



## THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE AND INITIATIVES OF THE RULE OF LAW INSTITUTE AND ADVOCATES EUROPE

by Lachezara Yosifova

**These two Christian organizations in the field of law have repeatedly demonstrated how necessary their activities are for both our country and our continent. During the 2018 Conference, which took place in the town of Gabrovo, delegates from 6 Bulgarian cities, as well as from the USA, Armenia, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and Belarus took part. The Conference was entitled: "THE LOBBYING ACT AND THE CONFLICT OF INTEREST PREVENTION AND ASCERTAINMENT ACT - INTERNATIONAL HISTORY, REVIEW OF CURRENT LAWS AND PROPOSALS FOR LEGISLATIVE CHANGES FOR THEIR BETTER ENFORCEMENT." The Conference was held with the support of ADVOCATES INTERNATIONAL and ROTARY CLUB - DENVILLE, USA.**

Dear readers, before telling you about the Conference, we would like to recall some of the more interesting initiatives of the Rule of Law Institute (RLI), founded in 1995 by attorney Lachezar Popov who in 2001 became also President of Advocates Europe.

Through these two organizations and through Advocates International - a NGO with representatives in more than 120 countries where Mr. Popov is a member of the Executive Committee of its Global Council, with the motto "Justice and Mercy", this encouraging attorney has given hope to thousands of people on different continents. Attorney Popov says: "From the very beginning of the Institute, I was fascinated by the opportunity for Christian lawyers to have their place in Bulgaria, both in Sofia and in other big cities. Our primary task was to learn how to apply biblical values in law enforcement, following models of morality and ethics by studying the Bible. Our friends from abroad helped us with more experience because such an organization had never been created in Bulgaria till then.

The Rule of Law Institute became also the Bulgarian coordinator of the Balkan Human Rights Network (BHRN) with headquarters in Sarajevo - the Federal Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This network functioned actively after the breakup of the former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The Balkan Human Rights Network was set up in 1998 to manage Bulgarian projects. We wrote a "Handbook on Police and Human Rights" and trained, using this Handbook, 150 training officers from the Academy of the Ministry of Interior. The Institute wrote and issued 5000 police manuals distributed among the training officers at the Academy and the Ministry of Interior system throughout the country. In the second project we published the book "Guide to Citizen and Police Rights". With a circulation of 15,000 books, about 10,000 were distributed to the Sofia Municipality, other municipalities, the Ministry of Interior, the Sofia Directorate of the Ministry of Interior, non-governmental organizations and citizens. These projects were well received by the public and the media.

We also made the survey called "Balkan Fast Check" and published a "Guide to its Application" under the auspices of the Danish Center for Human Rights with great authority in Europe and the world as a methodical center for human rights training and education on six continents. These legal instruments defined criteria that made it possible for business companies to apply corporate social responsibility by using the handbook to localize and prevent potential human rights violations with regard to their workers, the local population and the rest of the business. We also carried out the survey: "Human rights with regard to the risk of doing business in Bulgaria".

Our Institute also deals in mediation projects in cooperation with the non-governmental organization "Partners for Democratic Change", out-of-court dispute resolution and peacemaking. These projects were positively covered by the leading media. As a

result, it should be noted that in the field of civil law Bulgaria has already a Mediation Act. Peacemaking is not a one-time or one-year project because the leaders we prepare at the Institute must be trained to build bridges between people, between organizations, between the church and the state. In applying the principle of peacemaking, the reconciliation we seek is based on God's Word and Authority.

We participated in the elaboration of the Mediator Requirements Criteria in 2001 subsequently adopted by the Ministry of Justice. We published the book "The Peacemaker", a brochure for its application and the brochure "49 Character Qualities". We organized the first two levels of training on this subject in the cities of Sofia, Plovdiv, Stara Zagora, Nova Zagora, Plovdiv, Dobrich and Parvomay and in June 2018 we presented the course in the city of Veliko Turnovo. We had seminars organized for vulnerable groups of people - alcoholics, drug addicts and refugees – which were trained on place in their protected housing blocks, managed by Bethel. In this relation, through Bethel, we prepared and proposed changes in criminal and court enforcement laws.

As Rule of Law Institute and as Advocates Europe we were engaged in the written defense on the case of the Swedish pastor Åke Green years ago and won the case.

From 2002 on, we are developing "the European Forum for Religious Freedoms". That's why, we took the case of Pastor Åke Green who was just sentenced by the District Court in Sweden for preaching hatred against homosexuals, in connection with his preaching in church on Gay Pride parade going then in Stockholm. At second instance, we helped with legal arguments the defense of the pastor. We did the same in the Supreme Court of Sweden. Our main arguments were the inner freedom of a legitimate pastor to preach in church, according to his inner conviction, citing Biblical truths.

In June 2017 the authoritative American magazine Christianity Today published an article by Timothy Morgan "Blessed are the Attorneys" in which Christian lawyers from different countries, including attorney Popov, were presented. "I have the vocation to defend pastors" he says.

Popov supported the founding of the Rule of Law Institute in other parts of Eastern Europe such as Ukraine. Today he is also working in Western Europe and has recently consulted the founding of the Rule of Law Institute in Indonesia, the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. During the period 2001-2002 Attorney Popov was involved in the creation of the Religious Denominations Act and currently confirms that new problems have arisen with the religious freedoms in Bulgaria and Christians lawyers help pastors to solve them. In the past he helped when some local authorities opposed the broadcasting of the film "Jesus" and others refused permission for churches to use office buildings for worship. "One of the biggest challenges is the unification for understanding differences and against uniformity" Popov adds. "We come with understanding and love and we do not impose our vision on local communities and lawyers." We are gradually coming back to this year's RLI theme - The Lobbying Act.

"It is essential for countries in Europe, as it is directly related to the fight against corruption and the lack of transparency. We thank attorney Evgenia Popova and Pastor Rumen Popov from Gabrovo who showed true hospitality and good organization of the Conference. We liked the small Gabrovo souvenirs they offered us. Thanks for the sponsorship of Advocates International and Rotary Club - Denville, USA. Each participant gave its financial share but this support was substantial. The guests from Bulgaria and abroad had the opportunity to explore the unique ethnographic complex of Etara and did not stop taking pictures..."

We also joined as journalists, told the guests about the Institute's past activities and how it was covered by leading secular and Christian media and accepted by participants in an important business forum. We also distributed cheerful wishes with small symbolic awards to the participants, as well as bible verse cards. Evgeniya Popova was an encouraging host and among the leading speakers were attorney Lachezar Popov, attorney Yani Yanev from Varna Bar Association, legal advisor Christo Angelov from Veliko Tarnovo University, attorney Eric Oliver from the United States, attorney Benjamin Loop from Romania, attorney Hasmik Hovsepian from Armenia, attorney Ivan Mihalchuk from Ukraine, attorney Sergey Shavtsov of Belarus, the businessman and attorney Petio Yankulovski from Sofia, Manager of Yankulovski Consult and journalist Dimitar Stoyanov.

Tsetsa Yoneva, coordinator of the Institute, was touching with her testimony: "I want to thank the Lord that He brought me to this office. I have not done such a job and I had no experience but with God's help everything is possible. I was not afraid and worried about the organization I did everything with desire and ease. Not everything was perfect but we aren't perfect either. The participants were satisfied and grateful. The Conference, I think, was at a high level. Lecturers from universities, attorneys from Europe and the US, public figures and journalists shared impressive information about lobbying and the conflict of interest in their countries. It is important to continue the work on drafting the Lobbying Act in Bulgaria."

"The Conference was exceptional. It was amazing to be together with representatives from Bulgaria, Armenia, Ukraine and many other countries, teaching each other how to create a better Bulgaria and a better Europe" said Eric Oliver from the United States. The lady representing the oldest Christian nation - Armenia - Hasmik Hovsepian added: "It was a great pleasure for me to take part in this Conference. I was delighted to see brothers and sisters in Christ from different countries gathered together. Now Bulgaria is in my heart! "

Ivan and Julia Mikhalchuk from Ukraine expressed the following opinion: "It was a pleasure and privilege for us to participate in the International Conference in Gabrovo, Bulgaria, organized by the Rule of Law Institute and by Advocates Europe. We believe that such conferences are a driving force for making positive changes in our societies." And according to Benjamin Loop from Romania: "This Conference was a great opportunity to share ideas, to take decisions and to dream of better relationships, better societies and a strong presence of Christian lawyers in society. I am motivated to influence Europe through such events and to work together for substantial changes in European legislation. Together we can have great influence!" Rodica Gutan from Moldova added: "This is the first event of Advocates Europe in which I take part. I met a wonderful family of professionals dedicated to influencing their societies in the Name of God. In my country we also need such a fellowship." Sergey Shavtsov from Belarus summed up: "It was a wonderful conference. I am very grateful to the organizers. Let the Lord give them new ideas and bless Bulgaria!"

Lachezar Popov concluded: "The purpose of this Conference was to prepare the Lobbying Act to be voted by the Parliament. Because it is important to accept civil society initiatives. It is important to establish a legal path for lobbyists to follow in taking the proposals of public groups and persons they represent to the municipal councils, the Council of Ministers and the Parliament. This reflects in practice the right of citizens under Article 45 of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria: Citizens have the right to make complaints, proposals and petitions to government bodies. The Conference's international lecturers united around such and similar constitutional texts. Such a bill on lobbying will be a pilot project for Eastern Europe through this Conference where Bulgaria is a leading party. We had invited representatives of countries where there is no such law. It is essential that civil society is entitled to make proposals for the establishment of a regulatory framework. The lobbyist of a group of citizens presents their initiative to the municipal council or the Council of Ministers, respectively, when it comes to passing a bill through the Parliament. The group's interest represented by the lobbyist becomes transparent thanks to a special registry and relations regarding the proposal are organized as a debate on such proposal. In Eastern Europe the leading lobbying act was passed in Poland in 2005. The Act stipulates what constitutes lobbying activities, how to register lobbyists, the rules on transparency of lobbying activities, the forms of control and sanctions on lobbyists.

Our Rule of Law Institute deals in the rule of law, in the best interest of the whole society and for the benefit of the citizens. Sometimes they suffer because they cannot influence the legislative process. This is another essential motive for our pilot project, along with the widespread corruption in the countries of the speakers at this Conference. Our motivation is for this bill to enter the Parliament's agenda as early as 2019.

Our intention is, with God's help, to organize a joint National Conference with ministries, leading media and non-governmental organizations, on a topic relevant to Bulgarian citizens - the topic of personal dignity. Article 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights states: "Every citizen of the European Union has the right to personal dignity."