



magazine

15



THE STORY OF A  
15-YEAR JOURNEY

THE STORY  
CONTINUES

AMERICA FOR  
BULGARIA  
FOUNDATION



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**From my first visit to Bulgaria in the  
spring of 1992, I have been captivated by  
Bulgarians' unwavering determination to  
create a better place to work, live,  
and raise families.**

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**Nancy Schiller**

## Dear Reader,

I am delighted and honored to present *15*, a publication of the America for Bulgaria Foundation. This magazine celebrates a fifteen-year journey, showcasing the remarkable programs and individuals that the Foundation has supported. These partnerships are visually conveyed by & — the ampersand — a symbol that represents commitment and connection.

Selecting the content for this publication was challenging as we have been privileged to witness the dedication and passion of countless Bulgarians behind more than 1,000 projects. Each project represents a profound commitment to making a positive difference in communities throughout Bulgaria — from villages and towns to cities and the country at large — in areas such as education, healthcare, entrepreneurship, science and innovation, the arts, cultural heritage, nature tourism, and rule of law.

From my first visit to Bulgaria in the spring of 1992, I have been captivated by Bulgarians' unwavering determination to create a better place to work, live, and raise families. Through Foundation grants, we have seen some of

their inspired visions become reality. From the dozens of classroom renovations and performance spaces across the country to university lecture halls and museum restorations — the changes have been truly transformative. And, of course, the unmistakable aroma of freshly baked bread, seasoned with what I call Bulgaria's "magic salt," adds a delicious, welcoming touch to every ribbon-cutting ceremony!

As I travel through Bulgaria, I find myself immersed in its vibrant culture, rich history, and breathtaking natural beauty. Bicycling along the Danube, soaring over Belogradchik in a hot-air balloon, hiking through the Rhodope mountains, picking roses in the Rose Valley, marveling at the Bishop's Basilica of Philipopolis mosaics, and savoring homemade *lyutenitsa* at the annual Kurtovo Konare festival are just a few of my treasured experiences.

Through tourism, we have the opportunity to make a difference, one journey at a time. To that end, ABF supports cultural heritage and nature tourism projects that have the power to transform and uplift communities and preserve cherished traditions.



Supporting education opportunities equips young people with the skills to compete for quality jobs and nurtures the entrepreneurs, business leaders, and science innovators that will ensure Bulgaria has a bright future.

None of these successes would matter without an environment of freedom and justice. That is why ABF supports independent media as well as civil society organizations focusing on judicial reform and anti-corruption. These organizations uncover how our money is spent and give us access to the truth, fostering an environment where innovation flourishes, corruption diminishes, and societies blossom.

*15* magazine is a tribute to the shared vision to make Bulgaria an even better place to build your future. It embodies the spirit of collaboration, determination, and innovation that has

characterized our partnership, our &, with the incredible people of this country. I am excited to share this publication with you, and I hope it sparks inspiration and appreciation for the progress we — Bulgarians & Americans — have witnessed together.

To our many partners and friends, to the dedicated ABF team and board of directors, current and past, thank you for being part of this enriching and transformative journey. I look forward to continuing our collective efforts to create an even brighter future for Bulgaria. The story does continue.

Warmest regards,

**Nancy Schiller**, President  
America for Bulgaria Foundation



**BY BOAT,  
ON FOOT  
OR WHEELS:  
EXPLORE  
THE DANUBE  
(BUT BEWARE OF  
THE EELS)**

Its name is known the world over thanks to its lasting hold over popular culture: the Danube inspired one of the most recognizable pieces of music ever written, Johann Strauss's "The Blue Danube Waltz," entire painting and music styles, as well as books, movies, and even culinary specialties.

The Danube is also an explorer's heaven: the more you discover, the more there is to ex-

plore. Just when you think you have gotten to know it, the river throws a marvelous surprise your way, particularly if you venture out of the grand cities and major natural parks. Both manmade and natural wonders await adventurers along the 2,850 km (1,770 miles) stretch of coastline from the Black Forest in Germany to Ukraine's Black Sea coast, but for the river's best-kept secrets you would have to visit its right bank in Bulgaria.



Ancient and medieval fortresses, “mad” forests, reedy lagoons teeming with wildlife, haunting monuments to socialist urban planning, Europe’s oldest rock monasteries, kayaking expeditions and feasts with the river’s offerings, charming guesthouses and unforgettable encounters with locals, tucked-away museums—the Danube’s Bulgarian stretch offers that and much more.

You can even see the coastline through the eyes of an ancient Roman customs officer, medieval archer, or a prehistoric hunter-gatherer!

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**The Danube’s beauty is celebrated in the Bulgarian national anthem, and although far lesser known than “Blue Danube,” Bulgarian composer Diko Iliev’s “Danube Horo” is a fitting tribute to the river’s grandness. (Play it at your own risk: the piece may cause an uncontrollable urge to break into dance!)**

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Recognizing the region’s potential, the America for Bulgaria Foundation invests in local initiatives promoting natural and cultural heritage tourism in the country’s Danube basin and all of the Bulgarian North. Some of the initiatives are already underway, so why not plan your next getaway along the “Danube so bright and blue”?

## **Kudelin, Vidin Region**

This village near the Bulgarian-Serbian border is known mainly for being a starting point for Dunav Ultra — a 460-mile cycling route connecting the Bulgarian Northwest with the Black Sea coast and running mostly along the

length of the Danube River. (Dunav is the Bulgarian word for Danube.) Route developer and entrepreneur Boris Begamov first traversed the route as a personal endurance challenge, reflected in the “ultra” part of its name: his goal was to cover the distance of nearly 460 miles in under 48 hours. The more he got to know the side roads, layered history, and diverse communities along the river, however, the more captivated he became. This is why, over the past decade, he has been working to uncover the region’s enormous tourism potential.

Dunav Ultra is a recipient of an Innovation of the Year award from the Bulgarian Ministry of Tourism, and Dunav Ultra’s annual endurance challenge in September is an important part of Europe’s cycling events calendar.

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**Uncovering the 100 Dunav Ultra Sights will stimulate all your senses and take you on a unique journey through time and space.**

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And while cycling adventures along the route have a special charm, travelers can explore the region using their preferred mode of transportation. The Dunav Ultra app will guide explorers to the best places to stay and eat and all the natural and cultural sights worth exploring.



## Vidin

Bulgaria's northwesternmost city, Vidin, boasts centuries of history: it was in turn an ancient Celtic settlement, a fortified Roman town, one of the main cities in the medieval Bulgarian state, and the center of Osman Pazvantoglu's breakaway state at the end of the eighteenth century.

Nowadays, the city is home to Bulgaria's best-preserved medieval fortress, Baba Vida, Pazvantoglu's mosque and library, many old Orthodox churches, the Vidin Synagogue, and a number of grand nineteenth- and twentieth-century residences. To make the most of your visit, pick up a guide from the Regional History Museum in Vidin and follow one of the suggested routes, or hire an escorted tour. You can also explore Vidin and its environs by

boat. This will offer a unique vantage point for viewing popular sites such as the Baba Vida Fortress and New Europe Bridge and help you discover places known only to locals such as "Naked" Island.

## Belogradchik

Just over 50 km (30 miles) south of Vidin is the town of Belogradchik, of wondrous rock and fortress fame. For a bird's-eye view of the Belogradchik Rocks and the ancient Kaleto Fortress (also known as Belogradchik Fortress), as well as Vidin's major sights, rent a hot-air balloon ride with Adventure Center Belogradchik.

## Oryahovo

Beautiful turn-of-the-century architecture in downtown Oryahovo bears witness to the town's commercial and cultural importance at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Your exploration of this Danubian gem of a town won't be complete without a visit to the Oryahovo History Museum. There you will learn about the town's beginnings in Antiquity and its transformations over the centuries. Through the museum's Echo of the Centuries initiative, you will get a taste of medieval life in the area: guided archery practice is offered to visitors to the Rock, a medieval fortress managed by the museum.

To learn about the life and work of one of Bulgaria's most beloved composers (of "Danube Horo" fame), be sure to pay a visit to the Diko Iliev Museum, which is a part of the Oryahovo History Museum complex.





Find out who Van Man is and why one of China's most prestigious art institutes is named after a Bulgarian by visiting the museum's newest permanent exhibition, Marin Varbanov — the Prince from Oryahovo.

And while you are exploring the museum's many treasures, purchase a copy of the book *Window to Goodwill* for a glimpse into Bulgaria's long, proud history of philanthropy. Proceeds from the book support local initiatives.

## Nikopol

Despite its diminutive size, the town of Nikopol boasts a proud name and a rich history. "The City of Victory" (from Greek) has been a meeting point for Thracians, Greeks, Romans, Bulgarians, Slavs, Ottomans, and many others over the centuries. In the 1396 Battle of Nicopolis, it became the site of the last large-scale crusade of the Middle Ages.

Be sure to visit the medieval fortress and beautiful churches built in the style predominant during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

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**The Fountain of Elijah, set in a tombstone and immortalizing the love of Fronton, a second-century Roman clerk, for his late wife, Elijah, is a must-see as well. Seventeen centuries later, the inscription Fronton dedicated to his wife moved French explorer Dijardin so much he had a second, equally touching inscription made.**

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For a truly authentic experience, discover Nikopol through the eyes of a fisherman by booking a fishing and sightseeing tour with one of the skilled guides from the Amour Nikopol Association. In addition to learning about one of the oldest trades in the world, you will get an insider's tour of nearby islands and the only river-facing rock church in Bulgaria.

The Amour Nikopol Association teamed up with the local *chitalishte* (community center) to organize a Danube food and crafts festival every July.

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**Fancy becoming Indiana Jones for a day and search for lost ancient worlds? An hour's drive from Nikopol are the remains of the ancient Roman city of Ulpia Oescus, an important Roman economic and cultural center in the second and third centuries (and one of the 100 Dunav Ultra Sights!), said to have been visited by Emperor Constantine himself.**

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## Belene

Belene is a place of many contrasts. Alongside lush natural habitats swarming with wildlife are grim reminders of unrealized industrial projects and haunting tributes to communism's repressive system.

The town sits on the right bank of the Danube River facing Belene Island (also known as Persin Island), the largest island in Bulgarian waters and an important part of Persina Natural Park. The island is also home to the former Belene labor camp for political prisoners during the communist dictatorship in the country.

Visitors can book a tour of the island through the Belene Island Foundation, an organization

committed to preserving the memory of the victims of Bulgaria's totalitarian regime and to transforming the town and its surroundings into a place of year-round tourism.

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**Explore the island and the region by signing up for Persina by Bike, a multi-day bike tour for the whole family, developed by the Dunav Ultra team and held every summer.**

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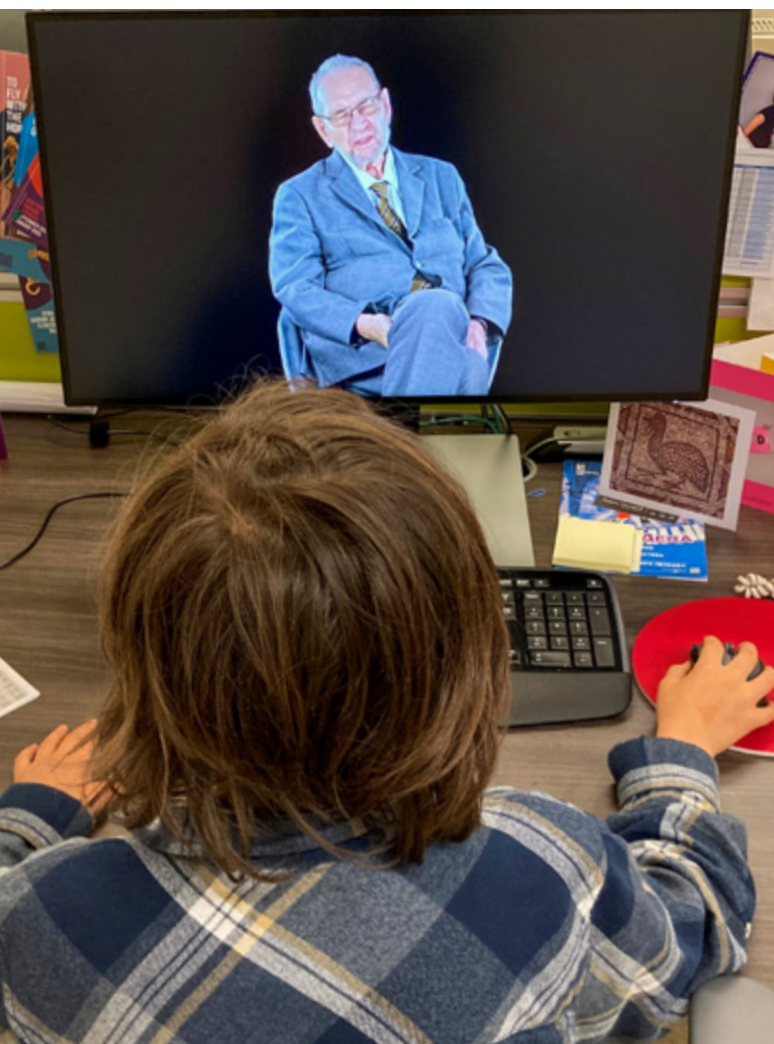


Belene boasts the first monument to Pope John Paul II in Bulgaria; the ruins of the ancient Dimum castrum fortress; two catholic churches, one of which is a cultural monument housing the sanctuary of Bishop Eugene Bossilkov, who was beatified by Pope John Paul II; and the Dimum neighborhood, with hundreds of abandoned apartments built for the workers of the never-constructed Belene nuclear power plant.

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**The town hosts an annual summer school on memory of the recent past for students, run by nonprofit Sofia Platform. The organization also developed Belene.Camp, a platform offering virtual conversations with communist labor camp survivors and a virtual tour of the town and former camp sites.**

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In the past few years, Belene Island has seen a rise in the Dalmatian pelican population after the birds had nearly disappeared. Due to the hard work of several organizations, there are now three colonies of the Dalmatian pelican nesting in the country. The Dalmatian Pelican Festival, held in July, celebrates the return of the pelicans to Belene Island.

Pelicans are far from the only birds nesting in the area. The Belene Islands Complex is a protected wetland area of international importance that is home to hundreds of rare birds and plants. As such, the region is a paradise for birdwatchers and nature lovers.

## Svishtov

Known primarily as the hometown of one of Bulgaria's best-loved writers, Aleko Konstantinov, Svishtov provides opportunities for both culture and nature tourism. The Church of the Holy Trinity in town is a must-see and the work of another great Bulgarian master, the architect and builder Kolyu Ficheto.

Whether you are a literature, history, or architecture buff, or are interested in the healing potential of the region's thermal springs, Svishtov has something for everyone.

Kayak Club Svishtov is similarly versatile offering kayaking trips to nearby islands and towns such as Nikopol, kayaking classes, kay-

ak and bike rentals, as well as walking tours of Svishtov. Don't miss the trip to Vardim Island and the combined tour on the Danube and Yantra Rivers!

## Ruse

Much can be said about and seen in Little Vienna, as the coastal city of Ruse is known among Bulgarians, but we will focus on one novel way of experiencing this gem of a city. In prehistory, the islets and caverns in the area were inhabited by hunter-gatherers. Modern visitors to Ruse can experience what life was like for the ancients on the banks of the





## Durankulak

Danube by booking an eponymous tour with Prista Tourist Society. Participants will learn how prehistoric humans built shelter and protected their territory, hunted and fished, and prepared their food. They will also find out what the ancients believed in and how their art reflected those beliefs.

## Tutrakan & the “Mad” Forest Area

Fishing is an important part of Tutrakan’s economy, and the town is famous for its historic Fisherman’s Quarter. Get to know the area by boat, on foot, and by bike by booking a tour with Danube Tours. The organization’s skillful guides will help you discover the region’s main sights, become acquainted with traditional arts and crafts, and sample local delicacies.

While you are in the area, make a point of visiting the Sveshtari tomb with the mysterious stone ladies and hunt for treasures in Razgrad’s Abritus Archaeological Museum.

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**An insider’s tip: Stay out for the sunset; you won’t regret it! (Ask a local for the best sunset viewing point.)**

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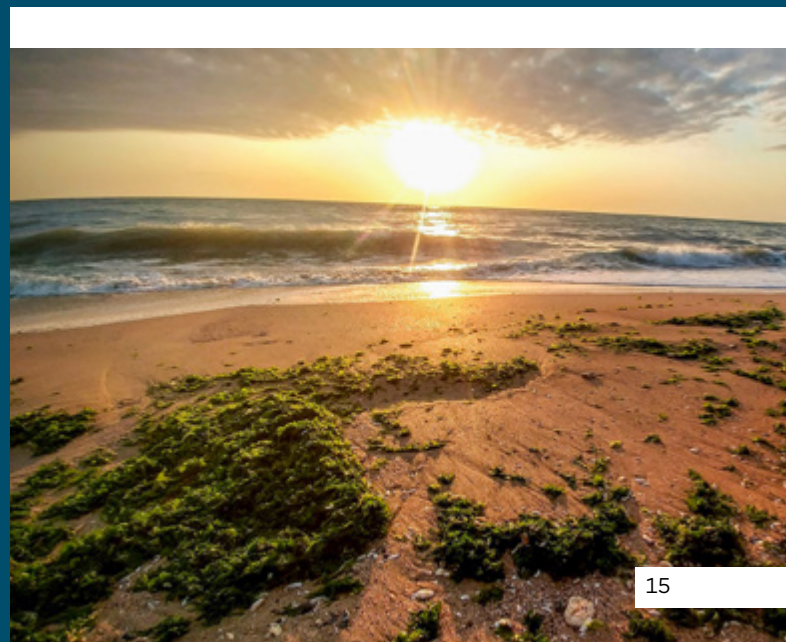
South of Tutrakan is a region known as Lugoogie, or Mad Forest, featuring picturesque villages, gentle undulating hills, and beautiful lakes and rivers (sadly, most of the forests were felled decades ago). To see the best of the area, book a weekend tour with Varna-based VeloWeekend.bg.

The end point of the Dunav Ultra route is one of the most interesting and least-known places in Bulgaria. Durankulak Lake is one of the last well-preserved coastal areas in the country, and on Big Island, also known as the “European Troy,” near the village of Durankulak, archeologists have found remains of the most ancient settled population of Europe (from the 54th century BCE).

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**If planning isn’t your forte and you’d rather have someone else handle the tedious bookings and other travel logistics, get in touch with Traventuria’s experienced tour guides. Watching rare birds along the Danube, tasting river-sourced delicacies, staying in authentic guesthouses, learning fascinating tidbits about the sights along the Danube coast, venturing out into the wildest corners of the entire Bulgarian north — Traventuria will make sure your trip is truly unforgettable!**

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# BAS

БЪЛГАРСКИ АМЕРИКАНСКИ БИЗНЕС ЦЕНТЪР

Б  
БИЗНЕС



НАРЪЧНИК ЗА  
УСПЕШЕН БИЗНЕС

AMERICA FOR  
BULGARIA  
FOUNDATION

**YOU ARE NOT A BORN**

**ENTREPRENEUR? TRY BASE**

## **Creating something of their own — many an entrepreneurial journey starts with this aspiration.**

For nearly six years, Business Academy for Starting Entrepreneurs (BASE) has helped hundreds of bootstrappers achieve professional independence and personal satisfaction by supporting their first steps in business. Graduates of the America for Bulgaria Foundation's free training program start successful ventures in their chosen fields, often in their hometowns or other desirable places. Their success also benefits their communities: in addition to creating jobs, a small business feeds families and supports the local economy.

BASE follows a time-tested model developed in the United States: program lecturers and mentors are successful entrepreneurs and professionals who volunteer their time, sharing their experience and knowledge. Over three months, participants learn how to develop their business ideas, why it is important to do a market study, how to talk to potential customers and suppliers, where to get start-up capital, how to price their goods and services, and how to avoid rookie mistakes.

Participants gain broadly applicable practical skills and access to a nationwide network of business partners and entrepreneurial individuals. At the program's end, the best business plans receive seed funding for the businesses' launch.

Free entrepreneurship training is available through ABF's partnership with the Trust for Social Achievement, Srednogorie Industrial Cluster, Association of Bulgarian Leaders and Entrepreneurs (ABLE), Council of Women in Business in Bulgaria, Magna Natura Association, East Accelerator Foundation, IT Stara Zagora, and Society and Security Foundation.



# 3 BUSINESSES IN FOCUS

## CAN ENTREPRENEURSHIP PRESERVE TRADITIONAL CRAFTS?

Four years ago, master woodworker Radenko Velinov returned from Scotland with the dream of reviving traditional crafts and occupations in his native village. Radenko bought an old purification plant in Smilyan and began restoring it with his own money. When he completes the renovation, the Purifier's workshop and exhibition space would enable artists and makers of various stripes to practice, display, and teach their craft to others. Bringing artists and craftsmen under the same roof would catalyze collaborations and the establishment of small businesses, attracting tourism and benefiting the local economy.

Radenko's vision attracted dozens of volunteers and donors as well as the support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation. In June

2023, the Purifier opened its doors and now welcomes artists and visitors.

The Purifier's guests have access to craft workshops, a coworking space, a fantastic open area for relaxation, yoga, movie nights, and chats with new friends (over Rhodope herbal tea, of course!), as well as the unsurpassed hospitality of the host — Radenko and his family.

For his efforts to preserve Bulgarian traditions, Radenko was awarded a Worthy Bulgarian distinction in 2022.



Dozens of friends and supporters from near and far attended The Purifier's opening on June 23. Bulgaria's "cosmic" voice Valya Balkanska and internationally renowned bagpiper Petar Yanev were guests of honor. Members of the ABF team were also there to mark the completion of a years-old dream by master woodworker and visionary Radenko Velinov, who came back from Scotland to preserve Bulgarian traditions in his native Smilyan.



Ms. Balkanska's message to those in attendance was: "Let's support the young and the hardworking. Radenko was abroad, worked, succeeded, and returned to Bulgaria to do something meaningful for his country. He deserves our deepest respect."

With the Purifier, Radenko hopes to revive and promote the practice of traditional occupations such as woodworking, weaving, leatherworking, metalworking, and pottery.

Radenko believes that "making art or practicing a traditional craft is a kind of purification, emotionally and spiritually."

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**The plans for the artisan center draw on Radenko's experience at furniture making studios in Scotland, a country that places a high value on craftsmanship and where he lived for nearly eight years.**

**Radenko trained with some of Scotland's best furniture makers and woodworkers, learning about both traditional woodworking techniques and modern trends in the craft, including sustainable sourcing of hardwoods.**

**"Radenko has a very old-fashioned commitment to the job he has to do, which is very rare nowadays," says Pol Bergius, a leading Scottish furniture maker and a mentor of Radenko's.**

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*Iliyan is particularly proud that he was able to pivot during the pandemic toward takeaway and catering and didn't have to lay off staff.*

## **ILIYAN FAILED TWICE BUT DIDN'T GIVE UP. HE MAKES THE BEST BANITSA IN SOFIA**

Iliyan's bakery failed twice before the business finally took off. "I see the two failures as a bonus because I learned a lot of things," he says.

He learned that "we were good at the craft but not at the business part." Business Academy for Starting Entrepreneurs supplied the necessary knowledge and some of the funds for a fresh start.

Banicharnitsa Tradicionna ("Traditional Banitsa-Making Workshop") opened its doors in 2018, staffed only by him and his mother. Initially, Iliyan put in 18-hour workdays even as he continued working part-time toward a university degree in film and TV production. Soon

business was booming, and he hired more staff. This freed up the time and resources for him to complete his university studies.

Today, Banicharnitsa Tradicionna sells a broad selection of *banitsa* (traditional Bulgarian puff pastry with an egg-and-cheese filling) and other savory and sweet delicacies out of the bakery in Sofia's Geo Milev neighborhood and through the major takeaway delivery services in Bulgaria. Banicharnitsa Tradicionna's second location, in downtown Sofia, opened in January.



## SUSTAINABLE CLOTHING BUSINESS DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM NANA

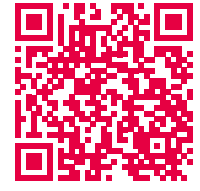
Participants in ABF's Business Academy for Starting Entrepreneurs don't wait around for things to happen: they carve their own personal and professional paths in life. Mariana Barakchieva gave up a comfortable life and a well-paid engineering job in Switzerland for a life of pursuing mountain adventures and building her own sustainable clothing business in Bulgaria.

Mariana may be new to selling her handicrafts, but she has been making things since she was a child, when she crafted notebooks and nailed together furniture for her sisters' dolls. Watching her great grandmother — *nanka* in the local Rhodope Mountain dialect — sew on an old Singer sewing machine was another favorite childhood activity.

It was the great grandmother's craft Mariana turned to two decades later when conventional professional achievement was no longer enough to satisfy her need for creative expression and freedom. This is how Nanka Creative was born, the brand Mariana co-owns with her Swiss husband, Simon Roder.

Nanka Creative honors tradition but also cares about the planet's tomorrow: to make the beautiful hoodies and shirts that shoppers rave about, Mariana only works with ethically produced, quality merino fabric sourced from a small sustainable factory in Finland.





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Mariana's plan for the future of Nanka Creative was one of the funded projects in the program's 2020 edition in Smolyan. The prize money helped her purchase a new sewing machine.

Mariana received further assistance developing her business through BASE Mentor, a mentorship program the America for Bulgaria Foundation launched in partnership with the Association of Business Leaders and Entrepreneurs.

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Mariana Barakchieva has programmed eye surgery software, worked in radio, done broadcasts for TV networks in Bulgaria and the United States, managed a mountain shelter in the Swiss Alps, and pulled off daring rock-climbing feats. Nothing in her experience, however, prepared her to run a business.

Business Academy for Starting Entrepreneurs taught Mariana to value her work more fairly.

"I realized that my early prices didn't factor in profit," she says, laughing about her rookie mistake today.

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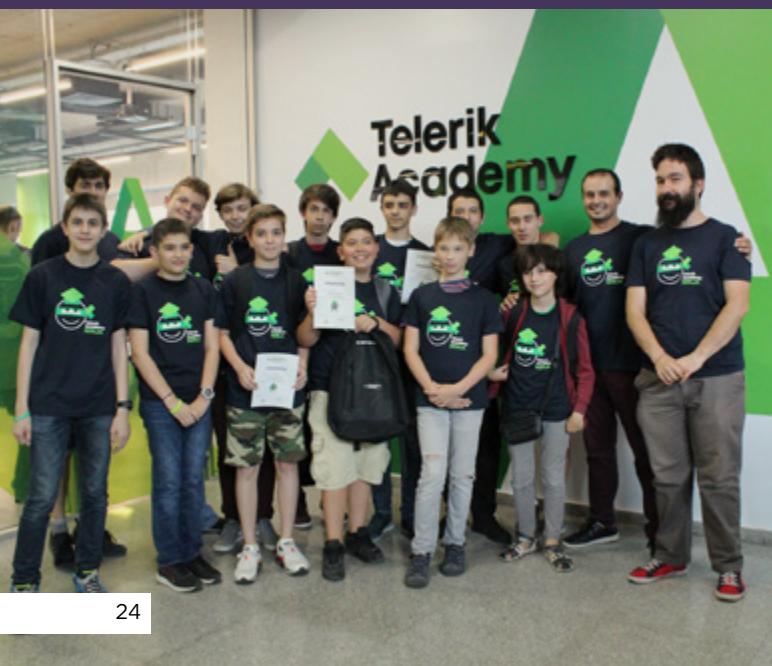


# THE IT PROGRAM THAT IS KEEPING YOUTH IN BULGARIA

Alexander Tsvetanov is only 21, but he is already an IT veteran. He has been taking programming courses since third grade, excelling in each one, got his first job in tech at 16, and is currently a software engineer at Chaos Group, the Bulgarian producer of the 3D rendering software V-Ray. He is also pursuing a degree in computer engineering at Technical University Sofia.

For two years in high school, Irina Hristova, now 24, commuted from her hometown, Lovech, to Sofia to attend IT courses. Then in her senior year, she turned to IT full-time, moving to the capital and finishing high school as a part-time student. The move helped her become a sought-after junior expert in the tech sphere, where she still works. Her current employer, Fourth, is a leading global provider of intelligent cloud-based solutions for the hospitality and retail industries.

Dimitar Tatarski loved his game development courses and his teachers' approach so much he became a teacher himself — at 17. He kept up with his vocation during his two-year employment as a program developer and through his university studies. At 23, he already has an impressive seven years of experience in teaching both youth and corporate clients.



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Alexander, Irina, and Dimitar are graduates of Telerik Academy School, the leading provider of free digital education to youth in Bulgaria, and all three credit their time at the academy as key for their professional orientation and successful career start.

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They are not alone. Although young, Telerik Academy School graduates have well-paying jobs, with every third earning well above the Sofia average, according to a 2021 Global Metrics report. This is thanks to the wide range of transferable skills students develop at the academy. Every fourth graduate occupies a senior role at their company.

Most academy graduates still in school say Telerik Academy School influenced their decision to continue their education in IT or a related field, with three out of every four graduates over 18 years currently pursuing IT-related majors at university. A number of them suggest that what they learned at the academy gives them a significant advantage over their university classmates and helps them breeze through some of the coursework.

In the 2022-2023 academic year, free quality digital education was extended to more than 3,000 students in grades 1-12 as Telerik Academy School launched a record 140 courses in 47 towns across Bulgaria. This way, students like Irina who want a future in tech no longer have to commute to Sofia to pursue their dreams.

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**Over the past six years, the academy has expanded its educational offerings to cover all of Bulgaria's districts. More than 20,000 children and young adults have benefited from its programs thanks to support from the America for Bulgaria Foundation, individual and corporate donors, municipalities, schools, local institutions, and nonprofits.**

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The Global Metrics report points to this expansion as one of the biggest achievements of the program. Its outreach to smaller towns not only contributes to the development of individual participants but also stimulates local economic growth, the report found.



Because digital skills are in demand in every sphere of activity today, quality education in the field benefits all students, not only those seeking IT careers.

“We are happy that our programs provide students with equal access to the digital world and an opportunity to enter it, so that they are freer to decide on a future profession and a location from which to exercise it. Our goal is to help them succeed regardless of the field in which they choose to develop, because digital skills are key to any profession, now and in the future,” says Petar Sharkov, the academy’s executive director.

“Another important aspect of our work is the teachers in our courses; we work with outstanding professionals across the country, and this year our network already numbers 100 teachers. A total of 94% of these teachers

say that they apply what they have learned at Telerik Academy School in their teaching outside it as well. This confirms that our work in the education system leads to positive change well beyond our programs,” Sharkov adds.

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**Educational change wasn’t what Telerik Academy founders Svetozar Georgiev, Boyko Yaramov, Vassil Terziev, and Hristo Kosev had in mind when they started the academy back in 2011. But just like their company Telerik — whose sale to Progress Software for \$263 million in 2014 is still the largest tech deal in Bulgaria to date — the academy became a true game changer in the ICT field in Bulgaria.**

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“When we started Telerik Academy School a decade ago, we were confident that it would be useful, but that was the extent of it. We started timidly, with no grand expectations or a sense of what the long-term benefits would be. We also did not have the tools to measure success,” Georgiev says.

“Gradually, with the development of the programs and their geographical expansion in Bulgaria, we began to see firsthand that the academy can literally change people’s lives, especially in smaller places. There is no greater feeling than to ignite a spark in a child and direct them on the path to a promising profession,” he adds.

Importantly, Alexander, Irina, and Dimitar are pursuing their dreams in their home country — as are 93% of the 1,850 academy graduates who

work in IT-related jobs, Global Metrics found. This is equal to about 5% of the IT workforce in 2021 in Bulgaria, an impressive result for a single program.

At this pace, we have no doubt that, in ten years’ time, most of Bulgaria’s engineers will have passed through at least one Telerik Academy School program — and that we can expect some great things from them. Just look at where Alexander, Irina, and Dimitar are in their twenties!

Not only that, but the academy’s programs might just be part of the solution to Bulgaria’s brain drain.



## Digital Literacy for Every Child

“Educating 3,000 children each year is a major achievement, but there are over 700,000 students in the educational system in need of our services. In the past two years, in partnership with 15 schools in the country, the Telerik Academy School team developed a new model that can be implemented at any school in Bulgaria. This model is dictated by the needs of schools to provide ready-made, high-quality educational content on current and interesting topics for learners, as well as by municipalities that want to develop and upgrade the digital skills of students,” says Petar Sharkov, executive director of Telerik Academy School.

## What’s Next

Telerik Academy School is working on a platform featuring educational content for grades 1 through 12. Schools will receive access to that content by buying annual subscriptions.

Each program developed by Telerik Academy School contains a complete set of study materials and teacher aids. The aim is to cover topics related to artificial intelligence, cyber security, mobile applications, design, robotics, programming, and game development as well as topics related to students’ personal development.



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**“Telerik Academy School’s programs are not for programmers. These programs fully develop students’ competencies in a digital environment: skills for accelerated learning, the ability to create mental maps and to plan. They enable a still-developing person to imagine the professions of the future and find their place in them. These are basic human skills. All other solutions for working with digital tools are focused on the process itself, while the academy’s programs are oriented toward the student; they work for the student and with the student.”**

**Mihail Nenov**  
principal of  
Alexander Georgiev – Kodjakafaliyata  
Primary & Middle School in Burgas

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## CLASSICAL MUSIC IS NOT FOR KIDS? FORTISSIMO PROVES OTHERWISE

**“I want classical music to reach every child in Bulgaria.”**

Renowned Bulgarian conductor Maxim Eshkenazy’s vision was a distant dream 15 years ago. In partnership with the newly established America for Bulgaria Foundation, he created the Fortissimo program, whose mission is to instill in children a love of classical music and to give a platform to talented young musicians, allowing them to perform alongside established names in the music industry.

Over the years, the program with the powerful name — “fortissimo” is a musical direction meaning “very loudly” — has amplified classical music’s presence on stages nationwide, bringing it closer to tens of thousands of Bulgarian children and their families.

By combining classical music by Bulgarian and foreign composers, favorite tunes from musicals, gospel, jazz, film music, Bulgarian folk melodies, and Romani rhythms, Fortissimo overcomes borders and barriers, challenges stereotypes, and builds a kind of cultural bridge between genres and nations, between young audiences and classical music.

The Fortissimo suite of musical programs includes Fortissimo Fest, the country’s largest classical music festival over the past decade; Fortissimo Class, the first children’s program for modern classical music education; and the family concert series Fortissimo Family.

Today Fortissimo is a fixture in the Sofia Philharmonic’s event calendar, and Fortissimo Family concerts are performed by the National Philharmonic Orchestra at Bulgaria Hall, the country’s leading classical concert venue.

## Why classical music?

Classical music has an extremely beneficial effect not only on the mental and psycho-emotional development of children but also on their social and cognitive skills. Research shows that exposing children to classical music at an early age stimulates their intelligence and emotional development.

Arts and culture are key to building democratic values by actively engaging citizens in discussions about important issues and encouraging a collective approach to resolving controversial issues.

Good educational strategies emphasize arts education. The arts improve learning outcomes, reduce student dropout, and maintain teacher skills.

Artistic expression helps to preserve cultural heritage and customs and pass them on to future generations.

Nonprofit organizations and artistic businesses create jobs and attract tourists, revitalizing cities, neighborhoods, and villages.







## The Fortissimo Effect

Fortissimo's programs inspired other cultural institutions in Bulgaria to open up to young audiences and direct resources to the development of youth programs. Today there is hardly a festival, museum, or gallery without youth offerings, audiences at cultural events are increasingly diverse, and the increased consumption of cultural products leads to the creation of ever higher-quality content.

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“The goal of Fortissimo Class is not to make a musician out of every student, but to show them the beauty of music. The final concerts of Fortissimo Class are a real treat; seeing a hall full of children clapping and cheering as if they were at a rock concert and enjoying music with their whole being — that is priceless!”

**Peter Makedonski,**  
a trumpet player at the Bulgarian  
National Radio Orchestra and a  
Fortissimo Class teacher

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**With 22 gold medals, Bulgaria tops the all-time ranking of the International Linguistics Olympiad, overtaking the United States, which has 21 gold medals, followed by Russia, England, and Poland.**

## Every year, Bulgarian students earn distinctions from prestigious international competitions, outperforming hundreds of the world's best high schoolers.

The Association of Olympic Teams in Natural Sciences supports the training and competitive careers of Bulgarian youth teams in disciplines such as mathematics, chemistry, physics, biology, astronomy, astrophysics, linguistics, and informatics. Since the association's founding in 2010 until now, Bulgarian competitors have brought back over 720 medals, including more than 120 gold, 300 silver, and 300 bronze medals.

Since 2010, the America for Bulgaria Foundation has donated nearly 3.7 million leva in aid of the teams' preparation and participation in the world's top science competitions. The support is an investment in the future of Bulgaria and its youth, who in the coming years will be the driving force behind the innovations and scientific achievements that will change the country and perhaps the world. Additionally, the Foundation financed the creation of chemistry and biology labs at Sofia University to support competitors' hands-on training.

## FROM COMPETITIVE PROGRAMMING TO THE HEIGHTS OF GLOBAL SCIENCE: RUMEN HRISTOV'S STORY



With two engineer parents and one of Bulgaria's top IT academies located in his hometown, Shumen, 29-year-old Rumen Hristov's success in the tech world was as good as certain. But even an ardent techie like him couldn't have predicted how far his youthful fascination with computers would go. Today, a technology developed by Rumen and his team is on its way to unlocking the secrets of diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's and speeding up the discovery of a cure.

A key factor on Rumen's whirlwind journey was his participation in international informatics competitions, supported by the Association of Olympic Teams in Natural Sciences. The three gold and two silver medals he won from the International Informatics Olympiad opened the door to the world's leading universities, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), where Rumen completed both his bachelor's and master's degrees and met his future business partners.

Nowadays, the company Rumen co-founded, Emerald Innovations, has a team of 20 and works with leading pharmaceutical companies in the US. For his contribution to healthcare, Rumen was in *Forbes* magazine's 30 Under 30 class of 2020.

Here Rumen talks about his journey from youth competitions to scientific innovation.

### **How did your interest in technology begin?**

**R.H.:** I've always been fascinated by computers. I remember when I was seven years old, I was amazed that you could press a key on a computer, and something would come up on the screen — that you could convince the machine to do something you wanted it to do. It turns on a switch in my brain.

All my early training in informatics and programming took place at the A & B academy, founded by Biserka Yovcheva. Everything I learned in the first six or seven years... the foundation of my knowledge was built there. This experience allowed me to grow.

The academy was also a good place to spend time in and make friends.

### **What do you think made the biggest difference for your success?**

**R.H.:** It all starts with a good teacher who is patient and really wants to teach kids, wants them to achieve their goals. Without a doubt, the most important thing for me was Biserka Yovcheva's A & B academy. The other factor was that I was good at programming. I won my first major tournament in 2005, and this made me feel like I was good at it. When you are doing well at something, you have the motivation to keep doing it.

### **What are the kinds of challenges that interested you during your competitive career?**

**R.H.:** Informatics problems are a very interesting combination between programming, writing code, where you actually have to implement something and the computer has to agree with you that you have given it the right information, and a theoretical part, where you have to create an algorithm. Like in math problems, you have to analyze the data you are given and come up with an algorithm, which you then have to implement on the computer. Finally, the computer has to agree with you that you have implemented it correctly.

The advantage of computer science competitions compared to other disciplines is that you have an infinite number of competitions online. You can compete more or less daily against other people and see who can come up with a better algorithm faster and implement it more quickly. In the end, your work is evaluated in an objective way. You can do all this from your desk at home, as long as you have a computer and an internet connection.

**Do these algorithms have real-life applications?**

**R.H.:** To a degree. For example, you are given a simple city plan with streets and junctions. You are at Junction A, and you need to get to Junction B. What is the fastest way to get from A to B? This is a simplified example, but it provides an idea of how you can get from informatics problems to real-life applications like Google Maps, for example.

**What drove you in those early days: was it the intellectual challenge, or did you know you wanted to help people even back then?**

**R.H.:** It's always a combination. A very important factor is how difficult and challenging something is, but equally significant is the application of what you are working on. Whenever something is more difficult, you are more motivated and engaged than you would be with a trivial problem. Something that has a better application always motivates you and gives you more meaning.

**The medals from international olympiads in informatics opened many doors for you, including to some of the most prestigious universities in the world. Why did you choose to study in the United States?**

**R.H.:** In recent years, fewer and fewer people in Bulgaria are considering America for their education. Yes, it is far away, but US education is top-notch, and American universities are the best in the world. Naturally, Oxford, Cambridge, and ETH Zurich are at a very high level and comparable to some extent. Another big advantage of the United States is the availability of funding. Right now, studying

in the UK is extremely expensive because it is not in the European Union, and there are no preferential prices for Bulgarians, as there were when the UK was in the EU. There are no student loans either.

America's top universities have a lot of money and offer need-based funding. In my case, MIT waived a very large portion of my tuition fee.

**How do the challenges you are working on now compare to the problems you solved in competitions?**

**R.H.:** When I took part in competitions, the problems were similar. But the more life stages I go through — bachelor's degree, master's degree, and now running a startup — the less often I say to myself, "Ah, this problem is like the last one!" We are always solving problems with some new nuance. Having the mindset and willingness to adapt to new circumstances is extremely important. In our startup, I also have to manage people and decide on who works on which project and which project is given priority during any given week.

I have to do everything, and every year I write less and less code, but the important thing is to know how to do it — even if I won't write it myself.

**What makes the Emerald device, your start-up's breakthrough technology, different?**

**R.H.:** The combination of radar technology and artificial intelligence did not exist before we started developing this project. What we have invented is a radar that works in people's homes. The device hangs on the wall and can monitor the location of people — whether they are sitting, lying down, walking, where exactly they are walking and how fast. We can also measure vital signs such as breathing rate and sleep phases without people wearing any sensors on their bodies and without even making contact with them.

**How can we use this information?**

**R.H.:** Every time I go to the doctor, I realize how difficult their job is. A guy comes in with some random complaint, and you have to be like Sherlock Holmes and figure out what the problem is.

Right now, with diseases like Alzheimer's, the best we can do is control the symptoms, but we can't cure the disease because we don't even know where it comes from.

Data, or objective numbers, is the best thing we have in the fight against these diseases. Algorithms are also important here: artificial intelligence will help us extract the data that would be useful.

Whenever I go to a doctor's appointment in America, they measure my pulse, blood pressure, blood oxygen saturation, etc. I may have gone there for something specific — let's say, my leg hurts — but they always measure all these things for me because they know that this data can save lives. Instead of doing this once a year during the wellness check-up, with our technology, you can measure people's conditions constantly while they are at home.



**How are you currently applying your technology?**

**R.H.:** Currently, our focus is on working with medical researchers, pharmaceutical companies, and in some cases hospitals. The bulk of our work is with pharmaceutical companies though. They have clinical trials when they have a new drug or some new hypothesis for a disease. To put it simply, they want to find out if the drug works or not.

In the meantime, we continue to develop the technology and algorithms so that they can extract more things and be more useful.

Our focus will remain medicine in the near future, but the technology has other applications as well. For example, it can make our homes smarter. A sensor that “knows” who is where in the house would configure the temperature of each room, turn lights on or off.

**What advice do you have for young people taking their first steps in informatics right now?**

**R.H.:** The main thing is not to give up. You always have difficult days, the important thing is to always keep going, to have persistence. This was one of the biggest strengths for me during my competitive days. There was a Top-coder competition every week. To make them accessible to people from all over the world, the organizers scheduled the competitions at different times. There were competitions at noon, at 6 in the afternoon, at 10 in the evening, and at 4 in the morning. Over a period of two or three years, I hadn't missed a single competition. Once a month, I had to wake up at 3-3:15 in the morning, drink coffee, and by 3:55 a.m. I was ready.

The computer science competitions were really very tough and that persistence, being clearheaded at 4 in the morning and thinking about a problem, was really very helpful.

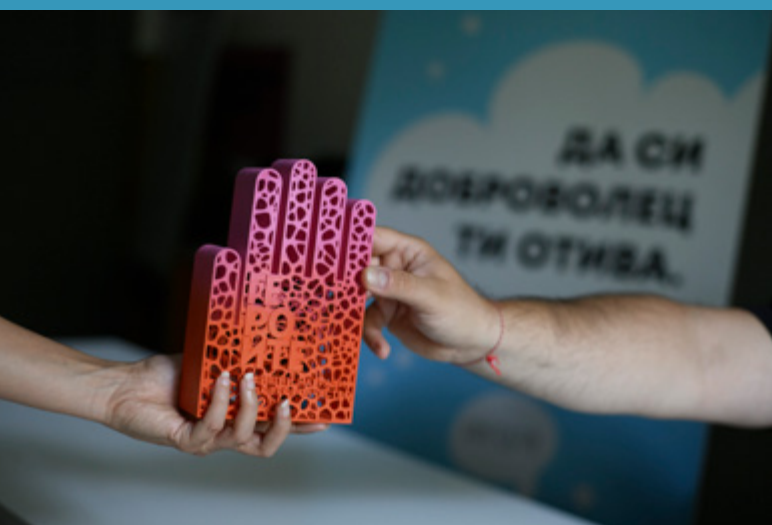




**Natalia Ivanova is the organization’s executive director and primary copywriter, and Nikola Kolev is responsible for TimeHeroes’ relations with business. Before devoting himself to volunteering full-time, Nikola worked in commerce, but like many other people, he rethought his professional priorities during the pandemic.**

Over the past ten years, TimeHeroes has worked to develop a culture of volunteerism in Bulgaria.

Whether you’re a company employee responsible for building a strong team or just a concerned citizen, the volunteer matching professionals at TimeHeroes will help you find a worthy cause.







# 5 WAYS VOLUNTEERING HELPS BUSINESS

We have long known that volunteering experience is a great resume booster, but work in the public benefit looks great on a company's About page as well. Research shows that corporate volunteering opportunities are a magnet for talent.

Additionally, the pandemic encouraged a re-evaluation of career priorities: people are realizing that employment should be about more than just a paycheck at the end of the month; a job should provide a sense of purpose and bring fulfillment. So ever more companies are piloting giving initiatives and instituting volunteering programs for employees. The more inspired people feel at work — and the more they feel

their personal values align with their employers' — the more likely they are to stay, according to Natalia Ivanova, TimeHeroes' executive director, and Nikola Kolev, who manages the nonprofit's relationship with business.

For more than a decade, the largest volunteering platform in Bulgaria, TimeHeroes, has promoted a culture of volunteerism in Bulgaria by matching volunteers with initiatives needing support through the TimeHeroes.org platform and by helping companies develop corporate volunteering strategies that reenergize teams and retain top performers.

## 1

### **Volunteering reinvigorates teams.**

Improving life for others has a stimulating effect on a team. Renovating a schoolyard or a library, winter-proofing an elderly individual's home, or mentoring disadvantaged children together with your teammates won't feel like

yet another work event. You will be doing something meaningful and much more satisfactory — and bonding with your colleagues along the way. Hey, who knew Steve from sales was such a great guy!

With help from TimeHeroes, Bulgarian software company Ontotext found the perfect opportunity: they cleaned and secured an area in the Western Rhodope Mountains. The experience not only brought the team together but also furthered the company's commitment to supporting nature conservation.

"In the past, we tried everything we could think of, but before this initiative, it wouldn't have occurred to me that cleaning could be more energizing than engaging in extreme sports or indulging yourself in other ways. Volunteering is magic; it could transform a bored consumer into a satisfied helper. That's what happened to us!" said Ontotext CEO Atanas Kiryakov.

His words are echoed by user experience specialist Yordanka Bogdanova from communication services provider A1, a company that actively works with TimeHeroes to develop a corporate culture of service. "The fact that the volunteering initiatives are carefully selected and that family and friends can join is a big plus. Everyone who has attended one of the initiatives with me is enthusiastic and 'hungry' for more. Children have fun and at the same time learn about solidarity and giving," she says.

## 2

### **Volunteering creates a sense of common purpose and a better work environment.**

"Team-building events have established themselves as a successful means of building closer relationships in a team. Adding to that collaborative work in support of a cause changes the team dynamic completely, adding an element

of comradeship," says Nikola, who organizes team-building experiences with a cause for TimeHeroes' corporate partners.

The Bulgarian division of food giant Mondelez relies on its partnership with TimeHeroes to involve its employees in the magic of volunteering. Tree planting in Sofia, soil conservation in a protected area near Burgas, and a park cleanup in Plovdiv are some of the missions that united more than 70 company employees. Their contribution not only improves life for people and natural ecosystems but also builds stronger teams.

## 3

### **Volunteering improves a company's relationship with its employees.**

According to a 2022 TimeHeroes survey among 190 employees at four companies, the company's service record is important to 94% of its staff. Every third respondent said that participating in volunteering opportunities provided by their employer makes them proud to work there.

Personal satisfaction is an employee's strongest motivation for getting involved in corporate volunteer initiatives. "I was especially happy and proud to find out that in helping the elderly from villages near Pravets through the collection and donation of food products for Easter, Mansion Bulgaria emerged as the largest contributor to the initiative," says Boyka Dzhartazanova, an employer branding specialist at international gaming company Mansion Group.



*Employees of food giant Mondelez plant trees in Sofia.*

## 4

### **Corporate volunteering creates a value that people look for in subsequent employment.**

“Enriching an organization’s culture is undoubtedly one of the most valuable benefits of employees’ participation in philanthropic and volunteer initiatives.” This is how Ms. Dzhartazanova sums up the advantages of corporate volunteering.

TimeHeroes’ corporate survey findings back up her conclusion: the longer employees spend at a company with a strong service record, the stronger their commitment to volunteering becomes. Moreover, good corporate citizens create a culture of volunteerism that employees may not have had before joining the company, and an employer’s service credentials are likely to be an essential requirement in individuals’ next job hunt.

“Increasingly, companies understand that part of the investment in their employees also includes a willingness to show and prove their commitment to social processes outside the office. This is important for several reasons. On the one hand, it is a demonstration of the company’s values and shows that its interest is not solely focused on the business, in isolation of the environment in which the business operates. On the other hand, it brings to the fore the human aspect, embodied by the people who work in the company and who, at the end of the day, are part of a society that still has many unresolved problems,” Natalia says.

## 5

### **Volunteering improves employees’ skills and has a positive impact on their development.**

Helping to resolve challenges experienced by NGOs, museums, groups at risk, and others lets a company’s employees shine on a larger stage. Not only does the opportunity improve their engagement and build company pride, but also the challenges hone their abilities, benefiting a company’s bottom line at the end of the day.

TimeHeroes enlisted the help of companies such as VMware, betahaus, and Amexy, as well as students from the University of National and World Economy, to develop a publicity strategy for the National Polytechnic Museum in Sofia.

“We applied for the workshop with the greatest pleasure as university students are the group that we don’t normally reach. It turned out that they had never been to the museum, but their suggestions were really good. Most impressive was their idea for a PolyTendar — a special calendar of events for a younger audience. We took them very seriously and have started implementing some of the ideas,” said Madlen Yaneva, the museum’s public relations coordinator.

## Working with business is key for a more successful society

“Companies and the private sector are an essential part of the environment we seek to influence with our work. That is why we believe it is important to work together. On the one hand, it makes people feel that they are part of something bigger and that the place where they invest most of their time and professional skills functions as a part of society. When you feel that company policy also sides with

your personal values, you understandably feel more motivated. This is part of a continuous process, at the heart of which lies volunteerism — building a more empathetic, healthier society,” Natalia concludes.

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**“The best thing is seeing the look of gratitude in the eyes of those you help. Next are the pleasant moments you spend together with your teammates during and after the event.”**

A 2022 TimeHeroes survey participant

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## A More Caring Society

Since its founding in 2011, TimeHeroes has worked to address a worrying trend: according to a 2007 Eurobarometer poll, only 7% of surveyed Bulgarians participated in volunteer initiatives.

After a decade of work, proudly supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation, including more than 2,710 completed initiatives in 361 places around Bulgaria with the help of over 92,000 volunteers, the outlook is far more encouraging. A 2019 study shows that a quarter of Bulgarians volunteered their time in support of their fellow citizens or environmental initiatives.

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic unleashed an unprecedented wave of empathy in Bulgarian society. Bulgarians’ support for those fleeing the war in Ukraine and the victims of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria as well as of the floods that devastated Bulgarian villages in the last two years is evidence that solidarity is permanently on the rise.





# PIROGOV'S LITTLE HEROES: THE JOURNEY THAT STARTED IT ALL

**Just like a pebble can start an avalanche, so a single occurrence can lead to substantive change.**

A casual “Hello. How are you?” early one Monday in 2016 at the America for Bulgaria Foundation offices unleashed an outpouring of corporate and private giving for the transformation of the children’s clinics at Pirogov Emergency Hospital into a welcoming environment for small patients and their families.

A colleague’s child had been admitted to Pirogov Hospital due to a medical emergency. The child’s fear of being unwell was compounded by the unwelcoming physical environment of the emergency admissions area. It is diffi-

cult for a child to understand that the gift of good care doesn’t always come beautifully wrapped!

But it got the Foundation’s team thinking about whether there was something ABF could do to help.

ABF’s dedicated professionals know a fair amount about building communities and managing significant projects, but not in health-care. To accelerate their learning, the team reached out to NGO partners, corporate citizens, the medical community, and public institutions to partner in what became Little Heroes—a project to refurbish the children’s wards at Pirogov Hospital.

The project began with a focus on the admissions area and, with the generous support of business and many individual donors, expanded to encompass 2,000 square meters over three floors and 65 rooms and even included an outdoor playground. Bulgaria's major news networks rallied behind the project, and so did the country's top tennis player, Grigor Dimitrov!

Today the transformed clinics provide a welcoming, soothing environment for all — from little patients and their parents to doctors and medical staff.

## The Idea

Pirogov is the largest hospital for emergency care in Bulgaria and has been a leading medical institution for decades. Hundreds of thousands of children rely on its care and spend time in the specialized pediatric wards.

The clinics' transformation was inspired by the success of Children's Science Center Muzeiko, another initiative of the America for Bulgaria Foundation. To engage a child's imagination like Muzeiko does, Little Heroes uses colorful, content-rich wall art and children's stories.

The refurbished wards also feature special children's furniture, toys, books, interactive digital games, and child-appropriate accessories.

## A Continuing Journey

ABF's role in healthcare didn't end with the 2017 ribbon-cutting ceremony for Little Heroes. In early 2020 along came COVID-19, and within weeks the world was paralyzed by a fast-spreading novel virus.

Over the three pandemic years, the Foundation successfully partnered with hospitals, local and national civil society organizations, community centers, and businesses to address pressing needs.

The more than one million levs ABF helped raise through the United Against COVID-19 campaign funded the purchase of medical equipment, protective gear, and basic medical and food supplies for hospitals and vulnerable communities. The aid reached more than 700,000 people across Bulgaria.





Access to healthcare is a human right and an important indicator of a country's living standard. ABF's mission is to support economic opportunity and community development, so in 2022 it added the healthcare priority area to its work portfolio. The Foundation's goal is to help improve healthcare for all in Bulgaria.

"The Pirogov experience affirmed our conclusion that it is worth revisiting ABF's role in this high-impact field. Today, we are applying the lessons we learned from Little Heroes to the Firefly project—through which we and our partners from Za Dobroto Foundation are renovating pediatric wards in several Bulgarian hospitals," says ABF President Nancy Schiller.

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**The real-life superheroes working at the transformed clinics also inspire their little patients.**

**"The hospital is not the most wonderful place to be, yet it was here that I learned some of the most important lessons — to never surrender, to believe, to fight, and to dream about the future... I am grateful to you for motivating me to study medicine so that one day I can help people, give them faith, and make them smile even more than before — as you did with me!"**

**writes Irina from Ruse, a former Pirogov patient.**

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The refurbished children's wards in Veliko Tarnovo and Lovech through the Svetulka project



## WELCOME TO HRISTO BOTEV SCHOOL IN KARNOBAT, SCHOOL OF THE FUTURE

Hristo Botev School in the Southeastern Bulgarian town of Karnobat is not your average school. Classes here don't start and end with a jarring buzz; the traditional school bell has been replaced with modern music, chosen in a student vote. When the principal appears in the hallways, he isn't met with awkward silence: students surround him, greet him happily, and even give him a high five.

Ivan Stoyanov has spent most of his life at the school—twelve years as a student, eleven as a history teacher, and the last seventeen as principal—and devotes almost all of his waking hours to it today. He explains his dedication with a lesson he learned early in his academic

career—from the school janitor. “She took care of the school as if it were her own home,” he says. “She taught me that no matter what you do, whether you are a school principal or a cleaner... you have to work hard and do your best. If your heart is not in it, you won't get beyond mediocrity.”

Despite his important office, the Karnobat principal does not exude unapproachable authority or academic stiffness. He is a warm, kind, and friendly person who really puts the “pal” in “principal.” He encourages students to be strong, independent, and responsible, but his door is always open if they have questions about academic or personal issues.



“At school, we don’t just impart knowledge; we build character. We strive to teach the students important values. We want them to be communicative and resilient enough to make their dreams come true,” Ivan explains. “Not all of our 800 kids are going to be top athletes or straight-A students, but we want them to become active and engaged citizens. All children should have this opportunity, and if we manage to change the lives of the one or two who wouldn’t have had the chance otherwise, we will have been successful.”

At the school, students created a “wall of goodwill” where they post interesting messages about peace, understanding, and the acceptance of differences. The school is home to students from different backgrounds, and the wall reflects this. “Some of the children’s parents live abroad, and their family relation-

ships are complicated. We also have students from ethnic minority groups who suffer from prejudice. As teachers, we have to show empathy. We have to try to understand what the students are going through,” Ivan explains.

The school’s tradition of encouraging tolerance and integration goes back to its founding at the beginning of the twentieth century: it started as a school for Bulgarian refugees from the Ottoman Empire. “That’s why our school was perceived as being different for a long time,” Ivan says. This, however, fostered the emergence of a supportive, tight-knit school community.

Hristo Botev School is one of 85 educational institutions across Bulgaria whose vision for interdisciplinary, hands-on science and technology learning was supported by the Foun-

dation’s signature program, Schools of the Future. The school leadership’s active promotion of both personal development and academic success was an important consideration for the Foundation.

In addition to an inclusive environment and inspiring teachers, Hristo Botev School now boasts a STEM center featuring natural sciences labs and a multifunctional hall with a 360-degree panorama and 3D printing and scanning capabilities.

In 2023, Ivan Stoyanov was awarded the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science’s highest award for contributions to education – the St. Ivan Rilski distinction.

“The principal of Hristo Botev Primary & Middle School in Karnobat, Ivan Stoyanov, has a professional feeling for innovation. The school is a leading example of positive change in the educational environment both regionally and nationally.

Ivan Stoyanov and his team are leaders in the presentation of STEM practices and inspirers of educational transformations, working with leading educational experts and nongovernmental organizations in the country and abroad,” says the ministry’s website.

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**“ABF helped us modernize our school.  
Now all our 800 students  
are eager to study.”**

**Ivan Stoyanov**  
Principal,  
Hristo Botev School, Karnobat

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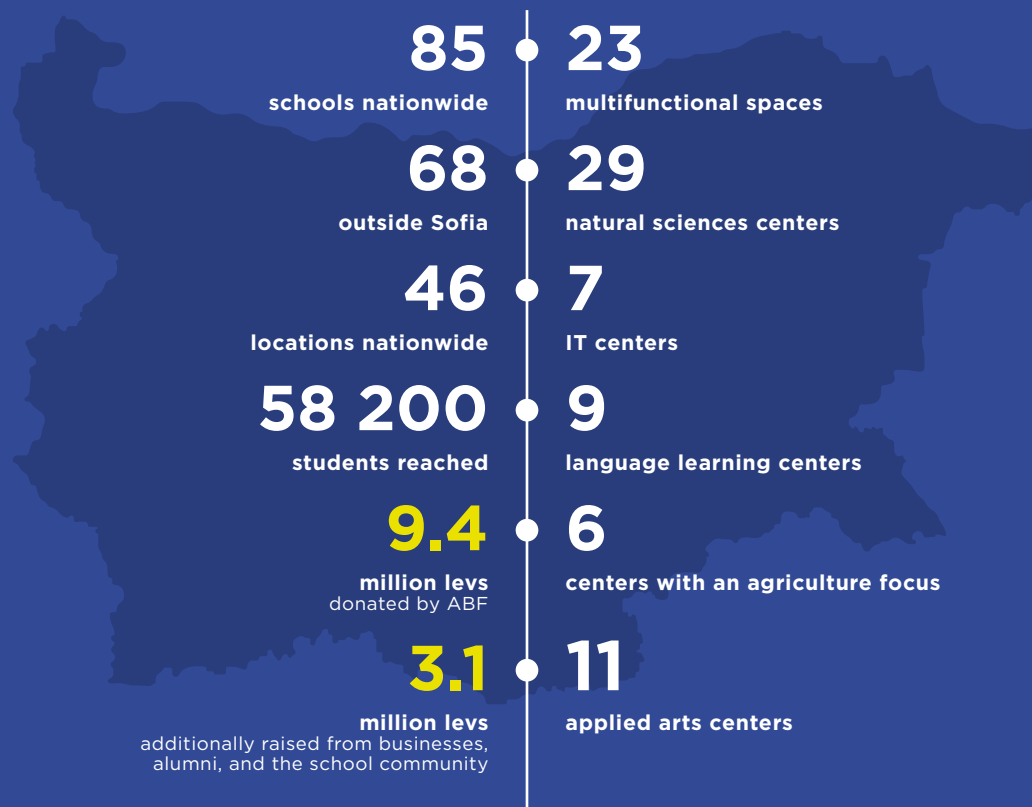




# SCHOOLS OF THE FUTURE 10-YEAR PROGRAM

2009 – 2018

Educational centers include:



## The Future of Learning

Schools of the Future is a program of the America for Bulgaria Foundation creating new-generation technological learning environments at Bulgarian schools.

Infrastructure improvements are only a part of the program's transformational approach. In partnership with the schools' management teams, the program creates model schools

that embody strong school leadership, modern teaching approaches, inspiring learning environments, and engaging educational technologies.

At the Schools of the Future, both students and teachers are more motivated, and young people are better prepared to meet academic and life challenges.



# STORIES IN PICTURES

**“ABF helped us improve beef breeding at our family farm. Our six stores in the Pazardzhik region sell top-quality beef.”**

## Alexandra and Ivan Stoyanov, Farmers

Alexandra and Ivan are among the hundreds of Bulgarian entrepreneurs and professionals who trained in America for Bulgaria Foundation-supported programs in the field of agriculture. Offered in partnership with leading American organizations and universities, the Foundation’s programs help farmers and agricultural enterprises in Bulgaria increase their productivity and efficiency through the introduction of new technologies and practices.





## Chipper-Bird, Frock-Feather, and Fire-Tail: Ancient Birds Speak

Birds were held in high esteem in ancient times. Parakeets were kept as pets by many. Guinea fowl, pheasants, and mallard ducks roamed the gardens of prominent citizens, while peacocks could only be seen in the courtyards of the nobility. The peacock symbolized the immortality of the soul, which is why we find peacock images in the Bishop's Basilica of Philippopolis in Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second-largest city.

Every discovery from the era adds new pieces to the grand puzzle that is Antiquity, enriching our knowledge of the tastes and beliefs of the ancients. The Bishop's Basilica and its mosaics, dating back to the 4th-6th centuries AD and rediscovered during construction work in the 1980s, are a treasure trove of information that holds the key to many secrets of that fascinating time. The Basilica is the largest early-Christian temple found in Bulgaria and probably among the first built after the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313 AD.

After seventeen centuries of oblivion, the Basilica is welcoming visitors again. Its restoration was a seven-year effort brought about through a public-private partnership between the America for Bulgaria Foundation, Plovdiv Municipality, and the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture as well as the support of countless volunteers.

## Meet Velingrad's Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman

Few girls from the Roma neighborhood in Velingrad finish high school, and even fewer go on to study at university. Yet, since she was a little girl, Rashka Gaitanova knew she didn't want to be part of the statistics: she imagined a different life for herself. Her dream was to become a doctor and help others. Her parents supported her, but the scarce family budget would not have been enough to cover the additional biology and chemistry classes she needed to prepare for the medical school entrance exams.

Rashka's dream came true thanks to support from the Trust for Social Achievement, established in 2012 by the America for Bulgaria Foundation.

The Trust for Social Achievement encourages the economic participation of the most disadvantaged communities through early education programs, improved school readiness and graduation rates, entrepreneurship and professional training opportunities, and housing support.

"I think Confucius said that if you do what you love, you don't really have to work. I completely agree," she says. "It is wonderful being able to give others hope. Serving people makes me really happy."

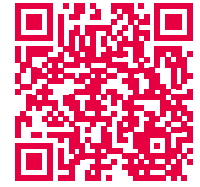




## **Bulgaria’s “Little Museum” Has an Immense Impact on Learning**

Its name may mean “little museum” in Bulgarian, but Muzeiko has had an outsize impact on education and museum programming in the country. For over seven years, Eastern Europe’s largest children’s science center has introduced tens of thousands of children and their families to the fascinating world of science.

At the beginning of 2023, the America for Bulgaria Foundation gifted Muzeiko to Bulgaria’s children. As a public institution managed by Sofia Municipality, Muzeiko continues to be children’s favorite portal to scientific discovery even as it explores new ways to support STEM teaching and learning in Bulgaria.



## What are you prepared to do to pursue the profession you love?

Dimitar Semkov and Ivaylo Dernev started with a small bar, got into craft beer brewing and event organization, and launched a coworking space. These are some of the many side jobs they do to support their true passion: doing independent journalism. Their giant workload pays the bills of the small independent news site PodTepeto.com, which has become one of Plovdiv's symbols over the years.

Support independent journalism by having a pint at Cat and Mouse, the bar Dimitar and Ivaylo run in the trendy Kapana district of Bulgaria's second city.





## **What's the best professional break an aspiring young artist can hope for? Coming across an exceptional teacher who opens a whole new world of possibilities!**

For years the America for Bulgaria Foundation supported the tireless efforts of the great Bulgarian opera prima Raina Kabaivanska and New Bulgarian University to prepare young artists for the world's leading opera stages.

For the past quarter century, Maestra Kabaivanska's prestigious international master class has brought together promising singing talent from all over the world. Many Bulgarian and foreign performers have seen their abilities unfold through the prima's experienced nurturing. Several of the world's opera heavyweights today got their first break in Sofia. Maestra Kabaivanska continues to share her experience generously with aspiring singers and has done more than anyone else to place Bulgaria on the world opera map.



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Texts: Sylvia Zareva, Nancy Schiller, Desislava Taliokova,  
Lora Krumova, Maria Yotova

Photos: Dobrin Kashavelov, Tsanislav Genchev, Boris  
Begamov, Nikolay Kovachev, Jodi Hilton, Svetoslav  
Tsvetanov, Petya Petkova

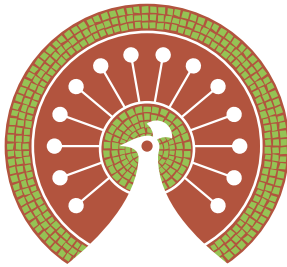
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