

## Rebounding from the pandemic: How a make-shift van is preparing the next welders of Kosovo

By: Lisar Morina & Alim Halimi

*As the metal processing sector in Kosovo grapples with the repercussions of COVID-19, SDC helps establish innovative on-the-go welding training and certification venture slated to aid the welding industry navigate COVID-19 disruptions, employ qualified staff, and improve the resilience of manufacturing firms.*

Kosovo's history with metal processing runs deep. The large socially-owned enterprises which once represented a pillar of the economy of the small country have now given way to smaller privatized companies that have carved a niche for themselves exporting metal products such as base metals, architectural steelwork, and heating and ventilation equipment to European markets.

Yet, despite the metal industry's huge potential for boosting economic development in Kosovo, and despite the sector's ever-increasing demand for employees, there's still a grave lack of qualified welders. Even with a startling amount of unemployment in Kosovo, especially among youth—49% of whom are jobless<sup>1</sup>—finding adequately-skilled welders is tough.



***THREE YOUNG WELDERS, ALBAN SALLAHAJ, 21, LEON MALA, 21, DRITON KAQANIKU, 20, (LEFT TO RIGHT) OPERATING NEW WELDING EQUIPMENT INSIDE THE WELD TECH VAN WHERE WELDING TRAININGS ARE HELD. (C) LISAR MORINA***

The reasons are many, but it boils down to a few things: training institutions and businesses still don't communicate with each other enough, many training-providers don't yet offer services that include internationally-recognized certifications, and there is a general lack of market information about the welding profession and trainings.

As COVID-19 made its way around Kosovo, it greatly disrupted the labor market, throwing into disarray an already fragile job market. The welding industry—like most other industries—was hit hard, and the prospect of finding qualified employees went from bad to worse.

### Supporting unprecedented solutions for unprecedented times

Innovative training providers didn't stand idly by. Many are finding inventive ways to adjust to the situation. But one enterprise, called Weld Tech, was particularly imaginative—in ways that Kosovo has probably never seen before. Weld Tech's solution? An ingenious a make-shift van turned into a mobile ISO-based welding training facility with cutting-edge technology!

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<sup>1</sup> Kosovo Agency of Statistics. 4th quarter of 2019

“COVID-19 has created a tough situation, giving rise to travel limitations for companies’ personnel,” says Ekrem Sallahaj, owner of Weld Tech, who is also an international welding specialist and civil engineer. “Metal-processing companies also have sensitive working dynamics, so it’s not rare that companies hesitate to send their welders for training and certification due to the busy work schedule. This is why we came up with a mobile training service that takes into account both these dynamics.”

Weld Tech’s ingenious mobile training is held entirely inside a van, whose interiors have been completely redesigned to provide in-company welding training, saving company personnel precious travel time, and enabling them to get right back to production when they’re done with training. The inconspicuous van travels around Kosovo providing training to all who seek it, all at the comfort of their workplace.

“We are the only training center in Kosovo that offers ISO-based trainings and certifications in cooperation with TUV Rheinland,” says Ekrem. “We trained over 30 candidates so far, the majority of them certified with IS 9606.”

Ekrem says that trainees are responding positively to the van. “The participants we get come from all sorts of backgrounds, and from different professions. They’re comfortable working inside the van—it’s a compact space and gives them a great feeling of really advancing their welding techniques. Welding is also in huge demand, and there is considerable interest and people don’t hesitate to pay and participate.”



*THREE YOUNG WELDERS, DRITON KAQANIKU, 20, LEON MALA, 21, AND ALBAN SALLAHAJ, 21 (LEFT TO RIGHT) STANDING NEXT TO THE WELD TECH VAN WHERE WELDING TRAININGS ARE HELD (C) LISAR MORINA.*

In a nearby village close to the small city of Suhareka, Kosovo, Driton Kacaniku, a 20-year-old graduate of the welding training who comes from small village of Dubrava, is carefully joining metal parts together and polishing metal surfaces. Taking a break from work to greet us, he tells us that the training inspired him to pursue a career in welding. “The welding training allowed me to learn both theory and practice, and I got certified in the end,” Driton says. “The skills I gained have helped me find work, and when I finished the training I started working here at the company [Ndertuesi shpk], which also made it possible for me to take the training. “Now I’m happy to travel to work every morning, and I want welding to be my profession.”

### **Welding, certifications, and COVID-19**

Weld Tech is a member of the Metal Industry and Renewable Energy Cluster of Kosovo (MIRECK) whose huge network of enterprises operating in the metal industry helps Weld Tech find new participants and reach out to interested parties. MIRECK also advocates for the welding profession, raising awareness of its profitability, market demand, and viability as a career choice.

“In recent years, the metal industry in Kosovo has evolved greatly, and new quality standards have been introduced, among which the EN 1090 is one of the most important,” says Astrit Rexhaj, Executive Director of MIRECK. “EN 1090 is a mandatory standard for exporting companies who seek new markets in the European Union, and in order to obtain it, companies must have welders who are certified.”

Astrit says that being aware of these criteria and the struggles of MIRECK’s member companies to go international, he has put a special focus on supporting certifications. “With the support of SDC through project EYE, as well as GIZ, we have certified more than 100 welders with EN ISO 9606,” he says.

But in 2020, with the government introducing social-distancing measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, new logistical challenges arose, securing travel and venues for participants became increasingly hard, and when production companies provided their premises for trainings, the learning process interfered with production processes and inconvenienced other employees. Welding machines are also expensive, and companies hesitated to rent them for training purposes.

This is when Weld Tech came up with the idea of creating a mobile training center that could provide training to welders everywhere in Kosovo. “In our industry, this is one of the most innovative projects, and I can say without hesitation that this is one of the most important project for the metal industry, offering flexible training and certification solutions that will help companies to improve their employees’ skills and expand to international markets,” says Astrit.

SDC’s project EYE has entered into a partnership with MIRECK last year as part of our long-term goals of systematically developing long-term partnerships with the private sector to support employment opportunities and facilitate labor market transition.

At EYE, we recognized Weld Tech’s huge potential, but it was a start-up with no means to fully invest in their mobile training venture. We supported Weld Tech in equipping the van with the state-of-the-art welding equipment, protective equipment, and industrial materials to provide the best training for participants. We’re now also helping them introduce two new trainings in Visual Inspection and Non-destructive testing of welds —services which local metal processing companies hitherto had to import from abroad.

“SDC’s support was crucial for adapting to COVID-19 and creating our mobile training service,” says Ekrem, owner of Weld Tech. “Going through the pandemic was not easy. SDC & EYE’s help was significant for Weld Tech, and we’re very thankful for it. Now we are looking toward expanding our capabilities in the near future, hoping to be able to hire more staff and deliver more trainings.”