

The American University...Where?

By Dr. Robert Phillips Jr.

If one were to ask where, after the tumult of the Eastern European revolutions, one would expect an American university to be established, most expert commentators of the time would likely have predicted Poland, due to support from the large Polish-American community, or perhaps Czechoslovakia, with its central location and scholarly traditions. Either would have seemed to be a probable host. But Bulgaria? In all probability, most experts would have placed it somewhere toward the end of the most-likely list.

These experts would have noted that Bulgaria, located in the far southeast corner of Europe, of all the Warsaw Pact states was perceived as perhaps the most firmly ensconced within the Soviet Union's international system. Within Comecon, the communist trading bloc, industries were typically centrally allocated to the member states. Bulgaria's allocation of the prestigious and militarily sensitive computer industry demonstrates just how loyal it was. Culturally, Bulgaria was a closer partner to Russia and Russian culture than most other Warsaw Pact states. A shared Cyrillic alphabet, Slavic heritage, and Orthodox religious tradition further cemented the relationship. History also created common bonds ever since the

Russian army successfully led the fight to free Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. Recognition of this bond can be seen to this day as one walks around Sofia. There, in one of the capital's most prominent locations stands the monument to Tsar Alexander II, otherwise known as Tsar Liberator, sternly watching the Bulgarian Parliament. So close was the relationship, at least amongst governing elites, that the Bulgarian communist government even unsuccessfully lobbied to become the sixteenth republic of the Soviet Union.

Though not closely connected to Bulgaria by international relations, culture, or history, the United States was not without a historic presence. American Congregationalist missionaries, for example, founded a high school that eventually became the American College as early as 1860, though it remained closed throughout the communist era. Despite these weaker links and the best efforts of government propaganda during the communist regime, public attitudes in Bulgaria were not hostile to the US. Professor Georgi Fotev, a sociologist who served as Minister of Science and Higher Education from 1990-1991 and later served as Deputy Chair of the AUBG Board of Directors, and Christian Djankov, a professor of American literature, undertook research shortly after the changes to understand perceptions of the United States in Bulgaria. It turned out that Bulgarians were quite familiar with American society, could identify major American writers and presidents, and held

generally positive attitudes toward the US. “We were quite surprised to find how positive they were,” says Fotev. “The founding of the American University did not come out of nothing. There was a foundation already in the country.”¹ A foundation, however, is not an explanation—and humans like explanations.

When faced with trying to explain the unknown, the human mind makes up a story. Humans can’t help it; this is just what the human mind does. Social science and brain research tell us that when creating an explanatory story of an unknown, the human mind tends to vastly overstate intention and rationality. The human mind also projects its own understandings or logics upon the unknown, attributing to the event what it considers would likely be the case. So when contemplating the creation of the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG), a typical human mind would likely expect to find a single clear motivation, careful planning, and skillful, precise, well-supplied execution. The United States and its NATO allies had just “won” the Cold War, right? So in the careful planning as the new empire stakes its claims upon the pieces of the former empire the American University must have been a strategic decision made by the same far-sighted, skilled leaders who “won the Cold War.” But, in this instance, like those many very clever political analysts

¹ (Fotev 2011)

who failed to predict the fall of the Berlin Wall, the typical human mind would be wrong.

Instead, the story is much more ordinary and at the same time extraordinary.

A Group Imagines

Eliana Maseva heard about the idea of an American-style university for Bulgaria sometime in the fall of 1990 at a meeting of deputies and members of the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the umbrella opposition group that had formed to challenge the recently renamed and reconfigured yet still dominant Bulgarian Socialist Party. At the time, she was the leader of the temporary executive committee of Blagoevgrad, a southwestern city of about 70,000, some 60 miles from Sofia. In the time immediately following “the changes” from communism to transitional democracy, the eight-member committee oversaw municipal matters until elections would bring in a regular mayor and municipal council under the new constitution that was still being hotly negotiated in Sofia.

"The idea was still very much up in the air for a university whose goal would be an example and leader for change and reform in the educational system," remembers Maseva. Just how this idea got up in the air in the first place is not exactly clear. Fotev recalls, “The idea for the University was neither mine nor the government’s; it came from elsewhere.” No one

involved in these early stages actually seems to remember who first came up with the idea of a university. If pressed, most will say it was John Menzies, the Press and Cultural Affairs Officer at the US Embassy in Sofia. Others think it could have been George Prohasky, Director of the Open Society Foundation-Sofia. One of the earliest documented mentions of the idea dates from November 1990 within the Bulgarian Grand National Assembly. In a proposal for an American University of South-Eastern Europe to be situated in Sofia, Bodgan Atanassov, hoped that such an institution would allow the peoples of Southeast Europe to come together to learn. While several deputies supported this idea, at least one deputy groused that “such a university would be out of touch with the Bulgarian soul.”² Atanassov, who would later teach English at the university, would see his idea partially realized in AUBG’s second year when Open Society Foundation scholarships brought the first Albanian and Romanian students to the university.

Whoever the original source, the idea rode the updrafts in the politicized atmosphere of 1990 Bulgaria. When asked if she would support the idea, Maseva answered "absolutely."³ "I knew that American educational traditions were valuable. ...Despite the Iron Curtain, we had been hearing about the success of American education both in theory and practice."

² (Bulgaria 1990)

³ (Maseva 2011)

However Maseva and others knew that the economic situation meant that any such endeavor required much outside support. She approached Prof. Elka Konstantinova, who like many in the nascent democratic movement was a university professor, for expert advice about the idea. Konstantinova became an enthusiastic ally. Somewhere along the way, Blagoevgrad UDF deputies Spas Dimitrov and Petko Tarpanov along with Maseva decided to put forth Blagoevgrad as a possible home for the endeavor.

The actual plan to make this happen is enumerated in a notebook that Maseva still keeps. In it, she listed three action points: 1. A meeting at the American Embassy to discuss the idea; 2. A conversation with the current government; and 3. A formal decision of the temporary executive committee of the Blagoevgrad municipality to set up the university.

Maseva first met with John Menzies at the US embassy to discuss the idea formally and begin planning. Menzies, an energetic US career diplomat, was widely known and respected among democratic opposition circles of the time. “Menzies of course was a driving force in creating AUBG,” remarks Dimi Panitza, who would later become involved in the AUBG project on its Board of Directors. Many Bulgarians in the democratic opposition and any American visiting Bulgaria at the time would eventually meet the seemingly omnipresent Menzies.

"They [Menzies and other American embassy officials] were very interested in assisting the democratization process in the region. This was the main theme of all the conversations that we had" notes Maseva. Central to this was the belief that "an educational institution can be an ambassador of these ideas." The Blagoevgrad group understood that such a university would create both possibilities and problems and that the regional capital was not the only viable host city. In a later meeting Maseva heard the suggestion that "Blagoevgrad would have to provide some facilities to be certain that it could be competitive with larger municipalities such as Sofia and Plovdiv which were believed to be better suited for it." Looking around their town, the group came upon the massive but only somewhat occupied building that formerly housed the region's communist party.

When asked about her motivations for wanting what critics warned was an American invasion of their peaceful town that they feared would "bring HIV and illegal drugs," Maseva states, "I felt that the location of Blagoevgrad was very good for such an institution that would help the stability of the Balkans in the long run." "I also thought that this investment of the American University would be good for Southwest University and would introduce new educational examples to be followed." "And last but not least, it would create liveliness in the town with two universities and a lot of young people. It would help the economy and commerce. We were saying to ourselves 'Why

don't we make Blagoevgrad a little Oxford?' Perhaps our dreams at the time were a little far-fetched, but I think that our thread of thinking was correct."

"Young people and education are the greatest riches of a nation," Maseva now says with a calm smile. In comments before the first AUBG Board meeting in 1991, Petko Tarpanov, a local member of parliament from the UDF and official at Bulgartabac in Blagoevgrad, outlined more what he saw as more "concrete benefits": "Blagoevgrad citizens anticipate that AUBG will assist the town in its transition to a market economy and will provide assistance to small businesses."⁴ Deputies Tarpanov and Dimitrov and others and I believed "that this was the best form of education for country leaving a totalitarian system." Maseva's confidence in the United States remains in her voice as she speaks: "There were all these things like the market economy, competition, democratic institutions, which had to be publicized in Bulgaria but also had to be implemented. ...I had a strong conviction that the American educational system is the best because it functioned in a democratic environment and market economy." Other supporters, such as Fotev, understood that many in the Bulgarian university community were already sympathetic to democratic values and thus saw a larger role for AUBG, "I knew that this university would contribute to a change in political

⁴ (Directors 1991)

mentality and culture and not so much to changing the educational system in Bulgaria."⁵

By late October 1990, Maseva and other UDF members suggested that the Blagoevgrad temporary executive committee put forward an offer to host the university. There was immediate strong opposition from the representatives from the Bulgarian Socialist Party. "You have to remember that this was 1990-1991," smiles Maseva. "I was not surprised by this reaction."

As the group worked to finalize an offer from Blagoevgrad, the Open Society Foundation in Sofia, in consultation with Menzies, initiated a small feasibility study.⁶ Through this study, it was realized that the US connection for such an undertaking would either have to take place through a consortium of institutions or a single, larger institution. With this understanding, Menzies contacted officials at the University of Maine, which had been one of the first US institutions to host Bulgarian exchange students, to inquire about supporting the project.

At the final vote, the decision of the temporary executive committee to extend an invitation to become home to the university was taken with five votes "for" to three votes "against," (these coming from the three BSP members of the

⁵ (Fotev 2011)

⁶ (E. B. Lavery 1993)

committee). "They told me I didn't know what I was doing and that I would impose great damage on the community. And they left the committee in protest." Maseva says this with a smile in her voice since their departure made it easier for further decisions to be made about the issue.

This did not end the problems. "The next thing I had to deal with was the status of the property. The state had claims on the building and argued that it was not municipal property."

Eventually the Blagoevgrad municipality was successful in acquiring ownership of the buildings from the state.

Blagoevgrad supporters still needed to get the municipal council to accept giving over the buildings for use by the university. "We had to keep defending the idea that it was for the good future of the town." Maseva later learned that the final successful vote in the council was, however, not the final step and that she would also need to seek the approval of the Ministry of Finance. "...I went to Sofia to meet with Minister of Finance Ivan Kostov. He asked 'Are you here for the American University?' I answered 'yes.' Then he said, 'Why are you waiting? Okay. Go ahead. Hurry!'"

"Everything took so much time and effort. Nothing was easy at the time," she sighs.

"This is about the time that we heard that the University of Maine would be involved in the endeavor. This created further

suspicious from the opposition in Blagoevgrad because they believed the University of Maine contained military facilities and was a base for NATO. ...We needed wider public support because there were a lot of rumors were being circulated. I spoke to representatives of the intelligentsia in Blagoevgrad. There were public discussions.” Eventually, a group of doctors, lawyers, and other supporters would be formed to popularize the idea. “We felt we needed the public to understand how the university would help the development of Blagoevgrad.” Those in Blagoevgrad, however, were not the only ones who needed to be persuaded.

Others agree

President Zhelyu Zhelev was elected president of Bulgaria by the Grand National Assembly in August 1990. This was a long distance from his earlier history. In the 1960s, he was doctoral student in philosophy; however, his choice of a dissertation displeased the communist leadership who exiled him from Sofia. He was able to return by the mid-1970s but by the late-1980s was again being punished for his political dissent.⁷ Upon meeting him, one senses the dissident’s warm heart and the philosopher’s contemplative disposition, but unlike most philosophers, he is ready to tell a joke at a moment’s notice.

⁷ Zhelyu Zhelev, PhD, DSc. Curriculum Vitae. Available at http://www.president.bg/en/inst_pred_jelio.php. (Accessed 12 September 2011).

Zhelev remembers being visited by the Blagoevgrad group with its proposal for an American university in Blagoevgrad:

“Initiatives like this always came to my office.” His answer was immediate, “I said ‘yes’ firmly you have my support.”

“We all understood that Bulgarians needed a different type of politician, another kind of thinking, a much freer type of thinking...Our policy at that time was to open Bulgaria to the rest of the world. The fact that education [at the new university] would be in English was seen as particularly important given its importance in world politics and commerce.”

“‘Okay, so what can the presidency do?’ They asked. And I said, ‘We are as poor as church mice. But everything else that you want from me—moral support, political support—you have it. And I’m sure that you will be able to find money from other sources.’”

Thinking that maybe the Council of Ministers would be able to put some money aside, Zhelev got in touch with some people from the government and described the initiative. “People there also understood the need for this—the need for a new type of professional in Bulgaria.” By January 1991, Zhelev had authorized the formation of an Initiative Committee to explore the idea and had assigned his foreign affairs advisor, Stefan Tafrov, a young diplomat who would later represent Bulgaria on the UN Security Council, to assist the group.

Funds to support these early efforts, however, were still needed. President Zhelev tells the story of how Tafrov and John Menzies took off on a heroic quest to secure these funds. Upon hearing that George Soros would be in Prague, they travelled by car overnight from Sofia to Prague to ask for his support for the initiative. As Zhelev tells it: “As they walked in the room” Mr. Soros greeted them with, “All right, gentlemen, tell me, how much is this breakfast going to cost me?’ ‘Only one million dollars’ answered John and Stefan. ‘Fine, you’ve got them – now, will you tell me what for?’”⁸

Realizing that such an initiative would need even greater support, Menzies and other supporters in Sofia and at the University of Maine in Orono began searching for other individuals, both Bulgarian and American, who would be able to support and supervise the undertaking. With University of Maine Chancellor Robert Woodbury and George Soros committed to creating AUBG, Sol Polansky became the other early American member of the initiative and would later become the chair of the American AUBG board and the first unified AUBG board.⁹ Polansky was in the eyes of many

⁸ (Zhelev 2010)

⁹ Legal requirements were such that AUBG had to be created as separate corporations in the US and Bulgaria. President Zhelev had created a Bulgarian Initiative Committee in January 1991, and several members would eventually become members of the “Bulgarian AUBG” board after incorporation by the Blagoevgrad court in June 1991. In the “American AUBG” incorporating documents of July 1991, Woodbury, Soros, and Polansky are listed as the three members of the interim Board of Directors until a complete board could be elected. During this time both corporations individually acted on their sides of the Atlantic. The first “Joint Meeting of the Boards of Directors of the American University in Bulgaria, a Maine Corporation, and the American University in Bulgaria, a Bulgarian Corporation” took place in Blagoevgrad from 01-03 November 1991. A unified board quickly followed.

uniquely suited for this position. As US Ambassador to Bulgaria from 1987-1990, Polansky made numerous contacts with the emerging democratic groups and enjoyed a strong reputation as a good and sincere friend of Bulgaria. His stature within Bulgaria was such that his early commitment to the project assured many Bulgarians, including Maseva, that the still tentative project would be eventually realized.

Later, in November 1991 and beyond, his skills as a diplomat would come in handy as he shepherded the young board through its first meetings as chair.¹⁰ While all members who would eventually become members of the board were interested in seeing the university succeed, there were still challenges in getting the very disparate group to come together. The further challenges of cultural differences, different ways of tackling problems, varying levels of experience of board responsibilities, and particularly working through translators made those first meetings sometimes long and difficult affairs. “Thank God for a man like Polansky.” Dimi Panitza, who would become an early member of the first board member, observes that the former

¹⁰ The first full Board of Directors (which would later be renamed as the Board of Trustees) were Ljuben Berov (professor, University of Sofia and later prime minister), Bodgan Bogdanov (Bulgarian Ambassador to Greece), Barbara Burns (Associate Provost of International Programs, University of Massachusetts), Spas Dimitrov (lawyer and member of the Grand National Assembly), Nan Frederick (former officer at USAID), Stefan Groueff (author), Yulian Genov (businessman), Ognyan Georgiev (research and development engineer with Bulgartabak and member of the Grand National Assembly), John Hitt (Interim President, University of Maine), Elka Konstantiova (member of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and deputy), Eli Maseva (Mayor of Blagoevgrad), Augustin Paege (a Bulgarian-American businessman in New York), John Dimitri Panitza (Managing Editor, *Readers Digest*), Ognian Pishev (Bulgarian Ambassador to the US), Sol Polansky (former US Ambassador to Bulgaria), Micky Salgo (founder of the Salgo Noren Foundation), George Soros (founder of the Open Society Foundations), Petko Tarpanov (engineer and member of the Grand National Assembly), Robert Woodbury (Chancellor of the University of Maine System), and Admiral E. R. Zumwalt, Jr., (US Navy, retired).

ambassador served as “cement” between the various individuals within the early board. Fotev agrees that Polansky served as a mediator between the Americans and the Bulgarians, "As a character and mentality, he was someone who could bring people together."

With the core of a board beginning to emerge in both the US and Bulgaria, those involved on both sides of the Atlantic discussed the need to involve representatives from the Bulgarian émigré community for the Initiative Committee and the eventual Board of Directors.¹¹ As Maseva remembers, "With our American partners we discussed who would be the right people for this initiative committee. We thought of people like Dimi Panitza and Stefan Groueff—people who were respected and had spent a long time abroad."

Sitting in his Paris apartment in January 2011, Dimi Panitza speaks about AUBG with the passion and love that he has held for it since he first heard of the idea. Panitza recalls how he was forced to leave Bulgaria in 1948. Other than what he carried in his sharp mind—his high school education and fluent English, French, and German in addition to his native Bulgarian—Panitza left Bulgaria with next to nothing. He would later have his Bulgarian citizenship stripped from him and would be considered an enemy of the state by the People’s Republic of Bulgaria. These early experiences—his living in and his leaving

¹¹ (AUBG 1991)

Bulgaria—would leave deep impressions upon the man he would become. His leaving made him in his own words "fiercely anti-Communist." His living in Bulgaria within "a family background of public service" would serve as a model of his future relationship with his beloved Bulgaria after the changes.

Because he had to support himself after leaving Bulgaria, Panitza was unable to continue his education in the usual way. He reveals that he missed not having made the typical path to university, a space that seemed to have been filled by a fascination with universities and a life-long devotion to education—his own and others. As the events of 1989 unfolded, one thought that began to occupy him was education in Bulgaria. "By the time I got to Sofia we had already talked about the state of education here among my circle of friends," says Panitza.

It was during his first trip to Sofia in 1990 that Panitza met John Menzies. As Panitza jumped wholeheartedly into helping out the democratic opposition, he continued to think about education. Characteristically, one of his earliest visits back to Bulgaria had him conducting interviews with young Bulgarians as part of a scholarship competition. While he was charmed with the young people he found, he began to realize the limiting effects of the former system on the minds of Bulgaria's youth. On a later trip, Menzies informed Panitza about the idea for an American university and that the University of Maine was

interested in assisting the project. This was just about all that Panitza needed to hear to become involved. Upon having his Bulgarian citizenship returned to him, Panitza would be asked to join the AUBG Board of Directors as one of its Bulgarian representatives. Stefan Groueff, a writer and fellow former exile, would also be asked to join the Board.

"You had a country emerging from 50 years of communism thirsty for new knowledge, for an opening, for a window on the world. For reasonably small—an incredibly small—amount of money you could do miracles. You would be a fool not to recognize the opportunities and possibilities of how far your generosity will go in establishing the university and what it will achieve. It will achieve the opening of minds and bringing down of walls."

Panitza's booming bass voice would inspire, cajole, and even sometimes terrify those involved with the university. He soon became a passionate supporter of AUBG. He would remain one throughout his life.

A University Undertakes

Despite sharing borders with more Canadian provinces (two) than American states (one), Maine is not exactly the first place that comes to mind when thinking about unusual international endeavors, and the University of Maine was not the most likely

candidate in 1990 to sponsor the creation of a university in post-communist Bulgaria.

"From my perspective it was absolutely serendipitous," explains Marisue Pickering, who as Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, participated in the University of Maine's foray into Southeastern Europe.¹²

This involvement began in 1989, when John Menzies actively began working to place Bulgarian students in international visitor and university exchange programs in the US. While searching for such opportunities, he contacted University of Maine President Dale Lick, whom Menzies did not know personally but who were members of the same church, about possibly taking Bulgarian students for an educational exchange. With two students accepted and attending, University of Maine's public relations director extended his Thanksgiving travel plans for a side trip to Bulgaria in order to meet with the parents of the exchange students. By chance, his arrival in late November just a couple of weeks after the 10 November 1989 collapse of the communist government made him one of the first American university officials able to meet with US embassy officers and Bulgarian education officials. Hearing that there were some very early ideas about opening a new American

¹² (Pickering 2011)

university, he suggested that University of Maine President Dale Lick go to Bulgaria.¹³

During mid-fall 1990, President Lick travelled to Bulgaria where he met Menzies and university supporters, including George Prohasky, Director of the Open Society Foundation and an early advocate of an American university. With the idea moving along in Bulgaria, a University of Maine team was sent at the end of March 1991 to evaluate the possibility of participating in the AUBG project. The team was composed of Charles Rauch (Vice President for Finance and a retired navy admiral), Jim Sherburne (Director of the Office of International Affairs), John Hitt (Vice President for Academic Affairs), Marisue Pickering, and Ed Laverty (Executive Assistant to the President). Just some months later, Laverty would become AUBG's first president. The team's visit included meeting with the newly formed Bulgarian Initiative Committee, government and parliamentary officials, and US embassy officials, along with a trip to Blagoevgrad to see the possible facilities.

These meetings impressed the University of Maine team. As the members learned, for many Bulgarians in the democratic reform effort, the creation of an American university would carry an "emotional symbolic element." For these Bulgarians, an American university created after the collapse of the communist government would parallel the creation of Sofia

¹³ (Pickering 2011)

University after Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Empire. "The message we kept getting was that Bulgaria wanted the university," remembers Pickering.¹⁴

What also became clear to the team was the short time frame for anything to happen. The Bulgarian Initiative Committee (which had been formed in January 1991) and other supporters felt that they were operating in a narrow timeframe, and if the university was going to happen it would have to open in fall 1991—some six months away.

Impressed with what they heard and saw, the University of Maine team returned home as advocates of the idea and began convincing President Lick, who was interested in internationalizing the University of Maine campus. Bob Woodbury, Chancellor of the University of Maine System, shared this view—a fact that would bring a wise and valued ally to the AUBG cause at University of Maine. Internationalizing the campus was not the only attraction of the AUBG initiative. For others, the idea offered a positive direction for University of Maine. As Ellie Willman, then a graduate student in Orono, explains, "The university had just gone through two years of major budget cuts. But having gone through this depressing exercise for two years, [AUBG was] something new and exciting

¹⁴ (Pickering 2011)

that we could dig our heels into—I think we were thirsting for that as an institution.”¹⁵

Other segments of the university community were not necessarily as supportive and saw the AUBG initiative as outside the University of Maine's mission.¹⁶ Some of the criticisms within University of Maine were that the institution did not have money to engage in international projects and that administrators were putting too much time into the AUBG initiative. “Fortunately,” says Pickering, “we had Bob Woodbury who had a vision about these things and who eventually came on the [AUBG] board. And Dave Flanagan who had been on the University of Maine system board saw this as an opportunity.” Flanagan, a Maine businessman, would go on to become a member and later chair of the AUBG Board of Directors. As news of University of Maine’s work in support of AUBG spread within the Orono community, concerns were raised here as well. “There was rumbling...it's like ‘where's Bulgaria and why Bulgaria? And why are you taking money from our students?’” University of Maine advocates, such as Pickering, Rauch, and Laverty, had to address these concerns also by talking to local press and small groups within the community.

By 29 May, the Implementation Plan drafted by the University of Maine team was completed and would serve as a blueprint

¹⁵ (Willman 2011)

¹⁶ (E. Laverty, AUBG History, 1990-1991 2011)

for the endeavor. As envisioned, the University of Maine would extend its accreditation to the fledgling university. AUBG would not become a branch campus of the Maine system; rather, it would develop under the supervision of Orono, the home of the University of Maine's central campus. The University of Maine would be responsible for recruiting faculty and staff, devising a first-year curriculum, and providing administrative support among other responsibilities. This entailed the appointment of 7 of the original 21 members of the Board of Directors and the AUBG president. It would additionally approve faculty and administrative appointments and approve budgets and curriculum. AUBG, on the other hand was responsible for day-to-day operations, fundraising, and implementing the curriculum. This unusual arrangement was a bit of a risk for the University of Maine as it would extend its accreditation to AUBG through the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC). US accreditation was seen as vital not only for Maine's participation but for making the AUBG a real American institution of higher education. This unusual arrangement would also create tensions later on.

To get the relationship accepted, the University of Maine needed approval from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. "We worked with them, and they were wonderful," says Pickering. "We did a lot of homework to try to find out what's going on in other places around the country so

that we could say "this is unusual but there are some parallels" and that "this could be something important." Later in August 1991, the universities' relationship would become formalized in a *Memorandum of Understanding between the University of Maine System and the American University in Bulgaria*.

Maine-iacs Descend

With the plan settled and summer beginning, time came for assembling the American part of the team that would actually construct the university. Since the University of Maine held responsibility for this part of the plan, the administrative team was made up of individuals drawn from the University of Maine community.

Yet in 1991, Bulgaria, with its small émigré community, was simply way off the map for most Americans. To the extent that the country was known, it was connected with the assassination attempt on Pope John Paul or the infamous umbrella murder of Georgi Markov—neither exactly appealing advertisements for individuals contemplating picking up their lives and going to Blagoevgrad. "I remember my friend Roberta. She was the physician director at the University of Maine for a time," recalls Paula Dalzell-Kenney, a physician assistant who would go on to set up the AUBG Health Center in 1991. "There was a *Life* magazine or *Time* magazine article with all of these pictures about what was going on in Romania—all of the pollution, the gray skies, the Soviet-like housing, the big factories, and people

with long dour faces. And she put this magazine in front of me and said ‘Look at this. Why would you want to go there?’”¹⁷

With only a few exceptions, the people who set up, became faculty, or became active supporters of AUBG had no family or diaspora connections with Bulgaria. "I had no, zero, personal connection with Bulgaria prior to this," remarks Flanagan. Instead, other motivations brought them to the idea and, for some, to Bulgaria.

"There was this real sense of opportunity and possibility," says Ed Lavery, AUBG's first president. Lavery would relocate along with his wife, Roberta, and their children. Roberta Lavery would become both a problem solver and extra pair of hands for the team and eventually a faculty member. For Steve Kenney, a Maine native working in University of Maine's financial offices at the time, AUBG offered a professional challenge, but that was not the sole motivation. Kenney, who became AUBG's head financial officer, admits that "We fell in love with the whole concept." Paula Dalzell-Kenney agrees: "The opportunity to start something from the ground up—just the whole idea of the wall coming down and the Soviet Union breaking up and Eastern Europe opening up, it was just really exciting to be on the cutting edge of what was happening there. For us...for two Maine kids to have that kind of opportunity was just really quite amazing." Ellie Willman, who would officially

¹⁷ (Dalzell-Kenney 2011)

become the president's assistant but unofficially become a rapid response problem solver, the allure also lay in the spirit of the times and the opportunity presented: "I got caught up in the excitement along with everyone else. I remembered Chick Rauch [University of Maine Vice President for Finance] saying that this was an opportunity that would not happen again." Wyatt Courtemanche was brought on to oversee the physical plant.

With the administrative team almost in place, Laverty remembers a conversation in which Chick Rauch told him, "You're going to need a Radar O'Riley," referring to a character on the popular television program, M*A*S*H. "You're going to need someone who can do anything." Several days later Laverty ran into Bill Porter, who oversaw ROTC on the Orono campus. Porter, a retired lieutenant colonel with command experience, was invaluable at logistics and getting things to work. In addition to being remembered for his no nonsense approach to problems Porter would be remembered for making the initial "American University in Bulgaria" sign that adorned the Main Building by personally cutting the letters out of Styrofoam and for introducing Bulgarian staff to their first doughnuts—years before the products would become commercially available.

Pauline Porter, who “would help with everything”¹⁸ during that first year, and their two kids would also join the team.

With the core group assembled and members arriving in late-June and July, the next step was simple—build a university in about 60 days.

Drafting a University

With the resignation of the Lukanov cabinet in November 1990, Dimitar Popov, a political independent was asked to form a grand coalition government composed of ministers from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the main opposition Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), and other parties. This arrangement would last until the Grand National Assembly completed a new constitution and regular parliamentary elections were held.

In January 1991 Andre Delchev began serving this technocratic government as the head of its legal department. Delchev first heard about the idea for the university in March 1991 and was asked by Prime Minister Popov to meet the members of parliament from the Blagoevgrad region, Spas Dimitrov and Petko Tarpanov, along with Mayor Maseva. They explained that they were interested in creating an American-style university in Blagoevgrad and had spoken with the US Embassy. "At that time it sounded, on the one hand, very attractive and, on the other hand, very unusual because it was something very new. We have to have in mind that at the time in Bulgaria we only

¹⁸ (Kostova 2011)

had state universities." There were no provisions for private universities in the Bulgarian Constitution, only "a very general text saying that parliament had the right to establish universities."¹⁹

"I took the idea as a professional challenge." And so Delchev and the legal advisors began to prepare the founding documents of AUBG, including the Bulgarian bylaws and the decisions of the Council of Ministers needed to create a legal entity. Coordinating with the Blagoevgrad group "in a relatively short period of time—about a month—we managed to prepare all of these documents." These founding documents were not really controversial within the government, which quickly endorsed the plan. With the legal questions largely settled, Minister Fotev took the issue into much more unfriendly territory—the Grand National Assembly.

The proposal's entry into the Grand National Assembly meant that the "founding of the university was fundamentally a political question," notes Fotev. Unfortunately for the concept of a private American university, the concept had two things going against it in the Assembly: it was "private" and "American." While the concept of a "private" university was well established within the United States, this had not historically been the case in Bulgaria. Private property had certainly existed before the communists came to power in 1947; however,

¹⁹ (Delchev 2011)

universities in Bulgaria had always been public. The concept of a private university “was complicated,” said Delchev, “...because it was completely new for Bulgarian society. It was the first university with a board of trustees, managed by a collective body.” While most Bulgarian universities are overseen by a collective body, he notes, for the most part the rector tends to run institution. To further complicate the picture, the idea that American faculty would teach in Bulgaria but would be under contract in the US also was quite unusual.

The more politically-charged challenge, however, was that the institution was to be created as an “American” university. This meant that the BSP, with a 22-seat majority in the Grand National Assembly, would need some convincing if the university were to become a reality.

Negotiating a University

While the Berlin Wall may have fallen and changes were happening on many fronts, attitudes usually take a little longer to change. For many in Bulgaria, the recent changes still took some getting used to. Dimitar Natchkov, a student in the first AUBG class, voices the topsy-turvy world of the time when he remembers his first visit to Blagoevgrad in July 1991: "Walking through the square in Blagoevgrad and looking at the building with the American flag at the top of it...I mean...It was what...16 months ago that the red flag was up there and the party building was there. So for us the American flag at the time was

something that used to be bad...Officially bad...Until a year and a half ago at least that was the impression that the socialist government wanted to create. We were only allowed to look at a Bulgarian flag or a Soviet flag because they were exposed everywhere. And the American flag was like, 'Oh my God, it's unbelievable.'”

Not all members of the BSP opposed the creation of the university. Some embodied a part of the party that “understood very well that things were changing and that they were no longer in control of them and that they should move with events instead of trying to control them.”²⁰ Many others within the party did not share this view. For these critics of the university, opposition to an American presence came either from generalized fear or frustration at being unable to control events or from ideological positions and strongly held beliefs. "To this point the United States had been an enemy. That was part of the ideology of the Communist Party," says Maseva. For these, the university in and of itself was a betrayal of their socialist ideals. Some members of the Board of Trustees, notably Panitza, would come to understand that there were some concerns within the BSP that AUBG was a “blue” institution dominated by opposition figures and without any membership from the socialists. To respond to this, persons associated with the BSP would be invited to the AUBG Board by the mid-1990s

²⁰ (Fotev 2011)

as a way to demonstrate the inclusive nature of the institution and alleviate suspicions. In 1991, however, former communists wanted nothing to do with the place and would be pleased to see the effort fail.

“There was still a lack of comfort with things from the West,” says Fotev, “and therefore hindering the efforts was seen as a good thing.” Still, because of the uncertainty of the times opposition from BSP critics was unlikely to be open; instead, the way to accomplish this was “through procedural maneuvers” within the Grand National Assembly.²¹ The legislative proposal for the university was not the only victim of a slowdown within the assembly. For some members of the UDF, the process of drawing up a constitution was taking too long. Ironically, in May 1991, a threat to the creation of the university was inadvertently delivered by some the university’s strongest supporters.

“Unfortunately [some of] the representatives of the UDF opposed the constitution which was being discussed in Parliament and they left Parliament. They set up a tent camp outside Parliament” remembers Maseva. “While I approved of their protest, it was not a good time for the idea of the university. I thought: This is the end!” she laughs. By July, however, the constitution was formally adopted. Shortly

²¹ (Fotev 2011)

thereafter, the Assembly voted to conclude its activities and thus set up a clear September deadline to create the university.

Laverty, through conversations with Bulgarian supporters, saw the legislative problem as: "How are we going to maneuver in this environment that is really dangerous? Not physically dangerous but institutionally dangerous." Part of the answer would come from his training as a political scientist and his experience in Maine politics.

Maine's small population (about 1.3 million) and small communities means that two degrees of separation characterizes much of the state's politics. "We are knit together by constant interaction with one another" comments Flanagan, who has worked in both business and political circles within the state. Personal interaction, friendship and acquaintance networks, and reputation dominate political interaction. In a place where friend-of-a-friend relationships are so pervasive, dehumanizing the opposition that has come to characterize much of contemporary American political discussions is more difficult.

Despite a population of about 8 million in 1991, Bulgarian politics was similarly dominated by familial, clientelistic, and friendship networks—a pattern that largely continues to dominate Bulgarian politics. Sofia, a city approaching two million unofficially, is sometimes referred to by locals as

голямото село or "the big village." This term refers to a phenomenon familiar to Sofians: no matter where you are in the city you are likely to run into someone that you know. The variant of this phenomenon is that upon entering into an extended conversation with a stranger you are almost certain to find a common acquaintance, if not a mutual friend.

Laverty saw that there were similarities between the way the Bulgarian Grand National Assembly operated and the Maine legislature operated. "[In Maine] I lived in a real rural area; these people are very genuine. They are genuine down-to-earth people. And I found out that Bulgarians are like that." He was particularly impressed with the Bulgarian sense of humor and recognized it: "The culture, the people, the sense of humor were similar. Everything was very different, but everything was similar."

Because of the size, the intensive interactions between members, and the unsettled politics of the time, much was decided in interpersonal relationships: "It was important to get to know people." This made it necessary to work with all political forces. "My experience here in Maine, I think, in a very strange and unique way qualified me very well to deal with the Grand National Assembly at that time," says Laverty.

Individually lobbying, discussing, and explaining the university to members of the committee in Sofia became a priority at the

same time that preparations to open doors were underway in Blagoevgrad. To help in this process, Iveta Gigova, newly-hired as AUBG's Director of Development, became a valuable assistant. The ever-smiling Gigova engaged in numerous meetings in the university's cause and in tag-team fashion she would work one side of a room while Lavery worked the other.

Lavery remembers one particular meeting with a senior BSP official intended to smooth over a problem that was hampering developments in Blagoevgrad. Attempting to demonstrate the open intentions of the emerging institution, Lavery articulated an open and transparent policy toward all political forces. "You can come into my office and go through the drawers in my desk," offered Lavery. These efforts, he believes, eventually began to have an effect as more within the BSP began to realize that "We weren't a threat. We weren't grabbing things. This was a sincere effort."

It was August, however, and time was evaporating under the hot summer sun. Preparations continued in Blagoevgrad, yet without formal approval from Sofia before the Assembly disbanded, the university would not open. While Lavery and Gigova worked the corridors, Minister Fotev argued behind the scenes that he "categorically supported the creation American University"²² and wanted to bring the initiative to a vote. Prof. Elka Konstantinova, in her role as chair of the committee

²² (Fotev 2011)

looking at the question, would assist this process as well. While procedural maneuvers and arcane debates over who had the authority to create a university were used to keep the question from coming up for a final vote, supporters' intensive last-minute efforts (as well as a compromise to allow the creation of a Slavic University) won the day. The bill creating the American University in Bulgaria was passed just days before the end of the Grand National Assembly.

Funding a University

While the political and legal intricacies were being debated in Sofia and the infrastructure being set in place in Blagoevgrad, one of the most important challenges to the endeavor was figuring out how to pay for it. The first funds had come from the Open Society Foundations to support a preliminary feasibility study by William Higdon, who would briefly serve as AUBG's first vice president, and later to support the creation of the University of Maine's implementation plan. A much more substantial amount was going to be needed to support the institution in its first year. Given the economic situation in Bulgaria, all knew that very limited funds would be raised through tuition in this first year. This meant finding other donors.

"Funding was the serious threat," remembers Steve Kenney, who served as the Chief Financial Officer for the emerging university. Funding from the University of Maine was not going

to happen; the institution had been just emerged from a period of budget cuts, and its involvement from the beginning included the condition that no Maine funds would be used to create the university. Instead, the University of Maine would assist AUBG financially through facilitating financial transactions and providing logistical support.

George Soros, through the Open Society Foundation in the US, was an early and very generous supporter. He had agreed to provide support for the endeavor that would amount to almost a quarter of the hard currency operating budget at the beginning.²³ Funding from other sectors was less certain. While the US government, by August 1991, had disbursed \$750,000 from the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) to continue setting up the institution, more hard currency funds would be needed to import needed materials and pay US dollar salaries.²⁴ Interestingly, however, Bulgarian leva funding was not a problem.

This earliest major funding breakthrough had taken place a few months earlier. Upon reflection, this commitment was a symbol of the very Bulgarian-American partnership that was at the core of the AUBG initiative. As Flanagan explains, "The first year that we were there, USAID had a Food for Peace program (US Public Law 480 or PL-480). Under that program the Bulgarian

²³ (Kenney 2011)

²⁴ (Lavery, American University in Bulgaria Status Report 1991)

government had, as was typical, paid for the food they had purchased. But they paid with a local non-convertible currency. So there was a huge pile of money by Bulgarian standards that was available in Bulgarian leva that could conceivably be used to pay for programs.”

The PL-480 program was part of the US foreign assistance program. Food was donated from US sources and sold in and by the receiving country. The funds generated could then be used by the recipient government to support development efforts within the country. This required, however, Bulgarian government approval. In this episode, explains Lavery, President Zhelev was key. Lavery and others explained that the American side needed a commitment from Bulgaria in order to secure US funding.²⁵ Within weeks, after consultations with US Ambassador Kenneth Hill, US embassy staff, and advisors in Zhelev’s office, the Bulgarian side had committed over 50 million leva (then worth approximately \$3.4 million) from PL-480 generated funds.²⁶

“We can thank Ed Lavery and his advisers during that first year for locking that money (PL 480) into place because otherwise it would not have been a viable situation,” notes Kenney. “It’s obvious that we had friends in Washington and in Sofia who were following up on these things and working on the

²⁵ (Lavery 2011)

²⁶ (Lavery, American University in Bulgaria Status Report 1991)

approvals and so forth to make sure that those funds came through....”

Designating these monies for AUBG, however, was just as sensitive a subject for Bulgarian political leaders as it was for leaders at the University of Maine. For Lavery and others, this signaled the Bulgarians’ serious intentions and the subsequent need to find a response from the American side. US supporters also recognized that there was a need to keep these American PL-480 derived funds in Bulgaria to be able to show the Bulgarians that the money from Bulgaria was being used in Bulgaria—to purchase supplies from the Bulgarian market and pay lev-based salaries.

To generate a clear US response, a collection of individuals in the US sought funding. Persons at the US State Department were looking for funds that could be used to support the endeavor from existing appropriations. John Menzies, who by this time was serving in the office of the Special Adviser for Eastern European Assistance,²⁷ supported this, including securing several Fulbright positions for the institution. Brett O’Brien at Sen. George Mitchell's office (one of Maine’s two senators and then Senate Majority Leader) worked to assist re-appropriation of already appropriated funds. Nan Frederick, a former USAID employee, lobbied to get funds from the American Schools and Hospitals Abroad program (ASHA). As

²⁷ (AUBG 1997)

these efforts were underway, Deputy Prime Minister Ludgev and Finance Minister Kostov, who were visiting the US, were assured of continued US support in various meetings with US political officials, including Lawrence Eagleburger and Vice President Dan Quayle.²⁸ As soon as board members were assembled, they too began looking for funds from a variety of public and private donors. Within months of joining the AUBG board, Panitza and Groueff joined in the lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill where, despite being Bulgarian-Americans, they became American-Bulgarians for trips through the halls of Washington.

“It was a hodgepodge of funding that had come together,” says Kenney. Hodgepodge, yes, but at least funding had been promised and partially secured for the first year. Still, there were no guarantees. By December, difficulties in getting US dollars deposited into AUBG accounts would force Lavery to announce that the institution would run out of US dollars within weeks.

If the next few weeks seemed to be a problem, future funding for a second or subsequent years was even less certain. As Kenney notes, this would be a “grueling process for the next two or three years just working through the funding process.” During the second year, faculty would be told at one point not to cash their paychecks. But that would be next year, for now, in

²⁸ (Lavery, American University in Bulgaria Status Report 1991)

the summer of 1991 the university would open for its first students—now it just had to find students.

Recruiting a University

"I was in the army and my mother sent me an article from the newspaper. She literally cut it out of the newspaper put it in the envelope and sent it to me. That was back in 1990." Dimitar Natchkov, a native of Assenovgrad, was one of those first students. Like many of the male students in the first class, after graduation from Plovdiv English Language School in 1989 he was marched into the army for mandatory military service.

"We didn't have e-mail then; we used snail mail, so she used to write me letters twice a week...And I spoke about it with Manol [Manol Peikov, who would also become an AUBG student] because we were in the army together. And he said, 'You know my mother also wrote a letter or either when she came to visit she told me that she saw a documentary on TV....' And so we talked about it. ...When we got discharged from the Army, which was in March of 1990, there was much more on TV and in the newspapers about this concept. So I said, 'Well why don't I try it?'"

As Natchkov notes, interest in the new university fed by press and word-of-mouth reports grew over the spring and early summer. By the time that Lavery arrived in Bulgaria in July 1991, the new university had become a hot press topic. Upon arriving to Bulgaria with his family for their move to the

country, Lavery remembers being met at the airport by George Prohasky who immediately took him to a press conference in a room filled with people. In response to a question about when AUBG would begin accepting applications, Lavery answered, “two weeks.”

“In fact, we didn't have anything, but I figured the last thing I could do at that time was equivocate.” As he retells this event, he looks exactly the same as the black and white photos snapped by press photographers of the time. Perhaps the beard is a bit whiter, but it is just as unruly. And his enthusiastic energy, as he careens from point to point, is the same as well. This enthusiastic energy and his belief in the idea inspired all who became involved in the Blagoevgrad project.

Lavery's answer established an even firmer deadline and a need to get even more focused on getting things up and running in Blagoevgrad. This also meant that the Maine-iacs would need to begin hiring local staff for the project. Some of the first people brought on to the project had already been working for the Open Society Fund in Sofia. Others had to be recruited from Blagoevgrad and elsewhere. Meanwhile, students across Bulgaria were focusing on other matters.

“We didn't know what the requirements would be, so we called,” remembers Natchkov. “They told us that all applicants

are welcome and that the two exams that would be taken for consideration are the SAT and TOEFL. They told us when the SAT and TOEFLs were going to take place in Blagoevgrad. So Manol and I went to his mother's house in Hvoina. We started preparing ourselves because for a year and a half in the army we didn't have the chance to practice our English that much, so we felt that we needed some preparation.”

Each year in the US, high school students planning to enter college take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT). It is a routine part of the college application process—in the US, that is. In 1991 Bulgaria, on the other hand, the SAT was unknown except to the few Bulgarians who were able to latch upon a copy of one of the preparation books sent by a friend studying in the US. But if the SAT was a challenge to students taking it, it was even a larger challenge to the team giving it.

Simply obtaining the tests had meant negotiating with a reluctant Educational Testing Service, the test's creators, to agree to their being administered in Bulgaria. But allowing the tests, which are closely protected, to be brought over involved more frustrating last minute negotiations remembers Willman. After further talks, ETS eventually released a batch of institutional tests to Willman and Courtemanche, who ended up lugging them over on the plane as their excess baggage.

Milena Stoicheva, who had recently been hired to oversee student affairs, organized the testing process. Just recently a student herself at Sofia University, Stoicheva understood the difficult environment in which the university was being created. “There was a lack of belief that things would be done in a different way.”²⁹ Honestly administered entrance tests and fair student selection procedures went largely unquestioned in the US, but in the aftermath of the previous system, suspicions of favoritism and connections were everywhere. For Stoicheva, this meant that “everything had to be transparent in an environment that had nothing like this before.” To help demonstrate that procedures would be carried out with integrity, she remembers locking the tests in the university safe and even sleeping with the key under her pillow.

This was not the end to the SAT saga. Without modern scanners to grade them, the tests had to be hand graded and application essays individually read. Limited human resources meant that the newly assembled Blagoevgrad team had to wear many hats during that summer; two of these hats became test grader and essay reader. After working all day on other matters, Willman, Stoicheva, Courtemanche, Roberta Laverty, and others would spend hours at night grading the tests.

“Then we got results and it blew us away,” exclaims Laverty.

“We didn't think it was real at first. This was a second language.

²⁹ (Stoicheva 2011)

They had never taken a test like this before.” The test scores were indeed impressive and, at the time, meant that AUBG students rivaled the entering classes of some of the more prestigious universities in the US.

With no past, an under-construction present, and an uncertain future, it is hard to imagine the level of the uncertainty that surrounded AUBG in 1991. All who became part of it were taking a chance that the institution would be up and running by the end of September and that it would remain in operation after that. But for those first students, “they were risking, not us,” comments Zdravka Bojinova, who joined the university staff in August 1991. Danche Melnikliyska, also newly hired, agrees that the first class of students were taking a risk: “these people must have been very brave to believe us.”

When asked whether he was taking a risk by attending the new university, Natchkov matter-of-factly responds, “Actually, I looked at it as something exciting. I never questioned the possibility of this university not being able to succeed in the future.”

Hiring a University

With student recruitment actively underway, the institution was now very publicly, and morally, committed to opening. While dwindling time and hard-to-find resources made setting

up in Blagoevgrad a challenge, the Maine team quickly discovered that human resources would not be a problem.

Some of the first Bulgarian staff to work for AUBG were hired from the Open Society Foundation in Sofia or recruited from the English language program at Sofia University. These channels brought Margaret Bazachka, Iveta Gigova, Ivan Skabrin, Snejana Slancheva, Milena Stoicheva, and Emil Tsenev to that summer 1991 AUBG team. As efforts got underway in Blagoevgrad the university began to bring on people from the local community.

Danche Melnikliyska first heard about the university through word-of-mouth rumors that some sort of American university was going to open. Working as an interpreter at Bulgartabac, she understood that Laverty was looking for an executive secretary, applied, and was immediately thrown into the preparations. At the beginning, “We were one office doing everything, so we were multitasking all the time.”

One of the first major tasks that the Blagoevgrad group had to carry out was the entrance tests. This brought others onto the staff. Zdravka Bojinova began working for AUBG in the summer of 1991 as a proctor for the entrance exams. When later asked to join the university full-time, she left her position as a research assistant at Bulgartabac to join the university. Bojinova,

Daniela Kostova, and Slava Popova found themselves working with Bill Porter in the Office of Administration.

Inevitably there were miscommunications and some things took getting used to. Melnikliyska remembers being puzzled over Laverty's request for "letterhead," an uncommon term at the time. When asked about other problems resulting from cultural differences, Bojinova recalls a meeting between Porter and a visitor from Sofia. Most in the AUBG community knew that on good days Porter was direct; on other days, Porter could be a bit more than direct. For whatever reason, the meeting did not exactly proceed smoothly, and the visitor later indicated that he was a bit offended or hurt from the conversation. In a later response, Bojinova apologized for "her bad English" which she told him had likely caused the miscommunication.

Bojinova tells the story as an example of the cross-cultural difficulties that appeared from time to time as American and Bulgarian cultures came together. In this case, Porter's American directness was interpreted as an affront by his Bulgarian conversational partner. The event does reveal something about the different modes of interaction and how these could bump up against each other. At the same time, the event reveals something about the relations between Bulgarian and American colleagues during that first year. As a result of the work together and the sense of community that developed, many within the AUBG community became trusted advisors

and friends. Bulgarian colleagues during that first year and since have shown kindness and patience to seasoned veterans and to newcomers, time and time again. And on certainly more occasions than their American colleagues ever realized since they were unable to understand the language and unaccustomed to the culture, Bulgarian colleagues and first-year students became guides, chaperones, and at times guardians for their sometimes bewildered American coworkers and professors.

The fact that this small team of Bulgarians and Americans could accomplish so much that summer is a testament to their perseverance and hard work. Willman credits this to the fact that all were committed and were willing to do whatever was necessary to get the doors open by the end of September.

"There's a very strong work ethic in Maine and a willingness to become a jack of all trades." This, she notes, also existed among her Bulgarian colleagues. "We worked well with Bulgarian people who were also willing to put on many hats and try something new. They weren't tied down to the idea of 'we tried that and it won't work.' I don't remember ever hearing that there—I don't remember ever hearing that sentiment throughout the whole project." Lavery agrees, "I was surprised at the competency of people. People just rose to the occasion."

While things were slowly being assembled in Blagoevgrad, back on the University of Maine campus a committee was formed to

select faculty, but the process appeared to be lagging. It was late July and there were great concerns among the team in Blagoevgrad that finding faculty on such short notice and appropriately vetting them would be difficult. "I was scared," admits Laverty. "I thought...we are going to set this all up and if we don't have really effective teachers here, not just teachers but people who can roll with it and understand...well...I also did not know how students were going to react to us."

When asked about the first faculty, Willman recounts that, "They were people who were willing to pack up and join an institution with no history—people who had planned for the jobs in the middle of summer, people who were willing to come to Eastern Europe." Then she chuckles, "So we got some interesting characters."

Matthew Fike read the job ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. He was looking for a job and was interested in going overseas. "It was 1991 and, like everybody else in the world," he had watched the revolutions in Eastern Europe. The more he learned of the idea, the more he liked it. He particularly liked that AUBG would be a liberal arts institution.

Fike is the quintessential English professor – intelligent, serious, bespectacled, demanding but supportive—the kind of professor who is endured by students during the semester and respected by them a semester later. The position, he

remembers, required teaching freshman composition and possibly more specialized courses later. "It felt like something fated to happen," he says quietly.

It was his first time overseas. Flights between the US and Bulgaria were not regular. This meant that most people arrived on a small private company called Jes Air. First-class travel it was not. Faculty at the time joked that there were two sections on the plane, "voluntary and mandatory smoking." After a tiring flight, Fike and Ruth Hertzberg, who would teach history, were met by Bill and Pauline Porter at Sofia airport for the two-hour drive to Blagoevgrad. Like all new faculty, Matt stayed at the then-unreformed socialist era Alen Mak Hotel next to the Main Building. Those first hectic days were spent choosing between a very limited number of available apartments and getting organized for classes. Dinners were large group affairs held at the Bistrizza Residence where Laverty and his family were living. The project "had the feeling of something magical" remembers Fike. As he reflects upon the assembled faculty members, he smiles, "we were a pretty ragtag group of people" but he remembers a "sense of community that was wonderful."

And so the faculty was collected and arrived in the middle of September, just two weeks before classes were to start. They were, indeed, a ragtag lot of a few seasoned senior faculty, a few new Ph.D.'s, and a few in between: grandly jovial Juliana Mutti, wise-cracking Russ Parker, dynamic Alan Trevithick, serious

Baldy Ransom and his convivial thespian wife, Ellen, among others. Geoffrey Dean and Ana-Maria Ravnopolska-Dean did double-duty working as faculty teaching introduction to music courses and added a valuable component of the liberal arts that first year, as well as being residence hall managers. The faculty came from Harvard, Carnegie-Mellon, University of Michigan, University of South Carolina, University of Indiana, Temple University, University of Maine, Columbia, and elsewhere. The group of Americans, joined by Melkana Brakelova and Gleb Harnatski, two Bulgarian mathematicians, became the first AUBG faculty. "The faculty got into it. They really bought the vision. They were there selflessly. They did a lot of things above and beyond," comments Laverty.

"The differences were there to be seen from the start," observes Maseva, "Between the mentality, between the educational systems, the teaching practices of the faculty, how tests were being used, and how campus life was organized." Laverty agrees, "They were really competent people at least in terms of their academic credentials and their ability to teach. I think we were exceedingly fortunate." Shortly after arriving Fike remembers thinking, "the magnitude of what I had done was staggering." And indeed it was.

Building a University

The large challenges loomed even larger as time grew shorter. One of the first surprises for the new arrivals in July was that

some offices were still occupied by former officials and that squatters had occupied other rooms in the Main Building, all of whom had to be asked to vacate the premises. This took some delicate negotiations and left more than a few bruised feelings as the Americans tried to get people to leave the very building that had been promised to the university. Dealing with these problems would on more than one occasion over that summer raise frustrations and doubts. As Willman remembers, "When we first got there the only offices available were the president's office, conference room, and the smaller office. That office had a really wide marble sill. I remember one day being completely overwhelmed not knowing how we were going to do whatever it was and lying down on a hot summer day putting my face on the cold marble."

Basic equipment that would be taken for granted in the West was simply unavailable or in very short supply. Melnikliyska remembers that the first president's office was rather Spartan during most of the summer, "We had a typewriter," she laughs heartily. Willman agrees that the office was indeed barebones that summer, "We had a fax, but not at first. We had a telephone." As she relates this, Willman also laughs. Their laughter comes from disbelief that sometimes accompanies hindsight—the humor that bubbles up in those "How in the world did I get here?" moments. The lack of equipment and supplies meant that some of the most basic tools and processes

had to be created on the ground. Willman remembers cutting out files for student records using available cardboard and a manila folder as a pattern. "I don't think that having information accessible was ever a priority in the past," she comments. This meant that even constructing a filing system was a challenge.

Yet basic equipment was still needed. Porter, Bojinova, Kostova, and others travelled across Bulgaria in the late summer and fall of 1991 acting something like peddlers in reverse. Instead of roaming across the countryside with their wares looking for customers, intrepid AUBG staff wandered across the Bulgarian countryside looking for wares. The collapse of the centrally directed economy meant that some factories produced goods, provided that they had the needed raw materials. What they often lacked though was experience in getting these goods to customers since there was simply little need to do this in the former system. The result was that Bojinova and Kostova spent many hours locating producers of goods and then would often need to travel directly to factories to negotiate the purchase of these goods.

Remembering those trips, Kostova now laughs, "We started—with Zdravka—working with purchasing because there was no separate office for this....We travelled for plates, for forks and knives, for cutlery, to the places they produced them in Bulgaria...for blankets, for pillows, for mattresses...with a van in

the heat of the summer just sitting on the blankets sweating all the time. But there was no other way. ...And the payments should be in cash...I mean thousands of leva you should carry with you so you can pay there on the spot.” She recounts one trip to Novi Pazaar to purchase plates needed by dining services. “I don’t know if anyone knows where that is. ...There was a big queue with trucks from all over the country waiting for plates, and with the truck that we hired from Blagoevgrad, we waited in this queue for one night so that we could be first in the morning. ...This was the only place in Bulgaria that produced plates...what to do? And for blankets it was the same...in Panagyurishte...”

“Nothing was easy,” she laughs again. “But the work needed to be done.”

Other early supplies were not provided by local producers and, instead, came courtesy of the US armed forces. On several occasions during 1991-1992 Porter would use his military knowledge and military charm to procure surplus supplies from American military bases in Greece and Germany. These goods were either being replaced on the bases or resulted from base downsizing due to the Cold War peace dividend. One can only imagine the confusion or consternation of Bulgarian customs officials when these goods appeared on the border—arriving from US military bases that just a year or so earlier had been enemies of the People’s Republic of Bulgaria. In Blagoevgrad,

more than a few faculty and staff offices would display a distinctly 1950s military gray steel and vinyl retro chic décor as a result of these donated desks, chairs, filing cabinets, shelves, and office equipment.

“These trucks came from Greece,” says Kostova. “I do remember it because we all went up to the Hilltop [the dormitory] where they needed to be unloaded. And we all helped...with any kind of matter. ...We just did what was needed.” When asked why, she doesn’t miss a beat, “Because we had the enthusiasm to do it. We were young and this place was new and we liked it very much. People can do a lot when they have the right motivation.”

Reflecting upon these summer scavenging and building efforts, Kenney considers that Bill Porter “had a bigger challenge in the sense that he was working with the logistics of trying to get something off the ground really quick...the renovations and building stuff. Because you have to remember, this is a three month process from the time we hit the ground in July to have something operational by September. I mean, you couldn’t do that in a university setting like that in Maine...let alone 10,000 miles away and with all the other communications and logistics challenges.”

Those communication challenges permeated the early process and added to isolation of the Blagoevgrad team and the faculty

members. Tenuous communication links would also begin to aggravate differences emerging between AUBG and University of Maine. In today's world of omnipresent cellphones and broadband internet, it is difficult to realize the sense of isolation that could descend upon the team.

“It is a little bit unnerving for example when you have to dial a phone number and you can't speak with the operator. And you can't dial the number directly so you had to go through the local exchange and speak intelligently with the operator who doesn't speak a word of English,” says Kenney. He continues to explain that after placing an order for the call, “then they call you back and ...sometimes those phone calls would be six or seven hours difference in time. You place a call in the afternoon and they call you back at 11:00. These were the funny things. These were the stressful things but they were also kind of funny. I woke up many times at one o'clock in the morning with a phone call and they would tell me, ‘Okay, US on the line,’ and I would have to ask the person on the other end of the line, ‘Who is this I'm speaking to?’” chuckles Kenney.

Other parts of the university also had to be assembled as well. Paula Dalzell-Kenney would organize the creation of the AUBG Health Center in a resource poor environment. "I had a really very little time to try to figure it out, but I knew I had to bring supplies." After that, Dalzell-Kenney remembers that the medical director at the University of Maine Health Center gave

her some of the most useful advice: "You need to make connections with the local community."

"The first challenge was to gain acceptance...to build and set up alliances and to make inroads with the local provider community." To this end, Dalzell-Kenney hired Ventsislav Daskalov, a local physician who spoke English, and then met with officials from the local hospitals and dentists offices to find out what was the situation with local healthcare services. "I think I was received well. I had the good fortune of having Elga Nikolova as my assistant and translator. She was very good and very diplomatic."

With facilities ready, a skeletal administration and faculty present, students entered first classes at what would be considered an ungodly hour by today's AUBG students, 8:00 a.m. on 30 September 1991. The lean course offerings would also seem ungodly to current students and faculty—about 40 sections of about 10 different courses were offered that semester. The challenge of setting up a university in less than nine months had been met, yet everyone's sighs of relief would be brief.

Keeping a University

"Honestly, at that time I had never even thought about why Blagoevgrad," admits Delchev. By the time that the initial concept had been placed in the lawyers' hands, the near ready

availability of Blagoevgrad's buildings had led many to this conclusion. Panitza agrees that the facilities were the major draw to Blagoevgrad, and despite discussions within the Grand National Assembly in 1990 of a Sofia location, most involved in the project had arrived at Delchev's conclusion by April 1991: "We took it as a fact that Blagoevgrad would be the place."

This seemingly foregone conclusion, of course, understates the efforts of Maseva, Tarpanov, Dimitrov, and other Blagoevgrad supporters in creating it. "That wonderful mayor"³⁰ as Panitza describes Maseva who was "hospitable and determined"³¹ had held numerous meetings with US officials, Maine officials, and Blagoevgrad citizens to create this very conclusion.

This hospitality, however, was partly built upon some misconceptions about the role of the new university in Blagoevgrad. These expectations came in part from generalized sense that the Americans would quickly fix things but also came about through newspaper articles citing a letter from George Prohasky at the Open Society Foundation which implied that the university would be accompanied by major US investment in medical and transport infrastructures. "As a result of this [the letter] people against the idea wanted to know when this would happen and after this happened then we could discuss the idea of the university," remembers Maseva.³² Dazell-Kenney

³⁰ (Panitza 2011)

³¹ (Delchev 2011)

³² (Maseva 2011)

agrees that “there were expectations that we would be flush with all this money and would be able to do great things with all this money. That was disappointing when people realized that we were kind of struggling to stay afloat—even though I don't think most people knew that. It was a huge financial struggle in the beginning.”³³

Curiosity made the ex-pats objects of observation amongst amused or suspicious locals and particularly among reporters. Because the university symbolized US involvement in Bulgaria, it was a frequent topic for journalists—even more than today. Getting used to the Bulgarian press, however, could be a bit of a challenge for people unaccustomed to being in a small spotlight. “When we bought our car, a Russian Lada, it made the paper because we bought this Russian Lada,” laughs Willman. Students were also quizzed about what was really going on at the American institution. “Actually, some of my friends asked me whether or not we sang the American anthem every morning and raised the American flag because this is what we used to do in high school: sing the anthem and patriotic songs and raise the flag.” Speaking with a sly smile, Natchkov continues, “Initially I would say ‘no,’ but later I would [jokingly] say, ‘Ohhhhh yeahhhhhh, of course.’”

“AUBG as den of spies” was one of the enduring press themes of that first year—and for several years after. Pantiza remembers

³³ (Dalzell-Kenney 2011)

that local newspapers continually wanted to see the institution as a spy factory despite the fact that US government officials had no role in developing the curriculum or administrative decisions. "One thing that struck all of us was the total degree of independence that was given to the board by American authorities. This has been absolutely remarkable."³⁴

Still the rumors would not die and they found unusual sources. Janet Connelly, a much-loved sociology professor in her early-60s when she joined AUBG's faculty, had been one of the thousands of young women who took secretarial and support jobs in Washington bureaucracies during World War II.

Connelly's position as a secretary in the OSS, the fore-runner of today's CIA, became just more fuel for the fire. Americans, of course, were not the only ones suspected of being spies. Some Bulgarian staff and even Mayor Maseva were quizzed about their espionage links. "At one meeting with me they [reporters] started asking me what is my relationship with United States...FBI? CIA?" Maseva, today, shrugs, "This was part of times."

The spy phenomenon was not only a product of the times. Nearly all of the Americans interviewed still confess to the feeling that they were being watched at times. Some of this likely had a basis in fact; both Bulgarian and Americans involved in the project note that there were concerns about

³⁴ (Panitza 2011)

secretive opposition to the university from recalcitrant communist elements or Bulgarian security services simply acting out of habit or uncertainty. Or perhaps it was just a very human reaction to the generalized uncertainty of the situation. For the Americans, there were concerns about who you were dealing with. Some Bulgarians would sometimes add to this perception by warning ex pats about certain individuals. "When you're a foreigner in a new environment and you don't really know your way around and there's some sort of sense of intrigue, it's very easy for that to grow and manifest and become part of the reality of the institution," notes Willman, a feeling shared by most Americans there at the time.³⁵ Whether or not it was true, the feeling permeated daily activities but did not determine them.

"In general I felt welcomed," comments Dalzell-Kenney. "There was a lot of resistance in the beginning from certain factions or groups within the community, but I think in general for the man on the street we were accepted. We were a great curiosity. I think people were skeptical in the beginning about what we would do. Olga would tell me about a lot of rumors that would float around. They would come out of thin air—both positive and negative things."³⁶

³⁵ (Willman 2011)

³⁶ (Dalzell-Kenney 2011)

Income disparities between the Americans and the larger Bulgarian community may have created some animosities as well, particularly in the economic crisis of collapsing communism. And while an AUBG student from the local community could sincerely comment that he was surprised that the Americans did not openly flaunt the income differences more, everyone recognized the income distinction. It did, however, creep into discussions as faculty noted the disparity between salaries of Bulgarian and American faculty. "The concept of a dual pay scale was a sensitive issue," remembers Kenney. He continues by noting that the disparity between pay scales has not been a problem only of the university and that many corporations and other transnational entities operate in a similar manner resulting in similar problems. Whether shared by other institutions or not, it would remain one of the sore points in that first year and would continue to be a point of real contention for much longer.

What would not be contentious was Bulgarian hospitality. "These people, they would invite you over to eat. They had so little compared to what we had, but they would spend so much money on all of this food. They were so gracious. It was really humbling," marvels Dalzell-Kenney. A small criminal element would make the most of the income difference as more than a few personnel would discover, "On the other hand there were

those people who would take advantage and rob our apartment."³⁷

While Americans and Bulgarians learned to work with each other, institutions had to learn this as well. Difficulties between the university and the Blagoevgrad municipal government continued during the first year, and some particularly difficult issues would take several years to be concluded. Most of the contention had to do with the facilities promised to the university. Those deciding where to locate the university understood the offer of the Main Building to mean the entire building, other than the regional library and the public hall. Upon arrival, however, the Maine team discovered that this was not the case. A number of offices had been occupied by different groups. The entire center of the fifth floor housed the regional communist party archives and, it was rumored, some of the archives for the Greek Communist Party. And the entire sixth floor was used by the law faculty of Southwest University. Still others laid claim to the Hilltop Dormitory.

It was largely left to the Maine group, basically Courtemanche and Porter, to recover this promised space. In some cases this took only explaining the university's claim to the space. In other cases, this required negotiations with political forces and officials in Blagoevgrad and in Sofia. In a few cases, this meant that some occupied areas, due to political sensitivities or

³⁷ (Dalzell-Kenney 2011)

connections, remained occupied for months or years. It would take numerous meetings and letters between the university and municipality and the Ministry of Education and even a lockout of Southwest University under the command of Bill Porter before movement would take place on that thorny issue.³⁸ Ultimately, the sixth floor was set aside for the law faculty of Southwest University. Years later, after numerous visits by mysterious, silent men entering and leaving the archives with their leather attaché cases, the archives would be moved and the promised area would be turned into classroom and storage space.

Keeping Up the Spirits

In 2011, Blagoevgrad has a plethora of shops, stands, and kiosks for shopping and now legendary nightlife of restaurants, bars, and cafes. It is easy to forget that this is relatively recent. The “Lukanov Winter“ of 1990-1991 was the height of the Bulgaria’s economic distress. Following the collapse of the Zhivkov regime, the distribution system for food which had been rather bare bones under communism finally broke down. Speak with Bulgarians of these times and you will hear stories of bread lines, power shortages, and coupons for cooking oil and milk and other basic commodities. While there was some improvement by the summer of 1991, the situation was still difficult and consumer goods were intermittently available or

³⁸ (Porter 1993)

found only after a determined search guided by word-of-mouth leads. Even staples could be hard to find leading to keeping one's own personal supplies. "There were rumors that one of the professors was running around carrying two rolls of toilet paper," snickers Natchkov. Light bulbs disappeared from stairwells and even university bathrooms, while keeping bathrooms stocked with toilet paper became a constant challenge for cleaning personnel. Everyone ate a lot of cabbage that year in many different forms. Imports, including petroleum, were difficult, if not impossible, to acquire as the country's currency reserves and flows declined. This meant that finding heating oil and at times even diesel and gasoline meant a concerted effort. Electricity supplies, which could be cut during the day without notice, had to be rationed by late autumn 1991 through an electricity regime of two hours on/two hours off that was set in place.

The electricity regime with the rolling blackouts was a challenge to everyone. For a period in the fall of 1991, electricity blackouts left the city dark and cold. And one's life had to be scheduled around the blackouts. Clever planning, however, could actually make advantages of the situation. Students up at the Hilltop dormitory, for example, would carefully navigate the stone steps down to the local park which was home to one of the few discos in the city at that time. Leaving during the dark meant that one could find a seat before others arrived with the

electricity. Water services were also sometimes a problem with water mysteriously being turned off to a building or a small section of the city for several hours. While information about these temporary water shortages was often passed along Bulgarian social networks, the ex-pat community usually found itself surprised to wake up one morning or return one night to no water.

Even the indomitable Ruth Hertzberg found the situation a bit distressing. Hertzberg, a history instructor, became known by students for her historical reenactments of historical events and throughout the city for her daily jogs—an exercise not commonly practiced by 50-something women at the time. Upon one such surprise morning water shortages, Hertzberg sighed: "You know...everybody needs a little bit of water, just to wash behind the neck." Yet, even in her discomfort, she found a way to make the situation a bit lighthearted.

While everyone in Blagoevgrad endured these problems, Blagoevgrad's small ex-pat community faced the added problem of isolation within the larger community. Today, one can hear English spoken throughout Blagoevgrad, as the university, tourism, and economics have brought the language into the city. In 1991, however, very few in the Blagoevgrad community spoke English, and many who did had been recruited into the university administration. For ex-pats, this meant that social interaction was largely limited to AUBG

colleagues and students, a very small number of other Blagoevgrad residents, and the ex-pat community. Trips to Sofia or Greece, which provided a bit of variety for those getting claustrophobia, were then certainly a challenge, if not impossible much of the time. The general economic situation meant that most people were not mobile. Trains remained a mystery to anyone who did not speak fluent Bulgarian. Buses, which ran infrequently at best, were unpredictable. An advertised, scheduled departure time meant very little in the wild capitalism immediately after the collapse. Bus drivers usually waited around until their busses were full (or more likely standing room only) before leaving. So a scheduled departure time might be kept or delayed by 15 to 30 minutes or even longer until the driver was sufficiently convinced that he had maximized his profit off that particular trip.

Adversity, common cause, and interaction create community. And in that first year, AUBG became a close community among faculty, staff, and students. Faculty members and staff were regularly invited by students to join birthday parties and were welcomed on the occasion when they showed up at The Mushroom or The Watermill (two of the very few bar/discotheques in the city at that time). With faculty, staff, and administration sometimes sharing meals or parties, the community became something like an extended family—particularly for some of the ex-pats who were separated from

their own friends and families. Sometimes, however, the relations became too close and separating one's private life from work and, in particular, the ex-pat community became difficult—a situation compounded over time by personality differences and later events. Janet Connelly, who out of affection was dubbed “Baba Connelly” by a number of students (but never to her face), did more of her share by serving as a compassionate moral compass and community shoulder for crying upon, as well as throwing good parties.

"We didn't have the kind of restraint that our own culture imposed upon us," notes Fike. This sense compounded by the cultural confusion in larger Bulgarian society typical of any post-revolutionary situation created difficulties. Times immediately after any revolutionary change in a society create uncertainties in habits and social mores in the population as things that were once forbidden become possible. As a result, there was a lot of partying as a way to cope with an intense, demanding work situation and highly stressful domestic situation. Ultimately the conditions sapped nearly everyone's spirits and, in some cases, health. One new faculty member, unable to adjust to the stresses, left several weeks into the semester.

"We were very unprepared for the whole cross-cultural experience. ...We get there and it's the adrenaline rush, it's the honeymoon period, and people are getting their apartments

and trying to nest and trying to figure out how they're going to get their classes started," remembers Dalzell-Kenney. "After the honeymoon phase you move to the anger phase once people realize what they are getting into. Their offices are cold; they can't find the food they want. The reality has set in. Their apartments are probably cold. Transportation was an issue. Getting to the stores to get what they needed was an issue."

Bill Porter, AUBG Director of Administration and ever the US Marine, understood the need to keep up morale better than most. In response, he organized that fall a trip to Greece for the ex-pat community—a trip that is remembered by all of the ex-pat community to this day. "People had felt so deprived. They came back with mops and cleaning agents and food. That was a huge thing for them. The daily living stuff... People need to feel that their physical needs are being met, not to mention their emotional needs. People had come without their family. People had come with their children. People had begun to realize that they were there and this is how life is going to be." People cope in different ways, and some ways were more helpful than others. Without the usual cultural, familial, and friendship supports, coping could become problematic. "To put somebody, even the most highly functioning person, into a situation like that, they're going to have problems," comments Dalzell-Kenney.

This trip and subsequent trips by individuals were not without complications for the ex-pat community. Invariably, the American shopping tourists would be quizzed by bemused or concerned Greek restaurant owners, shopkeepers, and waiters who wondered what on earth these Americans were doing up in Bulgaria. On the one hand these trips were needed R&R periods that brought people more in line with what they were accustomed to in the US. On the other hand, ex pats recognized the privilege that their US passports carried – a privilege that was denied to their Bulgarian colleagues. In an ironic twist since Bulgaria's 2007 entry into the European Union, however, Bulgarians now have the last laugh on their American colleagues—it's now Americans who have to go through passport checks at the Greek border while Bulgarians pass through with a simple flash of their Bulgarian identity cards.

As physical and emotional challenges mounted, the larger challenge was to create an institution in midstream. In a metaphor that would become tired through overuse during that year people spoke about "building a bicycle while riding it." Faculty and staff were continually called to design policies and procedures that, in hindsight, might not have been the most efficient use of human resources given other challenges of the day. "We should have just imported stuff," sighs Fike, "instead...we wasted time and put in place stuff that [eventually] had to be redone."

Still, as the year continued, development continued. Within a few months, what would much later become the Pantiza Library was born in a space now occupied by three faculty offices in the Main building. The initial collection started out with a small number of mostly reference books with a few additions to the collection donated by faculty, staff, and board members and did not amount to more than a couple hundred titles. Hoping to vastly expand the holdings, a trio made up of Professors Russ Parker, Matthew Fike, and Bobby Phillips set off to Sofia to go through what had been described as a warehouse of books to build the library. Upon arrival at the little 1970s-socialist concrete building near the airport, the expectant library builders were more than a little disappointed to find a 700 ft² (70 m²) room chaotically stacked about knee-high with books. Unfortunately, most of the books had been old desk copies from US universities—most of which were rather outdated. After hours of sifting through the dusty books, the trio managed to scavenge about 150 useful titles. It was not that many books, but as Fike remembers, at that time "they were precious commodities" and added to the libraries initial holdings, which though meager were constantly used.

University processes and governing structures also began to emerge as faculty and staff overstretched from building the institution had to simultaneously begin the process of daily governance. From the beginning, there was a commitment to an

ideal of open and democratic governance within the institution—if the university was to teach, it would also have to teach by example. This commitment could particularly be seen in the setup of the Faculty Assembly, which included the membership of the entire faculty. This atypical structure is different from many campuses that, instead, use a smaller faculty senate or council. For more recent members of the AUBG community, this structure is sometimes seen as cumbersome or frustrating. Here, however, the form and practice rise from the initial circumstances and values of the institution. AUBG's setup was due both to the small size of the faculty and to a recognition that the town hall participatory nature of this structure was appropriate given its location and could serve as an example for the community. There may also have been some influence from Maine's own experiences with direct democracy in smaller towns. There was also a clear commitment that meetings would be open not only to university officials and students, but the community as well.

Over the course of that first year still other processes and parts of the university began to take shape. Student government, somewhat reluctantly and somewhat prodded by the university administration, would be created through a constitutional convention held in the fall semester. Experience with governing structures in high schools would make many students concerned with the creation of what some feared would be an

AUBG Komsomol, the communist youth organization. It would take numerous conversations, and even a visit by a student government officer at the University of Maine before students would undertake the project. While students would consider student government structures at the University of Maine and other smaller institutions, the final AUBG structure would be heavily influenced by recent political experience in Bulgaria. Concerns over the concentration of political authority meant that the AUBG student government president would have fewer authorities and more supervision than most such officers on US campuses.

Radio AURA would also emerge in 1991. Students, this time without prodding, would use the existing intercom music system in the Hilltop dormitory to begin the first dormitory-wide "broadcasts." Music would be limited to available cassette tapes played on a tape recorder, but this did not deter those determined students. News reports and even nascent public affairs/public interest programming in the form of student and faculty interviews would be a part of the programming almost from the very beginning.

Keeping It Together

While at times, the small community forgot about the outside world in the rush to classes, the world did upon occasion make its presence known. The most constant outside pressure was financial. "There was doubt about the money," confirms

Kenney. For a long time, well into the second semester, it was not even certain whether there would be sufficient funding for a second year. These problems led President Lavery to implement a temporary freeze on discretionary spending late in 1991. This—and the knowledge that the university would likely run out of US dollars by mid-January 1992—created concerns among faculty members that salaries might not be paid and contracts might not be kept.³⁹

Throughout the early years, "there was a problem with the fund-raising in Bulgaria," explains Fotev. Fotev and others had to explain to American members of the board that some potential financial contributors were potentially problematic given the murky source of finances. "It was difficult to explain to American colleagues at the time why it was important to have the university and why young people wanted to go to this university but there was no real support from business in the country."⁴⁰ This meant that most of the early fund-raising had to come from United States and that in the first year, funding came almost exclusively from Soros, the US government, and other American sources.

The problem was not only finding funding but finding the right funds (dollars for out-of-country expenses and leva for in-country expenses) and getting needed funds where they were

³⁹ (Lavery 1991).

⁴⁰ (Fotev 2011)

needed in a sclerotic banking system and pre-internet age. In a tight-budget environment moving funds could be as difficult as acquiring them in the first place. Lavery and Kenney both remember several nerve-racking days early in 1992 when a \$500,000 wire from the US disappeared somewhere between the US and Bulgaria. The funds simply vanished, to reemerge just as mysteriously nearly a week later. While the funds eventually found their way into AUBG accounts, the event demonstrated the unpredictable and shifting environment and the fragile nature of the institution.

Negotiating with outside funders, however, was not the only external problem. The *Memorandum of Understanding* signed in August between AUBG and the University of Maine legally delineated the responsibilities of both partners; however, the relationship between the University of Maine and AUBG grew somewhat prickly over the course of the first year. Writing about the relationship in 1993, AUBG Provost Tom Isenhour would describe it as a relationship "that is probably viewed a little differently by every player in the game and needs to be agreed upon and optimized if the full potential of AUBG is to be realized."⁴¹ If the two institutions were still trying to figure out their relationship in 1993, the first strains appeared soon after the opening in 1991.

⁴¹ (Isenhour 1993)

"There was the reality of dealing with the politics of the country and the reality of dealing with the students and faculty who were actually there,"⁴² comments Willman. To survive in its environment, the young institution had to create policies and meet daily tasks. The difficulty was that the Blagoevgrad institution was only part of a network of institutions involved. This meant that the small administration had to respond to multiple groups—AUBG's board of directors, AUBG faculty, AUBG students, the University of Maine, and several US funding agencies. All of this made larger decision making difficult.

During the first year of operation, Blagoevgrad faculty and administrators began to make plans and policies to respond to immediate problems and adjust to the local circumstances. Meanwhile, University of Maine continued to work on fleshing out the curriculum and program offerings. Since its accreditation had been extended and in keeping with the Memorandum, University of Maine officials had an obligation to act and supervise.⁴³ These two processes eventually began to generate friction as they bumped into each other.

As a small institution, AUBG could decide quickly and felt that it knew what was best given its environment. Operating within a fast-changing, even bumpy, environment forced a small

⁴² (Willman 2011)

⁴³ (Gregory N. Brown 1991)

community to respond quickly. The larger University of Maine, on the other hand, required more time and energy to make decisions. From Laverty's perspective, while a few people gave immense support, there was never a wider institutional support for the AUBG initiative within the University of Maine. These factors combined to make it difficult for the University of Maine to quickly respond to decisions being made in Blagoevgrad.⁴⁴ From the perspective of Blagoevgrad, for example, recruitment of new faculty for the 1991-1992 year appeared to have been unreasonably delayed by University of Maine.⁴⁵ From the University of Maine perspective, the institution was responding as best as it could using normal processes. As a result of this imbalance, a feeling emerged that the University of Maine was slowing down decisions or interfering without being on the ground and, in turn, began to be resented in some quarters in Blagoevgrad. These challenges were exacerbated by the lack of easy communication links. In 2011 it is difficult to recognize just how difficult communication could be in a world before the Internet. Fax, phone, and occasional visits were the only way to exchange information and negotiate positions.

The typical classroom pressures that faculty usually face became magnified by the quality of the students and the remoteness of the institution. In the United States in the summer of 1991, few could guess what the students would be

⁴⁴ (E. Laverty, AUBG History, 1990-1991 2011)

⁴⁵ (Connelly 1992)

like—they simply were hungry to learn and to live. Education in the elite English language schools within Bulgaria had exposed most students to the classics of American, British, and Russian literature as well as their own Bulgarian literature. Several of the textbooks that had been selected would have been typical American textbooks at a time, yet as Fike remembers, University of Maine faculty "underestimated our students." For these students, the textbooks seemed to lack substance and be full of what they derisively called "blah-blah." This meant that faculty ended up in the frustrating position of having to rework courses as they were teaching them and feverishly scrounging up more advanced materials from any available source, including care packages filled with books and articles sent by friends and family in the US and occasional document drops by visiting Americans.

The concept of the liberal arts also had an impact on classroom expectations since the approach was indeed new to the region. Unlike higher education in European states that stressed specialization in depth in one particular field, the broader liberal arts approach in which students were not expected to specialize in the first two years perplexed many students. They wondered how they could achieve the success of the Americans by studying what seemed to be a replication of their high school experiences. Yet despite the quality of their educations, there were noticeable gaps as well.

Watching *Casablanca* one night with a group of students revealed just one of these gaps in the experiences of these young pioneers. Into the film, Rick, played by Humphrey Bogart, is approached by young woman who has been presented with the possibility of getting a transport visa from the French police captain, played by Claude Rains. As all true fans of *Casablanca* know, the young woman is trying to leave WWII Bulgaria because in her words, "things are very bad there." Most of the students, however, do not realize this, possibly due to the precision cutting of communist censors. Giggles, gasps of surprise, and hurried comments immediately erupted in the room as the young woman explains her plight and eventually obtains passage to America.

For some students the initial AUBG experience was not exactly what they expected. There are many reasons for this. In addition to the textbook situation, the classroom exchange between faculty and students was unexpected. Some students hungry for the "right" answers to achieve American success became somewhat disenchanted with Socratic method interaction and multiple perspectives on different questions. As Fike says, "they were chafing" because they could not specialize immediately. In some cases this translated into what some faculty members saw as an arrogance about their intellectual abilities.

"That first year we did a lot of things wrong," remembers Fike.

Although students were very strong in some ways, there were weaknesses well. Writing problems plagued students and were weaker than test scores might otherwise indicate. Janet Connelly put some of the other problems down to previous education. In writing to the board she noted that "we have also had to deal with the academic consequences of communism evident in our students: the evasive techniques they learned, the circumlocution, repetition, global and abstract statements without substance, and most distressing and unexpected, blatant plagiarism and cheating on (to us) and unprecedented scale."⁴⁶

The quality of the students, however, also meant that if pushed they could sometimes perform brilliantly and allowed for questions and themes on exams and assignments that might stump typical American college freshmen of the time. "We adjusted pretty quickly" says Fike. By the beginning of the second year, after trips to numerous bookstores and hours spent locating and photocopying articles in various university libraries, faculty members returned to Blagoevgrad with revised courses. "I was proud," remarks Fike, "that we moved from the level that we started at to a level that was appropriate for our students."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ (Connelly 1992)

⁴⁷ (Fike 2011)

A University Continues

Despite the many challenges, throughout that 1991-1992 academic year students were introduced to the multiplier effect, topic sentences, political legitimacy, five-paragraph essays, causes of the French Revolution, and much more. The university was working. Given the challenges facing all of Bulgarian society at the time, this was no small feat. In a spring 1992 meeting between President Zhelev and the AUBG Board of Directors, Zhelev quipped that the only thing working in Bulgaria is the American University. When asked about this quote almost two decades later, Zhelev smiles. "I probably said it. Because we were deep into a crisis period...this was after the winter of the Lukanov government. There was no food, no medication, no heating, and many state institutions began to stop working. But the American University worked on."

And it continues to work on, these many years later.

AUBG has grown. Over 3000 graduates have gone on to careers in Bulgaria, the Balkans, and beyond. Yet, it is different. From the initial class of 207 Bulgarians and Kasra, our sole non-Bulgarian student, enrollment has grown to over 1,100 students from some 40 countries. It has come to find a place, in Bulgaria, the Balkans, and beyond.

But AUBG remains rooted in the values that spurred its creation. When asked about what AUBG means after twenty years, Panitza speaks excitedly, as always when the topic is

AUBG. "AUBG is the emblem of opportunity. It provides a window to the world. It provides a haven of decency, of tolerance of friendship, of understanding, and a certain degree morality that most of Eastern Europe had lost in the 50 years of communism. It does give you this big fantastic opportunity of developing yourself...the example of the freewheeling American spirit." Fotev sees an institution that has tried to be faithful to the values of its creation: "...tolerance and respect for the human being. It is a source of personal pride to see that these values are being given to the young people of the region – that the American University is a living laboratory for these values." Maseva agrees when she says of AUBG, "I think that it is a peace corps—a place that creates peace."

AUBG remains committed to assisting the future through education. "AUBG sets a standard," says Zhelev, "...a professional standard and standards for what a good education should be like. These are important things for country in transition." Maseva has also seen how the institution has supported development, "I really think that students get a high quality of education. It's obvious that the liberal arts system that was unknown in Bulgaria prior to the foundation of University provides results. I've met with representatives of many multinational companies in Bulgaria who categorically say that the best graduates in Bulgaria, the most preferred

graduates, are those from the American University. That makes me very happy because these are the people who will make the future Bulgaria.”

And AUBG has become an accepted and respected as part of Blagoevgrad, of Bulgaria, and of the Balkans. "I'm glad that the next mayors, Prechkapov and Paskalev, saw the benefits of the university and they continued to support the construction of the new campus," remarks Maseva. While in comments before the university community in 2006, Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev, from the same Bulgarian Socialist Party that was at one time suspicious of AUBG, could say: “One of the most remarkable features of this university is the quality of education coupled with its cosmopolitan nature and openness to the world. I am sure that this distinctive feature of your university makes you more competitive in the age of globalization when it becomes so very important to understand the other, to perceive, to promote, and to take part in the changes that take place all the time.”⁴⁸

The Ordinary and the Extraordinary

It is difficult to relate the enormity of the challenges that had to be met over 1991-1992. There were simply so many. This poses

⁴⁸ (Stanishev, "Commencement Speech," 2006)

a problem for someone who wants to understand how the American University in Bulgaria was created.

Social science and brain research tells us that when people try to understand something new, they can usually only hold so many ideas in their minds at one time. Because of this they make mental shortcuts and simplify reality. One way they do this is to tell a story. And, as everyone knows, a story must have a hero.

Looking at the founding of the American University in Bulgaria in that very first, very fragile 1991-1992 period, it is difficult to find a hero. This is a story, but it doesn't have a hero. Instead, it is a story of hundreds if not thousands of people who simply heard, as Willman says, an idea that was "compelling and strong," liked it, and wanted to do something to help it along.

A lot of very ordinary people helped out in their own very ordinary ways. Even the worried, magazine-wielding doctor who attempted to dissuade Dalzell-Kenney from ever leaving Maine ended up doing something to help out. Some of the people and some of the ways have been recounted here; many more are not here. Some of the ways that people helped out may have been a little more difficult; some others may have taken a little more time; some others may have required a little more effort; still others may have needed more patience, or

skill, or determination, or flair, or ingenuity, or enthusiasm, or love.

"A few people can make big differences," says Pantiza. Yes, people matter. And lots of people can make a really big difference. Add a little luck to that and there you have it—a university. But to get these people to matter in the first place is the difficult part. Yet, in the American University in Bulgaria these many people found something that moved them. Maybe they did not see the entire vision; maybe they saw only their own slight sliver of the vision. But it didn't matter; because they saw it and they acted on it.

At so many points in this story, in so many places, at so many times, someone not doing something would have stopped the entire project. The American University in Bulgaria could have been one of those numerous unrealized initiatives that President Zhelev saw come across his desk that year. The American University in Bulgaria could have been a "nice idea" that remained just that—but it didn't.

And that is extraordinary.

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