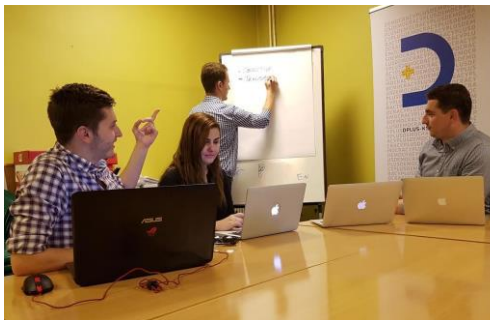




## SUCCESS STORY

### Kosovo Scholars Study in U.S. to strengthen Civil Society at Home

Activists form nonprofit to advance democracy



USAID scholars in action

Photo by: USAID

“When I came back to Kosovo last summer, I began thinking about my experience in the United States and how I could put it to use in improving the current state of affairs in Kosovo.” - Valmir Ismaili

June 2016—Kosovo activists are getting valuable assistance to effect change in their country and promote citizen participation in the democratic process.

While Valmir Ismaili was studying public administration in the United States under a USAID program from September 2014 to May 2016, he got the idea to form a civil society organization in Kosovo.

“I worked in civil society for 10 years before USAID’s **Transformational Leadership Program**,” said Ismaili.

“When I came back to Kosovo last summer, I began thinking about my experience in the United States and how I could put it to use in improving the current state of affairs in Kosovo. The idea for Democracy Plus began after talking to friends with similar values.”

The program provides Master's scholarships for Kosovars to pursue higher education in the United States, thus increasing the number of educated professionals to strengthen Kosovo's dynamic transition to a democratic, free market economy.

Ismaili and two other Kosovo activists established Democracy Plus (D+), an independent nonprofit, in March 2016. The organization works on an array of projects in the areas of good governance, rule of law, human rights, social issues, elections and political parties.

In September 2015, after returning to the United States to finish his Master’s Degree, Ismaili traveled around the country and discussed D+ with alumni from the USAID program. Roberta Osmani, Isuf Zejna and Ngadhujim Halilaj subsequently joined Valmir and his co-founders at D+.

“Our first meeting was over Skype because we were all still spread out across the United States,” said Osmani. At the time, Osmani was in Bloomington at Indiana University, Ismaili was in Chicago at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Zejna was in Pittsburgh at the University of Pittsburgh, and Halilaj is still a Master’s candidate at Northern Illinois University.

Through the USAID program, the four alumni gained valuable networking and professional experiences that all ultimately helped shape and guide the launch of their new organization.

“I graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a Master’s in commercial law, and the school gave me a very transferable skill set, whether I work in non-profit or in law. My work ethic, time management, and research skills have all helped me do the work I want to do,” said Zejna.

With a team of six full-time young adults, each with a range of international experiences, Democracy Plus combines professional expertise and high-level technical skills with fresh, innovative ideas and a strong work ethic. The organization places a high priority on social inclusion across all of its projects. At its core, Democracy Plus strives to be a model for citizen participation in democracy.

USAID’s five-year Transformational Leadership Program—Scholarships and Partnerships aims to provide Kosovars with access to advanced education, leadership development, and technical assistance. Under the program, which began in 2014, USAID has awarded 185 Master’s scholarships and 55 professional certificate scholarships.