

## Social innovation in Bulgaria

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This is an optimistic profile on Bulgaria's social innovation. We truly believe that Bulgarians are as innovative as anybody else in the world and indeed the country is a land of innovators with great ideas. While much progress has been done in recent years, we are facing some challenges in establishing the supporting environment and infrastructure to sustain innovation and transfer it into proper working organisations.

### The definition

In Bulgaria, social innovation is considered to be a new solution (to the organisation itself, to the sector, to the country and the world) to a social need or problem. This solution should be better than existing traditional approaches - i.e. it should be more effective, efficient and sustainable.

### The goals

There are two main goals for social innovation – to benefit people from vulnerable groups or to contribute to fixing an important common challenge such as the environment. Based on Bulgarian experience, innovative organisations or projects lead to better services or enable the access to quality services for broad contingencies in education, social services, culture, etc. Social innovations contribute to people's motivation and willingness to become masters of their destinies; by creating shortcuts to knowledge, by making what seems boring look attractive and by proving that impossible aims can be achieved.

### The supporting environment

Like in all countries in the EU there are a range of support instruments for social innovation. Governmental agencies and non-profit grantmakers are looking to fund innovators. For the Ministry of Economy, innovations are seen as an important part of competitiveness and the majority of the supported innovations promise more environmentally-friendly solutions. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy is looking at social innovations as solutions to major social issues such as poverty, social exclusion and unemployment.

Various start-up accelerators proved efficient for identifying and supporting social innovators. Some provide inspiration and training like Junior Achievements Bulgaria, Start UP Foundation, 9academy, Ideas Factory, and others like Rinker Center, Bulgarian Centre for Not-for-Profit Law and Reach for Change. Competitive and fast growing ventures with innovative perspective and social reach can find support by Eleven and Launchub. Zagorka Green Fund also annually supports ideas for water and energy saving.

**Access to education** is currently the field that benefits the most from social innovation. Here are some examples:

- The award winning **Ucha.se** (I teach myself) counted over 12 million views of video lessons after its launch and has been praised for its simple and attractive language which is making studying attractive and easy. Ucha.se has been voted Number 1 Educational site and has won the Best startup award. Its videos provide 12 million answers to the question-slogan "Who says students don't want to study?!"
- The wide-spanning legal information and advice site **pravatami.bg** (my rights) brings to light people's rights in various aspects of life – consumer rights, employee rights, rights in relation to

public administration, police, court; and many others. The founder of the site won the Certificate of the 2015 John Atanassov Award.

- A really ambitious systemic change is sought by the Bulgarian **Zaedno v Chas Foundation** (member of Teach for All organisations) which strives to secure access to quality education for every child in Bulgaria, regardless of school, location or financial situation of parents. The Foundation works to prepare capable and ambitious young people to become inspiring teachers and leaders who go and work with children in difficult situations. The aim of the organisation is to bring a change by both rejuvenating the school system but also to create a growing group of alumni with a continuous appetite to transform education as we know it.

- Transformation is both a mission and the main tool for another organisation too. **Tranformatori** (Transformers) is a group of designers, architects and urban designers. The association turns unused spaces and objects into friendly places or inspiring pieces. It encourages productive and cooperative competitions of ideas and partnerships between artists and institutions, and organisations.

- “Nothing like any other” is the expression which describes the work of **Maria’s World Foundation**. Finding no service matching their aspirations for a full and dignified life for Maria, a young woman with intellectual disabilities, her family founded the organization. Taking ideas from experienced models from other countries, they can now teach those others back. They run quality training programmes on ‘empowerment’ and run other services and products (such as a restaurant) provided by the beneficiaries. Their impact is also measured by the employability of their beneficiaries with employers outside the security of the World Foundation.

- Small steps with great impact mark the work of **Dechitsa Foundation**. While many givers reached as far as to provide financial and material support to orphaned and neglected children, Dechitsa focused on access to education. Despite its small operation and financial resources, the organisation rapidly developed a growing group of dedicated volunteers who managed to provide personal care to tens of children as well as access to good training, ability to do sports and arts and become responsible about their lives.

- On a national scale, two national platforms for giving changed the way people connected to good causes and facilitated their contributions adding both reputation and political weight to the individual act.

**TimeHeroes** is a web platform linking organisations who need volunteers with people who want to give time. Prior to TimeHeroes, volunteering had been a neglected area for charities and difficult to organise. Now there is a growing community looking purposefully at spending time and lending skills to a good cause.

**1777 DMS Bulgaria** is the national project which allows for both individuals and organisations to raise funds through text messages. Prior to DMS only a handful of organisations could reach to mobile phone operators and convince them to support these services. DMS in Bulgaria builds on the model and experience of the Czech DMS. So far, it provides assistance to hundreds of emergency and charitable appeals. In 2015 the project added an online giving opportunity and regular monthly DMS subscription.

- Back to small communities, after discussions on difficulties in life, the people from the Danube village of Dolni Vadin decided that they could do something about the lack of a local soup kitchen and similar service for vulnerable people. 10 women volunteered to cook and they now feed up to 40 people. Sometimes the chefs are returned the favour through handy work, repairs or farm work. The **Shared Kitchen Project** gives the opportunity to communicate and talk and laugh with neighbours around the table.