

## Fulbright Commission Activities in 2010

### Message from the Executive Director



*Prof. Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director, Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange*

Dear colleagues and friends,  
Another year of hard work has been added to the history of the Fulbright program in Bulgaria. We have every reason to be satisfied with the results of our manifold activities deriving from the goals of the Fulbright exchange as defined in the 1961 Fulbright-Hays Act and the 2003 agree-

ment between the US Government and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria. They can be summarized as follows:

1. Supporting academic exchanges in all fields.
2. Extending outreach to BG universities, schools and other educational institutions to provide a greater number and diversity of applicants.
3. Promoting the Fulbright program in Bulgaria in the context of increasing competition from European universities.
4. Strengthening efforts to increase the number of Bulgarian candidates by broader publicity of the Fulbright program, outreach and diversification of the Fulbright grants format, especially non-degree opportunities for doctoral students.
5. Promoting the Fulbright opportunity in Bulgaria at US universities and educational institutions so as to attract more and better US applicants in all categories.
6. Engaging Bulgarian and American Fulbright alumni in the promotion of the Fulbright program.
7. Helping Bulgarian universities to develop partnerships with US universities and other institutions.
8. Providing English language training services and paper-based and computer-based testing (TOEFL, GRE, LSAT, CFA, EPSO etc).

### US Grantees in AY 09-10 and AY 10-11

In AY 09-10 the number of US grantees was 14: 6 lecturers, 4 graduate students, 2 English teaching assistants and one senior specialist. The lecturers came from the following fields: law, organic chemistry, computational mathematics, mural painting, education, applied linguistics and gender studies. They were assigned to Sofia University, Veliko Turnovo University, Plovdiv University, the National Academy of Theater and Film Arts. The senior specialist was invited by the Balkan Heritage Foundation in cooperation with New Bulgarian University.

The Commission also hosted four US graduate students in public administration, psychology, women's studies and area studies. They were placed at appropriate educational institutions, such as the University of National and World Economy, the National Center and the Municipal Center for Addictions, Animus Association and Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. Three research students and two teaching assistants attended the Berlin Seminar in Germany; one graduate student participated in the *Seminar on EU and NATO* in Belgium and Luxembourg organized by the Belgian Fulbright Commission.

The English Teaching Assistantship Program was also successful and useful for students and hosts alike. One ETA worked at the German Language High School in Sofia, and the other taught at the Foreign Language High School in Burgas. The teaching assistant at the German Language School in Sofia, in cooperation with one of the visiting scholars, was involved in a research project focused on the development of the

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writing skills of high school English language learners.

To help the US grantees adjust more easily to the new cultural and academic environment, the Commission staff invited them to attend the annual two-week Fulbright International Summer Institute held in Tryavna in August 2009. At the end of September 2009, the Commission staff organized a two-day orientation with presentations, discussions, briefing from the US Embassy, and a welcome reception. The cultural enrichment program that followed covered the whole academic year and included trips to historic and natural sights, as well as informal meetings with Fulbright staff and Bulgarian Fulbright alumni.

The AY 10-11 competition resulted in the selection of 20 US grantees, most of whom are already working in Bulgaria. In the senior scholar category, there are 6 lecturers in American studies, art, journalism, employment law and mural painting. There are four students in international studies, psychology and neuroscience, violin performance and theology. The English Language Teaching Assistantship Program has been significantly expanded through the co-sponsorship of the *America for Bulgaria* Foundation and comprises of 10 students who work in foreign language schools throughout Bulgaria in the towns of Sofia, Plovdiv, Blagoevgrad, Stara Zagora, Pleven, Smolyan, Shumen, Lovetch, Haskovo and Dobrich.

## Bulgarian Grantees in AY 09-10 and AY 10-11

In the academic year under review there were 15 Bulgarian grantees in the following categories and fields: six scholars in sociology, Bulgarian studies, pharmacology, computer linguistics, political science and applied linguistics; seven students in art (2), law (3), communications and business administration; one recipient of the research grant for the study of civil society recently established between the Fulbright Commission and the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe; one New Century scholar.

The scholars were awarded 5-month grants to prestigious US universities and research centers: George Washington University, Indiana University, Rush University - Medical Center, Stanford University, George Mason University and Georgetown University. All of them have returned to Bulgaria. Their final reports are generally positive and express great satisfaction with the Fulbright experience.

Of the seven students, three have returned to Bulgaria after completing one-year LLM programs. The others are still studying in the US. Their periodic reports indicate that they are doing well and most probably will complete their degree programs successfully.

The recipients of the Study for Civil Society Scholarship and the New Century Scholar Award both presented interesting reports on their research results. Their findings hold promise for successful future publications.

The publicity campaign for the AY 2010-2011 competition yielded a total of 47 applications: 30 for graduate study grants, 13 in the senior scholar category, and four for Hubert Humphrey fellowships. Six scholars were finally selected in the following fields: chemistry, mural painting, plant pathology, geography, ethnology and literary theory. Two of them have already started their projects at prestigious US institutions: Stanford University, and the Agricultural Research Service USDA. Four scholars will begin their programs in January and February 2011. Their host institutions are: the University of Pittsburgh-Bradford, Ohio State University, Harvard University, and University of Pennsylvania.

In the student category, 6 students were approved and are currently enrolled in master's, doctoral and non-degree programs in po-

litical science, communications, law, business administration, sociology and social psychology. As usual, our graduate students are very strong and highly motivated, and it is not surprising that they were admitted to prestigious universities with financial support: Boston University, Fordham University, New School-For General Studies, University of Pennsylvania, DePaul University, and the University of Oklahoma at Norman.

Three six-month non-degree study grants were awarded to doctoral students for the first time. The recipients are now working on their Ph.D. theses in literary theory, finance and molecular biology at the University of California-Berkeley, University of Pennsylvania-Wharton School, and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute.

The joint scholarship with *Thanks to Scandinavia* Institute was awarded for a fourth consecutive year. The grantee is enrolled in a master's program in communications at the New School - For General Studies at New York, NY.

Our nominee for an AY 10-11 Hubert Humphrey fellowship, a promising law expert, was successful in the final stage of selection and is currently based at American University, Washington, DC.

The grants competition for AY 11-12 was announced in December 2009, with a deadline on June 1, 2010. A total of 48 applications were received by the deadline: 32 applications for graduate study grants, 13 in the senior scholar category, and three for Hubert Humphrey fellowships. The interviewing committees nominated eight principal and five alternate candidates for graduate study programs in business administration, e-commerce, graphic design, international development, law, comparative literature, film directing, economics and ethnology; five principals and one alternate candidate for senior scholar grants in philosophy, animal breeding, biogeochemistry, dental medicine, environmental science and robotics; two principal candidates for H. Humphrey fellowships in journalism and finance, and two principal candidates for the Research Scholarship for the Study of Civil Society co-sponsored by the Trust for Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe.

## Grantee Accomplishments in AY 09-10

Fulbright lecturer Kong Ho presented the first collaborative community mural painting at the National Academy of Art, Sofia. The project will remain on the wall of one of the Academy's auditoriums as a perfect example of Fulbright exchange of expertise, vision and talent.

Fulbright lecturer Judge Maureen Duffy-Lewis of the Los Angeles Superior Court shared her valuable experience on mediation, court and case management with students and faculty from Sofia University, and judges at the Sofia Regional Court. During her course in *Criminal and Civil Law in the Courtroom*, Judge Lewis organized a mock trial for her students. The event was a great success and received ample media coverage.

Fulbright lecturer Dr. Iona Sarijeva trained a large group of students and faculty from Sofia University to use MOODLE in the teaching and learning process and initiated a collaborative research project on the development of writing skills of high school English language learners. Participating in the project is a Fulbright ETA and teachers and students from the German Language School.

Fulbright Scholar Prof. Georgi Dimitrov completed a successful research project at George Washington University. As a result of his studies, a reader in American sociology for Bulgarian students is prepared for publication. The renowned journal *The American Sociologist* also acknowledged Prof. Dimitrov's expertise and accepted his article *Know Thy Heroes - the 20th Century American Sociology*.

Fulbright alumnus Dr. Boyan Dobrev developed the interactive In-

ternet portal *Virtual Bulgaria*. The project is endorsed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth and offers prolific information on Bulgarian culture, history, education, tourism and services (<http://www.bulgaria-vr.com/en/project.html>).

Bulgarian Fulbright student Dimitar Kaldamukov was invited to present the Fulbright program at the Dean's Dinner at George Washington Law School. The dinner was a charitable event attended by distinguished Law School alumni.

## Non-Grant Activities

During the year under review educational advising remained a vital component of the Commission's non-grant activities. In the context of Bulgaria's gradual integration with the European Union, the strong competition still coming from European universities, and the ongoing economic and financial crisis, it is essential to have an effective instrument of promoting the American educational system and the Fulbright program.

In AY 09-10 the Commission continued to expand outreach all across Bulgaria and especially in the underserved regions. Our attention was focused on three target audiences: university students, high school students and representatives of ethnic minorities. The visible result of this activity is the tangible increase in the number of contacts with institutions and individuals.

Worth mention is the Commission's regular participation and involvement in national and international educational exhibitions and fairs. A notable example is the October 2009 QS World Grad School Fair in Sofia in which prestigious graduate schools from the US, Australia, Belgium, Bulgaria, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, and the UK promoted their programs. In March-June 2010, the Commission was also represented at the 2010 QS World MBA & Grad School Fair, Begin Group International Education Fair, Education Beyond Borders, Career Fair at Sofia University and Job Tiger Career Fairs in the cities of Sofia, Burgas, Plovdiv, Svishtov and Veliko Turnovo. The events offered a great opportunity for 4 020 students, scholars, parents, educators, international relations officers, scholarship administrators, career officers, and others interested in international education professionals to find out more about studying in the US.

The summer of 2010 was marked by two important events of national and international significance: the 9th international Fulbright conference and the 9th Fulbright International Summer Institute.

The biennial conference on *Education for the New Age: Tradition, Reform, Innovation* took place in the town in Bansko on August 7-8. A total of 85 participants from Bulgaria, the US, Greece and Poland took part in panels, plenary sessions and workshops covering a wide range of topics relating to the global and regional trends in education, the increasing role of international education, the ongoing reform in Bulgarian school and university education, good practices and innovative projects, and many more. The conference proceedings are now available at <http://conference.fulbright.bg>.

The ninth edition of Fulbright International Summer Institute also took place in the historic town of Bansko immediately following the Fulbright conference. Between August 9 and 21, a total of 96 participants from 15 countries (Bulgaria, the U.S., Afghanistan, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Macedonia, Pakistan, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, and Sweden) attended sixteen courses in a rich variety of fields such as political science, sociology, international relations, finance, cultural studies, history and art. The importance of the topics can be easily

illustrated by the course titles: *American Foreign Policy and the International System in the Era of Globalization, Peace and Conflict Resolution in the 21st Century, Projects Writing and Projects Management, Seeing Films Philosophically, Logic in the Continental Tradition, The Philosophical Issues of the XXI Century, Words and Worlds of Thinking and Art, North America and Europe in the Indochina Conflict, Canadian Studies: Culture, Literature and Identity, Cultural Traditions in Bulgaria* (specially designed for the new group of US Fulbrighters), *Negotiation and Conflict Resolution, Debate. Argue. Reason. Examine, International Investing: Opportunities and Risks, Perspectives on Public Diplomacy and Foreign Policy, Development Struggles in a Globalized World: The Political Economy of Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, Court Annexed Mediation* (introduced jointly with the Sofia Regional Court).

The 9th summer institute was yet another memorable continuation of the FISI tradition started in 2002. Once again it fulfilled its many-faceted goals: to promote the Fulbright idea and program; to promote international education; to improve the quality of education; to introduce the new US Fulbright grantees to the Bulgarian cultural environment; to promote Bulgaria by showing its beautiful nature, rich culture, long history, and promising future.

Our efforts to create and develop a unique innovative educational product were rewarded at the 28th conference of Fulbright Executive Directors from Europe held in Berlin on May 8-12 this year. The Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the US Department of State conferred the newly established *Innovator Award* on the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission "in recognition of outstanding innovation in designing and implementing the Fulbright International Summer Institute". We are very proud of our achievement and deeply appreciate the decision of our ECA partners to select us for this high distinction.

The implementation of the Fulbright program in Bulgaria in 2010 was affected by the interplay of diverse factors working at national, regional and global level: general economic crisis; ongoing educational reform aimed at bringing our standards closer to the European and world practices and achievements; expanding educational opportunities in Europe; need for higher English language proficiency of our students and educators; rising costs of education in the US, etc. The Bulgarian Fulbright Commission is fully aware of the impact of these factors and is trying to counteract the negative trends and minimize their effects on the program. Our revised strategy involves intensifying existing methods and practices, on the one hand, and adopting new, more effective ones, e.g. expanding Internet resources and electronic communication; further extending outreach; offering English language training in Sofia and through the local centers; facilitating direct partnerships between BG and US universities; expanding the Fulbright International Summer Institute and using it for promoting the Fulbright exchange; diversifying the menu of grants; more actively engaging Fulbright alumni in the promotion of the Fulbright program; reaching Bulgarian students studying in Europe; establishing partnerships with foundations and institutions to raise funds for the program.

We feel highly motivated to continue to work for the mutual understanding among people in the world through exchange of education, knowledge and culture, and will spare no efforts to maintain the integrity and enhance the image of the Fulbright program in Bulgaria and worldwide.

I would like to wish all Bulgarian and American Fulbright alumni lots of health, success, happiness and creative energy in the coming year 2011.

Dr. Julia Stefanova

## Fulbright Office News

### Extended Outreach of the Fulbright Program in Bulgaria



Media representatives during the regular press-conference on Fulbright activities and the 2012-2013 Fulbright Grants Competition. Information was provided by Dr. Julia Stefanova, Executive Director of the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission.



Over 100 students and faculty attended the Fulbright Commission presentation on "The Fulbright Program in Bulgaria and the 2012-2013 Fulbright Grants Competition" at the International University College in Dobrich.



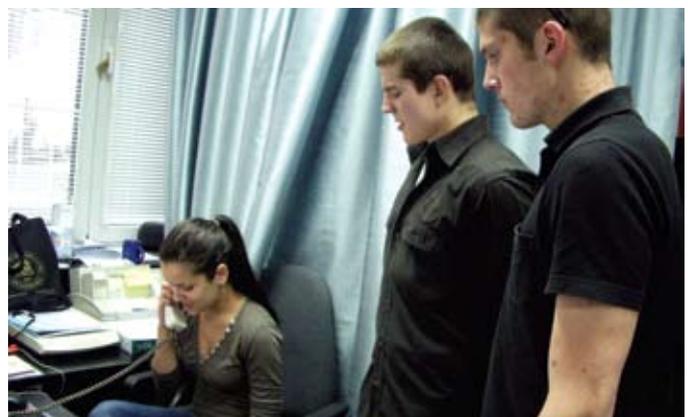
Information session on "Study in the USA" at the Fulbright Advising Center in Sofia.



Over 500 students and professionals visited the Fulbright booth at the National Career Fair in Sofia.



Approximately 100 high school students from all over Bulgaria and children from underrepresented communities attended the Fulbright Commission presentation on "Undergraduate Study in the US" at the American Corner of Sofia City Library.



Information session on the SKYPE with Ryan Saale, Assistant Director of International Affairs at Fontbonne University, St. Louis, MO, USA at the Fulbright Advising Center in Sofia.

## Fulbright Office News

### English Classes for Students from *Vassil Levski* Primary and Elementary School, Village of Novachene, Botevgrad

Since October 2010 the Fulbright Commission has supported English language training for nineteen disadvantaged and Roma students from grades 1<sup>st</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> at *Vassil Levski* Primary and Elementary school in the Village of Novachene, Botevgrad. The classes are conducted by teacher Iliana Dimitrova. The lessons focus on vocabulary and grammar. All the students participate enthusiastically in class and are showing good progress.



### Cultural Enrichment Activities for U.S. Fulbright Grantees



*Informal party at the Fulbright Language Training Center in Sofia to mark the Bulgarian National Holiday, March 3<sup>rd</sup>.*



*Trip to Rila Monastery*

## Fulbright Office News

### Drawing Across Borders



Joint exhibition of Prof. Diane Edison (Fulbright Scholar 2010-2011, University of Georgia, Athens, GA) and Prof. Ekaterina Russinova (New Bulgarian University) at Mission Gallery in Sofia.

## FULBRIGHT INTERNATIONAL SUMMER INSTITUTE 2010

August 8-20, Bansko, Bulgaria

The Fulbright International Summer Institute (FISI) is an academic and cultural program created by the Bulgarian-American Fulbright Commission in 2002. FISI offers one- or two-week intensive courses in a wide variety of subject areas. All courses are taught in English by distinguished professors from all over the world, and are addressed to undergraduate and graduate students, university faculty and professionals. This year FISI is scheduled to take place from August 8 to August 20 in Bansko. Prospective participants have the unique opportunity to make their own selection of courses. A tentative program with brief course descriptions and biographical notes for the lecturers is posted on FISI website ([www.fisi-bg.info](http://www.fisi-bg.info)). Applicants can choose between the following courses:

#### Business, Finance and Management

**Course 01:** Negotiation and Conflict Resolution  
*Lecturer:* Prof. George Siedel, University of Michigan, Ross School of Business, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

**Course 02:** Internet for Financial and Investing Decisions  
*Lecturer:* Prof. Dr. Chenchu Bathala, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, USA

**Course 03:** Global Financial Strategy  
*Lecturer:* Dr. Emmanuel N. Roussakis, Florida International University, Miami, FL, USA

**Course 04:** Entrepreneurship: Strategies and Skills for Starting One's Own Business  
*Lecturer:* Prof. Alyssa Martina, Walsh College of Business, Troy, MI, USA

**Course 05:** Strategic Foresight: Key Concepts, Methods, Tools – and what's next?  
*Lecturer:* Roumiana Gotseva, Foresight Alliance, Washington, DC, USA

**Course 06:** Company Valuation and Value Creation  
*Lecturer:* Prof. Dr. Miroslav Mateev, American University in Bulgaria, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

**Course 07:** Creative Leadership  
*Lecturer:* Prof. Dr. Frank Prochaska, Colorado Technical University, Colorado Springs, CO, USA

**Course 08:** International Career Planning in a Recession Globalized Economy  
*Lecturer:* Dr. Gary L. Schnellert, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, USA

**Course 09:** Projects Writing and Projects Management  
*Lecturer:* Danail Danov, Communications and Human Resources Development Center, Sofia, Bulgaria

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**Course 10:** International Management Systems: Building the Foundation for Global Sustainability  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Phillip Barnes, University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC, USA

## Political Science and Law

**Course 11:** American Foreign Policy and the International System in the Era of Globalization  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Dr. Mark Kramer, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, USA

**Course 12:** Peace and Conflict Resolution in the 21st Century  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan

**Course 13:** International Development Assistance  
**Lecturer:** Boyko Todorov, Center for the Study of Democracy, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 14:** Urban Politics in the Age of Globalization  
**Lecturer:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Sudha Mohan, University of Mumbai, India

**Course 15:** EU Citizenship: Migration and Residence Rights in an Enlarged EU  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Dr. Jo Carby-Hall, University of Hull, and Diane Ryland, University of Lincoln, UK

**Course 16:** D.A.R.E. --- Debate. Argue. Reason. Examine.  
**Lecturer:** David M. Korn, Phelps Dunbar LLP, New Orleans, LA, USA

**Course 17:** International Investment Law  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Jose Gustavo Prieto Muñoz, Universidad del Pacífico, Quito, Ecuador

**Course 18:** Protection of Human Rights in the Council of Europe  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Maria Zhurnalova-Jupponov, American University in Bulgaria, Blagoevgrad, Bulgaria

## Social Studies, Communication and Media

**Course 19:** Human Rights and Contemporary Social Issues  
**Lecturer:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Shirley Gatenio Gabel, Fordham University, New York, NY, USA

**Course 20:** Sustainability and Globalization  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Michael McAdams, State University of New York-Fredonia, Fredonia, NY, USA

**Course 21:** Youth Issues in the Arab Countries  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Eman Nasry Daoud Shenouda, Al-Fayoum University, Egypt

**Course 22:** Exploring Self Strengths in Different Settings  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Dr. Elka Todorova, University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 23:** Global Contexts of Well Being: International Community Psychology  
**Lecturer:** Ronald Harvey, DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA

**Course 24:** Technology of Imagination  
**Lecturer:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Kristian Bankov, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 25:** Public Relations: It Can Make or Break an Organization  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Dan Fellner, Arizona State University, Phoenix, AZ, USA

**Course 26:** Effective Communication across Cultures  
**Lecturers:** Dr. Noemi Marin, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL, USA

**Course 27:** Multimedia Journalism and Public Relations: Changing the World One Story at a Time  
**Lecturer:** Terry Anzur, Terry Anzur Coaching Services, West Covina, CA

## Cultural Studies, Humanities and Art

**Course 28:** Censorship Today: Is it Still about Sex, Religion and Politics?  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Svetlana Mintcheva, National Coalition against Censorship, New York, NY, USA

**Course 29:** Are Women Leaving Men Behind?  
**Lecturer:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Timothy Ilg, University of Dayton, Dayton, OH, USA

**Course 30:** Revolutions Unending: Feminist Theory in a World of Change  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Kathleen Dixon, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND, USA

**Course 31:** Thinking Critically and Learning Together in a Multi-Cultural World  
**Lecturers:** Prof. Dana Goodrich, Northwest Vista College, San Antonio, TX and Shelley Friend, Communication Consultant, Austin, TX, USA

**Course 32:** Logic in the Continental Tradition  
**Lecturer:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Alexander Gungov, Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski", Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 33:** The Philosophical Issues of the XXI Century  
**Lecturers:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Lidia Denkova and Prof. Dr. Hristo Todorov, New Bulgarian University, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 34:** American Pragmatism and Semiotics  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Dr. Ivan Mladenov, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 35:** Immigrant Theatre as Genre and its Uses in Promoting Intercultural Understanding  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Marcy Arlin, City University, New York, NY, USA

**Course 36:** Thriving in the Global Economy: Understanding & Using Cultural Symbols & Practices to Improve Communications, Design, Marketing, Sales, & Service  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Dr. Phyllis Miller, Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS, USA

**Course 37:** Technology Supporting Cultural Arts and Entrepreneur Trends in the New York City  
**Lecturer:** Prof. Michelle Hill, Parsons the New School for Design, New York, NY, USA

**Course 38:** Using Photography as a Tool for Research, Exploration and Recording  
**Lecturer:** Dr. Georgia Gene Berryhill, University of Maryland, Adelphi, MD, USA

**Course 39:** Bulgarian Literature and its Reflections in Film, Visual arts, Theater and Dance  
**Lecturer:** Assoc. Prof. Dr. Dimitar Kambourov, Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria

**Course 40:** Introduction to Bulgarian Language  
**Lecturers:** Team

If you want to participate in this event, please visit [www.fisi-bg.info](http://www.fisi-bg.info) for practical information and application forms. You can also obtain general information from: Bulgarian-American Commission for Educational Exchange, 17, Alexander Stamboliiski Blvd.; Sofia 1000, Bulgaria, Tel.: +359 2 980 82 12; E-mail: [rkaneva@fulbright.bg](mailto:rkaneva@fulbright.bg)

## To Chicago and Back

# California Dreamin': Six Months in Berkeley

**Angel Igov**

Ph.D. student in European Literature  
Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria

Fulbright Non-Degree Doctoral Student  
University of California: Berkeley, CA, USA  
AY 2010-2011

**W**hen I was told that in 2010/2011 one third of all Fulbright grantees that came to the US chose the West Coast, and the bulk of them chose the Bay Area, I immediately called my wife back in Bulgaria who was all the time scolding at me for not going to New York. Later, when she came to visit me, we traveled to New York and Washington DC, and she quite quickly fell into "California Dreamin'".

Most of the people I have met as a visiting PhD student researcher at UC Berkeley keep telling me the Bay Area is not America, adding shortly afterward, "But then again, there is no really an America". This is indeed the first stereotype you have to disregard when you come to – err – America. The US is a huge country with many regions and places totally different in terms of nature, society, lifestyle, and politics. For instance, little of the ecological awareness, the easy-going atmosphere and the radical thought of the Bay Area can be found in DC; and nothing of the hectic life and city-that-never-sleeps vibe of New York can be felt in the Bay Area. And DC – well, it has its monuments, museums and galleries so conveniently packed next to each other. I will come back to that in a while.

There is, however, something that seems to be common to all cities in the US, and that is the ubiquitous grid: the pattern of never-ending parallel and perpendicular streets sprawled all over the place without much concern about what the underlying terrain is like. If you look at the map of San Francisco, you might think that the city was built in a great flatland. Well, once you go there and see the hills, you



realize why some streets on the map are interrupted at certain points and then start again, as if nothing has happened. And, of course, you are impressed by the expertise of drivers who can not only navigate but even park their cars on those amazingly steep uphill streets.

The grid is useful for quick orientation: in such a city, you cannot in practice get lost. Convenience, however, comes at a price, and this price is the neutralization of space, at least that is what American anthropologists say and what I can see myself. Washington DC is a case in point. It has its central part – a vast field where museums, galleries, and monuments are collected; and its four quadrants: residential areas, strictly divided as to the income of the inhabitants, where nothing much happens. You can tell that this city was built at one go, with a monolithic, clear-cut rational concept in mind. That

is precisely why it did not work as American Enlightenment thinkers had wanted it to.

Let us get back to Berkeley, a town I actually started loving (in spite of the grid). At least two things about it caught me by surprise even from the start. The first thing was the food. A friend of mine who came to visit me from New York told me that when she asked her friends what she should do while in the Bay Area, they replied, "Eat". Berkeley is the cornucopia of the picky eater. How about a choice of 8 kinds of eggplant, 15 kinds of mushrooms, and over 20 kinds of apples in a single store? And how about all the labels on the foods saying, "No trans-fats, No hormones, No GMOs" etc.? Very, very far from the idea most Europeans have of American diet. Even cheap eateries around the campus never compromise the quality of the products they cook. And most of the products are local, too. People living on the coast of California may not like very much the sturdy and conservative guys from the interior of the state – but it is those guys that grow their splendid liberal food...

The other thing was the houses. Wait, do you call this a house? That could sum up my first reaction. In Bulgaria, building a house is like a sacred ritual. You build a house that could stay there for centuries and accommodate your offspring through the ages. So all the houses in Berkeley, cute as they are, with the exuberant greenery and colored facades, seemed to me as if they were built with chip board (and it seems they sometimes are). Mind you, it is not that warm in Northern California. Evenings are always chilly and November through March you need heating. One explanation for this curious architecture is surely the seismic activity in the region. You need to build light, and you had better build cheap, in case something happens under. However, it is also a cultural phenomenon. Many people around here, students and young professionals, are constantly on the move, they rarely own a house, and they do not spend much time home, anyway. Which is another typical feature of Bay Area life. If the weather is good, as it usually is, it seems somewhat offensive to stay home. You just have to be out, and then you have to do something: jogging, biking, hiking, you name it. Public parks are not what we are used to in Bulgaria: they are not central places for meetings, hanging around and slow walks, they are huge semi-wild spaces out of town where you go driving and then engage in some physical activity. When on weekends I roam the quiet streets where almost every house has a beautiful cozy porch, I am amazed by how empty it is around me. If there was such a quarter in any Bulgarian city or town, the porches would be full of people taking their time over a coffee or beer, children would play in the streets, and youngsters would just hang about. In Berkeley, it seems

only Afro-Americans are willing to spend their free hours like this: the others just feel obliged to do something.

Anyway, jogging, biking, and hiking certainly make sense in a place which has so much to offer in terms of nature. Too bad you usually need a car to reach it, even though by American standards the Bay Area has well developed public transportation. I cannot complain: I got very soon an offer to hike in Yosemite National Park in Sierra Nevada, and I took it. For someone like me, who has a good hiking experience in Bulgarian mountains, this was a different story. Because Sierra Nevada is so huge and old, and the climate is different, you are slow to realize how high you have reached: you just walk through the vast mountain plateaus, you watch the lakes, and only when your head and lungs start feeling weird does it occur to you that you are now at an altitude you have never reached on those steep and craggy peaks in Rila and Pirin. The arrangements of the National Park just struck me. You actually have to reserve tickets for a trail, you get a list of rules and regulations, and – what is this? – you get several big black boxes that open with a key. Are there so many thieves in the park? No, there are lots of thieving black bears! They are so many, and so little afraid of humans, that they go to camping sites at night and sometimes in broad daylight, looking for anything smelly: food, toothpaste, "tobacco-like substances", as the ranger put it. That is why you need to lock all this stuff in those "bear containers", and put them at some distance from your tent for the night. We never had the chance to see a bear, but we saw deer, marmot traces, and amazing birds. And not a single piece of trash. The fact that you have to travel for hours to reach the park, the lack of chalets, and even the small sum for your ticket, actually mean that the mountain only gets visitors who know why they are there. Nothing like the illegal cable cars up Bulgarian mountains, built with the explanation that "people need to go somehow up there after all"; nothing like barbecues and ice cream all over the place; and nothing like high-heeled ladies throwing coins and food leftovers in the mountain lakes.

California is known for its green consciousness, and, apart from the amount of gas and electricity needed to keep those cute houses with no isolation warm, that picture is true. Even before I went to Yosemite, I saw my first street lamp charged by a mini solar panel. Why not, after all? There are traffic lights charged by solar panels too. Garbage is strictly sorted and organic waste is composted. There are no plastic bags hanging from the trees. (But New York was full of them, and Washington DC seemed to know nothing about garbage sorting).

Our trip to the East Coast was an adventure, though. It involved a "red-eye" flight (that is, a nighttime flight) to New

York, a round trip with the “Chinatown bus” (a bus connecting two Chinatowns in two American cities), a return to New York just after a notorious winter storm with lots of snow, a canceled flight back, and three more days waiting for our air company to find a solution while selling available tickets instead of giving them to stranded passengers (and that company's boss says he is doing bad in business because of competition from European airliners). New York is... Well, it's a Big Apple! And, to translate the Bulgarian saying, it is no apple for any mouth. New York has so much life in it that it overwhelms you, leaving you knocked out. The avenues of Manhattan, the cafes of Brooklyn, a jam session in an old-style Harlem bar, an exposition of Fascist art in Guggenheim, the hours on the subway and the millions of faces we saw – it is really, really interesting, and it is really a bit too much. As for DC, I might have been a little harsh on it, because there is, after all, a lot to see there, and the monuments are magnificent. But if you come to live for some time in the US, the Bay Area is definitely preferable.

Why haven't I said anything so far about UC Berkeley? Three reasons: I do not like talking about work, I only know its libraries, because I am not taking classes, and, after all, Berkeley is famous for its university, so most people know about it but not too many know about Berkeley itself, and I preferred

to try an article about the place and how people live here. I love the university libraries, though. Since I spend most of my days there, I move, and change two or three libraries per day for variety. Some are old-style halls of the sort that curiously blends the lofty and the cozy. Others are huge well-lit spaces full of students. Still others are modern fusion buildings challenging the stereotypical idea of a library. But they are all places where you can hear freedom ring: the freedom that comes from knowledge.

My stay here has been a rather solitary experience, and any prospective grantee should have in mind that living alone in another country, away from all your usual life and totally engulfed in your work, is not always an easy thing. However, it is also what gives you the opportunity of that creative solitude that focuses your thought and channels your effort, and this now is an experience that gives you more than accomplishing the task you are after, it is something that stays with you for a lifetime. I am grateful to the Fulbright Commission and the UC Berkeley for giving me that chance, as well as the chance to get to know – err – America. Which is an unaccomplishable project but, well, one can at least try.

**Disclaimer:** The text is published in its original and unedited version.

## Bulgarian Fulbright Alumni Association Membership Form



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*To Chicago and Back*

## To Chicago and Forward: How the Fulbright American Experience Makes Going Back Home a Leap Forward

**Nikolay Mihaylov**

**Master in Clinical and Counseling Psychology  
Sofia University, Sofia, Bulgaria**

**Fulbright Graduate Student  
DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA  
AY 2010-2011**

I really am in Chicago actually: I am studying Community Psychology at DePaul University. With this account of my experiences I want to show you that coming to America on a Fulbright grant was a step forward to me, but it also makes my coming back to Bulgaria another possible leap forward. As a community psychologist who is interested in developing communities in Bulgaria, I want to make a case for each Bulgarian student to really go back and forward in Bulgaria, empowered with the Fulbright experience.

“Your heads will expand when you go to America, and they will never shrink back”, said one American graduate student on our preparatory meeting in Sofia, and his hands waved to show an invisible ball, about half a meter in diameter. Seven months into the program, my skull is still intact, but I need no mirror to see what he meant. Studying in a US university, living in Chicago, and being a member of the Fulbright network, made my months here rich and meaningful like years.

The first thing that struck me here was the work load. I say, work load, because studying in a US university is a full-time job. It is not just going to school, it is not just reading



and passing exams, it is not hanging out in the café. If you were annoyed by the slack of your undergraduate education in Bulgaria (but nonetheless enjoyed the carefree and slow days out of exam sessions, like me), well – brace yourselves! You will test the limits of your perseverance and motivation to learn. In my case: every week for classes I have to read

about 300 pages from books and articles and write a paper or two. Each course requires writing several serious research papers, which means reading through dozens of articles, using the tools and concepts discussed in class, and coming up with ideas and ways to evaluate them. Taking a course with an A really means that you know and you can do something specific and measurable. You don't leave a course behind when you finish it – you carry with you hundreds of pages of scientific texts, dozens of hours of data collection, articles search, and discussions, fifty or more pages of defensible text written by you, and practice in real settings. I can safely estimate that a quarter here (10 weeks of study) gives me knowledge and skills comparable to my whole undergraduate study. I am not trying to impress you with that – it is sad, but true for me!

Perhaps you can feel now that studying here requires learning a new set of skills and maybe a whole new work ethics. In the beginning I expected the load to subside naturally – the assignments to become fewer or just for me to somehow get used to the work without changing my BG-student work habits (I am not a café-guy, so I thought I was one up on that). Well, things didn't change. You realize something really happened out there – you are not in Bulgaria anymore! So I really had to change the way I worked – to plan ahead for months, to plan the week, to start working first thing in the morning (when my mind is fresh), to reevaluate my environment as cues to action (don't work on a computer with internet connection!), to prioritize, and most dramatically, to plan my leisure time. Even writing this text has a high opportunity cost (another concept you learn from experience here): not reading those five chapters for Monday or going to the gallery I've been targeting for a month now. And the greatest struggle for me was (and still is) to do all assigned work and yet to leave some time for reflection and work for my own interests.

Another experience that is pushing me forward post-Chicago was the discovery of my differences as strengths. I found who I am as a Bulgarian and what makes me valued and useful. Diversity is valued in US universities. As I became participant in classes or research projects, I was sensitized to my cultural differences – the ways I reacted, the norms and assumptions I followed, the pathways of my thinking, feeling and sensing. In Bulgaria, being a Bulgarian is not a big deal – it's just the natural way things are. Culture for people is like water for the fish. Like the smog for the citizen of Sofia. You just breathe it and live it, you don't notice it. Most people do things in very similar and thus often annoying ways. But if you are a fish and you go to Chicago, you will feel the difference. And it is inspiring and respiring.

What I thought was bad about me, worked well for me. I think I am shy and humble (that nasty Bulgarian modesty, right?) – here, where people usually speak before thinking, I am the reflective guy who gives great ideas. I used to think of myself as an overly watchful and anxious person. Here, I am being appreciated as a thoughtful and tactful team member. I remember a lecture here when an earthquake started to shake the floor. No, when I looked around I saw it was one of my colleagues: she was tapping the ground (she was beating the dust out of it!) fiercely with her foot because she was so bored by the lecture. Almost all US students seem to me to barely stand standing still. There are two significant qualities of any activity here: cool (good, useful, or pretty) and fun (interesting, amusing). Hence, I realized how valuable patience and concentration are, especially for things that are important but not very stimulating. Wait a minute! What we think of as the notorious Bulgarian “slavish patience” can actually be useful in a world where professional expertise requires on average 10,000 hours of learning? Who could have imagined?

Even the Bulgarian quality we all love to laugh at – be knowledgeable about everything and able to do nothing (politics, sports, business, you name it), which is so well embodied in the slackly Bulgarian higher education – even this gives you an edge in a team where everybody is a narrow specialist. At first I was depressed when I saw how deep and rigorous US education is, from the very first year in college, and compared that to my “a little bit of everything” semblance of training. Then, I realized how easy was for me to connect different fields of knowledge, see the big picture, and produce new, creative ideas. This was again, a strength appreciated by my colleagues.

Partly this new feeling of comparative strengths, stemming out of simply being Bulgarian among non-Bulgarians, is a result of a shift in perspective, of positive reframing of personal and cultural assets. Modesty can be viewed as thoughtfulness; restraint – as reflectiveness; breadth instead of depth – as creativity. But there is more to all that. The social environment in Bulgaria is scarce; opportunities are not abundant. Hence we are all conditioned to satisfy ourselves with little and to be on the watch for something more. In a land of plenty such as the United States, and particularly in a city as vibrant as Chicago, my Bulgarian background makes me a happy virus. What do I mean by “virus”? In contrast to my American classmates who prefer to stick with what the university provides to them, I am constantly looking for and grasping opportunities to learn, train, meet, enjoy. I enrolled in a world-class training for personal skills; got into a research project; joined a consulting team doing evalua-

tion of a state program; became active in the local Fulbright chapter and a member of two other societies; celebrated all major US holidays with local people; the list can go on and on, and the student status gives access to all kind of culture and entertainment institutions in Chicago. Again, being a Bulgarian is a door-opener. People are so excited that somebody from a very distant place is interested in their work that they let you learn from it virtually for free! You just have to ask and offer your time, and you are in. This is why I feel the Fulbright experience is so enriching and empowering: you can become part of world quality work just by asking and being open.

A side note – this perceived availability of opportunities is partly due to Bulgarian alertness, and partly – to the positive, pragmatic attitude of well-off Americans. The default reaction here is welcoming. You are here, I respect you, state your needs, if they relate to mine, we do something together. No suspicions, no hints, no sophisticated expressions of respect or reluctance. I remember crossing a street carelessly and barely jumping out of the way of a bike rider. I expected to hear a curse; instead, she laughed heartily. Most people have this amazing attitude: “Since we are both here together, it is in our common interest to make this encounter pleasant, productive and short”. I tend to explain this welcoming of strangers again with affluence. The first reaction toward a stranger is that the stranger is a good person just like me; he is not a thief, a beggar, a salesman, or other type of person threatening my scarce resources.

Now, I didn't tell you all of that to tease you. You might ask, well, how is this experience going to help back in Bulgaria? The stranger who welcomes you at Sofia airport is the cab shark driving in circles. Let me bring back the idea of cultural differences. In Bulgaria differences are difficult to see; a zebra becomes an exotic acclaimed animal outside the herd – in the heard you see only repetitive stripes of black and white. The good thing is, when you go back to Bulgaria, having really soaked in US work ethics, collaborative and positive attitude, you will be the different one, and it will be up to you to capitalize on the differences you bring into Bulgarian teams and communities. Another carry-on thing that will propel you in Bulgaria might be the new appreciation you will have of personal and cultural strengths. What once you thought was annoying irrational Bulgarian traits, now you might see as potential assets. It will be up to you to create contexts and situations where traits become useful, i.e. resources. And finally, the greatest benefit you can take from your US experience, I think, is a new learned reaction to strangers – a hearty laugh, a welcoming smile, a no-nonsense respectful hello. My experience shows that good attitude begets good conduct, and

treating somebody as a good person is self-fulfilling. That's how you can go forward in Bulgaria.

The third and last thing I want to touch upon in this text is how my experience in the US expanded my perspectives on the possible futures of Bulgaria, Europe and the world outside USA. If you like observing social phenomena first hand, USA is the land of everyday miracles. You will see concepts and issues we are struggling to grasp and define in Bulgaria in their purest and most advanced form. It is like seeing in real life answers to any “What if...?” question you might think of. I enjoy watching wonders from the first row with regard to consumer rights, freedom, public policy, civil society, business efficiency, community life, and work morale. So, for example, in Bulgaria we often discuss how little power the consumer has, and how unaccountable companies are. And we all know that in USA, the customer is always right. Right? Well, this is true, and I can feel it when I am shopping and when I am getting offers in the mail for blankets with foot pockets and what not. What you also see here, though, is that purchase “power” actually makes you more dependent on somebody else – somebody else cooks your food; somebody else takes care of your child; somebody else helps you relax. Very often a dinner with my American friends consists of 10 minutes of eating and three hours of board games. Making your own fun by talking and thinking together is a rare treat! Another devious thing about consumer “rights” is when the consumer's expectation to get the best service for the money paid expands to the realm of government. US citizens now perceive good government as a service they pay for. They are entitled to it and they expect it delivered. The result is a democracy that lacks participation, citizen input and control, and communities relying on services to bring them safety, order, and belonging. This is exactly what brings about the demise of democracy and community. This is what I learned about consumer power and its ramifications here. And I look at it from a more realistic perspective now, I think.

Another example of a pure form of social phenomenon I enjoy observing here is public policy and action. The United States are a designed country, and almost everything here is planned, built, and evaluated. There is little “organic growth” of social phenomena (as is in Europe, Africa and Asia), but there is a purposefulness in every action. Examples abound. The grass here is green and inviting to sit on, but it is not the British meadow of 300 years; it is turf laid in straight lines by professionals. The cities are purposefully planned and carefully zoned, so that a precise built environment – specific size and shape of buildings, streets, rails, alleys, and parks is achieved. The city map is a chessboard with streets running exactly north and east, and with blocks assigned numbers

in a way that makes them easily identifiable. Sometimes this planned purposefulness is tricky. If you see the public housing built in Chicago since the 1950s and the all-out push to end poverty, you will realize that the planning approach to economy of Bulgaria during socialism times actually had a rival in some aspects of US development! And the panel buildings in Bulgarian cities fade compared to the “housing projects” here.

This purposefulness has many appealing aspects for me. Americans take government and policy making extremely seriously. Programs here – on the federal level or in distant localities – are meticulously designed, implemented, and evaluated. The expertise of professional public officials is very impressive. Elected officials use input from experts and communities, and the public institutions are learning organizations. Science is used everywhere – in government, business, and civil society organizations – to inform action on any issue. Personal leadership – and not relying on structures to solve problems – is held in highest esteem. (In Bulgaria we tend to look at personal leadership as “unprofessionalism”). I would extend the purposeful attitude also to the non-nonsense, pragmatic US approach to communication and problem-solving. The question “Does it work?” is the slogan of this really active and acting society. The shady side of purposeful action is what some call “fix-it” attitude of Americans. This is a mechanistic, invasive approach to the world – natural and social – where problems are fixed instead of prevented. For example, instead of resource conservation (which would mean less consumption!) Americans prefer to rely on technology to outrun resource depletion. The “take a pill” solution – literally and metaphorically – supplants what in the Old World would be organic or preventive, long-term efforts to solve problems.

I gave these two examples of pure, extreme phenomena I observed here, to show you how instructive the US experience can be about potential futures of the country or community you want to spend a life in. Seeing the pure form of social concepts helps me imagine possible ways to make them reality, and also side effects that are not always desirable. It is really like going forward in time, but preserving the right to back up.

This was the third argument I wanted to make about how going back to Bulgaria after one or two Fulbright years in USA is effectively a leap forward. You can prepare this leap with the rigorous knowledge and new skills you get here, with the new appreciation and use of personal and cultural differences, and by imagining possible futures for the society you want to work in – and pathways to get to those futures.

Of course, these benefits do not come readily in your hands. Perseverance and hard work would seem obvious necessities, but I will share with you about some other things you might find helpful in maximizing your US learning.

The first and foremost is – know what you want to do with the knowledge, experience and contacts you will acquire in the United States. And I don’t mean just knowing the general direction or the profession you want to work in. I mean have your own plan about the places, the people, the values, and the issue you want to work with. They might change with your experience here, and that’s OK. But having the focus of your personal project will help you in a tremendous way to get the most meaningful learning out of your studies and to be active and alert about opportunities outside the school. The idea is to be able to always recognize how something new that you come across – an idea, an example, a person – can be a resource, an input to your project. The better you know your project, the easier it will be for you to make resources out of encounters. The second thing: prepare and force yourself to make a lot of contacts. Asking here is not perceived as stupid, or intrusive, or arrogant. If you meet a professor doing intriguing research (a potential resource for you) – ask him to take you in his team. If you hear of an organization working with a population you want to work with – call and ask to volunteer. If you see a pricey training for a skill you want to hone – ask for opportunities to get in at discounted rate. Prepare yourself a stack of business cards and don’t ever go out without three of them. You are in a very privileged position: everybody here will be excited to hear that what they do might be meaningful in a small obscure country on the other side of the planet. Finally, make a blog, or even better, buy a handy notebook to put down your ideas. Keep it with you at most times, especially by the bed, in the bathroom, and when you travel. This is your only chance to survive the deluge of ideas you are going to have once the floodgates of your US experience open into the riverbed of your personal project. Enjoy the flow!

I hope I was able to convey to you the sheer feeling of empowerment that grasped me in my Chicago. But power is always power to do something. So, I also hope that I have been able to show you how the US experience gives you power to be successful in Bulgaria. To go forward after Chicago. Because, in the words of one of my Fulbright colleagues from Pakistan, we are supposed not just to take opportunities, but to create opportunities. Will you join me, forward in Bulgaria?

**Disclaimer:** The text is published in its original and unedited version.

*Out of America*

## My Experience as an American in Bulgaria

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AY 2009-2010**

Nearly every country has some things that are notable and beautiful, and I don't know of any country in the world that doesn't have its own problems and challenges. Similarly, every foreigner who travels to live in a country other than their own faces experiences that delight and surprise them, as well as their own set of individual challenges. The actual everyday experience of *living*, not just *visiting*, but really *living* outside of America for 7 months (from the beginning of my Fulbright grant period in August until this point) in Bulgaria has both surprised and delighted me, as well as presented me with challenges of various kinds. The personal challenges accompanying adjustment to life in a new country include loneliness and homesickness. The professional challenges accompanying working in a school system with a different language and culture include the necessity of learning new ways to communicate with colleagues and how to function in a new system. Even while there are difficulties, through these I continue to learn that in each challenge is hidden the opportunity to succeed and triumph in areas that I never previously considered while living and working in my home country.

### **America, Out of America: On Being a Tourist vs. Being a Regular Working Part of the Community**

When you live in a place, it entails much more than visiting the tourist attractions. In Burgas, Bulgaria, where this year I have settled to live and teach, these attractions include the Black Sea; the Ethno-cultural and Archeological Museums; and the city center with the 2 beautiful pedestrian streets, Alexandrovska and Bogoridi. And certainly not to be left without mention is the beautiful Sea Garden (aka, *Morskata Gradina*), the Black Sea destinations in close proximity to Burgas (Sozopol and Nessebar, among others) and the cultural festivals of spring and summer. Of course, a foreigner enjoys all of these things. But after the first few weeks, a person who is settling for a while needs to think about other things: grocery shopping, renting an apartment, budgeting, cooking, cleaning, making friends, working and being productive and successful. When you live in a place, you get much more of an idea of the culture and daily life in the city than when you just go as a tourist. You must learn to do things as the locals do, or at least to do things in a way



*Steph Schaffner in Burgas, Bulgaria*

that works for you and enables you to live successfully in that area. You experience real daily life, not just entertainment and visiting. Whether in America or Bulgaria, ever present are the needs not only to eat and pay the bills, but to find what is fulfilling on a personal level: family, friends, an enjoyable social life, a true sense of purpose, and perhaps even a belief in a power greater than oneself.

### **The Hardships and the Victories**

The day after I arrived in Burgas, Bulgaria, I walked into an evangelical church\* carrying a Bulgarian-English phrasebook and looked for information about regular service times and activities among the signs and papers on the wall. I saw and heard only Bulgarian all around me. It was Sunday morning and the service was soon to begin. I was nervous because I understood nothing and knew no one. As I walked, phrasebook in hand, up the stairs toward the sanctuary, I heard a voice behind me say, "Hi! Do you speak English?"

This was Will, a British ex-pat who has lived in Bourgas for the past number of years with his Bulgarian wife, Mariela. Will and Mariela have

\*Non-orthodox or Protestant Christian church



*Burgas Sea Garden in the fall*



*Another victory! Reaching the summit of Mount Vihren in the Pirin Mountains of Bulgaria, September 2009*

since become my good friends. For the few months following that first conversation, when I would come to church on Sunday mornings, Will would ask me, "So what are some of your victories this week?" This question got me thinking. If there is one thing, that I can say about coming to Bulgaria as an English teaching assistant, it is that it has improved my confidence. At Geo Milev English Language School, I teach 12 forty- minute-classes of 30 students per week. This makes about 360 students total, composed of 5 classes from the eleventh grade and 7 classes from the ninth grade. For the forty minutes I have with each group, I am the only teacher in the room. Thirty teenagers. And me. I have no textbook to go by. As I am the only native speaker teaching classes this year, the school has given me no planned requirements or exercises except the assignment to help these students improve their speaking and understanding of English.

I am not a high-school teacher. At least, I was not before I came to Bulgaria. As a matter of fact, teenagers scare me more than I would like to admit. My teaching experience before I came to Bulgaria consisted of a class of eight university students in the English for Internationals course at Appalachian State University in North Carolina. This class was small enough that we could put the chairs in a circle and have discussions about language and culture. Moreover, I was not the only teacher. I co-taught this class under the supervision of my TESL\* professor and with another aspiring teacher like myself. When I applied for the Fulbright grant to Bulgaria, I was somehow under the impression that I would probably be placed teaching small groups of adults.

Never did I imagine that I would be set free to create my own lesson plans and actively use them as the only teacher with groups of 30 teenagers at a time – I didn't think I could! My first day, I felt like I had defeated an army as I stood up in front of the seven groups of ninth graders, one group of 30 after another. I never thought of myself as someone who could be a high school teacher, but it wasn't long before I realized that not only *can* I, but I also actually love doing it! If there is one thing I can say about my Fulbright experience, it's that it has opened my mind to see what is possible. And not only what is possible, but perhaps what is inspiring and enjoyable too!

## The Students at *Geo Milev* English Language School

I have learned so much from my students at Geo Milev. They love to sing and dance. They love to participate in fun activities. They find tremendous thrill in any opportunity to teach me Bulgarian. They are

*\*Teaching English as a Second Language*

enthusiastic. They are so much more ready to engage in activities and music than I thought they would be. Some of the best lessons we have had are the lessons during which I bring in my guitar and we play music, breaking down all of the lyrics and discussing the new English phrases, slang, idioms, grammar, themes, and cultural expressions. I would expect most American teenagers to be too shy or reserved (too "cool") to sing along. Not these students! I have been most pleasantly surprised to see that this doesn't seem to be a problem at all in Bulgaria!

## Personal Challenges

Of course, adjusting to life "out of America" was not always easy. This is, in fact, my first time living abroad. I miss my friends, my family and my dog. Moreover, Burgas is not a large city, but it is a city nonetheless, and coming from the mountains and the forests of North Carolina to the city was a challenge for me. While I love the beautiful Bulgarian language, it took me a while to learn to buy train tickets by myself and to buy from stores where the products are located behind the service counter. The constant flow of techno music from every shopping mall, restaurant and café in Burgas in the summer (the fall, winter and spring proved to be a bit more quiet and calm) at first seemed very unnerving and unfamiliar.

But these challenges, whether small or large, have helped me. Life in the city doesn't bother me as much as it once did. And I have to admit, I do take every opportunity to visit the smaller villages and beautiful natural landscapes that are so abundant in Bulgaria. I can fully understand why Bulgarian families flock to the sea and the mountains during their summer holidays. For a person who loves nature, the variety and beauty of Bulgaria is astounding!



*With students during Halloween celebrations at Geo Milev English Language School*



Most recent trip to the Belogradchik Rocks

## What are the Bulgarians Talking About?

With only three months remaining of my adventure in Bulgaria, I can confidently say that Bulgaria is a place that I have grown to care about a great deal on a personal level. With that in mind, I would like to share what I have learned about the concerns of the people of Bulgaria at this present time. Bulgaria has faced a lot of trying times. After five hundred years of domination and abuse while they were ruled over by the Turks, the Bulgarian people were liberated with the assistance of the Russians. What followed in the subsequent years (as Bulgaria fell under the Soviet sphere of influence) was communism under the Soviet regime. So what is Bulgaria like and what issues remain now that it is a democracy?

*Economic hardship* is the first phrase that comes to mind. I can't tell you how many times I have been asked by taxi drivers, store keepers, new acquaintances and general people on the street why I am here. It is more than just a simple question and general conversation topic. The question is expressed more in baffled amazement. It is as if they are saying, "We have no money here. There is so much unemployment, and even for the employed, the wages are low. We try to work abroad to make better wages. It is a better life in America or abroad, away from these problems. So you, from America, why do you come here!?"

Not everyone in Bulgaria thinks this way, but a great many do. Another issue that Bulgarians are talking about has to do with education and the younger generations. Many bright young Bulgarians leave their country every year to attend universities abroad. After their education is finished, many of them remain abroad never to live again in Bulgaria. If so many of the educated youth leave, who will be the qualified professionals in Bulgaria? Where are the great minds who will work to solve Bulgaria's problems and increase the quality of life?

As I learn of these hardships through observation and conversations with the friends I have made in Burgas, I am forming the opinion more and more that Bulgaria is a country with more reason for confidence in regards to the future than hopelessness. While I don't know that many Bulgarians would share this optimism, it seems to me that positive things really are taking place. In 2007, Bulgaria became the newest addition to the European Union. I have visited the universities in Burgas, Sofia and Veliko Turnovo and am impressed by what I have seen. The architecture itself is impressive, and this is just the begin-

ning. The students I have had the pleasure of meeting are intelligent to a competitive degree and motivated in their fields. Many also take part in the extracurricular activities available at their universities. Many other Bulgarian students thrive in talent and creativity in the fields of music and art. On several occasions I have heard the professors and administrative professionals at these universities speak about projects for expanding university programs and attracting more bright Bulgarian students back to their country to attend institutions of higher learning.

When I spoke about American universities at my school in Burgas and asked that those students who plan to study abroad raise their hands, few did. The majority of students expressed both their plans to stay in Bulgaria and their love for their country even with the current challenges. Many of my personal friends in Burgas are of university age. One studied in Sofia. Another recently graduated from the university in Veliko Turnovo with her degree in Russian and English linguistic studies. Another grew up in Burgas and decided to stay at home to attend the local private university. Many of these young people have expressed their desire to stay and make a change in Bulgaria, both in their local communities and on a wider scale. Many talk about whether or not there is hope for the future of Bulgaria. With young people like these, I see hope for Bulgaria. I will hold out hope for this place I have grown to care about so much over the past months. All too soon, I will have to leave. I thank Fulbright and the people of Bulgaria for the experience I have had, and I look forward to the time when I will be able to return to the country whose citizens have been an inspiration to me.



Standing on the Heights. Hiking in the Pirin Mountains of Bulgaria, 2009

"You, O Lord, keep my lamp burning;  
my God turns my darkness into light.  
With your help I can advance against a troop;  
with my God I can scale a wall!"  
He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him...  
"He makes my feet like the feet of a deer;  
he enables me to stand on the heights.  
He trains my hands for battle; my arms  
can bend a bow of bronze. You give me  
your shield of victory, and your right hand  
sustains me; you stoop down to make me great.  
You broaden the path beneath me, so that my  
ankles do not turn."

**Psalm 18**

**Disclaimer:** The text is published in its original and unedited version.

*Out of America*

## “Zdraveite!”

### Sophia Kleinsasser

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**B**efore I arrived at the airport in Sofia I knew precious little about the country I would be living in for the next ten months. The first couple of days were a blur of the seemingly incomprehensible language, different culture and a growing list of confusing things I wanted to understand. I remember feeling unprepared, not knowing the answers to fundamental questions I had about my new home. I knew I should have done more research, should have memorized the alphabet at least! But since then the learning curve has become less steep, and as I've grown more comfortable in my surroundings I'm not so embarrassed to ask stupid questions anymore.

The first week of school I felt like I had been thrown to the wolves; I didn't know what to say to my 300 new students who were just as shy to talk to me, their first native English teacher. My first instinct was to break down any barriers of formality between us. I told them they could call me by my first name if they preferred, and that I wouldn't be examining them or adhering strictly to the textbook as in their regular classes. This, I now realize, may have lost me some legitimacy as an authority figure but I've made up for it in the sense that most of my students regard me as more of a peer than a teacher. Another reason for that is certainly my age; I'm generationally much closer to my students than almost all of my fellow teachers.

The best part about teaching at my school is the flexibility. Because the Foreign Language School is one of the more rigorous preparatory institutions in Pleven, it can be a bit nerve-racking for its students who spend hours and hours studying every day. As the expectations for my lessons are simply to engage students in speaking, I can vary the topic of discussion and give them the chance to develop and expand vocabulary they are genuinely in-



terested in using. An example of this could be using a short video to introduce a new topic, such as use of technology or current events. I have found that students are much more willing to engage in thoughtful discussions when they care about the subject matter and are given the confidence to speak freely about it. This approach is in stark contrast to the majority of their other classes, and many students have told me that my class is the most enjoyable and relaxing one of the week.

Some of my favorite classes have been those in which students chose a topic to present to the class. Examples include Bulgarian tourism, culture and traditions, Japanese manga comics and revolutions in world history, which was part of a class discussion about the ongoing political demonstrations and crises in the Middle East. In several classes I recorded student video narratives on various elements of Bulgarian life and general interests of average high school students. These videos were sent to our "partner school" in Chicago, where their counterparts recorded video responses and comparisons. This audio-visual exchange project has provided a great tool to get students talking and interested in oth-

er culture and lifestyles. Recently for a school-wide presentation, a group of tenth graders and I decorated posters about American and Canadian culture to put on display in the halls during "English Culture Week."



In addition to the eighth, ninth, tenth and eleventh grade speaking classes I teach every week, I also teach an elective course on American culture attended mostly by my older students. I try to present topics that will spark further interest and discussion, and I rely mostly on student input to decide on themes and issues. One of the easiest ways to teach American culture is through holidays and celebrations: Halloween, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Christmas, Martin Luther King Day and Mardi Gras are some examples. Beyond that we've explored different communities such as Native Americans and various immigrant groups throughout U.S. history. My mother's parents were immigrants so I was able to incorporate elements of my own identity into the presentation. Using images, popular music and film has been especially helpful to convey changing values and attitudes during periods like the Civil Rights Era. Teaching this course has been the most thought-provoking aspect of my work, as I reconsider what "American culture" is or if it can be limited to a general definition.

As an American living in a foreign country I am acutely aware of cultural differences and similarities. I have noticed a few big differences between the educational system in the U.S. and Bulgaria, for example. Just like in the U.S. Bulgarian teachers' salaries aren't on average very high. But most teachers here don't make what ought to be considered a living wage. I'm sure this is due to many reasons but the simple fact is that a lot of teachers are working second or even third jobs to support their families. And because this isn't a very profitable profession, there are fewer and fewer young people who choose it, meaning that there is an extreme lack of new teachers at every school. Bulgaria has a long tradition of higher education (one of the nation's biggest holidays is dedicated to the "enlighteners," or inventors of the Cyrillic alphabet, and celebrates the work of teachers) but this isn't evidenced by current standards. This is why organizations like the Fulbright Commission need the resources to continue supporting efforts to

promote academic excellence in Bulgaria.

One of the most important steps I took to better acclimate myself here was taking language lessons from a private tutor. With a fair amount of patience and effort to remember all of the complex grammar rules, I have been able to get by and understand basic conversations. Although my attempts at speaking are childlike at best, the effort is always greatly appreciated and I have been met with surprising acts of kindness, like when my next-door neighbor replaced the broken lock in my door. This happened after ten o'clock in the evening and when I offered to pay for the parts, he flatly refused. Helping out your neighbors may be a dying value in urban areas like where I grew up, but in my neighborhood in Plevna I have noticed many examples of neighborly generosity, something deeply ingrained in a society going through a difficult economic crisis. Life in Bulgaria can be hard, this is true, but would be much harder without the support of one's friends and extended family.

I imagine that my life here would be exceptionally boring if not for the friends I've made. I spend a few hours each week with another teacher, Dessy, with whom I've become fast friends. Whether it's just meeting for coffee and cake or a walk through the park, the time I spend with her is always a welcome relief from the anxiety of living in a foreign country. She is someone I know I can rely on for advice and to share frustrations with at school. When you work with thirteen-year-olds, there are a lot of those. I have been invited on several occasions to dinner with her mother and to visit her grandmother's village. I always feel comfortable and welcome with her family and I know we will remain friends even after I return home.

Another perk that I enjoy here is the Fulbright community, which I was welcomed into at the summer institute. A huge support for me is just to know that there are nine other ETAs going through the same experience and being able to share strategies and accomplishments with one another. The Commission also organizes lots of events throughout the year which are always a great opportunity to connect and learn more about this fascinating country. Because of this extended network of grantees spread across the country, I have visited parts of Bulgaria that I probably wouldn't have on my own. Although living alone in a new place has been fantastic for my own personal growth, it is comforting that I'm only a short bus ride away from another member of the "Fulbright fam."

I can think of so many more reasons why I have loved my time here, but the biggest one is that I've learned a lot about myself and how I see the world. Even though this experience was at first a bit scary and confusing, I now feel very much at home in Bulgaria, especially because of the people I've met. I will definitely be reluctant to leave, but I'm excited to go home and share my journey with others. Hopefully I will return very soon.

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AY 2010-2011

Spring in Sofia has me falling in love with Bulgaria all over again. Don't get me wrong; Bulgaria and I didn't have a falling out. It's just that a grey winter had me forget about how alive and vibrant this place can be when days warm up even the slightest bit. The first warm weekend we had back in the beginning of March caused an explosion of people in every park around the city centre. Everyone seemed to be out enjoying the sunshine, the vendors, the street performers and the outside cafes. You can't help but love the way Bulgarians celebrate spring.

It's perhaps amusing how my first ever impressions of Bulgaria differ so much from my yearlong Fulbright experience. I'm not entirely sure why my memories of Sofia when I first visited in January 2007 are largely remembered like a black and white movie. Maybe it was because that winter was particularly harsh or maybe it was because I was a relatively inexperienced traveler. I remember a well-weathered city painted in every imaginable shade of grey. I can still see shapeless black forms wrapped in thick, black, wool coats, heads down against the falling snow, quickly walking to their destinations. Church ceilings were partly obscured by layers of black soot, covering the beautiful frescoes of saints who solemnly stared down upon the devout and the curious. I remember the flashes of gold in the icons and the hopeful faces of believers who bent to kiss them. I remember the biting cold and the failure of my inadequate boots to keep my toes warm for more than ten minutes at a time when I stepped outside onto the snow covered sidewalks. My memories are dirty, rough, and disjointed like a dream one barely remembers. It is perhaps difficult to believe that that experience inspired me to come back almost three years later, but there is something in visiting a place like Bulgaria that grabs you and doesn't quite let you go.

The cold did not scare me. In fact, I was attending university in Montreal at the time and it is not uncommon to experience winter days that reach -30 °C where breathing becomes uncomfortable and the hair around your faces freezes due to the condensation from your breath. In Sofia I defiantly trampled through snow and when I couldn't take it anymore, I ducked into cafes and restaurants. It was in these sacred places that Sofia, and Bulgaria, suddenly came to me in Technicolor. I



remember the rich smells of spiced meats cooking, the soothing taste of tripe soup, and the glow you feel when you've taken a gulp of Bulgarian brandy, or Rakia as it is known here. I realized that this country had so much more to offer than the requisite tourist sites and I couldn't shake the small taste I had had of the people, the food and the culture. These moments of forced reflection allowed me to process a little of what I had seen and it sparked a fascination with Bulgaria and the Balkans that had me eventually apply for a Fulbright grant.

And now I am here, back in Sofia, living and learning in the country that captivated me years ago. The winter this year was blessedly mild and the rest of the seasons beautiful and temperate as well. My research on the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has taken me all over the country, where I've interviewed and surveyed people of all ages and walks of life. This experience is something I will remember always and when it is done, I will look forward to the day that I am able to return to see and experience it again.

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