News in Brief

Mongolia Exchange Program Renewed with Luce Foundation Support

The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., has awarded IREX a three-year grant of $180,000 in support of its scholarly exchange program in the humanities and social sciences with Mongolia. The grant was announced by Henry Luce III, the Foundation's Chairman and C.E.O. For over half a century, the Henry Luce Foundation has contributed to the understanding between the people of the United States and East Asia and provided opportunities for scholarly exploration and development in the region. The Foundation, established in 1936 by the late Henry R. Luce, cofounder and editor-in-chief of Time, Inc., provides grants for specific projects in the areas of Asian affairs, higher education, theology, American arts, women in science and engineering, and public affairs.

Previous Links

In 1988 IREX signed the first cultural agreement between the United States and Mongolia instituting a reciprocal exchange with the Mongolian Academy of Sciences. This agreement allowed American scholars to work in institutes of the Academy and gave Mongolian specialists access to US colleagues. With the receipt of the Luce grant, the exchange program will be broadened to include other Mongolian institutions and universities.

Since 1992 IREX has been conducting open competitions in the Newly Independent States to select scholars for the USIA Regional Scholars Exchange program. Beginning with the 1995-1996 grant year, a merit-based open competition will also be held in Mongolia, with applications evaluated by members of the US academic community. Scholars in the social sciences and humanities holding the equivalent of a doctoral degree or candidate status will be eligible to apply. The deadline for the receipt of applications is April 15, 1996 for grants beginning after September 1, 1996.

A Rich History

Mongolia has a rich history as a geographic and cultural crossroads between China in the east, the societies of Central Asia, and the great Russian landmass to the north and west. At one extraordinary moment in history at the beginning

Albania Slowly Joining the Info Highway

By Ian Watson, Albnet-L Moderator

Until recently Albania was the only European country without an indigenous connection to the Internet. But international efforts to redress this have slowly borne fruit. For the past 18 months IREX has sponsored "Albnet-L," an Internet mailing list which serves as a forum for information exchange between organizations and people working to bring electronic mail to Albania. The list has witnessed the efforts of an international polyglot of organizations and specialists interested in developing sustainable network connections to the region.

Lagging Behind

Albanian networking has lagged behind because of the country's bureaucratic, technical, and economic problems, which are overwhelming even by Balkan standards. For example, an e-mail link was briefly established between the University of Tirana and the University of Pisa (Italy) as early as 1992, but quickly went down, as thieves tapped the phone line to make free international calls. This kind of theft is common in Albania and untraceable, since the phone system cannot provide itemized monthly bills. And the economic situation is such that universities have had to deny

Albania Joins Info Highway

continued from page 1

themselves computers in order to pay for chalk, paper, window glass, and heat.

In the absence of any indigenous Internet service, essentially all e-mail communication with Albania has been through private channels. Many organizations made expensive international phone calls to accounts on computers in other countries—Compuserve in Italy being a common choice.

In the summer of 1994, IREX conducted a comprehensive assessment of the Internet in Southeastern Europe, focusing on access for the academic and nonprofit communities. The **Albnet-L** mailing list grew out of the observation that although over half a dozen Albanian and international organizations had expressed interest in improving Internet access, none knew that other organizations were thinking this over too. More broadly, it was an attempt to provide an open forum for a critical combination of international assistance organizations, Albanian academic centers, and commercial interests to explore whether information-sharing could catalyze network growth.

The list went on-line in August 1994, and currently has over 150 participants from over a dozen countries, including representatives of various international donor organizations, several American scholars who have taught in Albania, and many Albanians studying at Western universities. A few Albanian subscribers living abroad have noted wryly that they could not have participated in electronic discussions on their home country's networks without first leaving the country.

New developments

As with any newsletter, **Albnet-L** has served as an effective bulletin, but credit for actual progress goes to a few dedicated people, companies, institutions, and concrete initiatives. Diane Hambley of the University of

---

Infosoft was forced to shut down after the Albanian parliament passed a law requiring commercial electronic data transfer operators to be nationally licensed.

Nebraska—who is presently teaching business administration at the Department of Economics in Tirana—founded a grassroots Internet Users Group in November 1994, aware that the Internet would arrive soon and that many students and faculty were already eager to use it. Ironically, at that point only one of the group's members had e-mail, and that only

---

The absence of a strong indigenous for-profit user community will likely hinder the development of functional, if expensive, commercial Internet service

---

borrowed time on the account of a Western diplomat in Tirana, whereby the minutes of the group's meetings were posted on **Albnet-L**.

Meanwhile, Albania's Institute of Informatics and Applied Mathematics (INIMA)—which brought com-

puting to the country in the mid-1980s—retired their old mainframes and re-equipped with personal computers. They now offer computer courses to the public and have worked with Italian firms on some successful commercial computing projects. INIMA now provides limited e-mail connectivity on a commercial basis. They have put together a World Wide Web server on a British server (**http://goole.octacon.co.uk/proj/etcetera/inima/inima.htm**), which will be transferred back to Tirana as infrastructure permits.

In spring 1995, the Soros Foundations, which have funded Internet expansion elsewhere in Eastern Europe, awarded a $19,000 grant towards the construction of a nonprofit network in Tirana. Soon thereafter, the United Nations Development Program joined the effort with a commitment to provide international connectivity to the Internet through a dedicated satellite link to the UNDP office in Tirana. The system is now on-line (visit **http://www.tirana.al**), and provides connectivity to the Albanian parliament, a local university, and a Tirana high school. Its design is intended to bypass the problems of both domestic and international phone lines by using wireless modems domestically, and the satellite connection internationally. The November 1995 issue of *Wired* magazine ran a short feature on Bill Eldridge, who was responsible for much of the on-site planning.

Private Sector Stunted

Yet the race among these groups to build the first link to Albania was originally won by a private company in Tirana called Infosoft, which starting in October offered limited e-mail service under the domain name vol.al. Affiliated with the Italian Internet service provider Video On Line (**http://www.vol.it**) through their "International Translation Center" in Tirana,

it operated by daily dialup file exchange with its Italian partners. This made sending e-mail slow and expensive, but reliable enough that many foreigners flocked to Infosoft for accounts.

However, at the end of January, Infosoft was forced to shut down after the Albanian parliament passed a law requiring commercial electronic data transfer operators to be nationally licensed. The import of this legislation remains unclear, but in other southeast European countries such licensing laws have sometimes appeared designed to restrict entry into the networking market to a few enterprises with close governmental ties.

Lessons Learned

Two main lessons can be drawn from the experience of **Albnet-L** and Albanian networking efforts. First, the purchasing power of the foreign community on the one hand, and the cooperative strength of local academic institutions on the other, will have to jointly underpin broader Internet connectivity in Albania. The absence of a strong indigenous for-profit user community will likely hinder the development of the kind of functional, if expensive, commercial Internet service providers now flourishing in the neighboring countries of Macedonia and Bulgaria.

Second, technical assistance in Internet development—even in a relatively small country like Albania—typically requires the cooperation of a myriad of organizations. This is necessary not just to pool funding and expertise, but to align oft-competing local and international interests to invest in a shared resource. Mailing lists like **Albnet-L** can serve as a forum for sharing information among scattered people and organizations involved in these efforts. ■

Connectivity Map of Southeast Europe

- ▨ Full Internet Access, broadly available
- ▦ E-mail broadly available, limited Internet connectivity
- ▨ E-mail Only
- ▢ Limited E-mail and Internet connectivity

For More Information

For general information on Albania, including instructions on how to subscribe to other Albanian mailing lists, an extensive home page maintained by Mentor Cana can be found at: **http://www.ios.com/~ulpiana/Albanian/index.html**.

Albnet-L messages are archived on the IREX Gopher server **(gopher://info.irex.org/11/list.archives/albnet/)**.

To subscribe, write to: **listproc@info.irex.org**, and in the body of the message, type Subscribe Albnet-L <your name>.

To contact the author of this article, write to: watson@info.irex.org