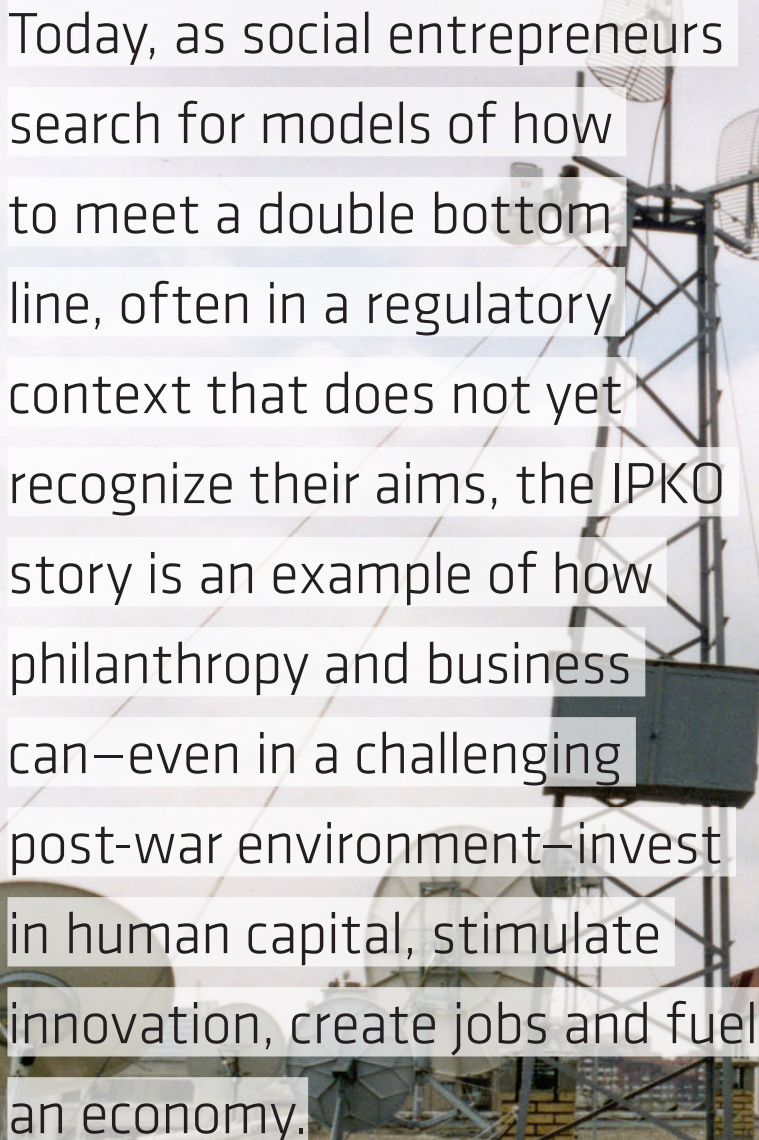
In 2009, the IPKO Institute became a grant-making foundation. The first local endowment in Kosovo and in the Balkans, the IPKO Foundation is guided by a board of directors whose members include IPKO's founding team: Kosovars Akan Ismaili and Bujar Musa, and Americans Paul Meyer and Teresa Crawford.

IPKO's legacy can also be seen in the role that the company, IPKO Telecommunications, has played in the nation's postwar development. The company has built a range of businesses – from high-speed Internet service to fixed and mobile telephony to digital TV – as well as a state-of-the-art national infrastructure. With over €230 million invested in IPKO since it was launched, the company remains a cornerstone of the Kosovo economy, employing some 500 people.

Although separate, both the non-profit and the for-profit entities that grew out of IPKO were fueled by the founders' entrepreneurial vision to create lasting value for Kosovo.

"From the start, none of us looked at it primarily from a business perspective," said Akan Ismaili, who until 2010 led IPKO Telecommunications as CEO and remains on the board of directors of the IPKO Foundation. "The social mission was a core value. The social impact was something everybody understood."

Today, as social entrepreneurs search for models of how to meet a double bottom line, often in a regulatory context that does not yet recognize their aims, the IPKO story is an example of how philanthropy and business can—even in a challenging post-war environment—invest in human capital, stimulate innovation, create jobs and fuel an economy.



Today, as social entrepreneurs search for models of how to meet a double bottom line, often in a regulatory context that does not yet recognize their aims, the IPKO story is an example of how philanthropy and business can—even in a challenging post-war environment—invest in human capital, stimulate innovation, create jobs and fuel an economy.

Wireless routers and radio antennas transmitted the satellite's Internet signal from the roof of Prishtina's Boro and Ramizi Sports Center, 1999.

PART ONE

Kosovo Online

THE GENESIS OF AN IDEA

On an unseasonably cold day in June 1999, five days after the war ended in Kosovo, Paul Meyer entered the country with a car full of what looked like phonebooks. An American lawyer working for the International Rescue Committee, Paul had produced these directories – named Kosovar Family Finders – from a database he'd created with information collected from relief agencies at work in the refugee camps in Macedonia and Albania as well as dozens of websites that popped up during the crisis. It was high-tech turned low-tech solution. During the war, thousands of families had been separated by Serbian soldiers who took away the men and older boys and forced the women and children to leave their homes. The Family Finders, like a refugee telephone directory, were helping them reconnect, and Paul wanted to get them into the hands of returning refugees.

A few days later, Paul met Teresa Crawford, an American graduate student who had just arrived in Prishtina from the refugee camps in Macedonia. There, she had been profiling Kosovar civil society on assignment for the U.S.-based Advocacy Project. Both during and after the war, the lack of Internet access was hampering the work of community-based groups, so earlier that spring Teresa had consulted with the founders of ZaMirnet, the non-profit Internet network that connected activists during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia. She had conducted site surveys in Macedonia for the placement of antennas in the hopes of starting something similar in Kosovo.

At a chance meeting at the International Rescue Committee's offices in Macedonia, Teresa and Paul began to talk about how they could get Kosovo online as soon as possible. Key parts of the telecommunications infrastructure had been destroyed during the war, which meant dial-up service was out of the question in the near future. They needed an

outside-of-the-box solution. While in Albania in May, Paul had learned that wireless technology was a possibility, and from news coverage he also knew that the U.S. Information Agency (now part of the U.S. State Department) had a satellite dish sitting in an empty refugee camp in Macedonia. Why not bring it to Prishtina and repurpose it to bring the country online?

At a chance meeting at the International Rescue Committee's offices in Macedonia, Teresa and Paul began to talk about how they could get Kosovo online as soon as possible.

Using his connections from his days as a White House speechwriter, Paul connected with staff at USIA and eventually Interpacket, the California-based company who owned the satellite dish. Paul managed to convince Interpacket to redirect it to them, and the idea – Internet Project Kosovo (IPKO) – started to come together. He and Teresa worked out a plan. Large humanitarian agencies in need of affordable Internet access would be IPKO's paying clients, making it possible to offer free access to hospitals, universities, schools and local nongovernmental organizations.

Interest in their idea quickly grew, and they needed money for operations and equipment. Paul called Reynold Levy, the president of the International Rescue Committee, who had supported the Kosovar Family Finder project. Reyn challenged Paul to write a business plan over the weekend. The following Tuesday, they learned that they would receive a \$175,000 loan from IRC. In addition, they would be able to operate as a project of the IRC, which meant they had access to IRC's vehicles, financial and procurement system. Interpacket's \$1 million donation in free satellite time would further reduce costs in the crucial start-up year.



Akan Ismaili in 1999.

A central element of their plan was for the ISP to serve as a long-term asset for Kosovo, not a temporary fix. The idea was to turn the massive investment in humanitarian relief into something lasting for Kosovo. For this reason, they were determined to find a local partner who would continue to build IPKO after they had left. At the same time, they needed a true techie on their team. They found both in Akan Ismaili, a Kosovar who was the network administrator for the U.S. Office in Prishtina, the predecessor to the U.S. Embassy. The three met at a café in Prishtina, and Akan agreed to join the team.

A MAJOR OBSTACLE, AND A SURPRISING BREAK

Meanwhile, the team was seeking approval to establish an Internet service provider from UNMIK, the UN Mission in Kosovo, which was serving as the interim government. But they had run into an obstacle:

the PTT, Kosovo's former post and telecom agency, was being re-configured into the PTK, the state telecommunications agency, and wanted the ISP under its purview. The team doubted the PTT's capacity to handle the launch of an ISP given the huge task it faced rebuilding a barely functioning phone system as well as a potentially protracted ownership dispute.

Jeremy Carver, a lawyer with London firm Clifford Chance who had come to Prishtina as part of an IRC board mission, worked closely with Paul on the negotiations with UNMIK. Through Robert van Leeuwen, the UNMIK official in charge of telecommunications, electricity and power, Jeremy and Paul visited the former PTT building that was to hold the new PTK, or Post and Telecom of Kosovo. After seeing the vast empty building, and how much work there was to be done, it was clear to them that the ISP would be essentially stifled at birth if made to be part of the old state-run enterprise.

Jock Covey, UNMIK's principal deputy to the special representative of the secretary general, Bernard Kouchner, recalls being convinced that an independent ISP would be far more expedient. Still, it was politically difficult for UNMIK to grant approval to this upstart group of entrepreneurs.

Meanwhile, demand for affordable Internet service was growing by the day. KFOR was relying on military satellite communications at a huge cost. Anyone outside of the international community who had Internet access got it through Belgrade via spotty dial-up phone service or mobile phones. Then on August 12, the Serbian authorities cut service, leaving Kosovars with no access.

In the general panic that ensued, Carver asked Van Leeuwen to give IPKO an "instant" license. In order to grant it, the team had to show that what they were proposing was, as Carver put it, "practicable and above all, for the benefit of the people of Kosovo." Van Leeuwen was



Jock Covey, second in command at UNMIK, the postwar authority in Kosovo, reviews IPKO's system in 1999.

persuaded by the plan, which included the provision that the IRC would transfer its assets at no cost to Kosovar citizens within 12 months.

The license was crucial, not just because it allowed IPKO to be established independent of the PTK, but because it meant that IPKO could operate legally in the eyes of KFOR, the NATO-led peacekeeping force, which controlled the wireless frequencies.

With the basics of registration and frequencies sorted out, it was time to line up some commitments of revenue. Dozens of international agencies and missions had arrived to assist in rebuilding after the war, and all needed affordable Internet access. Tony Rao, who headed information technology at the UN mission at the time, recalls that his only option, a commercial satellite system like Intelsat, was prohibitively expensive.

“We were looking for ways to bring in more Internet bandwidth and I heard about these guys providing satellite connectivity at a good price,” said Rao, who would eventually be servicing 4,500 UN staff. “To add to that, it was a very worthwhile project in that they wanted to set up a company that would be self-supporting and would promote growth in the local community.”

The UN became IPKO’s anchor customer. Others soon followed suit.

IDEA INTO REALITY

With Akan on board as tech guru, the IPKO team worked through the technological details of putting together the ISP. First up was resolving the wireless component—once they pulled down the satellite’s signal, how would they distribute it to their customers? They needed wireless routers and point-to-point radio antennas. Paul contacted an American named John Tully at MikroTik, a wireless company in Latvia that had just the right technology. Tully agreed not only to donate the routers but to come to Prishtina to help set them up. They got Aironet, an Ohio-based company, to donate radio cards for the routers.

The IPKO team had based their operation in a set of offices in the cavernous Boro and Ramizi Sports Center on Prishtina’s main artery. The location was secure in that it housed the CIMIC Center, KFOR’s Prishtina-based civil military information center. Its roof was sturdy enough to hold the 3.8-meter satellite dish and tall enough for a view of the orbiting satellite above the horizon. After weeks of negotiation, the team convinced the British KFOR officials that, once installed, the dish would be able to withstand strong winds. On a sunny afternoon in August, technicians from a Virginia-based contractor named Darlington arrived with the satellite from Macedonia. All went smoothly as a crane on loan from the UN lifted the satellite up and the technicians fixed it securely to the roof. So far, so good.



The IPKO team often worked through the night as they raced to bring Kosovo online in the summer of 1999.

A few days later, the equipment needed to receive and transmit signals had arrived, and the IPKO team was ready to take the connection live. All hands were on deck and champagne was at the ready. They aimed the dish at the satellite using a tuner borrowed from the UN and locked it into place. As they waited, they could hear the song “Killing Me Softly” coming from the bar on the street below. Still no signal. It appeared that the \$30,000 piece of equipment that processed the signal had been blown by a power surge.

When the replacement radio arrived two weeks later, the team re-assembled on the roof. Once again it was a Friday night, and when the singer at Bar Kukri below started to sing “Killing Me Softly” they began to worry. Again no signal. The team feared another receiver would be needed and they had worn out their stream of donations from Interpacket. Meanwhile, the community had high expectations, and until they were online, the IPKO team was reluctant to show their faces on the streets of Prishtina.

It took another two weeks to resolve the problem, thankfully without having to get another radio antenna. “This time we got it working, we got it connected,” said Paul. While others in the room struggled to determine if the connection was live, Akan, without fanfare, typed “www.yahoo.com” into his computer and discovered he was online.

It was September 20, and their champagne had been waiting for a month. With a ready stream of customers breathing down their necks, they had created Kosovo’s first Internet service provider, all in less than 11 weeks.

SMALL OPERATION, BIG VALUE

From day one, demand was huge, with no time for a normal business start-up cycle.

“Our customers expected high standards right away. There was no incremental quality,” said Akan. “It was the UN headquarters, agencies, government and nongovernmental organizations. All had essential work so it was a lot of pressure.”

Tony Rao, the UN’s technology chief, often visited the IPKO offices in the sports center. “Akan had to go through the process of proving that they had the bandwidth we were paying them for,” said Rao. “It was just a couple of servers and switches, things on desks and tables. There were no real racks or anything so it was so interesting to see how this little outfit was giving us so much value.”

Akan’s mobile phone was the customer service line. “To this day I hate the Nokia ringtone because it meant another problem to be fixed,” he laughed. “In 1999 it was difficult to buy things and everything had to be imported. So we really had to be creative.”

When a new server would arrive, Akan was in a hurry to hook it up to the system. Teresa remembered Paul flinching as Akan took his Swiss Army knife to a box that held a \$6,000 piece of equipment. But time was of the essence.

“Our customers expected high standards right away. There was no incremental quality. It was the UN headquarters, agencies, government and nongovernmental organizations. All had essential work so it was a lot of pressure.” –Akan Ismaili

Keeping the network going in the face of constant power outages was a Sisyphean task. Their main repeater antenna was on top of an abandoned skyscraper called the Rilindja, the old press building. “We would haul double-sized car batteries up the dark stairwells to the eaves of this skyscraper filled with pigeon shit,” said Paul. “It was like a nightmare—every four to six hours you would have to do it.”

It took constant vigilance. Akan could see the system light from his apartment and if it was flickering he would race over to troubleshoot. When Paul woke up at his place, he would check the horizon: if he could see the power plant’s two lines of smoke, they had electricity.

But often they didn’t. Early on they figured out that the first generator they bought was just not up to the task of keeping the system up and running. Fuel would run out so quickly that they rigged a second gas tank, connecting it with a tube. The generator was very loud—so loud that when it would go on at night it would wake up the KFOR soldiers who slept on the first floor.

“Often they would pull the tube out of the gas tank and we would have to drain out the air to get the generator going again,” said Teresa. The IPKO team had a great relationship with the soldiers—trading Internet access for food—but sleep loss could push some over the line, she laughed.

One of the first purchases made with grant money from the British Department for International Development was a high-powered yet quieter generator for which the team built an insulated box to further muffle the noise.

ROBIN HOOD MODEL

The first free connection that IPKO gave went to the University of Prishtina’s Faculty of Agriculture. This was quickly followed by free connections for the media, several departments at the main hospital, libraries, other university departments, and local and national civic organizations such as the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, the Kosovo Women’s Network (KWN), Mother Teresa Clinic and the Center for the Protection of Women and Children (CPWC). The Internet access made it possible for the CPWC to connect with the women’s shelters they were supporting across the country and for the members of the KWN to communicate more effectively as a decentralized network.

Meanwhile, demand for IPKO’s service continued to remain high among international agencies. IPKO set the monthly fee for paying customers at \$4,000, twice the estimated cost of providing the service, but still a great price. This fee secured them a 64k connection, which was enough to power a small network of about 20 computers and almost eliminate the need for satellite phones. Like Rao at the UN, many saw it as a win-win to get great service and be able to support local development.

AID BECOMES INVESTMENT CAPITAL

But the uniqueness of the IPKO model goes beyond the Robin Hood idea of using the resources of those who have to help those who don't. And it isn't just about the fact that IPKO pioneered the use of wireless technology in a postwar setting. IPKO created a way to transform money brought in by humanitarian agencies into investment capital.

"When humanitarian agencies swoop in after a crisis, you have a flash market," said Paul. "What IPKO did was to see it as seed capital to build an infrastructure that can actually last for the country."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan held up IPKO as a model in his 2001 Millennium Report, which put it like this: "So not only are international organizations getting robust communications links and saving money, they are helping to support Kosovar civil society and build a long-term Internet infrastructure for Kosovo."

By the end of 1999, IPKO had paid back its loan to the International Rescue Committee and was pursuing status as an independent non-governmental organization. Reynold Levy, IRC's president at the time, was happy to have made the \$175,000 loan.

"I thought it would be an enormous service to the NGOs generically and an enormous service to the UN," he said. "Most important, it gave us the opportunity to be involved in an organization that became a major employer and source of pride."

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struggled to determine
if the connection was live,
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(Opposite page)

IPKO team members
on the roof of the
Boro and Ramizi
Sports Center with
the satellite dish in
the background.



PART TWO

A

Thriving Organization

EXPANDING IPKO'S SERVICES

Akan Ismaili assumed the helm of IPKO in March 2000, when it gained status as an independent nongovernmental organization. (The International Rescue Committee transferred all assets to the new NGO.) Bujar Musa, a Kosovar who had been living in the United States, became chief finance director. Bujar's business acumen and financial agility superbly rounded out IPKO's founding team.

It was always the plan that IPKO would be run by Kosovars, and with that transition complete, Paul Meyer left Kosovo at the start of summer. Teresa Crawford had been consulting for IPKO since her return to the United States in the winter. Both continued their involvement as directors on IPKO's board.

By the end of 2000, Akan and Bujar had built IPKO into a thriving organization with a staff of 30 employees, more than 150 paying customers and more than 20,000 users. These included large agencies with thousands of users, like UNMIK, banks and other businesses, as well as the hospital, the university, schools and smaller community-based groups. The fees charged to IPKO's paying customers continued to cover the costs of providing free connections.

Like any tech start-up anywhere, the working environment at IPKO was fast moving and serious. But it was also filled with hijinks and music that got louder the later it got. In the early days, for example, they might be up all night getting the system going again after Serbian hackers had cut off service. In the meantime, staff members would put the ping-pong table to good use or print out photos of each other and tape them on a South Park poster to make "IPKO Park."



Billboards for IPKO's dial-up service made the point that ordinary people, like this produce merchant, could afford the Internet.

It was also a very creative environment. When they were finally ready to launch their dial-up Internet service in Prishtina, they designed billboards on the cheap that featured widely recognized people, city fixtures like the corner vegetable man or the guy who sold flags near the sports center. They chose these people with the intention of conveying that the Internet was not only affordable, but for everybody.

Petrit Selimi, a journalist and business owner, was a key member of the IPKO staff in its early days and later served as a consultant. He is currently a Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs for Kosovo.

"IPKO bringing us the Internet really meant a lot," said Petrit. "It meant connecting, it meant reconnecting with relatives around the world. It meant boosting the economy. It meant bringing innovation. In this respect, it set the fundamental bricks in the nation-building process."

FROM INTERNET SERVICE PROVISION TO EDUCATION AND TRAINING

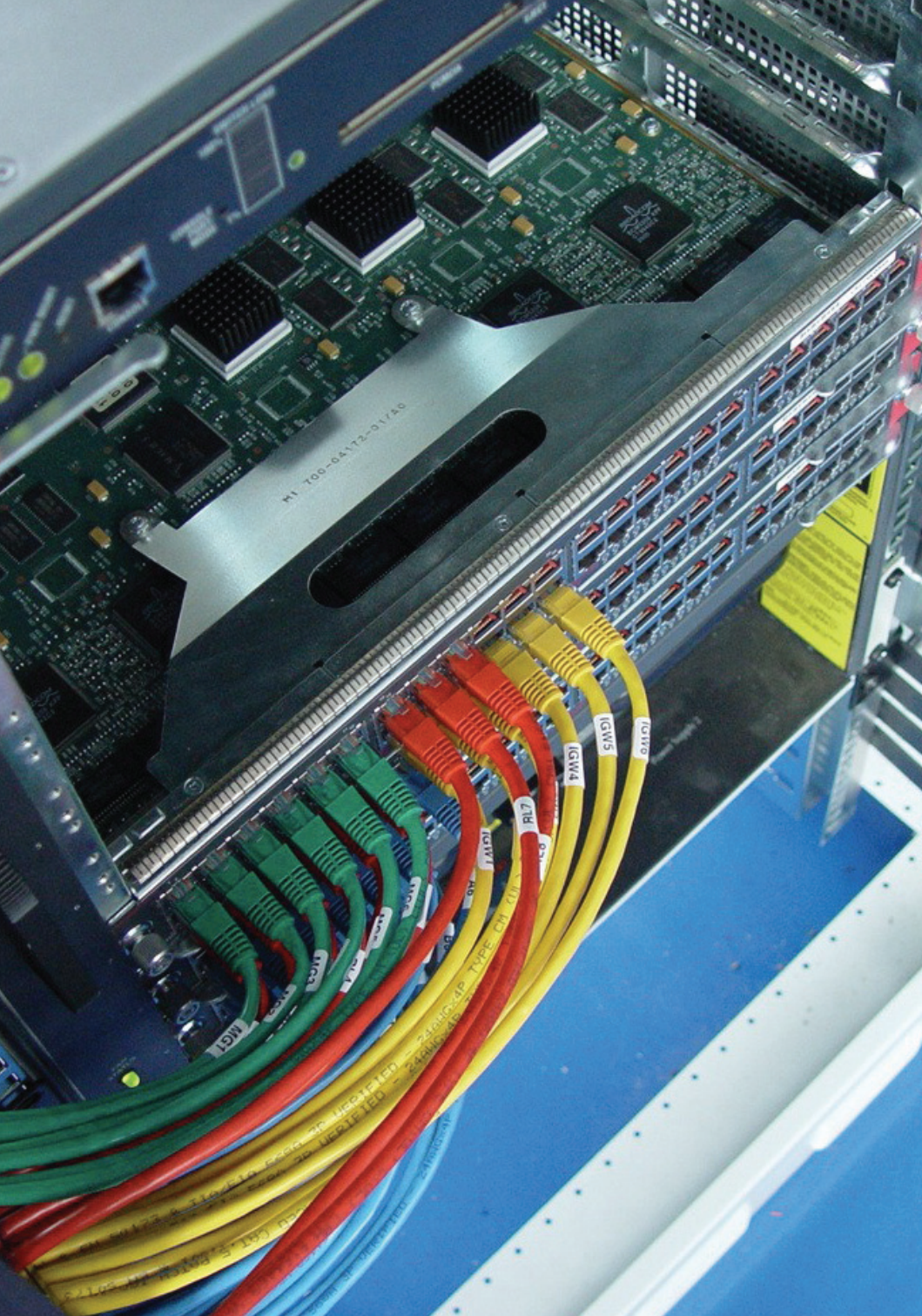
Connecting Kosovo to the Internet was an important achievement, but Akan and Bujar were clear that it was only the first step in bringing the country solidly into the global information age. Even before the war, the economy had come to a near standstill after the Serbian government revoked Kosovo's autonomy in 1989. A decade of disinvestment followed, and, as a result, every sector—from business to government, from health care to education—was behind technologically.

Akan and Bujar had seen this firsthand: the lack of educational skills and technological know-how on the market made it difficult to source qualified staff for customers as well as for IPKO itself. For this reason, IPKO had already been doing advanced IT trainings for its own staff and providing trainings for many of its customers.

But it soon became clear that a much more concerted educational effort was needed. In August of 2000, Akan contacted Driton Hapciu, an experienced IT manager who had worked for international organizations and local businesses, to discuss the problem. Over dinner at a Spanish restaurant, he and Bujar laid out a plan for an IPKO educational program. By the evening's end, they had invited Driton to head up the effort. IPKO would offer state-of-the-art training programs to help Kosovo bridge the enormous digital divide between it and the rest of Europe.

THE NEED FOR INVESTMENT CAPITAL

Meanwhile, the provision of Internet services continued to be IPKO's primary focus. Kosovo was online, but access outside of Prishtina was limited. Akan and Bujar had identified technology that would enable IPKO to offer Internet service to businesses across the country. This



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would be a huge boon to the fledgling banking and insurance system as well as to medium-sized enterprises looking to link up with foreign investors. But they needed money to buy the equipment and staff up.

By late 2000, the board could no longer ignore the fact that as a non-profit, IPKO's inability to raise investment capital was preventing it from extending connectivity to the rest of Kosovo. In order to fulfill that part of its mission, IPKO would need to operate as a business. What's more, there was an urgent need for a broader range of telecommunications services. Akan and Bujar could foresee a time when they would take IPKO into DSL, dial-up services, fixed and mobile telephony. Again, building the necessary infrastructure would require the kind of capitalization that IPKO could not secure as non-profit.

Convinced that that IPKO had reached the limits of its current structure, the board undertook the task of splitting it into two entities, one for-profit and the other non-profit. The for-profit would focus on expanding Internet service provision, and the non-profit would focus on filling Kosovo's training and education gap. Importantly, the non-profit's long-term sustainability would be ensured through the sale of its Internet service assets to the for-profit.

Bujar recalled how the founder of Cooper Union, the prestigious design college in New York City, had secured ongoing funding for the school budget by earmarking rental income from the Empire State Building, which he owned. This informed his thinking about the IPKO split. "The idea was to build the business at the same time as creating an endowment for an NGO, with the functions separated," said Bujar. "That way each does what they do best."

(Opposite page)

Some of the servers that IPKO used in the early days to connect Kosovars to the Internet.

SPLITTING IPKO

As it undertook the complicated process, the board took great pains to make the process transparent. It hired Clifford Chance, the London law firm, to structure the new entities according to the highest legal standards. The firm did an independent valuation of the ISP's assets and projected revenue, which served as the basis for the sale price and the value of the shares to be created for the company. The non-profit retained 30% of the shares. The new company, made up of a group of IPKO employees, purchased 60% of the shares, and outside investors purchased the remaining 10%. The company, named IPKO Net (later IPKO Telecommunications), financed the purchase of its shares through a loan extended by the non-profit, which became the IPKO Institute.

“The idea was to build the business at the same time as creating an endowment for an NGO, with the functions separated. That way each does what they do best.”

—Bujar Musa

As non-Kosovars, Teresa and Paul took no ownership or financial gain, a decision they believed was consistent with IPKO's founding aim to create a national asset. Both joined the IPKO Institute's board of directors, which included leading Kosovars from the fields of business, media and education, as well as Akan and Bujar.

“The attention to these details is in contrast to other ventures in Kosovo that developed around the same time, which were less transparent with how they brought in donor money and who benefitted,” said Teresa.



Akan Ismaili at the new education and training center founded by the IPKO Institute in 2001.

Additional accountability measures included Paul's appointment to IPKO Telecommunications' board of directors, to ensure that the IPKO Institute's interests would be well represented in company matters. But despite the clear provisions, accusations flew that the founders and staff had received undue financial benefit by creating a for-profit entity. Few recognized the amount of risk the owners of the new company had acquired in terms of its debt obligations and responsibilities to shareholders.

The IPKO founders attribute some of this suspicion to the postwar business environment in which it could be difficult to ascertain who gained, and how much, in a commercial transaction. As a result, people were often skeptical that the playing field was fair and level. Despite efforts by UNMIK authorities and national officials to establish a strong regulatory framework for fair competition, a lack of clarity still managed to persist in this interim period.

For this reason IPKO had from its very start sought to distinguish itself as an organization operating with the highest integrity. The board had instituted strict financial controls, including a three-bid procurement process and annual independent audits that began in 2000, five years before they were required by law. Much credit goes to IPKO's lead accountant Bashkim Uka, a CPA with long experience in banking and social enterprise, and to Arbresha Tuhina, who, with Bashkim's guidance, came to manage the organization's finances not long after she joined staff in April 2001.

"This period, from 1999 to 2001, and the decisions we made, defined everything else we've done, the way we've done it, and our approach to business," said Akan. "One of the things we were very proud of was how we had a lot of discussion about what IPKO would be—we would achieve some success and say, now what?"

A good example of this was the planning that went into the IPKO Institute, the seeds of which had begun to take root in the summer of 2000.

IPKO had from its very start sought to distinguish itself as an organization operating with the highest integrity. The board had instituted strict financial controls.

PART THREE

The IPKO Institute

CREATING KOSOVO'S FIRST PRIVATE EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

With the formation of the IPKO Institute, the vision of helping Kosovo bridge the digital divide was on the way to becoming a reality. In preparation, Akan and Bujar had been traveling to other European countries and to the United States to identify partners, clear that the educational programs would need to be of the highest global standard.

They found the institute's first partner in Cisco Systems, whose internationally recognized Cisco Networking Academy trains people to install and maintain computer networks of all types. Akan was confident that the team could get the training up and running fairly quickly, and the teaching approach was just what they had been looking for—combining face-to-face instruction with online content and hands-on learning.

Things started to move quickly: Driton joined the team in October 2000 and later that month they signed an agreement with Cisco. They would need to create a state-of-the-art training center at breakneck speed. Although many costs were covered with the institute's own funds from the agreement with IPKO Telecommunications, they needed to secure additional funds. They began to talk to donors. When the prospect of funding from a Norwegian donor fell through, another possibility soon materialized.

The U.S. Agency for International Development was investing some \$20 million over several years to foster economic development in Kosovo, and the effort was to be administered by Save the Children. Michele Lipner arrived in November to implement what she called an umbrella-grant program.

Michele remembers that the presence of several hundred local and international nongovernmental organizations meant that competition

for the funds was fierce. Still, news about IPKO managed to break through. The U.S. Agency for International Development told her about an organization that had managed to provide Internet service in spite of a near-impossible operating environment. “People talked quite highly about IPKO,” she said. “Akan was an incredibly well-spoken, dynamic individual—a real go-getter and really, really principled in that chaotic environment.”

To her mind, there was a twofold benefit to funding the IPKO Institute: providing free Internet service to small NGOs and educational institutions was helping everyone communicate effectively, while its training programs would build local capacity and local business. “It was a very professional organization and one of its kind,” said Michele.

After making an initial grant of \$100,000, Michele Lipner and colleagues at the U.S. Agency for International Development remained key partners, with additional grants of \$200,000. They often brought visitors to the IPKO Institute offices to show them the impact of their program’s grants.

But until that point in late 2000, the idea that education could be done privately and independently did not exist. The IPKO Institute became the first private educational institution in Kosovo.

AN OPTIMAL SPACE

Meanwhile, the IPKO Institute board had made arrangements to lease the top two floors at the National Library in Prishtina and hired an architect to draw up renovation plans. Built in the 1970s, the building is a unique structure that, from the outside, looks like it is encased in giant bubbles. From the inside, the bubbles form giant clear domes that rise up over sunlit spaces.



U.S. Ambassador Reno Harnish visits the IPKO Institute's renovated state-of-the-art training center in the National Library.

The problem was that the space was actually too bright. In order for students to be able to see the computer monitors, the design of the training rooms called for the installation of drywall punctuated with square windows to let in the right amount of light. The multipurpose rooms remained large but were able to be divided by garage doors, an inexpensive and novel solution. The full majesty of the place could be felt in the lounge area. Two stories tall, it featured a modern kitchen-ette and became the student hangout.

It was the first place in Prishtina to have flat screens, let alone classrooms of computers and equipment laboratories. “It was like a space shuttle in the center of the ruins of Prishtina,” said Driton, who managed the construction until Leke Zherka came on board as executive director. “It was a space out of the blue—a sort of high-tech tunnel.”

The futuristic design of the space was deliberate. The idea was to take students out of the tough day-to-day reality, the isolation, transport them to a different point in time and let them focus on their skills. It was about creating a different mindset, said Akan, not just about their training, but about how students looked at their future.

“It was like a space shuttle in the center of the ruins of Prishtina. It was a space out of the blue—a sort of high-tech tunnel.” –Driton Hapçiu

By many accounts, the extraordinary space signaled what people would find at the IPKO Institute: whipsmart people, instructors who really cared about their students, and staff members always willing to go the extra mile. This was also by design—the result of an active commitment to invest in the education and development of young people, both students and staff.

The IPKO Institute officially opened its doors in June 2001 with an event that was attended by partners and donors and covered on television and in the papers.

THE CISCO NETWORKING ACADEMY: FILLING A KNOWLEDGE GAP

While the construction was nearing completion, the IPKO Institute team was preparing to launch the Cisco Networking Academy. Cisco had donated the training equipment for the computer labs, and was providing a great deal of support, orchestrated by Nicolai Sandu.

Nicolai was based in Romania where he had been running a successful NetAcad since 1999. His goal, blessed by Cisco’s president, was to start an academy in post-war Kosovo, and in the spring of 2000 Nicolai

had visited Prishtina. This was when he met Akan and they began to explore a partnership.

“These guys had a vision to help their country through education, and information technology was the place to start,” said Nicolai. “Because any sector of the economy will depend upon the IT sector—you cannot develop the economy without telecommunications.”

A year later, the Cisco NetAcad, as it is known informally, was underway. The team worked with a creative drive that quickly came to characterize the institute work environment. It was a group of people with positive energy and complementary strengths, said Driton. Often they would pause at 5pm and play strategy games, but if they had to work all night, they would.

With a small grant from the British Council, Driton flew to Bucharest to meet with Nicolai, Cisco instructors and trainees. He took a second trip to get trained and certified himself. A short while later, when they advertised the upcoming training, there was a moment of collective fear: “We thought no one would apply,” said Driton. “But 600 people did—we were overwhelmed.”

“These guys had a vision to help their country through education, and information technology was the place to start.” –Nicolai Sandu

The hard work and investment had been worth it. They launched the Cisco Networking Academy in June 2001 with 156 students. Classes were held in the evenings to accommodate students’ work schedules. Sometimes the instructors would work with the students until 2am to catch them up and to prepare them for the exams. The IPKO Institute had a policy not to pass anyone they would not themselves hire, which set the bar very high.

The internationally recognized industry certification that graduates received immediately translated to jobs as IT technicians and network engineers, even at a time of high unemployment. Not surprisingly, all subsequent academy courses were full. To cope with the demand, Driton recruited the brightest students from the first class to be teaching assistants.

One such student, Visar Jasiqi, put his training and certification on fast forward, flying to Bulgaria to take Cisco's IT essentials course. He soon joined the ranks of IPKO Institute instructors. This was quite a leap for someone who had first studied IT not on a computer, but on a blackboard. Teaching had been banned in Albanian language in the 1990s, and Kosovo's makeshift schools had few resources. "Here was a completely state-of-the art environment with the latest equipment and hands-on learning," Visar said. "The style of teaching was completely new to Kosovo."

The focus on practical application is the key to career success, said Nicolai Sandu. "Students receive theoretical training at university but prospective employers ask, 'But do you have hands-on skills?'"

**"Here was a completely state-of-the art environment with the latest equipment and hands-on learning. The style of teaching was completely new to Kosovo."
—Visar Jasiqi**

Another way that students got hands-on experience was by helping IPKO Institute staff build networks free of charge for a number of organizations. They established a network with 300 connections at the National Library and installed computer networks at Prishtina's municipal library and several hospitals. As a result of all of this activity,



IPKO faculty often worked late into the night to ready their students for certification in systems networking.

those passing by the National Library were likely to see the brightly lit bubbles of the IPKO Institute far into the night.

By the end of 2001, the institute had enrolled 500 people in the Cisco Networking Academy. The following year they expanded across the country with six local academies. They also added new courses. In addition to the Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA), they offered the Cisco Certified Network Professional (CCNP) program. Graduates' ability to implement and maintain local and wide-area enterprise networks—and advanced knowledge of security, voice, wireless and video—prepared them to work as network technicians and systems engineers. By filling a crucial knowledge gap, the program began to affect nearly every aspect of the country's reconstruction and development. "Our alums were working in customs, government, business, banks," said Akan. "Our impact was huge."

THE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM: INTRODUCING MODERN SKILLS

By the end of 2002, Aferdita Rakipi had replaced Leke as executive director, and the IPKO Institute team was not just running the NetAcad but developing new programs as well. They had been observing another crucial knowledge gap—a lack of management skills, or, as Driton put it, “soft skills.” Akan explains: “Businesses were restarting, and we said let’s bring modern skills into an environment where business methods have not changed in 30 years.”

They found a like-minded partner in the School for New Media at Hyper Island, a Stockholm-based institution specializing in business education for the new media industry. Akan and Bujar visited, observed the learning environment and met with the school’s founders and staff. “I fell in love with their teaching methods,” said Akan.

Hyper Island had been founded by David Erixon and Jonathan Briggs. Both had found shortcomings with traditional didactic teaching methods and wanted to demonstrate a new kind of education. “The principles were simple: learning by doing, real projects, collaboration and reflection,” said Jonathan, a professor at Kingston College in the United Kingdom who also owns a company called The Other Media. “It is about setting very high standards,” he said, “but also serious play directed at learning worthwhile things.”

Sanna Johnson, who at the time worked for the Swedish Olaf Palme International Center, recognized that Kosovo faced enormous knowledge gaps. Impressed with the team’s vision and track record, she became a key ally, investing in the program’s development and later its operations with a total of \$500,000 in grants.

Over the next several months, the IPKO Institute and Hyper Island developed and launched Kosovo’s first management training course.

IPKO Institute staff, along with a consultant, Samuel Johnson, traveled to Sweden several times, and Christian Olsson of the Hyper Island staff came to Prishtina for an extended period. With guidance from Akan and Bujar, they designed a program especially for Kosovo.

“The principles were simple: learning by doing, real projects, collaboration and reflection. It is about setting very high standards, but also serious play directed at learning worthwhile things.” –Jonathan Briggs

The program's aim was to bring industry best practice into the classroom. Courses included business communications and marketing, project management, information systems and business plan development. The lecturers were all from industry. “We had lecturers—digital experts, creative people, CEOs, architects—tell them success and failure stories from their experience,” said Christian, who is now a partner at Hyper Island in Stockholm.

Kushtrim Xhakli was in the first cohort of students and relished being taught by top executives from companies such as Vodaphone, Shell Oil and the Financial Times of London. “These were industry leaders, people you couldn't even meet,” he said. Kushtrim is now the CEO of FastEuropeVentures, a new media company that develops mobile phone applications for businesses across Europe.

The course was a full-on university curriculum. Each week, students attended several lectures and spent an average of 35-40 hours on coursework and studying. Each module took up to two months and included coursework, tests, presentations and group work. The entire program lasted two years, with a break for summer, and comprised 12 modules, a month-long stay at Hyper Island in Sweden and then

a minimum three-month placement at a company. Students would be given a real industry problem to solve, but it was up to them to find the answer. Emphasis was on transferable skills, problem solving, analytics and critical thinking. “We provided the best possible set up or environment for them to gain as much as possible,” said Christian.

Creating this environment took much time and effort. Samuel Johnson took over as the IPKO Institute’s executive director upon Aferdita’s return to the United States. He coordinated a staff team that deftly handled administration, enrollment and recruitment. When Christian returned to Sweden, Sam hired Anna Soby, another Hyper Island graduate, to run the program. A key part of her job was to reach out to all types of companies in order to set up student placements. Many companies became very active in the program, providing lecturers, and in the case of ProCredit Bank, providing financing for many of the students.

Anna described a stimulating atmosphere where students were ambitious and took full advantage of the experience of the lecturers, who themselves were eager to share their knowledge. Jonathan Briggs, a frequent lecturer, said the institute was an exciting place because it was clear that the students were aware that they weren’t just improving themselves, but helping to build the future of their country.

“It was a very creative environment,” said Hajra Hyseni, who was in the second cohort of students. Students worked in groups or alone on real-time projects. “In a marketing module, we would help a real company in Kosovo do a creative marketing campaign.” And, he added, “The companies really welcomed the students and appreciated their energy and ideas.”

Hajra took over managing the program when Soby returned to Sweden, and is now a professor of social media and enterprise development at



Graduates of the IPKO Institute's groundbreaking management program were hired by banks and other businesses, or started their own enterprises.

the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom. To fully grasp the importance of the management program, he said, one needs to realize that it was offered at a time of great change in education and in the business industry in Kosovo.

Sanna Johnson said the program did a brilliant job at giving young people a voice and opportunity: "It created new young dynamic project managers in private enterprises but also in civil society. The skills they were offering were really quite unique. They learned to work as teams, which is really important when you come out into real life."

"[The course] created new young dynamic project managers in private enterprises but also in civil society."
–Sanna Johnson



Industry leaders like Beatrice Boija, from Ericsson Radio Systems in Sweden, taught at the IPKO Institute.

Two graduates who became civil society leaders are Levend Bicaku and Merita Mustafa. Levend, who was in the first cohort, now directs the Olaf Palme Center's Balkans regional office. He found great value in cutting-edge courses on new media and marketing. "I learned to work with a team, and at the same time, to multitask, to think about finance, resources, communications," he said.

Merita, who was in the third cohort, said that she not only gained solid skills but a get-it-done attitude and an entrepreneurial spirit that serves her well as director of an innovative anticorruption program at the Kosovo Democratic Institute. "The people trained at the IPKO Institute were highly sought after," said Merita. "Students who went to university know about the law, for example, but don't have the practical experience that we gained."

The course also imbued students with a set of values. “It played a big role by providing something that was missing in Kosovo at the time,” said Anna. “It gave students a chance to learn a way of doing business that had nothing to do with who you know or with corruption. It was hard and competitive, but it gave them a valuable toolbox.”

“Our students created the new marketing campaigns, the new products and services. They really did change the way businesses were managed in the country.”

–Hajra Hyseni

Hajra describes the long-range effects of the program. “Our students were hired by the banks, the PTK, Kosovo’s national telecom agency. They created the new marketing campaigns, the new products and services. Many of them are now senior executives in roles with a lot of responsibility. They really did change the way businesses were managed in the country.”

THE ONLINE PORTAL, TRAJNIMI.COM: BOOSTING COMPUTER LITERACY

Meanwhile, Sam and Visar had been talking to graduates of the Institute’s Cisco Networking Academy about an increasingly urgent training need. These former students were now working at banks and businesses across Kosovo and they reported that their colleagues’ lack of basic computer knowledge was hampering progress.

Computer skills were a requirement for most jobs, yet few people could afford the \$400 or more for a face-to-face training course. Teaching oneself was an option only available to those who knew English. Indeed, Kosovo was a decade behind other European countries in terms of computer literacy. How could they help make up for lost time?



Ministria e Arsimit
Shkencës dhe Teknologjisë

PLATFORMA DIGJITALE
EUROPEAN COMPUTER DRIVING LICENCE
IPKO INSTITUTE
TE REJA
RESURSET
KONTAKTI
NDIHMA

Edukimi alternativ

IPKO Instituti në misionin e tij është përkushtuar për sigurimin e mjeteve edukative që do të krijonte një ambient ku të gjithë qytetarët do të participojnë në fushën e edukimit, në mënyrë të hapur, transparente dhe të digitalizuar.

Lajmet:

2011-08-01

Best Practice Award 2008

2011-08-01

**Portali trajnimi.com shtrihet në gjithë Kosovën
nëpërmes Ministrisë së Edukimit**



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Gjithë literatura e publikuar e platformës ECDL



The IPKO Institute developed trajnimi.com, a free online computer skills course in Albanian.

In 2003 the IPKO Institute had purchased the license to offer the exam for the European Computer Driver's License, a process that certifies that a student is able to "drive" a computer. Affiliation with the ECDL was important because those who gained this certification would be recognized as having met the European standard for ICT education.

They had a syllabus from the ECDL, but no training material in Albanian. Sam and Visar spoke to several donors about funding the development of an online course in Albanian, but there was no interest. Determined to make it happen, they decided to build it themselves. What's more, they would offer it free of charge.

The IPKO Institute team went into high drive. The teachers volunteered to write the content and designers created graphics that would make it easy for people to learn the suite of Microsoft Office tools, including Word, Excel and PowerPoint. Kushtrim Xhakli, who directed the project

after he joined the Institute in 2006, described a highly motivated atmosphere in which they would work 14-hour days to get it done.

The online course, www.trajnimi.com (trajnimi means training in Albanian), went live in June 2007. It was deemed a national treasure by Kosovo's prime minister, and the following year, it won a best practice award from the ECDL Foundation, beating out contenders from across Europe. The foundation cited the program for its innovation in adopting the ECDL "as a means to increase employability."

In 2008, the IPKO Institute donated the online computer training program to Kosovo's Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. Today, some 5,000 people use the program per month, with about 20,000 people registered at any given time. Kushtrim believes the actual reach of the program is much larger. Families share accounts, and many of the users are teachers who have one account that is used by their entire class.

Trajnimi.com is a prime example of Kosovo's new entrepreneurship – a vision nurtured by the non-profit and for-profit arms of IPKO since 1999.

Kushtrim, a technology entrepreneur who now runs his own company, considers trajnimi.com a prime example of Kosovo's new entrepreneurship—a vision nurtured by the non-profit and for-profit arms of IPKO since 1999. "It was built by Kosovars for Kosovars."

PART FOUR

IPKO

Telecommunications,
the Company

INNOVATION FUELS EXPANSION

Meanwhile, the team at IPKO Telecommunications had set its sights on bringing Internet service to the rest of Kosovo. Akan and Bujar asked themselves what was the fastest way to reach 10,000 square kilometers? They ruled out laying cable because it was time consuming and costly. But could wireless work for the whole country? Analyzing the placement and height of Kosovo's 11 small mountains, they identified where to put transmitters for the greatest coverage. They then visited seven countries in search of the right technology, finally finding what they were looking for in the United States. A Scottsdale, Arizona company had developed a small rooftop antenna with an attached modem that would communicate via antenna with another modem.

This was a great solution for businesses, which would buy a modem and pay a monthly fee to access the Internet through IPKO Telecommunications' nationwide network. With loans and investment capital they were able to purchase the necessary equipment, and by early 2002, IPKO Telecommunications was offering Internet service to businesses in all of Kosovo's major cities. Coverage extended to three quarters of the country—a huge boon to the fledgling banking and insurance system as well as to other medium-sized enterprises looking to link up with foreign investors.

But in order to provide affordable access to residences, they needed a different solution. At close to €500 each, the modems were too expensive for residential customers. In 2004, they designed a pilot project in which they hardwired three high-rise apartment buildings in Prishtina. They put an antenna on each roof, and then ran lines of cable into each apartment. The concept worked, and they began to expand residential service.

IPKO TELECOMMUNICATIONS PREPARES TO ENTER THE MOBILE BUSINESS

At the same time, Akan and Bujar were preparing IPKO Telecommunications to enter the mobile phone business. The crucial first step was to win the upcoming bid for Kosovo's second mobile license. It was 2004, and Kosovo's sole operator was Vala, a subsidiary of PTK, the Post and Telecommunications of Kosovo, which had been privatized soon after the war.

Akan approached Jim O'Brien at the Albright Group in Washington, D.C. whom he had known when they both worked for the U.S. government. O'Brien had been a special adviser to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, and joined her when she formed the Albright Group. O'Brien and his colleagues recognized the opportunity to further develop the communications sector in Kosovo and agreed to support IPKO Telecommunications strategically. The former secretary of state herself served as a special adviser for a year.

The Albright Group introduced Akan to Western Wireless, a successful mobile company with extensive overseas operations whose international business model was to partner with a local company. IPKO Telecommunications and Western Wireless bid jointly for the second mobile license, but lost to a Kosovar company that had partnered with Telekom Slovenije.

Akan and Bujar decided to fight the decision. They had observed several irregularities in the winning bid, including the fact that 75% of the local company's shareholders had never had an external audit, even though the tender required three years of external audits.



Akan Ismaili and Bujar Musa led IPKO Telecommunications' entry into new markets, from mobile phones to TV.

IPKO TELECOMMUNICATIONS IS BOUGHT BY TELEKOM SLOVENIJE

In 2006, Telekom Slovenije, Slovenia's national telecommunications agency, was planning to privatize and wanted to boost its value in advance of an initial public offering. It made an offer to purchase IPKO Telecommunications with the contingency that the IPKO Institute sell its one-third share in the business.

In May, Telekom Slovenije bought IPKO for €19 million, a price that included IPKO Institute's shares, which amounted to €3 million. This money went into the bank, and the annual interest earned on the principal funded the IPKO Institute's programs.

The sale provided the IPKO Telecommunications with €10 million in investment income which they channeled into growth, including the rapid expansion of their residential Internet service. After 11 months

of negotiations, Akan had signed a 20-year lease with KEK, the country's largest power company, to use its infrastructure, its poles and underground conduits. "We were just cabling like crazy," said Akan. "What we created at that point was a fiber backbone for the city."

IPKO TELECOMMUNICATIONS WINS KOSOVO'S THE SECOND MOBILE LICENSE

In 2007, after a legal battle lasting two long years, the new mobile license was awarded to IPKO Telecommunications. "Us, the minnows of this market, and we managed to overturn the decision," said Akan.

Practically overnight, said Bujar, they had to staff up, adding hundreds of employees to put in the necessary infrastructure. Not all communities understood what they were doing and reacted with fear, even mounting road blocks. Bujar recalls one incident that was finally defused by a 75-year old man who declared, if you have a problem with it, see me. His fellow townspeople no longer protested.

Although Western Wireless had merged with another company and sold its international businesses, IPKO Telecommunications had learned a lot from the company about marketing. So when the team at IPKO Telecommunications launched its mobile service at the end of 2007, they were prepared. "When you are second in the market, you have to fight tooth and nail for market share," said Akan. "Our marketing crew came up with some great ideas."

In a spectacular launch, they hired American hip-hop artist 50 Cent to perform at Prishtina's stadium. To attend the concert you had to buy an IPKO mobile number, a bargain at €5. On a December night, despite the bitter cold, they packed the outdoor stadium with 30,000 people. The sign-up strategy worked: "On day one we had 20,000 users," said Akan.



Akan Ismaili tells a TV reporter about the company's plans to expand Internet service nationwide with bank financing.

Through events like the concert and special offers for friends and family members, IPKO Telecommunications achieved 20% market share in their first year of business. “We broke even at the end of our first year of operation,” said Akan.

Within a few years, IPKO Telecommunications’ mobile business grew to 300,000 customers and 35% market share. According to Petrit Selimi, whose firm assisted IPKO with marketing and events, including the 50 Cent launch, “IPKO Telecommunications became the fastest-growing second mobile operator introduced in a market on the entire continent of Europe.”

IMPACT THAT GOES BEYOND THE BOTTOM LINE

Over the course of two years, IPKO Telecommunications put in place 250,000 cable connections—defined as a port available within 10 meters of a home or apartment. The new fiber connections meant that antennas and wireless connections to the buildings were no longer needed for Internet service. It also meant that the company could add television to the suite of services it offered customers.

Today, IPKO Telecommunications is not just Kosovo's leading Internet provider but its leading provider of digital cable TV. It has the largest fixed telephone network, with 230,000 ports available, and a growing number of fixed telephone customers. With the second largest market share in the mobile business, it is a highly recognizable brand. IPKO Telecommunications employs more than 500 people and is a pillar of the postwar economy.

"We had no idea we would get so big," said Bujar. "The maximum investment we could imagine was €10 million." They ended up investing more than €230 million, much of it financed by the European Investment Bank.

At the same time, IPKO's impact was obvious to them from the start: "It would change the way people interact, how they developed their lives, their businesses and communities," said Bujar. If you don't think that way, he added, you limit your success, or your result is different.

Akan put it this way: "Because of the roots of how we started, the mission was beyond the PNL, the profitability. It was about what it was doing to society—the transformation in the company, but also around us."

“[We knew IPKO] would change the way people interact, how they developed their lives, their businesses and communities.”

-Bujar Musa

PART FOUR

The IPKO Foundation

SECURING THE IPKO INSTITUTE'S LEGACY

In 2008, the board of the IPKO Institute began to discuss the idea of becoming a foundation instead of operating as an institute. The landscape of higher education had changed—new institutions like the American University in Kosovo had been established, as well as some independent training companies. The board had already begun to transfer some of its programs to these emerging institutions, and decided to finish the process.

The IPKO Institute's online computer training program, trajnimi.com, was continuing to thrive at its new home at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The institute's other educational programs went to the American University in Kosovo, which Akan had helped to found in 2002.

From the board's point of view, it made enormous sense to give the programs to AUK. The institute's programs, particularly the Cisco Networking Academy, would continue to thrive in a state-of-the-art facility with support from a university administration with high standards. It in turn helped the university to have a strong program like the Cisco Networking Academy to anchor its new Training and Development Institute (TDI), which was established in 2006.

The Cisco Academy has in fact served as a major employment center, training more than 3,500 people since it began at the IPKO Institute, according to Visar Jasiqi, who left the institute and joined AUK as the director of TDI.

"All the network people out there today were trained by us: cable, wireless, those who put together a network for a specific building," said Visar.

Since 2006, TDI has grown exponentially. Together with AUK President Chris Hall, Visar has taken TDI into new arenas, adding systemwide change to its educational mission. One example is a large-scale effort to train 20,000 teachers at the nation's primary and secondary schools in IT in partnership with the Ministry of Education. Said Visar: "Our aim is to bring education into the 21st century."

SETTING A NEW COURSE

In giving away the IPKO Institute's programs, the board's aim was not just to strengthen the recipient institutions, but to free it up to focus on new challenges. So in the summer of 2008, the board focused on setting a new course that would build on the organization's longtime aim of preparing Kosovars to excel in a global information society. Rather than operating programs, they would make grants, and to reflect that change, they renamed it the IPKO Foundation. They honed a mission that focused the foundation on investing in the future, the next generation and innovation. The foundation's programs would be designed to fill a gap and refined as needed.

"We asked ourselves, what's the missing link we could provide?" said Teresa. "There were few, if any, scholarships in the IT sector, and most scholarships were sending students abroad."

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To reverse this trend, the IPKO Foundation designed the Next Generation Innovators scholarship program for students to study at



IPKO Foundation board member Teresa Crawford congratulates the 2010 recipients of the Next Generation Innovators scholarships.

a university in Kosovo. Now in its third year, students can be from any academic discipline, but must articulate a digital vision for Kosovo. The program is very competitive, with an average of 10% of applicants receiving the approximately 18 to 25 scholarships awarded each year. In keeping with the longtime IPKO commitment to transparency, the selection process is done via computer and completely blind: applicants' identities are masked and reviewers score the applications according to a publicly stated set of criteria.

As of this writing in 2011, the board was in the process of exploring other areas to invest in, awaiting the recommendations of a KPMG consultant conducting market research. Building on the investments of several new incubators and innovation centers in Kosovo, IF is exploring new areas of investment, including business start-up workshops, informal tech gatherings and support for other tech and innovation-related events.



Next Generation Innovators scholarship recipients Darsei Canhasi and Abetare Gojani.

Meanwhile, the IPKO Foundation scholarship program builds nicely on IPKO's legacy, according to Heroina Telaku, a longtime educator who advised the foundation on the program. "IPKO has moved from offering free Internet service to certificates in computer networking and management to scholarships," said Heroina, who is now a top adviser in Kosovo's Foreign Ministry. "It has been a natural progression based on how Kosovo has developed as a nation."

A NATIONAL ASSET

The IPKO Foundation was Kosovo's first endowment—and the first foundation to be created in the Balkans with money earned locally.

"What makes the foundation unique is that it is independent," said Teresa. "It's not money from outside the country but money created by Kosovars. And it's run by a board whose commitment is to invest and to continue to invest in Kosovo."

This is not only true with regard to the foundation's programs but also its investment policy—the endowment is invested entirely in banks in Kosovo.

It is important to emphasize that the IPKO Foundation is now a separate legal entity with no ties to IPKO Telecommunications. That said, telling the stories of both organizations is essential to conveying the complete history of the foundation because its mission is an outgrowth of the ideals behind Internet Project Kosovo. After the war, IPKO made it possible for thousands of people to restart businesses, attend school and university, and reconnect with loved ones living outside Kosovo. Today, more than a decade later, this legacy can be seen not only in Kosovo's vibrant IT sector, but across the economy and its education system.

Sanna Johnson, now an executive with Save the Children Sweden, says that IPKO—both the company and the nonprofit—helped Kosovo make an enormous leap coming out of 12 years of oppression. “There were gigantic knowledge gaps, whether you were a doctor, lawyer, teacher or nurse, because you had not been allowed to increase your knowledge. IPKO managed to break that and create pride,” she said. “By doing this they showed young people that there was a future—that everything was possible.”

An enormous leap like that is only possible through technology, she added.

Petrit Selimi summed this up nicely: “the IPKO story is about how technology can build a nation.”

Through grant-making programs that encourage innovation and the growth of Kosovo's entrepreneurial spirit, the IPKO Foundation continues to build on this rich legacy.



From the start,
none of us looked
at it primarily
from a business
perspective...

...The social mission
was a core value.
The social impact
was something
everybody understood.

– Akan Ismaili

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IPKO Foundation

Supporting the next generation of innovators
with a digital vision for Kosovo

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