

The Use of Information and Communication Technologies by Non-Governmental Organizations in Southeast Europe

A Joint Study by
the Southeast Europe Initiative
of OneWorld International and
the Information Program
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Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are central to the key roles NGOs play in Southeast Europe, often serving as the only method for crossing borders and maintaining connections. During the war-plagued years of 1991–1995, the bulletin board service of the ZaMir (For Peace) Transitional Network (ZTN)¹ overcame destroyed and disrupted telephone lines and transportation routes to bring together anti-war organizations, human rights groups, and others from Zagreb, Belgrade, Sarajevo, Ljubljana, Prishtina, Tuzla, and the rest of the world. Providing new possibilities for email, newsgroups, and conferences, the network allowed for continued communication in a time of conflict.

The Kosovo crisis saw another response in Macedonia, where the Association of Democratic Initiatives (ADI) in Gostivar established a database of the refugees that flowed across its border. Concentrating on those seeking shelter in private households throughout the country, the database covered a population that fell through the cracks of registration efforts that focused on the camps of humanitarian organizations. While searching was possible through more conventional means such as personal inquiries and telephone hotlines, the information was also available at a website containing more than 240,000 entries.² Used in part by relief agencies to coordinate food distribution and community programs, the effort also enabled ADI to connect more than 10,000 families.

With the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords, the death of Croatian president Franjo Tudjman, and the defeat of Yugoslav president Slobodan Milošević, Southeast Europe is now moving towards stabilizing governments, developing economies, and rebuilding societies. The outbreak of violence in Macedonia during the summer of 2001, the unresolved status of Kosovo, tensions between Montenegro and Serbia, and the slow pace of reform in Yugoslavia reveal that the region still confronts a number of hurdles. Corruption, gray markets, and trafficking are only a few of the additional challenges facing countries still struggling with sharp ethnic divides and displaced populations. In this delayed transition, not only from communism but also from war, the region's civil sector must remain vibrant: acting as a watchdog, offering outside analysis, and addressing community concerns. The need of NGOs for effective channels of information and communication remains just as vital.

¹ For a short history, see <http://www.foebud.org/org/zamir/zm-rpt.html>.

² The domain has since been taken over by “adult content.”

The examples from ZTN and ADI arose from a certain urgency, situations in which civil society had to turn to innovative alternatives to solve pressing problems. But this impetus has rarely been sustained as crises wane. NGOs must now learn to harness the powerful potential of ICTs to benefit their daily operations and long-term strategies. Though NGOs increasingly rely on email and the web to improve the quality and efficiency of their work, significant changes must take place before organizations are able to fully realize the benefits of these technologies.

In an effort to uncover these changes, the Information Program of the Open Society Institute and the Southeast Europe Initiative of OneWorld International joined together for a study to map the current status of ICTs among NGOs in Southeast Europe. In addition to assessing their online presence, the study aims to define the specific needs with regards to capacity building in each country, to identify other support and services which would have a significant impact on the NGO sector, and to determine the potential for a regional portal.

The study covers six geographical areas: Albania, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, and Vojvodina), with roughly 20 NGOs per country (except for Yugoslavia, whose size and scope require a larger sample). Participating organizations were selected with the advice of national NGO support centers, local Soros foundations, and other expert opinions. The list was chosen to represent the most active, important, reputable, and/or promising in the field, while also taking into consideration, when possible, a variety of sectors,³ cities, and technological capacities. The study was conducted over August–October 2001 by seven local coordinators, through one-on-one interviews and focus groups, and processed by a regional coordinator.⁴ Literature reviews, web research, and other consultations provide additional background.

With an anecdotal rather than academic perspective, the research took the form of informal conversations and discussions instead of scientific surveys. The results do not profess to present the complete picture, but rather cast some insight into uses, trends, and challenges. Due to its particular sample, this portrait is more optimistic than what exists in the remainder of the civil

3 These sectors include women, minorities, human rights, children and youth, media policy, migration/refugees, public health, the environment, education, arts and culture, conflict resolution, corruption/transparency, think tanks, legal reform, and gay and lesbian issues. Please see Appendix C for a list of participating NGOs.

4 The author wishes to thank Ana Balla, Žarko Cizmar, Dejan Georgievski, Nenad Obrenović, Nenad Perković, Ardi Pulaj, Borka Rudić, and Predrag Vostinić for their hard work and dedication. Darius Čuplinskis, Jackie Davies, Stephanie Hankey, Branislava Milošević, and Michael Miller also deserve acknowledgement for their feedback and support. Appreciation is especially extended to the NGOs and others who contributed their time and experiences.

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sector, and outside indicators often offer a less positive perspective than the participating NGOs. It is important to remember that many organizations do not even have premises for their activities, let alone computers or the staff to use them. While much of the top level of civil society is online, they may be among the only ones who are.

Regional ICT Capacity

ICT capacity is uneven across the region. NGOs in Serbia and Croatia, particularly those in the capitals, enjoy relatively high use of the Internet. A focus group in southern Yugoslavia shows that even organizations far from Belgrade are online. In Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, and Macedonia, however, even some of the most active NGOs do not have their own websites. At the same time, NGOs in Southeast Europe have much in common. The cost of equipment and maintenance, the price of Internet connection and phone time, the poor quality of telecommunication lines, the frequency of power cuts, a lack of sufficient human resources, and financial instabilities rank among the shared hurdles. Funding for ICTs constitutes a small percentage of most budgets, with estimates widely ranging from 1% to 20%.

Despite these challenges, almost all of the NGOs in this study have at least one computer, and many of them own enough for each employee. Most staff are computer literate, though primarily self-taught. While many NGOs require such literacy when filling positions, others have arranged courses for their members. Though there are a few cases of early difficulties or continuing reluctance, most claim confidence in their basic understanding. Searching the Internet, creating databases, and, in particular, designing and maintaining websites rank among the highest needs for further training. Those possessing initial knowledge appear most willing to learn from written materials, though face-to-face training remains preferable. NGOs without regular access to computers or the Internet experience problems with practicing the training they receive.

COMPUTER LITERACY

Email is widespread, most often for contact with donors and partners, and many NGOs call it their preferred method of communication. Though in some places it is also used within the organizations themselves, staff meetings and ad hoc methods are more common. While a few NGOs report difficulties (infection with viruses or hour-long downloads), for most email is a time-

EMAIL

and money-saving device. Others note its benefits in providing a copy of correspondence. Most email addresses are supplied through a local provider, with the exceptions of Kosovo and Macedonia, where the majority of NGOs rely on freemail accounts such as Hotmail or Yahoo. Almost all the surveyed NGOs subscribe to mailing lists, and some maintain lists of their own.

NGOs are widely using the web as well, particularly for popular search engines, freemail services, and news agencies. Most frequently, they consult the sites of donors and organizations engaged in similar activities. A handful of NGOs, however, do not trust other organizations as reliable sources of information, or find their pages unmaintained or poorly designed. One singles out the sites of the EU and the UN as “labyrinths.” Others note the difficulty formats such as pdf create in the face of poor connections.

WEB USE

Very few NGOs use interactive Internet options. Though a Macedonian respondent considers online conferences too time consuming and rarely useful, two Albanian NGOs note how such conferences will save them the time they no longer have for traveling. An environmental organization in Yugoslavia announced plans to organize one of its own. Calling opportunities limited in Europe, some NGOs recall the difficulties of trans-Atlantic participation. One organization once stayed up until 2am to take part in an online meeting organized according to working hours in the U.S., while another was disconnected from a Seattle-based chat due to their limited English.

Only some NGOs cited language as a barrier to their own Internet use, though more underscored that it was a significant problem for others, particularly in Bosnia. One organization suggests that official websites, such as those of international agencies, should be translated into local languages. Another tries to circumvent the issue by relying on sites from the former Yugoslavia.

LANGUAGE

Language presents a greater difficulty for the production of content. A new online effort by the South East European Refugee Assistance Network, led by the Croatian NGO Suncokret, is for now only partially in English. While the majority of the current participants, speakers of south Slavic languages, can access most of the site’s articles, Albanian NGO members cannot. Concerned about the problem, the site’s coordinator is searching for a way to overcome it.

Roughly half the NGOs in this study have websites, in great disproportion to the rest of the civil sector (where online presence accounts for as low as 2% of active NGOs and only as high as 14%). An additional number of NGOs announce plans for, or express interest in, having websites. While some of

WEBSITES

the remaining participants cite a lack of money, others simply state a lack of need. Most sites are hosted by commercial providers and are created by employees or volunteers.

Infrequently updated, NGO websites primarily contain details about the organization and are used to promote activities and present projects. The more active sites – approximately 3 per country – are also used for disseminating information: news, bulletins, reports, and publications. A few NGOs comment on how this saves them the time of distribution. More commonly, websites are directed at donors, and many of their most frequent users are indeed foreigners. One NGO from Vojvodina, Yugoslavia, unabashedly asserts: “It would be great to have a website, the donors would come to us.” Though NGOs increasingly recognize the importance of websites for transparency, close to none consider them as a means to reach a wider public. A few, however, have been contacted by people who found them on the web. Almost all sites are at least partially in English, some entirely so.

Country	# of active NGOs	# with email	percentage	# with websites	Percentage
Albania	Over 300	46	15%	20 (estimate)	7%
Bosnia	Over 360	200+	56%	35	10%
Kosovo	Roughly 500	143	29%	8 (estimate)	2%
Macedonia	Roughly 500	138	27%	50	10%
Montenegro	Over 435	175	40%	38	8%
Serbia	Almost 1000	594	60%	138	14%

Sources: Albanian Civil Society Foundation, Guidebook of Non-Governmental Organizations in Albania (2000); International Council of Voluntary Agencies, ICVA Directory of Humanitarian and Development Agencies in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2000); Kosova Civil Society Foundation, List of Kosovo NGOs; MaNGO Net; Center for Development of Non-Governmental Organisations (MN); Center for the Development of the Non Profit Sector (YU). Estimates based on research.

Note: only a 12 of the websites listed for Bosnia function. Figures for Croatia were unavailable.

Number of active NGOs with email and websites

Yugoslavia, Croatia, and Macedonia currently support significant efforts in online resources: Belgrade’s Center for the Development of the Non-Profit Sector (CRNPS), the Zagreb-based ZaMir portal, and MaNGO (Macedonian NGOs) Online. Southeast Europe Online (SEE Online) is the primary regional attempt. Maintained by the Applied Research and Communications Fund of Bulgaria and supported by USAID, SEE Online contains news, information on donors and events, basic country profiles, and analytical reports, as well as links to business associations, guides to national legislation, a focus on integration issues, and an NGO forum. Despite its hope to be a virtual network for NGOs of the region, not a single participant in this study mentions using the site.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Networking

NGOs are increasingly working with each other, women's, youth, and human rights organizations the most active among them. At times cooperation takes the form of networks at the local level – such as a group of NGOs in Becej, Vojvodina, that have come together to jointly approach local government, businesses, and constituents – or nationally within a certain sector – like the Albania Children's Rights Network. Most organizations view information sharing as a major part of cooperation. In Yugoslavia, however, many NGOs find that information is often hidden, for fear of theft, plagiarism, or competition. The experience of CRNPS reveals that NGOs are unwilling to inform others about their activities. Only 5 or 6 organizations contribute news to the CRNPS portal on a regular basis.

The web is rarely a component of domestic cooperation. With few local NGOs online, the Internet of limited use in this area. More significant is the role of personal contacts. In small countries where most organizations know one another, electronic methods are viewed unnecessary or inappropriate for communication or information. At the same time, NGOs operating outside of their country's capital face particular difficulties in reaching the potential partners, international agencies, and foreign donors that concentrate in larger cities. The reduced opportunity for personal contact is compounded by weaker telecommunication infrastructure in more rural areas. Without local ISPs, Internet access for these NGOs is often unavailable or at a far higher cost, leaving them isolated not just geographically, but also electronically.

Cross-border cooperation is slowly taking place, and NGOs are deeply interested in strengthening collaboration. Currently contact is most often established between the countries of the former Yugoslavia or between Albania and Kosovo. The largest NGOs in Kosovo seem particularly involved in bilateral activities, with countries including Bosnia, Bulgaria, and Croatia. Collaboration between NGOs from Albania and Kosovo and Albanian organizations in Macedonia or Montenegro, however, does not appear common. Though language is a barrier to further efforts with other neighbors – Romania, for example – they do exist, particularly in Vojvodina.

The newly launched Democracy Online stands as one recent electronic example. Developed by Romania's Euroregional Center for Democracy and supported by USAID and America's Development Foundation, the Timișoara-based portal operates in partnership with a number of NGOs in Serbia,

AMONG
DOMESTIC
NGOs

ACROSS
BORDERS

including Distrikt 0230 in Kikinda and the Office of Multicultural and Multi-ethnic Cooperation in Niš. The project boasts features such as web hosting – including a site builder – and an events calendar. Though currently serving as a link solely between the two countries, it ultimately seeks to expand throughout the region.

NGO experience with the media is mixed. Once a taboo subject in Yugoslavia, many organizations now report growing cooperation, such as weekly talk shows on local radio stations. Other countries also characterize their basic relationship as positive, though NGOs in Macedonia tend to note greater difficulties. Some claim that the media only report on NGO activities when such coverage is in the media's interest. Others recall the role of personal contacts in securing press coverage. In all countries there is a lack of understanding of NGOs on the part of journalists and a need to train the media on civil society issues.

WITH THE MEDIA

A limited number of NGOs, particularly the region's largest, benefit from significant cooperation. A publication of the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation, "Civic World," enjoys a bi-weekly printing in the one of the leading Macedonian dailies, *Utrinski Vesnik*. In Croatia, the women's NGO B.a.B.e. has a monthly radio program on Obiteljski Radio, while the national television has donated advertising time to the civic NGO GONG.

With knowledge of political developments among their most important needs, most NGOs rely on the media, primarily print and electronic press, as a significant source of information. The Internet does not play the central role. In the absence of a local presence on the web, one NGO from Kosovo finds itself traveling throughout the country – at least 3,000 km per month – to gather such information on its own.

Relations with government ministries are also mixed. Respondents in Albania report the highest level of cooperation, while organizations in Bosnia and Macedonia tend to note a lack of involvement, rather than cite particular impediments. Though the larger NGOs in Prishtina generally view their experience with the international administration positively, smaller organizations and those outside of the main city speak of other problems. One goes as far as to say: "We Kosovars have our plans for the development of our society but they [UNMIK] sometimes want to do what they want to do."

WITH THE GOVERNMENT

The situation in Yugoslavia remains complicated, though it is improving. One significant development at the federal level is the establishment of a working group on cooperation, headed by Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić. The country's NGOs, however, continue to operate without a law

governing the sector. In Croatia, despite the 1998 establishment of a Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs, the restrictive 1997 Law on Associations creates less than favorable conditions, granting the authorities the power to monitor and suspend NGO activities.

The Internet does not yet serve as a tool to improve the flow of communication or information with the government. With the exception of Croatia's *Narodne Novine*, most official information is not available online. One Tirana NGO thus finds itself searching through the Parliament archives for the laws that are necessary for its work. Electronic communication with government institutions is also not an option in an environment where officials still prefer faxes and phones. The situation in Yugoslavia may now change following recent agreements with Microsoft.

Cooperation with the private sector remains at an embryonic stage, with mostly isolated fundraising or in-kind contributions. As one organization admits, NGOs do not know how to approach the business community, underscoring the need for training in this area. At the same time, the region's fledgling markets do not create the ideal conditions for greater assistance, and few countries have adopted tax incentives for businesses that donate. An open competition for NGO grants, organized by Croatia's largest commercial bank Zagrebacka Banka, stands among the most visible exceptions.

ICT forms one rare area of common cooperation with the business sector. A number of NGOs have Internet access or web space donated by private ISPs.

WITH THE PRIVATE SECTOR

NGO	Country	Donating ISP
HERA	Macedonia	MOL
Center for Civic Initiatives	Macedonia	Unet
Megjasi	Macedonia	Unet
Kosova Education Center	Kosovo	IPKO
Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms	Kosovo	IPKO
The Forum	Kosovo	IPKO
Kosovar Action for Civil Initiatives	Kosovo	Koha

Examples of NGOs receiving free Internet access or web space

Selection of Sectors

The NGO sectors selected for this study represent areas of activity addressed by programs of the Open Society Institute and the services of OneWorld International. A spectrum of civil society issues was also chosen to demonstrate the ways in which different NGOs working in different areas use ICTs differently. A main distinction in this regard lies between those NGOs who engage in educational or advocacy efforts and those who focus on service provision or community development. This distinction rests as well within specific fields: some organizations dealing with refugees, for example, may concentrate on legal matters; others may engage in psychosocial support. Minority groups may address equality of access or sponsor cultural events, while environmental NGOs may work on awareness-raising or clean-up campaigns. ICT needs vary according to the respective approaches.

NGOs that deal with media issues, such as monitoring and training, have some of the strongest websites in the region. This is particularly the case in Yugoslavia, where press freedoms were a common target of the Milošević regime. While in Macedonia the country's leading media NGOs are just now designing their own sites, Bosnia's Media Plan Institute maintains a particularly strong presence. Its activities include "Media Online," an Internet journal containing comments, analysis, research, and news on media trends in Southeast Europe. Initiated in October 2000 to support regional cooperation and information exchange, the journal serves as a communication channel linking various independent institutions and organizations throughout the area. The multi-lingual site is available in English, French, Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian.

MEDIA

Human rights organizations not only rely on daily information, such as news reports, but also view the production, or repackaging, of information as an important part of their activities. These organizations are thus among the most active in using the Internet as both a source of finding material and a means for distributing it. With weekly reports, Prishtina's Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms maintains not only the most frequently updated website in Kosovo, but also one of the region's. The Albanian Human Rights Group, the Albanian Center for Human Rights, and the Belgrade Center for Human Rights are also among their countries' strongest.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Women's organizations that function as rights groups rely similarly on ICTs. But other women's groups often see technology as peripheral to their work. The Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade, for example, notes that the Internet can be inappropriate in areas that require a human touch, such as outreach to victims of violence. Women's groups in Kosovo, conducting much of their work in the field, appear particularly hesitant to turn to ICTs. Yet Motrat Qiriazhi (Sisters Qiriazhi), engaged in the education of rural women, does own a website. Created with the help of the U.S.-based Advocacy Project, the site aimed to show the organization's 10-year-old history in an effort to repudiate international accusations that it was an NLA structure. The organization later used the Internet to highlight the plight of Albanian refugees from Macedonia, posting photos on the website and sending emails to UNHCR. Coordinator of the Kosova Women's Network that links 32 organizations across the province, Motrat Qiriazhi is also spearheading the Network's upcoming monthly e-newsletter and a new website.

WOMEN

Environmental groups in the western Balkans can benefit from existing examples set by their neighbors. Started in 1998 by a group of eight organizations and a member of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) since 2000, the Bulgarian environmental NGO information network "BlueLink" covers news, campaigns, jobs, fundraising, and a variety of issues from biodiversity to water. It also maintains the country's largest electronic mailing list, including more than 180 subscribers and 3–10 messages per day. Romania's Strawberry Net, also a member of APC, represents a similar effort. The trilingual portal (in English as well as Hungarian) includes an interactive database.

ENVIRONMENTALISM

Further efforts may be aided by a new project of the Regional Environmental Reconstruction Program for South Eastern Europe. A component of the Stability Pact, the project seeks to promote cooperation among regional NGOs by supporting electronic networks. A recent study of the Regional Environmental Center for Central and Eastern Europe, a major actor in the arena, addresses the status and needs towards this direction.⁵

ICT use among Roma organizations varies from country to country. On one end of the spectrum, Yugoslavia's Rrom Inter Press maintains an active website containing articles, news, and links. The Internet serves as its primary source of information, as well as its main means for communication with other organizations and donors. While for the Roma Information Center in Kragujevac the web is best for finding information on funding and con-

ROMA

⁵ See http://www.rec.org/REC/Programs/SEE_Networking/

ferences, personal contact and more traditional methods remain most important for dealing with their beneficiaries. Roma organizations in Macedonia echo the same sentiment.

On the other end of the ICT spectrum is Albania's Democratic Union of Roma. Serving a community of 150,000, the organization operates out of an aging office in the middle of a Tirana bus parking lot. Its sole 15-year-old computer is unequipped to handle email or the Internet, though it still serves somehow in the publication of its magazine. While the organization does visit a local Internet café in order to exchange information with other NGOs, it encounters particular difficulties in maintaining communication with its 17 branches within Albania. In Kosovo, an NGO by the name of Democratic Hope only recently opened a Yahoo email account. It does, however, plan a web-based newspaper on the activities of the Albanian-speaking Ashkali community.

Though other minority concerns do not appear to be strongly represented, either domestically or online, one issue that is gaining increased attention among NGOs in Southeast Europe is AIDS. The International Summer School STOP AIDS, held in Yugoslavia this past August, saw participants from Macedonia, Serbia, Bosnia, Croatia, and Montenegro. Two organizations currently have websites, though both the lack of staff or funds for their maintenance. One calls the creation of a CD presentation, containing information on all its activities, the best investment they have made thus far. Youth against AIDS from Sarajevo also speaks of a regional campaign with its Serbian and Macedonian counterparts, which will include a joint website.

AIDS

Name	Country	URL
Action +	Albania	None
Action against AIDS	Bosnia and Herzegovina	None
Association of Youth Zvornik	Bosnia and Herzegovina	None
Youth against AIDS	Bosnia and Herzegovina	www.mps-org.ba (under construction)
HERA	Macedonia	www.stopaids.org.mk
CAZAS	Montenegro	none
JAZAS	Yugoslavia	www.aids.org.yu www.jazas.org.yu

AIDS NGOs in Southeast Europe

Once the most isolated of the former communist countries, Albania still suffers from some of the weakest infrastructure. Internal strife, such as mass rioting following the 1997 collapse of pyramid schemes, destroyed much of the already limited development, while low wages and output and high unemployment and emigration rates have prevented greater reconstruction. Though it has been spared the ethnic conflicts that have torn apart its neighbors, it has also borne part of the brunt, receiving hundreds of thousands of refugees. Regional crises do have some benefits: they help bring international attention. The situation has also bolstered the image of NGOs and public participation in them.

There are currently 600–700 NGOs in Albania, with 80 established in the last year. Organizations encounter common difficulties in their work, including unclear visions, limited management capacity, untrained staff, and a lack of funds. The most successful include women's, youth, and environmental NGOs as well as think tanks. While the strongest NGOs are concentrated in all the region's capitals, in Albania this tendency is particularly pronounced. At the same time, Tirana-based NGOs often have offices in other cities; the Society for Democratic Culture, for example, has 35 branches throughout the country. A network of civil society development centers, supported by the Netherlands Development Organization, is also seeking to extend services to other areas.

Like the country's civil sector, the development of ICTs remains in the early stages. Even academic institutions, most often the starting point of Internet use, cannot ensure connectivity. Though international actors – the common impetus for growth in the country – have been involved in extending access, their efforts appear to be few. The UNDP, for example, established the first Internet connection in Albania in 1995 and later the country's first webpage in 1996. Providing email service for a number of NGOs and Albanian institutions, the project also trained the group of experts that created the private ISP, ICC. Having given the situation a push, the UNDP program ended in the beginning of 1999. The local Soros foundation continues to offer Internet service to universities, a few NGOs, and some independent media.

Given that data from December 2000 reveal only 5,000 Internet users in Albania and only 250 addresses in the country's domain,⁶ it is not surprising to discover low ICT use among Albanian NGOs. Many organizations

⁶ European Survey of Information Society Projects and Actions
<http://www.eu-esis.org/esis2basic/ALbasic7.htm>

are just now discovering the potential of the Internet, and some, like the Democratic Union of Roma, still lack the computer capacity. Some consider themselves solely as passive receivers of information; others unable to find what they seek. All of the participating NGOs, however, use email for communication. A number of Tirana's strongest organizations also have web pages, but many sprung from projects that have since ended, leaving the sites now dormant.

Some NGOs currently maintain information and documentation centers, such as the Children's Human Rights Center, the Women's Center, and the Albanian Disability Rights Foundation. Many of these hope to include their centers into their existing websites. In collaboration with the Soros Foundation, the information and documentation center of the Albanian Center for Human Rights is also establishing an income-generating project that will provide free Internet access to its users as well as access at a reduced price to students and other community members. The Albanian Civil Society Foundation is already operating a similar Internet center.

IN FOCUS :

Albanian Human Rights Group www.ahrg.org

The Albanian Human Rights Group maintains one of Albania's most active NGO websites, including online reports, bulletins, newsletters, and information updates. It is also the rare local example of innovative ICT use. Since 1999, the AHRG has operated an OSI-sponsored complaint center for the rights of citizens (known as QANK, according to its Albanian acronym), which addresses failures of the judicial system, law enforcement, and other state institutions to respect human rights. Also covering violations of or by the media, as well as the protection of the rights of women, children, and minorities, the center offers assistance, consultations, and representation, including contact with administrative organs, international organizations, and Strasbourg's European Court of Human Rights. Its activities also target public opinion, publishing, for example, information on cases that it handles.

The AHRG's work also extends to the Internet. In an effort to "come nearer to the needs of people," its website contains an online option that allows users to fill in a complaint form and check on the status of their complaint via a private code.

Though outside sources cite low public confidence in state structures, Albanian NGOs report a high degree of satisfaction in their relationship with official institutions. Many describe such cooperation – ranging from receiving required permits to lobbying for legislation – as both necessary to, and a significant part of, their work. The Democratic Union of Roma is the main exception, noting that the Roma community needs greater attention from the government. Media relations are viewed positively as well, with

many NGOs offering training for journalists on issues such as AIDS, gender, and children's rights.

The Internet first came to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 through the university UTIC line, with services extended the following year via the telecommunications company BH PTT. Once among the countries in Europe with the lowest number of Internet connections per capita, the country remains significantly below the continent's average at perhaps 50,000 users. Further development is in part inhibited by a situation of service provision that reflects the divided nature of the country itself, with three different operators covering three different communities: Republika Srpska Telecom in the Serbian republic, HTP in the Croatian areas of the Federation, and BihNET in the Bosniak areas.⁷ Limited overlapping and little competition ensure monopolistic prices.

Infrastructure also remains a problem. Phone connections are poor, making the sending of messages by fax, let alone by email, difficult. The electricity voltage, which often fluctuates between 220 and 170 volts, is also unstable. These circumstances compound the costs of Internet use. The hourly charges added to monthly subscriptions are paid each time a user connects, which may occur several times within one hour due to frequent disruptions. Pricing systems also maintain separate dial-up numbers with higher tariffs for using freemail sites, or require minimum connection times. With funding for ICTs difficult when many projects do not cover such expenses, the Internet remains a luxury for most NGOs.

Internet clubs are widespread in most cities, including 15 in Sarajevo (4 in the Stari Grad [Old City] municipality alone) and 4 in Banja Luka. The cost of access runs 2–10 DEM per hour; many of these clubs also teach courses on webpage creation and Internet searching, at 100–200 DEM per person. Though private businesses – local providers or PC distributors – sometimes offer specials to new clients, such as a month of free connection, the NGO sector has yet to step in to help provide communities with access. The DemNet network, financed by USAID, reports a single NGO from Jablanica which operates one such center. Given the success of the DemNet-supported “telecottage” movement in Hungary, and its recent extension to Yugoslavia, this model may be developed in Bosnia as well. In the meantime, the efforts that do exist have not found much success. The NGO “Sanus Prijedor” ran an after-hours Internet café for 6 months, charging 1 DEM for 20 minutes to its 10–20 daily visitors. Initially supported by an Italian agency that

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

⁷ See Merim Bilalić, “The Internet in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Some Indicators,” http://194.109.221.181/media/bosnie/the_internet_in_bosnia.html, and Darija Tankosić, “Cyber War in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” <http://www.pressnow.org/media/bosnie/cyberwar.html>.

financed the provider, phones, and training, the café recently closed with the end of its funding. Though the organization searched for other donors, turning as well to the media and a private ISP, it was unable to find the help.

The difficulties of financing rank among the common reasons for low ICT use among the country's NGOs. The Association of Independent Intellectuals, "Krug 99", states both why the organization would like to have a website and why it does not have one. "We need better presentation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in the world, to provide information for a larger audience on our activities, and to increase and reinforce our influence on citizens and events in the country," its secretary explains. A website would contribute to greater feedback on its work, allowing for the input of criticism and new ideas. It would also allow posting of the association's quarterly magazine, reducing the time and financial costs of its circulation, and making its articles available for a broader readership. The creation of such a site, however, would run upwards of 1,500–2,000 DEM, with an additional 150–200 monthly for maintenance and updating. Like other NGOs, Krug 99 has not found a donor willing to finance its ICT capacities.

With few equipped for the Internet, NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina rely on other organizations as their primary source of information. The association of women "Bolje Sutra" (A Better Tomorrow), once located in the office of CARE but without premises since it left, currently functions without phone or fax. Lacking even local media in the small southeast town of Glamoc, the organization does not know how it would receive information or carry out its programs without the assistance of its counterparts. Other NGOs cite the role of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, with one group calling its help "priceless." Participation in seminars and the use of personal contacts, rather than electronic communication, lead to the establishment of relationships and the planning of joint activities.

Based in the Canton of Herceg-Bosnia, Livno's Center for Citizen's Cooperation is one model of information sharing. With the area's greatest ICT capacity, the Center reports regularly to local organizations on donors, tenders, and other possibilities for improvement. It also offers courses on the use of the Internet for the smaller and less developed NGOs of the Canton. Recognizing the need of NGOs for websites and the lack of knowledge in the area, it recently began a project that will include education on creation, maintenance, updating, and use. The organization is also active in aiding in the registration of NGOs and assisting them in finding funding. Thanks to the Center – and to the Internet – one group found a donor in Germany to donate a small bus they need for the transportation of children with special needs, many of whom live 20–30 km from the school.

IN FOCUS:

Action against AIDS/Akcija protiv SIDA

Starting as a group of medical students in 1996, Action against AIDS exemplifies how one organization uses ICTs to overcome its limited resources in the effort to combat fear and prejudice.

Without premises, employees, or permanent funding, Action against AIDS relies on the few computers of its members, some of which do not even have phones. (With one activist, a refugee, they communicate via a neighbor.) They carry with them floppy disks at all times in order to slip away to Internet cafés to send email or print documents. In the words of one of its activists: "We could not work without using all advantages of the new technologies."

The organization prepares all lectures, seminars, and educational materials through and with the assistance of the Internet. They have downloaded condom-themed designs for posters, asked organizations around the world for assistance in improving their activities (receiving in return three parcels containing leaflets, t-shirts, etc.), and maintained contact with colleagues met at conferences, seeking their advice and adapting their ideas to local conditions. Lacking sufficient data at the national level, they rely on a number of international websites such as UNAIDS. At the same time, they cooperate closely with the national coordinator of the Republika Srpska for the fight against HIV and AIDS, conducting research and publishing results.

Action against AIDS also sees the promotion of email as part of its activities, publicizing their own address on all their materials. After hijacking a radio show discussion on the more acceptable topics of drugs and alcohol, the organization encouraged the audience to email questions, inventing a number of initial inquiries to put listeners at ease. Though the organization believes a website to be a necessary component for information, communication, and education, it lacks the sufficient funds to create one. The official site of the city of Banja Luka has recently offered space for a sub-page.

The work of most NGOs in Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects the country's troubled past and uncertain future: the status and rights of women, refugees and displaced persons, as well as education, inter-entity co-operation, and human rights. Their work is complicated by the lack of a registration procedure at the state level. Organizations with activities spanning the country's two entities must therefore register twice – once in the Republika Srpska and again in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Though there are no exact figures of the number of organizations, NGO directories estimate around 350. Out of the 35 websites listed in one, only 12 actually function.

Croatia boasts some of the most encouraging factors for the development of ICTs among NGOs. With government offices for both "cooperation with NGOs" and "internetization,"⁸ its civil society theoretically enjoys an institutional support and stable infrastructure that much of the neighborhood lacks. Its greater distance from the war era than the remainder of the region, its eagerness to detach itself from a Balkan identity, and its status in the EU

CROATIA

⁸ See <http://www.ekt.gr/news/events/ekt/2001-06-29/esee/Mauher-ict-croatia-esee.ppt>.

accession process, also place it in a unique category. Despite these factors, the NGO sector appears fragmented, confused as to how to make the transition from crisis to cooperation. With a loss of political relevance, dwindling foreign funds, and a populace tired of lingering conflict issues such as refugees, NGOs now find themselves in an environment of competition in which many rely on reputations built in the past but no longer realized in the present. They must instead learn that by sharing common objectives and joining efforts, they increase their chances for making a larger impact and achieving greater visibility. According to one observer, however, current efforts towards networking are inspired by the fight over money, following the latest buzzwords rather than professionalism or commitment.

That Croatia was the one area in this study in which it was difficult to locate the numbers of NGO email address and websites is one reflection of this fragmentation. While the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs does maintain a list of the country's approximately 16,000 registered organizations, its entries do not include email or URL addresses. Posted on the office's website, the list is solely sorted alphabetically, containing neither a search engine nor categorizations by sector or city. The country's central resource center, the Center for Development of Non-Profit Organizations (CERANEO), with an old website hosted on the free server Geocities, does not appear to maintain one of its own.

Croatia's general ICT situation presents more promise than its civil sector. Though the country's infrastructure was significantly damaged by the war, its reconstruction has included the installation of a national fiber optic network reaching the major population centers, as well as digital switches (a precondition for services such as high-speed Internet) and connections to international networks. Some of the most affected areas still remain without basic services, where the presence of mines, for example, may hamper repairs. The country's main ICT hurdle, however, is the monopoly of the telecommunications provider, Croatia Telecom (HT), a situation which was not helped by the sale of 35% of the company to Deutsche Telecom in 1999. While competition does exist, ISPs must use HT's core infrastructure and contract with HT for its concession. HT's HiNet thus maintains 79% of the market share; its closest competitor, Iskon, has 17%.

The academic provider CARNet, connecting educational and research institutions, has recently expressed interest in collaborating with the civil sector. ZaMirNET, Croatia's nonprofit ISP since 1997, already serves many of the country's NGOs.⁹ With a specific mission to support the development of civil society, ZaMirNet also provides related information and encour-

⁹ With roots in the Anti-War Campaign of Croatia in 1992, ZaMir was the Zagreb base of the ZTN bulletin board service.

ages its exchange through a website containing petitions, press releases, current events, and databases. Its activities include the organizing of online conferences, the maintenance of news groups, and the hosting of groups such as a lesbian press, a union of conscientious objectors, and the Stop Trafficking in Women project. ZaMirNet also offers training in basic computer skills, including the Internet and web design. Recently, it entered talks with a number of Croatia's leading NGOs – including B.a.be. and the Croatian Helsinki Committee for Human Rights – concerning plans for an NGO e-zine.

B.a.be. is already involved in online networking through the South East Europe Legal Initiative, expanding its experience with women's rights throughout the region. As mentioned earlier, the Suncokret representative to the South East European Refugee Assistance Network is also developing an information and communication system for the network. A number of other organizations also plan electronic initiatives, with many expressing great interest in interactive options. The Croatian National Youth Council, for example, is constructing a website that will serve as an "informative kiosk," enabling possibilities for forums, chat, and even videoconferencing. Another Zagreb-based youth association has similar hopes for their redesigned site.

I N F O C U S :

GONG www.gong.hr

Founded in 1997 to encourage civic participation, GONG stands as one regional model for educating citizens and monitoring government. Echoing the responses of other Croatian NGOs that relations with the authorities are improving, GONG cites its successful effort to enable visits to the Parliament and the viewing of its sessions as an example. However, the unavailability of public information, or its false dissemination, remains a major issue, such as the often contradictory daily instructions that were issued prior to the last elections.

The weight of GONG's name has allowed it to secure some of the best inter-sector cooperation in the region. Croatian national television donated airtime for its campaign spots, while Microsoft and Symantec donated all of its software. Enjoying additional assistance from Iskon and Span, GONG is currently negotiating the possibility to organize free computer education for Parliament members. It is also reportedly working with the Government Office for Cooperation with NGOs to produce a computer application that will serve as an NGO directory. Other activities have included an online petition for free Internet access to the official publication of Croatian legislation.

Presently undergoing reconstruction, the graphical interface of GONG's new website will be developed by external designers, with the scripts and databases to be developed internally. While the new site seeks to be dynamic, GONG has no plans to make it interactive, citing the number of existing forums and chat possibilities in which its staff are already participating on a daily basis. Using a local area network and Intranet with an internal portal for inter-office information exchange, GONG has also adopted an internal rule making email the official communication between employees, regional offices, and volunteers.

Despite good relations with the media, the government, and even the private sector, Croatian NGOs repeatedly refer to difficulties with donors, claiming that international agendas fail to consider local priorities. While one of the country's most famous organizations has always succeeded in finding funding for hardware and software, they have been unable to find funding for development of their own website and related education for other NGOs.

Since the 1999 crisis, Kosovo's civil sector has experienced a mushrooming growth, with liberal procedures allowing for the registration of over 1,000 NGOs. Some of these were actually businesses seeking a way to obtain legal personhood in the earlier absence of a commercial code or looking to take advantage of the 15% VAT return on humanitarian goods. Others were commonly created for or from projects. Many of the remaining NGOs find themselves isolated from donors, in a climate where the large number of organizations translates into limited funds. One international agency describes the sector as characterized by a gap between large and small, with a few elite NGOs functioning as institutions, monopolies, or clearinghouses for others. Often politicized, the sector is still at a stage of competition rather than cooperation. It must now learn how to shift from relief to development, transferring its relative success in service provision and aid to strengthen its capacity for advocacy. Currently, the most active fields include women, youth, public health, and human rights.

KOSOVO

The status of NGOs in Kosovo is reflected in their use of ICTs. Out of perhaps 500 active NGOs, only around 30% have an email address, primarily through Hotmail or Yahoo. Few NGOs enjoy their own Internet connection; most rely on alternative access points, with often frustrating results. Many find the prices of Internet cafés prohibitively high; one tells of another establishment run by a religious organization with the aim of propaganda. NGOs using the facilities of OSCE NGO centers encounter difficulties that include a single computer designated for all NGOs, restrictions on Internet use (20 MB for uploads, 200 MB for downloads), inconsistent connectivity, bad phone lines, closed doors, and long waits. One woman from an organization in Peja finds it easier to go to Prishtina (where her brother has antenna connection) than to stand in queues.

The International Organization for Migration, in conjunction with USAID, once ran 8 centers throughout Kosovo as part of an 18-month project called the Kosovo Information Assistance Initiative. Completed in April of 2001, the project sought to offer communication possibilities for refugees by providing a half an hour of Internet access per day. These centers are now being transferred to local NGOs or schools; three of them – in Gjilan, Frizaj, and Mitrovica – have been handed over to the Kosova Foundation for Open

Society. The Kosovar Civil Society Foundation also reports a collaborative project to build an Internet Center in a village along the border with Serbia and Macedonia. In addition, the youth NGO Forum runs a “Center for Internet Services” in Prishtina, offering free access from their 18 computers.

IN FOCUS :

IPKO (Internet Project Kosova) www.ipko.org

Already the subject of international attention – including coverage in the New York Times and Wired Magazine – IPKO is one of the region’s great success stories. The leading ISP among Kosovo’s 4 providers and a local NGO, IPKO began in 1999 as an initiative of the International Rescue Committee. Through a direct satellite link to the US Internet backbone and a network of wireless microwave antennas, IPKO now connects 150 organizations and most civil institutions. It also offers dial-up service to roughly 3,000 private customers and provides connection to 20 of Prishtina’s 35 Internet cafés. Its operations – generating revenue of one million DEM a year – are currently limited to Prishtina, however. With the area’s lack of infrastructure, there is little to support expansion.

Recently, IPKO has turned its attention to e-learning, launching a technology training institute that will offer courses in networking, system design, and web development. With a scholarship program supported by the Save the Children Kosovo Assistance Program, students who complete the program of the IPKO Institute of Information Technology will be awarded certificates as a “Cisco Certified Networking Associate.” IPKO’s executive director hopes that the Institute will help compensate for the labor drain to the international agencies that currently hire most of the area’s few skilled professionals.

IPKO hopes that Kosovo will serve as testing ground for a model that will later expand to the rest of the region. It also has plans to build a new “NGO to NGO” website that would become a “marketplace,” allowing for private exchanges with donors and others.

Though NGOs prefer in-office access, many that apply for such funding do not receive it. According to one observer, if the organization can afford a computer and printer, it can also afford the costs of the Internet. At the same time, a number of the strongest and most active NGOs in Kosovo do receive donated antenna connection, the costs of which could otherwise run 1000 DEM/month. These NGOs – all of them based in Prishtina – also form the sole 7 or so organizations that currently register websites. A few other NGOs report plans for their creation.

Kosovo’s most active NGO website is the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms, which is maintained on an almost daily basis. For the November 2001 elections, the Kosovar Action for Civil Initiatives posted election reports, voter turnout, and media monitoring to its website. Although two staff members of the Kosova Education Center are professors of IT at Prishtina’s university, the organization does not see a possible pub-

lic that would be interested in an Albanian version. Solely in English, the site mainly targets international donors and partners. These NGOs, however, represent a mere 2% of Kosovo's civil society; without a broader base, greater skills, and better connectivity, others are not prepared to take advantage of the Internet. In an area still focused on providing basic needs, it is difficult for both organizations and their donors to consider ICTs a priority.

Though the estimated number of NGOs in Macedonia reaches 2,000, only 500 of them can be considered as active. The civil sector suffers from a number of common maladies: single-person, project-based operations that lack clear missions; the concentration of international support in the hands of a few NGOs; and organizers who work in the sector because of its benefits, whether financial perks, travels abroad, political influence, or government protection. The situation creates great competition for limited funds, in an environment where many NGOs still lack their own facilities or equipment. Macedonia, however, does boast a number of strong NGOs throughout the country, including the towns of Kumanovo, Tetovo, and Gostivar. Many NGOs were active during the Kosovo crisis; others deal with issues such as media, women, Roma, and the environment. Though none of these organizations are Albanian NGOs, some have multicultural membership and/or address inter-ethnic issues. The country's present troubles occupy the concerns of many.

MACEDONIA

While the Internet remains an expensive, albeit decreasingly so, commodity, Internet providers are generally good, and accessibility high. Since all of Macedonia's ISPs are located in Skopje, costs present a particular problem for NGOs outside the capital, which must pay long-distance charges in addition to the average 30 DEM flat fee dial-up (56/k) connection. NGOs with more stable funding often opt for an ISDN 64/k connection, at 300 DEM a month; only one is able to afford the minimum 1000 DEM of a lease-line option. Most NGOs, however, do not enjoy in-office connection, relying instead on the private accounts of members or the increasing number of alternative access points. Since last year's Macedonian Telecom campaign, every town in the country has at least one Internet café, providing services at reasonable prices; private, smaller cafés also prosper. Several NGOs provide facilities for computer and Internet use as well, including the Center for Civil Action in Skopje, NGO support centers in Prilep and Veles, and a Tetovo-based group serving children's organizations.

In addition, the UNDP, in cooperation with OSI Macedonia, is establishing Information Technology Centers in 16 municipalities throughout the country. While primarily directed towards local government, these centers also serve both the general public and local NGOs. Their services include

free training – mostly Microsoft Office packages and Internet searches – and two hours daily of free access. One center in the city of Gostivar also offers tech support and more advanced courses, as well as hosting for small presentations (its own site is limited to 2mb). The center in the town of Kriva Palanka has not offered training in web design due to the lack of interest by NGOs; it has, however, prepared a number of pages for them.

I N F O C U S :

Youth Information Center/Mladinski Informativen Centar www.mic.org.mk

The Youth Information Center (Mladinski Informativen Centar) of Tetovo offers another glimpse into the possibilities for ICTs and the civil sector. Noting the lack of information at the scene of some of the fiercest fighting in summer 2001 – which destroyed transmission lines of RTV stations to the town – the Youth Information Center found one way to calm a panicked public. Seeking to inform both the citizens who fled the town and those who remained behind, the organization added to its site webcam images of the city's center and its surroundings. This online team, along with the organization's mobile unit, was among the first to witness the situation on the ground. The recorded materials, which documented both the problems of the residents and their needs, will later be used for a film on Tetovo during and after the crisis.

Acting as well as a resource center for other NGOs, YIC/MIC also operates computer centers with 13 computers and an ISDN 64/k connection. These centers are income-generating operations where roughly 20% of their earnings are reinvested in new equipment and software.

Web sites do not appear to be a current priority for most Macedonian NGOs. According to one observer, this is not due to generation gaps or technophobia, but rather because of the lack of knowledge and financing. The low quality of many of the sites that do exist – both in content and in design – he attributes in part to insufficient technical training. But NGOs themselves share a portion of the responsibility. As long as they operate on a project-by-project basis, there is little they feel they can, or need to, post. Thus many of the country's 50 pages contain a few initial documents, maybe an image or two, and are then forgotten. The web-hosting experience of the Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC) stands as one example: from their perspective, the hosted NGOs do little to update their presentations. One hosted NGO, however, complains they lack control of the site, including data such as the number of received hits.

With the sites of a number of the country's leading organizations still under construction, an effective online presence remains the domain of a select few with the professional staff and consistent funding to develop in this direction (those that can outsource creation, or hire an employee for maintenance). These include MCIC's own website, which contains two

glossy digests on the country's NGO sector, "Civic World" and "NGO Bulletin," and the think tank Euro-Balkan, with an electronic news archive of all articles printed in the Macedonian media over the past several years.

An encouraging sign in the development of ICTs and NGOs is the establishment of a portal project by the name of MaNGO (Macedonian NGOs) Online in 2000. Originally created by OSI Macedonia, the project moved from its base in Skopje to the nearby town of Veles, in an effort to disseminate the operation to other parts of the country. MaNGO acts as a web directory and content provider for some 200 members, in two languages: the Macedonian site enjoys around 2,000 hits weekly, while the English site receives 200–300. Its services currently include NGO news, a calendar of events, an email bulletin, and a gateway to a domestic freemail sponsored by the ISP Sonet. While the portal's coordinator admits room for improvement – including better search capabilities, pdf publishing plans, and databases on foundations, NGO consultants, and media organizations – MaNGO is an important step towards strengthening Macedonian civil society. Despite the often erratic use of the web by NGOs in general – primarily focused on freemail sites and large search engines – the NGOs participating in this study seek a single place that would concentrate NGO information in one spot.

Yugoslavia stands as a regional anomaly. While its former incarnation had been the most open of the socialist states, its break-up led to the most violent transition, leaving its truncated form under domestic repression and international isolation. Despite these conditions, and in part due to them, civil society grew surprisingly strong, from alternative education to independent media. The protest movement Otpor (Resistance), with its stenciled fists and "gotov je" ("he's finished") slogan, captured the spirit of opposition to Milošević. But it was radio B92 that best showed how ICTs could circumvent the regime's efforts to silence other voices. Home to Belgrade's first ISP, Opennet, the station triumphed over state control, closures and other threats, distributing news through its mailing lists, posting developments to its website, and broadcasting via the Internet. Its ability to reach domestic listeners and garner outside support played a pivotal role in bringing down the rule that sought to bring it down.

The October 2000 elections served as a rallying point for Yugoslavia's civil society, with NGOs from around the country coming together for a common cause. Get out the vote campaigns targeting youth, women, and villages; an information center, coordinating calendars, media relations, and bulletins; and a website including newsletters and daily updates formed the

YUGOSLAVIA¹⁰

¹⁰ Serbia, Montenegro, and Vojvodina.

thrust of these activities. The Center for Free Elections and Democracy (CESID) in particular turned to ICTs in its efforts: using software for collecting results and a database for archiving them. The importance of its website in this process is in part revealed by attacks on it: twice the site was hacked and election results altered.

The defeat of Milošević represents the possibility for a new era in Yugoslav civil society, one in which NGOs find the potential to work with the authorities, rather than against them. While current cooperation varies from place to place, often depending on personal politics or ruling parties, most organizations report that the situation has improved. At the same time, NGOs still find themselves battling previous conceptions that dismissed them as, in the words of one, “corrupted by foreigners.” Perhaps more challenging than forging new relationships with the government will be forging new relationships among NGOs themselves. Though Yugoslavia boasts some of the strongest NGOs in the region, the civil sector also claims the strongest level of distrust. Information continues to be a hoarded commodity, with NGOs outside of the capital in particular lacking access.

I N F O C U S :

Center for the Development of Non-Profit Sector (CRNPS) www.crnps.org.yu

With programs including information and documentation, education and training, advocacy and aid, as well as volunteerism, public relations, legal counseling, and research, CRNPS stands out as the region's strongest actor in fostering civil society. It also serves as the one common thread among NGOs in Yugoslavia: repeatedly throughout this study, the country's organizations called it their main source of information and the rare example of sharing it. Maintaining a monthly-updated database directory and a mailing list of 2,000 addresses, CRNPS also supports a website containing daily news, reports on the civil sector, links to a variety of donors, and additional information on ISPs. The organization would also like to see an interactive forum.

Though the Internet acts as a major method for the distribution of data, it is not the main means for its collection. Instead, CRNPS relies on field work, conferences, seminars, the BETA news agency, and its own network of 7 regional offices to report on the activities of NGOs, the government, donors, and beneficiaries. NGOs themselves form the greatest barrier in this collection, with most unwilling to contribute. The organization names the needs for greater professionalism, increased transparency, better information systems, and a media more understanding of the role of NGOs among its primary concerns.

The efforts of cooperation that do exist appear most common at the local level. Novi Sad's Panonija was cited for its coordination among Vojvodina's NGOs, while organizations such as Protecta in Niš have been active in informing colleagues in southern Serbia. Belgrade's Civic Initiatives, with a 20-page publication sent to 1,600 recipients and an email list of several hun-

dred users, and women's organizations such as the Autonomous Women's Center, are among the few others. With 50% of the country's NGOs currently lacking premises and equipment, some NGOs are also providing ICT services: the Timok Club in the town of Knjazevac maintains an Internet café, the Novi Sad Humanitarian Center is building a database on Vojvodina's social infrastructure, the mini-portal Yungo hosts a limited number of organizations, and the organization @digital has offered training.

Serbia also enjoys the highest web penetration in the region: 60% of the almost 1,000 active NGOs have email and 14% have websites. In addition to common complaints of bad connections and high prices, a handful of NGOs raise new issues: the hacking of their Internet accounts and the question of pirated software. Like in other countries, connectivity is a greater problem in remoter areas. However, the Yugoslav Telecottage Association, based on the Hungarian model, has recently established 66 alternative access points throughout the country (2/3 of them in the north). Currently seeking government support to ensure sustainability, the national employment system has agreed to cover staffing expenses.

Though Montenegro is technically still part of the federal republic, its NGOs operate in a separate environment. While the government remains slow to see the civil sector as a partner, NGOs have not functioned under the repressive conditions of their counterparts. The republic's law on non-governmental organizations represents not only a legal framework lacking in Serbia, but also a leading example of cooperation. Its current form derives from proposals and suggestions from the NGO CEDEM. The government has also allocated 600,000 DEM a year for NGO activities, and consulted the Network for Affirmation of Non-governmental Sector for advice on distribution.

Like many in Serbia, Montenegrin NGOs report "informational isolation," with few organizations aware of the activities of others. Montenegro's sole mailing list, forwarding the same information to all recipients regardless of its specific utility, has been a cause for complaints and quarrels. Though the republic's most developed NGO, the Center for Development of Non-governmental Organizations (CRNVO), sees its main role as informing others, it expresses a certain dissatisfaction with its methods. Currently maintaining a website containing articles and links, it points to CRNPS' site as one it wishes to emulate.

With one ISP, poor connections, and limited knowledge, few Montenegrin NGOs rely on ICTs. Yet a number express great interest in doing so, in particular, the Law Informatics Association, whose managing board conducts its meetings online. The Pedagogic Center in Podgorica, citing a weak educational system that fails to grasp the importance of computers, also hopes to play a role in promoting ICT use. The Network for Affirmation of Non-

governmental Sector, for its part, offers the use of two of its 4 computers to other NGOs at a minimum cost, while the Internet Society of Kotor provides courses and training for free.

Significant Factors for Future Development

Connectivity – and the degree of it – remains a major determinant of ICT use. Telephone prices and poor telecommunication lines render dial-up connections sufficient solely for sending and receiving email and light Internet searches. They make more extended surfing or online conferencing expensive and difficult. NGOs without in-office connections cannot rely on the web to meet daily communication or information needs, and visits to alternative access points often take time away from other vital activities. Weak searching skills and random search results leave many NGOs just starting when their allotted hour has finished. Outside the major cities, there is also a great need for local dial-up numbers to cut the costs of long-distance calls to out-of-town ISPs. And in some places, like the more remote areas of Kosovo, satellite remains the only option for access. Weak infrastructure, including common electricity shortages and daily power cuts, also does little to foster Internet use, let alone regular operations.

CONNECTIVITY

The problem of sustainability is not unique to Southeast Europe. Fee-based memberships, government grants, in-kind contributions, and private donations remain limited options in all countries where ministries, businesses, and citizens are still struggling to make ends meet. Income generation can also be tricky in places where the concept of a nonprofit organization is not always entirely clear: many registered NGOs are in fact for-profit operations seeking tax or customs benefits. And in some areas, like Yugoslavia, NGOs are mistrusted as mechanisms for making money, particularly when foreign assistance sometimes renders civil society salaries higher than other fields. The sector's reputation for a lack of professionalism stems from employees that are motivated by a well-paying job, rather than committed to an issue or cause.

SUSTAINABILITY

The lack of NGO resources is not only financial, it is also human. The production of material is a time-consuming activity, and one that can take valuable time away from providing services to NGO beneficiaries. A well-functioning website further requires the staff to regularly update it or the ability to solicit someone to do it for them. This remains out of reach for

the majority of NGOs, which are still largely one-person operations. There is also the question of language: it is one thing for organizations to be able to understand English; it is another for them to translate it. The consumption of information takes additional energy: many NGOs in this study mention the necessity of having one member whose sole responsibility is reading and redistributing.

Though NGOs are often criticized for being donor-driven, donors also need to take responsibility for the ways in which they drive. This is also the case in areas where funding plays a role in addressing conflict and aiding the recovery of it. While outside actors once concentrated on the non-governmental sector as a form of opposition to the Yugoslav regime, their shift of support to the new authorities creates a new arena for competition. That most of the advancement of ICTs in Kosovo stems from the presence of the international community can be a dangerous lesson: some whispers in Macedonia cynically wonder if the country's security situation will be one vehicle for attracting donors. At the same time, one local NGO rated the drain of staff to higher paying international organizations as the greatest concern in their work.

Just as Bosnia and Herzegovina stands as a painful example of the misappropriation of money, Croatian civil society reveals what happens when the money dries up. Kosovo NGOs are awaking to this future. Though the handful of leading organizations in Prishtina express a certain confidence, smaller NGOs, and in particular, those outside of the main city, are feeling increasing pressure now that the emergency period is over and donors are growing less generous. While perhaps only the strongest will survive in this struggle, many NGOs remind that connections sometimes supercede quality. NGOs that lack personal contact with decision-makers are left disadvantaged in the process. Some report experiences where their proposals do not receive even basic consideration at board meetings. Others feel that donors only give money for certain issues, such as multiethnic projects.

NGOs from other countries report similar experiences. When one AIDS organization approached an international health agency for financial assistance in preparing a campaign for World AIDS Day, they were told the agency did not have funds allocated for that particular region. Later, the organization learned that it was the agency's local coordinator who rejected the proposal. To the question of why there are not more initiatives addressing issues such as corruption and trafficking, another observer explains: donors don't give them priority. Other organizations repeatedly note that funding often follows foreign agendas rather the needs of the communities they should serve. The lone NGO that outright refused to participate in this study

DONOR PATTERNS

did so with the explanation that it was tired of being asked what it needs, without ever seeing anything delivered.

The comments of NGOs reveal two additional trends: that many donors do not fund ICT costs separately from projects, and that ICT efforts end when the project's funding is over. Few NGOs receive support for ICT-specific proposals. This situation may change as international agencies increasingly recognize that ICTs are becoming necessities rather than luxuries. The Open Society Institute, Hivos, UNDP, USAID, the Markle Foundation, and others already incorporate programs for ICTs into their existing strategies for civil society. The dependence of NGOs on foreign funds may have therefore one positive consequence: NGOs do what donors want. As closing the digital divide becomes a global priority, greater ICT use may follow.

Current Needs and Possible Projects

NGOs' expression of their needs remains somewhat limited. Lacking a wider picture of the potential of ICTs, they do know for what kind of help to ask. When the Kosova Foundation for Open Society announced a competition for ICT-related proposals, for example, not a single organization applied. Relying on the web for email, entertainment, and browsing, none had any idea what kind of projects they could do or what would be of assistance. Thus in addition to obvious training such as searching skills, webpage design, and database management, the clearest area for further development is a greater understanding of ICTs and their possibilities. NGOs do need email for improving communication with donors, the Internet for finding additional information about partners, and their own websites for increasing visibility. But they also need to learn about the other opportunities offered by the web: to foster dialogue, exchange case studies, share best practices, and reach a larger public. It is not just the technical knowledge but rather the innovation – and sometimes, motivation – that needs the most encouragement, the what and why rather than the simple how.

Training needs to include not just the aesthetics of design, but also the development of content. The few materials currently produced tend to remain basic, often for reports required by the donors many see as their main target audience, leaving most NGO websites containing only contact numbers and brief descriptions. Educative efforts should also highlight additional functions, such as local news, relevant legislation, interactive options, and online campaigns. At the same time, they should also be careful in their

TRAINING

promotion of certain technologies. While some NGOs may be attracted to features such as Flash, they cause difficulties for other NGOs who may not enjoy quick or easy connections.

As the financial costs of ICTs stand as one of the greatest barriers to larger use, additional training should include how to overcome limited resources by pooling skills with other NGOs and how to approach the private sector for further cooperation. Models already exist for ways in which some NGOs are searching to become more self-sufficient. Euro Balkan, for example, a Macedonian think tank dealing with the EU and related issues, charges for the analyses it supplies to official institutions, the media, and foreign missions. While the system is not ideal – the government has difficulty in covering its bills – good information can pay well. Other NGOs, such as the previously mentioned Albanian Center for Human Rights and the Youth Information Center in Macedonia, are establishing computer centers in order to generate income.

Civil society development organizations play a number of vital roles in Southeast Europe, including advising on legal issues, offering technical training, and granting additional funds. These centers should also be supported for the important part they can play in extending the benefits of ICTs for NGOs, from computer courses and Internet access – like the Albanian Civil Society Foundation – to mailing lists and information portals – like Yugoslavia’s CRNPS.

NGO SUPPORT AND RESOURCE CENTERS

Name	Country	URL
Albanian Civil Society Foundation	Albania	www.acsf.org.al
NGO Information and Support Center	Bosnia and Herzegovina	www.geocities.com/cip_sarajevo
Center for the Development of the Non-Profit Organizations (CERANEO)	Croatia	www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/9175/
Kosovar Civil Society Foundation	Kosovo	under construction
Macedonian Center for International Cooperation	Macedonia	www.mcims.org.mk
Center for the Development of Non-Governmental Organizations (CRNVO)	Montenegro	www.crnvo.cg.yu
Center for the Development of the Non-Profit Sector (CRNPS)	Yugoslavia	www.crnps.org.yu

National NGO support centers

Civil society development organizations commonly maintain NGO directories that are of limited use. Most often compiled through mailings and surveys, the entries are dependent on the timely completion of distributed questionnaires. NGOs who are not contacted, and those who fail to return their replies, thus remain uncounted. More problematically, these directories often suffer from erroneous or out-of-date information, rendering their utility quickly irrelevant and wasting human and financial resources. A lack of coordination often leads to overlapping efforts, with different groups publishing parallel lists, such as the separate collections commonly maintained by women's NGOs. Online directories are not without problems – CRNPS reports that their electronic edition was once stolen and resold, while MaNGO notes that most NGOs still prefer to submit their details via traditional post. But they do allow for the easy entry of new or corrected information and cut the costs of distribution. To be truly effective, online directories should include searching options by sectors and by cities. They must also avoid the pitfalls of their conventional counterparts: updating must be regular and accuracy verified.

ONLINE DATABASES

NGOs are already relying on mailing lists and news groups. What most do not have, however, is a centralized source for all necessary information. Repeatedly throughout this study, NGOs express desire for a single site where they could find all civil society matters, such as donors, tenders, and partners, in order to reduce both the human and financial costs of searching. Though portal projects require an Internet connection that email-based options do not, mailing lists create difficulties for those without regular access. An NGO that checks its email once week may confront an overflowing inbox, and freemail accounts often limit the memory they provide to each user. Portals can also act as filters and archives in instances when there is too much information, or, as many NGOs define it, too much “useless” information. They can also provide the space for specialized search engines and other knowledge categories – relevant legislation, databases of experts, event calendars – that NGOs need for their work.

PORTALS

With the benefits of ICTs limited in local contexts, the desire of NGOs to deepen inter-country cooperation, and the Internet's ability to reach farther places in quicker time at less cost, regional initiatives form a major field for potential ICT projects. Though content is currently limited for a portal that relies on NGO sites alone, the pooling of information produced and distributed by domestic sources such as CRNPS, ZaMir, and MaNGO could be one step in serving NGO needs across Southeast Europe.

REGIONAL INITIATIVES

NGOs also appear particularly interested in efforts within single sectors: a focus group conducted during an AIDS conference in Yugoslavia, for example, expressed interest in an electronic network of like organizations for communication and collaboration. Regional initiatives also are important in fields where the experiences of international counterparts may not easily transfer to local conditions or for concerns that are especially related to cross-border issues, such as refugees and trafficking.

Volunteers offer one solution to staffing limitations, a non-paid, often educated resource, with growing technical training and knowledge of foreign languages. But not all volunteers need to be in-country. As the online volunteering program of NetAid.org demonstrates, ICTs allow for people to help via the Internet, no matter their location. Interested individuals living in Canada, Germany, or Australia can aid with writing, editing, translating, designing, reporting, and a variety of other activities from their home computers, and then email their work to NGOs anywhere in the world. Considering the large diasporas of countries such as Albania and Yugoslavia, and the resulting brain drain, online volunteering also allows for emigrants to contribute their skills from abroad. A few organizations are already turning to this option, such as Gay Serbia, whose one of two webmasters sits in Los Angeles.

ONLINE VOLUNTEERING

In addition to meeting current needs for the dissemination of information, additional options should provide opportunities for the exchange of knowledge. Interactive initiatives – such as discussion forums and online conferences – allow NGOs to take a more active role in sharing experiences and practices, both good and bad. While some NGOs acknowledge this necessity, few have been turning to the Internet as one method (and many lack the technical capacity to do so). Educational efforts can encourage both the etiquette of participation and the skills of moderating.

OTHER POSSIBILITIES

Other possibilities include an alternative to Yahoo groups. One Macedonian NGO described how their attempt to create such a list was derailed by a flood of junk mail. Even the Civil Society Division of the OSCE Kosovo expressed interest in another option for linking their NGO support centers – all using freemail accounts currently – that are scheduled for eventual transfer to local NGOs.

Few NGOs are using free hosting sites, and even less express interest in the need. NGOs still prefer the individualism of their own domain names and control over their pages. The popping windows of free sites also frustrate visitors. Portal projects and online directories can aid those that do not have their own sites by offering a web presence they otherwise lack.

Conclusion

The use of ICTs among NGOs in Southeast Europe can be viewed as a pyramid. At the bottom rests the majority of organizations, lacking premises, equipment, staff, and/or training. These organizations experience the greatest difficulties in receiving information, which in turn inhibits them from finding further funding or discovering the knowledge that may help them grow. The middle consists of developing organizations, groups with one or a few computers, sufficient computer skills for emailing and browsing, maybe dial-up access, perhaps even a simple webpage. Many of these NGOs remain consumers rather than producers of information. Their infrequent searching often yields ineffective results, and in limited circumstances in which they may lack the time or the ability to sort through irrelevant material. At the top are the region's strongest NGOs, with multiple computers, solid staffing, regular Internet connection, and active websites. Able to collect more information, these organizations are consequently able to produce more of it, reaching wider audiences and reinforcing impact. As these organizations grow subsequently stronger, they also become more likely to receive additional support.

The ability of this top rung of NGOs to maximize the benefits of ICTs is limited by the capacities of its counterparts. Low ICT use by partners, beneficiaries, and governments leaves their utility primarily in the domain in which they presently stand: as a means to communicate with current donors and reach new funding. A handful of organizations – those with stable financing or clear missions – have been able to move past this myopia, but for the most part, as long as NGOs remain dependent on outside support, their use of ICTs will focus on obtaining the means for their subsistence. As more and more organizations are feeling that less and less money is being allocated, this tendency is likely to intensify. These fears are most notable in Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo, places where previous foreign attention is now diverting elsewhere.

Despite these common characteristics, the areas of this study do not stand on the same ground. For Albania, Bosnia, and Kosovo, infrastructure remains the more pressing barrier to use of ICTs, while in Croatia, Yugoslavia, and Macedonia a lack of professionalism presents the greater obstacle. NGOs require functional connectivity and technical training, but they also require a seriousness of purpose and an environment that ensures they can maintain one. They must be ready to change the ways in which they consume information, produce materials, and work with each other. Their govern-

ments must also be ready to promote favorable laws and strategic development. ICT use therefore cannot be divorced from its larger context, political conditions, economic status, or social circumstances. But ICTs can transcend these contexts, allowing for opportunities in cyberspace that may not exist on the ground. They do not create information and communication but they do facilitate their access and exchange. It is not a question of whether NGOs will engage in electronic efforts if they are not already involved in traditional forms of networking. Rather, it is the degree to which the possibilities of ICTs – for knowledge sharing and cross-border cooperation – will encourage such practices and activities.

The conducting of research for this report already inspired small developments: NGOs who started to rethink their ICT strategies, individuals who over the course of an interview promised to learn how to use the Internet, organizations who met at focus groups for the first time establishing new grounds for partnership. The initiators of this study and its author hope that its findings will not only inspire other organizations but also influence relevant decision makers – such as foreign donors and national governments – to recognize the increasing importance of ICTs for NGOs. In the past, the region's ICT innovations – the ZaMir Transitional Network, the broadcasting of B92 over the web, the establishment of the Internet Project Kosova – arose during its wars. It is time for ICTs to now play their role in ensuring the region's peace.

About the Study's Sponsors

OneWorld is an online community of over 1,000 organizations working to promote sustainable development and human rights. Coordinated by OneWorld International, its values-based network is currently based in 10 centers in Africa, South Asia, Latin America, Austria, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Finland, UK, and the United States. Carrying over 1.5 million pages of text, images, video, and sound, its supersite www.oneworld.net contains language versions, special editions, and thematic channels including debt and education.

Recognizing the need to support the development of civil society in Southeast Europe, Hivos, the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries, based in the Netherlands, is currently funding OneWorld's Southeast Europe Initiative. In addition to investigating the possibility of establishing a regional portal for the exchange of information, the Southeast Europe Initiative includes an audio exchange service (www.oneworld.net/radio/see) that enables radio stations to share material on local issues, human rights, civil society, and democracy.

For more information please contact cara.stern@oneworld.net.

The Open Society Institute is a private operating and grantmaking foundation that develops and implements a range of programs in civil society, culture, education, media, public health, and human and women's rights, as well as social, legal and economic reform. OSI is part of the Soros foundations network, an informal network of organizations established and supported by investor and philanthropist George Soros, and active in more than 50 countries worldwide. Together with the New York-based Open Society Institute, OSI-Budapest provides support and assistance to Soros foundations in Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, Guatemala, Haiti, Mongolia, and Southern and West Africa.

The mission of its Information Program is to promote the equitable deployment of knowledge and communications resources for civic empowerment and effective democratic governance.

For more information please contact info@osi.hu.

