

# Renewing a National Resource

## Re-skilled Bulgarian teachers return to work

---

Mark West

*Northwestern University*

June 2008

**CENTER FOR INFORMATION & SOCIETY**  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON



## Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

Center for Information & Society  
University of Washington  
Box 354985  
Seattle, WA 98195  
+1 206.616.9101

[cisinfo@u.washington.edu](mailto:cisinfo@u.washington.edu)  
[www.cis.washington.edu](http://www.cis.washington.edu)

When Natasha's employer explained that her position as a secretary had been eliminated, and she would have to work on the factory floor to keep her nominal paycheck, she reluctantly agreed. But after a few months of coming home from the wood products factory with an aching back and sore arms, Natasha knew she needed a change.

She signed up for an ICT training course with the local NGO in the small Bulgarian town of Vratsa. As a schoolteacher for seventeen years, Natasha Todorova knew that the mind is resilient. And when faced with the long haul of building new skills for

a new profession, she reached deep for that resilience. Recalling the early days in her e-skills training course at the local center, Natasha was grateful for her trainer's good humor. "There were cases when we did not follow his directions, and then Valyo would ask, 'Ok, why did you do this?' And then we would say, 'If we knew why, we wouldn't be here.' So Valyo was very patient with us and he explained things."

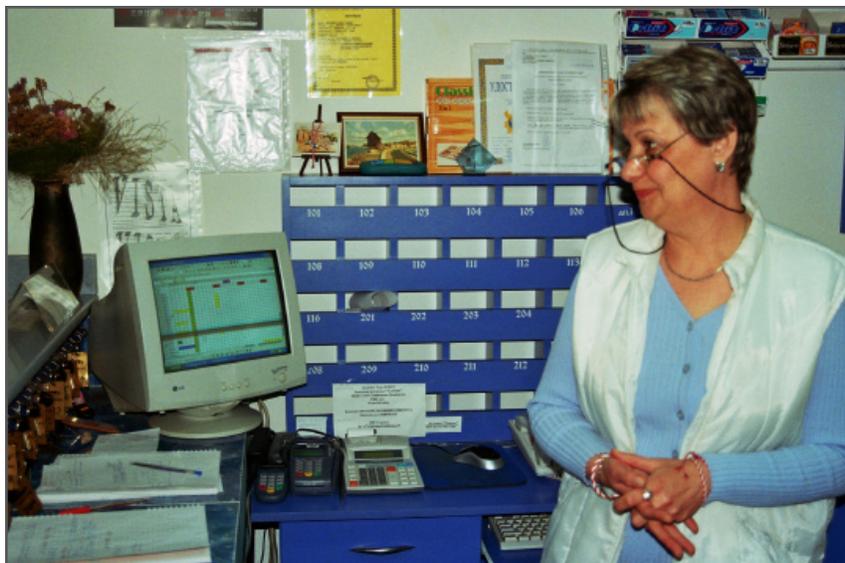
While Natasha remembers the difficult beginning days, her trainer Valentine ("Valyo") recalls the outcome: "They changed their lives, their professional lives."

Those were the first days for Natasha and her ten classmates, all unemployed Bulgarian teachers hoping for a second chance: a chance to honor their value in the workforce, a chance to provide for their families once again. For many of these women, the second chance turns into a new economic opportunity. They report finding secure jobs in challenging new environments. The CIS research team sought them out, finding them at work in post offices, at hotel front desks, and in security firms. Promises fulfilled, but only after a long and difficult road.

## Thousands of Teachers Out of Work

The plight of Bulgaria's unemployed teachers is not enviable. A demographic shift has devastated the teaching profession, with literally thousands of teachers losing their jobs as hundreds of schools have closed down across the country. In the early-1990s, after the fall of communism, young Bulgarians began leaving the country in search of work. The trend continued, and after ten years some 700,000 have gone – an enormous number for a small country of seven million. The result is a plummeting birth rate, school closures, and teacher layoffs.

For the unemployed teachers like Natasha, the search for new work is arduous. Though well-educated, highly experienced, and possessing proven people skills, Bulgaria's legions of out-of-work schoolteachers fit a difficult profile for a very traditional country. Nearly all are women, most are between forty and fifty-years-old. Many employers are reluctant to hire women that they perceive as just a few years from retirement. Coupled with their lack of e-skills, these thousands of knowledgeable and productive



*Natasha Todorova was pleasantly surprised to find that her new job – at a resort hotel in the mountains of Vratsa – used Excel spreadsheets and an Access database as the foundation of her daily tasks. Natasha had just completed and intensive training in both programs a couple of weeks earlier.*

Bulgarian women hit a wall when applying for jobs.

With the help of local labor offices across the country, the national network of Bulgarian iCentres decided to tackle this employment problem head-on. As part of its portfolio of e-skills offerings (including public access computing, re-training of the state administration, and programs for people with disabilities and the Roma) the iCentres sought to support the government's "Optimism" program aimed at helping Bulgarian teachers return to work.

*"No matter where you start looking for a job, every employer asks about your IT skills."*

*Natasha, on the importance of ICT skills to employers*

## Back in the Classroom – as Students

Building on the premise that ICT skills are a key to 21st Century employability, and that they're essential to starting a new profession after twenty years at the blackboard, the iCentres launched a program to renew Bulgaria's precious national resource: its teachers.

The iCentres took the Microsoft Unlimited Potential curriculum (translated into the Bulgarian language, using the Cyrillic alphabet) and adapted it to an intensive 300 hour program. In addition to their immersion in ICT, the graduates emerge with a diploma from the National Association of Vocational Education and Training, named a professional degree in the Bulgarian Education Act. After completing the training, the teachers have a new lease on their professional lives: a couple of decades of proven experience, and now a new set of certified skills.

Recalling her early classroom days as a college student and young teacher, Natasha explains that "computers were just starting to enter our lives." In her brief time as a secretary, before being cast out to the factory floor, Natasha had used computers only occasionally. Upon entering the training program, she realized how little she actually knew. It was a dizzying array of new experiences: operating systems, office programs and the wide world of the Internet.

For each new terrifying slice of software, however, Natasha and her classmates remembered the

economic reality they faced. A reality which had sent them back to the classroom after all these years. "No matter where you start looking for a job," Natasha insists, "every employer asks about your IT skills."



*A national network of 109 telecenters in villages and cities across the country, the Bulgarian iCentres are a model for state-private partnerships, and the efficient delivery of e-skills to tens of thousands. Angel Panov (left) and Spas Kostov, pictured here in the Sofia telecenter, are part of the national management team that runs the network.*

## New Job, New Sense of Self

As her ICT course was winding down, Natasha learned of a receptionist position opening up at a resort hotel in the mountains on the edge of Vratsa. She applied with her certification fresh in hand, and was hired for the job. "It was much easier for my current employer to choose a person who has an idea of IT, instead of hiring someone who doesn't have this knowledge." Once on the job, she recalled, "it took

*“I’m calmer now...My husband was at ease that I wouldn’t be doing physical labor anymore and that I felt comfortable and calm.”*

*Natasha, on the benefits of finding ICT-based work*

me less than a month to get used to all the details.”

Part of what helped Natasha was the specific applicability of her new skills. When she first arrived at work she was relieved to see that her position was based on two of the programs she had just mastered at the Vratsa telecenter: Excel spreadsheets and Access databases. “My work day starts with talking to my colleague, what reservations there are, if I have to issue invoices, if there are customers with special requests or preferences. Then I check the computer and the reservations for the day. When people check out, I inform the chambermaids that they can clean the rooms. I take reservations on the phone and on the

spot.” Pointing at the computer screen as she explains her work, Natasha states the obvious: “I am using the MS Excel and MS Access...every day.”

An essential part of the return to gainful employment for these Bulgarian women is not only the security of a good wage, but also health insurance and a pension. Natasha has all three, and her salary is nearly double what she was making at the wood products factory.

With her new job, her smile has also returned. Her daughter notices “I’m calmer now,” and “of course my husband was relieved that there would be more money coming into our household now and the payment would be regular. He was at ease that I wouldn’t be doing physical labor anymore and that I felt comfortable and calm.”

Some of the Bulgarian teachers explain that their new economic change is accompanied by a psychological change, now that their sense of self-worth and social value is renewed. Maria Boneva, who is from the small town of Tryavna in central Bulgaria, is still looking for work after completing her course. She recalls the hard times as the classrooms emptied, and schools shut down: “especially for people like me, at my age, our lives turned upside down.” Putting the pieces back together takes time, perseverance, and an open mind. Daniela, her ICT training classmate, sought work in a surprisingly new sector for her – at a security firm. Still, as the alarm system operator, the job gave her social contact, something she had greatly missed. “You see,” Daniela explained, “I am a person who likes making contact with people, and I get this when I work in a school.” Now Daniela must find this contact in a different, and more unusual, way.



*ICT training was the key to winning her new job at a security firm in the town of Gabrovo, in central Bulgaria. But firearms training was also a requirement for Daniela Ivanova, an adventurous former junior high school chemistry and physics teacher.*

## **An Adventure at Forty**

When she applied for her job at the security firm, Daniela Ivanova’s first task was to

receive firearms training. Daniela recalled the thrill of the new job requirement, explaining that she's the one responsible for handing out the guns each day. "I'm a person who likes learning and growing," she said with a mischievous grin.

Daniela saw the job posting during her final days in the ICT course, and when she read that there was no age requirement she did a double-take: "There was an IT literacy requirement, and there was no age limit which is very rare in Bulgaria." With a laugh, Daniela recalled her surprise at the unusual opportunity: "I called and double-checked the age limit and they assured me there was none."



*In an effort to boost government efficiency and productivity, the Bulgarian iCentres have trained over 40,000 state workers since 2006. These Interior Ministry employees study the Microsoft Unlimited Potential curriculum in Sofia.*

The final days at the Gabrovo telecenter provided an opportunity to re-make her CV in the new European format – a job requirement. Then Daniela set out for the interview process. "I submitted my application and I had to pass a test, then interviews were held with all pre-selected applicants, and on the following day they called me to inform me that I was approved for the position. There was a requirement to have IT skills in order to be admitted to this competition and to be able to work with the database," she explained. "There were about six or seven applicants for the position. The company approved one person, they needed only one person." Her.



*Some graduates of iCentres training for unemployed teachers don't need to go far to find jobs. This postal worker's new office is right next door to her old training center in the small, historical town of Dryavna.*

## **Facing Structural Unemployment Head-On**

While not all unemployed Bulgarian teachers find success in the first weeks or months after completing their ICT training, many do. Across Eastern Europe dramatic changes are underway in the workforce, in government, and throughout society, and it is often difficult for the unemployed to complete all the necessary steps toward a new career. The psychological trauma of being laid off, the new ways of working in a free market

system, the bias against hiring middle-aged women, and the difficulty in learning new skills, are just some of the challenges facing these graduates. Add to the mix the new Information Society, and its demanding knowledge economy, and the fortysomething Bulgarian teacher faces an uphill battle. Nonetheless, soon after completing their iCentres training courses under the Optimism program, 30% of graduates report finding work. More likely find jobs later, but by then they have less contact with their training centers, so records are more difficult to keep.

According to Margarita Anguelova, the head of the Labor Office in Vratsa, the transition to a new occupation is not easy for mid-career women. Because it bolsters professional development in a systematic way, however, ICT training provides a smoother transition. “Teachers are not usually very keen on changing their occupation, but now they like it, and they are asking,” Margarita reports.

As many telecenter trainers and managers emphasize, the development of e-skills is not just about learning a new trade. Instead, the skills provide a new outlook on life, enabling the training participants to communicate with their children, engage in e-commerce, and to finally feel part of the modern age.

*“Teachers are not usually very keen on changing their occupation. But now they like it and are asking” for ICT training.*

*Margarita Anguelova, on the growing perceived value of ICT re-skilling among teachers.*

## **AUTHOR**

**Mark West** is an ethnographer whose international research and work in the development field is based in South Asia and in Central and Eastern Europe. Mark’s fieldwork has centered on the use of critical ethnography to bring a more participatory connection between local communities and international development projects.

In South Asia, Mark’s research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or “untouchables,” with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford LawSchool. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.