On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo – Rebuilding After the War

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From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

Last fall, 'On the Record' looked at the origins of the Internet Project Kosovo (IPKO), the project that brought the Internet to Kosovo following the war.

The IPKO was made possible by good luck and imagination. At the height of the Kosovo refugee crisis last year, Interpacket, a private company, offered the use of a large satellite dish and free satellite time for the Kosovo refugees. The dish was installed at the refugee camp of Stenkovac in Macedonia.

The refugees returned to Kosovo before they could make use of the offer, but two enterprising Americans -- Paul Meyer and Teresa Crawford -- persuaded the owners to move the dish to Prishtina and put satellite time at the disposal of Kosovo. They also secured the agreement of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a respected international nongovernmental relief agency, to back the idea. The IPKO sent out its first message by email on September 20, 1999.

Today the IPKO is entirely run by locals. It is also providing Internet service to 80 paying customers. The fees they pay make it possible for the IPKO to provide a free connection for 30 leading members of civil society, including the National Theater and several faculty departments at the national university.

This is the first time that information technology has been used in this way, and the formula is already being studied with a view to future emergencies. (For example, the **US Institute of Peace** is using the IPKO as a case study for a large program of research on the Internet, information sharing and peace-building that involves several branches of the US government.)

In spite of this impressive record to date, the long-term success of the IPKO is still not guaranteed. The IPKO has weathered a difficult year and is currently showing a healthy profit. It has provided an essential emergency service at a time of crisis. But the IPKO will be judged

ultimately by its contribution to a new Kosovo, rather than by its response to last year's emergency.

An important move was made in this direction on March 5, 2000, when the project was formally handed over to Kosovar ownership under a new board. With that, the IPKO ceased to exist and gave way to the Internet Projekti i Kosovës (which retained the same acronym, IPKO).

But many questions remain. Can the new IPKO function on its own without the backing of the IRC? Is its technology simply too sophisticated for Kosovo? What is its impact on business? Can it survive after its free satellite time is finished? Above all, does it see itself as a catalyst for civil society, or a standard-bearer for information technology?

This issue attempts to answer some of these questions. Iain Guest wrote it following a visit to Kosovo in July of this year. Teresa Crawford has now given up all active involvement in the day-to-day running of the IPKO. She remains involved as a member of the IPKO board, which met for the second time in mid-July.

Getting Started

The Internet Project Kosovo (IPKO) proposed a high-tech solution to a down-to-earth problem -- the destruction of Kosovo's telecommunications by North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombers and Serbian marauders.

There were plenty who wondered how easy it would be to adapt sophisticated new information technology to a country in ruins. It proved surprisingly easy.

The IPKO gives its subscribers access to the Internet through a wireless system that sounds complicated, but in fact is not. It begins with the Interpacket satellite, which sends a signal to the satellite dish that was originally installed at the Stenkovac refugee camp in Macedonia. The dish now sits on top of the IPKO offices in Prishtina. From the dish the signal is transmitted to a repeater on top of the tallest building in Prishtina. From here it is spread out to the computers of customers through microwave dishes and routers. The system completely bypasses the creaky phone system.

This technical infrastructure was put in place last fall (for more on this, see 'On the Record,' Vol. 10, No. 10). Over the next six months, electricity turned out to be the biggest headache. The IPKO's satellite receiver and servers had to be maintained around the clock, which required a regular supply of power. But Kosovo's two main power plants -- chronically inefficient even before the war -- had been crippled by the departure of their Serbian workforce and the lack of spare parts. Power cuts were a part of daily life in Kosovo throughout the winter.

The IPKO has spent 60,000 DM ($30,000) simply to protect itself against power failure and ensure a 24-hour service. The first step was to purchase a generator for the main office, which kicks in when the main power supply fails. The generator uses five liters of diesel an hour and is kept ready night and day. By way of added protection, the IPKO also purchased a few big UPSs (Universal Power Supplies).

As the IPKO's service expanded, it set up four new repeaters around Prishtina, which carried the satellite signal to clients. Four deep-cycle batteries were bought to keep the stations working around the clock. These batteries need an hour of electricity each day to keep them going for 24 hours.

The IPKO also had to learn politics. The Kosovo PTT was reconstituted by UNMIK as the Post and Telecommunications Kosovo (PTK). Kosovar officials at the new PTK made a strong bid to bring the IPKO under PTK control. This would have placed the Internet under a government monopoly before the government or the Internet were even developed. It would have set a disastrous precedent for the future of information technology in Kosovo.

Luckily for the IPKO (and the Internet), the PTK found it difficult enough to manage what remained of its telephone network, let alone take on the new information technology. The PTK also had little support from international agencies, which needed an Internet connection immediately to the outside world. But Meyer and Crawford still had to appeal to the very highest level of UNMIK to win a reprieve.

UNMIK authorized the IPKO on the condition that it would remain non-profit and address a clear humanitarian need. It was agreed that the project should be based in a 'neutral' site to calm local politics. This ruled out the university -- an early choice -- because the university was seen as a potential competitor by the PTK. So the decision was made to set up an office in the Boro and Ramizi Center, a huge sports complex in the middle of the city.

The winter of 1999 was long, cold, and grueling for the IPKO team, as it was for all agencies working in Kosovo. But looking back, some team members feel it might have been a blessing in disguise, because it toughened them for what lay ahead. The electrical safety net would also give them a distinct advantage over future competitors, who would be much more vulnerable to power cuts. 'We went through a very steep learning curve during the last winter,' says Akan Ismaili, who joined the project last September and now serves as the IPKO Executive Director.

The IPKO emerged this spring in good order, with over 50 paying customers and a reputation for reliability. Unlike many other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Kosovo, it also had clear plans for the future. There was really no alternative, because the Interpacket grant would only last until September 2000. This deadline forced the IPKO's co-founders to think about the project's long-term sustainability from day one. It also made them determined to hand over to Kosovars as soon as possible. This promised a smooth transition to local ownership.

Painless Transition

The transition took place on March 5, 2000, when the IPKO was handed over from the IRC to the newly constituted Internet Projekti i Kosovës.

Everything was transferred except the title to the equipment, which the IRC retained so that it could be insured. (At the time, local insurance was not available in Kosovo.) The new organization would even be known by the same initials as its predecessor, IPKO.

Continuity was also ensured by the choice of Akan Ismaili as the new IPKO Executive Director. Akan was one of Kosovo's leading 'techies,' who had worked for the U.S. Information Service through the war. He had joined the IPKO in September as technical director and grew steadily into the job over the months that followed. Akan's reputation also grew as the IPKO attracted international attention. By March 2000, he had already been labeled a 'Tiny Geek' and even 'Robin Hood' by admiring profiles.

Severing the link to the IRC was, remembers Akan, like saying goodbye to an old friend. The IRC had basically ensured the IPKO's survival through the first six months. It had loaned the project $175,000 (all of which was paid back) and allowed IPKO staff to use IRC vehicles, letters of credit, equipment, satellite phones, and even guest houses. In one last contribution, the IRC helped draft the new IPKO's statute. (The IRC Country Director sits on the IPKO board Ex Officio.)

Association with the IRC had given the IPKO political cover in its tussles with the PTK and has allowed the IPKO to enjoy tax-exempt status as an NGO. This permitted the project to bring in computers, servers, and other equipment without paying U.N.-imposed import tax at the border. The fact that the IPKO was partnered with the IRC also reassured the IPKO's early clients.

The IPKO had already been registered as a Kosovar NGO before the hand-over, but it did not yet have tax benefit status and securing this was the first order of business. NGO status does little more than provide an organization with a legal identity and allow it to do business with international agencies. But the second categorization, known as 'public benefit status,' brings more tangible benefits in the form of exemption from tax.

Such public benefit status is eagerly sought, and UNMIK tries to ensure that it is not used as cover for private entrepreneurs seeking to avoid tax. The IPKO applied and waited several weeks while UNMIK officials tried to confirm that the IPKO was indeed a non-profit organization. This was not immediately clear to UNMIK because the IPKO was charging clients, making a healthy profit, and applying strict business practices. On the other hand, all the profits were being ploughed back into the enterprise to expand the network, and no single person was benefiting from the profits. Eventually, exemption from tax was secured and the new IPKO was set to pick up where its predecessor had left off.

March to July was a time of consolidation. Outwardly not much changed except for the ping-pong table where the IPKO team now takes out their frustrations. The old sofa still remains, although it has ceased to serve as a waiting room for passers-by who drop in and log on.

The office is still on the first floor of the huge Boro and Ramizi sports center and lucky to be there. Three months ago, the main hall of the sports center was gutted by fire. The IPKO staff had to carry the equipment downstairs in case the fire spread and then haul it back again. It was a reminder that in Kosovo the unexpected is always just around the corner.

Healthy Balance

One measure of the IPKO's success so far has been its financial viability. This has been achieved by taking advantage of the Interpacket grant and converting it into a healthy profit.

The IPKO began by charging customers 2,000 DM ($1,000) a month for a 64K connection. The charge increases with the size of the bandwidth. (The U.S. government and the United Nations both pay 5,000 DM a month for a 256K connection.)

As of mid-July, 80 customers were paying approximately a total of 160,000 DM a month, of which half represented profit. This has allowed the IPKO to reduce its charges (from 2,000 DM to 1,650 for a 64K connection), to attract qualified staff, to connect more civil society organizations for free, and to start making some bold plans for the future.

Eighteen Kosovars are now on the payroll, drawing salaries that are generous by the local standards of Kosovo (where government-employed surgeons and professors are paid 400 DM a month) and competitive with the salaries paid by the United Nations and most international NGOs.

Mark Vuksani, who was recruited from Koha Ditore, heads the IPKO's technical team of seven. Mark is low-key in person, but scintillating as a techie. He recently wrote code for software that would allow the IPKO to monitor which clients are logged in and anticipate likely technical problems in advance.

The IPKO also hired a new Chief Financial Officer, Bujar Musa, from a New York construction company. Bujar has a New Yorker's appreciation for healthy income statements. He notes that salaries (which total 24,000 DM a month) account for less than 16 percent of the IPKO's operating costs -- a figure of which any private company would be proud.

The big question, of course, is what happens when IPKO begins paying for its satellite time in September. The IPKO will continue to use the Interpacket satellite, but for a fee of $30,000 a month. But this will still leave the project with a monthly profit if it can retain its customers and its costs remain constant.

If things go according to plan, the profit margin should even grow. In the first place, all of the IPKO's media customers (which have received the service free) will start paying a fee starting November 15 after the elections. From September 1, customers will be able to dial up to the IPKO as Kosovo's telephone system comes back online. Fifty users are already dialing into the IPKO (free of charge) as an experiment, and last month the PTK installed another 30 lines to the IPKO. This will allow 600 new users to dial up. Each will be charged 2 DM an hour through modem connection, bringing in some 15,000 DM a month.

The Monopoly Threat

For the moment at least, then, the IPKO is financially secure. Outside of political pressures (which are examined below), the only possible threat would seem to come from a large-scale

withdrawal of the IPKO's major customers, coupled with a substantial increase in competitors.

Neither seems probable in the immediate future. Donors show no sign of retreating en masse from Kosovo, while competition -- if anything -- seems to be on the decline. At one stage there were five Internet service providers (ISPs) in Kosovo, including the IPKO. As of July, the number had fallen to three. The most serious business competitor is a company named Kujtesa, which was formed by a group of friends who ran a computer store. They copied the IPKO formula and lowered its prices by 10 percent. Kujtesa has six clients but suffered when its system fell victim to a power cut that lasted four days.

This lack of competition, while good for IPKO, raises the issue of a monopoly. One of the concerns expressed last year was that with its hefty grant of free satellite time and backing from UNMIK and the IRC, the IPKO might be cornering the market and closing off opportunities for others. This would not exactly help business in Kosovo. Nor would it help the IPKO to campaign against a government monopoly of information technology.

Akan and his colleagues understand the charge of monopoly that is leveled against the IPKO, but they dispute it. They feel that the IPKO has created the market, rather than taking it over. Someone had to break the ground, they say, and in a devastated country like Kosovo there was no way that it was going to be broken without some kind of financial backing or subsidy. The ISP managed by the newspaper Koha Ditore has been consistently subsidized by Soros.

In addition, over the last year a number of other factors have conspired against a competitive market to make the environment even more difficult for ISP start-ups. They include the lack of lending institutions, uncertainty over the future status of Kosovo, lack of business regulations, and also a very small pool of knowledgeable technicians. To top it all, until the intercity telephone links are restored this will be a tiny market with small profit and few prospects for growth.

In the view of Akan and his IPKO colleagues, if there is a monopolistic threat, it comes from government.

At first sight, this also seems improbable. Certainly, in some parts of the Balkans region the trend is toward less government control over telecommunications. (Several governments have applied for membership in the European Union and been told to liberalize their telecommunications industry. Most have been given a transitional period in which to phase out a government monopoly.)

As for Kosovo, it has no government and minimal regulation. UNMIK has created a regulatory body for the telecommunications sector, namely the PTK. But so far, the PTK has enjoyed no authority over the Internet. As a result, for most of the last year the IPKO has enjoyed considerable independence. It pays no tax and has no government authority perched on its shoulder.

In spite of this, techies like Akan in Kosovo look with alarm at neighboring Macedonia, which has several ISPs but only one route into the backbone of the Internet -- controlled by the

government. This allows the Macedonian government to regulate prices, and acts as a major disincentive to initiative and innovation.

How great is this danger in Kosovo? UNMIK and the PTK are certainly attempting to rebuild Kosovo's telecommunications and to impose some kind of regulation. As noted earlier, the PTK made an early attempt to take over the IPKO last year but was rebuffed by the United Nations. It has not given up the design. The PTK recently proposed a surcharge of 30 pfennigs (15 cents) for each minute spent on the Internet -- a grab for money and control that would have put the Internet beyond the reach of every Kosovar.

This proposal was dropped after a storm of protest (led by the IPKO), but it was an ominous sign of what might come. The IPKO team is convinced that the PTK still has them in its sights. They suspect, for example, that the PTK dragged its feet in installing new telephone lines into the IPKO office, so as to slow the IPKO's search for dial-up customers.

The threat has convinced the IPKO team that it has to do more lobbying for a free Internet, but without openly provoking a fight with the PTK. Akan himself has quietly tried to solicit support and even visited the European Commission in Brussels in support of allies.

Whether or not the PTK can be persuaded to hold off and let Kosovo's fledgling information technology sector continue to soar without government interference will probably depend on UNMIK. Senior U.N. officials came to the rescue of the IPKO early on, partly because the United Nations needed its services. They must understand that greater regulation would run counter to trends elsewhere in Europe.

On the other hand, UNMIK's overriding objective for the province is to create central institutions with credibility. Eventually, this may collide with the vision of an information technology sector free from government control.

The Free Connections

When they started the project last summer, the IPKO's three founders set themselves several important goals -- that the project be self-sustaining, locally run, replicable, and that it produce some benefits for civil society. After nine months, it is possible to start drawing some preliminary conclusions.

The IPKO has provided free Internet service to several organizations representing a broad cross-section of Kosovar society. These organizations include:

- Media: All the media in the Rilindja building (9 newspapers, 2 news agencies, 2 TV stations, and 3 radio stations); Radio Kosova; and Television Kosova
- Six faculty departments at the university: (Math and Science, Agriculture, Electrotechnical, Medical, Mechanical Engineering, and Law)
- Four departments at the Prishtina hospital (Surgery, Facilities, Emergency, and DOW library)
- The NGO Forum Internet Access Center
- The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR) Media center

- The National Theatre

The board authorized another six connections at its March meeting, including: Reinvest (a business think tank); the Mother Teresa Society; the Kosova Olympic Committee; the Chamber of Commerce; the Rural Women's Network; and the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms. Half of these organizations have been connected. Additionally, they authorized a connection for Handikos, the association of handicapped, and have made progress toward connecting all of the high schools in Prishtina.

These free connections allow the IPKO to make the Internet accessible to civil society, but they also cost the IPKO between 1,000 and 1,200 DM a month. While they say there is no question of ending the service, several members of the IPKO team question whether it is the IPKO's most useful contribution to society. With the IPKO's own subsidy about to end, this discussion will no doubt intensify in the weeks ahead. The concern is not so much the costs of the connection, but ensuring that the connections are used. IPKO is struggling to provide technical support for both paying and non-paying customers.

The IPKO board carefully screens applications for a free connection, which are expected to meet certain criteria. Not surprisingly, to qualify for a connection, a group must be able to use it. This means possessing computers and a clear communications strategy.

These criteria are quite strictly applied. One organization that could benefit from access to the Internet is Handikos, the association of handicapped whose dynamic director Halit Ferizi was profiled earlier in this series. Handikos has an excellent reputation, but its application to the IPKO for a free connection was put on hold after robbers broke into its office and stole all of the computers. (A donor has since replaced the computers and Handikos was voted a free connection at the recent July board meeting of the IPKO.)

It may not be enough just to have computers. One example was the NGO Forum, which was intended to serve as a computer center for local NGOs in Kosovo. The Forum was started by several savvy young Kosovars who were educated abroad and understood the need for, and the uses of, the Internet. They persuaded the European Union to provide 50,000 DM for the purchase of computers.

But they made a number of basic mistakes. They did not find a technician to oversee the use of the computers and imposed no rules about the use of computers. As a result, the Forum was constantly full of teenagers downloading music from Napster and other MP3 files. They did not install windows software on the computers, which were not even protected by passwords.

The Forum's founders drifted off, and the center closed for several weeks. It has since reopened with new rules and a new management. This is important because no other center offers NGOs access to the Internet or email. Many groups, like the Kosovo Young Ecologists, depend on their contacts with friends abroad, but there is no point giving them a large, expensive connection to the IPKO -- particularly when they may soon be able to dial up the IPKO at a fraction of the cost.

After nine months, it is probably time to evaluate the impact of these free connections. From a

technical perspective, the NGO Forum showed that an organization must have a fairly extensive system in place before it can take full advantage of the free connection and that this involves much more than just computers. They have to have a plan for the use. The question might be asked whether the IPKO should not dig into its profits and help NGOs put together the necessary package. So far, the answer has been a resounding no. The IPKO board is convinced that this would send the IPKO in a hundred different directions and dissipate its technical expertise. One can understand the concern. Almost 400 NGOs have registered with UNMIK in the last year, and many of them have no clear goals beyond getting hold of aid money. In other words, at this point civil society in Kosovo looks distinctly mushy and unfocused. The IPKO could put itself on a slippery slope if it offered anything more than connectivity.

The larger question -- of great interest to the Advocacy Project but probably less relevant to the IPKO -- is whether connecting civil society to the Internet provides real benefits in a war-torn society like Kosovo. Is connectivity a goal in itself, or a means to some greater end?

Many might say the former, because advocacy is the oxygen of democracy and advocates depend on communication. Connectivity is sufficient unto itself. Yet access to the Internet does not necessarily make an organization more effective. For example, the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms has been one of the big disappointments of Kosovo's transition. It is politicized and centralized and has done little for Kosovo's embattled minorities. Nonetheless, it received a free IPKO connection and will probably make good use of it.

The IPKO does not see itself as a judge of the effectiveness of civil society, nor should it become one. But at the same time, by providing free connections it is making an important statement. Are these free connections making a serious contribution to Kosovo? If not, why continue? If yes, why not do more? With these and other questions in mind, there is a growing consensus in the board that some kind of evaluation is needed of the free connections. This will be discussed at the next board meeting.

Akan's Vision

Akan Ismaili, the IPKO Executive Director, has his own views about the IPKO's contribution to society. To judge from our recent interview in Prishtina, it does not lie in providing free connections to NGOs.

Akan feels that the IPKO is laying a solid technical, educational, and business foundation for information technology in Kosovo. This, he believes -- together with fighting for an independent Internet -- should be the IPKO's principal mission.

Akan grew excited as he explained it in his excellent English: 'Kosovo does not have exports of its own. We offer a tiny market. Seventy percent of our population is under the age of thirty. Information technology is a perfect solution! The IPKO needs to promote the use of the Internet in Kosovo and prepare Kosovo for the new technology age. We can turn Kosovo into an information technology center in the region, capable of producing software solutions, programs, and products.'

Judging from the explosion of Internet cafes in Kosovo, the first part of the vision -- the rapidly expanding use of the Internet -- is coming to fruition.

There are currently 17 Internet cafes open in Prishtina; eleven of which are customers of the IPKO. In terms of population and area, this is surely more than any other European capital. While the figure may be distorted by the lack of home computers and the enormous number of U.N. officials with money to spend and families to contact, there can be no doubt that the Internet has caught on in Kosovo. It is also lining some pockets. The Internet cafes charge 6 DM ($3) an hour and are often full.

With each new user who logs on, the information technology culture gains acceptance. Credit for this undoubtedly belongs to the IPKO. At the same time, this mini-boom (if such it is) is driven by the profit motive and market forces. This is a far cry from the kind of non-profit initiatives that normally energize civil society in the aftermath of a war.

To Akan it matters not. 'Which does more for civil society in Kosovo -- wiring up a hundred new Internet users and promoting the free use of the Internet, or wiring up a rural women's network?' It is not yet an either/or. But it is an interesting question.

Akan's vision of the future includes a bold plan for establishing an information technology training academy at the university. The plan has been given the go-ahead by the IPKO board and is well under way. Starting in the fall, students would pay a fee of around 500 DM ($250) per month to receive state of the art training that would guarantee them jobs in the technology sector on graduation.

It will cost an estimated one million DM to refurbish and rent the office space at the university and install equipment. Most of the courses, especially in the beginning will be Internet based, using online teaching systems from two partners: Cisco Networking Academy in the United States and the Noroff Institute in Norway.

Under the plan, the IPKO will put up 150,000 DM toward the initial costs, and the Norwegian government has agreed to pay for the first 150 trainees. The rest of the money will have to be raised, presumably from donors.

Donors will be reassured by the fact that not all the beneficiaries will be from the private sector. The plan is for UNMIK and international organizations to send their employees for training (and also pay the costs). Non-profits will also be able to use the academy to train their techies. Before they get their certificates, students will have to intern at non- profits.

Decisions, Decisions

It is a measure of the confidence of Akan and the IPKO board that they are prepared to invest so much of the IPKO's profits in the new training school. Some would call it a gamble. But Akan himself is completely convinced of the need and of how it fits with his vision for the IPKO.

Who is to say he is wrong? Akan certainly makes you want to believe. He has a cheerful, attractive personality. Everyone is welcome to the IPKO office. And, like many of Kosovo's new

leaders, Akan paid his dues during the 1990s. In 1994, at the height of Serbian repression, he took over the technical management of the Kosovo 'node' in the famous Zamir network. This ran out of Koha Ditore, and it allowed embattled NGOs in Kosovo to contact peace groups throughout the Balkans.

This was a crucial contribution to the development of Kosovo's 'parallel society,' and it introduced Akan to many of the leaders profiled in this series (some of whom have sought an free IPKO connection.) After Koha, Akan moved to the U.S. Information Office in Prishtina. He spent the war at U.S. Information Service in Vienna.

This is an impressive resume. Coupled with a winning personality, a ferocious work ethic, and technical expertise, it makes Akan a superb spokesman for information technology -- and not just in Kosovo. He is beginning to get the recognition he deserves beyond Kosovo.

But does his vision belong in Prishtina or in Silicon Valley? Some would argue that the IPKO still has social dues to pay in Kosovo, and that Akan's vision will do more to invigorate the private sector than civil society. Both may have a role in a new Kosovo, but many would argue that the latter is more in need of help from initiatives like the IPKO. Kosovo is bursting at the seams with entrepreneurs. Businesses will soon take notice.

This debate over the role of the IPKO looks it will come to a head soon. The proposed training center at the university will eat into the IPKO's profits when it can no longer fall back on the Interpacket subsidy. This will test the IPKO's capacity to the fullest. And it may make it harder to justify free connections.

There are other challenges just over the horizon. Politically, the battle for the IPKO is far from over. Technically, the IPKO's greatest limitation is the fact that it cannot reach outside the capital Prishtina except with a shaky dial-up. This means that those who live in the interior of Kosovo have no way of reliably and consistently logging onto the Internet. The U.S. government and International Organization of Migration (IOM) have established Internet centers in seven towns that are each connected to a satellite, but users have to reserve two days in advance and there are doubts that the service will survive much longer.

Slowly and ever so laboriously, the PTK is repairing the telephone lines from Prishtina to the interior, but it will be many months before a sufficient number of lines will be repaired to permit Internet as well as telephone use.

Sooner or later, Kosovo's interior will open up. The only questions are when and whether the IPKO should step in sooner. If one of the IPKO's goals is to promote Internet connectivity, opening services to the interior is clearly worth consideration. In theory, the IPKO could build a series of repeater stations to carry its satellite signal to towns like Mitrovica and Gjakova.

But according to Akan, this would cost over $1,5 million, not counting the cost of maintenance. Does the IPKO want to assume such a burden? Could the money not be better spent elsewhere? Is it ready to service a countrywide wireless network? Would this not be seen as usurping the PTK and provoke a show-down with the transitional administration and UNMIK?

Above all, is it really the task of the IPKO to continue filling the telecommunications void for Kosovo? That might have been appropriate during the emergency, but is it still appropriate after a year of reconstruction, with the private sector resurgent and the PTK increasingly competent?

Perhaps the IPKO would be better advised to fill a different kind of void where it has no obvious competitors and focus on advocacy and education. That is certainly no less important to Kosovo's future.