



Personal Impressions on a USIA Mission to Macedonia and Bulgaria to Deliver Internet Training

by Dr. Clarisse Behar Molad
CBM Consulting

In September of 1996, I was given a grant to go to Eastern Europe and deliver a series of workshops on electronic commerce and the Internet. I was invited by the US embassy in Skopje, Macedonia and Sophia, Bulgaria, to address representatives from the business community, the academic community and government agencies.

It was with great anticipation that I packed my bags, particularly since Skopje, Macedonia is the birthplace of my parents, and I have not been there since 1967. I was looking forward to witnessing first hand the changes that have occurred in the country since it became an independent state and how it affected not only the public at large but my extensive family as well. I was thrilled to find out that one of my cousins happened to have started the first private Internet business in Macedonia and would be heavily involved in assisting me with delivering the workshops.

When I arrived to Skopje, the embassy representative told me that the workshop had an unprecedented enrollment and that they had to turn people away because of lack of space. This was especially interesting considering the fact that so very few individuals and companies had access to the Internet. None the less, I walked into my first workshop to a room full of eager faces with people from an assortment of businesses and government agencies that all wanted to see first hand what the magic of the Internet had to offer to their small country.

Initially, I did not want to overwhelm any of them with too much information and tried to keep my presentation very simple and basic in its content. However, the apparent thirst for knowledge was so strong that I found myself surfing the Net at great speed so I could show all of them the new electronic world awaiting them beyond their country's physical borders.

As my workshops proceeded, I was besieged by requests from the media - newspapers, magazines, television and radio - to talk about my work and the great potential the Internet had to offer to a country like Macedonia. The questions I was asked were very poignant and to the point. Everybody felt that, for the first time in history, they were given a key to a vast resource that could change their future lives significantly.

Macedonia is a small country that has struggled with its separation from the former Yugoslavia. For the first three years of its existence, it also suffered from a hostile neighbor to the south, Greece. Its main income has been from agricultural products that were exported to the other Yugoslav republics. Now it faces a situation that in order to become self-reliant based on a market economy, it needs to quickly

privatize many industries and move aggressively toward taking advantage of its relative stable political environment in order to strengthen its economy.

I was able, through my workshops, to reach out to over 400 decision makers in the country and open their eyes to the global opportunities available to them through the use of the Internet. Needless to say, they were very excited to see examples of other small countries, like Slovenia, who have succeeded in harvesting the Internet as a powerful tool for information dissemination and electronic commerce.

The same could not be said of my visit to Bulgaria. The country was on the verge of collapse in its political and economic infrastructure. The people attending my workshops were merely curious and also very cautious. They were polite in their assessment of the opportunities available to their country with the use of the Internet, but wanted far more to discuss the economics of getting on line in the first place before even discussing any possible commercial applications.

I was quite amazed by the disparity between these two neighboring countries. When talking to people on both ends, it became very clear that they are aware of their differences. Traveling from Skopje to Sophia, the differences were glaring. While Macedonia was lush with well-kept fields and small towns bustling with construction activities, Bulgaria was strewn with closed factories, almost deserted little villages and unattended fields. And yet, one of the most thriving trades on the streets of Sophia was that of pirated software - software that sold for peanuts. It made you wonder where all those computers were for which that people were buying and selling software. Apparently, many Macedonians go to Sophia for the purpose of buying their software there. For two American dollars, you could get a copy of Windows 95, and for ten dollars, you could get a customized CD-ROM with any Microsoft applications you wished.

The Bulgarians, though, had a beautiful library at the USIS center with two computers hooked to the Internet. Yet, the library was deserted on both days I was there, and the phone lines to hook up to the Net were down. This was very symbolic of what I witnessed there. The intellectual curiosity and the know-how about computers fed the need to have those available to the public, but the underlining infrastructure to support them was crumbling. In Macedonia, the private Internet provider made sure that we had Internet connections to the lecture hall at all times, and the demonstrations we gave drew a record crowd.

I was not surprised to hear on the news recently about the woes of the Bulgarians. The families whom I visited wanted to know all about my line of work, but at the end of the day shifted their full attention to the real issues of the high price of bread and their government's corruption. They knew that they had a lot more work to do internally before they could "reach out and touch the world" through the Internet.

Recently, I was invited by USIA to visit two other former republics of Yugoslavia - Slovenia and Serbia. They had heard about the work I have done in Macedonia and wanted to have a similar program. Slovenia is the most advanced of all the former Yugoslav republics in the use of the Internet. They are actually hosting an international electronic commerce conference this summer for the third year in a row. Part of what I am going to try and do during my visit there is to establish a pilot project between companies in Macedonia and in Slovenia to conduct electronic trade transactions. The Slovenians and Macedonians were engaged in commercial trade while they were part of the greater Yugoslavia. Now, however, they want to strengthen their ties and develop an integrated electronic trade program supported by both the private sector and the government.

In Belgrade, I expect to further support the work already done by the people of B-92, who have been so instrumental in informing the world about the latest political developments in Belgrade. Even though I know that talking to people in Belgrade about the Net and its role in electronic commerce might be somewhat premature, I also know that there is eagerness in all those countries to put the past behind them and take a quantum leap towards the future.

My wish and that of USIA is that any seeds I have planted and will be planting in the future in that region will sprout and grow and be the basis for the information society of the future. We want to provide the new generation of entrepreneurs and government officials with the tools to interconnect both locally within their region and globally with the rest of the world. Furthermore, we want to help redefine the means by which those Eastern European countries will undertake the restructuring of their economies. Providing the countries with some new knowledge and feeding their intellectual curiosity is only the first step. However, with the human potential that exists in those countries, I am very confident that the knowledge we disseminated will create the basis for an informed quest to better the lives of its citizens.

Some background about the countries visited:

Bulgaria

Bulgaria is situated in the south-eastern part of Europe, in the center of the Balkan Peninsula. The territory of the country is about 47 000 square miles and the population is 8.472 million people. The greatest asset of Bulgaria is its geographical situation (the Main Route No. 5, which is the most rapid link between Europe and the Middle East and Asia, crosses the territory of the country), the fertile soils and the natural beauty of the Black Sea coast and the mountains.

The capital of Bulgaria is Sofia. About 1.2 million people live in Sofia. Sofia is the second oldest capital in Europe (after Athens). The name of the town (which in ancient Greek means "wisdom") comes from the name of Sophia -- the daughter of the Roman Emperor Justinian.

Until the end of World War II, Bulgaria was a constitutional monarchy with a constitution that was considered to be quite modern for its time. The first Head of State was Count Alexander Battenberg, who ruled for 11 years. Then the Bulgarian throne was offered to Ferdinand Saxe-Coburg Gotha, succeeded by his son Boris, who died in 1943. Driven by his personal ambition, Ferdinand launched wars in the beginning of the 20th Century that resulted in Bulgaria losing almost a third of its territory though it never lost a battle. During World Wars I and II, Bulgaria was an ally of Germany. During World War II, Bulgarian troops occupied parts of Greece and Yugoslavia. After the war, Bulgaria was occupied by the Red Army, which subsequently left the territory of the country. Until 1947, Bulgaria was a pluralistic state. In 1946, a referendum proclaimed Bulgaria a Republic.

1948 established a hard-line communist, pro-Soviet regime. From 1954 on, Todor Zhivkov ruled Bulgaria for 35 years. Bulgaria became a "typical" socialist country - with tightly centralized and "planned" economy, heavy industrialization (with heavy pollution as a result), massive migration to the towns and

depopulation of the rural areas (which lead to the ruining of agriculture, dramatic increase of the foreign debt and almost total economic dependence on the Soviet Union).

By 1989, the crisis in Bulgaria became unbearable. On November 10, Todor Zhivkov was ousted. In June 1990, Bulgaria had its first free democratic and pluralistic elections for army reforms and, after a four-day general strike in December 1990, a coalition Government was formed.

Macedonia

The Republic of Macedonia is a small, landlocked country in the Balkans, bounded on the north by Yugoslavia, on the east by Bulgaria, on the south by Greece, and on the west by Albania. Formerly part of Yugoslavia, it became independent in 1991. The territory of The Republic of Macedonia is 25.713 square kilometers wide with population of over 2 million people. The rest of the territory that was historically considered to be Macedonia now belongs to Greece, Bulgaria and Albania.

Skopje is the capital and largest city of the Republic of Macedonia. It lies on the upper course of the Vardar river and is located on a major north-south Balkan route between Belgrade and Athens. Skopje was founded as an Illyrian city. In the 4th century AD, it became a Roman post called Scupi. The Serbs took it in 1189, and the Ottoman Turks captured it in 1392. In 1913, during the Balkan Wars, the city came under Serbian control, and in 1918, it became part of Yugoslavia. Currently, the population of Skopje is about half a million people. It is the administrative and political center of the Republic of Macedonia. Industries in the city include iron and steel works, electrical machinery, chemicals, textiles, carpets, and foodstuffs. Skopje is a trading center for the cotton, tobacco, grains, and livestock produced in the surrounding region as well.

Although small, Macedonia has had a long and eventful history. Alexander the Great and his conquests introduced its name into world history. The first Slav educators, Cyril and Methodius, were born and started their work here: their disciple, Kliment, founded the first Slav school in high learning in Ohrid. He compiled the alphabet and created the Cyrillic system used by many Slav nations.

During Second World War, Bulgaria annexed the Macedonian territories of Yugoslavia and Greece, as well as Western Thrace. By virtue of the Hilter-Filov accords, Bulgaria occupied almost the whole of Yugoslavian Macedonia- with the exception of the western provinces, which fell within the Italian zone of occupation. Initially, a large part of the population, unhappy with the Serbian administration, greeted the Bulgarian army as liberators. Even the local communist leaders seceded from the Yugoslav Party and joined its Bulgarian counterpart. The inconsiderate behaviour, however, of the Bulgarian authorities created a much cooler climate that developed into hostility between the local population and the Bulgarian occupation forces. Thus, with considerable delay, the Titoist partisan movement began to spread also in Yugoslav Macedonia. It was at this critical moment that the Yugoslav communists announced their manifesto for the post-war reorganisation of the Yugoslavian state on a federal basis. One of the six federated republics was to be the "Socialist [at that time, 'People's'] Republic of Macedonia", whose Slav population would cease to be regarded as "Serbian" or "Bulgarian" and would acquire a new name: "Macedonian".

The Macedonian people and the other nationalities inhabiting The Republic of Macedonia were granted full national freedom and statehood only after they gained independence from the former Republic of Yugoslavia.

Dr. Clarisse Behar Molad is an electronic commerce expert who was instrumental in forming numerous multi-national projects in industries like the process and construction industries. She also served for several years as a co-chair of a trade facilitation group in the UN. She had written extensively about global electronic data interchange and lectured to industry and government groups all over the world. Dr. Molad's parents were born in Skopje, Macedonia and moved to Israel in 1948. She was born in Jerusalem but left in 1974 to go study in the United States. She makes her residence in Houston, Texas.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate particular policies.

This paper was prepared for the Virtual Diplomacy conference hosted by United States Institute of Peace in Washington, D.C. on April 1 and 2, 1997.