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**Active  
citizens fund**

# Citizens at Work

**Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria under the European  
Economic Area Financial Mechanism 2014–2021**

Open Society Institute – Sofia Foundation  
Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation  
Trust for Social Achievement Foundation

Sofia, 2024



Compiled by *Elitsa Markova*

Photos have been used from the archives of the represented organizations and persons. The included texts resulted from the joint work of the Fund Operator's team and the teams of the organizations that implemented the projects.

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You can find more information about the Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria and all supported projects and initiatives on [activecitizensfund.bg](http://activecitizensfund.bg), the websites of the organizations that are the Fund Operator and on [facebook.com/activecitizensfund.bg](https://www.facebook.com/activecitizensfund.bg).

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# Introduction

Over the last seven years, we have built a bridge between active citizens and civil society organizations in Bulgaria. We believe we made it!

In the course of those seven years, more than 300,000 citizens crossed that bridge and the outcomes of our joint initiatives reached approximately one million people.

Now we are happy to share with you our joint success stories. You can read in this Book where Svetla Kostadinova (Institute for Market Economics) draws legitimacy for the work of her organization from, how Alexander Kumanov (42 Foundation) explains to his family and friends about the job he does or which book Kristina Hristova (Association of European Journalists) is currently reading and a lot more.

The Active Citizens Fund is the Program supporting civil society in Bulgaria under the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism for the period 2014–2021 (EEA FM).

With its financial resources of over 16,045,000 EUR, provided in full by Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein in the course of seven years, from 2017 to 2024, the Fund supported more than 200 initiatives of Bulgarian civil society organizations and their partners from the country and the donor states in six key thematic areas for the civil society sector:

1. Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness
2. Support for human rights
3. Empowerment of vulnerable groups
4. Increased contribution of civil society organizations to gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence
5. Increased civic engagement in environment protection and climate change
6. Enhanced capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector, including civil society organizations

The scope, the re-defined specific objectives and the indicators were confirmed after a broad discussion with a large number of active non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from across the country prior to the launching of the program and the preparation of the calls for project proposals.

The achievements from the persistent work of the supported non-governmental organizations contribute to the goal of the Active Citizens Fund, namely strengthened civil society, active citizens and empowered vulnerable groups.

The outcomes, very few of which we have been able to present in this compendium, are also a valuable contribution to the overall objectives of the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEA FM) and the Norwegian Financial Mechanism (NFM) to reduce economic and social disparities and strengthen bilateral relations between the beneficiary states, Bulgaria in particular, and the donor states, i.e. Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein.

The Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria has also included a special component to grant scholarships and mentorship support to Roma students enrolled in Medical Studies. 121 young male and female students were supported in the period 2018–2024, of whom more than 50 graduated successfully from their higher education and acquired valuable civic competences to work in the community.

The Operator of the Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria over the last seven years was Open Society Institute – Sofia Foundation jointly with Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation and Trust for Social Achievement Foundation.

Soon after the launching of the Program, we faced unusual difficulties, which put to a serious test our sustainability and flexibility skills. We passed together through a series of challenges and their aftermath, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the unprecedented political instability, the growing division in society on important issues, the wave of disinformation and fast-paced global changes which, as we could see from the findings from our surveys, have been growingly recognized as an important factor for the development of civil society in Bulgaria.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a number of changes to our work, as the impossibility to meet face-to-face opened the door to digital interaction, learning and sharing at a rate inconceivable earlier and challenged us in a number of ways.

Project activities were reconsidered, reorganized, sometimes temporarily suspended, quite often suspended several times. The changes to the grant contracts concluded at the beginning of the Program followed one after the other, including in connection with the removal of the requirement for co-financing of projects, which was undoubtedly a considerable relief to all supported organizations. We managed to keep this welcome change in all upcoming calls for proposals. In short, we were there for the organizations at these relatively turbulent times.

In our capacity as Fund Operator, we not only organized calls for project proposals, including two extraordinary calls in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the war in Ukraine, but we also provided ongoing support and consultations during the implementation of the projects, organized bilateral and regional exchange of good practices, knowledge and ideas, worked with young civic leaders, studied public attitudes and the dynamics of the civil society sector, organized thematic meetings and lived through the

difficulties and success of each project initiative together with the supported organizations and their teams.

We would like to thank all our colleagues, the Financial Mechanism Office and the donor states of Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein for their trust and support!



On the photo: Some of the team members of the Fund Operator

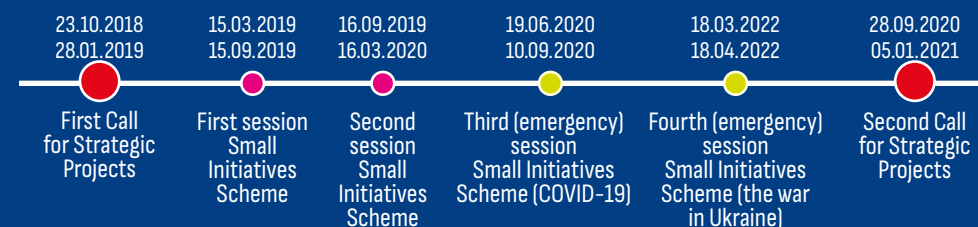
In this compendium we have been able to present just a few of the supported initiatives as well as some of the people that are behind the causes of the supported organizations and that have spared time to respond to our questions. They shared with us information not only about their professional career but also about their personal motivation and outlook on the future. We can also learn about them from the shared titles of books and films. That is because despite being professionals and active citizens 24/7 and regardless of the great extent to which we identify ourselves with our work, all of us are people first. When we get to know each other better, we can do many more things together...

I hope that this Book will be interesting for you and perhaps will bring you joy!

*Elitsa Markova, Program Manager*

**6** thematic areas

**6** calls for project proposals



more than  
**250** supported organizations

**211** projects  
in **32** settlements

more than **300,000** citizens  
engaged in diverse project initiatives

more than  
**300** reports, studies  
and publications based  
on data

about a **Million** reached  
citizens across the country



## Thematic priority

# Strengthened democratic culture and civic awareness

# 01

62 supported projects with specific objectives:

- Citizen engagement in decision-making about public policies
- Carrying out studies to support decision-making, public policy-making and debates
- Promotion of media literacy and civic education
- Improved transparency and accountability of public institutions
- Monitoring and promotion of compliance with ethical standards in journalism

Illustration of  
Yasmina Zornits for  
*Fine Acts*



## Project titles speak for themselves...

Access to Information Forum ○ Security Risks. Towards a Bold Reform of Institutional Policies. ○ Research based arguments for new housing policies in favor of all ○ Inclusiveness and Disabilities ○ Reducing Poverty and Inequality of Opportunities through Reforms in Social Transfers and Social Services ○ Channel 4 ○ Active Citizens in the Villages ○ Vision for Vision ○ Bulgaria grows with its children ○ Informed citizen participation in favor of nature ○ Social and legal action to combat honor related abuse ○ Democratization of the processes of design and implementation of policies in the cities with district division – Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna ○ C.L.A.S.S [Critical : Curious : Active : Courageous] ○ Accountable Local Authorities, Strong Communities: Implementing local accountability and integrity standard through engagement of local NGOs and media ○ Causes with voice and face ○ Civic Hubs in Universities: Activating civic energy for supporting civil society organizations ○ Advocacy campaign for social housing and housing plots in the municipalities of Stara Zagora, Plovdiv, and Maritza ○ Entrance For Citizens – CPF Network for Improvement of Local Public Consultations ○ Countering conventional crime through monitoring and raising civil awareness ○ Citizenship education via pupils' participation ○ Index and methodology for the study of media literacy skills for high school students ○ Back to school: pathways to improve effectiveness of the policies for re-engaging and retaining out-of-school students in education ○ Local Democracy Youth Reporters ○ From ideas and actions to civic awareness at school ○ Media Literacy for Citizens Journalism ○ How Public Are the Public Media? (Disinformation in BNT and BNR: Sources, Speakers, Dissemination) ○ Advocacy campaign for proposal, adoption and dissemination of a Concept for Specialized Day care center and other related services in the community for people with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia ○ Hidden innovations: A study of research and innovation activity remaining uncaptured by official statistics ○ Civil Society Initiative for Effective Biodiversity Conservation Policy ○ Participatory budget for Sofia ○ The role of citizens in local self-government ○ Policies Optimization and Neutralization of the Negatives Effects of COVID-19 ○ E-lessons from history for a post-COVID-19 Bulgaria ○ Citizens' Budget Initiative ○ Broken legitimacy: prevalence and impact of vote fraud in Bulgaria ○ Supporting workplace innovation among SMEs in Bulgaria: analysis and recommendations ○ The patients' response to COVID-19 ○ Adapted Models for Digital Citizenship under an Epidemic Environment in School ○ Active Citizens for Community-owned Energy ○ Neighborhood democracy in urban communities ○ Children at the heart of the Bulgarian Democracy ○ Access to home and community-based long-term care services for elderly people (65+) – policies and reality ○ Active citizens for local and national reform in healthcare ○ Share, Care, Cure: Transforming care for rare diseases. Network of Active Citizenship Platforms ○ Science and Journalism: Together against Infodemic ○ Integral approach to the development of students' media literacy ○ From Repression to Prevention and Social Integration: Towards a Decisive Reform of Bulgaria's Criminal Policies and Criminal Code ○ Active Citizens Platform *LeaderLand* ○ Advocacy Efforts for Economic Recovery Through Reforms ○ What we can achieve together ○ Public institutions through the lens of factual reporting ○ Needs assessment of women in Bulgaria ○ Civic Monitoring on Public Appointments: a Strategic Tool for Good Governance ○ Countering disinformation: e-lessons from Bulgaria's past ○ *Democracy* – a journal, a podcast and round tables for politics and society ○ Digital democracy vs. Digital dictatorship ○ Innovative Training of Students in Technological Recognition of Misinformation focused on Emergency Conditions of War ○ Media education for active citizenship ○ Together and Equal: The Rights of Refugees and Asylum-Seekers ○ Young Reporters for Peace – YR4Peace.

## Reducing Poverty and Inequality of Opportunities through Reforms in Social Transfers and Social Services

Project of:

Institute for Market Economics (IME)

Implementation period:

September 2019–2022

Place of implementation:

Sofia

More information on:

[socialchangebg.info](http://socialchangebg.info); [ime.bg](http://ime.bg)

# 01

All the efforts in the project were focused on carrying out studies in support of debates, decision-making and public policy-making.

IME's work contributed to expanding the scope of monthly social benefits and heating benefits, which are among the most efficient social assistance programs in the country and have a direct bearing on poverty and inequality indicators.

The amendments adopted in the Bulgarian legal framework have expanded the coverage of social assistance programs, reaching out to include over 70,000 more people at risk of poverty.

The increased remuneration in the social assistance field covered approximately 40,000 social workers.

### The project in numbers:

10 analytical reports, 12 opinions and positions and more than 140 articles in the IME's newsletter were prepared; 4 round tables were carried out, approximately 200 media appearances.



The active work with the stakeholders, the numerous occasions of participation in the media and public events as well as the constant communication with institutions have contributed to a change in the social assistance model in Bulgaria, including the binding of monthly social benefits with the poverty line and a greater coverage of benefits.

6 young people in total completed three-month-long traineeships and took an active part in the analytical work on the project.

*"A new aspect of our work was the setting up of an advisory council with a broad range of experts and representatives of the stakeholders. The discussions in the council were public and took place in an informal environment and they often took the IME's team out of its comfort zone and ultimately enabled a much more comprehensive approach to poverty and social protection. One of the most valuable project outcomes was identifying simple and efficient solutions by experts with an incredibly diverse background, who had had over the years various visions about the role of the state in the social services field."*

Institute for Market Economics



A video from the 4th round table titled *A new approach to social protection: opportunities for reforming social transfers and social services*, which you can watch by scanning the code.



# We would like to present to you

**Svetla Kostadinova**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I have been the Executive Director of IME since 2007 and I have worked in the organization since 2001; that is, I have been in the civil society sector for over 20 years. In 2024, IME celebrated its 31st anniversary and it seems that it is one of the first organizations that were set up in the beginning of the transition that is still active today. My personal motivation is my faith that everything is possible but only if efforts are made to make it happen. I am an optimist and this is important when you work for an organization that does not have direct power to change policies but acts in the long run with analyses, events, campaigns, shaping public opinion, participation in coalitions, etc.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

It took some time for my parents to understand what I do for a living, but after quite a few observations, explanations and real outcomes, they do now. However, it seems that they have not fully realized it, as they cannot explain it to a third person. I do not have to explain to my children, they understand everything and, in their opinion, I click on the computer, travel and attend events.

## ***What book are you currently reading?***

I'm reading at the moment *How Innovation Works* by Matt Ridley, who gives examples from across the world how life has improved through innovation over the last 300 years. Most stories show that successful innovation has often resulted from an error, a happenstance or an ongoing process of improvement of an invention which could not have been applied in its original version. This has taught me a very important lesson that we should never give up on improving things that are important for us.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Do you have a permanent team, an office?***

IME's mission is to present the role and opportunities of the market to solve the challenges faced by society. IME is a very active organization and has a permanent team of economists and legal professionals.

## ***What gives you legitimacy most of all?***

It often happens that we are contacted by people, companies or associations that have a problem or a solution to a problem in a public policy. They do it because we have shown over the past 30 years that we have not swayed from our belief that greater freedom for people and businesses is the right way forward to greater opportunities and growth. Our work with data, our understanding of the Bulgarian economy, the experience acquired and constant monitoring of the debate and developments have also contributed to having our opinions heard, sometimes accepted by politicians, and to having businesses look for our expertise to improve the business environment.

## ***Can civil society organizations successfully contribute to make a difference for the better in people's life?***

Of course, civil society organizations contribute to make people's life better. Think of any major change that comes to mind, in any public policy in Bulgaria, and it won't take long to identify the civil society organizations that proposed the change or have been active partners of the public administration in the development, introduction and implementation of the change. In addition, the role of the sector to be a watchdog deters a lot of potentially bad practices, which is also a positive contribution.

## ***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I expect many more small but strong, active and dynamic organizations acting in local communities – no longer only to solve specific issues but also to offer visionary initiatives and solutions.

## ***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

There is a room for improvement in each field, especially nowadays when AI allows everyone to use it for that purpose. When it comes to public policies which need a lot of civil society energy, I think it is healthcare, care for elderly people, the media and quick adaptation of the curriculum content so that it is relevant at least a little to reality.

## ***Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed?***

Civil society organizations will always need support both for specific initiatives and to expand their influence and activity. In this respect, programs such as the Active Citizens Fund are very useful and needed. The Active Citizens Fund has allowed us to concentrate our efforts on improving social policy and we managed to exert ourselves to transition from analytical into advocacy activity, which ultimately led to the specific change.



## Channel 4 and Network of Active Citizenship Platforms

Projects of:  
Forty-two Foundation

Implementation period:  
September 2019–2023

Place of implementation:  
Sofia

More information on:  
[channel4podcast.com](http://channel4podcast.com)



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*“Young people need adequate information, presented in a comprehensible language, about everything that depends on them so that they can live in a normal state, in an organized society, and share the values typical of the present and not the past.”*

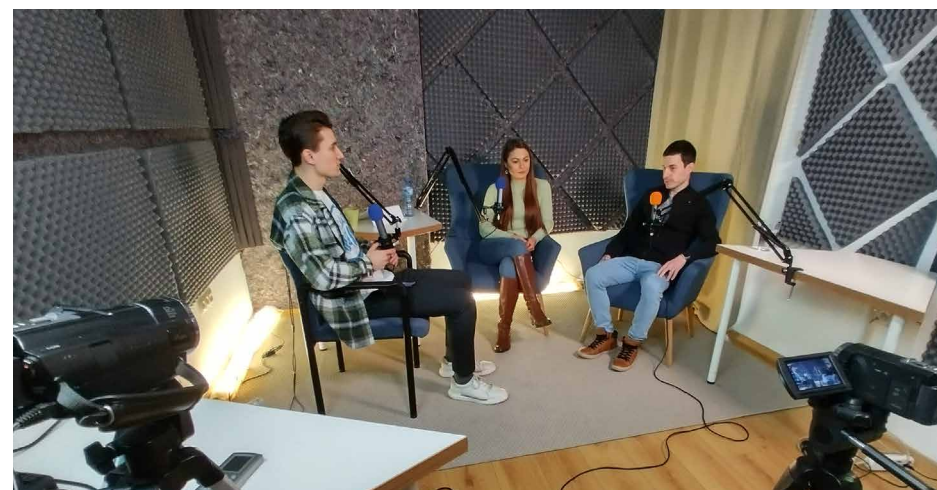
Forty-two  
Foundation

*“There is a lot to be heard” or  
the platform for young people  
to practice active citizenship*

How did it all start? A team of 10 young people, all aged below 30, created more than 40 podcasts and about as many videos in the form of vlogs, interviews and interaction with activists, their peers and interesting people.

Most diverse topics have been “translated” from young people for young people into a language the latter understand to trigger critical thinking. With the help of mentors, the young people created content and took an active part in the planning and dissemination of the content among their peers.

68 new audio and video episodes were created during the second season addressing topics such as freedom of speech, democratic values, citizen activism and volunteering. A network of friendly platforms was set up.



# We would like to present to you

## Alexander Kumanov



### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

My name is Alexander Kumanov. I am the Director of 42 Foundation. I have been in the civil society sector since 2010 and I have worked in NGOs since the end of 2001. It is then that I came into an environment that provided support to organizations of young people to fulfill their ideas and, somehow, it has naturally become my first and so far my most cherished cause.

Being able to see how support and encouragement of creativity manage to “correct” really quickly all the shortcomings of the education system and how you really “shape adequate people” are the main things that still motivate me to not give up and have been the reason for me to return to the field after the brief periods when I did something else for a living.

### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

I’m telling them that I allow young people to make mistakes and help them learn from their mistakes. I don’t think they understand me well. But the reason for not understanding might be due to the fact that the concept of “mistakes as a foundation of success” is missing in general from our DNA.

### *How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

I’ve heard all sorts of prejudice and nonsense. I took it to heart at the beginning, then I somehow realized that it’s more important to not sway from your road instead of making a stop at every step to try to talk to deaf ears until you completely lose your momentum.

### *What book have you read lately?*

*The Elegance of the Hedgehog* by Muriel Barbery. I definitely recommend this book, and not only because of its insight that you cannot understand what Marx’s *Capital* is all about unless you have read other philosophers such as Kant and Montesquieu and have understood them first.

### *What is the mission of your organization? Is it currently active?*

42 Foundation strives to help everyone who contributes to change in Bulgarian society for the better to have the opportunity to present themselves, be understood and find followers. With regard to our work with young people, we have set up a program to help them develop skills for digital activism by encouraging their interest in self-expression, their leadership

qualities as well as their skills to create and develop their own podcast channels. This is how Channel 4 ([channel4podcast.com](http://channel4podcast.com)) came into being. Right now, we have almost reached the final stage of developing our own podcast studio, two people are hired under an employment contract and the whole team has more than 10 members.

### *What gives you legitimacy most of all?*

Our entire activity is public. We have no activity carried out over the last years that does not have any video or audio material left that isn’t published online and is unavailable to the general public. This is the legitimacy that we have ensured for us. It has also brought new people to the team. In our 12-year history, we have found partners. It was not an easy task to prove ourselves in an environment where the resources are limited and it does not help a lot to build trust but we have managed to a certain extent and we can say that fledgling organizations now need much more support than us.

### *Can your organization continue forward if you start doing another job?*

I do not believe in the idea of “organizational capacity”. The capacity is concentrated mainly in the people and their knowledge and skills. The loss of people from the team is also a loss of capacity regardless of all efforts to distribute work within the team. That inevitably slows down the organization. In this respect, 42 Foundation will definitely continue forward but how persistently it will be, I cannot say right now.

### *Could you share about a certain occasion at work when you felt the greatest satisfaction?*

When we gathered the team of young people and listened to how they planned their activity. It was something real and vigorous, far beyond indicators and values.

### *What will remain as a long-term effect of the project under the Active Citizens Fund?*

The name of Channel 4, which attracts new young people to join the team, give it a try in front of the camera and a mic, get an in-depth understanding of public processes and find themselves in the solutions. This effect will stay even without 42 Foundation for more than 20 young people who have been directly involved so far and for everyone else who has got to know Channel 4.

### *Can civil society organizations contribute to a change for the better in people’s life?*

These organizations are the only ones that provide support to large groups of people. However, it’s a good question whether they can successfully contribute for a change. Even after 35 years of democracy and civil society in Bulgaria, we still need to answer it. I believe that there are serious gaps in the communication between this sector and the public and we cannot persuade people that it is the organizations that strategically approach the solving of problems that strongly need support, which would have a



much stronger impact than pure charity. There are good examples but in general we are not good at it.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form a coalition?***

In a society where the culture of cooperation is not present and the environment for resources is highly competitive, partnerships quite naturally turn up more complex and transient than natural. The NGOs are not a part of another society. We live and work in this environment and we are aware of the fact that in order for us to be stronger, we need to be together, but there are few examples of such successful initiatives (National Youth Forum, National Network for Children...).

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I don't think that there will be any significant changes and I'm even pessimistic about the possibility that a critical mass of young and highly motivated people will join the sector to achieve the goals that we did not have the passion, time or money to achieve. The structure of the society shows it, and it can also be seen from the developments over the last years that there is an incredible need to strengthen and rediscover values and values, are the main fuel of the civil society sector.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Education focused on the development of skills; democratic values and the nature of civic engagement; support for vulnerable groups; ecology and youth policies.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund are needed and how did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

Programs that invest in the sustainability of civil society organizations are definitely needed. The Active Citizens Fund played such a role for us, as we received highly valuable support (not only financial) to further develop our portfolio of activities by adding activities that meet the expectations of our target audience and to update our approach and establish ourselves.

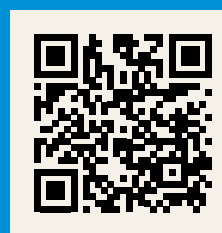
## What we can achieve together

Project of:  
Darik Foundation  
in partnership with  
42 Foundation and Program and  
Analytical Center for European Law

Implementation period:  
October 2021 – December 2023

Place of implementation:  
Sofia

More information on:  
[kauzisglasilice.org](http://kauzisglasilice.org)



01



This partnership project aimed at triggering the media's interest in the work of civil society organizations and thus bridging the gap between the nongovernmental sector and the general public. The radio programs not only introduced to the listeners the people who work in civil society organizations but also provided information about how to join in causes and how to initiate and create communities for change.

In the course of 27 months, the podcast channel [kauzisglasilice.org](http://kauzisglasilice.org) presented the 90 radio shows broadcast on national air. 26 video broadcasts took place, 6 of which were carried out live before an audience. In addition, the editors in the NGO Portal prepared comprehensive articles on the topics from the radio shows. More than 100 organizations and initiatives were presented to the public and the materials from this activity remain available for further use in various communication channels, such as the project website, YouTube, podcast platforms, the website of Darik Radio and the NGO Portal, as well as on podcast platforms, such as Spotify, Google podcasts and Apple podcasts.

***"The project further developed the platform to have a free, informal and honest conversation about activities, outcomes and the motivation behind them of people working for NGOs. A serious interest for response was stirred which exceeded our preliminary expectations."***

Darik Foundation

## Entrance for Citizens

Project of:  
Citizen Participation Forum  
in partnership with the Bulgarian  
Center for Not-For-Profit Law

Period of implementation:  
October 2021 – December 2023

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[fgu.bg/vhod-za-grazhdani](http://fgu.bg/vhod-za-grazhdani)

# 01

The **CONSUL Platform** is an easy and convenient way to be an active citizen: it works in 130 public administrations across the world. It is an open-source platform and can be adapted for each municipality or any other institution worldwide. Citizens can vote online on the platform for certain issues. The project *Entrance for Citizens* helped Bulgaria become one of the first Balkan countries to have CONSUL implemented.

The municipalities of Kardzhali and Targovishte showed the greatest motivation.

The platform *Kardjali for You* is available at: [zateb.kardjali.bg](http://zateb.kardjali.bg).

*Entrance for Citizens* opened the door to good-quality public consultations and participation of citizens in 7 pilot Bulgarian municipalities: Vratsa, Karlovo, Kardzhali, Lovech, Montana, Targovishte and Sofia City.

Why “entrance for citizens?” Many Bulgarian municipalities have a good legal framework regulating citizen participation, which, however, is rarely enforced. At other times citizens have been left with the impression that the consultation processes are rather formal and do not lead to real results. Each municipality wants to be recognized by its residents as open, transparent and accessible. However, the latter cannot be achieved through declarations only but through real and convenient ways that would enable people to participate.

All good practices from the implementation of the project have been gathered in a special book, *A Collection of Short Stories with an Open Ending*.



You can learn more about CONSUL in this short video:

## Young people are the engine of the advocacy campaign in Kardzhali #KardjaliForYou #EntranceFor Citizens





In Montana young volunteers put in effort to attract local people to join a pool of volunteers that would be an active unit with the municipality. **#BankVOL-UNTEERS** is the initiative with which Advocates Association together with

the Municipality are completing their work as local partners of the Citizen Participation Forum. The initiative aims at making people participate with ideas and work in the implementation of local initiatives.

Montana also updated its local strategy for social services during emergencies.



*"The dynamic and unpredictable socio-political and health situation over the last years provoked our adaptability and resulted in a change of some of the planned activities but at the same time helped everyone directly involved in the project to be flexible, more digitally-oriented and most of all patient."*

Citizen Participation Forum Association

## Integral approach to the development of students' media literacy

Project of:

Media Literacy Coalition  
in partnership with  
Center for Evaluation in Pre-school  
and School Education

Implementation period:

September 2021 – February 2023

Place of implementation:

across Bulgaria

More information on:

gramoten.li

01

The project is a follow-up of the *Index and Methodology for Studying the Media Literacy Skills of High-school Students*, developed in 2020 with the support of the Active Citizens Fund.

Both initiatives were supported by the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Culture and were endorsed in the schools within the remit of the two ministries.

In 2022 the Methodology for Assessment entered the next stage by conducting of a national survey of media literacy skills. The goal was to have the skills develop as an integral part of the entire education process regardless of the subject taught.

Tenth-grade students from 229 classes in 170 schools across Bulgaria took part in the first Bulgarian national survey for assessment of digital and media competences of high-school students.

The Handbook *How to Develop Digital and Media Skills of High-school Students* is tailored for teachers and it presents a multidisciplinary methodology for the development of digital and media skills of high-school students. It was created and tested in a real learning environment by real teachers and educational experts and it is fully practically oriented with the examples, tools, resources and curricula included in it.

You can find the handbook here:



# We would like to present to you

Kristina Hristova



## *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

I have been working in the civil society sector since 2010 when a couple of friends and I set up the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria (AEJ). To this day, just like then, I am motivated to work on the shortcomings I see in society to the extent of my abilities and expertise, i.e. in the field of the media and journalism. I used to work as a journalist for 8 years before the Association. In the very beginning of the work of AEJ – Bulgaria, I realized that without the support

of the public, the media and journalists cannot withstand the great political pressure on them and cannot deal with the overwhelming disinformation in the social media over the last years. That is why I also realized that we have to start working with the public by raising people's media literacy. In 2017 we set up the Media Literacy Coalition together with representatives of the media and educational organizations (AEJ – Bulgaria is one of the founders of the Coalition). The goal was to act in a united way against disinformation and in favour of a reform of the education system towards the goal of boosting critical thinking and skills to deal with the risks of social media.

## *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

I am involved with the civil society sector through two organizations, which might work in the same direction but still work with different target groups: AEJ – Bulgaria is engaged mainly with journalists, while MLC is engaged with citizens, among them teachers, the elderly and the young in particular. This makes it even more difficult to explain what exactly I do, especially to people who are not well aware of the work of the civil society sector. But what I say is that I fight disinformation in two directions, by supporting the work of journalists with verified facts and by helping ordinary people recognize fraud and manipulation in the social media.

## *How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

That's my favourite challenge! Especially in smaller settlements where we carry out media literacy training sessions. Unfortunately, propaganda against the civil society sector has worked and people have become mistrustful. But it is those very meetings face-to-face with people in the context of media literacy training sessions that are the way to fight the conse-

quences of propaganda because people can see us live, they can see that we are normal human beings and not some alien forms of life, "sorosoids", which helps a lot to overcome the bias accumulated in them as a result of conspiracy and manipulation.

## *What book are you currently reading?*

The book I'm reading at the moment is *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, which has incredible insights into human relations and prejudice. The film that I have recently watched and kept memory of in my soul with a lot of beauty is *Perfect Days*.

## *What is the mission of your organization?*

The mission of the Media Literacy Coalition is to boost media literacy in the Bulgarian society. The organization is active and it implements projects in line with its mission, we have a permanent staff and we share an office with AEJ.

## *What gives legitimacy to the work of your organization most of all? Do you need support, what kind of support and who from?*

The need to develop media literacy has been already broadly acknowledged by the EU institutions and by the Bulgarian institutions. After the need has been "legitimized" on paper, the greater challenge remains, namely to persuade the institutions and the education system to practically develop this modern literacy. We receive support in this "battle" from a lot of teachers, school principals, NGOs, journalists, representatives of the academia and the media.

## *Could you share with us about a certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?*

I have felt the greatest satisfaction when I've seen the change in the elderly in small towns after a media literacy training session.

## *As of today, what has remained a long-term impact of the project or the projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?*

The methodology developed under the project supported by the Active Citizens Fund is a sustainable product that we actively use to train new teachers. The methodology together with the educational program for teachers are part of our long-term strategy to work with schools and we will rely on it in upcoming applications for projects.





***Can civil society organizations contribute successfully to a change for the better in people's life?***

Civil society organizations are the main catalyst of improvements in the Bulgarian society in many fields. A positive change from the work of NGOs is particularly visible in the field of education. But it is not only education. When it comes to the environment, social work and many other fields, civil society organizations are behind the significant changes. As it can be seen in particular over the last years, at times of constant changes in the governance of the state and the failure to launch real and long-term reforms in any field, civil society organizations remain constant and sustainable with respect to the positive changes they work for in Bulgaria.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria and what do you think about competition?***

I believe that without partnerships and coalitions in the civil society sector, it is not possible to achieve real significant changes. I strongly support the idea of having civil society organizations work in a coordinated manner on common topics for them. This is the only way to make a difference. Of course, there is unfortunately unhealthy competition in the civil society sector as well, but these are natural processes that happen everywhere, and I accept them as inevitable difficulties along our common road.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

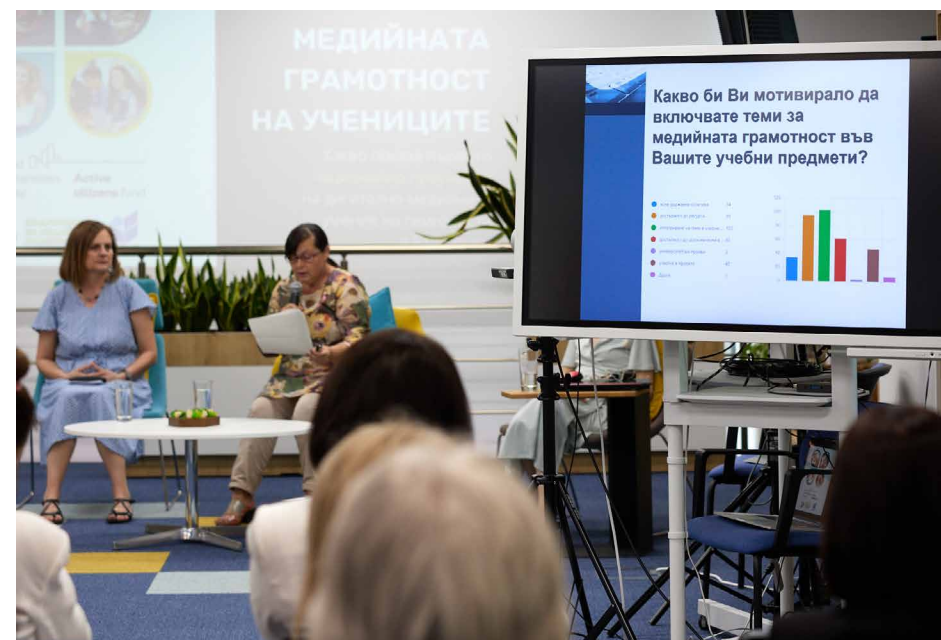
I hope that in 15 years the civil society sector will have much greater financial sustainability so that it can work for long-term changes instead of wasting its energy on piecemeal projects. In addition, I also hope that the civil society sector and the state institutions will work in close partnership to a much greater extent than now.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

The most important fields for me are education, including lifelong civic education, the fight against corruption, access to healthcare and social services, support for elderly people of retirement age and their reintegration in society, the environment and support for independent and good-quality journalism.

***Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed? How did the Fund contribute to the development of your organization?***

This is one of the most important programs supporting NGOs in Bulgaria and its mode of operation has been extremely well thought out to support organizations in a sustainable way in their long-term strategies. The support of the Active Citizens Fund was of key importance to us to help create an entirely new direction of work with teachers for the development of media literacy through each school subject.



On 15th June Media Literacy Coalition presented the findings from the first national survey of digital media skills of high-school students in Bulgaria.

You can find the analytical report about the findings by scanning the code here:





## E-lessons from Bulgaria's past

Projects of:  
MY CENTURY

Implementation period:  
June 2021 – November 2022

Place of implementation:  
Sofia, Montana, Lom

More information on:  
mycentury.tv;  
editor@mycentury.tv



# 01

MyCentury.tv is a popular website with videos that combine archive footage and testimonies about some of the most important events in the 20th century.

- *The Bacillus Calmette-Guérin (BCG) vaccine 1950*
- *HIV and Aids in Bulgaria*
- *Health mediators*
- *Bulgaria, a reluctant Nazi ally?*
- *Dual liberators?*
- *The Roma, builders of socialism?*
- *Who did the border security officers protect until 1989?*

The films can be watched on the website of My Century, Vimeo and YouTube.

My Century created three short films under the project E-lessons from history for a post-COVID-19 Bulgaria, each of which addressed a health crisis from the past in Bulgaria and sought answers to the question whether there are any lessons to be learnt.

The films used unique archive footage discovered in the Bulgarian National Film Archive and interviews with people linked to the respective period of history.

The first film addresses the tuberculosis epidemic in Bulgaria in the 1950s and the creation of the BCG vaccine. The second movie addresses the arrival of HIV/AIDS in Bulgaria in the 1980s and the attitude of the authorities then to the HIV seropositive people. The third film addresses recent events from the turn of this century and the health issues faced by the Roma community.

The film presents health mediators in the Roma neighbourhood Kosharnik near the town of Montana. All three films were created and filmed in such a way so as to trigger questions and lead to debates in the classroom or among university students, and they were included in the e-textbooks of Prosveta Publishing House.

The second series of films addressing the topic of dis-information aimed at busting established myths from the recent history of Bulgaria and questioning some tacit "taboo" subjects among the majority of the society.

The topics of the films with archive footage are: *Bulgaria, a reluctant Nazi ally?*; *Dual liberators?*; *The Roma, builders of socialism?*; *Who did the border security officers protect until 1989?*



Ivan Obreykov, Camera operator, Janet Barry, Film director, Velislav Radev, MY CENTURY



Health mediators Valya Alexandrova and Petar Tsvetanov in Kosharnik neighbourhood in Montana.



An image from the *Health Mediators* film

# We would like to present to you

**Velislav Radev**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

In my youth, as a teenager and a university student, I lived in Bulgaria during the regime of Todor Zhivkov, at a time of ideological confrontations that often divided even families. Ever since then my primary goal has been to distance myself from ideology and to make almost a cult of facts, authentic testimonies of the time, first-person narratives. Later I emigrated from Bulgaria, I

worked for a long time as a BBC reporter in London and in hotspots across the world. I still cherished the desire to film and show one day these testimonies of history, now with the help of the Internet and the emerging technology. So, in 2009, my wife Janet Barry, who has had a longstanding experience in front of and behind the camera, and I launched this website mycentury.tv. During the first couple of years, in particular, such a project is inevitably fuelled by enthusiasm and self-giving. Soon information about us and our short films started spreading on social media, including in countries neighbouring Bulgaria. In 2017, we registered a non-profit association in Bulgaria together with several colleagues with me as manager. We started working on transforming our website into an educational history platform, we found our first partners and our films found their place in history textbooks. In 2021, we received our first grant from the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA Financial Mechanism for a project addressing COVID-19 and lessons from the history of Bulgaria and health crises in the past. In 2022, our project was once again supported by the Active Citizens Fund, this time addressing the topic of disinformation and the changed environment as a result of the war in Ukraine. What started as a youth dream for me has started turning more and more into a measurable factor.

## ***What book are you currently reading?***

I'm reading *Fake History – Ten Great Lies and How They Shaped the World* by Otto English, the pen name of the British writer and journalist Andrew Scott. The light-hearted at a first glance form is only at the surface as this is a serious story about persistent and unsettling myths in the British society.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Do you have a permanent team? An office?***

Our mission is to enlighten, it is related to history education and presentation in a clear and accessible way of civic values without any political bias, nationalism or any other ideology. The make-up of our team is permanent, it consists of 7 members. Depending on the project we also hire external colleagues with the respective expertise and qualities. We do not have an office. The organization is active and we are looking for new projects and partners.

## ***What is the foremost source of legitimacy of the work of your organization? Do you need support? What kind of support and who from?***

Our organization unites people with longstanding experience as experts: our team includes journalists with over 20-year-long experience of impassionate storytelling, scientists such as a sociologist, a specialist in contemporary history, a Bulgarian language specialist – a university professor in Stockholm. We discuss our projects together or separately with our colleagues and this makes us certain that we make the right decisions and we choose appropriate topics to work on.

## ***Could you share about a certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?***

For those of us who were involved in the project for busting historical myths as part of fighting disinformation and for me personally, it was the interest our films sparked among the youngest in the audience on TikTok. However, some of the response to the films was concerning, as the students discussed Nazism and Communism in a superficial way without any knowledge of the facts. It was as if they have not been taught at school anything about the Gulag or the Holocaust and Bulgaria's allies in 1941–1944. At the same time this interest and debate gave us confidence about how important our work and the support for it were.

## ***As of today, what has remained as a long-term impact of the projects implemented under the Active Citizen Fund?***

We highly appreciated having the opportunity to work with Ms. Anina Chileva under the first project supported by the Active Citizens Fund on the history of health crises in Bulgaria, as Ms. Chileva is one of the masterminds behind the first campaign to fight HIV in the 1990s and is at present an expert at the National Center for Public Health. Her participation in the project ensured continuity between generations and illustrated in practice the increased authority of the public sector. We would be happy to have the opportunity to continue our dialogue in the context of a new project as well as to contribute to including public health issues in school curricula. Our cooperation with Prosveta Publishing House to have our films integrated in its e-textbooks developed prior to our two projects supported by the Active



Citizens Fund and it continued after the implementation of the projects. We are currently coordinating with *Prosveta* to work on films about the contribution of Bulgarian scientists.

***Can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?***

To me, these organizations are somewhat of a corrective of state efforts to provide a better life for all in society. NGOs are also particularly needed due to their independent way of decision-making. Thus, for instance, our mission to teach history and civic education without political bias, nationalism or any other ideology sets us apart from other organizations in this field. The Active Citizens Fund or the donors supporting our projects have not interfered with the messages conveyed by our films except for the post-editing visualization.

***What do you think of partnerships with other CSOs?***

It would have been nice to have more meetings similar to the one at the National Palace of Culture a couple of years ago with Bulgarian NGOs from the public sector. That was an incredibly valuable opportunity to make direct personal contacts and present the projects as well as look for potential partners. Thus, for instance, our cooperation with *Roma-Lom* Foundation started after a spontaneous meeting during the shooting of our health movies under the first project and their representatives were included in our second project about disinformation targeted at the Roma community. We are really happy to know them and we follow the success stories of *Roma-Lom*.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

In my opinion the most important fields to invest such energy in are education, healthcare/health education, human rights, gender equality and the environment.

***Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed?***

The need is real and programs such as the Active Citizens Fund are a main source of financing and often a matter of survival for many civil society organizations. Such programs also lead to particularly important social changes. Thus, foreign observers have also begun pointing out that Bulgaria has lately started to acknowledge much more the importance of historical memory, knowledge of the period 1944–1989 and its place in Europe. However, the way financing of such programs is organized should encourage much fairer distribution of projects to the disadvantaged in the society and outside big urban centers.

## Broken legitimacy: the controlled and bought vote in Bulgaria, size and influence

Project of:

*Anti-Corruption Fund* Foundation

Period of implementation:

December 2021 – August 2021

Place of implementation:

across Bulgaria

More information on:

[acf.bg](http://acf.bg)

01



*"We also prepared lists of risky polling stations in the elections held in April and July 2021 that were submitted and used by the law enforcement authorities. The topic was actively covered by the media and the citizens have a valuable resource for own study and further analysis, i.e. short videos illustrating the most important findings from the research as well as a list of the risky polling stations and interactive maps with geolocations."*

**What is the scale of the controlled and bought vote?**

**Which are the polling stations at risk?**

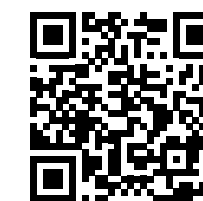
**Which political forces received the greatest number of votes in the polling stations with controlled and bought vote?**

***Over the last 30 years, vote-buying and suspected rigging of the election results have been part of all political elections held in Bulgaria...***

The project aimed at engaging citizens more actively in the electoral process by presenting them objective information about vote-buying and the extent to which it has impact on the vote results.

The team offered 5 analytical documents based on the methodology prepared to measure risky voting in Bulgaria. The analyses cover all elections in Bulgaria in the period 2013–2019 as well the elections held in April 2021 and July 2021.

Scan for the analysis here:



## Access to home and community-based long-term care services for elderly people (65+): policies and reality

### Project of:

National Catholic Federation Caritas Bulgaria in partnership with Caritas Vitania, Caritas Ruse and Caritas Sofia

### Period of implementation:

September 2021 – April 2024

### Place of implementation:

national and local level

### More information on:

[caritas.bg/dostap](https://caritas.bg/dostap)

# 01



*Old age is also our responsibility, not just responsibility of the state. Loneliness kills and the elderly suffer from it most often. The system of financing of social services for the elderly at present is mainly organized on a project-based principle and it lacks sustainability. There is a shortage of professionals, such as social workers, and of sufficient home care services in smaller settlements, in particular.*

These are some of the conclusions of a large-scale survey about the access of elderly people (65+) to long-term home care or community-based care that was carried out by the Caritas network across the country.

In 2027, one in four Bulgarians will be aged over 65. The population of the country is aging at a faster and faster rate. The need of long-term care for the elderly is growing not only because of aging itself but also because of unhealthy aging. That is why the main goal of the initiative is to attempt to influence a change of the existing policies for home and community-based long-term care for one of the most vulnerable groups in the Bulgarian society, i.e. the elderly.

By analyzing the root causes of various issues, Caritas offers specific solutions including sustainable financing, clear quality standards, efficient planning, better working conditions, legalization of informal service providers, diverse models of home care and facilitated access to services for the more and more aging population of Bulgaria, and the latter are some of the most urgent measures to provide quality affordable and accessible care for all.

The results and the recommendations were discussed at a series of round tables and discussions with a broad range of stakeholders across the country.

The highlight of the communication campaign of the project titled **Old age is our responsibility as well!** were the personal stories of elderly people from various settlements across Bulgaria. The campaign put an emphasis



on the complicated situation in the sector of long-term care in Bulgaria with its severe shortage of professionals and lack of good-quality and accessible care for the elderly.

*"In order to guarantee the right of a life of dignity to every elderly person, Bulgaria needs to reform considerably its long-term care sector by granting it deserved recognition and efficient support."*

Caritas Bulgaria

You can scan the code to get the summarized report from the community-based consultations held with the stakeholders in the field of long-term care for elderly people (65+):



## Active Citizens Platform LeaderLand

Project of:  
Deystvie Youth LGBT Organization

Period of implementation:  
October 2021 – March 2024

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[leaderland.bg](http://leaderland.bg)



01

*LeaderLand is a free-of-charge platform for civic education in Bulgarian language only, which is focused on the points of intersection of the forms of discrimination.*

The platform builds on the acquired experience of leadership training and offers the opportunity to acquire civic competence tailored to the needs of the LGBTI community but also including Roma and deaf leaders and other civil society activists.

The platform was created to meet the need of active, empowered and involved leaders in the LGBTI community, the Roma and the deaf community but it also raises legal skills in the civil society sector in general.

The content of *LeaderLand* is important for young people (aged 18–30) who are members of vulnerable groups (LGBTI+, Roma and deaf) and for volunteers of civil society organizations.

The four training sessions offered on the platform are:

Module 1: Social movements

Module 2: Fundamentals of law

Module 3: Active citizenship skills

Module 4: Campaigning



On the photo:  
Deystvie  
Youth LGBT  
Organization

## We would like to present to you

**Borimir Totev**



***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

My name is Borimir Totev and I work in the field of development and communications in *Deystvie* organization. I have cross-cutting interests in the fields of migration, politics, community organization and culture. I graduated from University College London and I have experience as a producer of creative and cultural events, communication and social impact marketing as

well as development, management and provision of public programs in the fields of charity, civic rights and non-profit. I have started living and working in Bulgaria again for several years now after I spent most of my life in the UK.

***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

In short, I say that I work in the NGO sector. I go into detail according to who is standing across from me as a listener. Most people understand and take a genuine interest when it comes to work that aims to protect human rights.

***What book have you read lately?***

The last work that I have revisited time after time looking for spiritual humility, meaning and guidance is a series of interviews of Maya Angelou, an American poet, social activist and a prominent representative of the civil rights movement in the middle of the 20th century.

***What is the mission of your organization?***

*Deystvie* is an organization dedicated to making a difference in the life of LGBTQI+ people in Bulgaria. Our vision is to achieve full legal recognition and social inclusion of the LGBTQI+ people in a society where they feel secure and recognized.

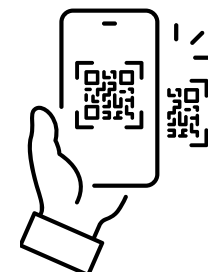
***What gives the greatest legitimacy to the work of your organization?***

*Deystvie* is a good partner of institutions which has a well-established position and visibility in the civil society sector in Bulgaria and Europe, owing to its success in the field of strategic litigation carried out by our team and the successful amendments to the legal framework implemented thanks to our work.

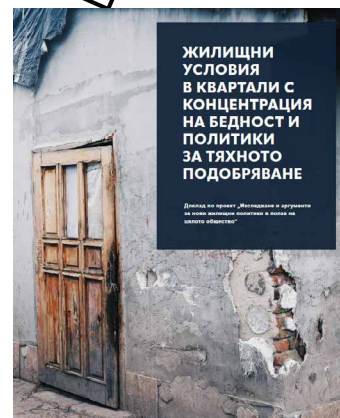


*How do you expect that LeaderLand will develop in the future? What difficulties does the project face? Do you find understanding among new audiences of people that have not heard about the organization or have been initially skeptical or even hostile?*

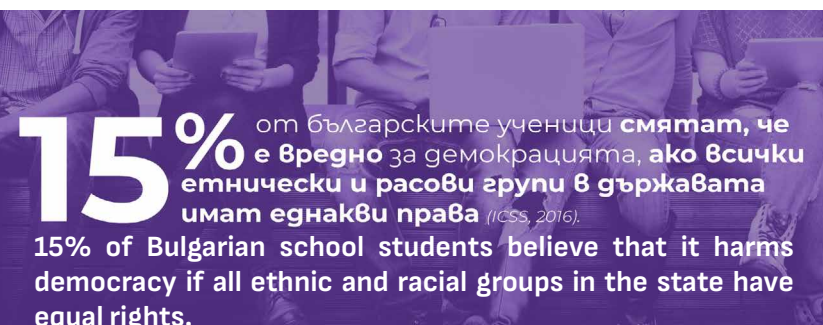
We expect that *LeaderLand* will remain a key tool and resource for the sector as well as among teachers. We treaded carefully at the beginning, aware of the fact that regardless of our experience in training university students, the public administration and the Ministry of Interior, we have never reached directly to independent circles of activists and residents of smaller settlements. After we worked on the supported initiatives, that stretch geographically from the village of Drenovets to the town of Sevlievo, we have started feeling as a family of like-minded people regardless of the fact that each supported initiative had a different cause. The sense of having created a *LeaderLand* community was significant.



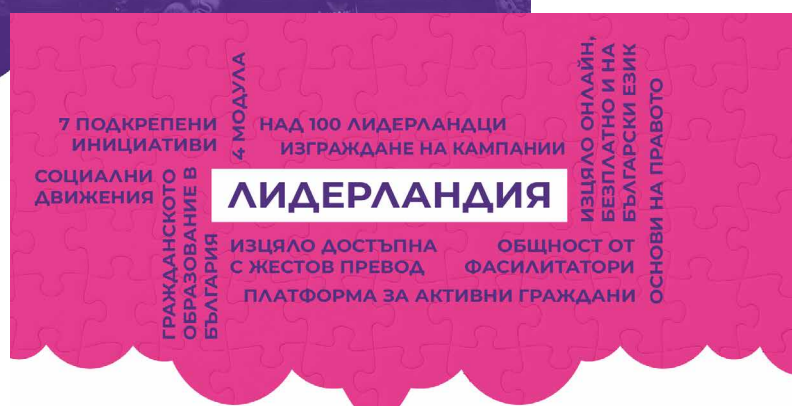
## More titles and links to supported studies



**Research Based Arguments for New Housing Policies in Benefit of All** of *Habitat for Humanity* Foundation. Scan the code to access the report and all studies under the project.



*The sense of having created a **LeaderLand** community was significant.*



**Back to school: pathways to improve the effectiveness of the policies for re-engaging and retaining out-of-school students in education** of the Institute for Research in Education. Scan the code to see the report.

**How Public Are the Public Media?** of *Human and Social Studies Foundation* – Sofia in partnership with *For a New Partnership in Journalism* Foundation. Scan the code to see the report.



**Civic Monitoring on Public Appointments: a Strategic Tool for Good Governance** of *Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives* Foundation. Scan the code to see the report.

**Bulgaria grows with its children: building and developing the professional competence of people working with children in early age** of *For Our Children* Foundation. Scan the code to see the report.



## Neighborhood democracy in urban communities

Bilateral project of:  
BG Be Active  
in partnership with  
Nabolagshager AS



Period of implementation:  
September 2021 – November 2023

Place of implementation:  
across the country

More information on:  
[bgbeactive.org](http://bgbeactive.org)

01



Good practices and legal opportunities in Bulgaria and Norway were studied under the project and publicly available resources were created including a handbook of good practices from Norway and handbooks for the community and for municipalities.

The Handbook for the Community presents practical tips to start making changes in urban spaces by actively involving citizens.

You can scan the code here to get access to the resource:



### How to create a community around urban spaces and how to work better with the institutions?

Placemaking, or in other words making spaces, is an easy and accessible process of organizing local citizen initiatives in public spaces.

The residents of a given place are encouraged to make use of it more actively for various activities such as having meetings and conversations, taking a walk, playing, etc.

In the Bulgarian context, the method enables improving internal communication and overcoming the lack of trust between citizens, the institutions and civil society organizations.

Island  
Liechtenstein  
Norway

Active  
citizens fund

АКТИВНИ  
КВАРТАЛИ

## ПЛЕЙСМЕЙКИНГ ЗА ДЕМОКРАЦИЯ

НАРЪЧНИК ЗА ОБЩНОСТТА



In Lyulin neighbourhood of Sofia City, people with impaired sight were engaged in creating a safe and accessible space for socialization. The remaining initiatives in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Haskovo involved people from urban neighbourhoods without accessible green spaces.







In 2023, the project gathered over 150 activists, civil society organizations, municipalities, national public institutions and the media in order to support the creation of a national placemaking network.

The network continues functioning as a hub for exchange of information, practices and challenges. The “bottom-up” approach

has been adopted and the methodology is targeted at the level of the community, local citizens and small organizations.

Unlike in other states, the placemaking network in Bulgaria is developing at the initiative of the civil society sector. In Norway, for instance, a similar network was launched at the initiative of public institutions.



## We would like to present to you

**Laska Nenova and Vlad Fedorov**



***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

*BG Be Active* is a collective of people and organizations providing alternative solutions to existing problems by creating concepts, resources and connections at national and international level. We are based in the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria, and ever since 2011, with every initiative, we have inspired and supported different people and organizations to work together to make a difference here and now, with small but real steps, and we have been steadily pursuing our major goal, namely an active Bulgarian civil society.



Our team includes experts in communication, marketing, project management, international relations, accounting and work with communities. As in our country, given its history, communities in most cases do not have a practical experience of exercising their civic habits, we see our role in creating opportunities for participation and dialogue.

***How do you engage citizens? How do you work with other stakeholders for citizen engagement?***

We are really passionate about topics to do with interventions in urban space by involving the community, creating social urban spaces and mobilizing people to take an active part in this process. We use placemaking (creating spaces) in order to encourage the sense of belonging to a community. Ever since 2017, our team has adapted placemaking to the Bulgarian context and in the course of more than 50 interventions across the country, supported by partners, we have acquired extensive experience from a number of positive and sometimes not that positive lessons.

The concept of placemaking (creating spaces) is promoted by various international organizations and movements, at the beginning through Project for Public Spaces back in 2018 and then through *PlacemakingX* since 2019 on. There are currently regional organizations for Asia, Africa and Latin America. We launched the network *Placemaking Bulgaria* in September 2023 in Bulgaria to bring together activists, municipalities and experts in a platform for exchange of experience and dissemination of good practices

for creating and developing public spaces with the active involvement of communities.

***What is your understanding of democracy and how does it work?***

We believe that democracy starts locally: when people are encouraged to take part in activities in a community they take care of, they feel motivated to take responsibility in their own hands, which ultimately results in greater involvement, empowerment and trust. That was the principle underlying our project *Active Neighbourhoods* that was financed by the Active Citizens Fund. Our goal was to involve communities in decision-making on local level and to develop civic habits of participation because democracy needs to be practiced and maintained regularly.

We explored community spaces under the project as places to exercise one's democratic involvement with one's history, interests, conflicts and opportunities. It was a particular pleasure to work with different communities in small settlements and towns, listen to their issues and develop a solution together, whether to improve a park space for people with pets or create a space for disadvantaged people, or improve a school zone for children and youth. People explained their ideas about a specific place during the process, discussed the action plan with their neighbours, made compromises and worked together. All of this encouraged them to learn to negotiate, look for a consensus, overcome conflicts and act together. This is how community democracy is born and citizen activism is enhanced.

***Why are NGOs needed in Bulgaria in the field in which you work? What sets them apart from other organizations?***

Against the backdrop of significant global shocks over the last years, democratic tools become ever more important for looking for efficient shared solutions and civil society organizations have a key role to play for making space to look for the latter. Even though the immediate impact might not be seen, civil society initiatives in the long run encourage good governance, empower citizens, create a positive experience for civic engagement and boost general confidence in institutions. That is why *BG Be Active* will continue its work to create opportunities for people to practice the habits of being active citizens through placemaking by focusing on inclusion of young people and residents of small settlements.

## Science and Journalism: Together Against the Infodemic

### Bilateral project of:

AEJ Bulgaria

in partnership with

Norsensus Mediaforum

Trakia University, Center of Plant

Systems Biology and Biotechnology

and Association for Career Development  
and Training



### Period of implementation:

October 2021 – October 2023

### Place of implementation:

Sofia, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, Stara Zagora

### More information on:

factcheck.bg

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Against the backdrop of growing disinformation and dissemination of fake news, the partners of this project developed a model of cooperation between scientists and journalists on a special platform for fact-checking.

Almost 100 journalists and representatives of the academia took part in a series of training seminars and online lectures about fact-checking in Sofia, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad and Stara Zagora. The partners taught the journalists how to check the academic rating of scientists in various scientific disciplines and have a better grasp of various systems of scientometrics. A database was created with scientists that journalists checking facts can turn to. The Norwegian partners from Norsensus

shared valuable experience with their Bulgarian partners as well as with the participants in the organized webinars.

In the course of two years, 75 articles were published on the fact-checking platform Factcheck.bg, exposing manipulative or false data about phenomena from the world of science. The publications reached 400,000 users. 7 episodes of the podcast *The Facts Speak* were created, which were listened at least 8,000 times on the website and on the social network page of the project. The five educational videos about fact-checking with digital tools have been watched more than 30,000 times.

Climate scientists consulted the translation and the Bulgarian edition of the Handbook for journalists reporting extreme weather.





# We would like to present to you

## Tsvetelina Hristova



### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

As it probably happens with all good things, I started working in the civil society sector by chance. Back in the days when I was a student of Romanian Philology at St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, I came across an advertisement for an internship with Romanian and English language at the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe. It was then that I got to know a lot of non-governmental organizations from across Europe. It was particularly important for me that I had the opportunity to travel abroad. This is how I got to know the inspiring stories of many people who worked as catalysts of positive change. Almost 20 years later, I am

still glad to work in the civil society sector. I have worked with the Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria since 2018 and I am involved with various projects about media literacy, fighting disinformation and hate speech. I have great colleagues who teach me something new every day.

### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

It seems that nowadays people understand more easily what I do. Most people understand the concept of the project principle no matter whether they work in public or private organizations. My children know that I coordinate a youth online media channel for school journalism and that I organize media events and conferences and for my children this is the most interesting part of my job.

### *How do people respond when you tell them that you work in a non-governmental organization?*

Most people respond in a positive way, as they associate most often non-governmental organizations with charity, volunteering and support for vulnerable groups. Though rarely, I've had strangers respond with a sneer by voicing some of the claims spread about NGOs in Bulgaria, i.e. "foreign agents" or "grant abusers", suggesting that civil society organizations are first and foremost engaged in making use of funds from the EU and the USA to buy influence in Bulgaria.

### *What book have you read lately?*

I have re-read lately *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by Milan Kundera. The novel has a lot of layers which are inspiring for me and which sound up-to-date today as well. I was surprised to find out that a fiction movie

was filmed after the book in 1988, which stars Juliette Binoche, which also brought me just as much pleasure.

### *What is the mission of your organization?*

The Association of European Journalists – Bulgaria is part of the international AEJ, an independent observer with the Council of Europe. However, as a Bulgarian legal entity, AEJ – Bulgaria has the freedom to choose and manage its activities. Its work is most of all related to supporting journalists to practise freely their profession, organizing training sessions to boost the competence of journalists and the work is overall oriented to improving the media environment in Bulgaria. Our team believes that free media is vital for each democratic society.

### *What gives legitimacy to your work?*

AEJ – Bulgaria is a membership organization, which has more than 130 journalists and media professionals as members and which constantly continues to receive membership applications. This is an indicator which shows that membership of such an organization is valuable for journalists. At AEJ we try to respond in a timely manner with opinions in cases of violation of the ethical standards of journalism, exposing to risk the life and health of journalists and impeding journalists' work. A key topic for AEJ has become recently the so-called "SLAPP" strategic lawsuits against journalists and entire media channels. Our organization spends time and resources to provide legal support to colleagues in such situations. We have had also cases when we organized fundraisers because the administrative fees for such lawsuits are often unbearable, especially for small regional media.

### *As of today, what has remained as a long-term impact of your project supported by the Active Citizens Fund?*

The support our organization received to administer the fact-checking platform *Factcheck.bg* and post publications related to exposing disinformation on scientific topics was of key importance. The project Science and Journalism enabled us to have a database (which continues to expand) of scientists and experts in scientific fields, whom the factcheckers from *Factcheck.bg* can refer to. Last but not least, we started receiving invitations from Bulgarian and international organizations about new projects related to science and journalism and we have been recognized as a "natural partner" in the field.

### *Why are NGOs needed in Bulgaria in the field you operate?*

The media environment in Bulgaria is quite challenging, and it is not difficult for journalists to feel disheartened when they try to do their job for the benefit of the public, and instead of receiving gratitude, they are threatened, fired or sued in a court of law. That is why it is very important to have organizations that give the sense of a community to those journalists who believe in their profession and its mission. When a person is not alone, it is easier to continue forward even when the person faces challenges along the road.



### ***How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years?***

The most valuable resource of the civil society sector in Bulgaria are the people working in it. We can sense already the arrival of a new generation of colleagues who contribute with their free-spirited thinking, original ideas and desire for a positive change. Quite a few of the young people who start working in NGOs in Bulgaria have returned from abroad where they completed their higher education. Thus, they introduce a new mode of operation as well as Western democratic values, tolerance towards those different from us and a new positive energy. I personally feel quite optimistic about the Bulgarian civil society sector in 15 years!

### ***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Education, education, education, education and once again education! Not only education of children but also of adults and the elderly. I believe that lifelong learning is the key to the well-being of each nation. Literate societies can regulate themselves their healthcare, economic sustainability, internal affairs, the public administration and social solidarity.

### ***In your opinion are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under EEA FM needed and if yes, why?***

The presence of the Active Citizens Fund under EEA FM in Bulgaria is important not only as an opportunity for financial sustainability but also as an opportunity to transfer valuable experience and learn. Having implemented two projects under the Program, one as a recipient and one as a partner organization, AEJ – Bulgaria developed in several directions. First, the organization boosted its organizational capacity: during the process of administration, coordination and reporting the projects, our team learned new things and was constantly supported by the implementing organization. Second, the organization has created a lot of useful resources for journalists that will be used in the long run. Third, the organization has supported and helped develop the fact-checking platform Factcheck.bg. Last but not least, our organization added to its portfolio the topic of Science and Journalism and AEJ – Bulgaria is currently sought by Bulgarian and foreign partners for participation in new projects related to the same topic.

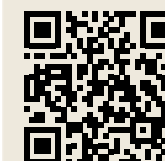


On the photo: Some of the members of the team of AEJ



Журналистът в света на постистината - уебинар | The Journalist in a Post-truth World - A Webinar

Scan the code to get access to the online lecture of Vedat Servicer titled *Journalism in a Post-Truth World*



## Children at the Heart of the Bulgarian Democracy

**Bilateral project of:**  
National Network for Children (NNC)  
in partnership with  
The Office of the Ombudsman  
for Children in Iceland



**Implementation period:**  
July 2021 – July 2023

**Place of implementation:**  
Sofia

**More information on:**  
nmd.bg

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NNC's team prepared a study of the practice of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in Iceland and the initiative *Become an Advocate for Children* engaged more than 100 members of political parties with working in the interest of children and families in the 47th, 48th and 49th National Assembly.

More than 7 000 signatures were gathered under the project together with parents and activists to have a National Children's Hospital built in Bulgaria. Two important legislative amendments were

achieved: ensure guaranteed medical tests to uninsured pregnant women and increase the opportunities for hiring pedagogues in nursery groups instead of medical specialists only.

A Proposal for Legislative Framework and Rules on the Office of the Ombudsman for Children in the Republic of Bulgaria was drafted and submitted. That document will serve to support future advocacy actions of NNC before the state institutions in Bulgaria.

Children's policies over the last couple of years have fallen victim to disinformation and dissemination of fake news.

Parents' fears were used to repeal key legislative acts for the protection of the child.

NNC's project responded to the need to change policies on children and families in Bulgaria, arising from making informed decisions based on authentic data and information.

In the course of almost three years, the project directed public attention to the issue of the rights of the child and child policies.

*"The work of the Ombudsman for Children involves advocacy, systematically and purposefully placing children on the agenda of those in power. It is also important for children to know that they have their own representative among those in power that they can contact, talk to and that would stand by their side."*

Salvör Nordal, the Ombudsman for Children in Iceland

## We would like to present to you

**Georgi Bogdanov**



**Tell us in brief about yourself.**

I have had various jobs, the most exotic one being that of a miner for the *Rare Metals* uranium mines, but I have always been involved in issues concerning children and families throughout my professional life. I have been working for the National Network for Children (NNC) since 2009; it is an organization uniting the efforts of more than 130 organizations and civil society activists for the rights of the child. I had to help NNC with preparing a project and after I did it, the Managing Board offered me a permanent job. When I started working at the

organization, we used to be just 12 organizations and 1–2 people hired under an employment contract, while NNC today unites 130 organizations and 12 full-time employees work for it.

**How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?**

The simple explanation is that I work to have the laws on children and families amended, so that children can be happy in their own families and can be provided with good education and healthcare.

**How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?**

People do not know what an NGO is and even if they know, they associate NGOs with something negative, unstable and confused. There are a lot of reasons for that. First, NGOs themselves do not speak in a comprehensible manner about what they do and how they help. Second, civic-mindedness and activism are low in the country as a result of our education. Young people are not aware of the work of the Council of Ministers, the Municipality, the role of civil society organizations, etc. Third, the defamation campaigns led against the sector are so massive that they come from various directions: from politicians as well as from external sources in order to boycott democracy in the country. However, this is going on not only in Bulgaria.

**Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from?**

Our legitimacy comes from two sources. First, the network members, which are united to uphold the rights of the child and to help children subject to abuse, children living in isolation or just active children to have the opportunity to be included in public life. Second, the international legal act



that guides our activity is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is the foundation based on which our organization has been set up and we are united to make the rights of the child a reality. As Janusz Korczak said: "Human rights start with the rights of the child".

***Could you share about a certain exciting occasion from your work on the project?***

We had a lot of achievements during our work on the project but I was most impressed when we visited Iceland and the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and we did not see any organizations there such as ours. I was impressed by how a state can work so well without having so many civil society organizations. What I noticed, in fact, was that state-governed organizations in Iceland operate like non-governmental organizations. They are close to people and are in constant dialogue with them. While we were in Iceland, we saw the Mayor of Reykjavik in the street talking to people; we met Ministers and state officials who knew everything about the circumstances in which their fellow citizens live. I was most satisfied with the fact that when we shared what we do for the rights of the child, they listened with great interest and we heard from almost all directions that we are ahead in certain respect, given the context we work in.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project?***

The project that we implemented was very important for the National Network for Children because it coincided with a very difficult period for the organization of very limited financing. We were on the brink of downsizing our team and suspending our development. So, we first stabilized our organization. Second, we have kept very good relations with the Ombudsman in Iceland and we still exchange emails on important issues to this day, as Mrs. Salvör Nordal is Chairperson of the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children. In response to your question whether we will have soon an Ombudsperson for Children, I am rather pessimistic because the political situation in the country is not conducive to reforms and children's policies have been pushed far to the background. Nevertheless, I believe that one day we will have an Ombudsperson for Children because we still raise this topic and advocate for it. Bulgarian children need to be heard by someone at the highest possible level in the country. We do not have such an institution.

***Can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?***

We were the organization that made the topic of a children's hospital important for politicians. It is not possible for Bulgaria not to have a children's hospital and for our healthcare system to be in such a poor condition, without pediatricians and nurses, and for children's wards in hospitals to operate in such an outdated fashion. Organization like ours play an important role because they not only point to the problems but they also offer

solutions. We have carried out monitoring of child policies for more than 14 years, presenting a report called *The Government's Report Card*. We prepared two editions of this report under the project with the participation of more than 40 experts and over 3,000 children and adults by identifying the problems and offering solutions to overcome them.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs?***

I believe that when we are faced with a serious problem, we get together and form coalitions quickly. Otherwise creating networks and maintaining professional advocacy for a particular issue, such as children, for instance, is quite difficult. Organizations differ, they have a very different understanding of policies and approaches to solving issues. It is quite often believed even in our network that it competes with its members. However, if our network is granted a project, the advantages or the activities are to the benefit of all members, for instance to organize an annual meeting, prepare the *Report Card*, organize the Golden Apple Awards, etc.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I would like very much for us to be like Iceland, the civil society sector to be less developed and be operational more in the field of services, while the state and the public institutions to work for the people. However, we are too far away from this reality. I can imagine the civil society sector being more professionalized, more focused on development of giving and work with citizens.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

You would hardly hear "no" in response to this question. It is extremely important in countries such as Bulgaria to support the organizations that work for the development of democracy. We do that through children's policies, but there are organizations working for democracy through green policies, support of the elderly, etc. The Active Citizens Fund allowed the National Network for Children to stabilize its organization and bring to the fore the topic of our children that are at the heart of democracy in Bulgaria.

39 supported projects with specific objectives:

- Civil society organizations involving young people in their activities and campaigns for protection of human rights, including as volunteers
- Improved implementation of international standards on human rights
- Provision of legal aid and counselling to victims of discrimination and violation of human rights
- Development and application of educational tools for protection of human rights
- Communication measures for overcoming negative stereotypes targeted against vulnerable groups of society that are victims of hate speech

An illustration by Milena Filipova for *Fine Acts*



## Project titles speak for themselves...

Assessment of the Reform in Places of Detention in Bulgaria: Law and practice after the pilot European Court of Human Rights judgment Neshkov and Others ○ Ex iure ad iustatium (from rights to justice); Principles for fair court proceedings for people with disabilities ○ The Butterflies of Plato ○ She in Bulgaria – setting up community groups working for visibility of women's problems and establishing a network of activists for women's rights ○ National LGBTI Legal Program ○ Migrants Got Talent ○ Toler@nce platform 2.0 ○ Practice your rights with knowledge and creativity ○ International Human Rights Standards on Focus ○ Youth volunteering in support of human rights ○ Creative campaigning: innovation in support of human rights ○ Increasing Democratic Competence and Human Rights Awareness among Young People ○ Efficient legal aid for refugees and migrants in Bulgaria ○ INvulnerable ○ Do we understand our rights? ○ Time to be active ○ Ensuring effective protection against gender-based violence against Roma women and girls ○ Right to participation and voice ○ Motivation of Young Roma for Participation in Botevgrad Municipality's Public Policies ○ DEFEND: Preparing a new generation of young defenders of the fundamental rights of refugees and migrants ○ There is a reason! Support for the right to education and non-discrimination ○ Overcoming alienation: support the children of prisoners in pandemic Covid-19 ○ Supported through the crisis ○ Human Rights Protection during a Pandemic ○ Legal aid to financially disadvantaged refugees and immigrants during a pandemic by using and improving the Migrantlife.Bg platform ○ ..."slowly, without malice, humanly"... ○ Protecting human rights ○ The child – a subject of their rights: access to care and therapeutic support ○ Knowledge of Human Rights ○ Creative communications in support of human rights ○ Community Voices ○ Youth volunteering for human rights ○ Human Rights Lens ○ CRC (Children for the Rights of the Child) ○ Efficient legal aid for refugees and migrants in Bulgaria – continuation ○ Human Rights Academy ○ Building an accessible network for legal aid to displaced persons from Ukraine in Bulgaria and preventing and counteracting human trafficking ○ RefuGenes – information campaign for refugees from Ukraine about the possibilities for personalised medicine (diagnostics and therapy) in Bulgaria ○ A friend in need is a friend indeed.



## Practice your rights with knowledge and creativity

### Project of:

Flower Theatre Non-Profit Association

### Period of implementation:

September 2019 – August 2021

### Place of implementation:

the towns of Zlataritsa, Sliven, Zlatograd, Chepelare and Plovdiv

### More information on:

theatretsvete.eu

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Approximately 100 students aged 13–17 from Zlatograd, Zlataritsa, Plovdiv, Sliven and Chepelare set up 5 youth clubs, each of which prepared one Forum Theatre performance. 30 performances in total were presented to the broadest possible audience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*We created theatre companies with these children and we prepared Forum Theatre performances that were of interest to them. They themselves performed in front of their schoolmates.*

*In this way the children we work with broaden their hori-*

*zons, knowledge of the world and themselves. They achieve something they did not suspect they could do, build self-confidence and develop responsibility for the others. Both teachers and parents have said: "Our children have changed so much! They've grown up."*

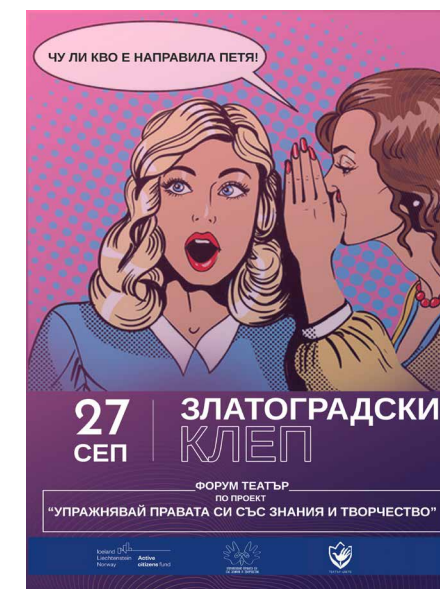
A training program was developed under the project titled "Joking a Forum Theatre performance", including topics, a curriculum, a methodology and practical assignments, and all the groups were trained during the camps organized.

During the hands-on sessions, a real issue related to human rights violation was presented and afterwards the Joker invited the spectators to try to trigger a positive change in the circumstances of the victim and when the scene was replayed, the spectators had to take up the role of the victim at the moment they chose and change the victim's behaviour in an appropriate manner.



*"We present a story on stage that is close to the hearts of the children, as they are both the authors and the spectators in a problematic situation. The emotionally engaged spectators are set a task to find the approach, solve the issue and improve the outcome of the situation. They can come on the stage and play together with the actors by making some changes in their behaviour in order to change the situation for the better. There is a frontman, everyone discusses together whether they have achieved a result and looks for alternatives. Everyone relies on their own personal experience, what they know and have lived through. The conclusions bring together children's knowledge and views into something united, into common knowledge."*

Tsvete Yaneva



*"We constantly teach children what it means to have a civic position, show responsibility to themselves and to the others and we have dissatisfactory results. What you showed instead was a series of events, actions and consequences when a group of people start spreading fake information and a mountain is made out of a molehill. That stirred strong emotions in the children, you made them take a position and understand that everyone is responsible to put an end to something that might have grave consequences and to step in or seek help in order to uphold truth and human rights."*

School psychologists about the project

# We would like to present to you

**Tsvete Yaneva**



## *Tsvete Yaneva shares about the work on the project amidst the pandemic*

The first training of children was scheduled for the spring school holiday of 2020... However, the training camp could not take place at the time because of the lockdown. When the anti-COVID restrictions were relaxed for the first time, we coordinated again the rescheduling of the demo sessions held across the country with the schools willing to join.

Our longstanding friends from the Roma village of Dolni Tsibar were truly happy and grateful to receive us again and boast that their school, which we knew about as a primary school, had become a secondary school. However, some school principals, who had been willing to take part in the project in the past, started understandably to give up in the context of the growing COVID-19 crisis. The first to give up on the project was the Roma school in *Kulata* neighbourhood in the town of Kazanlak. A friend referred us to another similar school in the city of Plovdiv. The students and the teachers there enjoyed very much our performance and rushed to sign up for our camp.

The school in the town of Targovishte suffered a major loss. COVID-19 took the life of a favourite teacher immediately the day before the demo-meeting was held. The refusal to run risks logically followed the event. Fear across Bulgaria was growing more and more. The town of Zlatograd replaced the town of Targovishte.

The time to hold the first training camp was approaching; the camp turned from a spring event into an autumn one. We started negotiating about the transportation of the participants. We encountered another surprising change, this time from the parents and not the school principals. The families were scared by the lockdown and waiting for the next lockdown, they refused to let their children take part. The official letter from the Regional Health Inspectorate that travelling was safe managed to persuade the parents from Zlataritsa but not those from Plovdiv. Thus, in Chepelare we were looking forward towards groups of children from the towns of Sliven, Zlatograd, Dolni Tsibar and Zlataritsa. We did not get to see the group from Dolni Tsibar. The parents refused to let their children come and the school principal failed to send us a notification. We had to respond on the spot. We invited a group from the town of Chepelare.

***The topics that proved important for the children:***

The most important topic in the towns of Chepelare and Zlatograd was *Gossip in the Small Town* discussed as a phenomenon limiting personal freedom and a tool for manipulation leading to violence and personal drama.

In the town of Zlataritsa, the more important topics were discrimination, trafficking and the negative attitude of the local community to communication between different ethnic groups.

In the city of Plovdiv, where the group was fully made up of Roma, the issue of early marriages turned out to be most important. Controversies surfaced that have been deeply ingrained in the Roma culture and that came up against the desire for independence and integration and resulted in personal drama. The participants discussed the cause-and-effect chain in such cases, i.e. the practice of stealing away the bride, which in the Roma culture was equal to marriage, and therefore to the right to have sex; the quick awareness that the partners are not suitable for each other; the following break-up but with a child already born from the union; the inability of the mother to earn a living and take care of the child; the abandonment of the child and other grave consequences; the role of parents, etc.

In the town of Sliven, the topics of greatest interest were discrimination and violence, often resulting in restriction of personal freedoms and rights. As the participants were students from one of the best high schools specialized in the humanities in the town, which was also attended by Roma students, the issues at the forefront were related to barriers to communication, underestimation, isolation not due to personal merits but due to the fact that certain behaviour was not "acceptable" by both ethnic groups.

Three on-site supervisions were launched in September that aimed at reviving Forum Theatre performances, including attracting new participants in the towns where some of the adolescents had already graduated. Premieres were held in each settlement followed by the planned 6 performances delivered by each theatre company in front of a youth audience. During the premieres and the follow-up discussions, meetings were held with young people interested in joining the created clubs.

It turned out that the premieres on site in the settlements were harder to be delivered by the groups than the premieres during the festival. We sensed the tension of coming out on stage during the rehearsals which was not observed during the second training camp and the festival. After we discussed the issue with the groups, it turned out that almost each group had some fears; the children feared performing in front of their parents and relatives as they believed that the latter would not bear the truth or would get angry...

The Forum Theatre provides spectators with the incredible opportunity to try out various behavioral models in possible problematic situations in life in a safe environment. The use of art as a tool for support of the personal development of young people, for introduction to key spiritual achievements of humanity (human rights, democracy, active citizenship) and education in worthy moral values needs to be supported and made use of for the well-being of our society.



## Efficient legal aid for refugees and migrants in Bulgaria

### Project of:

*Voice in Bulgaria* Center for Legal Aid in partnership with *Foundation for Access to Rights* and *Mission Wings* Foundation

### Period of implementation:

October 2019 – October 2023

### Place of implementation:

across Bulgaria

### More information on:

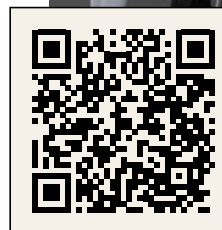
[migrantrights.eu](http://migrantrights.eu)

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The numerous individual legal consultations provided together with procedural and administrative representation before judicial and administrative authorities, social and psychological support helped achieve significant results with regard to the protection of individual human rights of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers in the territory of Bulgaria. Approximately 3 500 people sought and were provided with assistance in the course of two years.

As a result of the lawsuits conducted, a significant number of court rulings were issued having the potential to change the situation in the

The campaign *Almost Here* provides a direct glimpse through the virtual reality tool on the natural reasons for fleeing countries of origin with ongoing armed and political conflicts of people who chose to change their destiny and find a life for themselves and their families.



Watch and hear by scanning the code.

long run towards respect of human rights of refugees and migrants in Bulgaria.

The six legal analyses published with recommendations, the final report and additional strategic opinions and analyses were disseminated to the broad public and triggered commitment in return by the State Agency for Refugees and Migration Directorate. Constructive discussions were held at expert events.

The articles written about the countries of origin and the personal stories of refugees and asylum seekers described (see [migrantrights.eu](http://migrantrights.eu)) helped the project message to reach quite a few citizens and contributed to overcoming prejudice and discriminatory stereotypes.



ИРАК – РУБИНЕНАТА КОРОНА НА ИСТОРИЯТА И ЧЕРНИЯТ ПЛАЩ НА ВОЙНАТА



РОДИ НАМО – ЗА САЛСАТА НА ЖИВОТА, ЛЮБОВТА КЪМ БЪЛГАРИЯ И НУЖДАТА ДА ГЛЕДАШ ВИНАГИ НАПРЕД

*“With the help of these stories, we would like to explain why it is important to have accessible and real access to a safe territory and international protection procedure.”*

The project partners



# We would like to present to you

**Diana Radoslavova**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

Our organization provides legal aid to refugees and migrants. I have always regarded law not as a foundation for career development but as a powerful tool for change, protection and justice. I encountered for the first time the issues refugees face in 2005 when I visited a refugee camp in Thailand, on the border with Burma, as part of my specialization program in international law. We travelled inland in Burma and recorded the cases of internally displaced Karen minority. The stories I heard there and the look in the eyes of the women and children I saw as if predetermined my path in life. After I returned to Bulgaria, I worked for two years as Chief Legal Counsellor at the Legal Clinic for Refugees and Migrants with St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University. In 2009, I became one of the

founders of Voice in Bulgaria Center for Legal Aid.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

I would not have managed to cope with the stress of my work without the support of my family and friends. When my children were younger, I used to tell them stories from books for a good night's sleep alternating them with embellished real stories of children just like them or moms and dads that faced difficulties and obstacles but were brave and managed to overcome them successfully, becoming winners. My children met afterwards in person some of the heroes in these real stories, played together, made friends.

## ***What do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

Over the years, I have seen how our civil society has become much more active and conscious and much more rarely do I have to justify the fact that I work with refugees or dispel suspicions about money laundering.

## ***What book have you read lately?***

*Time Shelter* by Georgi Gospodinov, which is a very unconventional novel, going beyond time and space that we can imagine, challenging and beautiful.

## ***What is the mission of your organization?***

Our organization has provided for 15 years already legal aid (counselling and procedural representation) and advocacy to asylum seekers, refugees,

migrants and undocumented persons in Bulgaria. Our vision is to provide these people with maximum protection of their rights, secure access to the status determination procedure, high standards of reception and integration, so that with this assistance they can become a building stone in our society. We have a small but close-knit team. It is incredible that we have been together in the organization with a third of the team members more than 7 of the past 15 years. We are open to providing counselling to any person in need in our office at the center of Sofia City every Tuesday in our reception hours. We kept our reception hours even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## ***What gives you legitimacy most of all?***

The legitimacy of our organization is founded on our high level of professionalism and services provided with a tailored, holistic and humane approach. We are members of active European and Mediterranean networks with which we have been working for years.

## ***If you are the leader of your organization, can it continue forward in the event that you start another job?***

I hope so. Due to the project-based financing, some of the main activity of the organization is carried out by the team members on a voluntary and interchangeable basis. I believe that it is what has made us resilient and independent.

## ***Could you share about a certain exciting occasion at work?***

Every time when we see in the eyes of the people we work with at least a glimmer of hope, change, strength to go on forward, we also get the strength to continue supporting them. Our satisfaction is not only connected to the victories in court but also to changing human lives. This is what gives meaning to each project we work on.

## ***As of today, what has remained as a long-term impact of the project implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

Apart from the huge amount of work we did and the people we helped, what is particularly valuable is our experience of working together with partner organizations, exchanging systematically expertise and building stable unions in our field that are particularly needed at present.

## ***Do you happen to interact with people that fear or even openly demonstrate hatred towards migrants?***

We interact every day with such people, both in the context of our work with the administration, politicians, even the media as well as in personal communication. What helps me personally is my ability to listen to the other point of view and keep my respect of the person I am communicating with despite our differences of opinion. Maintaining an environment of courtesy and respect for the dignity of the other is a foundation based on which we could easily find common points and interests that can help us live and work together.



***In your opinion, can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's lives?***

Not only can civil society organizations contribute but they have showed many times that they are a key factor in making a difference and solving crisis situations. Especially in an environment in which the capacity of the institutions is quite insufficient. That became painfully clear in the crisis situation of reception of both Syrian refugees in 2015 and Ukrainian refugees in 2021. A wide range of NGOs were there to work and respond to the needs of the people arriving in our country without having any available budget and without a particular foreign support. It is this inherent readiness to give regardless of what you get in return that is typical of the NGO sector and very important for the operation of every society.

***What do you think of partnerships with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

There is no point in talking about competition because civil society in Bulgaria, in our sector in particular, is quite insufficient to cover all the needs rather than compete. We need to complement each other and work together. The only difficulty is the limited capacity of organizations to develop and take part actively in networks due to their busy schedule and intense field work.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I can see it much more united, mature, larger in scale and more efficient.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Involvement of the civil society sector in governance; independent monitoring; protection of the independence and freedom of civic space; education; cross-sectoral consolidation of effort and voice.

***Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed?***

Definitely yes!

## Creative campaigning: innovation in support of human rights

**Project of:**

*Fine Acts Foundation*

**Period of implementation:**

October 2019 – April 2021

**Place of implementation:**

across Bulgaria

**More information on:**

[creativeplaybook.org](https://creativeplaybook.org)

[fineacts.co/love-speech-campaign](https://fineacts.co/love-speech-campaign)

[fineacts.co/love-speech-sprint](https://fineacts.co/love-speech-sprint)

[fineacts.co/saying-is-doing](https://fineacts.co/saying-is-doing)

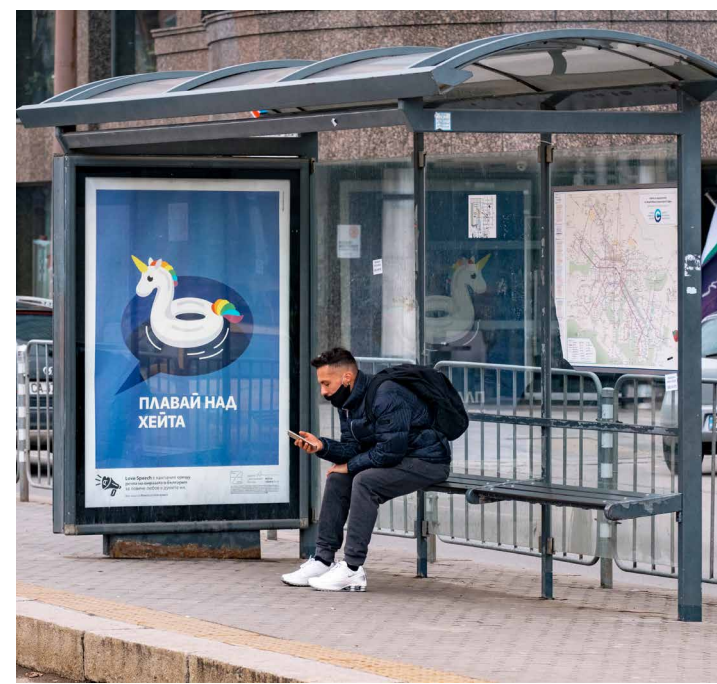
02

The project managed to increase support for human rights in Bulgaria by carrying out an efficient awareness raising campaign about human rights focused on hate speech and by boosting the capacity for campaigning of the civil society sector.

The team created innovative and high-quality artistic products (viral videos, an interactive installation, art interventions in the urban environment, 8 visual works), which raised public sensitivity towards the topic of human rights and placed on the agenda hate speech through a lens that inspires hope.

High-quality and freely available resources were created and disseminated (a handbook and a platform for creative

activism, a collection of 80 visual works, an information package, examples and guidance for the use of visual works), which reflect the needs and shortages of the civil society sector for carrying out creative campaigns and considerably boost its capacity.



The city light posters with messages against hate speech that were placed could have been seen for four weeks in the period March – April 2021 at key central locations in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv and Burgas.





The rolling-out of the campaign continued with the successful conduct of three art interventions in the urban environment in Sofia City devoted to the topic of hate speech against Roma, LGBTI, refugees and migrants in Bulgaria.

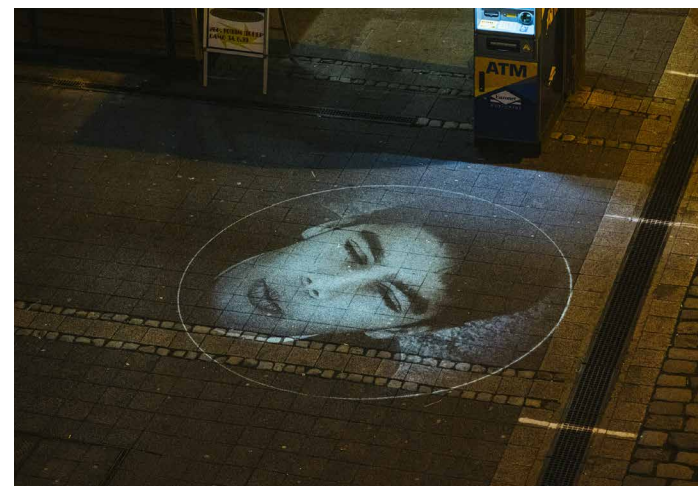
Nikolay Petrov created a huge mural on 38 Bacho Kiro Street,

his biggest independent work so far. The mural shows the society as a kaleidoscopic composition made of the various unique colours, nuances and shades of each individual.



The second art intervention was a video installation of the artist Venelin Shurelov. The location was close to Serdika Gallery at Women's Open-air Market and the installation opened on 8th April, International Roma Day.

Venelin used street lighting to "light up" the faces of an invisible community



#### Artist Venelin Shurelov about the message of the work of art

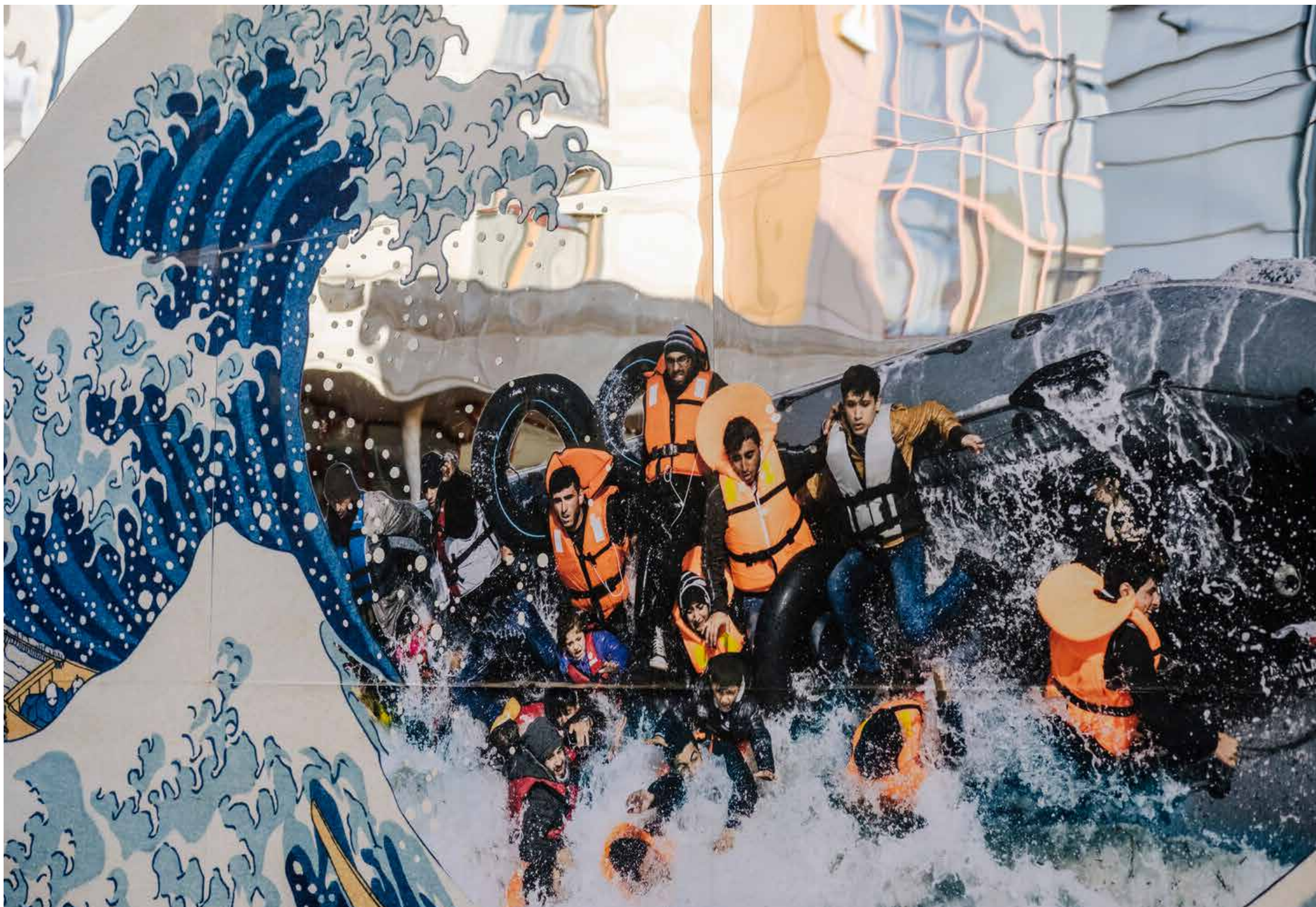


*"Personal lighting" is at a first glance a light-minded, airy project. It is actually made up of light. Behind the ephemeral presentation lies a grave legacy. My task was to "cast light" on a marginalized community. The faces lit up by the light fixture are simultaneously a sum of individuals but also a practical means to see our way forward, where we tread and on whom.*

*Light is closely connected to darkness, light marks the boundary, helps reaching, facilitates sight, all the latter being comforts that can help balance interaction between us. The location was well-selected and 5 minutes into the assembly, a passer-by exclaimed "Ah, those are our people!". Yes, those are our people.*

The third urban art intervention was devoted to the topic of refugees, i.e. *The Other People* by the artist Stanislav Belovski. The work was vandalized at the end of the project, which was a good occasion for us as a society to think again about the inhuman levels of hostility, failure to accept and rejection that some groups have to live with every day and about our personal responsibility to support them.











*"Creative campaigns do not differ from the conventional ones in that both are about making a change in a given field. Regardless whether you try to stop the closing down of a local community center or you fight for a change of a policy at national level, social campaigns aim at making a difference in the world for the better. However, the question is how to achieve this change and what approaches and tactics to use. We at Fine Acts, a global non-profit creative studio for a social change, are committed to using art and creative campaigns to involve people and encourage them to act for a particular social cause."*

Fine Acts Foundation

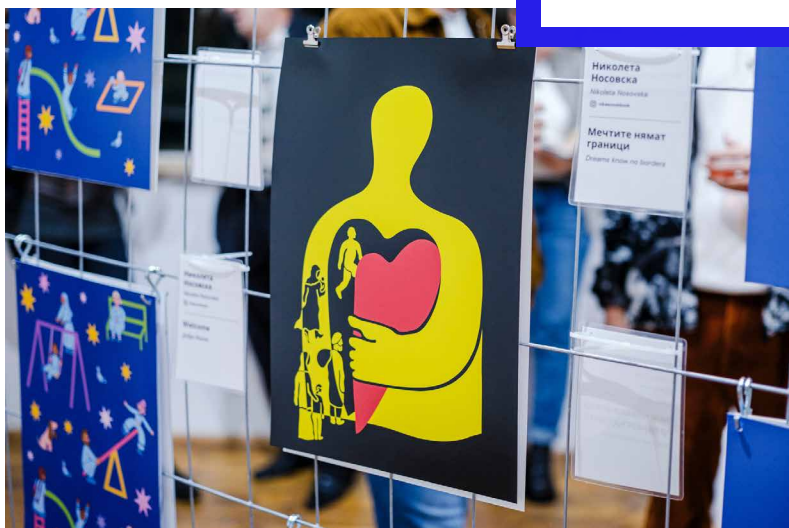
The **Creative Playbook platform** was developed under the project as a valuable and innovative resource for the civil society sector.

The platform contains diverse information that is presented in an accessible way about the organization and carrying out of creative campaigns.

The platform has published articles, resources, interviews, publicly available materials as well as the recording of the webinar for carrying out successful creative campaigns.



Exhibition *Traditional Values*



# We would like to present to you

**Ana Alexieva and Yana Buhrer – Tavanier Kunchev**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

*Fine Acts (fineacts.co) is a global non-profit creative studio for social impact. We organize diverse creative campaigns devoted to various topics related to human rights and climate; we produce strongly socially-engaged artwork; we develop and carry out experimental formats of the intersection between activism, art, technology and cognitive and behavioural science; we train and support with resources the civil society sector. Our overall approach is based on our concept of play-tivism: the creation of multidisciplinary spaces for experiments and creative play that encourage innovation and boost the capacity of organizations and activists, counteract high stress and burnout rates in the non-profit sector and stimulate new cross-sectoral collaborations and partnerships. The organization was founded in 2015 by Yana*

*Buhrer-Tavanier and July Freeman (both TED Senior Fellows) together with Pavel Kunchev (Obama Scholar) with the support of a broad international advisory board and a collective of artists. What motivates us to keep forward is the great impact of our work, its freedom and the joy it gives us.*

***How do you explain what you do for a living and do people understand you well?***

*We act in such a way so as not to leave people indifferent.*

***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

*They pity us (ha-ha). But after we tell them in detail what we do, they envy us.*

***Have you got any favourite film that you have watched recently?***

*The last film the whole team of Fine Acts watched together was the multi-award-winning *Chasing Chasing Amy* directed by Sav Rodgers. The global premiere of the film whose Executive Producer was Fine Acts was at Tribeca Festival in New York and the film was very highly rated by the critics.*

***Do you have a permanent team? And an office?***

Our organization is active both in Bulgaria and worldwide. We have a permanent team and hundreds of collaborators across the world. Our office is in Sofia.

***Where do you draw your legitimacy most of all from?***

Direct feedback from our direct work with communities and artists is our main compass for the legitimacy, efficiency and meaning of our activity.

***Could you share about a certain occasion during the project when you felt most satisfied?***

We felt great satisfaction when the hall could hardly hold the visitors who attended the opening of our exhibition *Traditional Values*, even though the event took place on a very rainy November Friday evening. The interest in the works, the messages and authors was extremely strong. The collection which was published with an open license for free non-commercial use continues to actively exist, empowering activists and citizens.

***What will remain as a long-term impact of the projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund? It is hard to explain why art is important for democracy?***

Our projects supported by the Active Citizens Fund leave an extensive database of resources freely available for use by the civil society sector: the Creative Playbook handbook and the online platform for creative activism; the guide for visual communication about human rights titled *The Image of Hope*, the collection of over 100 publicly available illustrations, the video archive of Creative Activist Summit (the only conference so far in Bulgaria for creative communication), the omnibus of 5 films titled *Stronger than Words* and the viral video *Love Speech* that continue to live online; the developed skills of dozens of organizations and activists that were trained by us and, of course, the good practices from our numerous public art initiatives. We have looked for the long-term impact and common benefit in all of our initiatives and we have strived to achieve results that will last even after the end of the contract for financing. The creative campaigns and art initiatives that Fine Acts organizes stir emotions of empathy, hope, sharing and connection, which of course engages people and frees us of the difficulty to explain why they are important.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years?***

Our work is rooted in hope. That is why I believe that it will be much stronger, much more united, optimistic and elated.

***In your opinion, are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed and how did it help your organization?***

There is a huge need for programs such as the Active Citizens Fund because the local opportunities for financing of the civil society sector in Bulgaria, in particular of initiatives related to human rights, are extremely

limited. Our work with the Fund had a very positive influence on the development of our organization, as it allowed us to roll out a large-scale portfolio of activities with many local artists and organizations and to present our innovative approaches in a local context. Our work under the program also enabled us to work in a consistent and thorough way on specific topics, such as negative stereotypes and hate speech, focused on developing multidisciplinary collaborations, innovation and free resources.



On the photo: *Traditional Values* Exhibition



## Youth volunteering in support of human rights

Project of:

Time Heroes Foundation

Period of implementation:

October 2019 – June 2021

Place of implementation:

across Bulgaria

More information on:

[kupatanageroite.com](http://kupatanageroite.com)

[timeheroes.org](http://timeheroes.org)

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Youth volunteering has its competition and an award and that is the *Heroes Cup*. The idea emerged with this project in the quest for a more attractive way of engaging school students and young people aged between 8 and 19 in volunteering, including introducing them to the activities of local and national civil society organizations.

Owing to the remarkable results achieved, the Heroes Cup turned into the most popular and loved national volunteering competition of the schools in Bulgaria. Participating in it, young people across Bulgaria have the opportunity to learn the most important lesson in life, i.e. how to help others.

The competitive format, in turn, encourages them unnoticeably to engage with different causes and thus acquire knowledge on important topics and develop valuable personal skills by taking part in a game. Many of the clubs that have been set up are based in settlements outside of the big cities, for instance in the towns of Lukovit, Kardzhali, Valchi dol, Popovo, Etropole, Zlatitsa and Haskovo.



"At the end of the project, we are certain that we managed to achieve incredible results. 29 volunteering clubs with more than 800 new members joined the Heroes Cup network only in the course of the previous year. They carried out more than 250 volunteering initiatives on various topics related to human rights and also recorded more than 6,000 engagements in total in monthly challenges. The platform [kupatanageroite.com](http://kupatanageroite.com) was visited more than 51,000 times during the whole duration of the project. Our project was also recognized officially by the National Network for Children and its annual Golden Apple Awards. Our work for children's well-being in Bulgaria was highly appreciated and we were awarded the prize in the category Children's Organization for 2021."

Time Heroes Foundation





# We would like to present to you

**Natalia Ivanova**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I am a journalist and an editor, as I graduated first with a degree in Journalism and then completed the MA program Translation and Editing at Sofia University. Before I started working in the civil society sector, I spent almost 9 years in editorial offices; I worked mainly on materials related to the cinema, theatre and literature, but I also have experience from working in the news media as well, and I have also had publications on political and social topics. In

2020, there came a time when I was no longer satisfied with my work, as I mainly raced against the clock to publish the next piece of news and fulfill my daily quota, so I started looking for something else. I remember clearly the day when I saw the advert on the Facebook page of *Time Heroes* looking for an editor. At an NGO! I had not thought somehow up until that moment that I would be able to use the knowledge and skills that I acquired working as a journalist in the civil society sector. Fortunately, I was hired and started working at the Foundation in November 2020. The last three and a half years have been extremely important for my development as a person, both in professional and personal terms. I feel really grateful that it all happened in this way.

## ***How do you explain what you do for a living?***

Most people show curiosity. I have noticed that they do not distinguish greatly between charity and volunteering, and whenever I have heard my family explain the job I do, they would usually say something along the following lines: "Nati works for an NGO for charity causes!". Whenever I have the opportunity, I try to explain the difference, but I do not mind the fact that they don't distinguish it: they have understood more or less the essence, i.e. that we try to support causes and help people do good. This is the simplest explanation even for a child, though they have difficulty understanding why people have to do in particular such work: isn't everyone obliged to be good? Right now, I am expecting my first child, and it would be interesting to see how I would explain what his/her mom does for a living and how the child would understand, though it will be some time before I get to know it.

## ***Would you share about a favorite book or film that you have read or watched recently and liked?***

The last three books that I read are written by Bulgarian writers: the debut novel *Ane* of Kamelia Panayotova, which explores the topic of children's trauma and forgiveness, *The Women of Warsaw* by Georgi Markov, a great novel about the power of stories, and before that *A House Beyond the World* by Georgi Danailov, a very witty and diverse book, which actually reaches quite delicately deep philosophical issues. I recommend all three. The last film I saw at the cinema was *The Zone of Interest* by Jonathan Glazer, and I read a comment that it was a movie about the banality of evil, which could not have been described better.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization active currently? Does it have a permanent team? And an office?***

Our mission is to help volunteering in Bulgaria develop. Fortunately, we are active! We have a permanent team which has expanded and has already 7 members, which is great: we had some periods when there were only two of us. We are a close-knit team and we share common values, which is very important and which supports us in hard times. As for the office, we have started recently to work in a shared space, where we gather three days per week. We decided that this is what we needed currently.

## ***Where do you draw legitimacy most of all from?***

First of all, from the organizations we work with as well as from the volunteers who trust us and take part in initiatives through our platforms. We look for feedback and we heed it. We have been lucky recently to receive support from volunteers as well, including those who help us pro bono and provide us with services that it would have been hard for us to pay for.

We also face the same difficulties as every other NGO; we are still almost fully dependent on project financing, and that makes us somewhat vulnerable, but we try to be creative and develop new activities with our projects that also give us future prospects.

## ***Could you share about a certain occasion at work when you felt the greatest satisfaction?***

We feel satisfied every time at the end of the month when we see how many things the student-volunteers from the *Heroes Cup* have managed to do, dozens of missions to support various causes. Without exaggerating, it brings tears to our eyes almost every time, and we discuss with the other team members what touched us most. We invite all to visit the website [kupanageroite.com/events](http://kupanageroite.com/events) to read as well.

## ***What do you think about partnership with other civil society organizations?***

We work really well with other organizations and always in the spirit of understanding. It is true that most of us rely on the same sources of financing, which could be regarded as competition, but at least we do not feel it in this



way, probably because our field in particular is more of a niche. We are always willing to look for partners and to “complement” each other, including with regard to project work. We all have different resources, different knowledge and skills, and I believe that there is a lot of room for joint work.

**How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?**

I hope active, united, visible, having won public recognition.

**Which are the five most important fields for Bulgaria?**

On a global level, I believe that ecology and green issues will become increasingly important for mankind in general. The war conflicts we witness more and more frequently also increase the need for the work of organizations receiving refugees and creating conditions for a life of dignity for them. The topics that seem to me a little bit more connected to our country have to do with the Roma inclusion, the work of the organizations in the field is also very important. Just as important is the work of organizations focused on the empowerment of women and fighting gender-based violence. Many more important fields come to mind immediately: improving the life of persons with disabilities, media literacy, sports, science, culture, the rights of LGBTI+ people. It is very hard not to include any field.

**Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed? How did the ACF Program contribute to the development of your organizations?**

Such programs are needed, as proved by all the successfully implemented projects which have a measurable impact on the surrounding environment. Such programs enable organizations to continue their work, which is important for many people from the vulnerable groups. The Active Citizens Fund contributed a lot to the development of our organization and our work with youth, in particular. Even though we had set our foot on this territory prior to 2020, four years on we are exploring it and freely walking on it. The projects helped us learn a lot of important lessons, we managed to attract students from across the country, we managed to try out various formats of working with them and see which one works. We are ready to continue forward with this knowledge. Of course, our work on the projects was extremely valuable for our organization as well, as it enabled us to feel stable and focused without any difficulties on activities developing youth volunteering in Bulgaria.

## Migrants Got Talent

**Project of:**

Multi Kulti Collective

**Period of implementation:**

October 2019 – April 2024

**Place of implementation:**

across Bulgaria

**More information on:**

[multikulti.bg](http://multikulti.bg)

02

*Migrants Got Talent* is a national media campaign which shows cultural diversity in Bulgaria and helps overcome the negative stereotypes of aliens. What is more, the campaign has placed under the limelight the talents of aliens and has empowered them to enter the public space with their own voice and signature.

More than 200 migrants from across the world took part in the project, and they hosted

more than 100 small-scale events such as art workshops, concerts, lectures, cookery courses, exhibitions, personal development seminars, theatre and dance workshops, motivational seminars, etc. The migrants were invited to more than 20 media with over 350 media publications and interviews in which they shared about their talents and achievements.

In 2022, the project was awarded the *Agent of Change Award* in the category Communications of JAMBA and the important award of the *Human of the Year* of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.



A photo from the unique cookery course devoted to Jamaican food, hosted by perhaps the only Jamaican in Bulgaria, the wonderful Patrick Anderson.

# We would like to present to you

**Bistra Ivanova**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I found myself as a volunteer and an active member of the civil society sector in 2010 while I worked on a project about citizen monitoring at the police. I was a student at the time and no matter how much I liked the specialty *Mass Communications* that I studied, I had not found myself in it. When I got to know the project team, Zvezda Vankova and Atanas Dimitrov, I felt for the first time that I came across like-minded people who are

deeply concerned about social issues and want to make a change in Bulgaria and protect human rights. As early as the first year, I had already taken part in dozens of volunteering causes, and I received the national award *Volunteer of the Year for 2011*. I liked feeling useful, I liked watching the diversity of the world, I liked developing my professional and social skills, I liked feeling that something depended on me, even a little bit, and that I make Bulgaria move in the right direction in my opinion. Thirteen years later, all the latter reasons still motivate me. I am happy that I have still kept my most sincere volunteering energy and that I have not turned into an NGO bureaucrat.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

It took many years for my parents to understand what I truly do, even though they had attended our *Multi Kulti* events, where foreigners from across the world presented their culture and cuisine. I usually say that we build bridges between cultures and people, we help both Bulgarians and aliens to get to know each other through art, food, music, traditions. We also fight with racism, discrimination, hate speech. We organize training seminars, we prepare studies, we work with the media.

## ***What book have you read lately?***

I was really impressed by the book *Eyeball it: Village Culinary Adventures* by one of "our" talented migrants, Rory Miller. It is an incredible story with words and photos of an American with experience in Master Chef who visited Bulgarian villages, filled with lots of curiosity and patience in order to meet elderly women and men who had prepared for him local signature dishes while sharing about their life in the countryside. I particularly liked to watch with the eyes of this unbiased foreigner who sees us, the Bulgarians, and loves us. I am happy that we managed to help him under our project to

take part in at least 7–8 television and radio programs, magazines and online media to present his book and reach more people.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization active currently? Does it have a permanent team? And an office?***

The mission of our organization is to promote the two-way process of integration between Bulgarians and aliens, protect human rights, counter-act phenomena such as hate speech, discrimination and racism. We have been active for 13 years in a row and we have worked with a more or less permanent range of experts over the years, but we face difficulties hiring them under an employment contract due to the fragmented financing. Instead, we cooperate on a project-based principle, most often under a service contract, which is far from perfect. We have tried to have an office, but we ended up only paying for it without anyone going there, as we are very active digital nomads, we navigate a lot of projects, we often travel and work from hotels, airports, mountains and near and far-off capital cities.

## ***Could you share about a certain occasion at work when you felt the greatest satisfaction?***

I have had a lot of beautiful times, but the episode which stands out most took place a couple of years ago when just a few days before Christmas the house of two refugees that we had worked on a lot with, Freddie Benjamin and Linda Auanis, burned to the ground. The family, who had already lost their home in downtown Baghdad, ended up again without a home, documents, money, phones, computers, and they simply stood shocked wearing their slippers, facing the flames. An accident started the fire that took away too much from them. I am really happy and proud of the response of our community: our campaign raised more than 120,000 BGN for a new house for the family just in a couple of days. In addition, the people sent hundreds of warm words of support, which our team compiled and printed out in a book to warm the hearts of Freddie and Linda in the cold winter nights. That family had given a lot to Bulgaria, and to a great extent, it was its cooperation with *Multi Kulti* that had made them popular. When we technically processed the hundreds of donated amounts, I could not hold my tears constantly because good is beautiful, because good ennobles man!

## ***Why can democracy and human rights be also upheld through projects including food, cooking and meetings between people?***

Human rights often seem abstract, something that one would rarely see, feel and touch. When asked, most people say that they are tolerant, not racists or xenophobes. All of these are mental constructs that materialize only when people meet, when they do something together, when they sit round the table and communicate directly. We regard food as a way to connect people from different cultures, stir curiosity and get to know the other. In addition to our field work, *Multi Kulti* publishes every year in-depth studies



as well, addressing topics related to the integration of migrants and refugees, hate speech, discrimination and racism, migrants' education... Thus, for instance, *Multi Kulti* has published the findings of the most in-depth monitoring of integration policies targeted at refugees.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years?***

Twenty percent of the people regularly taking part as volunteers in NGOs; 80% of the people regularly donating for causes that are important for them; 75% of the people having a good opinion about the NGO sector as beneficial for the country.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Communication about the work of the civil society sector and how it is useful for the public; encouraging citizen involvement and volunteering; development of studies that can be used for policy-making; creating coalitions of NGOs with common goals; protection of human rights.

***Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

The Active Citizens Fund is one of the best donors that we have had in our history because it offers long-term support and great freedom in planning our activities. This flexibility provides a considerable value added, so that NGOs respond to the real immediate needs of their beneficiaries and work in their fields. The ACF Program enabled us to focus on our key and most important activity, namely communicating the message that migrants bring value to the society, that they contribute to social development, that they have talents, ideas, passion to make Bulgarian a more successful country. We believe that we have changed attitudes through more than 380 media publications under the project in leading media such as the Bulgarian National Television, NOVA Television, the Bulgarian National Radio, Darik Radio, Dnevnik Daily, 24 Hours Daily, Bacchus Magazine, Vagabond, DW, "Take a look!" Magazine, The Program, Go Guide, Mammi.bg, I read (AzCheta) and many others.

## **Increasing Democratic Competence and Human Rights Awareness Among Young People and Human Rights Lens**

**Bilateral projects of:**

*Partners Bulgaria* Foundation  
in partnership with  
Menneskerettighetsakademiet



**Period of implementation:**

October 2019 – December 2023

**Place of implementation:**

across Bulgaria with focus on the cities  
of Gotse Delchev, Blagoevgrad, Montana  
and Varshets

**More information on:**  
[humanrights-education.org](https://humanrights-education.org)

02

The organizations showed through partnership under these two projects that human rights education can be interesting, applicable and engaging for young people and the communities they live in.

Interactive learning and participatory learning are important parts of human rights education and they have to come first over lectures and theoretical presentation of content. When arts are included as main subjects or methods in teaching human rights at school, they encourage creative thinking and the creative abilities of students and help shape their civic behavior and ability to take responsibility and solve issues.

You can find valuable resources for human rights education on the online platform **humanrights-education.org** that was created, which can

be used for youth aged 14–29. The website is bilingual and can be used by teachers and facilitators in Bulgaria and abroad. It presents a model for interactive learning by involving and engaging the community as well as a model for institutional interaction (between the municipality, schools, museums, etc.).

*"Our cooperation with the Norwegian Human Rights Academy made it possible to study various ideas for children's involvement, creative activities and interactive learning by doing and mobilization of the community resources."*



[humanrights-education.org](https://humanrights-education.org)

The methodology is based on the Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture of the Council of Europe. The Norwegian National Museum Network for Human Rights helped transfer experience of museums that are active participants in human rights education. The bilateral cooperation continued with the project *Human Rights Lens*, which in turn enriched the developed teaching methodology with additional tools for involvement of young people, such as video laboratories and “dialogues about the rights”. More than 80 young people from the towns of Montana, Varshets, Gotse Delchev and Blagoevgrad were trained using the video laboratories method.

*“When the students create photo and video materials, they show that they truly care for the issues of discrimination in their small communities, such as the challenges of providing good-quality medical services or education. We can see that young people explore issues that they care about, and they have the opportunity to present them in the way they themselves see the problems. It is important for the teacher or facilitator to guide and help the students when they choose a problem or a dilemma to focus on and not to censure, correct or restrict them in any way.”*



ПРАВАТА НА ЧОВЕКА  
ПРЕЗ ОБЕКТИВА

Наръчник за младежки  
фасилитатори



Partners Bulgaria Foundation



## We would like to present to you

**Daniela Kolarova**



On the photo are Daniela Kolarova (on the left) and Lilian Hort from the Norwegian Human Rights Academy

### ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

In the 1990s, I used to teach at the Civic Education Department with *St. Kliment Ohridsky* Sofia University, where we organized courses for teachers from across the country on topics such as democratic citizenship, human rights and peaceful dispute and conflict resolution. That was the period when the democratic institutions in the country were being set up, but what was missing and what was really needed were people with democratic thinking and mind-set, i.e. democrats. Education had to respond to the need of transferring knowledge and skills needed by young people to develop a democratic culture, become informed, respon-

sible and active citizens. Civil society organizations which provided informal education had much bigger opportunities to develop innovative learning programs and combine them with application of knowledge and skills in practice through initiatives and projects in the communities. That is why, when I was offered to become the Director of *Partners Bulgaria* Foundation in 1989, I took the job because applied work made a lot of sense to me. *Partners Bulgaria* is the Bulgarian center of the international network *Partners for Democratic Change* (PartnersNetwork), and we have gained a lot in terms of exchange of expertise and the opportunity to learn from the experience of counterpart organizations working across the world. Our first efforts had to do with the dissemination of models and processes that facilitate the peaceful resolution of changes, differences and conflicts, such as cooperative planning, having a dialogue, mediation, reconciliation, negotiating and facilitating public meetings.

### ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

The easiest and most understandable way is to say that we are involved with informal education and that we support various initiatives which improve the life of people in the community, such as extracurricular activities in schools or new social services for people in need. Of course, we do much



more, including doing research, publications, developing methodologies for support of specific groups and formulating recommendations to improve policies in different fields.

***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

A lot of people are not aware what a non-governmental organization means, and that is why we have to explain to them what exactly we do. We have not faced any negative response with regard to our work.

***What book have you read lately?***

The book is *Doughnut Economics*, which I not only read myself and was left very impressed but decided that more people should read it. That is why I contacted the author Kate Raworth and had the book translated into Bulgarian and published. The book explains with a lot of arguments and examples why a robust economy should be designed to thrive instead of be left to unlimited growth. And to “thrive” means for the economy to develop in a fair for all and safe manner for both people and nature. The book describes a society which can be achieved, which is oriented towards the future and in which the needs of every person can be met without destroying the world that all of us depend on. Many elements of this model are already being implemented in most of the developed democratic countries.

***Where do you draw your legitimacy most from?***

The work of the organization is supported by the municipalities where we work. We enjoy the trust of the schools and institutions in the towns where we are active. Four of our educational programs have been approved by the Ministry of Education and Science as appropriate for supporting training of teachers. We have been approved by the Ministry of Justice as a training organization of professional mediators. We are a member of several Bulgarian associations and international networks. We try to maintain high professional and ethical standards. We renew annually our quality management certificate ISO 9001:2015. All of this helps us find financing for our activity, even though fund raising is our greatest challenge because we do not have permanent donors and sources of financing.

***Could you share about a certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?***

Supported by the Active Citizens Fund and in partnership with the Norwegian Human Rights Academy, we developed educational materials and a platform with modules and resources for education for democratic citizenship and human rights at school. The modules provide knowledge, raise awareness of human rights principles and build the competence of young people to take up the initiative for respect, protection and promotion of the rights for all. Over 80 young people from the towns of Montana, Varshets, Gotse Delchev and Blagoevgrad were trained in our photo and video laboratories where they studied images of topics related to human rights protec-

tion and learnt how to create such images. We found out that the goal of the project to raise the awareness of young people about human rights had been fulfilled when the young people looked at their community through the lens of human rights protection and through their photos expressed their opinion about the development of democracy in their town. The developed bilingual educational resources, together with the outputs of the youth initiatives, such as photos, videos, exhibitions and campaign materials, are available to everyone who works with young people. The human rights education program was organized as a course to boost the competence of teachers and it was endorsed by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2023.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years?***

Stronger, more united, more influential and more widely spread across the country.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Education for democratic citizenship is the field that I would repeat five times. When we create a nation of people with an authentic democratic culture, all the other problems related to the economy, ecology, justice, social affairs, etc. will be solved much more easily, and the differences between the means of solving the issues will be reconciled without any drama and shocks.

***In your opinion, are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under EEA FM needed? How did ACF contribute to the development of your organization?***

The Active Citizens Fund is one of the few funds for NGOs in the country, and its presence was like a breath of fresh air in the enclosed space of the civil society sector. It was an opportunity for us to show that Bulgaria can develop successfully as a democratic community only if we put in the effort and energy to educate the young generation in values such as freedom, equality, solidarity and empathy, if we support young people to act as responsible citizens and if we keep the faith that changes can happen if they have a fair cause and put in effort to mobilize their community.

## Thematic priority

# Empowerment of vulnerable groups

## 03

36 supported projects with the following specific objectives:

- Introduction of innovative (new or improved) methods and approaches to the needs of vulnerable groups
- Training members of vulnerable groups in advocacy for the needs of their communities as well as support for advocacy campaigns initiated by them
- Support for economic inclusion of vulnerable groups

An illustration of  
David Espinosa for  
International Planned  
Parenthood Federation  
and *Fine Acts*



## Project titles speak for themselves...

Pathways to Freedom: Empowering Young People Leaving Alternative Care to Live an Independent and Fulfilling Life ○ Right to the Village Advocacy Network ○ Transfer of practices to improve the support for children with special needs and their families towards inclusive education ○ Roma Professional Network ○ Mentoring for inclusion ○ Build bridges for a change ○ Maritime academy 2019–2020 ○ Rainbow Hub ○ Countering Domestic Violence in Three Municipalities in Veliko Tarnovo District ○ I CAN WORK! Supported access to the labour market for people with intellectual difficulties ○ EMPOWERare ○ Empowering LGBTI Youth Through Access to Support Services, Motivation, and Targeted Policy Implementation ○ Effective sexual health education for Bulgarian teenagers via educational courses and attractive online content ○ Give yourself health! ○ Back to work ○ Motivated teachers – successful students ○ The music in me – promoting talents and their inclusion in the creative industries ○ Give Roma health ○ Let's be on one page – the voice of the blind ○ Empowerment of young migrants and refugees through innovative practices for more inclusive (post)pandemic, (post) crisis Bulgaria ○ Model for Early Education, Care and Active Participation – I CAN (abbreviation in Bulgarian) ○ Let's work together – development of labor skills of people with intellectual disabilities ○ I have a dream (a grass-root civil society campaign for empowerment of Roma women via direct advocacy) ○ Strengthening the network of active local Roma groups for the empowerment of Roma communities in North Western Bulgaria ○ Active civil advocacy for the INvulnerability of young people in the municipality of Dupnitsa ○ Helping the digital inclusion of people with visual impairments ○ EMPOWERare-2021 ○ Regional model for empowering vulnerable refugees and migrants seeking protection in the country ○ Deaf Leadership: Civic and Professional Empowerment of the Deaf Community ○ „Our rights and responsibilities“: a program for empowerment of vulnerable groups ○ Children on Focus in Diverse Families ○ BLINFO – Voice that matters ○ Virtual Hyde Park „The Voice of Youth“ – stimulating civic activism among Ukrainian youth – refugees in Bulgaria ○ Ukrainian Women in Bulgaria – Life Without a Risk of Trafficking ○ The New Citizens of Bulgaria ○ Partnership for Sustainable Refugee Inclusion



## Model for Early Education, Care and Active Participation – I CAN

Project of:  
Health and Social Development  
Foundation (HESED)

Period of implementation:  
July 2021 – April 2024

Place of implementation:  
Sofia City, Fakulteta Neighbourhood

More information on:  
hesed.bg

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The Model for Early Education, Care and Active Participation (I CAN) introduces an innovative, holistic approach that helps the development of the Roma community by improving the way in which parents bring up their children in the key period of early childhood.

I CAN is comprised of five educational modules tailored to the child's age as well as practical activities related to feeding and early education, i.e. games and communicative skills, education and day care for children aged 3–5, consultations with a doctor about



*The findings from the survey show that the program definitely has an impact on children's school preparedness, including all the components of children's speech development and their social and emotional development.*

*The program also influences the values priorities of parents so much that they start appreciating better the importance of education compared to the hierarchy of priorities they had before they joined the program.*

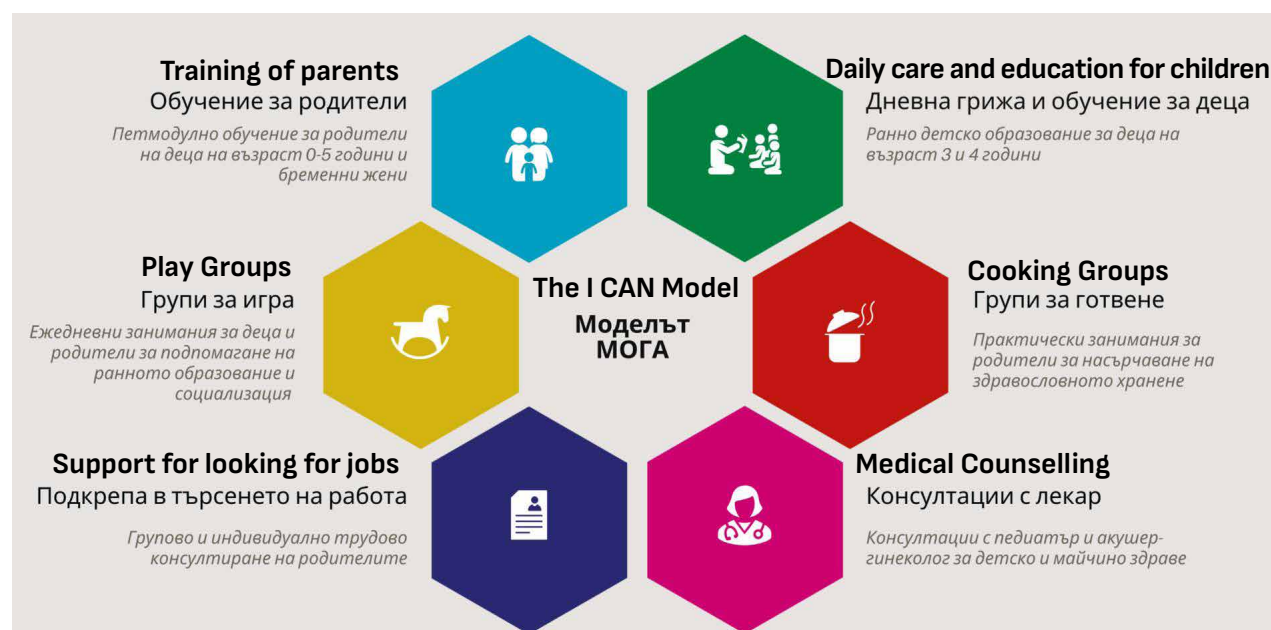
*I CAN has definitely proved its potential to mobilize parents' communities to engage with the subject of support for early childhood development.*

maternal and infant health, labor counselling and support. The program is addressed at the parents of children aged 0–5 and their children. Parents take part in the program on a voluntary basis and they are encouraged to sign up through informational and motivational campaigns in the community.

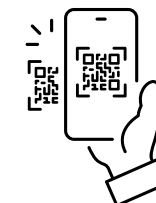
I CAN is capable of achieving its ambitious goals only when all the elements are carried out simultaneously and in the long run.

A report was published at the end of the project with findings about the impact of the model on children's development and the progress made by parents with regard to parenting capacity, value orientation, social skills, employment and civic participation.

*Fakulteta Neighbourhood is really big and it is necessary to work systematically to improve skills as well as change parents' attitudes towards early education and education in general.*



You can see here the full version of the report on the impact of the model on the development of children and parents:



# We would like to present to you

## Elena Kabakchieva



### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

I started my professional career as a doctor at a pediatric ward and then continued as a teacher at the Medical University of Sofia, Head of the National Center of Public Health and Analyses. However, when my colleagues and I saw that there was a key field that could not be included successfully in the public sector, we decided to set up an NGO, Health and Social Development Foundation (HESED), to develop projects and show the benefits of social innovation and the lines along which public policies

can be more efficiently guided.

### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

My family and friends care about social issues and they do not even imagine their personal well-being without being involved in activities for the common good.

### *How do people respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

Some are impressed by the difficult task we have undertaken. Others do not understand at all why we have not chosen simply a science research career or the opportunity to be great professionals in a field. They do not understand that we have it all in our work. The most interesting discoveries happen on the border of combining knowledge and methods from different fields, and the greatest challenge is to find a way to apply them in practice.

### *What film have you watched recently that has impressed you?*

I have recently watched an American movie about two financial experts who noticed “the bubble” of the mortgage market, which caused the global financial crisis in 2008. They try to explain the situation to various authorities by quoting data, but they end up isolated and suspended from office. The film starts with the following quote of Mark Twain: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you in trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so”. Well, it occurs to me sometimes that we, the people in the NGO sector, often “get ourselves in trouble” when we try to explain that some of the measures taken are not the right ones that would lead to mitigating or solving a problem...

### *Where do you draw legitimacy from and do you need support?*

The multidisciplinary and multiethnic team of HESED Foundation has developed for over 25 years the Model for Integrated Development (MID) of Children aged 0–18 and their parents in compact vulnerable communities.

The services and programs are based on professional analyses and the main factors on which the efficiency and sustainability of results depend are addressed. We follow contemporary scientific theories and practices and we adapt them to the specific needs. However, we draw our legitimacy most of all from the rapid progress, joy and enthusiasm of children and parents, as well as the respect of the community. The recognition by the municipality and the institutions enhances our sense of legitimacy. The health, education and skills of the people are the biggest capital of a country. These are the prerequisites that ensure social and economic well-being of people; these are the prerequisites that can break the vicious circle of poverty and isolation. What greater legitimacy can there be than that? Yes, we do need a lot support from donors to showcase the effect of social innovation in the long run in order to carry out successful advocacy to have them included in public policies.

### *Could you share about a certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?*

I have felt satisfaction many times when I see how fast children progress in their development, how the parents start having expectations about a better future for their children, how proud our team members are of the success and trust in them and in the organization. However, I believe that we are to feel the greatest satisfaction when we see that social policies place first the development of children and their parents and create conditions for it!

### *Can civil society organizations contribute to a change for the better in people's life?*

NGOs can have a very serious influence for a positive change both on individual and group level and for a change of the social environment and even a change in policies. The field we work in is subject to public policies. A lot of institutions are involved (schools and kindergartens, the health sector, social services) which administer large resources for a reason. Sometimes methods and approaches are used that are not sufficiently adequate for the fast-changing environment (a large number of children in a vulnerable social position, the fast development of science and technology, engagement of people to take responsibility for their own health and the health of their children, etc.). The outcomes of public policies are often unsatisfactory, which causes discontent in citizens, tax payers in particular. All of the latter reasons make it necessary to look for new, more successful and cost-effective approaches.

### *What do you think about partnership with other civil society organizations?*

I have quite a positive opinion about it. We have great partnerships with other NGOs that have not only enriched our practice but also have helped a



lot for our sustainability. However, partnerships in the sector are complicated. Individual NGOs have their own motivation to take action, have different professional expertise and experience in solving an issue that is “a common cause” for them. The latter fact hampers a lot the work of coalitions and the composition of the most appropriate recommendations to the institutions. It most likely makes it difficult for donors to make an assessment.

#### ***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

According to Alvin Toffler, often described as the most influential futurologist when he was alive, the NGO sector will play a more and more important role in public policies. The pursuit of efficiency and outcomes combined with the introduction of cutting-edge technology, flexibility and cost-effectiveness (as in the business sector) and pursuit to serve the public interest together with transparency and public control will result in the most tangible public benefits and prosperity. In this sense, I hope that NGOs that have a professional capacity will be recognized as suitable partners for the introduction of innovation that can boost a lot the efficiency of public policies. There are NGOs in all possible fields and their role and importance will grow because new generations in Bulgaria will become aware how important it is to fight for the public interest and be able to influence political decisions.

#### ***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

1. Personal and community development, as it is not possible to have social well-being without personal well-being. The latter goal can be achieved through personal development for better health, education, social skills and development of civic activity. Group approaches and combination of different fields are most efficient. The activities that would be most appropriate in Bulgaria will be healthy eating habits (one in three children in Bulgaria are overweight), physical activity, prevention of screen addiction (in children, in particular), creating a culture of knowledge and recognition of fake news.

2. Environment protection and the culture of conservation of resources.

3. Modernisation of mainstream services (education, healthcare, social services).

There are a lot of fields, such as fighting social exclusion, ethnic tolerance, local development, but they will be positively influenced by interventions in the above fields. Especially if they are focused on vulnerable communities.

#### ***Are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed?***

Yes, programs such as the Active Citizens Fund can have their “protected territory”. This program is capable of recognizing areas of development and impact that might have been underestimated by the institutions and

municipalities. Over the last 10 years, we have received support for 2 big projects that helped develop our Model for Integrated Development (MID), assess its efficiency by means of different tools, receive the assessment of local authorities and promote the effects and benefits for children and parents in the vulnerable communities we work with. We have also worked on smaller-scale projects that have greatly supported the capacity and technical capabilities of our organization.

“It is important for programs for work with children and parents to become visible for the whole community and to organize additional events to actively join up.” The photo illustrates such a moment under the project *Model for Early Education, Care and Active Participation (I CAN)*.



## Strengthening the network of active local Roma groups for the empowerment of Roma communities in Northwestern Bulgaria

Project of:  
Roma-Lom Foundation

Period of implementation:  
September 2021 – November 2023

Place of implementation:  
Northwestern Bulgaria

More information on:  
[roma-lom.org](http://roma-lom.org)

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an agreement was signed between *Roma-Lom* Foundation and the Municipality of Lom about specific projects to be included in the plan. The latter development resulted to a great extent owing to the 76 trained members from the community, predominantly young people, the 10 advocacy campaigns organized and the over 200 meetings carried out in the Roma neighborhoods across the municipality.

*"You cannot pursue development of the Roma community without general development of the settlement and the region, just like it is not possible for a specific settlement and region to develop without the local Roma community developing as well. We managed to set up active citizen groups made up from members of the Roma community, having hard cores of active young Roma from the region within the project scope."*

Roma-Lom Foundation

The project helped make the members of the local Roma community feel confident again that they can and need to take part in policy-making and looking for solutions to the issues facing not only their community but also the development of the settlement and the region.

10 active citizen groups were set up in Northwestern Bulgaria from members of the Roma community with hard cores of young Roma activists. A number of initiatives and campaigns took place during the project which contributed to a number of improvements in the local environment.

The Roma community took part actively in the discussions about the drafting of the Integrated Development Plan of Lom Municipality and



The specific outcomes achieved include the following: a space created for interaction between the members of the Roma community and the representatives of local authorities by means of building two volleyball courts in two settlements; creating a space for table tennis in the local community center; cleaning and painting a children's playground; the contribution of the campaigns held to build a bypass to provide drinking water for more than 3,000 members of the Roma neighborhood and solve the issue with outstanding payments; the setting up of a safe bus stop for the children and students from the Roma neighborhood; a clean-up of Roma neighborhoods in which the representatives of the municipality also took part, etc.

*"The individual and group discussions held clearly showed that the members of local communities do not believe in their own capability and are unfamiliar with advocacy tools that they can use to influence local authorities to make and fulfill commitments for specific issues of the communities."*

*The lesson our organization learned was that communities need small victories to regain their confidence. Constant effort has to be made to make citizens regain their confidence and motivation to be active."*

Roma-Lom Foundation



# We would like to present to you

**Nikolay Kirilov**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

It can be said that I have taken part in civil society initiatives all my life, as I come from such a family. My great-grandfather founded the first Porters Society in Bulgaria in the 20th century. A street was named after my grandfather in the town of Vidin for his public work. In the 1960s, my grandmother together with other activists was behind the

idea of building a water supply pipeline in one of the Roma neighborhoods in the town of Lom. In the 1970s, a film was shot about my grandfather, my father and their family for their contribution to the development of the Port of Lom and water transportation in Bulgaria.

After I had graduated from university, I came back to the town of Lom in 1994 and we set up an informal group aspiring to achieve Roma empowerment and place the Roma in a better negotiating position on issues affecting the community. In 1995, the first vacancy for an expert in ethnical affairs was opened with our help in the Municipality of Lom. In 1996, we officially launched the work of *Roma-Lom* Foundation. It was needed to set up an organization, while the state entered a period of a financial collapse for years. It can be said that the field of education for all children in the period from 1966 to 2000 relied on the activities carried out by *Roma-Lom* Foundation. Education mediators, health mediators and other policies were launched in that period with the help of our partners. We have had ups and downs in personal and organizational terms, which has made us stronger over the years.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do?***

I have always taught my children that throughout history our family has a responsibility to work for the development of the Roma community and to fight injustice in our society. We are also convinced that by helping the Roma community we contribute to the development of the city and our state.

## ***What book have you read lately?***

The last book I read was *Calling Bullshit* by Jevin West. It's a very valuable book in the context of misinformation, propaganda, data manipulation and the challenges of identifying credible information sources.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Do you have a permanent team and an office?***

The mission of *Roma-Lom* Foundation is to encourage the process of empowerment of the excluded groups and social emancipation of disadvantaged communities. We have not stopped working even at the worst times for the organization. We rely on a permanent team of 5–6 people, we have a very well-developed network of volunteers in the municipality and in the region and good partnership relations with other civil society organizations both in the region and at a national level. The organization has one of the best-organized and equipped offices in the country and lots more.

## ***Do you need support and what kind of support?***

The Active Citizens Fund can play a key role to strengthen the role of organizations similar to ours by providing independent financing, one could even say providing general support that can ensure the flexibility and sustainability of the organization. Support is also needed for an ongoing building of the capacity of the organization and the representatives of the community due to the generational shift and the dynamics of the context in which we operate.

## ***You are the leader of your organization. Will the organization be able to continue forward if you change your job?***

The organization has experienced various stages of its development, as well as periods when I worked for other programs. The organization has the support of its managing board comprised of people committed to the Roma cause. The organization might face some shocks, challenges, but it will definitely continue its work. The organization has lived through organized political repression as well, but we have managed to survive total pressure from the institutions.

## ***Could you share about a certain occasion from your work under the project, when you felt the greatest satisfaction?***

The small victories accomplished under the project have given citizens confidence that the political processes on a local, regional and national level depend on them. The mayor of one of the settlements helped in person for the installing of a table for table tennis, needed to create a space for interaction of young people from different ethnic groups. Other examples include the following: the restored water supply and provided access to drinking water in one of the Roma neighborhoods, the renovated electric power transmission grid in one of the Roma neighborhoods, which was followed by a snowball of other initiatives, such as the installing of 3 bus stops, putting asphalt on the streets in the neighborhood, etc. The launching of a petition to preserve the state forest enterprise in the territory of Lom Municipality also became a campaign involving all the citizens and it ended up saving the forest enterprise and the jobs of the people.

**What do you think about partnership with other civil society organizations?**

It's more and more difficult to talk about real partnerships. What can be seen are partnerships connected to financing but fewer and fewer related to causes. The organizations are placed in a competitive environment for limited resources. The main beneficiaries are local authorities and in order to provide financing, organizations might become dependent and often lose their critical role.

**How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years?**

It is necessary to unite efforts against political hypocrisy on local, national and European level. Or else we would witness more and more support for fictitious organizations and ever greater mistrust by citizens.

**Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?**

- empowerment of communities;
- educating voters;
- support for civic initiatives;
- support for innovation centers for young people, especially from ethnic communities (reverse the direction in response of the dynamic context in which we live);
- creation of credible information sources; support for civil society organizations to make them credible information sources.

**In your opinion, are programs such as the Active Citizens Fund needed?**

**How did it contribute to the development of your organization?**

The Active Citizens Fund is the last ray of hope among sources of financing of civil society organizations. The financing granted has given freedom to the organization to work actively with the members of the Roma community and allow the community to learn about tools of civic impact. When we planned the activities, we had the freedom to choose the methods, approaches and activities. The project supported by the Active Citizens Fund allowed *Roma-Lom* Foundation to organize a network of activists in the region where the organization is active. It also helped improve relations with the representatives of the institutions involved in the making and implementation of policies related to the community. The implementation of the project has shown that *Roma-Lom* Foundation is the main tool for members of the Roma community to participate in the making and implementation of policies related to the Roma community. *Roma-Lom* Foundation took part actively through the organized active groups in the discussions about the development of the concepts for integrated territorial investment.

## Regional model for empowering vulnerable refugees and migrants seeking protection in the country

Project of:

*Mission Wings Foundation*

Period of implementation:

July 2021 – April 2024

Place of implementation:

the municipalities of Harmanli, Svilengrad, Dimitrovgrad, Galabovo, Stara Zagora and Nova Zagora

More information on:

[missionwings.bg](http://missionwings.bg)

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Lack of knowledge of the language, local culture and the institutional system leads to an almost full isolation of refugees and migrants in Bulgaria, regardless of their legal status. The lack of basic knowledge about how the society operates often makes them incapable of taking part in making important decisions about their own life.

During the project the team managed to develop an activity to reach to the most affected ones, in particular children and women who have experienced a trauma.

In the course of almost three years, hundreds of people, asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, mainly from Syria,

Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tunisia and Morocco, received support. Approximately 100 of them live in rented apartments outside the registration and reception centers in the municipalities of Harmanli, Svilengrad, Dimitrovgrad, Galabovo, Stara Zagora and Nova Zagora. Approximately 450 Ukrainian refugees with temporary protection status were also reached and supported occasionally under the project.







*"During the training under the mentorship program, all the participants introduced themselves by sharing what they had in their mind, in their heart, what they could do with their hands and where they want to go with their legs. That's our favourite game of introduction. We begin the new groups with it."*

Diana Dimova, Wings Mission



It is important for the project team to have refugees join in as equal participants in the process of looking for a quality change in their lives and in the social environment and perceive them as individuals who can contribute with their activity to their own life and the community. The latter became possible after the following activities were carried out: awareness-raising health and legal consultations were held; "communication cards" for dai-

ly communication in emergencies mainly targeting unaccompanied minors were filled in; a mentorship program was organized for empowerment of leaders among the refugee and migrant communities; crisis interventions and psychological support were provided to the most vulnerable ones.

Specialized training modules were carried out to support the development of professional capacity of the institutions and organizations in the region.



On the photo: A drawing of a heart by a Syrian child to send a message of friendship with a common fate to Ukrainian children  
June 1st holiday, 2022

*"The smiling girls in the picture are children taking part in the mentorship program that have been placed with their families in Harmanli Registration and*



*Reception Center. Our volunteers from the mentorship program worked in a child protection workshop with them. They taught them how to stay safe, how to protect themselves, how to recognize they are in danger."*

Diana Dimova,  
Wings Mission

# We would like to present to you

Diana Dimova



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I have worked in the sector for as long as I can remember, for more than 25 years. I have faced all sorts of situations. *Mission Wings* is my youngest child. My favorite one. Inequalities are the main reason for the organization to exist. Just like the ones, which I helped set up and develop. Organizations are a powerful tool for change, which takes time to learn how to handle as a weapon. If you do not master that art, you have to find another

professional field. People looking for quiet and easy-going days have a hard time thriving in organizations. A different outlook takes years to develop.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

In a sentence or two. It is hard for them to cope with more. I tell them that I help the weak. That everyone's responsibility. That one should not turn a blind eye to injustice unless one wants to become an accomplice.

## ***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

I'm usually faced with silence for a brief moment and then the topic is changed quickly. I can only imagine what thoughts occur to the people. I have worked in the NGO sector all my life and the negative response to it has only been growing. But there are also people curious to know. They are important to me. I focus on them.

## ***What book have you read recently? Or watched a film that impressed you?***

I have recently watched the Polish film *Green Border* from the program of Sofia Film Fest. I was astounded. I was not myself for several days. It is not that I saw anything surprising, but I saw a part of my professional life over the last two years in a film. It is quite petrifying to see yourself from aside. I definitely recommend it! The film addresses the forced pushbacks on the Polish-Belarussian border. It is a horrific reality that can also be seen in our area as well. The topic is intentionally avoided. The film is bloodcurdling! I would like to congratulate the author for her courage!

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team? And an office?***

The mission of *Mission Wings* is to support, encourage and contribute to the untapping of the full potential of vulnerable children and adults that can have

achievements in various fields of life in Bulgaria. We work with priority in the regions of Stara Zagora and Haskovo. We have four open centers for consultations, one of which offers shelter to vulnerable mothers with children. Two of the centers are in *Lozenets*, Roma neighbourhood of Stara Zagora, and close to the refugee center in the town of Harmanli. We try to be close to the people in need and facilitate their access to various services. We have a permanent team in our centers as well as a temporary team under the different projects.

## ***Could you share about a certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?***

Some of the best moments have been connected with the success achieved on specific cases of people in need. Refugees are one of them. That keeps me going forward. Otherwise working with refugees is very hard. Very. Almost each member of our team bears signs of secondary trauma in his/her consciousness. You cannot avoid that when you work on the first line. What is more important is to learn and use self-recovery mechanisms.

## ***As of today, what has remained as a long-term effect of the project you implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

A lot of changed human fates. Thousands. I cannot list them. At some point we even stopped registering people in some of the interventions because the number of those we served had increased more than tenfold over the planned one. We would have been lost in documents and would have left behind the people and we chose not to do it. I believe that we introduced some fundamental practices in the local institutions — stakeholders. The institutions did not like the practices but had to take them into account. Some of them include, for instance, access to the status determination procedure, access to the scene of incident on the first line in case of emergency calls for refugees in distress, access to social services for them. As you can see, I used the word "access" three times. I could not have spelled it more clearly. These people are not welcome in Bulgaria, they are rejected. They are rejected in a particularly indirect manner by those who are obliged to provide them with help, protection and assistance. It is excruciating when you become aware of it while working on a case. That is why we resorted to a lot of advocacy for their rights under our projects supported by the Active Citizens Fund. We have small but important achievements. Something worth mentioning are the mentorship programs for refugees. I saw how people change before my eyes during the training sessions and later in the field initiatives. They as if changed the way they thought of themselves. They started believing in themselves. And started acting on it. They became striking and noticeable. We ourselves started seeing them in a different light.

## ***What do you think about partnerships with other civil society organizations?***

I became aware at some point over the last couple of years that you cannot survive without partnership. I put a strong emphasis on building and



maintaining a supporting network of partners. I believe it to be very important for every organization. The like-minded people give you an identity. You can draw energy from them. Together you can break through the wall. You can build a bridge. At such times of crisis, it is much more life-saving to spread your wings with someone else and fly high so as to be seen by all instead of crawl into your shell like a snail. Yes, spreading your wings takes a lot of courage and a great amount of madness. You have sometimes to swallow your ego and insult and look beyond your personal interests. If you can see a cause at all. The cause is worth more than you and it pays to give yourself in to it.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years?***

I strongly believe in the power of civil society. I believe that in order to make it, we have to work with communities. Not so much with individuals. This is one of the major mistakes in the sector. We focus too much on someone's personal change. While it is the power of community that can make and change policies and heal the man. I truly believe in this philosophy.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Oh, it's a difficult question. Let me try, though. Children and youth – everything for them. They are the future. The vulnerable – what we have done for their inclusion is not enough. The environment – developing skills to protect the environment is almost mission impossible. Building and mobilizing communities – they will change the environment. Only they can do it. Zero tolerance of injustice and violations of human rights – I cannot see NGOs lining up to work in that minefield. And they should!

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under EEA FM are needed?***

The program was very valuable for our organization and the region, for Bulgaria in general. I liked this program very much. It had a very targeted focus and methodological efforts for a change with competent agents from the NGO sector. However, someone has to pick up the baton or else it would be very difficult and lonely for the sector. I would recommend less harsh administrative rules, so as not to take up precious time and resources and thus focus the whole energy on the people whose world we want to change.

## Rainbow Hub

**Project of:**

*Bilitis Resource Center Foundation*  
in partnership with  
*GLAS – Bulgaria Foundation*  
and *Deystvie LGBT Youth*  
Organization

**Period of implementation:**

November 2019 – June 2022

**Place of implementation:**

Sofia

**More information on:**

[rainbowhub.bg](http://rainbowhub.bg)



03

***How do we accept differences in the family or at the workplace? What does transgender mean? What are the stereotypes about lesbian and bisexual women? How can we find help and support if we are “different”?***

These are just a few of the questions in response to which you can find information in the content created (a website, videos and brochures) under this project.

The LGBTI people are vulnerable to hate speech, hate crime, lack of access to healthcare (trans and intersex), discrimination at the workplace and stigmatization. The project organized advocacy training sessions for 7 different mutual help groups that joined actively the movement for equal rights of LGBTI people in Bulgaria with their own initiatives.

More than 200 representatives of the LGBTI community were trained in advocacy with the support of experienced activists and experts.

The campaigns and activities in the *Rainbow Hub* also helped raise awareness of the representatives of a number of public institutions and the general public about the needs and challenges faced by the LGBTI people.

The advocacy campaign **BraveLab** helped create useful resources for LGBTI young people and their parents to assist both parties in the hard moments of disclosure and acceptance. A number of useful articles for LGBTI+ youth and their parents were uploaded on the website BraveLab; the articles were prepared by the young people in the group. Also, a LGBTI+ dictionary was drafted to facilitate any website visitor. The website has been visited more than 5,000 times.

The advocacy campaign **QueerFemme** provided useful resources for lesbian and bisexual women about topics that are not openly addressed.

The goal of the advocacy campaign **T.I.A.** was to create the first of their kind informative online resources on trans topics that are targeted at the general public.

Events were organized as part of the campaigns **LGBTI Families** and **Family and Friends of LGBTI People** that addressed the rights of same-sex families in Bulgaria and how to be good allies of our LGBTI relatives and/or friends.

The campaign **Work it OUT Club** offered useful resources on the subject of discrimination and acceptance at work.

The advocacy campaign **People living with HIV** aimed at raising awareness and breaking the related stigma.



On the photo: An event held as part of the advocacy campaign of a group for LGBTI families. June 2022.

The meeting aimed at addressing mainly the challenges faced by the group LGBTI Families, look for support as well as have cards given away and filled in with messages to the institutions supporting the rights of LGBTI people and addressing the issues of lack of adequate legislation regarding the rights of same-sex partners and same-sex families with children.



On the photo: Support for the case of “baby Sarah” and providing visibility for the campaign #EqualRightsForAllChildren among the LGBTI community and the public in general. 15 April 2022.

The event was attended by same-sex partners and their children and members of the group LGBTI Families who showed their support for the “baby Sarah” case (referring to the refusal of the Bulgarian authorities to issue a passport and a Bulgarian Birth Deed to a child born in Spain in the family of a same-sex couple of a Bulgarian woman and a British woman), voiced their position before the court proceedings and also attended the court proceedings.



# We would like to present to you

## Paul Naydenov and Manuela Popova



### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

**Paul:** In 2002, I started as a member-activist of *Gemini*, the no longer existing first in Bulgaria gay and lesbian organization. In 2004, I co-founded *Bilitis* together with 6 more lesbian and bisexual women. As an intersex person, it was hard for me to disclose in those early years of the LGBTI movement, and I found support in the lesbian community. I grew up with *Bilitis* over the years and in 2013, I became one of the founders of the pan-European network of intersex organizations OII-Europe. In 2017, I won a case enabling me to change my gender and I had new ID documents issued. Ever since I have been helping families with intersex children to find strength to support their child if the child does not self-identify with the gender assigned at birth. *Bilitis* is the only LGBTI organization in Bulgaria that not only helps intersex and trans people but also includes them in its management. We do not simply talk of empowerment but we do it. We build a platform for young LGBTI people to fulfill their potential and uphold who they are.



**Manuela:** I have worked in the civil society sector for 4 years now and I have been holding the position of co-director of *Bilitis* Foundation since September 2023. Before that I had the pleasure to be a longstanding volunteer and ac-

tivist for human rights always focused on feminism and LGBTI+. I was very young when I realized that I witnessed injustice and discrimination towards different communities and I decided to act upon it. My motivation comes from my belief that every person deserves dignity, fair treatment and equal opportunities. My commitment to the cause got even more stronger when I launched the campaign *Do not get offended but ...* in 2019 which stirred a lot of interest and brought me a number of awards. The truth is that my work in *Bilitis* makes me very proud because I can see how our effort leads us to making real changes and improvements for the people we work for.

### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

**Paul:** My parents have always supported me and they understood why I had to leave my previous job and start being fully involved in activism. My children also understand me well because they grew up with my activism. Unfortunately, they were also affected by it. I remember how in a biology class at my daughter's school, the class discussed the topic of snails and hermaphroditism in snails and the teacher gave me as an example of hermaphroditism in people (at the time I told my personal story to the mass media to ensure visibility for intersex people in Bulgaria). The term "hermaphrodite" is a concept of the past and it has not been used either in its medical or in its social meaning for ages. My daughter came home very distraught. She was hiding who her parents were so as not to lose the few friends that she had in high school. Today, though, she is extremely well prepared to work on topics stirring public debate and extreme division in society.

**Manuela:** Explaining what my work is all about to my family and friends, including children, is an important part of my interaction with them. I usually share that I am with an organization that works to protect the rights of the members of the LGBTI+ community. I explain that it mainly means helping people who have suffered discrimination (and I explain to the children that this is unfair treatment of people because of who they love, how they look like or how the rest perceive them). Of course, depending on children's age, I give them information in such a way so that they can understand me and I encourage them to ask questions. My family and friends usually understand and support my work and appreciate its importance for society.

### *How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

**Paul:** A lot of people, even those that are well-intentioned towards us, do not accept the work in an NGO as "work" but as an interest-based activity that should not be paid for. Other people, who are among our most fierce opponents, believe that NGOs are some budget-supported organizations paid to "steal children". It is very important to clarify what an NGO means and why scientific literature refers to NGOs as the "pillars" of civil society.

**Manuela:** When I share that I work in an NGO, I have noticed that many people are not familiar with the term and I often have to explain what it means. I usually tell them that NGOs are organizations that are not state-funded and their utmost goal is to work for public benefit, solve social issues and help people in need. Still, I admit that not every NGO shares the same democratic values and respects human rights. There have been cases, of course, when I came across people voicing some doubt or criticism at the civil society sector. Nevertheless, few of them have dared tell me openly in the face. Most people really admire and support my efforts when they find out what *Bilitis* aims to do and what we do. I always regard such cases as

small victories and it helps me continue being involved in my work to make a positive change in society.

***Could you share about a book that you have read recently?***

**Paul:** My literary taste leans mainly towards science fiction and I prefer as a whole to analyze the ideas behind a literary work. *Starship Troopers* by Heinlein and Asimov's *The Bicentennial Man* are the books that I will never forget, though I wish I had never seen the movies after the books.

**Manuela:** I finished reading *Queer Conception* by Kristin Liam Kali a couple of days ago. My partner recommended it to me. The book is truly impressive. It is written by a trans person who works as an obstetrician and provides trans-affirming care for LGBTI+ families. The book addresses in detail the process of conception and assisted reproduction, including additional information for trans people, most of all those who do not identify themselves as women but would like to take part somehow in the process of conception and pregnancy. This book was a highly valuable resource that helped a lot our family, which is at odds with the "traditional" models.

***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Do you have a permanent team? And an office?***

**Paul:** Our mission is to overcome all forms of discrimination and achieve full equality for LGBTI people in Bulgaria. We create conditions for LGBTI people to be active and achieve their aspirations in activism. The opposite of an activist is a passivist. We work with a young team in which we try to prevent the burnout of people but don't always succeed. Together with GLAS Foundation, we maintain the *Rainbow Hub*, which is our common home and community center.

***What is the foremost source of legitimacy for the work of your organization? Do you need support, what kind of support and who from?***

**Paul:** Bilitis studies annually the community needs from online questionnaires as well as by collecting feedback from the visitors of *Rainbow Hub*, who have been more than 500 unique persons over the last 12 months. Our team is particularly sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable LGBTI people who have to cope with intersectional challenges. Certain members of the community often have unrealistic expectations of us, which grow into online discussions and take time and strong nerves. When we add attacks from radical opponents, we get an unfavourable external work environment, which is exhausting for the team. That is why we regularly use the services of professional coaches and psychological counsellors to keep and develop good atmosphere in the team. We will always need such support at least until the environment in which we work becomes slightly less dangerous. It is hard for each team member to draw a clear line between the personal and professional space because the rights of LGBTI people are a personal cause for the people who work for us. The latter creates an incredible atmosphere of commitment to work but sadly it is also a precondition for a burnout.

**Manuela:** With regard to the need for support, we are always open to co-operation and support from various parties. Of course, in order to ensure that our work is sustainable, we value most of all financial support from donors who share our vision and values and are ready to invest in our projects and programs. In addition, what is extremely important for us is active involvement and commitment of volunteers, experts and partners who can contribute with their knowledge, skills and resources to the accomplishment of our goals. Our organization ultimately needs the support of the entire society to continue its work to make a difference and change for the better the life of the people we represent.

***Could you share about a certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?***

**Paul:** That was the moment when I felt how the *Rainbow Hub* had turned from a place for meetings and daily work of a small group of activists into a community center, which offers diverse services, events, opportunities for self-expression of new actors from the community and an incredible atmosphere of sharing and mutual support. I believe that the *Rainbow Hub* will live a life of its own in the coming years because the community has growingly recognized it as its space. We also have people coming to us who live in poverty and cannot afford to go to clubs and other community centers which operate in a commercial manner. We are the only so far non-commercial LGBTI space in Bulgaria and we take great pride in that.

**Manuela:** I felt most satisfied when my work under the *Rainbow Hub* project changed dramatically. From a person who gathered and briefed several groups of young people how to work for the community, I became a witness to the magic they made. I saw how each volunteer and member of a community group took the work in a very serious and committed manner. That was the time when I could simply watch how people got inspired from one another, worked with a passion and commitment to achieve our common goal. That wave of enthusiasm and dedication made me extremely proud and happy because I knew that we had achieved something much bigger than simply a project, we had created a community that is kept and developed by members themselves.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project or projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

**Paul:** The Active Citizens Fund supported the *Rainbow Hub* when it was just nascent and gave the initial impetus for its development as a community center for LGBTI people. Financing programs such as the Active Citizens Fund are particularly important for the LGBTI community, which is absolutely neglected and ignored by the Bulgarian institutions!

**Manuela:** The long-term effect of the projects that we implemented under the Active Citizens Fund was the turning of the *Rainbow Hub* from an apartment with a few rooms into a community center. The *Hub* is not simply



a space but the heart of our community, where people feel accepted and supported. The most important thing is that our community center continues to exist and operate successfully providing support and opportunities for development of the LGBTI+ community in the future. This is one of the greatest achievements of our organization and we are proud to see how the Hub will remain a steady and important part of our community.

***In your opinion, can civil society organizations contribute successfully to a change for the better in people's life?***

*Paul:* My spontaneous response would be "Yes, they can." Civil society organizations can successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life. However, when I get to think about it, civil society organizations are just as diverse in essence and goals as political parties are. Sadly, the civil society sector also includes NGOs that incite aggressive attacks against people like us, justifying them with support for "traditional values". The *Rainbow Hub* was completely destroyed at the end of 2021, not by street hooligans but by the very people who claim to be the ambassadors of traditional values. Hatred is not a traditional value. That is why NGOs like ours are needed to dispel delusions and empower the voiceless.

*Manuela:* Yes, absolutely. I believe that civil society organizations can successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life. In Bulgaria, NGOs such as *Bilitis* Foundation play a key role in protection of the rights of the LGBTI+ community and promotion of justice in our society. Organizations such as ours are characterized by independence, flexibility and ability to act as the voice of their communities.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

*Paul:* Sadly I'm not optimistic and I don't believe that it will be easy to overcome the division created in civil society based on values. The civil society sector mirrors the processes in the society as well as global processes, though it can also influence them. A more radical global change is needed to achieve convergence of the extreme poles and overcome the conflicts in the Bulgarian society. My prediction is that in the upcoming 15 years, the civil society sector in Bulgaria will continue to be divided into clusters that follow different political goals and work based on different principles.

*Manuela:* I cannot say whether my assumptions are simply hopes but I envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years' time as more dynamic, innovative and integrated in the society. I hope that we can always continue working to achieve a fairer, more democratic and sustainable society.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

*Paul:* In my opinion, human rights, democracy, good governance, environment protection and poverty eradication together with protection

for socially vulnerable people. I believe that investment in human rights and stimulation of civic participation to create a culture of protection of human dignity are vital. The lack of a basic standard of respect for human dignity can be observed in many areas, and unfortunately, the standard of living in Bulgaria declines, which forces a lot of people to leave the country (especially the young).

*Manuela:* I'd say that to me the areas are social justice and fighting poverty, healthcare and education, green economy and environment protection, workers' rights and workers' self-management, equality and fighting discrimination. This is to me the basic common human minimum.

## Ukrainian Women in Bulgaria — Life Without a Risk of Trafficking

Project of:  
*Dignita Foundation*

Period of implementation:  
August 2022 — October 2023

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[dignita.bg](http://dignita.bg)

# 03

Lack of knowledge of the local legal framework, institutions and realities, lack of a supportive environment as well as the trauma from having to flee the war in Ukraine make Ukrainian female refugees particularly vulnerable to trafficking in human beings.

The project helped the members of the Ukrainian community in Bulgaria to obtain systematized information about their rights in Bulgaria, the specificity of applying for a job in the country and the related risks.

The women's circles providing systematized information and individual counselling to Ukrainian women are a pilot model of *Dignita Foundation*, which proved to be needed and useful for the women.

The analyses of risky adverts that the Foundation made is the only of its kind research practice so far and can serve as the foundation of even more in-depth studies of various risks among Ukrainian refugees. The interest they stirred in the Ukrainian community, experts and specialists, organizations, institutions and the media has shown that the topic is particularly important and not well-researched.



On the photo:  
A women's circle in the city of Varna



*"Dignita Foundation managed to get together at two consecutive events the representatives of important institutions and organizations whose attention was focused on the safety of Ukrainian refugees and the need to empower and include them. The institutions play a key role in that and that is why the work with them should be continued and maintained."*



You can find here the analytical report titled *A study of risks in the search for employment among Ukrainian refugees in Bulgaria*.



# We would like to present to you

**Kamelia Dimitrova**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I have worked for various civil society organizations in my professional career. I joined for the first time the civil society sector in 2001, soon after I had graduated with my Bachelor's degree.

I founded *Dignita* Foundation in 2020 after I had acquired experience working in the civil society sector, the public administration and as an international expert with intergovernmental organizations. I am a woman of action by nature and my motivation was to streamline the acquired experience and observations of the needs and shortcomings in the system for prevention of human trafficking and victim protection into something specific, measurable and foreseeable.

I believe that working in the NGO sector allows us to implement quick and efficient solutions. In addition, my experience from holding an executive position in the public administration was invaluable. After heading the Secretariat of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and being involved with legislative amendments, preparing the national strategy and extending the network of services, I feel much more prepared to offer solutions having knowledge of the mechanisms via which these proposals turn into measures and policies.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

I am still working on that, how to explain in brief, especially to younger children, without scaring them and giving them information that is not appropriate for their development. I explain to my close ones that I work in a human rights protection organization in the field of prevention of trafficking of human beings and violence against women and in support for the victims. As I have been working in this field for almost 20 years, I cannot say that there are any close people who do not understand what I do. They sometimes wonder and do not understand why I chose this grave field and ask if I am not bearing too big of a burden. My short answer is that when I graduated with MA in Human Rights, that was one of the main human rights protection issues that I came across. It is much easier for me to act instead of simply know what the challenges are as well as the dimensions of this crime and to remain simply observing.

## ***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

Unfortunately, public attitudes to civil society organizations have changed negatively as a result of targeted disinformation campaigns and aggressive behaviour of some political forces. That is why it is needed to put in even more effort to explain our mission, our contribution to society and the groups we support. We have to be transparent with regard to our priorities, the sources of financing and the efficiency and effectiveness of spending to achieve our goals through activities. I hope that with a more active and efficient communication with the general public, we will manage to win back trust in the civil society sector at the levels typical of mature European democratic societies.

## ***Which book have you read recently which you could share about with us?***

I am currently finishing Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*. I have recently revisited *The Physics of Sorrow* by Georgi Gosodinov. That's a book that gives me consolation.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team? And an office?***

The mission of *Dignita* Foundation is prevention of trafficking in human beings, advocacy and support for victims. The foundation is active and I am happy to share that we have been growing steadily over the last four years. The organization has already a small in number but very active permanent team.

## ***What is the foremost source of legitimacy for the work of you organization? Do you need support and what kind of support and who from?***

I believe that we draw our legitimacy from the clarity of the cause that we fight for and the full compliance with the activities supporting our mission and the priorities declared. Another source of legitimacy is the recognition, expertise and reputation of the members of the Management Board. Last but not least, the good cooperation of the organization with the institutions on national and European level also contribute to our legitimacy and recognition.

## ***If you are the leader of your organization, will it be able to continue forward if you start another job?***

At present we can still only dream of autonomous development of the organization, as we were set up 4 years ago, but it is certainly my vision for the organization in the long run. I am carefully following the processes of emancipation of civil society organizations from their leaders and I am drawing experience and ideas from them.

## ***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project or projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

Certainly the effects from our project financed by the Active Citizens Fund are longstanding. As part of our project financed by the Active Citizens

Fund, we empowered Ukrainian refugee women to identify exploitation risks behind suspicious job adverts. We helped the women with information sessions to get better knowledge of Bulgarian labor law and be aware of their rights. We introduced them to employers and we consulted them about their preparedness to apply for a job. Some of the refugee women started working during the period of support, others became better prepared to find a good employer. We believe that the knowledge and skills acquired are sustainable and they help the women's integration in the long run. The project was assessed as a good practice by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and a report on the risky job adverts in the process of looking for jobs by Ukrainian refugees was published on the European Website on Integration ([migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu](http://migrant-integration.ec.europa.eu)). This is the EU's official portal for integration of migrants which has existed for 15 years already and has over 20,000 readers a month from across the EU, including policy-makers, researchers and practitioners. This provides great visibility of our work on European level.

***What do you think of partnerships with other civil society organizations? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

I believe that partnerships with other organizations that work in our field and related fields are extremely important. I believe that in order for our voice to be heard in the area of advocacy for more efficient policies which better protect human rights, we need to be united and to work in a coalition. Since we are engaged in a difficult field and we are sometimes discouraged by the heaviness of Sisyphus' boulder, the opportunity to share troubles and challenges with colleagues in our field helps keep our mental health and makes us more resilient to a burnout. I truly consider these relations important and invaluable. In our sector, professional relations quite often become friendships. Of course, there is competition in the civil society sector because the sources of financing are very limited. However, I believe that it should not stop us from entering into partnerships and coalitions. It should not prevent us from having sincere relations among colleagues and supporting each other in the accomplishment of our missions and causes.

## I Have a Dream (a grass-root civil society campaign for empowerment of Roma women via direct advocacy)

**Bilateral project of:**  
Liberal Alternative for Roma Civil Unification – LARGO Association  
in partnership with  
KUN Center for Equality and Diversity



**Period of implementation:**  
October 2021 – March 2024

**Place of implementation:**  
Kyustendil, Rakitovo, Radomir, Botevgrad, Dupnitsa and the village of Kovachevo

**More information on:**  
[largo-dream.com](http://largo-dream.com)

03

*A teacher of Bulgarian, English and Math, a social worker, and advocacy expert, a mother, an owner of emergency care office, a laboratory worker, a health mediator, a student, a future geologist, a make-up artist, a hairdresser, a small business owner – all of them are women and are the living proof that the Roma woman can achieve a lot in various fields of life.*

For three years now LARGO Association in partnership with the Norwegian advocacy organization KUN Center for Equality and Diversity has worked to empower Roma women and young girls and protect women's and minorities' rights by means of direct advocacy.



On the photo: The second national meeting of Roma women's clubs. 4-5th November 2023, the town of Bansko

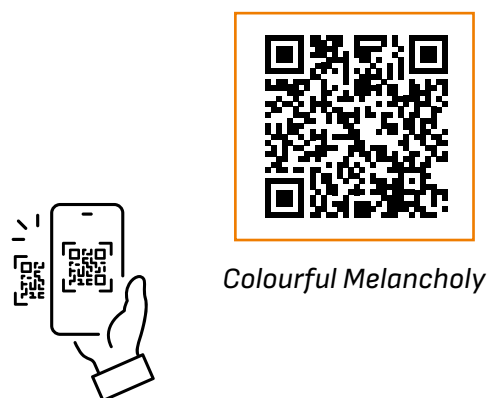


The project aimed at contributing to the creation of women leaders who are active citizens and who can set an example both within and outside of the community. The approach included an exchange of experience based on innovative Norwegian models of direct advocacy through art and culture as well as conducting empirical research with analysis of the attitudes in the community.

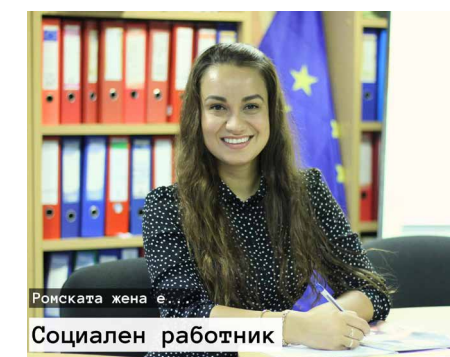
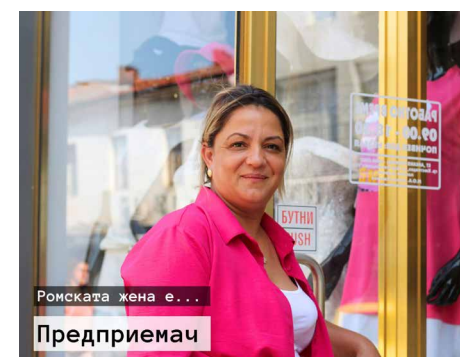
The female participants went through a series of training sessions about personality skills, which they applied in practice as well in advocacy campaigns in their communities.

More than 300 women from six settlements (Kyustendil, Rakitovo, Radomir, the village of Kovachevo, Botevgrad and Dupnitsa) joined in 160 in total meetings of the newly-founded Roma Women's Clubs.

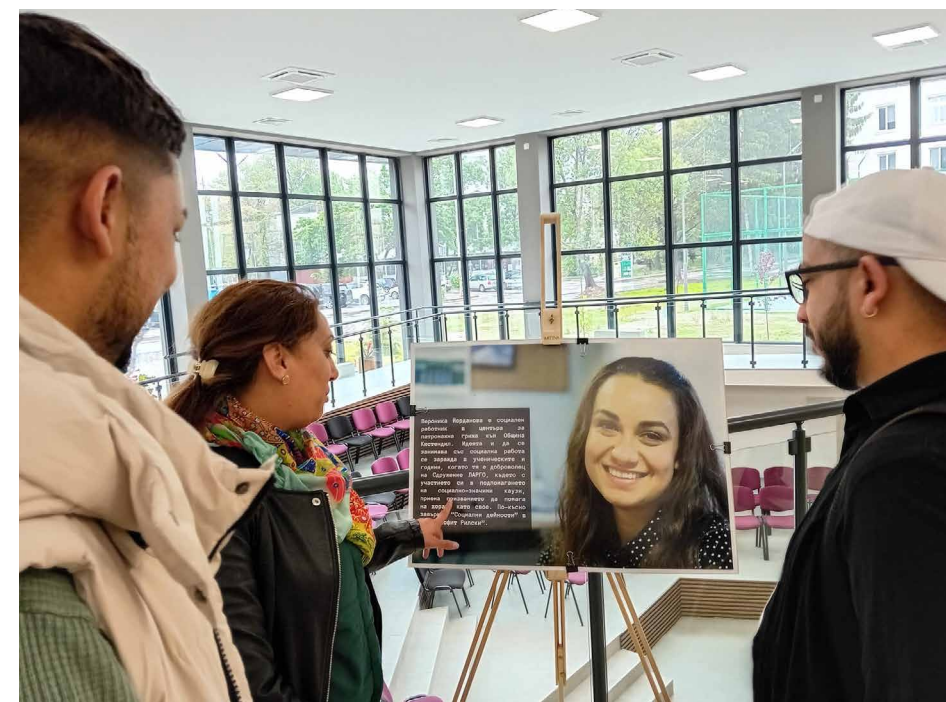
During public discussions in the towns of Radomir and Kyustendil, the book titled **Colourful Melancholy** was presented; the book presents the personal stories of women across the country who are of different age, have different professions and fates and who do not conceal their Roma origin. On the contrary, they are proud of their origin. The discussions were triggered by the conclusions and recommendations of the report titled *Why do dreams fly south?* prepared by Venelin Stoychev.



The touring exhibition *Photo Voice: The Roma Woman* showed the numerous faces of successful Roma women and demonstrated positive role models of women and young girls who succeeded in their professional fields. They are educated, beautiful, ambitious and are firmly determined to work the professions they have chosen.



The inspiring stories of the eleven women shown in the exhibition were presented as part of a broad communication campaign and the exhibition toured different places in the country.



Thematic priority

# Gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence

## 04

10 supported projects  
with the following specific  
objectives:

- Conducting research on the reasons, consequences and possible approaches to prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and related to gender equality
- Monitoring of public policies and practices related to domestic violence and gender-based violence
- Strategic communication and advocacy campaigns



An illustration of Olga Mrozek for  
*Fine Acts* x OBI

## Project titles speak for themselves...

Development of a monitoring methodology and conducting a national monitoring of policy and institutional practice in relation to domestic and gender-based violence in Bulgaria ○ Pro-active Against Violence Against Women ○ Prevention Through Awareness ○ Equal in the diversities ○ Rock' n'roll for Girls ○ Research and Prevention of Violence Against Roma Women in the Municipalities of Kuklen, Perushtitsa and Rodopi ○ Coordination and cooperation in support of victims of domestic violence ○ Socio-psychological biography of violence in the Bulgarian family and interpretation of ethno-psychological traits in relation to European values and policies ○ Fair Play ○ No means NO



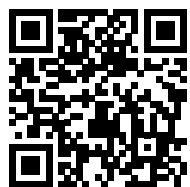
## Pro-active Against Violence Against Women

Project of:  
Animus Foundation  
in partnership with  
Society and Security Foundation

Period of implementation:  
November 2019 – November 2022

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[activeagainstviolence.com](http://activeagainstviolence.com)



# 04

*Domestic violence is the most widespread but also the most covert form of violence.*

*Where can you find support in case you become a victim of domestic violence?*

*What can you do if you are a victim and/or a witness of violence?*

The project *Pro-active Against Violence Against Women* aims at raising the awareness and mobilizing civil society about violence against women.

On the website we created *From A to Z about Violence*, you can find not only detailed information about the problem, i.e. how to recognize it, how to act, but also a link to a map of social services in the country, a template of an application form to the regional court for protection from domestic violence and a lot of other useful materials.



Women – ambassadors who had faced in the past a situation of violence but are no longer afraid to talk about the hell they went through, spoke on the subject.

Their voice was heard by a large audience on social media, during training sessions, working meetings, in the media and at round tables.

As a result of the active advocacy campaign, a Legal Aid Bureau was opened in Sofia City, a Legal Clinic for support of Victims of Violence and a new Crisis Center.

Focus groups with police officers were held in the districts of Sliven, Silistra, Smolyan and Sofia City so as to study their attitudes and treatment of domestic violence.

The police officers also joined in 8 training events to boost their competence to work on domestic violence cases.

The twelve working meetings in the four districts with representatives of the court, the prosecutor's office, Social Assistance Directorates, municipalities and social services helped develop a monitoring system of public policies and practices for gathering information about the issue of domestic violence as well as outline the issues the latter faced in their work on violence cases.

Analytical reports and various opinions were drafted that are available on the project website.

# 0800 1 86 76



НАЦИОНАЛНА ЛИНИЯ  
ЗА ПОСТРАДАЛИ ОТ НАСИЛИЕ

Линията  
е безплатна и денонощна **24/7**

Кампания  
„Любовта не боли! Говори! Помогни!“  
Проект АСФ 41  
„Активни срещи с насилието над жени“



An awareness-raising campaign was organized and carried out for better awareness about the problem of domestic violence and it helped disseminate prevention materials across the country.

# We would like to present to you

## Miglena Atanasova and Nadezhda Stoycheva



### ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

**Miglena:** My name is Miglena Atanasova and I started working in the civil society sector in 2008, when I joined the team of *Animus* Foundation. I started as an administrative secretary of the Foundation but over the time, with my involvement and owing to the team and the knowledge and skills they gave me, I have been a coordinator of programs and projects for more than 8 years. It all started for me personally from the desire to help because I have a degree in psychology. I'm most motivated in my work by the results we achieve by implementing projects, the satisfaction that I feel when I see the positive outcomes of my work and the influence we have on the life of the other people. What also motivates me is the incredible team whom I have the pleasure to work with, as they are tireless professionals and friends.



**Nadezhda:** My name is Nadezhda Stoycheva and I am one of the founders of the Foundation. I have been working in the civil society sector for 30 years. Apart from being the Director of the Foundation, I am also a psychotherapist, who works with victims of violence. My story started in the distant 1994 when I met a woman and we decided to set up an organization. As it was hard for us to be accepted in other organizations with our ideas about supporting women who were victims of violence, a friend of mine, who had a company and offices in Sofia City Mill, gave us one of his offices. We used to enter the premises with a sausage in hand to appease the watchdog Cesar. The first project we won was about a family center. We were granted a PC and a printer by Open Society. We drafted our next two projects on this PC, the first of which was addressed at *Mama Cash* to work directly with victims of sexual violence and the second of which was about dissemination of information about violence and its victims and the project was supported under the PHARE Program. That is how we started 30 years ago. Today we have numerous programs and we work with about 100 people.

### ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

**Miglena:** When I explain to my family and friends, including to children, what I do as a job, I try to do it in a way that is easy to understand and inspiring. I usually tell them that my job is to help people in need. I explain that I coordinate various activities and events, organize training sessions and working meetings with partners and institutions, which are also involved with solving social problems. I tell them about specific cases or projects in which I took part, what I achieved. My family and friends usually understand my work and appreciate it, they support me and are proud of my commitment and the energy that I put in it. Or in brief, as my children say: "Mom helps women and children not to cry and makes them smile."

**Nadezhda:** My family and friends understand and support me but it can sometimes be quite hard, especially when I am very busy or exhausted.

### ***What books are you reading?***

**Miglena:** I wish I had more time to read but sadly I reach for the book more and more rarely. I am trying currently to read a book about parent-child relations and how parents can adapt to the contemporary digital world.

**Nadezhda:** I read and edit books that are about philosophy. That's my hobby.

### ***What is the mission of your organization? Is it currently active? Do you need support, what kind of support and who from?***

**Miglena:** The mission of *Animus Association* Foundation goes as follows: healthy interaction among people and gender equality in the Bulgarian society; forming attitudes of tolerance towards otherness, respect for suffering and zero acceptance of violence in the Bulgarian society; presence of accessible psychotherapeutic services and programs offering competent professional assistance to the people in need; understanding and accepting the values of psychodynamic psychotherapy.

This year the foundation will celebrate its 30th anniversary. These 30 years are a proof of its sustainability, tireless spirit and even stronger motivation in our work. Our foundation is one of the largest social service providers and the foundation runs two crisis centers *St. Petka* and *St. Sofia* for women with children who are victims of violence, a Center for Rehabilitation, Counselling and Psychotherapy, a Complex for Social Services for Children and Families comprising of a Community Support Center and a *Mother and Baby Unit*, *Protection Zone* Community Support Center, a Legal Clinic and a National Hotline for Victims of Violence: 0800 1 86 76.

70 people work in the organization hired under a permanent employment contract. 30 volunteers run the National Hotline, which shows sustainability because the hotline was created in the distant 1997. We own two buildings where we provide some of the social services. The buildings of the Complex for Social Services for Children and Families and *St. Sofia* Crisis



Center are owned by the municipality; 50% of the social services are activities delegated by the state.

Each organization needs support, permanent at that, to develop its activity. We have received support over the years to this day from various institutions, the European Commission, the Active Citizens Fund, the state and other governmental and non-governmental organizations. This support and commitment have helped us further build on our experience and disseminate our knowledge, develop and manage various programs and services for 30 years now.

***Could you share about certain occasion when you felt the greatest satisfaction from your work?***

*Miglana:* We have been implementing the project *Pro-active Against Violence Against Women* for three years and we could share about each activity with satisfaction. I, personally, in my capacity as a coordinator of the project, felt the greatest satisfaction at the final conference.

One of the key activities was the training of women who have suffered violence to tell their stories without feeling embarrassed to a large audience. These women came out with their faces and their stories and their voice was heard on 25th November 2022. That was a particularly exciting moment, which emphasized the importance of our activity and inspired all the people in the audience.

I won't forget the faces of the majority of participants, including the Ombudsman of the Republic of Bulgaria, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Labor and Social Policy, the Chairperson of Sofia Municipal Council, representatives of the judiciary, the Prosecutor's Office, the police, social services, etc. That was a particularly emotional moment and I believe that this activity, which is a good practice, has inspired a lot of women to share about their path of salvation and to have actions taken to amend the legislation about domestic violence.

***As of today, what has remained as a long-term effect of the project under the Active Citizens Fund?***

*Miglana:* A lot of the project activities remained long-term, e.g. the women who joined the program as ambassadors against violence against women continue to talk in public and share about the difficulties they face on their way out of the situation of violence. As a result of our relations with the institutions built in the other cities where the project was implemented (Silistra, Sliven, Smolyan), it often happens that the participants in the project activities (police officers, social workers, prosecutors, judges, etc.) contact us in relation to cases of violence. We have managed to train more than 100 police officers in the four towns of the project and to make new partnerships with the institutions and stakeholders. All the materials developed (videos, handbooks, analyses, prevention materials) are still used to

this day. A song and a video were created under the project, which are also gaining popularity in social networks. The conference influenced the institutions to accelerate their work on the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act. These are perhaps just some of the outcomes that give us satisfaction. What is important for us is that projects end but our work stays.

***Why are NGOs in Bulgaria needed in the field in which you work? What makes NGOs different from other organizations?***

*Miglana:* The problem of domestic violence cannot be contained without the NGO sector. The issue used to be a taboo topic in the past. No one dared speak about this phenomenon and women who were victims of violence did not look for protection and support. All of us know the consequences of domestic violence, psychological, emotional, the feeling of impunity, etc. If it weren't for the people helping the victims to overcome the trauma, if it weren't for the crisis centers, the dark chronicle would be even darker. I can bravely claim that it is owing to the activity of our foundation that the society woke up. Our experience is significant because one cannot protect a woman who suffered violence if one has not heard her story and the path the woman had to pass looking for salvation.

*Nadezhda:* A lot of NGOs in the country have worked on the issue of violence together with us for years on end. They are the experts in the Bulgarian state that know the specificity of the victims. It is only recently that the state joined in assisting the victims by providing funds through activities delegated by the state, on the one hand, and through the new Protection Against Domestic Violence Act, on the other hand.

***What do you think about partnerships with other civil society organizations?***

*Miglana:* Partnerships and coalitions are important and valuable in the fight for a cause. Uniting the experience and knowledge of various professionals contributes to greater weight of the change, awareness and mobilization of the public. The foundation is a member of various coalitions and in my opinion, it is a good approach to follow the national motto "Unity makes power" that leads to a change. Thus, for instance, the last coalition we joined together with 35 more organizations is *Together Against Violence*. We jointly drafted and submitted a letter to the Council of Ministers and to all the institutions to enquire why they had not done their job in line with the Rules Under the Protection Against Domestic Violence Act of 01.01.2024. Another example is our coalition *Early Childhood Development* with the National Network for Children. We believe that coalitions are important for certain specific causes to impose joint pressure on the slow progress on painful problems.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years? Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

We imagine that the civil society sector in Bulgaria will be better developed and more active in 15 years, with greater involvement of citizens in public affairs and with greater influence in the decisions made. The five most important fields we believe it is necessary and worth investing energy most of all are as follows:

1. Advocacy for human rights, social justice and justice in law enforcement
2. Education, prevention and promotion of mental health
3. Social assistance and healthcare
4. Environment protection and sustainable development of tourism
5. Culture and arts

***Do you think that programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under EEA FM are needed? How did ACF contribute to the development of your organization?***

Programs such as the Active Citizens Fund are undoubtedly needed. These programs play an important role for the promotion of citizen involvement, support of civil society initiatives and development of the public sector. We would be happy to have more such stable funds like ACF and we would happily apply again, as our work under the project has brought about sustainable outcomes. We believe that the Active Citizens Fund is one of the funds with the greatest restrictions, with the harder auditing that we have had and with the largest amount of paperwork.

## NO means NO

**Project of:**

Debut Association  
in partnership with  
Moyat Grad (My City) Association

**Implementation period:**

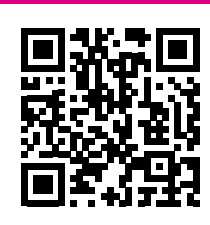
September 2021 – August 2023

**Place of implementation:**

Kyustendil and Varna

**More information on:**

neznachine.org  
youtube.com/@neznachine  
tiktok.com/@neznachine



04

***No means no, or how the children from Kyustendil created an emotional TV series and turned the stories about violence in school into a film.***

In 2021, children from the town of Kyustendil, led by the director Lozen Yordanov and supported by the Active Citizens Fund, undertook the task to expose various aspects of sexual violence among adolescents.

The films created aim to reveal the issue of sexual assaults of girls (aged 14 to 18) among teenagers as well as to lead to the making of policies for primary prevention of sexual violence at this age.

The adolescents themselves discovered and gathered personal stories about sexual violence. The scripts of the created short films were based on the stories discovered.

The children from the city of Varna shared 10 stories and relied on the professional support of specialists from the Bulgarian National Television Two (BNT2). The participants in the project from the town of Kyustendil worked together with artists from the Municipal Theatre and created a film plot in 10 episodes.

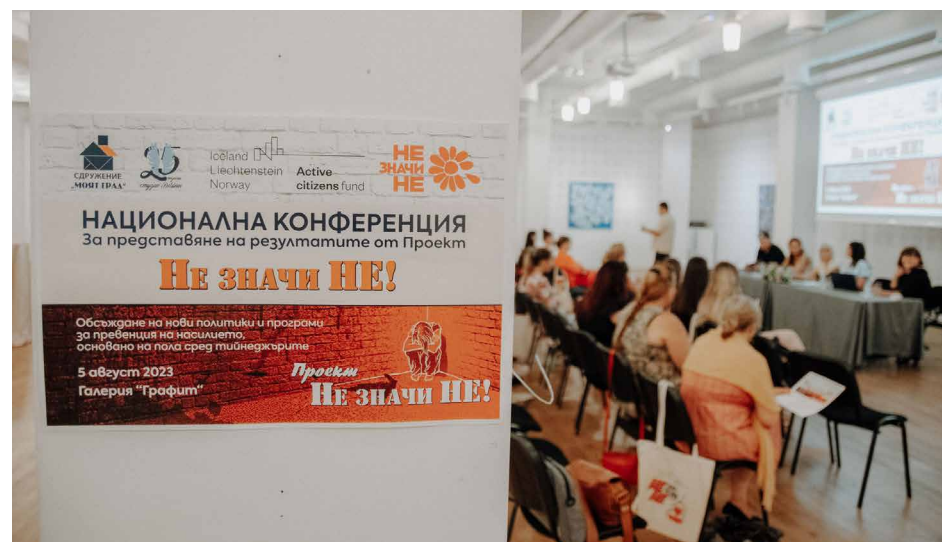
Before the adolescents started their creative process, they worked on topics related to creating a text, editing, screenwriting, types of montage, special effects, expressive elements of sound, specificity of cinematic expression and image. Their training also included hands-on drills for speech and breathing techniques in voicing the text, the selection of the background music, the sound recording and processing. The goal was to have every participant go individually through the stages of scriptwriting, filming with professional video equipment, cutting and voicing a film. The participants had a common interest in cinema and television and the way the latter visual arts have impact on people. You can learn more about the process of filming and the project on neznachine.org.



*NO means NO – The EXPERIMENT recreates an amazing story intertwined with love, break-ups, revenge and true friendships. Our heroes face life challenges after they have suffered severe sexual traumas. Despite drama, they find strength in them to stand up and fight for their real power and dignity.*



The 10 short films and the 10-episode film series have been watched more than 350,000 times on TikTok, 100,000 times on YouTube and more than 50,000 times on Facebook.



The participants in the discussion proposed to enhance the role of school psychologists and pedagogical counsellors by taking them out of the structure of school pedagogic staff and direct reporting to the school principal. The participants believe that the latter step will ensure a better opportunity to prevent violence and intervention should be based on support and not on school penalties. Young people believe that specialists in psychology should be present in schools and work in a supportive manner with difficult children and also the specialists should keep an active contact with the other institutions responsible for prevention.



The national conference was held under the project on 5th August 2023 with the participation of the creative teams from *Moyat Grad* Association – Varna, *Debut* Association – Kyustendil, NGO representatives, school psychologists, school and university students. The young people noted that the completion of the project coincided with the time when the issue of violence had been in the public spotlight which proved that their two-year work to cast a light on the issue and highlight the topic matched the public interest.



On the photo: Exercises to make people get to know each other in the first classes of acting skills

# We would like to present to you

**Lozen Yordanov**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I have been the chairman of *Debut* Association since 2008 and we have managed to carry out successfully a number of projects fighting hate speech towards vulnerable groups through theatre and cinema. The main objectives of the projects included overcoming social issues, such as violence, gender and racial discrimination, among adolescents. What motivates me most to keep on going after so many years is working with young people and the opportunity to be useful for their development as real leaders with a civic position in the modern society.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

Explaining my job to my family and friends, including my son, has always been a challenge. At first, when the idea occurred to turn the school into a non-governmental organization, everyone was skeptical about it and believed that it would be a waste of time and resources. They did not realize how serious my goals and ideas were. After some time, though, my family and friends started realizing how important all of it was for me. Over the years I have received the most genuine support from the volunteers and the team of the association. They have become the source of my greatest support and inspiration and they have made me go on even at the hardest of times.

## ***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

Initially, upon hearing about a project and an NGO, a lot of people associate it with a financial benefit, which shows how unfamiliar they are with what we do at the association. Over time, after we implemented our first successful projects for public benefit, their opinion started changing. They saw the real outcome of our work and understood that we strived to make the world a better place and not just to gain a financial benefit.

## ***What is the mission of your organization? Is it currently active? Do you have a permanent team and an office?***

The mission of our organization is to fight hate speech, reduce aggression and discrimination among adolescents by means of the art therapy, the

forum theatre and cinema. We create and perform various theatrical and musical spectacles, film series and short films that have an impact on the public. This is the main cause and mission of the organization. Our organization is currently active and continues working on new projects. You might find us at the Municipal Theatre of Kyustendil where we work mainly with volunteers of the association.

## ***Where do you draw most of all legitimacy for the activity of your organization from? Do you need support, what kind of support and who from?***

We draw legitimacy for the activity of our organization mainly from its longstanding experience and excellent reputation that we have built in Bulgaria. Our work with partners from various cities such as Sofia, Varna, Burgas, Gabrovo and others has further strengthened our legitimacy. The projects we have implemented speak for themselves about the quality of our work and our commitment to public benefit. Nevertheless, we are always grateful for support. Partnerships and cooperation with other organizations and foundations are significant for the success of our effort. The support we get from the institutions, public actors and citizens are very important for our work. We would like to sincerely thank the Active Citizens Fund for the trust and support we have received over the last years.

## ***If you are the leader of the organization, can the organization continue forward in case you start another job?***

I am absolutely sure that our organization can continue forward even if I start another job. The people I work with at the moment are young professionals who share the commitment and faith in our cause. Over the last couple of years, we have worked in the spirit of continuity and cooperation which has strengthened our team. I believe that the cause and mission of our organization are strong enough for my colleagues to continue to do their job and survive over time. In addition, in 2024 we are celebrating the 30th anniversary from the foundation of our school, which highlights on its own the sustainability and importance of our contribution to the public.

## ***Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you felt the greatest satisfaction?***

Undoubtedly one of the moments of greatest satisfaction for me was related to my work on the project *No means NO*. That project was the largest that we have implemented so far and it would definitely remain one of the most satisfying. Implementing the activities was hard but very exciting. When the whole film series was viewed more than 100,000 times on the YouTube channel of the project and we attracted the attention of the public with our posts in social networks which were viewed more than 500,000 times, the feeling was once-in-a-lifetime! The topic of the project, i.e. fighting sexual assaults and violence among adolescents, was quite important and our visible success only made stronger our belief that our mission was right.



***What is the key to working with youth on topics such as democracy and human rights and what is needed to make sure that each good idea has its debut?***

The key to successful work with young people on topics such as democracy and human rights is creating exciting, interactive and engaging educational programs and events. It is necessary to build trust and relations of equals with young people, making it possible for them to express their opinion and ideas. It is also important to instill skills for critical thinking, empathy and involvement in the community. For every good idea to make its debut, it is needed first and foremost for it to be supported by a clear vision and goal. It is important to develop a strategy for implementation and to find suitable partners and resources. It is also necessary to have a committed team, ready to spend time and effort to implement the idea. What is most important is having faith and persistence to overcome challenges on the way to success.

***Can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life? Why are they needed and what makes them different from the other organizations?***

Yes, civil society organizations can successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life. They play a key role in society by giving voice to the people who are often marginalized or underestimated by the institutions. Civil society organizations have the opportunity to express the needs and interests of the public, monitor the work of the authorities and trigger changes in policies and practices. Non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria are badly needed in the field in which I work, as social problems, such as violence, discrimination and lack of information, are still quite widespread. NGOs play a key role in raising awareness and creating educational programs helping solve these issues. In addition, NGOs offer support and services to people who are victims of violence or discrimination by providing them with psychological support, legal counselling and other needed resources. What makes NGOs different from other organizations is their independence and commitment to public benefit. NGOs have volunteers and professionals working for them, who are motivated by their desire to make the world a better place and help people in need. Non-governmental organizations are also flexible and innovative and they can quickly adapt to the changing needs of the public and offer efficient solutions to social problems.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I envisage the civil society sector in Bulgaria in 15 years as a stronger and more influential factor in society. I can see organizations that work more efficiently and cooperate more actively with one another and with other sectors such as businesses and the state. The impact of the civil society sector in solving social issues and protecting citizens' rights will be much

more visible. In my opinion, the civil society sector will play a more and more important role in shaping public opinion and making decisions about key social issues. It will be the main engine of change and progress towards a fairer and more sustainable society.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under EEA FM are needed? How did ACF contribute to the development of your organization?***

The Active Citizens Fund plays a key role for the development of the civil society sector in Bulgaria, including for organizations such as ours. The program does not only support financially organizations but also provides them with the opportunity for professional development and exchange of experience. The latter not only helps organizations implement their projects but also prepares them for more efficient action in the future. For our organization, participation in the Active Citizens Fund was decisive for its development and establishment. The program provided us with the needed resources, knowledge and experience that enabled us to expand the scope and impact of our activities. The program also inspired us to be more innovative and ambitious in our initiatives. At the end of the day, our participation in the Active Citizens Fund helped us become a stronger and more efficient organization, ready to continue working for public benefit in the future.

## Development of a monitoring methodology and conducting a national monitoring of policy and institutional practice in relation to domestic and gender-based violence in Bulgaria

Bilateral project of:  
*Positive Personal Skills in Society*  
Foundation (PULSE)  
in partnership with  
Center for the Study of Democracy (CSD)  
and Menneskerettighetsakademiet

Period of implementation:  
November 2019 – March 2022



Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[pulsfoundation.org](http://pulsfoundation.org)

04

This is one of the strategic bilateral projects which were affected due to the impossibility to have face-to-face meetings between the partners as a result of the emergency situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite challenges, there was a way for good practices and the partners achieved the desired goals: they developed a methodology for monitoring politics, legal tools and the institutional practice and they prepared a monitoring report about the current situation with gender-based violence (GBV) in Bulgaria.

The monitoring methodology was developed by the team of the Center for the Study of Democracy and the team of PULSE Foundation piloted it in Bulgaria. The methodology was presented at the final conference held under the project and was disseminated among key stakeholders in Bulgaria and Norway.

*The participation of the experts from the Human Rights Academy in Oslo, Norway, was particularly valuable for the project team. In the course of work the latter shared their experience and the difficulties they faced, as well as ideas to improve the methodology and carry out field research.*

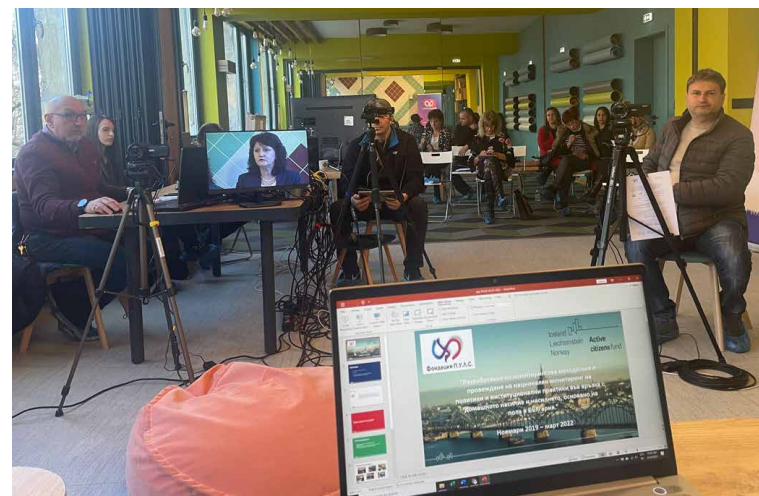
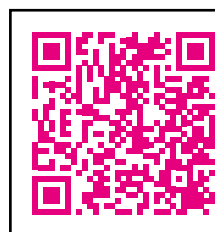
As part of the preparation for national monitoring in the period June – October 2021, the team of PULSE Foundation held focus groups with specialists from the cities of Blagoevgrad, Bourgas, Varna, Veliko Tarnovo, Vidin, Pazardzhik, Pernik, Ruse, Kardzhali and Samokov. More than 100 specialists



from various structures, i.e. municipalities, district administrations, social services, Social Assistance Directorates, Child Protection Departments, National Patients Organization, Ministry of Interior District Directorates. etc., took part in the focus groups and in individual interviews.

The final conference was held in February 2022 in the town of Pernik and was attended in person by more than 20 representatives of the institutions. More than 80 participants took part online. The event stirred great interest across the country.

You can see a video recording of the event when you scan the code:



The documents and tools developed under the project are freely accessible for future research in the country.



# We would like to present to you

## Julia Andonova



### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

My name is Julia Andonova and I have been a member of the team of PULSE Foundation for many years now. PULSE Foundation is an organization with a 25-year history. It was set up by three young and ambitious ladies in 1999, i.e. Tatyana Arsova, Ekaterina Veleva and Yana Katsarova. My connection to the organization goes back to the time when I was 15 years old and worked as a volunteer with the Bulgarian Youth Red Cross and the offices of both organizations were next to each other. Growing up as a civic activist, it has naturally become my job and my life is devoted every day to fighting domestic violence and protection of human rights. What gives me strength to continue

forward despite some quite hard and difficult moments is the meaning and the difference we make for the people we support, as PULSE Foundation has supported for 25 years now victims of violence and we give a chance for a future without violence.

### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

I explain most often to my children that my job is to help children and adults live better, be happier and loved together.

### *How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

In a different way. Some are happy, others do not understand, but my job has always been a good occasion to talk about human rights, violence, discrimination, social services and protection with different people. These are all topics that are hard to discuss and there is a lot to be said about.

### *What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Do you have a permanent team and an office?*

The mission of PULSE Foundation is to work for a world free of violence by providing help and support to people who suffered violence and to raise the sensitivity of the public to the problem in order to eliminate forms of violence in human relations. Our organization has provided for 25 years already a complex program of services to victims of violence. We continuously develop and improve the programs for support and prevention of violence. The organization has an office, a counselling program and a crisis center in

the town of Pernik, as well as counselling offices in the town of Kardzhali. We have a devoted team of incredible psychologists, social workers, lawyers, educators and other specialists.

### *Could you share about a certain occasion from your work under the project when you felt the greatest satisfaction?*

It gives me the greatest satisfaction to work with people, the saved human lives, a different example set for children. The feeling of being a part of a new life without violence for both children and adults is unrivalled. I am happy that I have the privilege to be a member of the team of PULSE Foundation and to see every day meaning in helping people, and somehow when you see the smile of a person or the relief that the person is not alone in distress, then you know that all the efforts are worth it.

### *As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project or projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?*

The project for the first time has studied the policies and practices in Bulgaria regarding domestic violence. These are things that we as experts are familiar with very well from our experience but now we also have a study and recommendations that help us in our work to improve the system in the country.

### *In your opinion, can civil society organizations contribute to a change for the better in people's life?*

We not only can but we do it. I have seen it for 20 years now. Civil society organizations unite people with ideas, dreams and energy for a change. We are the ones, the mad ones, who do not lose their faith in good and we put in effort day and night to save human lives, provide quality social services, access to education and protection in critical situations... We are often the voice of those who cannot speak, we enhance the voice of the people and we are not afraid to put forward hard topics such as violence, discrimination...

### *What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria?*

I do not think that we can talk about competition in the sector. We exist for the people, to help and pursue the ideal goals of our organizations. Sadly, there is too much work and need of support in the field of social services and activities. Coalitions are not hard to create but are hard to keep. We have built durable partnerships and true friendships over the years in the NGO sector, which helps us in our day-to-day fight for human rights.

## Thematic priority

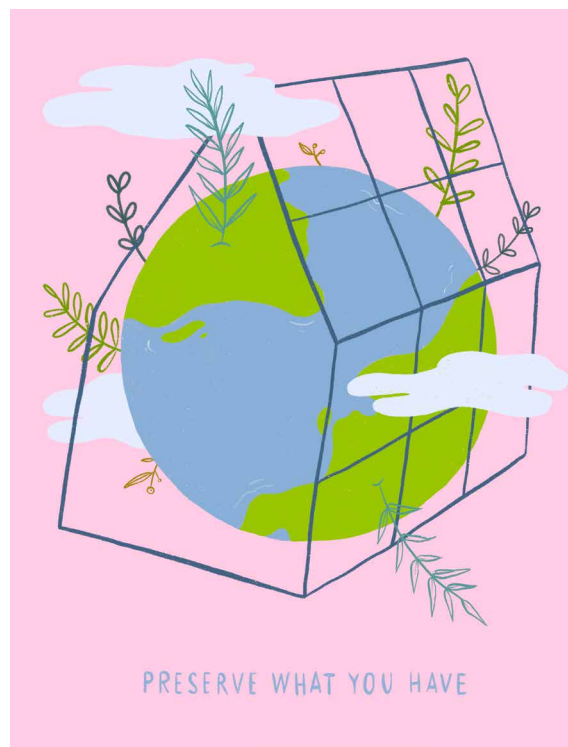
# Environment protection, climate change

# 05

14 supported projects with specific objectives:

- Access and use of studies on issues related to the environment and climate change
- Monitoring of policies and advocacy
- Establishing and keeping partnerships between civil society organizations and public or private institutions and organizations

An illustration  
of Daria Lednova  
for ArtistsForClimate.org



## Project titles speak for themselves...

Eco-society through food: personal choices against climate change ○ Green cooperation beyond borders ○ Citizens and Experts for the Application of Green Laws ○ For clean air in Kyustendil ○ Citizen Science in support of local communities and nature ○ Clean solutions to air pollution ○ Active farmers for climate change adaptation ○ Active citizens for a clean and beautiful village Benkovski ○ Educational eco-communities – inspiration for eco-activists ○ Remember to communicate: citizens and politicians in a dialogue on environmental policies ○ Eco Champions ○ Be Smart, Think Circular ○ Civic initiatives in the fight against climate change and environmental protection in the Sliven region ○ Let's Be Energy Independent



## Eco-society through food: personal choices against climate change

### Project of:

Slow Food in Bulgaria  
in partnership with  
Association Roditeli (Parents)

Period of implementation:  
September 2019 – September 2022

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
<https://slowfood-bg.com/obrazovanie/>

05

*Slow Food in Bulgaria believes that when children and grown-ups know where their food comes from, who produced it and how, they will learn to combine both pleasure and responsibility in their daily choice and will reconsider the cultural and social importance of food.*

The activities under this colorful, delicious and useful project have connected academic and educational institutions with civic initiatives in small settlements in Bulgaria.

The network of nine research centers that was set up encourages the choice of food as a means to fight climate change.

The project also included joint work with schools to raise the environmental awareness of children and their parents about the link between the choice of food and climate change.

*The analysis of the school curricula and textbooks for primary and basic education has shown that food and eating habits are presented in them in a very simplified and schematic manner and that the road from the field/ farm to the table and the manner of preparing food and healthy eating habits have been reduced to making a difference between the groups of foods and nutrients, the preparation of simple meals (salads and sandwiches) and the food pyramid as the means to create a healthy diet. The curriculum for the youngest children (first-to-fourth graders) misses important topics, such as food diversity, which is connected to biodiversity in general, and the services provided by eco-systems; food composition and quality, sensorics and the experiences related to food, etc.*



In response to these shortcomings, an educational program for first-to-fourth graders was developed and tested and it is available on [slowfood-bg.com/obrazovanie](https://slowfood-bg.com/obrazovanie).

Teachers, parents and children can use it as an additional source of information and as a source of inclusive activities and games in school and out-of-school education.

The educational materials and opportunities for further joint work were presented to school principals, teachers and the local administration of Vitosha and Kremikovtsi Districts of Sofia City Municipality.

13 public presentations of food manufacturers and chefs took place under the campaign *Biodiversity on the Plate* and it was covered in publications in social media, magazines and news websites. The meetings of the *Terra Madre Bulgaria* Forum further involved in the cause more people from across the country.

*Do you know that: the largest local biodiversity of those crops has been preserved in the Rhodope Mountain, as they have been and continue to be a main source of proteins. The preserved genetic resources and the traditional knowledge connected with them are important for the protein transition, which is one of the approaches to mitigate climate change and reduce meat consumption.*



The campaign *Biodiversity on the Plate* was carried out by *Slow Food in Bulgaria* in partnership with the institutions of the Agricultural Academy.



The Institute of Agriculture — Kyustendil took part in the Farmers' Festival Grown on the Farm, presenting the variety of apples it keeps and develops.

*Terra Madre Belasitsa*, 2022. The three-day event ended with an exhibition and tasting of the diversity of local foods.



A festival of *Staro Zhelezare Babek* (dry sausage) and *Sharena Sol* (colorful salt), held at the House of Traditions by the *Slow Food Community* in *Staro Zhelezare* as part of *Terra Madre Bulgaria*.



Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway

Active  
citizens fund



# Еко-общество чрез лични избори срещу климатични

по-зелена

Отговорно  
земеделие –  
съхранена природа  
и разнообразен  
избор

Местни храни –  
екологичен, културен  
и икономичен избор

Знание  
и иновации  
информационен  
избор

по-приобщаваща Европа

26 СУ „Йордан  
Йовков“, София

Хранителна  
общност  
Горно  
Драглище



*It is important not only to keep the memory of forgotten traditional foods as part of our cultural heritage but also to respect and encourage all attempts for such foods to be revived and to become once again a natural part of our diet.*

You can read here more about the famous Plevun Tarhana and about the revival of the valuable tradition of making it:



*Despite the unmatched benefits of the Tarhana prepared with sourdough, women nowadays rarely agree to make it due to the time-consuming process of making. However, in the past, every household had supplies of Tarhana for the winter because once it has been made and dried, it has a long shelf-life and it is a wonderful, quick and nutritious breakfast.*



On the photo: The Plevun Tarhana of Temenuzhka Mateva

## We would like to present to you

**Desislava Dimitrova**



***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

I am a biologist and Associate Professor in Botany at the Institute of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Research. When Bulgaria joined the international movement *Slow Food* in 2004, my research work was through the lens of food. Food is an interdisciplinary topic and it allows me to combine ideas that seem to be impossible to combine at first glance. For instance, why do we use flavors

to describe our mood, a sour face, bitter disappointment, the atmosphere soured, etc.? Ever since 2009, when we set up *Slow Food in Bulgaria* Association, I have both worked as a researcher and have voluntarily chaired the association. *Slow Food in Bulgaria* is an independent Bulgarian organization and not a branch of *Slow Food International*. We have been recognized as their partner but it is not connected to financial support. We get financing based on projects, just like the *Eco-society Through Food* project, and the rest is possible owing to the motivation of our members and like-minded supporters.

In the distant 2004, the topic of traditional food, local varieties and breeds and traditional knowledge connected with them was almost unknown, the model of planned economy and the Bulgarian State Standard (BSS) prevailed. I was invited to help organize a Bulgarian group to take part in the first edition of the *Terra Madre* Forum, a global meeting of the *Slow Food* network. We just sat down and made a long list of products that we believed at the time to be in the context of *Slow Food* and we started going from place to place, from door to door, to spread information about this amazing international initiative. We have had a lot of cases over the years when it was not possible to continue forward but something always helped remove the obstacles and new horizons opened up.

***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

At first, I explained enthusiastically to everyone how important the ideas upheld by *Slow Food* were. Then I discovered that it was just better to let knowledge spread and that people would find it. The philosophy of *Slow Food* is an interesting dividing line between those who are willing to create and those looking to take. It is easier with children, but they are often brought



into confusion by their parents who associate *Slow Food* with healthy eating habits and strict rules and not with the pleasure to taste different foods and most of all learn the stories behind them. *Slow Food* is a fairy tale told through our senses and emotions.

**Which book have you read recently or would you like to share about?**

Last year I was truly fortunate to translate Dan Saladino's *Eating to Extinction*. The title of the Bulgarian translation is *Izchezvashtite Hrani*, published by Kragozor Publishing House. The book is inspired by the stories of some of the products included in the *Ark of Taste* of *Slow Food*. I had moments when I had to stop working to calm down or give way to tears. It is a book about the suicidal arrogance of mankind.

**What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?**

Our mission is to discover, research and preserve traditional Bulgarian foods and listen to the stories of the people who have preserved them over time. When we do not work on a project, the work of the association is maintained by the local communities that share the *Slow Food* philosophy. These are often community centers or local NGOs with which we have a long-standing partnership. As I have already said, our association works on a voluntary basis due to which we cannot keep an office. The team has a core of permanent members, but we do not have full-time employees.

**What is the foremost source of legitimacy for the activity of your organization? Do you need support, what kind of support and who from?**

The legitimacy of our organization comes from the people we work with and work for. Not everyone embraces the philosophy of *Slow Food*, but there are a lot of people who understand its meaning and connect with it. We need, of course, support, but I have established that we get the most durable support through barter, i.e. when we can have mutual benefit with the organizations/businesses we have similar views with. Otherwise, we seem to need better marketing. The people in the association somehow focus on doing their job as best as possible and cannot show off their results.

**Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?**

Our project took place fully against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was satisfactory that we managed to implement our activities under these circumstances with the great support from the Active Citizens Fund, whose team showed understanding and flexibility in their requirements to us. The project helped us expand our network, maintain a full contact with the institutes of the Agricultural Academy, which are the guardians of the old Bulgarian varieties and breeds. We successfully took part in Terra Madre in Torino in 2022. We also have a new website.

**As of today, what will remain as a long-term impact?**

With the support of the project *Eco-society Through Food*, we strengthened and expanded our network, which means greater sustainability of the organization and enhancing our knowledge about traditional foods in Bulgaria.

**Why can important issues such as climate change be also upheld through projects involving food, cooking, meetings between people? That seems to be sometimes less obvious for all. You are not the typical think-tank and are not involved in politics in the mainstream way...**

Food IS politics, our daily choice of food has a direct impact on the environment and climate. Just remember how many wars used to be waged for resources, including food. Even nowadays one of the reasons for the migratory pressure on Europe is famine, lack of resources, the deprivation of millions of people from the opportunity to feed themselves. The connection between food and politics is not widely discussed because mankind still does not have an answer to the question why 30–40% of the produced food turns to waste even before it has reached the supermarket shelves, while at the same time more than a million of people across the world, including a lot of children, starve to death. Intensive farming is one of the greatest sources of greenhouse gas emissions. Meadows and pastures have a great potential for carbon sequestration and instead they are being ploughed to be replaced with monocultures that are then sprayed with chemicals. Varieties and breeds that have been a source of livelihood for centuries are being replaced by “machines” for food, milk, eggs. Today the world depends on several breeds and a handful of varieties, the products from which takes the global food market. It is a very long and painful topic.

**In your opinion, can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?**

Bulgaria painfully lacks common humanity and I believe that a number of NGOs manage to solve painful issues with a look to the human and the humane. Our state has abdicated its responsibility for hardships, values, care for the future and then non-governmental organizations step in to try to make up to some extent for the absence of the state and the institutions. In fact, we also do the latter. Owing to a coalition of several NGOs *Clean Food for Fair Livelihood*, in 2010 Ordinance No 26 on specific requirements to the direct delivery of small quantities of primary products and foods of animal origin was amended. The state had conveniently omitted to regulate how small producers shall process and market their production. Bulgaria still lacks a national policy for conservation of culinary traditions in the country. We provide visibility to the people who preserve culinary memory and traditional farming practices, old varieties and populations, breeds that can one day save people from starvation.

**Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?**

I believe that there are shortcomings in every field of our life that can be solved with the help of NGOs. Let me try to limit myself to five of them. First, education, as everything done to keep curiosity in children is of key importance. Our education system is in a dire state. Someone needs to provide the lifeline for the smart children's minds. Healthcare also needs a more humane approach and hope. Human lives are often saved owing only to the efforts of a group of enthusiasts that put in their professionalism to make the impossible. Culture comes next, as we know how underfunded culture is in Bulgaria. Free initiatives of citizens fill in a glaring crater in cultural space. The social services field comes next, in particular creating conditions for a better life among the disadvantaged social groups. Not simply providing financial support but supporting people to get back on their feet and have control of their life in their hands. Then comes environment protection. We have a very powerful and professionally operating civil society sector, which has helped Bulgaria remain a country with preserved nature despite investors' greed. Let me also add here the organizations working in the field of foods. Even though there is a lot of room for improvement in our field in order to consolidate the sector.

**Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed?**

It will not be overstated to say that the Active Citizens Fund has been the best donor we have worked with so far. From the application process through the implementation of the activities to reporting, we enjoyed outstanding professionalism and support. We hope that a new programming period will be launched because several ideas of ours are waiting to be given the chance.

## Citizens and Experts for the Application of Green Laws and Citizens and Politicians in a Dialogue on Environmental Policies

### Projects of:

Society for Investigation Practices  
(SIP)

Period of implementation:  
October 2019 – March 2023

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[zelenizakoni.com](http://zelenizakoni.com)  
[facebook.com/sdruzheniezaizsledovat](https://facebook.com/sdruzheniezaizsledovat)

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In the course of almost four years, the team of the *Green Laws* initiative drafted and promoted dozens of analyses on various environment protection topics and involved thousands of citizens and new like-minded followers.

The experts worked mainly on **biodiversity and forests, climate, territorial structure, energy, rural areas**. Mutually complementing the analyses on these topics proved to be a valuable approach, as the interconnection between topics is often lost when developing sectoral policies; it can be seen in the cases of agricultural subsidies damaging biodiversity, the use of forests as an energy source, the development of renewable energy sources on land that is vital for biodiversity or agriculture.

*Green Laws* established itself as a platform for discussion of environment-related issues between citizens and politicians and it attracted dozens of participants in working meetings and discussions, including the institutions, engaged in drafting and implementing policies about nature. The initiative involved politicians from various parties who discussed with citizens topics related to the development and implementation of environment protection laws and policies about the environment and climate.

Three debates between politicians and citizens took place and were also broadcast online. The video recording is available at [zelenizakoni.com/videos](http://zelenizakoni.com/videos).



All videos and recordings from the discussions can be watched here by scanning this code:



*The examples of successful advocacy in front of the institutions and consistency in following longstanding cases motivate more and more people to be active citizens. The sustainability of our work is first and foremost related to the establishment of a new culture and the embracing of our messages by a wider circle of citizens and politicians than the current one.*

By having meetings with initiative groups across Bulgaria, by setting up a network of active citizens for environment protection, by having our traditional debates with politicians and with the help of designer experts and trainees in various fields, the project organized more than 12 thematic campaigns in the fields of expert monitoring of Green Laws, i.e. biodiversity, forests, territorial structure, rural areas, energy and climate.



We also had partial successes: we resisted legislative amendments about environmental impact assessments that were harmful to the environment; we persuaded Members of parliament to fight for healthier criteria for new industrial capacities and for democratization of energy from renewable sources (first on the roofs of each household); we managed to reinstate the protection of Kamchia River sands; we persuaded the authorities to limit subsidies for cattle grazing in national parks; we persuaded also various people to support our causes, such as transparency in planning natural areas, both in the cities and in the mountains and along the Black Sea coast and better protection of forests and not permitting the increase in cutting trees for firewood.

A report about the main topics of Green Laws in the period 2019–2022



Ключови закони  
НЕ ТРЯБВА ДА СЕ ПРИЕМАТ БЕЗ  
обществен и експертен дебат



ЗЕЛЕНИ  ЗАКОНИ

Iceland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway  
Active  
citizens fund



# We would like to present to you

Vera Staevska



## *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

In 2007, I defended my PhD thesis about the ideological discourse for youth in Communist Bulgaria and in the EU integration period. After I had completed a PhD degree in Sociology, the labor market offered few opportunities: quantitative (marketing or pre-election) surveys; scientific research; or work in NGOs. I had already experience from doing scientific research for 3 years and I wanted a taste of the “real life”. I tried to work in NGOs, but the insecurity of pro-

ject-based work when you do not know when you will have work did not make me feel good. So, I worked for a marketing agency for a little over a year during which I took part in rallies and followed public life and felt completely cut off from everything important. It was some time after the first protests held at Orlov Most in Sofia about forests and Strandzha mountain. What was on the agenda were the replacement transactions, media law — cartels. I used to read blogs and watched ReTV. When I could do it under my contract, I left the agency and it mattered to me to work in the field of environment protection and take part in important matters. So, I have worked for 10 years for *Green Laws*. In fact, 15 years, as 5 years prior to setting up *Green Laws*, I used to work as Project Manager of two more environmental protection organizations. At the end of the day, despite the lack of security of project financing and the lack of prestige, comparing our salaries to the ones of our fellow students from the university in other fields, the NGO sector has allowed me to work for the causes that were important to me and to achieve what I came back to Bulgaria for, i.e. help to make small steps of change towards a more European and a more democratic country.

## *How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

Most people around me believe me and see the efforts I make. But I sometimes have to explain about black PR and why certain claims are false, for instance, about the millions allocated for environment protection that have nothing to do with NGOs, about the accusations of “green racketeering” during the appeal proceedings of illegal projects and development. However, I believe that this is one of the important duties of NGOs, i.e. explain and be transparent about what we do. In this way we stand a real chance of creating a more realistic picture of our work.

## *Which book have you read lately?*

The latest book I liked was *Sofia Duets* by Ivan Dimitrov. Even though the book came out a long time ago and I knew Ivan, I had not read it, as I only regarded him as a poet. I liked very much the idea of a novel about Sofia, which is looking at it from Vitosha Mountain. The story took me back to the time we were students hitchhiking, then the defence of beaches and mountains. The story came close in general to my experience of Bulgaria.

## *What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?*

The Society for Investigation Practices was founded as an association of students of sociology, culturology and psychology in the distant 2003; we wanted at the time to do research and take part in international exchange. Then we implemented one or two youth projects. We did that until I realized that I was most interested in the intersection of social science and environment protection, i.e. analysis of policies. Then, in 2013, I drafted my first project about the *Green Laws* initiative. Since then we have monitored policies in five areas: biodiversity, territorial structure, rural areas, climate and energy. The experts are more or less permanent and are the “stars” of Bulgarian environment protection in the relevant areas: Alexander Dunchev, Petko Kovachev, Stefan Avramov and Toma Belev have been with us from the very beginning. The topics for which we are currently left without experts: climate (Antoaneta Yotova used to be our expert) and rural areas (Boyana Vasileva) will perhaps be left behind. It seems that the most important thing is complementing expertise and our small united team in which our PR colleagues also play an important role: in our last project Ivan Radev, Antonia Vlaykova, Yordan Nachev and Yana Dakova complemented each other at different times. Right now, we do not have the funds to rent an office but we have shared an office over the years with the Association of Parks in Bulgaria and we have rotated paying for it, whenever one of us has had a project with funds allocated for renting an office.

## *Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?*

Our legitimacy stems from the good reputation of our experts, their success in helping citizens with various environment protection causes, as well as from our fight against bad laws and sometimes, though less, from good amendments to the rules on environment.

## *Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?*

It was a month ago, when our proposal that was developed together with scientists about the reinstatement of Kamchia River sands as a protected zone, was promulgated in the State Gazette. Just like when our proposal about *Rila Buffer* under Natura 2000 was endorsed by the Ministry of Water and Environment a couple of years ago.



***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

The network of active citizens created across the country, a lot of expert analyses available at our website, several lobbyist-promoted laws, several protected zones and drafted legislative acts and rules for the Operational Programs.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

The environment is competitive due to the scarce funds that NGOs depend on. However, there is an environment protection community through the coalition For the Nature in Bulgaria and other coalitions for air and climate. The problem is the limited number of experts working with the individual NGOs. Environment protection suffers as a result because the burnout rate is really high, remuneration is insecure and people sometimes simply vanish.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

To me, three fields are the main ones: education, nature and justice. There are also intersecting points, for instance green education in the open air and sustainable tourism, civic education, media literacy and political literacy.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

The Active Citizens Fund has allowed us to work freely for four years in a row and to think long-term. That's a rare luxury. The Fund is unique with its support for larger-scale environmental projects, namely the intersection between citizen monitoring and environment protection. We would not have probably existed were it not for it.

## Green cooperation beyond borders

Bilateral project of:

Junior Achievement Bulgaria  
in partnership with  
Young Entrepreneurship Sogn og  
Fjordane,  
Nordic Innovation Hub  
and Green Business Norway



Implementation Period:  
October 2019 – October 2021

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[jabulgaria.org/bg/blog/priklucheni-proekti/zeleno-sutrudnichestvo-otvud-granici](http://jabulgaria.org/bg/blog/priklucheni-proekti/zeleno-sutrudnichestvo-otvud-granici)

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***Modern-day school and university students will be the most affected ones by a destabilized climate, damaged biosphere and exhausted resources in the future. However, they are Bulgaria's and the world's most important resource: their skills and competences, their imagination and sense of entrepreneurship are the secret ingredient of transition to green technology, circular economy and a shared, sustainable prosperity.***

The project taught young people from Bulgaria and Norway under a special program for green entrepreneurship, combining theory and experiential learning about global environmental challenges, the man's role, sustainable development, circular economy, green entrepreneurship and setting up one's own sustainable business.

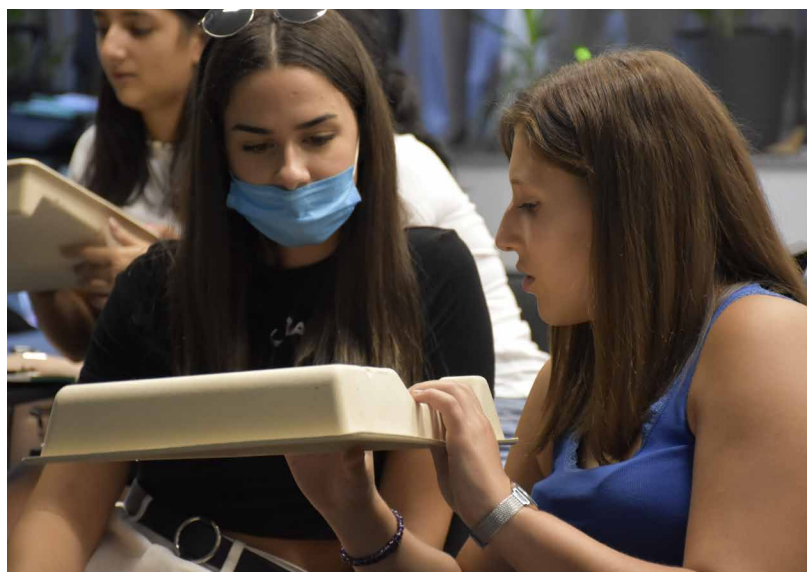
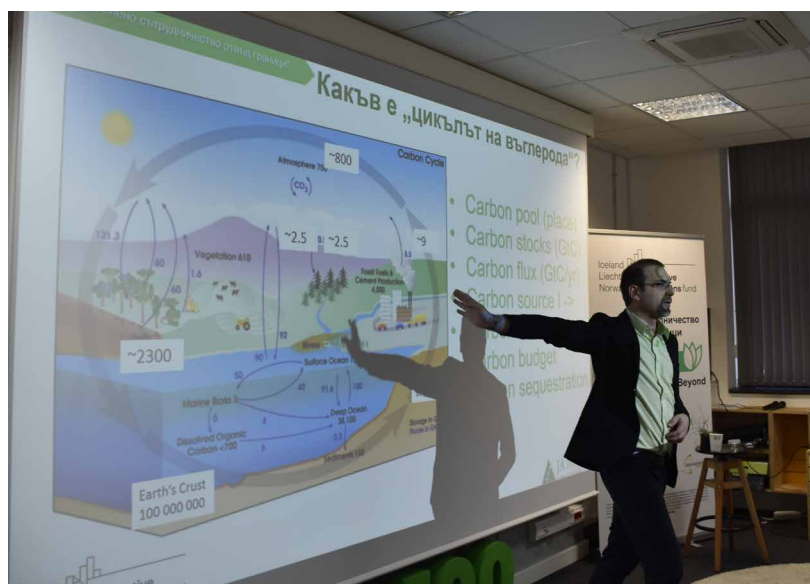
Afterwards the students went through a process of development and support of individual entrepreneurship ideas.

Another important outcome was building competence of secondary school teachers to teach a green entrepreneurship curriculum at school. In parallel, a network was set up of supporting organizations, green start-ups and large companies whose employees supported young people as mentors and lecturers during the project activities.



The participants from Bulgaria and Norway shared useful experience through online and live international meetings, formal and informal interaction, and as a result, exchange of experience, information and, last but not least, inspiration among the youth took place.

The project managed to involve the following participants from Bulgaria and Norway: 23 teachers, more than 500 students, 27 mentors and 47 successful student teams.



## We would like to present to you

### Vera Petkanchin



#### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

I have worked in the civil society sector since 2008. Ever since I have been a member of the team of the NGO *Junior Achievement Bulgaria*. As it often happens, everything started by chance. I was an intern at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) which was ending its work in Bulgaria at the time. *Junior Achievement (JA)* was one of the organizations beneficiaries of USAID and this is how I found out that they were looking to expand their team. I had already

had interviews with people from JA and had visited schools and worked on our entrepreneurship programs and I liked very much the organization's mission and philosophy. In addition, I have always had a positive attitude to sparing my time to contribute to various causes. Fighting to protect the environment has always been the most inspiring cause for me and I used to be one of the leading green activists in Bulgaria at the time. Motivation for me is something inherent, something that comes from the heart. It might be connected to something very subjective, for instance, feeling home at a given place and feeling thus motivated to protect it if it is endangered; it might also be the sense of having extremely good teamwork with someone and becoming even more motivated to develop in a professional field.

#### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

My children are still little (1 and 3 years old) and what I have told my elder daughter so far is that mum visits schools and teaches children and teachers various useful things about nature and life. My family and friends have always viewed in a very positive way what I do. It may be due to the fact that over time I took a position of greater responsibility at JA and my income is good (which is important for my mother). At the same time, my cousin, who is a banker, keeps joking "Do you at NGOs work at all, I thought you were just fooling around". The joke aside, the latter comment shows a common (mis)understanding of the essence and meaning of the work of the civil society sector.

#### *Would you share a book or a film that have impressed you lately?*

Sadly, I do not have time for films at this point in my life and most of the time I have for books I invest in reading books about early childhood development. I was impressed by the books of Dr. Haim G. Ginott and Jesper Juul



about this topic. In addition, I am re-reading Linda Woodrow's *Permaculture Home Garden*, because most of the time I live in the countryside and I have started a new vegetable garden in my yard.

***Where do you draw your legitimacy most from?***

I believe that we draw legitimacy from our mission that is widely recognized in the educational circles and the society in general and from the already gathered serious proofs of the importance of our work. JA alumnae that have attended over the years our educational programs and projects have shared time and again about the transformative impact they had on the alumnae's personal and professional development. These people run their own innovative businesses today, hold executive positions in Bulgarian and international companies and some of them have even set up nongovernmental organizations inspired by us.

***Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?***

I have shared about this occasion during various presentations. It happened at an eco camp in Norway, where we took Bulgarian school students under our previous project supported by the EEA FM titled *Green Entrepreneurship for Sustainable Development* (2013–2015). One day our counterparts from JA Norway took the whole group on a trip to an iceberg. In addition to the fact that it was the first time that our students saw first-hand the consequences of climate change, they also learned something else that was very important. We had rented a bus and we travelled on it to the foot of the iceberg and our counterpart from JA Norway had had additional driving lessons to be able to drive a bigger bus. At some point the bus stopped and we got out. We saw several mailboxes on the road. My colleague explained to us that this road section was maintained by a family of farmers living nearby and that is why we had to leave some money in the mailbox for the transit. One of our female students asked quite surprised: "Why would you do it? There is no-one here to check." Then Yorn answered: "Because people in our society trust each other." It was such a powerful experience for me, and I saw how something sparked in the minds of the Bulgarian students, and they learnt that a society can be organized in a completely different way. Then I really felt that what we do under this bilateral cooperation program has a lot of meaning to it.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project or projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

JA's green entrepreneurship program is the most durable trace; the financing received under the EEA FM as well as financing from other sources helped us establish the program as a leading field in the work of JA Bulgaria and start introducing it also in the global JA network. Bulgaria has several vocational high schools which introduced the program in their school cur-

riculum and have used it for the last 4 years. Outside Bulgaria we introduced the program in Tanzania, Columbia and Mauritius.

***Can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?***

Yes, they can definitely contribute to a change for the better. Non-governmental organizations are first of all full of people who are highly motivated and put in their soul and heart; I believe that it is true for NGOs to a much greater extent than the corporate sector, even though there are also people with a cause in it as well. However, people looking for a cause and meaning quite often shift from corporations to NGOs, which is indicative. Are we capable of achieving this social change with the tools of NGOs? Sometimes yes, sometimes no: the situation is complex, the law does not always help, and there are also groups that actively interfere with their campaigns trying to slur the NGO sector. We have to wait for a long time in the education field to see the results and we have to be quite consistent to see the impact of what we do. We help introduce new topics and innovative methods in the education system and we try to lift it from its inertia: we challenge the students who take part in it to leave their comfort zone.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

With more grassroots initiatives on the local level, in smaller communities.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Environment protection, education, the rule of law, the rights of marginalized groups and volunteering.

## Be Smart, Think Circular

Bilateral project of:

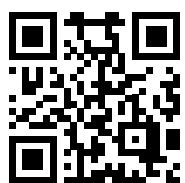
Tempo Foundation  
in partnership with  
Green Business Norway,  
Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation,  
Poppals Ltd.



Implementation period:  
September 2021 – August 2023

Place of implementation:  
across Bulgaria

More information on:  
[b-smart.education](http://b-smart.education)



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An interactive educational program was developed under the project on topics related to environment protection and circular economy. It is available on the project website together with five educational videos, a handbook for teachers and parents and a recording from the training during the final event.

The team carried out five online tournaments on exciting topics. More than 500 children and more than 100 teachers from 80 schools took part in them and more than 100 students from 20 schools took part in the challenges organized during the tournament. In addition, four online training events were held with 80 teachers from 35 schools across Bulgaria.



*How can we make a school meteorological station from materials on hand?*

*How can we make shoes out of plastic bottles?*

*How can we use food waste and produce energy from it?*

*What is the Norwegian family tradition to spend time in nature "friluftsliv" like?*

*How can we learn from research projects?*

*How can we learn by experience?*

*Be Smart, Think Circular* engages the attention of adolescents with the more and more topical issues of environment protection, adaptation and addressing climate change by offering contemporary educational approaches to help teachers and parents.

*The five tournaments drew the attention of the adolescents that took part to the environment-related topics and demonstrated the opportunities provided by modern devices and technology and how we can use them to learn and work in a team.*



*We really hope that the teachers who attended the training have become ambassadors of the project as well as persons who will strive to make Bulgarian education more and more innovative and abreast of modern trends.*







This Handbook presents in a reader-friendly way the fundamentals of modern concepts about some of the most important topics related to environment protection. The students can find both information complemented with data, charts and infographics, as well as ideas how to learn more through experiments and research.

The Handbook is also of value to teachers who are ready to face with courage these challenging topics.

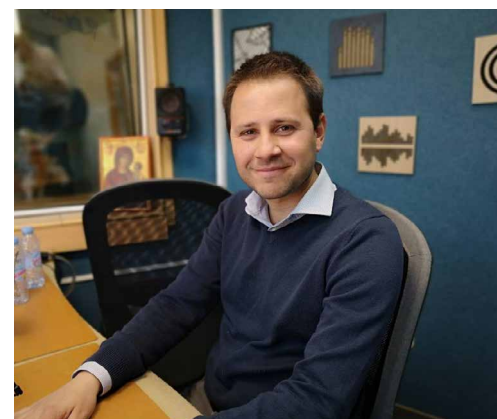
You will also find in the handbook a summary of the Scandinavian practices of "learning in nature". This approach has shown notable results and can be used successfully by teachers in Bulgaria.

You can use the Handbook by scanning this code:



## We would like to present to you

### Vladimir Tsvetkov



#### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

My name is Vladimir Tsvetkov and I am a teacher. I started in 2012 as a teacher under the program *Together in Class* in the village of Mirkovo. During the first two years as a teacher, I faced a lot of challenges and opportunities for improvement in the education system as well as great and inspiring examples. In 2014, five more

colleagues and I, not being capable of putting up with the mediocre level of education, set up *Tempo* Foundation, which finds and implements ways to improve the quality of education.

#### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

When you deeply believe in the importance of what you do, then you can explain it even to a child. As a teacher, I like explaining by asking questions, for instance, do you like being at school? If yes, then let us make schools enjoyable for all children in Bulgaria. If no, let us find a way to make things better.

#### *What book are you currently reading?*

I am currently reading *Difficult Conversations* by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen. The book is quite practical and as I have been reading it, I have become aware of things that I would change in my approach to all the stakeholders in our work.

#### *What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?*

The mission of *Tempo* Foundation is to inspire, encourage and develop understanding, awareness and innovation in the Bulgarian education system. The foundation is currently working mainly on projects that are maintained by me and the Executive Director. The work is organized remotely without the need to use an office. We also engage our network of experts and volunteers in various projects. Our main focus right now is on the project titled *Questions Are the New Answers*, under which we work with five schools to implement a model of learning through long-term work on complex issues that require complex and thorough solutions.

***Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?***

Partnership is very important for the successful work of *Tempo* Foundation, partnership with participants in education, the education establishments, other NGOs and financing organizations. The most valuable support we get is through building such partnerships.

***If you are the organization leader, can your organization continue forward if you start doing another job?***

*Tempo* Foundation was founded 10 years ago by 6 people with shared values but different ways of pursuing the mission. I believe that the latter gives sustainability to *Tempo* Foundation as well as our vision for the future.

***Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?***

We created a lot of opportunities for teachers and students to work additionally on topics related to environment protection under our last project implemented under the Active Citizens Fund. A very exciting time was when a teacher felt so inspired that he engaged 10 more colleagues from the region for the follow-up activities. There were also schools where the teachers were not active but, in such cases, it was quite often the parents or students who had learnt about the opportunity from social media and made up for it with their energy. What gives me greatest satisfaction is active participation and in-depth understanding of the meaning of our work by the participants.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

Under the project *Be Smart, Think Circular*, we created a Handbook with summed-up information and proposals for activities on topics related to environment protection. The information is adapted so that it can be used by teachers, parents and students. In addition, we have made available online the games we developed in partnership with Caringers. Children and adults can test their knowledge on five environmental topics on the Caringers platform.

***In your opinion, can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?***

The majority of the positive changes in the Bulgarian education system over the last decade have been due to the untiring work of strong NGOs. On the one hand, the reason for that is the great motivation of the people working in the NGOs stemming from a clear vision and work in line with specific values. On the other hand, NGOs enjoy greater freedom from the institutions in the Bulgarian education system and they embrace and implement changes faster.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

Unlike politics, coalitions among NGOs are made much faster and more easily. When we share common causes and values, it is much easier to trust the others to work together. In the NGO circles, people are much more easily available and most often open to proposals and new ways to pursue their goals. Competition in this sector is most often displayed when applying for financing but that results in better quality of project proposals. We in *Tempo* often work with partners and thus multiply the effect of our work.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I envisage the entire state being much better organized, with a very clear vision for the future and specific priorities. Non-governmental organizations will be the guardian of the orientation towards these priorities and a champion of new ideas and opportunities for their achievement.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

To me, of course, education definitely comes first as well as development of civil society, environment protection, early childhood development and treatment of marginalized groups in society.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

The Active Citizens Fund provided us with the opportunity for meaningful and very efficient partnerships which will have a long-term effect in education and environment protection. Such programs, apart from bringing together organizations and promoting coalitions, also provide a clear structure and time limits, which can considerably boost the efficiency of non-governmental organizations.



## Thematic priority

# Capacity and sustainability of the civil society sector and civil society organizations

# 06

50 supported projects with the following specific objectives:

- Creating and strengthening partnerships between civil society organizations and public/private organizations
- Development and maintenance of platforms and networks among civil society organizations
- Boosting the capacity of civil society organizations
- Raising citizens' awareness of the role of civil society organizations in the public
- Carrying out advocacy campaigns to improve the environment for civic activities and the work of civil society organizations.



An illustration of Vik Slimane for Fine Acts

## Project titles speak for themselves...

Improving public awareness for the role of the civil organization in the society ○ Visual communication and identity ○ Chitalishte Network for Sustainable Development of Vidin Region ○ For the Citizens and Their Organizations ○ Youth Theatre Against Hate Network Development ○ Philanthropy for Change ○ Different Together – capacity building of Youth Priorities Association for working with vulnerable groups of young people ○ For a transparent and effective civic sector in the Targovishte region ○ Education Without Backpacks: Support for world-class education. Sustainability through local partnerships, better fundraising and organizational development ○ Independent Living with Personal Assistance ○ Enhancing capacity and sustainability of HESED through introducing an e-system for collecting and preserving personal data – d@ta.hesed ○ Defending our rights in times of populism – capacity building for the team, partners and supporters of BFPA in the field of advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights ○ Enhancing the capacity of Sdruzenie „Shans i zakrila” to create partnerships for the benefit of children ○ New forms of transparency and community engagement ○ Shared spaces ○ Virtual Panda Guide ○ For a more sustainable civil sector in the municipality of Troyan ○ „Priobshti.se” in new partnerships ○ Building the Capacity of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee ○ Synergy of the network /The strength of the civil organizations is in their consolidation ○ Steps for Sustainable Development ○ Donation and COVID-19 for better children's policies ○ New Mechanisms for Improved Organizational Communication ○ Sure ReStart in a Post-pandemic Situation ○ HD WEEK (Huntington's disease week) ○ Learning to sustain ○ New Line Against Domestic Violence ○ A25 Cultural Immunity ○ Inform, Engage, Succeed! ○ Ngobg.info: The Media of Bulgarian Civic Organizations ○ Philanthropy compass for effective partnerships ○ We give nature a voice ○ Stories for Good ○ Data as a Tool for Successful Advocacy Campaigns of the Civil Society Organizations ○ Improving the capacity of the civil sector to respond to humanitarian crises and support refugees and migrants ○ The war takes away childhood from children! ○ Capacity Building of BILI and Transfer of Expertise in Response to the Negative Effects of the War in Ukraine ○ United Forces for Community Development ○ Crisis response mechanism for civic organizations in Varna municipality ○ Regional Model for Institutional Cooperation in Response to the Refugee Crisis Related to Asylum Seekers from the War in Ukraine ○ For a home away from home – developing the capacity of civic leaders to help and support refugees in Bulgaria ○ Building BOLD's Capacity in Response to New Challenges ○ Rainbow Hub Without Borders ○ #United Together – Improved NGO Advocacy Capacity in Response to the Refugee Crisis ○ Establishment of a humanitarian corps at the NAVRB to deal with the wave of refugees from Ukraine ○ Development of the organizational capacity of the HALO 2019 Foundation ○ The non-governmental sector in Svishtov – to help the ousted from the war ○ Looking Forward

## Philanthropy compass for effective partnerships

**Project of:**  
Bulgarian Donors' Forum Association (BDF)

**Implementation period:**  
October 2021 – April 2024

**Place of implementation:**  
across Bulgaria

**More information on:**  
[dfbulgaria.org](http://dfbulgaria.org)  
[ngo.dfbulgaria.org](http://ngo.dfbulgaria.org)

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The project met the need of boosting the capacity of civil society organizations for establishment of new partnerships with corporate donors in the changed context of giving attitudes and practices after the first crisis year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Donating during and in response to crises is one of the most vivid examples of mobilizing a large-scale support. Peaks in donations are usually followed by troughs when civil society organizations have the greatest need of knowledge and skills to find new followers and donors.

*"The project reinforced the role of the Bulgarian Donors' Forum as a reliable, expert and efficiently operating infrastructural organization. The trust gained and the new operational skills will contribute to further boosting our potential for work and achieving a follow-up organizational, programmatic and financial sustainability."*

### Bulgarian Donors' Forum Association

The Bulgarian Donors' Forum organized three editions of the **NGO Mentorship Program** under the project. The program aimed at boosting the capacity of the participating civil society organizations in the area of partnerships with businesses, fund raising and public communication. 44 organizations in total from 18 settlements in Bulgaria, including a lot of small towns and villages in the country, took part in the three editions of the program.



Програмата е безплатна и се организира от БДФ в рамките на проект "Дарителски компас за устойчиви партньорства", подкрепен от Фонд "Активни граждани"

Isoland  
Liechtenstein  
Norway

Active  
citizens fund

### МЕНТОРСКА ПРОГРАМА ЗА НПО

Каним ви да се включите във второто издание на програмата, която ще продължи от април до юни 2023 г.

Teachers were trained under the school program **Learn to Give** to work with children from 1st to 9th grade to promote and build knowledge and skills for active citizenship, donating and volunteering. 71 teachers took part in the last edition of the program in 2023/2024 school year, who worked with 76 classes (1,560 students) from 31 settlements. More than 40 representatives of civil society organizations and institutions visited the schools to work with the children and contribute to the development of the local community, at the center of which is the school, as well as the parents, local businesses and institutions.

170 civil society organizations, community centers and research institutes from across the country registered on the **platform Infobank for distribution of financial donations from businesses to NGOs**, which was created by BDF under the project. NGO Infobank helped coordinate more than 151 donations from various companies, which donated more than 4,100 products: furniture, equipment, technical devices, etc.



BDF had a section added to its website titled "You ask, we answer", with 29 publications on specific topics of help to NGOs and their effort to attract like-minded supporters and donors.



# We would like to present to you

**Teodora Bakardzhieva**



## ***Tell us in brief about yourself.***

My name is Teodora Bakardzhieva and I have been a member of the team of the Bulgarian Donors' Forum (BDF) since 2016. I graduated from the Technical University in Sofia more than 20 years ago but I have not worked on my major even a day in my life. As it happened for various reasons, I joined as an intern a program for community development and integration of vulnerable people of a civil society

organization. The new world that opened its doors to me and the opportunity to work with highly committed people who shared common values and vision and made efforts to achieve a meaningful change in the life of the community proved to be a strong attraction that still keeps me in the civil society sector. Over the years I have been a member of the team of various organizations, which have devotedly and professionally worked to achieve their missions. The civil society sector is like a cosmopolitan city: all of us are different, we speak different languages, there are neither mathematicians nor philosophers only, we have a different culture and we come with a different experience. This diversity gives us the energy to come up with smart solutions on the way to making a visible difference for the better.

## ***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

I have to admit that it is hard for me to present in an easy-to-understand way the multilayered work of BDF to people who are outside our professional community. However, it has been the easiest to make people understand when I describe our role as a linking unit between those willing to give and those looking for support. It is also easy to understand the role the organization plays when I present it through the individual human story of achieved success that we have contributed to, for instance, via the donations platform DMSbg.com or via our school program *Learn to Give*. The school program has helped us make donating more recognizable by young people as a way for them to be active citizens and to contribute to the implementation of ideas for the benefit of their communities.

## ***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

The well-intentioned ask additional questions, try to make connection to popular names of organizations and look for additional information about what we do. The others simply raise their brows knowingly. But donating is the word that starts a conversation. I believe that more and more people recognize donating as a natural way to be useful to the others, show your civic engagement, contribute to achieving a meaningful idea.

## ***Which book have you read recently or which film have you watched?***

I was quite impressed by two documentary TV series, which expose mega causes that people across the world blindly believed in and donated millions of dollars. These are *The Telemarketers* and *Hillsong: A Megachurch Exposed*. Both films leave a bitter taste due to the trade-off and explicit abuse of trust of donors. At the same time, though, the documentaries can be of use to those professionally engaged in attracting donor support for their causes, as well as for any of us who wants to be and is a donor. There is a point in bitter lessons as long as we do not repeat them, as trust is the most valuable resource in the field of donations.

## ***Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?***

The legitimacy of our organization is both formal and informal. We are registered under the Non-profit Legal Entities Act, but I would say that our legitimacy is rather determined by the interests and shared vision of our members about the impact that we would like to achieve as a network organization developing philanthropy in the country. We explicitly work to improve public opinion of donating through various initiatives and the surveys and analyses about donations that we carry out every year show a trend of an increasing number of people who support various causes with funds, donations in kind or labor. Just a couple of years ago, a lot of people believed that common causes, solving issues in one or another social field, helping strangers in distress did not depend on them. The situation has started to change since 2020 in particular. The support that we need is growing. We can see like-minded followers who share our mission and more good examples related to giving, both corporate and individual. We can see more civil society organizations that prove their role through successful partnerships with their donors and work for a legal and media environment that is conducive to donating and that can be achieved only through successful cooperation with the institutions.

## ***If you are the leader of your organization, can it continue forward if you start doing another job?***

Yes. BDF has a 20-year-old experience, which is a robust foundation to build a stable organizational culture, internal processes and most of all the

trust of its members, partners and the institutions. These are all preconditions for an efficient transformation in the event of a change of leadership, regardless whether planned or not.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project or projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

Each supported and successfully implemented project is a real contribution to untapping the potential and acquiring new skills by our team, which will contribute to the sustainability of the organization. We made new contacts, expanded our network of like-minded supporters and established our expert role. The projects supported by the Active Citizens Fund enabled us to also test a new model of distribution of material donations from companies to civil society organizations and the results give us a reason to continue with it.

***In your opinion, can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?***

We believe that the extent of development of civil society organizations is an indicator of a democratic society developing in a sustainable way. The more civil society organizations and their work are recognized by the public, the greater trust and support they can attract. And respectively have greater success in achieving their mission. The civil society sector has the potential to be a corrective of the work of the institutions but also a worthy partner – expert in the field, a champion of new ideas and working solutions that uphold human rights.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

There is always competition, even among civil society organizations. The best that we can take from it is the search for different solutions and approaches in our work, which in turn has a positive impact on the environment as a whole. It is not hard to create coalitions or develop different forms of interaction when the parties involved have clear goals, expected results, no hidden agenda and the parties share understanding of the processes and approaches.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I would be glad if every active civil society organization had at least three different sources of financing with a long-term perspective and enjoyed great trust by the community and the work environment. My dream is to have fundraising campaigns in Bulgaria initiated mostly by civil society organizations supporting their causes and initiatives and not by people looking for a financial support for treatment, etc.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Donating in Bulgaria is still practiced most of all for causes related to health and social needs because these are the fields where the shortages

of the state are most visible and affect large groups of people. In this sense, very important and more abstract at a first glance areas are left in the periphery of donors' attention, while investment in them and their development in the long run are vital for good quality of life. These areas include protection of human rights and democratic values, media literacy and education, support for vulnerable groups through the tools of art, etc. I cannot say whether it is worth putting in civil society energy in these areas most of all, but I believe that when we can break the circle of humanitarian support for causes and start investing in the so-called causes for development that would mean that we, as a society, have come a long way in charity.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

It is significant for civil society organizations to have financing programs initiated by donors that have clear rules and an ethical attitude to the supported organizations. That was the case with the Active Citizens Fund. In the course of three years, the Fund enabled us to further develop and upgrade some of our key programs and areas in which we work and it was very useful and valuable for us. We had the opportunity to benefit from the expert support of the team members of the Active Citizens Fund when we discussed issues related to the implementation of the projects. Thus, we managed to further develop and experiment with ideas with potential and to give them a new meaning and content.



## Virtual Panda Guide

**Project of:**  
WWF – World Wildlife Fund,  
Danube–Carpathian Program Bulgaria

**Implementation period:**  
May 2020 – May 2021

**Place of implementation:**  
across Bulgaria

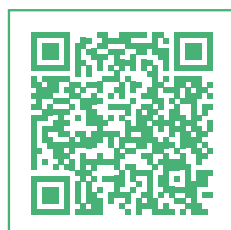
**More information on:**  
[chats.viber.com/panda-bot](https://chats.viber.com/panda-bot)



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The Virtual Panda-Guide offers the following: a chat, a map of the country with localization of sites and quizzes. The chat is automatized to keep 24/7 communication with visitors having questions about WWF Bulgaria. The virtual map of Bulgaria shows locations related to the work of the organization. They have videos, news and information about interesting facts in-built.

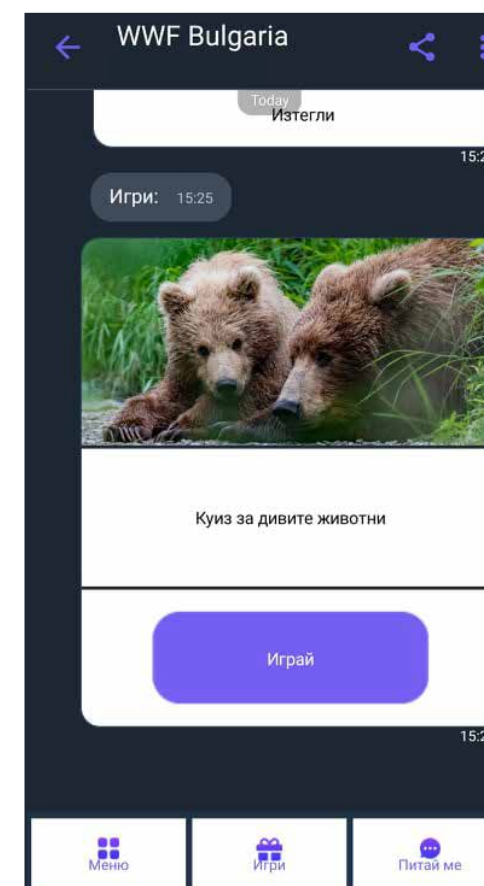


### Meet Pan!

The project aimed at boosting the capacity of WWF Bulgaria to pursue its mission by creating an innovative way of interaction with users online, i.e. a virtual bot available on Viber.

The bot combines a number of functions, but its main role is to offer educational content and information including the most remarkable achievements of WWF Bulgaria over the last 10 years as well as the work of the organization in general.

After the chat, Pan's feature engaging visitors most is the opportunity to check your knowledge in 6 different categories, i.e. the main fields of activity of WWF: climate, water, forests, consumer behavior, protected zones and endangered species. In the event that the user has more than 60% correct answers to a quiz, the user receives a special certificate that can be shared online and which certifies knowledge in the relevant area.



*"The Virtual Panda-Guide is a proof that NGOs can create attractive and interactive content and look to engage supporters and fans in a dialogue in an unconventional way."*

*"We received feedback from users, especially users with children, who were trying to win all the certificates from our quizzes. To do that they play again and again until they learn the correct answers. In this way we manage to give not only new knowledge but also practical and useful tips about choices of behavior in our daily life that are environmentally-friendly and we work to build a more conscious society."*

## Capacity Building of BILI and Transfer of Expertise in Response to the Negative Effects of the War in Ukraine

### Project of:

Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives Foundation (BILI)

### Implementation period:

September 2020 – May 2023

### Place of implementation:

across Bulgaria

### More information on:

[bili-bg.org/167/page.html](http://bili-bg.org/167/page.html)

# 06

The changes in the environment and the new challenges following the war in Ukraine have increased significantly the danger of cyberattacks, spread of disinformation, manipulation of public opinion, making threats for the purpose of propaganda that polarize, fragment and radicalize democratic societies. Civil society organizations are particularly vulnerable in this new situation because some of the attacks aim to discredit them as well as downplay the issues they work on.

After completing three specialized training sessions under the project, the team of BILI summed up the information and knowledge gathered in the Handbook titled *The Civil Society Sector Against Disinformation*.

The first part of the Handbook is devoted to understanding disinformation as a dynamic event and it addresses the grounds to use manipulative campaigns, sources, tools and target audiences in the process of spreading disinformation.

The second part of the Handbook is focused on specific attacks against the civil society sector as well as the negative consequences of the attempts to delegitimize, stigmatize and marginalize a number of organizations in Bulgaria. The situation has been illustrated through examples giving a clear idea of the creation of a specific environment and sentiment in society aiming at having a deterrent effect on civil society organizations and shrinking civic space.

The third part addresses the duties and responsibilities of civil society organizations against the backdrop of the growing risk for them to be involved in one of the numerous money laundering schemes or bear the consequences (including for their reputation) of malicious attacks.

If the above has stirred your interest, you can learn more about different disinformation tools used in the social media from the Handbook *The Civil Society Sector Against Disinformation*.



## Как се създава и разпространява дезинформацията



*"During the communication campaign under the project, we had a series of conversations with other civil society organizations that we expect will lead in time to the building of a sustainable partner network. The latter will help take joint action to counteract adequately the negative consequences of disinformation and propaganda."*



# We would like to present to you

## Teodor Slavev



### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

My name is Teodor Slavev, I am 36 years old and I have a degree in Political Science. Both as a school student and later a university student, I was always involved in some kind of organized civic engagement activity. It is part of my understanding of the world. I cannot bear injustice, which is too prevalent in Bulgaria, and the civil society sector allows us to be a corrective. My MA thesis addresses civil society and my PhD thesis addresses the issues of social capital, civic and political engagement and public trust, which is fundamental for the functioning of

institutions. I joined the Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives in 2012 after briefly working for the public administration.

### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

I sometimes tell strangers that I work in the fields of “computers”, and they stop asking. I am joking. In truth, it is quite difficult to explain what I do, especially when civic engagement culture in Bulgaria is lacking, being replaced with simple labels, and our education system does not do much to encourage it. When I am asked about my work, I say that I uphold democracy. Not that it fully makes sense either. Otherwise, the work at a think-tank, such as BILI, has to do with policy monitoring, surveys and analyses of political processes, the judiciary, the fight against corruption. We make recommendations and show the institutions how to be more efficient.

### *How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?*

One or two years after I had joined BILI, a large-scale defamation campaign was launched against the civil society sector, which was later reiterated by certain political parties and MPs. This wave can be seen not only in Bulgaria, as similar events have been observed in other countries as well, the Central and Eastern European countries being more vulnerable in this respect. On a more general level, a political coup is executed against expert, data-based approach and common sense. This is so because, while we are busy trying to protect ourselves against gender ideology, corruption continues to be rampant, the institutions are controlled, and society is handed an imaginary enemy, the battle with whom steals public attention away. People who are not familiar with the work of NGOs most often associate NGOs with “foreign agents” or “sorosoids”. The latter expressions are among the definitions of NGOs most often used by a majority of politicians.

### *Which book have you read lately and would like to share with us?*

Reading has been my most steady hobby. I read and listen to books every day. Right now I am reading about the investigation of Siddharth Kara, an American journalist and activist of Indian origin, *Cobalt Red*. The book tells the story about the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the country with the largest cobalt deposits in the world. Cobalt is used in all batteries, from those in smartphones to the ones in electric cars, but cobalt is mined with child labor, forced labor, without any proper working conditions. It is frustrating to know that forms of modern slavery exist in 2024, but that should make all of us think about it.

### *What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?*

The Bulgarian Institute for Legal Initiatives is a non-governmental organization, a think-tank, founded in 2006. The organization prepares analyses, surveys and initiatives related to the rule of law, the fight against corruption and good governance. This is one of the most critical and demanding organizations when it comes to the reform of the judiciary. The organization has been active from the beginning and it has a permanent team and an office.

### *Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?*

The rule of law is one of the pillars of democratic states, and as we know, they are very fragile. The shortage of basic justice can be sensed by everyone in Bulgaria. Our institutions enjoy a very low trust and the country is constantly criticized by its international partners and the organizations which the country is a member of for its failure to ensure an independent court or accountability for the prosecutor's office for its failure to investigate high-level corruption. The shortcomings of our institutions and the needs of the public give us energy to keep on insisting that Bulgaria holds a place of dignity in the community of democratic states. We need support most of all from a critically significant part of the Bulgarian public which understands the need of solving these issues, first of all, and supports the fight to deal with them, next.

### *Could you share about certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?*

In 2014, I started working on BILI's project about monitoring the appointments at the National Assembly. Ten years later not only do the public and the media understand how important independent control, supervision and regulatory bodies elected by the Parliament are, but we have already an indication at the highest legislative level, through the latest amendments to the Constitution, that the latter bodies will be elected adhering to higher standards. We are still quite far from it, but recognition of the problem has always been the first step. I remember how at the beginning they used to ignore us, doubted our right to carry out monitoring and threatened us with

filing claims before the court. However, at the end of the day, we managed to put forward the issue and explain to the public why it was important to have transparent, fair and competitive procedures for the appointment of people in management positions. The Active Citizens Fund has been our partner on the project for monitoring public appointments throughout all these years. The platform appointmentsboard.bg that was created with the help of the Active Citizens Fund is also unique because we have managed to maintain it for more than 10 years and we have organized in a systematic way a huge array of information.

**How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?**

I imagine that in 15 years, when I attend international conferences, I can point to Bulgaria as a good example, that we will top rankings and will be able to help other societies develop in a democratic way and will share about the important role the civil society sector played for that.

**Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?**

The fight against corruption, justice and good governance. I believe that those three areas are fundamental in order to enact reforms in the other important public systems such as education, healthcare and social services. If there are too many shortcomings or no penalties for abuse of public funds and no recovery of the funds, it is not possible to achieve any progress in the other systems.

**Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?**

Such programs are definitely needed. It is with the help of such programs that we managed to raise and put forward such an important topic as the election of public bodies. We have expanded our methodology from appointments in the Parliament to those in the executive power and we have managed to also include people outside Sofia in the monitoring process. Most importantly, the Active Citizens Fund has shown understanding of the work of organizations such as ours, which is not common everywhere.

## Data as a Tool for Successful Advocacy Campaigns of the Civil Society Organizations

**Project of:**

Institute for Public Environment Development Association (IPED)

**Implementation period:**

September 2021 – November 2022

**Place of implementation:**

across Bulgaria

**More information on:**

[datazone.iped.bg](http://datazone.iped.bg)

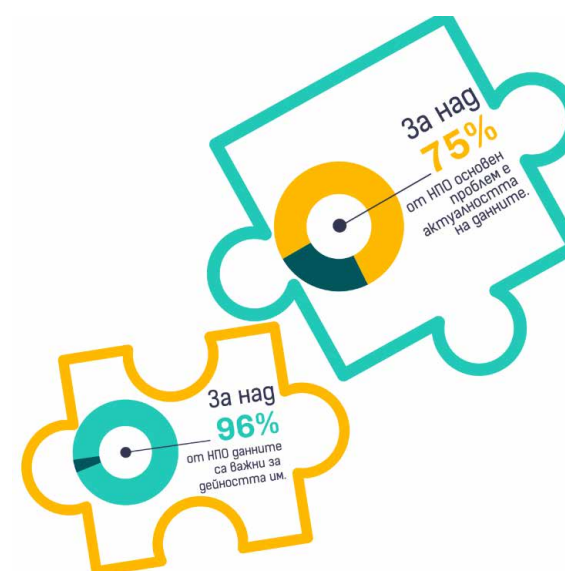


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**Data is an important resource for the quality of work of nongovernmental organizations to achieve efficiency, build a reasoned position and improve their reputation.**

Despite positive trends among Bulgarian institutions to publish data, data remains not sufficiently well-organized, difficult to access or in a format that requires special skills to process it.

The online platform **Data Zone** created by the IPED team is a hub for institutional data provided in an appropriate and accessible way. The platform also offers educational resources for NGOs so that activists can carry out in-depth studies and improve the efficiency of their initiatives.



Why do we need statistical data? Where can we find data? How can we prepare it for an analysis? What can we do with data and how can we visualize it?



When we developed the specialized materials, we took into account the findings of a survey carried out among NGO activists about the statistical methods they use to work with data.

A training course was prepared with information about data sources, the methods of working with sources, approaches to visualization, etc. The materials have been included in the Handbook *Data in the History of Non-governmental Organizations*.

#### ОБУЧИТЕЛНИ МАТЕРИАЛИ



Видео и текстови материали за основните източници на институционални данни и работата с тях.

#### ДОБРИ ПРАКТИКИ



Добри примери за успешни инициативи, базирани на работата с данни.

#### РЕГИСТРИ



Търсене на институционални данни по тематична област или източник на информация.

The Handbook has the following thematic sections:

- importance and accessibility of statistical data, preparation of data for analysis;
- description of statistical data on national level;
- preparation of data for use: programs for data processing;
- data visualization in a graphic form: examples of specialized software.

20 video materials were also developed as part of the training course. The Handbook and the videos are available in a separate section of the *Data Zone* platform.

A number of good examples of international NGOs working with data to support their initiatives were also studied under the project. Based on that, several stories of NGOs working in different fields and regions of the world were selected. The team included among good practices an example of the work of IPED related to data from the European Parliament elections in 2019. Voting machines had been used for the European elections in 3,000 polling stations in the country. The study of IPED showed that the preferences of the people who used a voting machine to cast a ballot in approximately 40% of the polling stations (or 1,139 of them) were not recorded correctly. The publication also presented the reasons for that, possible solutions and the progress made.

## We would like to present to you

### Iva Lazarova



#### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

Before I graduated from university, I had the opportunity to start as a “rookie” at IPED. Even though when you study the humanities, you learn a lot about the main ideologies, governance forms, social development, etc., I have never imagined how complex are in reality the processes of making and implementing governance policies. I have learnt how many issues people in reality face in various settlements in the country, how many diverse approaches there are to solve them and how the root causes of issues

are sometimes the same. I did not realize then how much and how long one has to learn, research, read and pay attention to come up with a successful recommendation to solve an issue. As I had some knowledge of foreign languages at a time, when artificial intelligence still did not translate online, I became a member of a team studying the laws regulating the operation of capital cities such as Berlin, London, Belgrade and Kiev. That is how IPED, which was founded in 2003 and which brought together the efforts of extremely purposeful and knowledgeable like-minded people, became easily a personal cause. Thus, I have been an adult — citizen activist for 16 years now. I have been the head of the organization for six years.

#### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

It is easy to explain to my family and friends, to my daughter as well. Almost all of my friends (those who are not simply acquaintances) are in one way or another active citizens, volunteering and working for the benefit of their local communities. All of us want the same fundamental things such as respect for human dignity, freedom and opportunities for development. As for children, it is easy to set an example for how to work to protect those values. The values themselves are “encoded” in children, and when inherent curiosity works, there is nothing easier to explain. It often happens by telling a story about how good it is to play together in the park or ride freely bikes, followed naturally by the question about who these “freedoms” and “opportunities” depend on.

#### *Which book have you read lately?*

I have in earnest re-read again *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter* and for the first time *Sherlock Bones and the Curse of the Pharaoh's Mask*. Reading children's literature is a must for those who live with six-year-olds. Two are the

books for grown-ups that I have recently read. Who has the patience to read just one book when time is beyond our control? *Recursion* by Blake Crouch and *Freckled Stories* by Zdravka Evtimova, an author that I truly admire. I am also waiting for my stellar moment of “recursion” of time to get to watch Part Two of *Dune*.

***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?***

The Institute for Public Environment Development (IPED) works to increase citizen involvement in governance, limit the influence of money in politics and ensure a fair election process. Our mission also includes development and application of mechanisms for accountability of public institutions and for citizen control on their work. The organization was set up in 2003 and fortunately we have always been active since that time. We have a small but closely-knit team with whom we follow everything related to elections, work with volunteers, actively maintaining two online platforms: *I Vote*, which explains voters’ rights, and *Open Parliament*, where we publish analyses on urgent issues and a lot more things.

***Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?***

We draw legitimacy from our instruments of incorporation, mission and goals of the organization. We always turn to them when we plan specific activities. Another incentive for us are the goals that we set ourselves and the support we get from like-minded followers, volunteers and in many cases complete strangers, for whom some of our publications, for instance, have been of use. Yes, we always need support, especially having a small team such as ours. In our work we rely on volunteers on the election day, as we have carried out independent observation for more than 10 years. We arm our observers with various materials during training, and they pay visits to the polling stations in the country and abroad and tell us about the “specificity” of the Bulgarian election process. For the upcoming elections in June 2024, we will once again need their help, which is valuable because the recommendations for improving the organization of the election day are in fact based on their effort and information.

We always need new like-minded people as well to support our initiatives for protection of the democratic rights of all citizens. Sadly though, it is quite often not a very attractive cause for donors and companies.

***Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?***

Our initiative supported by the Active Citizens Fund included working with NGOs from across the country to show together that data processed by organizations can have a “human face” and they have been in fact at the

heart of our effort to reform the environment. The Bulgarian NGO Portal also joined the initiatives. As an active organization, IPED has been following the website of the NGO Portal and has always known that their activities are extremely useful. However, the project allowed me to get much better understanding of their work and to find out the “scale” of this usefulness. We also got to know a very interesting for us activity, “casting light on” municipal funds, owing to *Halo* Foundation in the town of Haskovo. It is very satisfactory to come across like-minded people and see how they live and breathe for the initiatives they work on.

***In your opinion, can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people’s life? Why are NGOs needed in Bulgaria in the field you work in?***

Civil society organizations are the only associations of people whose final goal is to end their activity. Each non-governmental organization by definition sets itself and pursues to achieve goals, for instance, equal access to quality education, environment protection or holding fair and transparent elections. The moment the goals are achieved, the organization is set to end its activity because it has achieved its goals. That would mean that the shortages in the relevant field no longer exist. In this way NGOs differ from businesses, whose main goal is profit, for instance. The need of having the NGOs sector lies in this particular detail. The NGO sector has a key role to play representing citizens’ interests and balancing the positions of the institutions and businesses. NGOs are often an extremely important source of information and analyses that can be of help in the decision-making process. NGOs are also the ones which alert the public about existing issues in the work of the institutions. This is the only way to ensure public pressure with the goal of improving the quality of our life. The developments across the world over the last years have proved that democratic rights are not guaranteed to us. Democracy is at the heart of all public fields, be it education, healthcare, social services, etc. If we are facing problems in any of them, the problems cannot be durably solved without an institutional response and approach. For that reason, the work of organizations like ours, putting efforts to raise civic engagement and the transparency of the institutions, is very important.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

It is difficult to establish coalitions in Bulgaria between civil society organizations because they quite often have small teams. The people in question often work on several projects at the same time and rarely have the time needed to invest to build a successful partnership. Competition is also a factor to be considered. After Bulgaria joined the EU, a lot of foreign donor organizations left the country because of the understanding that Bulgaria was already a stable democracy with well-functioning institutions. The latter created difficulties for the NGO sector in Bulgaria and hindered



to some extent the momentum for making changes and establishing partnerships that had been accumulated. However, over the last years the understanding that we can achieve much more together has returned. In fact, one of the goals of the project we implemented under the Active Citizens Fund was namely the latter, i.e. to cooperate with various organizations and support their activity.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

Whenever I receive this question, I always respond that I hope some NGOs will have already achieved their mission and have stopped operation. Or they will have changed their role and instead of filling in the gaps left by the state, have become a real partner and corrective of the state, providing an innovative, in-depth point of view in decision-making. However, I believe that we have a long way to go before we have reached this moment.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Most partially, I will list democracy first. Lack of sufficient accountability and transparency in the work of the institutions underlies all the other issues. If no fair elections in Bulgaria are held, how can we expect from the elected candidates to develop fair rules and work for efficient policies? Members of Parliament at that make laws in all fields of action, be it health-care, social policies, education, etc. Without clear rules we cannot expect from the institutions to do the work themselves. It is hard for me to rank other fields. As I said, it is important for the institutions to work in an efficient and transparent way, as only then can we have real changes made to education, environment protection, refugees' rights, etc. Each field needs activism and pressure from citizens to improve the public environment.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

Programs such as the Active Citizens Fund are extremely important, especially in Bulgaria. As I said, we do not have that many sources of support for civil society organizations. The latter limits the theatre of action of the civil society sector. It is important to have institutional help, as we cannot often predict what might happen in the upcoming five, three, even one year. We live in dynamic times and civil society activists have to be more and more prepared for more and more issues, so that support for the development of the organization's capacity is also greatly needed. It is important to have diverse sources allowing NGOs in Bulgaria to be independent.

The Active Citizens Fund allowed us to take a look at our own organization and update some of our policies and practices so that we can keep "in

line" with the requirements of the environment we live in. The support of the Fund enabled us to cooperate with various experts and organizations, try to further develop together our communication and analytical capacity but also lay the foundation for potential future cooperation. The latter, in turn, was an invaluable experience for the team of IPED.



## Ngobg.info: The Media of Bulgarian Civic Organisations

**Project of:**  
Program and Analytical Center  
for European Law

**Implementation period:**  
September 2021 – October 2023

**Place of implementation:**  
across Bulgaria

**More information on:**  
ngobg.info



06

*The NGO Information Portal is the largest information and reference hub for non-governmental organizations and civic engagement in Bulgaria. The portal supports a database about more than 14,000 organizations and prepares more than 2,500 publications annually about their activity.*

By upgrading and expanding the activity of the portal, the project contributed to boosting the capacity of organizations to present to the public and improve their visibility in society and, as we know, this is a precondition for greater trust and civic engagement.

In the period 2021–2023, the portal achieved 66 media partnerships and maintained an internship program with students from various universities.

The work of the team and the six regional correspondents helped the broad public to learn about the practical benefits from the work of various civil society organizations across the country. A number of examples, case studies and stories were published on **ngobg.info** and on social media and some of the best materials were compiled in the book *Chronicles of the Good*, 2. During the period of implementation of the project, the portal was visited by more than 630, 000 people and the visited pages exceeded a million.

*"84% of the organizations about which we published stories have noted that the work with correspondents helped them to a large and very large extent boost their capacity for public presentation of the outcomes of their work."*

## We would like to present to you

**Georgi Genchev**



On the photo: Georgi Genchev (to the left) and Ralitsa Nikolova, Editor-in-Chief of the portal

**Tell us in brief about yourself.**

This month (April) marks 30 years since I started working in the civil society sector. In fact, I have spent all of my length of service in it. I started as a coordinator of the program of one of the largest donor organizations in Bulgaria. A few years and positions later, I left "those who give" in 2001 and took the side of "those who demand" by becoming the head of the newly-founded *Program and Analytical Center for European Law Foundation* (PACEL). The foundation

had a clear goal, that is to assist the accession of Bulgaria to the European Union through its own comparative legislative studies. In the early 2009, Bulgaria was already a member of the EU, we had reported our last project to the donors, and my colleagues and I contemplated in earnest to have a ceremony to officially end the activity of the foundation that had achieved its goal. However, an opportunity came that same year to apply for the development of a Bulgarian NGO Information Portal. We had a lot of contacts among civil society organizations and we also had good partners. We created the Portal together with the Bulgarian Center for Not-for-Profit Law, and I have headed the team from the outset of the work and the launching of the website online in the early 2010. The development of the Portal was financed by the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe. Afterwards we have been supported in our work mainly by *Charles Stewart Mott Foundation*, *America for Bulgaria Foundation*, *Active Citizens Fund* under the EEA Financial Mechanism, the European Union and *Open Society Institute – Sofia Foundation* under the project *Rights and Values*. All formalities aside, I would like sincerely to thank them. A couple of years ago, our organization started running independently the Portal and we have been devoted to it ever since. We delayed changing the name of the organization for various insignificant reasons until we got to the current point when few people have heard about PACEL but have heard many more times about the Portal (and use it), and almost no-one connects the two. We have decided to mark the 15th anniversary of the Portal next year, on 22.02.2025, as NGO Portal Foundation.

My motivation over the years has remained unchanged, namely an extremely strong sense of meaning in the work carried out by the civil society sector and belonging to a huge network of professionals and incredibly well-in-



tentioned people from across Bulgaria who work for public benefit. This sense is very deep, in the background, and much stronger than the enthusiasm of specific causes and initiatives. It has not changed very much neither following occasional failures nor the “wow” successes. I think that this is a sense my numerous colleagues and friends in the civil society sector also share.

***How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?***

I tell my children that I help organizations which help in turn people in distress. They understand pretty well what it means to be in distress, as they are often curious to know and I share with them some stories. I have to explain sometimes to younger children what an organization means, but the older ones know what a website is. To the adults I most often simply give the Portal’s web address and tell them that if they are interested, we will talk more. With some of them we continue talking, I guess with most of them.

***How do people less familiar with the NGO sector respond when you tell them that you work for an NGO?***

Twenty percent of them say nothing, simply keep silent but not in a hostile way. Seventy percent want me to explain what an NGO is, how we get financing, what the meaning of having NGOs is, etc. The critical ones are 10%. Criticism varies in range, from clichés that we hinder business, blackmail the state, benefit criminal and lazy people to statements such as “oh, yeah, you have a foundation, you must be a millionaire”. The only successful way to change at least some of these attitudes is to show that almost everyone gets in touch with an NGO but often doesn’t know. Thus, parents, for instance, definitely “do not want NGOs at school” but fully trust the initiatives of, let’s say, the Association of Bulgarian Primary School Teachers, which is also a civil society organization.

***Which book have you read lately and would like to share about?***

Not long ago, at the end of March, Daniel Kahneman passed away, he was one of the most influential psychologists and economists and a Nobel laureate. I started again reading his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, at least for a third time over the last several years. It is a remarkable work, which explains why our judgements can be often wrong, how we tend to replace complicated questions with simpler ones and what it leads to, how easy we can “slip” and look for causal links where they do not exist and much more. I believe that everyone working with people – and most of us in the civil society sector do that – has to read it.

***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?***

The mission of the NGO Portal is to facilitate and promote sharing up-to-date information about the Bulgarian NGO sector, which benefits organizations themselves, donors, businesses with corporate social responsibility in Bulgaria and everyone interested in civil society organizations, their activity and the outcomes of it. The main team of the Portal is made-up of two people only, but we work with external authors, volunteers and interns.

***Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?***

Our legitimacy comes from NGOs themselves, which publish information in the Portal and help us with feedback, recommendations, advice and criticism. All of them are organizations devoted to various causes and they want to be seen, understood and supported. These are organizations which truly understand how important it is to be open about your activity. That was the motto of the Portal when it was created, i.e. *Legitimacy Through Visibility*.

The Portal has every year more than 300,000 unique visitors, which is a lot for such a niche website. We maintain daily contacts both with counterparts as well as numerous citizens that are looking for advice that ranges from protection of their rights to rescuing a maimed kitten. We connect them to appropriate organizations, refer them to the institutions, etc. In short, the NGO Portal has found its place in the Bulgarian information and reference space, it is sought after and needed.

***If you are the leader of the organization, can your organization continue forward in the event that you start a new job?***

I honestly do not know. What we strive to achieve, myself and Ralitsa Nikolova, who has been the Editor-in-Chief of the Portal for 9 years, is directly in charge of its content and definitely knows very well the Bulgarian civil society sector, is to establish and maintain clear and honest algorithms of work and interaction between us, our users, our audience, donors and, quite importantly, IT service providers, the cost for which account for quite a share of our budget. At the same time, I also believe that each organization is the shadow of a person (Ralph Waldo Emerson, if I am not mistaken). So, as there are the two of us, we try, and I believe that we manage, to have the NGO Portal be the shared shadow of two people. The latter makes possible changes in the team unthinkable for us, on the one hand, but it is also a proof that work processes can be simple and predictable, on the other hand, so that if needed, the work can be taken up easily by other colleagues. However, this is not what our plans are.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

The NGO Portal has existed for 14 years, during the last 4 of which we worked mainly with the financing provided by the Active Citizens Fund. As of today, we do not see any serious threats for its future operation and development.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

Yes, there is most of all need for programs and donors that invest in the organizations’ capacity with the clear understanding that NGOs are not an exotic but natural and practically unreplaceable segment of democratic

societies. As our experience has shown, the Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria Program demonstrated in a professional and elegant manner that even under strict, severe and sometimes restricting requirements for application, reporting and project implementation, a large-scale donor program can support, encourage and facilitate work and most importantly, regard the goals of the financed projects as its own.

## Establishment of a Humanitarian Corps at the NAVRB to deal with the wave of refugees from Ukraine

**Project of:**  
National Association of Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAVRB)

**Implementation period:**  
September 2022 – July 2023

**Place of implementation:**  
across Bulgaria

**More information on:**  
[navrb.bg](http://navrb.bg)

*We managed to build a sustainable action model in the event of humanitarian crises and we boosted our capacity for work in emergency situations. National Association of Volunteers in the Republic of Bulgaria (NAVRB) did not have a developed action plan and a methodology for work in humanitarian crises so far, which hampered our work very much.*

*The developed methodology helped outline the main directions and modi operandi in such situations, and NAVRB applied the developed methodology not only in the work of the Humanitarian Corps but also in the process of raising humanitarian aid for the people affected by the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria. The latter improved considerably the efficiency of work of the organization.*

The project helped build a team of trained and experienced people, who know and can respond to various emergency situations and humanitarian crises.



On the photo: Annual awards of the NGO Portal, October 2023.







After the Corps examined the existing needs, the Corps focused its efforts on assisting Ukrainian refugees, including them more actively in public life. Two seminars were organized for them: *Access to Education in Bulgaria* (the recording is available on [youtu.be/PYiOmx-Pwab0](https://youtu.be/PYiOmx-Pwab0)) and *Medical Rights for Ukrainian Nationals with Temporary Protection Status in Bulgaria* (the recording is available on [youtu.be/naSYXqJuhvw](https://youtu.be/naSYXqJuhvw)). We have also provided support for various issues related to the residence of Ukrainian nationals in Bulgaria such as employment, preparation of documents, etc.

In March and April 2023, two events took place to support Ukrainian students left without the financial support of their parents. The Corps provided help to more than 230 Ukrainian citizens under the project.



## We would like to present to you

### Yasen Tsvetkov



#### *Tell us in brief about yourself.*

I have worked in the civil society sector for about 10 years, although the latter figure is quite provisional. I have taken part in various volunteering initiatives prior to working as well. If we add the latter experience, it will be more than 15 years. In addition, I would not call it simply work. Apart from my purely professional engagements in the civil society sector, I am first and foremost a volunteer. Our organization (NAVRB) was founded in 2014 to unite volunteers who respond to disasters and

it has continued to exist mainly on a voluntary basis. I became part of it as a regular volunteer. The experience that I had in the non-governmental sector and appropriate education were the reason to be elected as the head of the organization in the current term of office. Our successes motivate me most of all. NAVRB is an organization that is sustained by the voluntary efforts of its members and as a result we constantly face a number of serious challenges. Despite the difficulties, we have managed to achieve significant success both for the development of the organization itself and the cause that unites us.

#### *How do you explain to your family and friends what you do for a living?*

Unfortunately, the work of non-governmental organizations is not sufficiently familiar. We often find ourselves in situations in which people do not understand how our organization (as well as the other NGOs) works. I would say that I come across more lack of understanding and awareness about the sector in general. Of course, there are people who are aware and well prepared, but I believe they are a minority in our country. My child is 4 years old and he knows that "Daddy is a volunteer and helps in the events of fires, floods and earthquakes".

#### *What book are you currently reading and would like to share your opinion about?*

I am reading at the moment *The Secret Reports of Sol Polansky About the 10th of November 1989* by Aleksenia Dimitrova. The author is a Bulgarian journalist who took advantage of the right to access to public information in the USA and requested at the beginning of the century declassification of the reports of the US Embassy in Sofia to the US authorities in Washington D.C. from the several years before the fall of the Communist regime. The

book describes a lot of the political events, economic processes and social upheaval from the period from the point of view of an external observer. The book in general provides an interesting outlook on the period in question and lifts the curtain on events and happenings which reveal in a very meaningful and authentic way the essence of the Communist rule. It is particularly interesting to read it in 2024.

***What is the mission of your organization? Is your organization currently active? Does it have a permanent team and an office?***

The NAVRB assists the process of creating, maintaining and developing an active and efficient network of volunteers that can be of help to the professional services for risk prevention, disaster containment and removal of the aftermath of disasters. The association works actively to promote the cause and attract like-minded supporters from all sectors of public life.

The organization is active. All the members elect a Managing Board with a term of office of 5 years. Apart from the Managing Board, some of the other members also contribute to the development of the organization and the achievement of its goals. We have a permanent team from a functional point of view but no-one is paid any remuneration for the work done, which creates a lot of problems for our organization's development. Our members are volunteers, on the one hand, who respond to disasters, and volunteers for the development of their representative organization, on the other hand. Our organization does not have its own office. Our seat is at the headquarters of the Fire Department, but due to legal restrictions, we cannot establish a permanent office there. Our activity is carried out on premises with equipment and devices provided by our members or on premises that are owned by the Ministry of Interior and other institutions (for large-scale events such as conferences, etc.), which they provide to us for a short term for particular events. What we particularly need a lot is a warehouse, where we could keep our specialized and rescue equipment for disaster response. The NAVRB carries out its work mainly based on the enthusiasm and efforts of an active core of its members, who provide everything necessary on their own. Our organization covers its costs mainly from a modest membership fee and from donations of like-minded followers.

***Where do you draw legitimacy for the work of your organization most of all from? Do you need support and if yes, what kind of support and who from?***

The NAVRB unites in one organizational structure all the agents in the process of disaster management, i.e. volunteers, professional firefighters and rescuers and local self-governance. The organization follows the model of national fire safety associations in other European countries. Our members are the following: volunteers from municipal structures for disaster containment; volunteers from structures registered with NGOs and other organizations; General Directorate Fire Safety and Civil Protection (with a

permanent right to participate in the Managing Board); National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria (with a permanent right to participate in the Managing Board); and municipalities. We have an acute need of support to strengthen the organization itself. With regard to duties and responsibilities, we are an organization registered for public benefit but with regard to the financing and securing our activity, we are a voluntary civil society organization.

***If you are the leader of the organization, can your organization continue forward in the event that you start a new job?***

Most likely, yes. We are a public organization which unites like-minded followers. It will be a serious challenge to find another person who would spare so much time, energy and resources the way I do, but still the organization will continue forward. Our main credo is there is no "me" but "we" with us. There are no indispensable people, on the one hand, and the NAVRB nevertheless has members with different expertise and experience, who could continue developing the organization without me, on the other hand.

***Could you share about a certain occasion from your work on the project when you were most satisfied?***

Over the last couple of years, we have had a lot of occasions to show what we do and we proved that the civil society sector in Bulgaria is ready to confront challenges. We organized for the first time an international rescue mission following the earthquakes in Turkey in 2023. Fully financed from donations and driven by enthusiasm, we managed to deploy 51 prepared volunteers and a trained dog at the epicenter of the destruction and we managed to save 31 human lives. In parallel, we set up an organization of more than 120 volunteers distributed across 22 humanitarian aid collection points. We are also proud of the assistance that we managed to provide to the people who fled the war in Ukraine and the Bulgarian institutions who faced a potential humanitarian crisis. The NAVRB was among the leading organizations that responded in this hard situation. We had to confront for the first time not a natural disaster but a potential humanitarian crisis of an unprecedented scale. Hundreds of our volunteers and newly-attracted volunteers managed to organize the following assistance: free medical aid provided by more than 100 volunteer doctors across the country; we also took part in the setting up of the National Contact Center of the Bulgarian state for Ukrainian refugees and we still secure its work to this day; our members worked on-call at the service points in the cities of Ruse, Varna and Sofia; we provide food and medication, sign language interpretation and psychological support. One of the occasions that makes us feel satisfied is the support we managed to provide after the floods in the area of Karlovo and during other large-scale disasters, such as the floods in the area of Tsarevo, several big forest fires, etc. Our volunteers also joined in one of



the most complex rescue missions in the Morca cave, when an American speleologist had to be rescued from the depth of more than 1,100 meters. Our volunteers, cave rescue teams, were among the first who arrived and played a key role for the operation.

***As of today, what will remain as a long-term effect of the project or projects implemented under the Active Citizens Fund?***

The project started at a very important moment and turned into a part of our integrated efforts to assist those fleeing from the war and it also enabled us to further build on our efforts by also turning towards actions to support the follow-up integration of refugees on the labour market, in the healthcare system, the education system, etc. With the help of the project to establish a humanitarian corps with the NAVRB, financed by the Active Citizens Fund, we managed to ensure internal organization and secure the provision of assistance to Ukrainian refugees. Apart from supporting our effort to address the refugee crisis, this internal organization was the foundation of our action in other directions, for instance the collection and dispatch of humanitarian aid for the population in the aftermath of the earthquake in Turkey, the support of households in need that were affected by various disasters in the country and, last but not least, the organization of charity campaigns for those in need, that are also included in the scope of our portfolio.

***In your opinion, can civil society organizations successfully contribute to a change for the better in people's life?***

Not only can NGOs do that but they already improve people's life. The impact of the NGO efforts remains quite often not understood and underappreciated, but nevertheless, NGOs play a very important role in our development as a society. The NGOs in our sector, as well as in many others, first of all find the places in the institutional system, where an organization vacuum has arisen, and they fill in the vacuum with meaning. In other words, they find the shortcomings of the system and work to remove them. NGOs often do the type of work that no-one else will do. What makes them different from other organizations is that they are not mainly motivated by gaining an economic advantage and making a financial profit but by working for a particular cause of public importance. The latter, of course, comes with its difficulties and challenges that commercial companies and the institutions do not experience.

***What do you think of partnership with other CSOs? Is it difficult to form coalitions in Bulgaria? What do you think about competition?***

Quite naturally, pursuing our goals as an organization, we have managed to build partnerships and even friendships with other organizations. Based on the departure point of civil society organizations working for public benefit, close to us in essence, we very easily find where and how we can help

one another and complement our efforts in our work for our causes. I cannot talk of competition in the sector because competition may arise when one's main goal is gaining profit and we work for causes. If someone else can manage to solve the problems of a cause that I have undertaken, that should actually make me happy.

***How do you envisage the civil society sector in 15 years?***

I envisage the civil society sector playing a key role for the public, just like nowadays, but I hope that it will be a bit better understood by the general public, which would boost it with additional energy. I also dream of it being easier to work as an NGO, to be capable of thinking more about one's public cause and the challenges facing its achievement rather than about the efforts to ensure the survival in reality of the organization.

***Which are the five most important fields that need to have the greatest civil society energy put in Bulgaria?***

Tackling the negative impact of and adaptation to climate change; development of the organizational capacity of the civil society sector; promotion of volunteering (in all fields); freedom of expression and critical thinking; healthcare.

***Do you think programs such as the Active Citizens Fund under the EEA FM are needed? How did it contribute to the development of your organization?***

There is an acute need of the Active Citizens Fund, including of increasing its scope. This is a key tool for support of the civil society sector, and the sector badly needs support. The contribution of the Active Citizens Fund to our organization was not considerable in terms of a financial amount but it was very well targeted and received at an opportune time, which enabled us to continue and further build on our efforts, even up to the point of being capable to apply the project outcomes in our regular work after its end as well.

## Component

# Scholarship Program for Roma Students Enrolled in Medical Studies

The Active Citizens Fund in Bulgaria included a component for granting scholarships to young Roma students enrolled in Medical Studies (the Scholarship Program) with a total budget of 600,000 EUR.

The Scholarship Program is aimed at helping to create a community of healthcare professionals that are motivated and prepared to contribute to solving the healthcare issues in the Roma community and that have the potential to become prominent role models for young Roma.

The Scholarship Program is managed by the Trust for Social Achievement Foundation (TSA). Complementing the Scholarship Program under the Active Citizens Fund, TSA also implements the pre-defined project *Mentorship Support for Roma Students Enrolled in Medical Studies*.

## The Scholarship Program in numbers:

More than **270** granted  
scholarships in the period 2018–2024

**120** supported students

More than **50** engaged mentors –  
health specialists and university teachers

**40** students have graduated  
and 11 more are to graduate  
in 2024

**50** students will continue their  
education after the end of  
the Program



# A Letter to our Scholarship Holders

*Our esteemed young ladies and gentlemen – students of Roma origin enrolled in Medical Studies,*

*The end of a Scholarship Program inevitably tempts us, the people behind it, to speak first and foremost in numbers, to quote settlements, specialties, number of students... However, what lies hidden behind the numbers is the potential of this Program to gather and tell stories. It has turned out difficult to talk about the participants without turning to you in person. That is why we would like to write this letter to you.*

*We have experienced a lot of things over the last six years: for some of you enrolling at the university coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic; others have already graduated and provide medical services; you carried out information and prevention campaigns among your communities; you completed and presented research papers; you made friendships. Both you and your mentors encountered hardships and obstacles as well as achieved success and victories.*

*You organized and took part in 20 small-scale community initiatives: lectures, information campaigns and meetings devoted to a health or education topic. You believed in the need to talk about such socially important diseases as diabetes and hypertension, which pose a threat to the society in general but affect the Roma community to a particularly big extent.*

*Almost every initiative started with a feeling of anxiety: "But I have never worked on a project. I don't know how to do it!", and after the successful planning and implementation ended with a desire for the next initiative: "Now I want to do something on a different topic as well!". Many of you can confidently confirm now that they have worked on a project. Even two or three of them.*

*With the support of your mentors, you carried out research, prepared academic publications, presented them at forums and conferences to the professional community. Some have already given back the knowledge acquired during their studies to their communities. Of course, we have looked forward with anxiety many times to the upcoming exams, participation in conferences and facing the audience on stage.*

*All of this was worth it for us. We believe that it was also worth it for you!*

*The Scholarship Program officially aims at assisting to create a community of healthcare professionals who are motivated and prepared to contribute to the solution of healthcare issues in the Roma community and have the potential to become prominent role models for young people who hardly dare to dream of your way and most often come from Roma neighbourhoods. Beyond the official goal, we believe in your desire to contribute to more accessible and affordable health services, and better health status of all people in Bulgaria.*

*Over the years, we have tried to plan and to give you occasions that will help you develop as personalities. We asked your opinion about the competences that are important for you but are not taught at the university, such as acquiring communication skills, mental health issues and management of personal finance. A favorite topic that you chose every year had to do with Roma culture and history. You also loved very much meetings organized with inspiring members of your community.*

*Certainly the most exciting moments for us were to see you in the field, how you communicate with people when you perform your role of a health specialist, the people's joy to see you and if they do not know you, to get to know you and respect you when they face you for a medical check-up.*

*It is not easy to meet the locals and to speak about vaccines during one of the largest-scale anti-vaccine campaigns in our history during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not easy to talk about sexual and reproductive health in front of teenagers. You exceeded your own expectations every time with a clear sense that you might be the first source of such health information for the members of your community. The schools that you have graduated from, in turn, welcomed you with enthusiasm, even when you wanted to work with the students on difficult topics. This is something that has proved challenging for quite a few civil society organizations lately.*

*While your mentors looked for ways to support you efficiently, sometimes coming up with ideas, at other times failing to do that, they also learnt about mentorship, about you and your communities, about the road each of you passed to get to the university, about the difficulties on your academic way. Though imperceptibly, you have become ambassadors of your community and culture. Many of your mentors will continue to support you in the future as well, rejoice your personal and professional achievements and give you a hand when you fall. It is up to you to take care and develop these relations.*

*In 2022, you were awarded a prize for being Ambassadors in the category Volunteers of the Fifth Annual HEROES Awards of the TimeHeroes.org platform. The jury pointed out the following among the reasons for awarding this prize to you: "Their work is an inspiring example of the development of a*

*future generation of health specialists who are capable of being role models and activists. People capable of curing some of the issues in society."*

This program was the last in a series of scholarship and mentorship programs that have created a long-standing and successful tradition of support for Roma students in Bulgaria. The support provided in the form of scholarships for the first Roma students about 20 years ago and their desire to set an example and be mentors of the future generations have led to an exponential growth in the number of young people willing to study at a university. Now we can observe hot spots of academic achievements, i.e. small towns and villages with dozens of young Roma enrolling in higher education studies. Nevertheless, we can see that this trend is extremely fragile and dependent on social and economic factors and barriers such as discrimination and stigmatization during the academic life of Roma students.

You are a new generation of Bulgarian citizens who have a lot of energy, ambitions and desire to have a full-fledged position in society. Some of you step proudly forward with a full sense and declaration of your identity, of who you are and where you are from. Others still have a road to walk ahead until both you and the environment surrounding you become prepared for that. Here comes the role of quality education and open-mindedness of our entire society, the absence of which are still tangible obstacles on the road to success and self-confidence of young people like you and all of us as a society.

We know that after you become successful professionals and parents, the future of your children and grandchildren will be marked by the first generation in the family that has studied at a university, i.e. you yourselves. Staying in school or studying at a university most probably will never be a dilemma facing your children and grandchildren. This is an investment worth being made.

Trust for Social Achievement Foundation (TSA)



*"Their work is an inspiring example of the development of a future generation of health specialists who are capable of being role models and activists. People capable of curing some of the issues in society."*







## Pre-defined project

# The Initiative for Building the Next Generation of Civic Leaders

*Workshop for Civic Initiatives* Foundation has created the Initiative for Building the Next Generation of Civic Leaders, led by the understanding that “tomorrow starts today” and in response to the need of a new and fresh outlook on the needs of the new generation in the sector and the need of a targeted support for young people, working for a cause and, last but not least, the need of building a community of people with shared understanding and values.



The last couple of years, marked by serious crises, health, political, economic and migrant crises, as well as marred by the natural disasters that took place and the war in Ukraine that broke out, have in reality turned civil society organizations in structures operating on the “first line”. Most of these organizations, apart from their work to overcome the “new” challenges, work on difficult in principle topics such as human rights, gender equality, antidiscrimination, domestic violence, overcoming social inequalities, including education, civic engagement, media literacy, environment protection, clean air, biodiversity protection, access to culture, etc. The work of these organizations often depends on human potential, most of all the leadership qualities of the people working in them. At the same time, young people have long ago stopped being the majority in civil society organizations, the way it used to be in the early 21st century. New employees are also not that many. The aging trend has been clear and visible ever since 2017 and it is still going on today (see data from the survey about the dynamics in the NGO sector carried out in 2023 by Open Society Institute – Sofia, available at [osis.bg](https://osis.bg)).

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We have tried to find the people who have not only desire but also professional experience in the sector, as well as a vision, to develop themselves and their organizations. Our programme has been based on the understanding that in order for young people to work efficiently, they need to have not only knowledge and skills but also knowledge of the new trends, directions, approaches to work as well as for them to have opportunities for sharing with colleagues, support from mentors who are experienced professionals and, last but not least, creation of an environment where the community members know one another. Our focus was on the development of “adaptable leaders” who have the strength to resist crises and insecurity.

We have invited leaders in the IT sector for training in design thinking as a way to solve problems with a new approach to work. In order for the new leaders to be successful, we worked together on the topics for creation of organizational resources, both financial and human, that include skills for fundraising, networking, building partnerships, etc. Due to the complex and complicated nature of management processes, the need to adhere



to high standards with regard to transparency and accountability, the efforts to build trust among a large circle of people (the team, volunteers, donors, supporters, the community), serious attention was paid to the topics of strategic management and transparency and accountability of organizations.

Promoting diversity and inclusion has also been an important goal with regard to the development of young people and the inclusion of a wide range of voices and viewpoints in decision-making processes.

We have tried to ensure continuity and sustainability through mentorship so that current leaders can transfer their knowledge and experience to the new generation enabling a continuous success. Each young person had a mentor to guide, support and encourage them, and this is how young people acquired a real understanding of the work in the civil society sector and the challenges facing leadership.

The Alumnae Club that has been set up continues to be a space for discussions, training and counselling. What gives us greatest joy is that there are already organizations of the participants that have carried out joint projects.

*"What was very important and valuable for me and what I got from the initiative were the lectures at the beginning about management of organizations, fundraising, marketing presentation of various causes and initiatives. The other very valuable thing, that is inestimable, are the contacts I made because we were very different people selected, from a lot of different fields.*

*We have made numerous mistakes, we have come up against walls. These are things that you cannot learn about until you come across them. And my contacts with people from the business, with people from the NGO circles and my mentor make me as if walk on a well-trodden path. I have freely gathered knowledge and skills from people who are professionals in the field that I have devoted my life to and this is incredibly valuable for me. This is what makes the initiative valuable."*

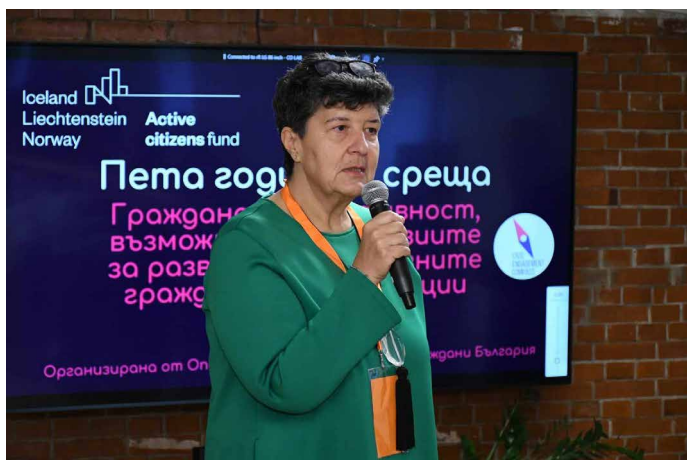
Nikolay Nikolov, Verniyat Nastoynik (Loyal Guardian)



*"We have to understand something: civil society organizations do a great favor to the state. They are there when the state is not or they are there when the state is there but does not know what to do. Therefore, along this line of thinking, the civil society sector has a great potential, but the biggest challenge of the sector is that it has no time, money and resources, knowledge, most of all.*

*This is exactly what the initiative has given me. This is the most valuable in this project of the Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation, the knowledge it has given me. Because when you have the knowledge, you will find money and resources."*

Alexander Milanov, National Foster Care Association



You can find out more about the Initiative here:



On the photo: Iliyana Nikolova, Workshop for Civic Initiatives Foundation

## Pre-defined project

# Project Generation Facility

The Project Generation Facility is a specialized mechanism of Open Society Institute – Sofia for support of civil society organizations working for equal inclusion of the Roma. It is aimed at developing integration projects and provision of access to financing as well as the successful implementation of projects with the funds from available financing programmes.

The Project Generation Facility supports:

- civil society organizations mainly working in the field of Roma inclusion;
- other civil society organizations that develop projects aimed at improving the state of the Roma community and contribute to the Roma integration.

The Facility supports work under programmes that are perceived by the applicants as:

- hard to access due to complicated procedures and rules for application and implementation of projects;
- highly competitive;
- requiring expertise in other fields, as they are not directly targeted at the Roma.

## The Project Generation Facility in numbers

Over the last four years, the Facility has generated and supported with gratuitous counselling aid **more than 200 project ideas** of non-governmental organizations related to better education, employment, health, social services and cultural development targeted at vulnerable Roma communities in the territory of **49 municipalities** in two-thirds of all administrative districts in Bulgaria and in the territory of all 6 planning regions in the country.

The NGO partners that entrusted themselves to us were provided with gratuitous counselling aid for the **development and submission of 115 project proposals** that are important for local communities, **47 of which were granted financing in the total amount of almost 13 million BGN**, and 15 more project initiatives aimed at the promotion of intercultural education in kindergartens and schools are to be evaluated. We believe that many of them will be implemented.

Our training sessions inspired **more than 200 representatives of the civil society sector**, most of whom of Roma origin, for more successful development and implementation of projects as well as for more efficient partnership with the public institutions and the media in the name of more equal and full-fledged inclusion and involvement of the Roma in public

## What the organizations themselves tell us...

*We congratulate you on the idea because it truly responds to real needs of small organizations.*

*We are a new organization and we have no experience in planning projects. The consultant helped us structure our project idea and develop our concept. The consultant was incredibly useful for us for the budgeting as well.*

*The consultations helped us follow the right direction. We also got a sense of security and confidence. The aid received was provided with the needed expertise and knowledge, it was timely and accurate.*

*It is the first time that I have come across opportunities for support that develop my own expertise, from the Facility in my case, and I believe that boosting the expertise of beneficiaries is the most important contribution that has to be developed.*



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