

Computer whiz kid becomes Balkan celebrity at age 9

Marko Calasan is one of the world's youngest Microsoft Certified System Engineers, but without support he doesn't have much of a future in Macedonia

Kole Casule

Skopje — Reuters Published on Friday, Feb. 05, 2010

Macedonia, which hopes to transform itself into a regional tech centre, could not be more proud of nine-year-old Marko Calasan, who recently became one of the world's youngest Microsoft Certified System Engineers.

The problem is that without serious state or private support Marko can't see much of a future in the landlocked Balkan country that declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1992.

"I want to stay, but there are no resources for me here. I want to go to America, where I can find more technical resources for what I need. I cannot prosper here. I want to, but cannot," Calasan said in an interview.

The Macedonian government is implementing an ambitious program to provide a computer for every student in the country. But Marko wowed his parents, educators and the public in one of Europe's poorest countries years before it set the school computer plan into motion.

At the age six, Marko had his first systems administrator credential from Microsoft. He became an instant media celebrity across the Balkans in December when he became a Certified System Engineer, a title difficult to obtain even by more veteran computer system engineers.

With great talents come special rights, and the Macedonian government has granted him special permission to attend school infrequently.

"I love going to school, but cannot go every day. It's a bit easy there, but I learn something new," said Marko, who already speaks fluent English.

At the entrance to his elementary classroom, next to the childish art of other students, hangs a large mosaic of newspaper clippings with headlines referring to Marko as "the Bill Gates of our 'hood" or the "Computer Mozart."

A few doors down the hall Marko teaches eight- to 11-year-olds computer basics. He also works as a remote system administrator for a non-profit organization that helps people with disabilities.

His mother, Radica Calasan, said her son showed talent at the age of two, when he learned to read and write, and immediately after that started to learn about computers.

The Calasan family hoped to promote a project of Marko's that would have taken him to an important high tech show in Germany, but could find no money or support to apply.

"Nobody in this country helped us, not even one company, or even less the government," she said with disappointment.

Marko now has a new project teaching people computer knowledge in English through high-definition streaming video.

In between managing computer systems and sharing his knowledge, Marko appears to be a regular kid who enjoys playing soccer with friends, in-line skating and defies the computer geek couch potato stereotype.

He considers computer games a waste of time compared to playing "real games outside."