

Bela Rechka Project:
**“Communication, communication, communication...
communication!”**

Understanding the GOATMILK Festival impact on the
village of Gorna Bela rechka



April 2007
Yuriy Vulkovsky

1. Preface

“(1) According to your opinion, could we say that the Festival (incl. the activities before and after it) changes the village and the life of the local people? If yes – how exactly? (2) Could you show the concrete signs of the change (in the people’s behaviour or feelings, in the image of the village, etc.), if you find out such? *(Some of the questions in the questionnaire about the social impact of the festival; the questionnaire was distributed through e-mail at April 2007)*

“What change were you hoping for? A weeklong retreat for artists might brighten the week for the village, but are there long term plans for using the capacity and network created by the Goat Milk Festival to improve the village? I may not have enough information about the goals or the organization, but I’m a little concerned about what change you were looking for and why.” *(Some of the answers to the questionnaire by Richard Glass, United States Peace Corps Volunteer in Varshetz, who have visited the third GOATMILK festival at 2006 year)*

The Bela Rechka Project started as an initiative of several people, with different professional background and from different countries, who want to understand what the memories are, why the personal stories are important, and how all of this could help us to understand ourselves better.

The inspiration of the first visit to village of Gorna Bela rechka (Upper Little White River) in the autumn of 2003 and the interest of the local people lead to the idea to organize a yearly festival, which has been later named GOATMILK Festival.

The Festival takes place at Gorna Bela Rechka since 2004, and since then the village slowly, but evidently started to change, and so did its inhabitants. The festival has economic and social impacts - it even touches some environmental issues. But most impressive is the impact of the festival at a personal level. The Festival changes the sense of the local people about their current way of life, it broadens their horizons, and it gives them opportunities to establish new friendships. It also stimulates their creativity, awakes their memories, makes them more confident and raises their self esteem.

The truth is that this variety of economic, social and personal impacts is not intentional; at least they are not a result of preliminary planning and purposeful actions from the New Culture Foundation, the organizer of the festival.

Thus, the current report is not an evaluation of the Bela Rechka Project, aiming to assess to what extent the project managed to fulfil the preliminary set objectives. The aim of the research presented here was different – to identify and to present the impact of the festival on the village and on the local people, as comprehensive and well-grounded as possible.

Could a cultural event lasting a few days change the life of the people in a small village? My explicit answer is: “Yes!” and the clear evidences are presented below.

The report is divided in 5 parts. The first and the second parts describe respectively the village and the Festival; the festival part contains information about its history, resources, the team and the main specifics of the Bela Rechka project. The third - and most elaborated - part is devoted to presentation of the social and economic impacts of the festival classified in four groups: Economic Impacts; Local image and identity; Revitalization of the village and Personal development. In the fourth part, instead of a conclusion, the reasons for the project success are presented. An executive summary of the report is also included.

The methodology of the current research is presented in an appendix, where information about the number and type of the interviews, as well as about other sources of information, is available. Here I would only like to mention that most of the research was conducted between September 2006 and March 2007, when 21 interviews were taken in Gorna Bela rechka, Vurshets and Sofia, and a lot of text and visual documents were examined.

In addition, the research is based on some observations and notes from my seven visits to Gorna Bela rechka since the summer of 2005 till now. When I first visited the village at August 2005, I was impressed by the organizers’ wish to develop the festival, while at the same time they preserve the “intimacy of the place”. During my last visit, March 2007, the former mayor Boris gave me may be the most clear and concentrated definition what is the festival for the local people: “*Communication, communication, communication... communication!*” It is important to mention that my work is naturally coloured by all meetings with the people, by my participation in the third festival at 2006, by my numerous conversations with Diana Ivanova - the main initiator of the project. I do not believe in the absolute objectivity of the humanitarian studies, but I am convinced that a researcher could achieve precise and reliable results when he/she is responsible and honest.

I would like to use the opportunity to thank Diana Ivanova and her colleagues from the New Culture Foundation for the trust they put in me with the commissioning of this research. I would also like to thank Francois Matarasso whose texts were my main guidelines during the whole process of research and writing of this report.

Yuriy Vulkovsky, April 2007

2. Executive Summary

2.1. Information about the Festival

The GOATMILK Festival of Memories takes place since 2004 in the village of Gorna bela Rechka. The village is situated in the North-East of Bulgaria, municipality of Varshets. About 90 people live there, most of them pensioners aged over 70.



GOATMILK is an international festival. In its first edition, the participants included artists and guests from Austria, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, France, Holland and Czech Republic. In the next years, people from Albania, Turkey, Serbia, Switzerland and Japan also join. Through the years, the number of the festival guests varies between 100 and 300, most of them from Sofia and abroad.

Specific of the festival is the combination of the interest in tradition, past and memories, at the same time using new multimedia technologies, work in an Internet environment and an accent on the contemporary artistic forms.

The unusual format of the festival and the unique atmosphere in Gorna Bela Rechka attract an extreme media interest, as early as the first festival in 2004. Through the next years the festival is the subject of many publications and broadcasts in national media, including “Capital”, “Dnevnik”, “24 Chasa”, “Svyat i Diplomaciya”, “Bulgaria Air”, Bulgarian National Radio, Radio France International and “Svobodna Evropa”, Bulgarian National Television and the national channel bTV.

In addition, the festival gains publicity, including international, through its broad Internet presentation in the websites www.belarechka.com, www.hiddenspirits.net, www.goatmilk-fest.com (now at www.goatmilk-fest.org) and www.novakultura.org.



Projects 2006

Goat milk - Memories Festival III



The main theme of this year festival will be **The private history** – how can we better understand and work with our own private history, what does it reveal to us and others, can the private history be a window into the collective history of a village, region, country?

workshop: “The private history : family&objects”

The workshop mix different techniques (oral history, theater, multimedia, psychology and music) and practical work in both villages – Gorna and Dolna Bela Rechka– and will be led by international group of artists and psychologists (full info on www.goatmilk-fest.org). Participants can choose between 3 different models of workshop, work individually and in groups, with objects, memories, photos and all kind of visual traces and create “a museum” that can be viewed during the festival following next days (24-25 May) in the Bela rechka village and will exist only during the festival. One of the aims of the seminar is to encourage the creative way of exploring our private histories and their sharing through objects and other visual traces.

There will be 3 groups working together on 3 themes:

1. Family trees and objects in Bela Rechka – exploring relationships in both villages –Gorna and Dolna Bela Rechka – now and in the past.
2. My family story, my objects– different ways of telling, exploring and showing our own story to others.
3. Dreams and objects.

The festival receives strong support by the local people and the local authorities.

2.2. Social and economic impact of the Festival on the life in Gorna Bela rechka

The Bela Rechka project is a complex process with a multitude of results and effects. The present text is only based on the impacts that the project causes to the village and its inhabitants. Wherever impacts of the festival are mentioned, they include the influence of the other activities and projects in the village, which happen in the months before or after the festival.

2.2.1. Economic Impact

The economic impacts of the festival could be divided in three groups: **First**, attraction of additional investments in the village. **Second**, creation of local employment (temporary or permanent). And **third**, development of tourism.

The festival leads to the **raising of the interest to buy real estate in the village**. In 2006 and 2007, two houses in the village have been bought by people directly linked to Bela Rechka project. Buying a house includes **additional investments**, which infuse into the local economy, as well as **additional employment of local people** – selling goods and services, cleaning, construction and reconstruction work, etc.

The festival brings additional attention from Varshtets municipality to the project, which also shows, among other things, through yearly investments in construction and improvement of public utilities. This includes reconstruction of the old school, and its gradual turning into a functioning festival center, reconstruction of the public toilet and covering with asphalt of the path leading to it, renewal of the curb stones along the road, construction of a drinking water fountain, etc.

The festival brings also **investments from the local small business**. Most visible is the **annual renewal and expanding of the local pub**, which has to take in a lot of visitors during festival days, as well as in other periods of the year when project events take place.

The festival stimulates **creation of temporary and permanent employment**, in both private and public sectors: additional cook for the local pub during festival days, two long-term unemployed people hired to reconstruct the building of the old school where festival events take place, a part-time leaning lady for the renewed building, etc.

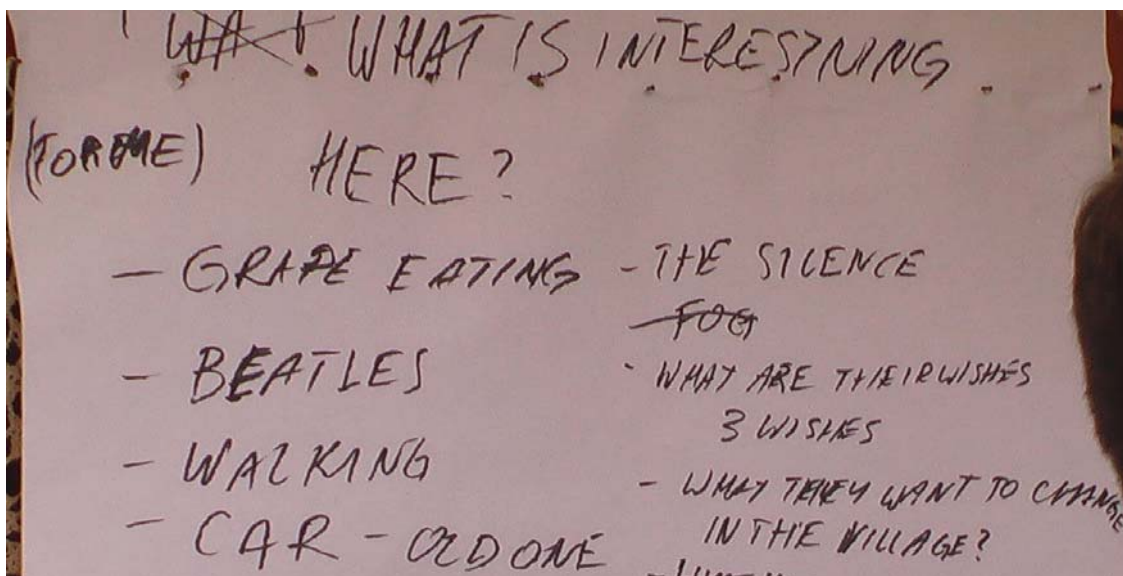
The festival has a **direct economic impact for the six people in the village who offer rooms for rent**. Depending on the number of rooms/beds, offered for rent, the income for the festival days varies between 80 and 120 leva for each of the six owners, which is equal to an additional income of one extra minimum monthly pension.

The festival also has **indirect impacts on the local economy**, which are harder to measure, but they include the value of all costs for food, materials, fuel and other goods and services, which the tourists attracted by the festival spend in the region.

The festival contributes to the development of a new type of tourism in the municipality of Varshtets, which adds up to the traditional for the town and the municipality spa tourism, and it creates new development opportunities.

2.2.2. Local image and identity

The festival **creates an image of the village** as a place with its own individuality/uniquity, where interesting things happen.



Through Internet and the media, **the festival makes the village visible** for the people all over Bulgaria and from abroad.

In the framework of the municipality, **the festival distinguishes the village**, and it turns into its watermark, which also shows into the words of the museum director in Varshets, who said: *“Now I have something to tell about the village. Like the other villages in the municipality – they have spa, they have something else...”*

The Bela Rechka project **creates a new feeling of belonging to the place, and it provokes virtual or real “coming back to the roots”**: an evidence of this is the story of the painter who lives in Sliven but he was born in Gorna Bela Rechka, and after he found out about the festival from the TV, he wishes to make an exhibition on his home village; as well as the initiative of the owner of a printing company who was also born in the village, who offered several times to support the publishing of a kin history book.



The presentation of the village in the media and Internet, as well as the interest of young people and foreigners to the village, **create a strong feeling of local pride** among the people of Gorna Bela Rechka.

2.2.3. Revitalization and Personal development

The festival **revitalizes** the village. The local people describe the festival by expressions like: *“More lively!”*, *“The village is animating”*, *“The village became merrier”*. Or, like one of the people interviewed in Varshets said: *“To themselves [local people] it is some kind of awakening. One can feel life.”* An especially important part of the general revitalization of the village is the **presence of a lot of young people**, because, like one of the old village women said: *“Having young people here is the most precious thing... When you see someone young, your heart opens”*.



The festival brings **diversity** in the village. The screenings, the performances and concerts during the festival are interesting for the local people and create an atmosphere which local people describe like: “*We had fun, we all had fun... It is good, we hope it will happen again*”, “*We go there willingly*”.

The festival gives the inhabitants of Gorna Bela Rechka the opportunity to **meet new and unknown people**, often from foreign countries and with irregular professions and interests. These meetings enrich both the outside visitors and the local people, they give them **new knowledge and new understanding of the others**. Or, according to the words of one of the old village people: “*It is interesting, because... I learned something more*”.



The festival **creates friendships** which last long afterwards.

The festival **strengthens the self-respect** of the village people, and it **helps them feel complete** – because they learn new things, because they re-discover their place of birth through the eyes of the others, because they see the interest to themselves, to their memories, to their dreams, because they receive, but they also give. because they participate in an equal dialogue.



The festival does not only **awake the memories** of the people of Gorna Bela Rechka, but it also **provokes them to express themselves and what they feel**. The strongest examples of that are Boris¹, who brings out his old accordion years later, provoked by the music of an Austrian musician, and the old lady Nikolina, who twines a wreath of spring flowers to decorate the door of the old school, because she remembers it was so when she was a schoolgirl.



¹ Everywhere in the text the people of the village are presented with their first names. I ask all of them to take this not as a lack of respect, on the contrary – as courtesy to the specific intimate atmosphere of Gorna Bela Rechka.

2.2.4. Environmental issues

In 2006 the festival team organized a **large-scale cleaning of the river** in the village of Gorna Bela Rechka. More important than the cleaning itself is, that the ecologic action attracts attention from the local people as well as from the municipality.

The festival causes the posing of many questions connected to the cleanness in the village. Like the main organizer of the festival said: *“When many people come, one sees a lot of things – that there are no toilets, that there are no litter bins.”* In fact, during the festival the municipality provides litter bins and transportation of the garbage, but this raises new questions: *“You cannot bring in litter bins for 3 days, and then take them out – because people ask where the bins are.”*

As a whole, the festival creates in the village an environment for debate on ecological problems (cleanness, clearing the forests, etc.), but it also provokes a lot of new ideas – for the introduction of divided gathering and composting of the waste, supporting the construction with natural materials, signing of an ecological chart of the village, etc.

2.2.5. Other impacts

The festival **provokes the local people to ask (themselves) questions** which have no easy answers. From the question *“What do they [foreigners and people from Sofia], if it is poor and miserable here?”* which means re-thinking of what values we have, to the question of the old ladies from Dolna Bela Rechka, who asked in the municipality: *“And what is going to happen in our village?”*

The festival is the reason for the signing of the “Memorandum of cooperation” between the Municipality of Varshets and the Foundation for New Culture (organizer of the festival) - a precedent for the municipality, which has never signed a similar document with an NGO before.

The festival attracts in Varshets people with different ideas, contacts and professional experience, and thus it opens **new opportunities for partnerships and joint projects**. According to the words of the interviewed office workers at the Tourist Information Centre in Varshets: *“Around the festival, many other things happened. An event of the British Council. The website “Our memories”. A children competition [“My street” project]”,* and more: *“At the moment, we develop a project for cross-border cooperation. We keep the festival in mind.”*

And last, but not least – the festival provides an **example of decentralization of cultural life** through the organization of an international cultural event in an extremely small settlement. It is also a proof that an international festival which stake on new media and contemporary arts, can take place with local support and volunteer labor, not necessarily counting on big international donors. In addition, for the people of the region the festival provides access to cultural patterns which are different from the standard cultural production reaching them through media and traditional cultural channels.

2.2.6. Negative impacts

The research does not show any negative impacts caused by the festival on the village or the region.

At the same time, several potentially problematic points were shown, among them – the great expectations of the village people, which could easily turn into disappointment, eventual tension between Gorna Bela Rechka and the surrounding villages, as well as the chance that the raising of the real estate prices in the village could be seen more like a problem than like a positive impact.

The development of the project, though, shows that the probability of real problems on these subjects is extremely low.

2.3. Reasons for success

The Bela Rechka project owes its success and its great influence on the local people to a complex of factors, some of which listed below.

2.3.1. Clear vision and flexible implementation

Bela Rechka is not a classic project. It is more like a research project, which often achieves results different from the preliminary expected. One could also say that Bela Rechka is an artistic project, to a great extent based on improvisation. But it has one of the main characteristics of the successful project – a clear vision of the direction it is going to, and of the type of change it wishes to achieve.

2.3.2. Sensibility, smoothness, gradualness

The sensibility is a very important element of the idea of Bela Rechka project, which through the years tries (and succeeds) to establish a strong connection to the local people and the village. The sincere aspiration to develop in unison with the processes in the village, not hurting its atmosphere, is characteristic of the project. It brings new things in the village, but it is trying to do so in smooth and gradual manner.

2.3.3. Tradition and modernity

The combination of the interest to the memories, past and tradition with modern technologies and ways of expression has turned into a watermark of the festival as well as its main distinctive characteristic.

This unique feature of the festival continues to provoke interest – in Bulgaria as well and abroad.

2.3.4. Effective work with media

The extremely broad media coverage of the festival is directly connected to many of the effects, described in this report – the local image building, a part of the economic effects, the raising of the self-confidence of the local people, etc.

In addition, the active presentation of the project in the Internet is of key importance for the dissemination of information to certain target groups, the first among them - youth.

2.3.5. Mobilizing local support

The festival receives strong support from the village people and the local authorities in the form of volunteer labor, donation of objects, organizational assistance, as well as through direct financing and in other ways.

The strong local support is a sign that the local people accept the festival, and they stand behind it. This is a very important guarantee of its future sustainability.

2.3.6. Strong leadership

The Bela Rechka project owes a great part of its success to the strong team as well as to Diana Ivanova's leader skills – she has a clear vision, she is able to involve a lot of people in her ideas, while at the same time she is open to accept change in the preliminary plans. Diana is one of the bearers of this sensibility and naturalness that are key for the project and the festival.



2.3.7. Continuity

The GOATMILK festival is not a one-time event. The village people see that festival organizers come constantly in the village, and this probably makes them feel assured that the events will keep happening in Gorna Bela Rechka. Diana, Mariana, Kalin and the other members of the main festival team com so often and frequent, that they are not in fact “outsiders” for the village anymore.

The trust building is a long process which takes patience and persistency, and in this respect the Bela Rechka project team has obviously done a lot.

