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Bi-weekly Newsletter

>> USAID Local Government Initiative Celebrates Achievements

At a conference on April 17, USAID celebrated the successful completion of its assistance program in the area of local government reform. The conference recognized both the overall contribution and achievements of USAID's Local Government Initiative (LGI) implemented by the Research Triangle Institute and highlighted the importance of continued attention to the local government agenda.

The conference was a multi-faceted event attended by central government officials, representatives of municipalities, and NGO partners. More than 100 participants from 15 partner institutions focused on a common policy vision in the two main areas of LGI assistance: fiscal decentralization and accountable local government.



Ambassador Beyrle discusses local government issues with Lachezar Rossenov, Chair of the Board of FLGR and Ginka Kapitanova, FLGR Executive Director

USAID presented a film capturing key events and achievements of the program in the last 13 years. Ambassador John Beyrle addressed the audience, recognizing the role of USAID assistance and domestic stakeholders in building responsive and accountable local governments.

Key Achievements of the USAID Local Government Program:

- ✓ The establishment of sustainable local organizations, such as the National Association of Municipalities of the Republic of Bulgaria (NAMRB), the Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR), and nine regional associations of municipalities, that became key players and will continue to drive the local government reform in Bulgaria.
- ✓ USAID assistance for fiscal decentralization proved critical in enabling municipalities to fund and provide more effective services. All key legislative acts in Bulgaria's local government sector are a direct result of USAID LGI. These legislative changes resulted in a significant improvement of overall financial condition of the municipalities, such as a net swing of over 430 million leva from deficit to surplus over the period 2000-2006, a doubled percentage of own-source revenues within the total municipal revenues (from 17% to 35%), and a steady increase in the percentage of municipal budgets going to capital investment (from 7% to 20%).
- ✓ The USAID Local Government Initiative has been the key driving force for institutionalizing policy dialogue between national and local authorities through the establishment of the Council on Decentralization in 2006 with significant municipal representation. The Council formulated a new Decentralization Strategy for 2006-2009 with a legislative program approved by the Council of Ministers.
- ✓ USAID helped develop an annual decentralization policy monitoring program adopted by the Council of Ministers. ❖



>> Sofia Courts Open First-Ever Children's Interview Room with USAID Support

One of the most difficult issues in the judiciary was addressed with the opening of a new room for interviewing child participants in court proceedings on April 20 in Sofia. Constructed with support from USAID Judicial Strengthening Initiative grantee Childhood Without Tears, the interview room is run by the Institute of Psychology at the Ministry of the Interior. The space is an important part of court reform affecting many areas of the judiciary, especially criminal cases involving children as victims or witnesses, and family law cases in which children need to be comfortable with the emotionally difficult proceedings.



The new children's interview room at the Institute of Psychology will be available to the Sofia courts.

The new interview room was opened by JSI Director Ken Stuart, who has extensive experience in cases involving children, and Kalin Gaidarov, the Director of the Institute of Psychology. The opening at the Ministry of the Interior was greeted by much attention from the Sofia press, including an extensive feature by one of the two leading dailies, *24 Hours*. ❖

>> It All Happened in Russe

USAID's Commercial Law Reform Program (CLRP) publicly presented the newly developed *Judgment Enforcement Performance Monitoring System (JEPMS)* in the city of Russe on April 20. The centralized, web-based system provides automation of working processes in judgment enforcement, as well as a national data base of enforcement cases. The system creates possibilities for reliable statistics and ongoing preventive monitoring and supervision over the activities of Private Enforcement Agents (PEAs). The public site featuring sale of real estate and movables is probably the part of the JEPMS which will generate the most interest from the general public.



The President of the Bulgarian Chamber greets his Romanian colleagues

One of Russe's private enforcement agents presented the system to more than 20 representatives of the regional media and colleagues from the northeastern part of Bulgaria, CLRP Chief of Party, Chris Thompson, and Georgi Dichev, Chairman of the Chamber of PEAs.

CLRP started designing the system in early 2006 and forming a working group of representatives of the Chamber of PEAs and the Ministry of Justice. The software developer, Rila Solutions Ltd, was selected through public tender. The JEPMS presentation was followed by a press conference and an open council meeting of the Chamber, a transparency and accountability practice encouraged by CLRP.

On April 21' the Chamber Council hosted a business meeting with the representatives of the Romanian Chamber of Bailiffs, including the President, Vice President, Administrative Director and Head of the Bailiff Training Center. This initiative is part of the Chamber's plan to establish regional cooperation with neighboring institutions. ❖



>> *National Institute of Justice Expands Reach of Judicial Training with New Center*

After over a year of planning, design, and construction, the National Institute of Justice opened its new building on May 4 in Sofia, further expanding the reach of judiciary training in Bulgaria. The new Study and Information Center will be a resource for all distance learning programs and research functions, and will house the NIJ library. The USAID Judicial Strengthening Initiative, as the primary source of ongoing American support for the NIJ, contributed to the office furnishings and library materials of the new annex.

United States Deputy Chief of Mission Alex Karagiannis addressed the assembled NIJ staff, and was joined by Ambassador Willem Van Ee of The Netherlands, Ambassador Fernando Arias Gonzalez of Spain, and European Commission Representative Michael Humphreys. The opening of the new building was hosted by NIJ Director Pencho Penev and attended by Supreme Court of Cassation Chair Ivan Grigorov. Mr. Karagiannis emphasized the sustainability of the Institute, and the continued commitment by the U.S. government. He also highlighted the future of the NIJ: "A great opportunity exists for the NIJ to play a leadership role in Eastern Europe – an opportunity to assist neighboring countries in developing stronger judicial systems, with highly qualified professionals." ❖



NIJ staff and partners inaugurate one of the new training rooms at the National Institute of Justice.

>> *Last Issue of Municipal Radio Forum*

For six years on every last Thursday of the month, the waves of the National Radio burned with hot topics from the local governance reform agenda: municipal budgets, housing, local economic development, administrative services, rural development, and innovative practices. Mayors, municipal council chairmen, municipal experts and representatives of NGOs made on-air appearances. The goal of the six-year effort was raising public awareness of the work of Bulgarian local governments.

On April 26 the Bulgarian National Radio (BNR) aired the last issue of *Municipal Radio Forum*, a joint initiative of BNR's "Horizont" program and the Foundation for Local Government Reform (FLGR) with the financial support of USAID. This issue of the *Forum* was dedicated to the legacy impact of USAID programs on the work of Bulgarian local governments and featured as guests USAID/Bulgaria Democracy Officer Gene Gibson, Senior Local Government Advisor Kiril Kiryakov, National Assembly of Municipalities in Republic of Bulgaria Executive Director Ginka Chavdarova, and FLGR Executive Director Ginka Kapitanova. ❖