

Connecting with Eurasia

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The U.S. government is promoting Internet skills and computer knowledge among diverse populations in Eurasia.

For decades the U.S. State Department has been sponsoring educational and cultural exchange programs for citizens around the world to promote mutual understanding. The department has always tried in one way or another to maintain links with alumni of these programs. For alumni in Eurasia, that effort moved into cyberspace in a formal and comprehensive way in 1995 with establishment of a network of public access Internet sites throughout the region.

The program that established the network offers, in addition to mere Internet access, Web site design, training, and distance learning, and it encourages Internet-based activities between alumni, the general public, and counterparts in the United States. The program has built a network of professionals in the 12 countries of Eurasia who communicate daily, sharing lesson plans, engaging in community service projects, and connecting citizens of those countries with U.S.-based resources and counterparts.

Background and History

The State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (<http://exchanges.state.gov>) created the program in 1995, calling it the Internet Access and Training Program (IATP). Two organizations share management responsibilities for the program—Project Harmony in Russia (<http://www.projectharmony.org>) and the International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX) in Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, and in the Caucasus and Central Asian countries (<http://www.irex.org>).

The main goals of the IATP are to expand knowledge and use of the Internet in order to foster the free flow of information and ideas across national borders; to provide Internet access to

exchange-program alumni as well as targeted members of the general public; and to provide training in using the Internet and accessing the resources on the World Wide Web.

So far, the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs has spent nearly \$30 million on IATP in Eurasia, and the results have been profound. IATP has counted more than 2,500,000 users, supported development of more than 6,000 Web sites, and provided training for more than 210,000 individuals. In addition, IATP has 79 open access centers in 54 regions of Russia, and a total of 140 sites in Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, and the Caucasus and Central Asian countries.

The Russian Experience

Under Project Harmony's guidance, the IATP program in Russia has focused on enabling local citizens to participate in the global Internet community. Emphasis has been placed on fostering civic leadership, harnessing Internet technology, and facilitating cross-cultural learning.

IATP has 79 centers across the country, of which 41 are based at regional libraries, 22 at universities, and 16 at other facilities. Each host institution provides an educational coordinator and a technical specialist. All partners provide fully remodeled office space and furniture, and they cover monthly Internet connection, staff salary, utilities, and security costs. A key goal for the centers is to be self-sustaining once U.S. government support ends.

Center staff recruit exchange program alumni to participate in Web design courses and thematic training, and they encourage them to teach classes for the general public. All centers are open for a minimum of 20 hours a week for alumni and general public Internet access, and they offer an additional 20 hours of training for such diverse groups as non-government organization (NGO) workers, women's organizations, individuals with disabilities, and orphans. Four centers are dedicated to exchange-program alumni and persons with disabilities. Many program participants engage in community service work and many also have acquired sufficient Web design skills necessary to gain fruitful employment.

The U.S. Embassy in Moscow cooperates closely

with Project Harmony to administer the American Corners program in Russia. American Corners, launched more than three years ago at the initiative of former U.S. Ambassador to Russia James Collins, is a scaled down, high-tech version of American cultural and educational centers in other parts of the world. A large portion of their collections are on CD-ROM.

The embassy has even taken this concept a step further, creating a U.S. Virtual Consulates Program. Virtual consulates, offering visa information and forms via an embassy-produced Web site, are available at IATP centers in several regions of Russia.

This year, IATP added several new elements. One, done in partnership with the World Bank Institute, is the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), which gives alumni access to more than 25 distance learning courses. The VLE, available to all IATP centers free of charge, provides courses on a range of topics, among them public speaking, NGO management, resume writing, leadership, managing a board of directors, geometry, and database development. Each online course is limited to 25 students and is always facilitated by a professional instructor. During each course, an assistant is selected to study the notes and techniques of the instructor so that he or she can lead the course in the future.

IATP conducts outreach to the smaller republics of Russia. For instance, a project conducted in the Republic of Mari El led to creation of an extensive educational network there as well as a team of information technology specialists. Alumni of the Teachers for Excellence in Education (TEA) and Partners in Education (PiE) exchange programs are implementing a similar effort in the Republic of Kalmykia, for which the republic's ministry of education is providing substantial financial support. Similar projects have been implemented in the Samara and Irkutsk regions.

IATP offers all alumni 50 megabytes of computer server space to develop their own Web sites and e-mail services. Not surprisingly, the State Department relies principally on e-mail to keep in touch with alumni and inform them of U.S. government assistance programs.

IATP in the other Eurasian Countries

IREX administers more than 140 IATP centers across Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine as well as the countries of the Caucasus and Central Asia in close cooperation with U.S. embassies there.

IATP provides computer workstations, a server, a printer, a scanner, related cabling, and power back-up systems for each center. IATP also provides a site administrator who often works with partner institution personnel to administer the site. The partners commonly cover costs for the center's room, renovations, utilities, and security. In some cases, partner institutions contribute computer equipment.

The centers offer the Step-by-Step Training Program to members of targeted organizations such as community groups, educational institutions, libraries, and NGOs after identifying their needs. Through this program, schools have acquired computer hardware and begun doing their own training, and newspaper associations have worked with IATP to create e-mail networks to share news stories and photographs.

In Tajikistan, the Step-by-Step Training Program has already resulted in the first Web site dedicated to combating tuberculosis. The Web site is currently filling up with information about the specifics of the disease and its reach in Tajikistan, and it serves as a forum for Tajik doctors dealing with the illness.

In Spitak, Armenia IATP is using the Step-by-Step Program with children, teaching them to use the Windows and Linux operating systems to create personal Web sites. The children of Spitak now maintain an online newspaper and a Web radio station, participate in Web-design groups, and create their own animations. Some of these children even assist IATP trainers throughout the region.

Spitak can now boast a cadre of young people with highly marketable and practical technology skills.

The IATP Mobile Training Program is closely aligned with the Step-by-Step Training Program. As the name implies, the Mobile Program takes training on the road to organizations that have their own computers, providing users with training targeted to their organization's particular needs, such as the creation of a mailing list.

IATP is the largest Internet development program in the region, and all of its sites have a standard look and feel. Key to this standardization is early training for IATP center staff, both in computer and Internet basics as well as in specialized areas such as library science.

In many cities, councils of exchange-program alumni work with community groups to identify training needs, advertise the services of IATP sites, and raise awareness through special workshops on such subjects as trafficking in persons, HIV/AIDS, and culture and life in the United States. Alumni can often contribute specialized knowledge about specific academic or professional fields they studied in the United States. For example, members of an alumni council in Ferghana, Uzbekistan recently taught computer skills to more than 60 professionals who work in the fields of natural sciences and community organizing.

In eight short years, IATP has established a dynamic and growing network of computer and Internet users in Eurasia, linking them with each other and with their counterparts in the United States and around the world. Jobs have been created, knowledge acquired, associations established, and mutual understanding promoted—all testimony to the power and effect of cooperative engagement in an environment of open and free communications.