FIRST PERSON
Entrepreneur Brings Internet To Roma

USAID-funded workshops help Roma develop business skills

Thanks to Georgi Georgiev's entrepreneurship, Roma children in Dupnitsa now have a club where they can access and learn about the Internet.

Photo: USAID

"We want to give children the chance to learn more about the world through computers and the Internet. Our next step is to educate parents that technology is indispensable today," said Georgi Georgiev, owner of an Internet club in Dupnitsa.

At one time, none of the inhabitants of the five Roma neighborhoods in the town of Dupnitsa could enjoy public Internet access. Thanks to the efforts of local Roma entrepreneur Georgi Georgiev, the Roma there now have their first Internet club.

Georgi took part in a leadership institute organized as part of a USAID inter-ethnic program. After completing the 30-module program, aimed at imparting leadership and management skills, he, together with his peers, formed the Roma NGO Chisto Sartse ("Pure Heart") and was elected its president.

Later, he attended a one-week workshop for minority representatives through another USAID program. There, Georgi learned how to develop a business plan for his idea (which was to open an Internet club), establish an accounting system, and hire and manage personnel. With this valuable experience, he applied successfully through Chisto Sartse for a small grant.

About a year later, his Internet hall, fully equipped with computers and a permanent Internet connection, officially opened. Operating the computers were five professionally trained Roma neighborhood residents. The Internet club offered a free short computer educational course, in which ten children, selected from among many based of their grades, participated.

Besides the training courses, the club offers paid computer and Internet services for the local population that will help it become sustainable. An average of 20-30 children visit the club daily, with more during summer vacation. Sometimes ethnic Bulgarian children from the neighborhood also spend their time at the club.

Georgi is now developing his idea to introduce parents to the world of information technology through a Roma Educational Center. "The idea came from the parents themselves. I could hear them discuss that the way their kids learn is already normal in Europe, and that they have to know how to work with computers, too," he said. "When I asked them if they would be interested to attend similar parent courses, their answer was 'definitely yes'."