

Profiles of Civil Society Leaders in Kosovo (1999-2000)

- **Halit Perizi**, the president of Handikos, the handicap association
- **Sabit Rrahmani**, the president of the first political party for Ashkali, one of Kosovo's dwindling minorities
- **Guri Shkodra**, a founder of the Young Ecologists of Prishtina
- **Musa Rrhudani**, a leading member of the community improvement council (CIC)
- **Igo Rogava**, executive director of the women's group Motrat Qiriaz
- **Akan Ismaili** has taken over the Internet Project Kosovo and turned it from a pioneering humanitarian project into a pillar of postwar civil society
- **Sevdie Sadiqi**, a law student at Prishtina University, has taken steps to arrest the decline at her once-proud university

Halit Ferizi, the president of Handikos, the handicapped association, looked on the arrival of international agencies in Kosovo as a godsend. He was convinced that they would be receptive to his message and his model of advocacy. It was, he felt, a "historic opportunity" to get the needs of the disabled integrated into the reconstruction of Kosovo.



Disabled people in Kosovo faced new challenges after the war. By December 1999, Handikos had registered 340 new disabilities from landmines and unexploded cluster bombs, and even more by cars. "Old cars and bad drivers are creating a new generation of paraplegics and spinal injuries," said Halit sadly.

Halit had other reasons to be gloomy when we met with him in early 2000. Thieves had just ransacked the temporary offices of Handikos and stole all of the computers. With them had gone 13,000 personal files on handicapped families, laboriously collected over the years. But Halit reacted as he does to all reversals—with optimism and enthusiasm. He was much too busy to let it get him down. Within hours, the Handikos staff had new computers and were rebuilding their data base.

Like all successful advocates Halit set himself clear goals. One was to preserve and strengthen the Handikos network. This was not helped by the fact that international agencies recruited ten of

the most talented Handikos volunteers. (None was disabled. In fact, not a single disabled person was hired as an interpreter by the agencies.) Halit also found that international agencies were often insensitive to the needs of disabled. He was unable to attend meetings of the UNHCR's community officers because they were held on the second floor of a building whose elevator was broken. But true to form, Halit tried to turn this to advantage. He argued that ramps should be built into every public building constructed in Kosovo under the U.N. program. If this could be done early enough, it would cost no extra money. UNMIK was trying to build a new health system from scratch, and Halit knew there would never be a better chance of integrating the needs of the disabled into the national health policy. He was also determined to find a place for preventive health care, so as to reduce the number of accidents.

When the United Nations announced plans to hold elections in municipalities, Halit immediately began thinking of his constituency. How would disabled get to the polls? How would people without hands cast their vote? He also watched with growing concern as the U.N. administration developed a policy on welfare. So little money was coming in from tax revenues and aid that the UNMIK proposed to put a very low cap on welfare payments. Furthermore, instead of supporting vulnerable individuals, every single member of a family would have to qualify as vulnerable before that family could receive any support.

Halit was more than happy to work with the international agencies to get through this challenging agenda. He remained grateful to international NGOs like Handicap International, which had supplied Handikos with wheelchairs during the dark days of Serbian rule. (Halit was less complimentary toward NGOs working on landmines. Sometimes, they would support mine victims while ignoring victims of other forms of disability who lived in the same village. This, to Halit, was discriminatory.) Halit was willing--even eager--to work with the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which was trying to organize Kosovar NGOs into a democratic structure. After several abortive attempts, the NGOs came together for an assembly, which elected 13 organizations to an Executive Council. Halit willingly accepted to join, although he has since been critical of the Council's apathy.

He was asked to join a working group on healthpolicy and also to represent civil society on the central elections committee. These were both important policy-making bodies, and Halit accepted the invitations with excitement. This enthusiasm is critical to Halit's success as an advocate. Instead of snubbing international officials, he sympathizes with their frustration. While everyone else predicts doom and gloom, Halit Ferizi's face is wreathed in smiles. He would come bounding out to meet visitors, if only he could walk. So, from his wheelchair, Halit does the next best thing. He embraces them and makes them feel important.

Coming from someone who has been partially paralyzed for almost 30 years, it is both humbling and uplifting. One leaves Handikos convinced that UNMIK would be crazy not to build its entire reconstruction plan around the needs of the handicapped. It is completely genuine, and it has also brought rewards. Halit has become something of a poster child for reconstruction. Money is

pouring in to Handikos, and Halit is emerging as a person to watch in post-war Kosovo. The disabled will be a force to be reckoned within the new Kosovo. Despite his disability, Halit is in many respects the personification of civil society in action. "Civil society means taking control of your own life," he says. *"We are ready to assume our responsibility. They cannot make democracy without us."*

Sabit Rrahmani is president of the first political party for Ashkali, one of Kosovo's dwindling minorities. He is also a rarity—a minority leader who has placed his trust in conventional politics.



To Sabit it was a matter of survival. The Ashkali are closely related to the Roma. This makes them deeply suspect to the Albanians, who blame the Roma for siding with Serbia during the war. Sabit argued that the best way for the Ashkali to protect themselves was to speak with one voice. This could only be done by forming a party. Others disagreed strongly. Indeed, by the time the Advocacy Project interviewed Sabit in December 1999, his initiative was embroiled in controversy. At the very least this showed how hard it is to

create a new party from scratch in an ethnically divided society.

Sabit lives in a small country town of Dubrava, near Ferizaj. Before the war, Ferizaj had a thriving community of Roma and other minorities. Following the war, their houses were burnt, and many were driven out. But 3,700 Ashkali remained. Like so many of Kosovo's beleaguered minorities, they were under a cloud of suspicion. Fourteen villagers from Dubrava had been conscripted into the Serbian forces during the NATO bombing campaign, and the entire village was suspected of collaboration. Ashkali did not dare to send their children to school. They were being turned away from health centers. They were receiving less than their allotted emergency food rations. Most of them were out of work.

In the summer of 1999, Sabit started making the case for a new political party, known as the Ashkalia Democratic Party of Kosovo. To Sabit and his friends, it seemed the only course to take. But others worried that it further divide the Roma, who were leaving Kosovo in droves. These critics maintain that the Ashkali are descended from Roma who stopped speaking the Romany language and became assimilated by the Albanians. In other words, they are either ethnic Albanians or ethnic Roma. By insisting on a separate identify for the Ashkali, they said, Sabit was making it harder for the Roma to speak with one voice.

Even some prominent Ashkali in Ferizaj felt that Sabit was merely pandering to the international obsession with party politics. He was being an opportunist, not a democrat. Sabit Rrahmani, a

soft-spoken but confident 24-year-old, does not fit the image of a political firebrand. Nor does he strike one as a manipulator of the international community. (When we met him, he worked for a Lutheran aid agency). His own story is of a man trying to straddle different identities. He is Muslim by religion, and his own credentials are solidly anti-Serb. Before the war, he was president of the Mother Teresa Society branch in Dubrava and captain of the Dubrava football team. It was the only Ashkali team in the region, and it did exceptionally well, winning the municipal championship. Sabit played striker. His prowess at soccer made Sabit a potential rallying point for Kosovars and therefore suspect to the Serbs. He was arrested briefly in December 1998 and left Kosovo after being released. He returned to Dubrava after the war to find the villagers demoralized and divided, and quickly assumed the role of leader.

He organized security patrols and assumed the task of negotiating with the KLA on behalf of the 14 villagers who were suspected of collaboration with the Serbs. A third of the villagers had fled into exile, and Sabit used this fact to argue that both Albanians and Ashkali had both suffered at the hands of a common enemy. Among his own people, he made much of the ordeal suffered by the Albanians at the hands of Serbian forces and paramilitaries. Sabit and three others even removed 42 kilos of explosives from the offices of the LDK. It was very brave and also very foolish-but he was doing everything to avoid confronting the Albanians. Even before his party was launched, Sabit was acting like a veteran politician.

His first challenge in building a new party was to clearly establish the separateness of the Ashkali from the Roma. He argued that Ashkali have their own distinctive form of dress, music, and marriage. This was more than enough basis for claiming a separate identity. Besides, he says, it was for him to choose his own identity-and the same went for his people. The real questions were practical: Could a new party attract support? Would it survive? Would they get the necessary support from the international agencies?



Interestingly, the signals were mixed. UNHCR officials in Ferizaj disapproved. They felt that Ashkali were facing a humanitarian, not a political crisis in Ferizaj. Ashkali needed food, education, housing, clothing, and medical care-not political representation. To present these humanitarian problems in political terms would only create confrontation. But officials from the OSCE were delighted. They were trying to coax democracy from Kosovo's barren soil, and in Sabit Rrahmani they saw someone who was inculcating a sense of pride into Kosovo's dispirited Roma. Sabit pushed ahead. Three representatives were chosen by each of the three Ashkali communities near Ferizaj (Metvici, Salahane, and Dubrava). An open meeting was then called to launch the actual party. It was attended by 60 Ashkali, some elders, and officials from the OSCE. Nine Ashkali were elected to a board, with Sabit as president. They spent the next month consolidating the organization. Each Ashkali family was asked to contribute one D-mark every two weeks, and a member of the committee was designated to issue receipts. It was a small

step on the road to accountability. After three weeks there were 900 D-marks in the kitty. By December, the new party was attracting articles in the press.



Ashkali protested the discriminatory food distribution practices of local Mother Teresa Society offices

By focusing on building the party, they were able to postpone the tough decisions. Sabit knew that a political party thrives on campaigns, but he also knew that the crisis facing Ashkali—the denial of food aid, the lack of security—was caused by Albanians. Campaigning on such issues would define the Ashkalis' rights in terms of grievance. It could be suicidal.

When we met Sabit, he was seeking an issue around which his members could mobilize without provoking their neighbors. The municipal elections seemed promising. The whole purpose was to give local communities some control over their lives,

and if the Ashkali could win votes they might well emerge with a seat on the council and a role in administering the basic services that they so badly need.

But before they could even field candidates, they would have to collect 3,300 signatures to register as a party. This was clearly beyond the means of the Ashkali from Ferizaj alone, and it meant they would have to form a partnership with Ashkali parties in other municipalities. This would test even Sabit's political skills. He had found it hard enough to unite the Ashkali of Ferizaj—many of whom were related. How much harder would he find it to coopt Ashkali from other areas, where he was looked on with some distrust? When we left him, he was just starting to wrestle with the implications.

** Update: Sabit Rrahmani failed in his first bid for elective office. He managed to weld several Ashkali groups into a national party (The Democratic Party of Albanian Ashkali in Kosovo - PDASH). He also raised enough signatures to field candidates in seven municipalities during Kosovo's November municipal elections. But the party only won 1,562 votes in total. Only one PDSAh candidate was elected, in the municipality of Fushe Kosove (Kosovo Polje). The party won 425 votes in Ferizaj, or 1% of the votes cast.*

On December 1, 1999--International AIDS Day--**Guri Shkodra** and 40 other Young Ecologists of Kosovo dressed up as condoms, gave out a thousand examples of the real thing, and stopped the traffic on Prishtina's main street. It was not the first time that Guri had ended up with his photo in the papers. But what, we wondered, did AIDS have to do with ecology? "Oh," he said, without missing a beat, "ecologists care about people."

Guri Shkodra is wise beyond his years, and for much of the past year he has been one of the more visible advocates in Prishtina. He found the perfect foil for his drive and ambition in the international agencies, and



The Sky Above Guri's Home

the perfect issue in the environment. This rarely features on the U.N.'s peace-building agenda but it is under everyone's nose, particularly in Kosovo. It goes back to the 1990s, when Kosovo's environment was subjected to a deadly combination of government neglect and misguided energy policies (such as the excessive use of sulphurous coal). Then came the war, which reduced thousands of houses to rubble and littered the countryside with mines and unexploded NATO cluster bombs. Then the influx of aid workers and motor vehicles followed the end of the war.



Guri Shkodra

For months there was no waste disposal service to clean up the mess. When the Serbian forces left, they took the functioning garbage trucks with them. Prishtina's only landfill was clogged with discarded uniforms, old currency, and the occasional body. The result was that for month after month people were forced to pick their way past piles of stinking trash. It broke Guri's heart. Even at his young age, he could remember when the parks were clean and Prishtina was easy to live in.

Guri's transformation to activist came during his exile in Macedonia, where he stayed with an uncle. With time on his hands, he concluded that the environment would need all the help it could get. After returning to Prishtina, he joined up two other schoolfriends, Dren Ukmata and Arber Istrefi. Together, they formed the Young Ecologists of Prishtina. They registered as an NGO with UNMIK (using their mothers' names because they were under age.) Then, they set about making their presence felt.

Their first activities were aimed at young children. Guri tried out the message on his five-year-old brother to see how much he understood about the environment. Quite a lot, it turned out. Armed with the advice, Young Ecologists toured kindergartens and talked about ecology. They also handed out coloring books-at the suggestion of Guri's brother. The money for this came from UNICEF. It is more difficult to get through to the older kids of Kosovo, partly because parents set such a shocking example. But Guri found ways to talk to them as peers. Many Kosovo kids practice a disgusting game of catching birds and cutting their wings. The Young Ecologists patiently explained how this damaged the environment. They were always on the lookout for new ideas and they struck the right note-mischievous but not malevolent. This was guaranteed to appeal to the international agencies, which were desperate for Kosovars with a sense of community spirit. Guri was the perfect "local partner." He represented youth (one of the U.N.'s most favored categories). He was brimming with initiative, instead of fatalism. His goals were far removed from ethnic hatred. In fact, he was proof positive that Kosovo had a future.

Guri knew that he had a willing audience for his brand of advocacy in the international agencies. When the OSCE decided to hold an exhibition by young Kosovar artists, his group was one of the four sponsors. They painted 40 pictures for the exhibition. They took part in festivals. They produced a poster urging Kosovars to "save their environment" and then took it to UNICEF,

which printed 60 copies. They put up a tree in the UNMIK garden at Christmas and dressed up like clowns. Guri is a fabulous networker and from the start he was hungry for contacts abroad. It was just a matter of time before he decided to turn to the Internet. Their first message was to Joschka Fischer, leader of the German Greens and Germany's Foreign Minister. The Advocacy Project contacted friends in Germany, and the Minister graciously replied. The Advocacy Project was also able to put Guri in touch with one of our associates, 15-year-old Andrew Siegel from Washington, DC. Andrew designed a website for Guri. The site was launched on the occasion of Earth Day. Within three days it had received 1,677 visitors.

Throughout this giddy year, Guri and his friends did not fall into the trap of letting their organization take priority over their work. They yearned for an office, which was the ultimate status symbol for many NGOs in Kosovo. But they also knew that reputations are made by results not offices. Besides, there were practical considerations, not least the fact that they were still at school. Guri has not completely given up hope of opening an office. In the meantime, he has decided to rent a vacant garage. Each Young Ecologist is contributing 4 DM toward rent. The hard work and ingenuity is starting to pay dividends. Guri's profile has grown to the point where CNN was considering featuring him in a television series on local heroes in Kosovo. During the summer, the Young Ecologists received one substantial grant, worth 10,000 DM and a prize worth 9,000 DM, for cleaning up another eyesore.

*From the Federal Minister for
Foreign Affairs of Germany*

I find it most impressive and encouraging to see how you and your friends, under the current difficult conditions in Kosovo, are working to protect the environment and bring people together in ways that are peaceful and constructive. The activities you have organized are highly original. Raising people's awareness of environmental issues is very important and I am sure you are making a valuable contribution here, especially with regard to young people. Carry on the good work with the same creative zest and spirit of can-do! I wish you and all members of the Young Ecologists of Kosovo good luck and every success!

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*Yours sincerely,
Joschka Fischer*

Guri now faces the challenge of creating an organization that can take on big-time lobbying, while still retaining its charm and quirkiness. For most of the last year, Guri has occupied a special place in the ranks of Kosovo civil society. He was loved by the international agencies while they felt unloved-but also treated with some condescension.

With normal life beginning to return to Kosovo and the agencies starting to gain some confidence, the Young Ecologists will find themselves facing the sort of government mischief that preoccupies most green lobbies. Guri received a foretaste of this, when he discovered by accident that the environment department was the only one of the 20 transitional departments (ministries) still without a Kosovar co-head. This suggested that the United Nations and Kosovo's politicians are still shockingly indifferent to the environment, and it cried out to be exposed. But this would be a very different kind of campaign from cleaning up a park.

Of course there will still be a role for the Young Ecologists' charming brand of activism. UNMIK is making plans to recycle glass and cans. Guri's eyes lit up at the news. Cans! Kids! Cameras!

But if they are to be truly effective in the new Kosovo, Guri and his friends will need to shed their image as school kids-to be seen as an equals, rather than mascots. This could be hard to do-particularly when school still beckons.



Andrew Siegel (left) celebrating Earth Day

Musa Rrudhani is a figure of authority among the 360 villagers of Novo Selo, in the municipality of Gjilan, eastern Kosovo. During the era of the parallel society, he was president of the village committee that governed the village. He showed his prowess as a farmer by growing enough potatoes to feed his large extended family during the war. Now, after the war, he has taken on new responsibilities as a leading member of new form of self-government, known as the community improvement council (CIC).

The CICs are the brainchild of USAID's Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI), and they work as follows: whenever OTI receives a request for assistance from a village, it invites the village to elect a community improvement council, or CIC. The CIC then identifies the community's needs and sends a project request to OTI. OTI made a considerable commitment to the model in 1999. By December 1999, 160 councils had been established in Kosovo, involving some 2,400 villagers. OTI had spent over \$2 million on projects identified by these new councils. From a donor's perspective, this is intelligent aid. It helps OTI to get money directly into the hands of beneficiaries and also increases the chances that a project will be sustainable after OTI's funding dries up. If a community has designed and owns a project, it is more likely to make a long-term commitment. But what is the impact on civil society? In December last year, the Advocacy Project visited the village of Novo Selo with David Savard, an official from OTI, to find out.



Musa Rrudhani

It was the second time that the council had met. It was elected by 60 villagers-about 20% of the total population-and it comprises 11 councillors, including two 14-year-old boys and several women. This was encouraging because no women sat on the LDK council that ran the village's affairs under the parallel society. The meeting was held in the schoolhouse, and it was well attended. One thing quickly became clear-these villagers knew exactly what they needed. Top of the list came desks and chairs. They had built a schoolhouse at the end of the 1980s, but it had

never been used because they had no chairs. Now they needed the school badly, because the nearest school was several kilometers away, along a dangerous stretch of road. Once they have equipped their school, the villagers of Novo Selo would like to improve their supply of electricity. Out here, they said, they are at the very end of the grid. They also wanted to provide piped water to the soccer field, pavement for a key stretch of road in the center of town, and a bridge over the stream that runs besides the schoolhouse.



**The Novo Selo Council (far left)
David Savard, USAID**

It did not take long to identify these needs and prioritize them. The next decision was to delegate a council member to go with David to Gjilan and take up some of the issues at a higher level. Musa Rrudhani confidently volunteered. It was agreed that he would talk to UNICEF, which had chairs and desks in storage but no schools to put them in.

This was a small step forward. Musa might or might not return with desks, but at least he would be able to report back. Under Communism, villages like Novo Selo were the last to hear about anything. This persisted after last year's war: no one knew why electricity was so difficult to come by.

How do the CICs score as a model of aid? From our limited time in Novo Selo, we would say bold but expensive. It takes repeated visits by OTI officials to coax a CIC into existence, and several more visits to help identify a project. Even then, the project might turn out to be no more than the purchase of school tables. Each grant has to be carefully tailored to the individual community. As such it will require intensive oversight. But OTI officials were convinced that this was well worth the investment. It was, said David, the process that mattered-of electing councils, of identifying priorities, of delegating, and of public discussion.

All this was sparking a small grassroots revolution in Novo Selo:

"It gets them thinking about the public good-something that rarely happens in the Balkans. Usually, decisions are taken at the top and dissenters keep quiet. Communal decision-making is the start of real democracy. Once that is in place, they can move on to petitioning the government. They need to learn that you can make a difference by campaigning and lobbying."
--David Savard

In practice, this is less subversive than it may sound, because those elected to the CICs are usually village leaders. The old guard certainly remains powerful in Novo Selo. The committee that ran the village during the 1990s was comprised of representatives from the 40 leading families, and it still exists. Musa Rrudhani is Vice-President, as well as serving on the new CIC. In a sense, the CIC thus reinforces the status quo. But while OTI might focus on the implications

for democracy, to the villagers of Novo Selo like Musa it all came down to foreign aid. As befits his role as village spokesman, Musa posed the question on everyone's lips: How could the international community help to revive the local economy? In a sense, this is the key question, because the task facing Novo Selo is not about rebuilding after war, but jumpstarting an economy that slipped back into the dark ages during the 1990s, when it was isolated from European markets and ignored by Serbia. The war added salt to the wound. Before the outbreak of hostilities, 20 villagers had paid employment. Now, the number had fallen to four: the bus driver, the teacher, the doctor, and a gas-pump attendant.

Before the war, Musa himself worked in a ceramics factory, which has stopped producing because it has no propane and only one functioning oven. But he still puts in an appearance every week to register for work. This ensures that he remains nominally on the payroll and entitled to any benefits. It also allows him to claim that he is employed, which is a mark of distinction in Novo Selo. But it's not really work. At the same time, Novo Selo's unemployment statistics are less dramatic than they might appear, because the villagers long ago ceased to place their trust in formal employment. Their hopes are pinned to the rich loam that stretches out beyond the houses. Here, Musa grows potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, and cabbage, all of which he sells at the local market. The cash goes under his mattress. The villagers have not used or trusted banks for years.

Musa earned about 3,000 DM (\$1,500) from his potatoes in 1999. The interesting thing is that he could earn more if he linked up with other farmers to build a silo. This would permit them to sell potatoes out of season at five times the normal price. Building a silo in Novo Selo would put more D-marks under the mattress and make a lot of sense. This would seem tailor-made for a small business loan. But it requires banks and credit. Even if these had been in place-and they were not during the first year after the war-Musa himself was unconvinced. It did not seem to matter that he lived among friends and relatives: he had grown used to working alone and competing at the market. We found ourselves in the strange position of arguing the merits of cooperatives with this former Communist. We left Novo Selo feeling that the new councils might or might not promote a new form of village democracy, but that the real revolution must begin in the minds of farmers.

** Update: The fate of the CICs is unclear, as OTI phases out of Kosovo. Field offices are scheduled to close in July 2001 and the main OTI office in December 2001. In July 2000, OTI support for NGOs, media, and the CICs fell sharply.*

Igo Rogova, Executive Director of the women's group Motrat Qiriazi, was in tears. During the war she had faced down Serbian paramilitary. Now, a year into the peace she was up against the United Nations.

Late in July 2000, women in Kosovo decided to organize a march to honor the victims and survivors (mostly women) of the massacre at Srebrenica during the war in Bosnia. It was a gesture of solidarity. In the time-honored fashion, they wanted to march down the main street with photos of their loved ones. Although they had been granted a security permit by the police, the Office of Gender Affairs in UNMIK—supposedly the mouthpiece for women in Kosovo—did not sanction the march and attempted to stop it. The women of Kosovo responded as only they knew how. They linked arms and stopped traffic, until the UN police agreed to clear the street and allow the march. But the incident left a sour taste on both sides. To Igo, UNMIK had shown itself once again to be condescending, patronizing, and unhelpful.



Igo Rogova – Center of Attention

Inside the conference, there were further demonstrations of the gulf between the United Nations and women of Kosovo. The Kosova Women's Union, which organized the meeting, decided not to admit more than two representatives from international organizations at any one time. The message was clear: this is our show, not yours. This was merely the latest in a series of skirmishes between the United Nations and women's movement in Kosovo in the months that followed the arrival of UNMIK. In one sense they started on the wrong foot and never recovered. In another, it was quite deliberate, particularly on the part of Igo Rogova. Unlike Halit Ferizi and Guri Shkodra, who chose conciliation and cooperation, Igo chose confrontation. She was more than happy to mix it with the international agencies—to complain when they slipped up, and to demand more. She was most outspoken in denouncing the Kosovo Women's Initiative—the \$10 million fund for women administered by UNHCR. When the OSCE tried to impose coordination on women, it was Igo who led the revolt and initiated a separate meeting for women. She was the one who complained that Bernard Kouchner, the Special Representative of the U.N. Secretary-General in Kosovo, was treating Kosovar women "like Barbie dolls."

Igo's most recent campaign occurred over gender mainstreaming. Everyone agreed that women should be represented in UNMIK and also in the transitional administration. Twenty transitional departments (or ministries) have been established, with 40 "co-heads." Seven co-heads are women, and they include Vjosa Dobruna, one of the founders of the prestigious Center for the Protection of Women and Children. The United Nations also established a special office on gender affairs to advise Kouchner and coordinate gender issues among the rambling mission. U.N. working groups have been drafting new laws on violence against women and trafficking—both issues dear to the women's movement. UNMIK received little credit from Igo. One reason was that Kouchner reportedly favored creating a department for women.



Bernard Kouchner treats us like Barbie Dolls

A recent gender audit of reconstruction programs in the Balkans, conducted for the Urgent Action fund, found that discrimination against women had impeded the process of peace-building in Kosovo. Specifically, it found that discrimination against women has impeded the women's contributions, critical to sustaining peace in the region. Specifically in Kosovo:

**UNMIK authorities failed to take into account the need for democratic structures within UNMIK itself as an example of democratic governance and few women have been appointed to key decision-making positions.*

**Within international nongovernmental organizations, the UN and OSCE operations, there is a lack of gender balance in the jobs available.*

**There has been a significant rise in the sexual exploitation of women, trafficking, forced prostitution and sexual harassment.*

**Statistics categorized by sex and age are not a priority even though such statistical work is a vital ingredient to the integration of women and girls in all economic, social and political concerns.*

**Women who have become heads of household due to the death of male family members have been marginalized.*

**The international bureaucratic processes have been slow and often duplicative. Much of the funding for women's programmes is channelled through international umbrella groups, which, at times, appear to be searching for appropriate ways to spend it. With this orientation, it is possible that local groups will develop only in response to perceived international needs and thereby become dependent on the international funding*

**Many professional women in Kosova resent the international media's portrayal of Balkan women as "backward" with fundamentalist attitudes.*

The Gender Audit was researched by Chris Corrin, Center for Women's Studies, Glasgow University

Igo and others felt that this would marginalize women's issues and put them under the control of the political parties.

But the deeper disagreement concerned the role of women in the rebuilding of Kosovo. The real challenge to Igo was not about mainstreaming gender in UNMIK-important though that was. The real task was to build reconstruction around women and work in partnership with the women's movement. This movement had plenty of experience, as she herself had demonstrated during the parallel society and in war.

The intensity of Igo's style left some U.N. officials hurt and angry-feeling that nothing they did seemed to make a difference. But others understood what was at stake and put up with the rebuffs. As director of the controversial Kosovo Women's Initiative, Maureen McBrien was repeatedly targeted by Igo. Still, Maureen liked and admired Igo greatly. She realized that Kosovo would need some of Igo's steel once the United Nations had departed.

For all her inconsistency, Igo is hard not to like. Behind the smoker's cough lies a sunny, optimistic personality-a trait that she shares with other successful advocates. She is also constructive. She protested angrily when international NGOs muscled into the sensitive town of Mitrovica and established no fewer than three women's centers, competing directly with Motrat Qiriazhi's center. She was ignored. Still, she asked her director in Mitrovica to coordinate between the four centers and see how they could work together.

Her own great skill-and passion-is networking. Once the women of Kosovo had decided to boycott OSCE coordination meetings, Igo made sure that they turned to building the women's movement, instead of trashing the United Nations. They formed a forum that now meets monthly and includes over 30 different organizations. Each one brings 10 D-marks to the meeting. When the kitty reaches 1,000 DM it is given to a deserving group.

When we last met with her, Igo told us of the partnership between an Albanian women's group and a dynamic Serb woman who was caring for Serb refugees in Kosovo. They were put in touch with each other by international agencies. As the relationship grew, it allowed the Albanian women to see Serbs as victims as well as rapists and turned out to be an important step on the road to reconciliation.

This side to Igo the fighter is deeply attractive. It remains hidden from many U.N. officials. But if they could only get over the personal hurt they might understand that Igo is using the United Nations as a foil to strengthen the women's movement.

It seems to be working. Women are emerging as the strongest and most confident sector of civil society in Kosovo.

**Update :Capacity Building for Roma Women*

Igo Rogova held two days of training for fifteen women from Kosovo's Ashkali, Roma and Egyptian communities in Prishtina, between December 21 and 22, 2000. Igo asked the Advocacy Project to publicise the results of the training, which she described as a great success.

The 2-day meeting helped to break the ice between the women (some of whom had known and disliked each other). They decided that illiteracy among women is one of their most pressing problems, and should be the focus of joint proposals to donors. The group agreed to set up a network and celebrate International Roma day (April 8, 2001) in the Kosovo town of Prizren.

For more information on this and other capacity-building programs for women in Kosovo, contact Igo at motratqiriazhi@ipko.org

Akan Ismaili is one of the most cheerful advocates in Kosovo. Perhaps with good reason. He has taken over the Internet Project Kosovo and turned it from a pioneering humanitarian project into a pillar of postwar civil society.

Akan is Executive Director of the IPKO formerly known as the Kosovo Internet Project. The project brought the Internet to Kosovo, and since sending out its first message on September 30, 1999, it has done everything right. It has won a reputation for technical competence. It has money in the bank. It is employing 18 Kosovars at decent salaries. It is providing Internet access for a score of civic initiatives (including many of those featured in these pages). And it is entirely run by Kosovars.

Right now the project is at something of a cross roads-struggling to reconcile its two roles as a pioneer for information technology and a supporter of civil society. It's enough to bring a frown to the most cheerful of brows.



**Akan Ismaili – wired
to work**

The IPKO was started at the height of the Kosovo refugee crisis. Interpacket, a private company, offered the use of a large satellite dish and free satellite time for the 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 a year's satellite time at the disposal of Kosovo.

They also secured the backing of the International Rescue Committee (IRC), a respected international nongovernmental relief agency, for the idea. This brought a number of concrete benefits, including tax-free status. It also gave the IPKO powerful support when the newly created Post and Telecommunications Kosovo (PTK) made an early attempt to take control of the information technology sector.

Like all the successful initiatives profiles on these pages, the IPKO addressed a gaping need. In this case it was communications. Years of neglect and NATO's bombing campaign had put much of the telephone system out of action, and this dealt a grievous blow to the relief agencies that poured into Kosovo. One international agency spent over \$15,000 in the first month on satellite phone bills alone.

The IPKO's solution was to build a network of repeaters, microwave dishes, and routers around Prishtina that allowed customers to reach the Internet by wireless via the Interpacket satellite. Once the system was in place it had to be protected against the frequent power outages and adapted as demand grew. The IPKO emerged from its first year with a strong technical base and some of the best technicians in town.

'This project can serve as a model for future humanitarian emergencies. By building a shared Internet infrastructure, international organizations will benefit from more reliable communications at a much lower cost and they will be able to take advantage of shared access to databases and other Internet-based applications to improve their effectiveness.

When the crisis ends, the infrastructure can be left in place and local people trained to maintain it."

Kofi Annan, Secretary General of UN

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Millennium Report



The project shed its link to the humanitarian emergency on March 5, 2000, when it was handed over from the IRC and reconstituted as the Internet Projekti i Kosovës, with Akan Ismaili as the new Executive Director. It was a smooth transition.

By now the IPKO was something of a hybrid. On the one hand, it was registered as a non-profit NGO. On the other hand, it was making a healthy profit. As of mid-July, 2000, 80 customers were paying approximately a total of 160,000 DM a month. Half was profit, thanks to the free Internet satellite time from Interpacket.

This has allowed the project to provide a free connection for 30 leading members of civil society, including the National Theater, several faculty departments at the university, 15 media outlets, and some of the groups profiled in these pages. (Handikos was given a free connection at the last IPKO board meeting.)

One major question has always been what would happen when project's year of free satellite time expired (in September 2000). Akan and his colleagues are confident that they can make up the monthly subsidy (\$30,000) by

retaining their current clients and attracting new customers once they can begin to offer dial-up access.

But even with its technical and financial base secure, the project seems likely to enter an uncertain new period. As the Kosovo economy shows signs of revival, it is fighting off charges that its generous subsidy has given it an unfair advantage over competitors.

Akan points out that the other three service providers in Kosovo have all received subsidies. The real threat of a monopoly, in his view, comes from government. He looks with alarm at neighboring Macedonia, which has several Internet service providers but only one route to the backbone of the Internet-controlled by the government.

The threat has convinced the IPKO team that they have to lobby for a free Internet, but without openly provoking a fight with the Kosovo PTK that will assume control over

telecommunications once the United Nations withdraws. Akan himself has quietly tried to solicit support and even visited the European Commission in Brussels in support of allies.



The IPKO Satellite Dish

The larger question concerns the IPKO's future role. Should it be to support civil society, or promote information technology?

As life becomes more complicated in Kosovo, it could become harder to fill both roles effectively. If it comes to a choice, Akan would probably chose the latter.

"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." -- Akan Ismaili



The ever expanding IPKO crew

Part of the dream is already coming true. There are currently 17 Internet cafes open in Prishtina-eleven are customers of the IPKO. The Internet cafes charge 6 DM (\$3) an hour and are often full.

Akan's vision of the future also 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 the IPKO will put up 150,000 DM toward the initial

costs. The rest of the money will have to be raised, presumably from donors. In September, IPKO signed an agreement with CISCO Systems to become a CISCO networking academy. This will ensure high quality curriculum and give the training an imprimatur of legitimacy in the technology world.

This could drain the IPKO's profit and make it harder to wire up civil society. But if the IPKO's board members are worried, they have swallowed their doubts. It is a measure of their confidence in Akan. His cheerful demeanor certainly makes one want to believe. And, like many of Kosovo's new leaders, he has paid his dues. In 1994, at the height of Serbian repression, he took over technical management of the Kosovo "node" in the Zamir email network. This 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. Later, he moved to the U.S. Information Office in Prishtina.

It 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. Europe needs this "Supergeek."

Sevdie Sadiqi, a law student at Prishtina University, decided to arrest the decline at her once-proud university. In so doing she became an unwitting symbol of the gulf that has existed between civil society in Kosovo and the international agencies during the first year of "peace-building." Prishtina University is world famous. It was here that Albin Kurti, the student leader, helped launch peaceful mass demonstrations in 1997 and (successfully) demanded educational autonomy for Kosovo's Albanian population.



Peshorja- working for change at the University

collected 3,000 signatures asking for reform. Based on their findings, they decided that they needed to be more organized. So they registered as an NGO with the United Nations, took the name of Peshorja ('Balance'), prepared a budget, and looked for money. Over the next three months, they did not receive a single inquiry from a potential donor.

Albin still languishes in a Serbian jail. His union has collapsed, leaving the students bereft of a champion at a critical moment. Of the university's 23,000 registered students, only 8,000 attend classes. Students find it so difficult to pay the cost of tuition and lodging that some professors are speaking to empty classes. Other professors have given up and are working at NGOs or U.N. organizations.

Sevdie and some friends spent seven months studying the crisis. They

Sevdie's first mistake was to assume that donors would be interested. There was good reason for believing it. After all, donors had poured money into emergency relief. In 1999 the British government wrote Kosovo a check for \$160 million. But in 2000 Great Britain proposes to spend around \$7.5 million. The British example is extreme but not untypical. Earlier in this series, we noted how USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) had pushed villages to create "community improvement councils" (CICs) in order to design appropriate projects. But OTI is now cutting back its budget, leaving many projects unfunded. The blunt fact is that donors are losing interest in civil society, or shifting their funds to longer term infrastructure development projects. This is hard to understand because advocacy has such a critical role to play in Kosovo at this time. Kosovo has none of the conventional checks and balances of a normal society. Everything is in flux-its government, its economy, and its politics. Advocates like Sevdie can help fill the void and provide some legitimacy. But to do this, they need support.

Peshorja's second mistake was to rely on the OSCE. Sevdie and her friends brought their proposal to one of seven NGO "resource centers," which have been set up by the OSCE to provide facilities for NGOs and put them in touch with donors. The OSCE's Kosovo NGO resource center has a staff of five, a meeting room, and a large basement for training. It also offers use of two computers. Neshat Shaqiri, the Center's manager, had been a teacher under the parallel society and he knew that Sevdie was on to something important. But his Center had not yet attracted a loyal clientele among NGOs or donors. It was seen as an outside implant by many veteran civic groups, and it was clearly not on the radar screen of donors.

One is tempted to say that Sevdie's third mistake was to insist on creating an NGO. This status is bestowed by UNMIK, and the application is something of a formality: As of July 2000, an astounding 642 Kosovar NGOs had been registered. As was noted elsewhere in this series, the existence of NGOs conveys the impression of a vibrant civil society, but this is clearly not justified. Being an NGO is no guarantee of being effective, and it may even cause a backlash. In the first place, NGO status imposes administrative burdens (boards, reports, audits, etc.) that can divert advocates from the campaigns. In the second place the funds are drying up-as Peshorja has found to its cost.

UNMIK's NGO registration process holds out a false promise, particularly to advocates, because it encourages them to form organizations prematurely. The most successful advocates, like Halit Ferizi of Handikos, only evolve into organizations as their needs become clearer. Donors, also, are holding out a false promise to advocates. Sevdie Sadiqi put in seven months of unpaid effort to advance one of the key goals of the international community - namely the revival of Kosovo's educational system. She feels that this work is enough to warrant support from donors. What happens if a group like Peshorja submits to this grueling apprenticeship and puts in seven months of unpaid effort to advance one of the key goals of the international community-namely the revival of Kosovo's educational system? Sevdie Sadiqi has no doubts at all. She feels there is an unwritten contract between civil society and the international community. She feels that she and her friends are owed. This is not expressed well, or graciously. "I've made sacrifices," she said, with a touch of petulance. "We've been at this for seven months."

We suggested that this sort of talk would not go down well with donors. When they think of sacrifice, they think of the relatives of disappeared or victims of rape-not middle-class students

collecting signatures. But at heart she is clearly right. Not only do Kosovo's donors have a moral obligation to support advocates like Sevdie-it lies in their interest if they are at all serious about reforming higher education in Kosovo. Like so many problems in Kosovo, the crisis in the university feeds on resignation and silence. A dollar spent on Peshorja will do more for peace than ten dollars spent on "youth projects" through an international NGO. Peshorja was finding it hard to make this case. Still, they don't give up. Just recently, we were pleasantly surprised to receive a new proposal from Peshorja, written with the help of another NGO, which makes more concessions to donors. Hopefully, it will shame someone into responding. Certainly, when it comes to civil society, persistence is the name of the game.