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BULGARIA

CASE STUDY

Bulgarian Courts Go On The Record

Audio recording in court improves transparency and accountability



Photo: USAID/George Petrov

District Court system administrator Dimka Badalova, left, oversees use of the audio recording equipment installed by Charles Ferrell, center, and Petar Shangov at the court in Shumen, northeastern Bulgaria.

“The public is informed about the verbatim recording at the beginning of a hearing. They know that they will receive a fair trial and court procedural rules will be followed and can be verified through the recording system,” said Tatiana Alexandrova, Vratsa District Court Chair.

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Challenge

In the Bulgarian court system, the official record of a trial, known as the protocol, consists of notes taken by a court secretary or summaries dictated by the judge. This process produces inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate records. Contrary to practice in other European countries, the Bulgarian civil and criminal procedure codes do not require a verbatim transcript of court proceedings.

Initiative

A USAID study found that using audio recording would be a cost-effective way for Bulgarian courts to facilitate drafting more accurate protocols. In 2004, USAID piloted a personal computer digital audio recording system in two Bulgarian courtrooms. In 2005 and 2006, USAID expanded the recording system to six additional courtrooms in Bulgaria. Special multi-channel software designed specifically for courtroom recording allows each speaker to be heard and recorded separately. The software compresses the size of the audio files, uses different formats compatible with word processing software, and allows notes to be inserted during the proceeding to identify exhibits or to index witness testimony.

Results

The system caught on quickly and is now in demand by other courts. Judges from the pilot courts report that the system provides a more complete, accurate, and transparent record of court proceedings. There has even been an improvement in how participants and witnesses handle themselves in court, since they know their statements are being recorded. Witness statements that are accurate and can be reviewed enable judges to resolve cases more quickly. The ability of judges, court staff, and attorneys to verify the accuracy and completeness of the protocols also protects litigants' rights. The number of complaints and requests for modification of protocols has dropped drastically, a sign of increased public confidence in the transparency of the court process.