

The BEST Year!



BEST FOUNDATION

Bulgarian English Speech and Debate Tournaments Foundation
2018-2019 Annual Report

A Letter from BEST

Dear BEST Community,

August 1, 2019

We are proud to say that BEST has come very far. We celebrated our sixth straight year of participation growth: BEST programs reached nearly 1200 people from 27 regions of Bulgaria. We continued our collaboration with the Bulgarian Fulbright Commission through funding of the BEST-Fulbright ETA Fellowship and sponsorship of ETA participation at BEST tournaments and trainings. We pioneered new programs and partnerships. And, may I add, that we did this all on a lean budget of approximately \$62,000 USD. The credit for this success should be shared among our dedicated staff, volunteers, participants, and supporters in Bulgaria and beyond.

When co-founders Hannah Allen, Michael Deegan, Athena Lao, Tatiana Rostovtseva, Claire Sagstuen, and Juliana McMillan-Wilhoit decided to organize a speech and debate tournament at the American University in Bulgaria in the spring of 2013, their intent was to engage Bulgarian English-language learners in a way that supplemented what they learned in the classroom. Since then, BEST has evolved into something much bigger and better than language practice: it is civic engagement and youth empowerment at its finest.

Through speech and debate, BEST gives Bulgarian youth a unique forum to express and explore new ideas. It fosters a positive community for action-oriented students, teachers, and volunteers to use the power of words to contribute to their communities, to Bulgaria, and to the world. In these times of global political upheaval and volatility, we at BEST believe that we owe it to our kids to let them know that *their voices matter*.

As the testimonials on the following pages highlight, BEST's impact does not stop once students graduate from high school. They carry lessons learned from BEST with them as they continue into the next chapter of their lives. Both the numbers and stories show that BEST strikes a chord with Bulgarian youth, and it provides a source of empowerment that many of them would not have access to otherwise. We hope that you will join us in making the 2018-2019 year not just great, but the BEST year ever.

BEST Wishes,

Anna Fuselier
Chair of Board of Directors

Lazar Lazarov
Executive Director

The Ideology of BEST



Our Vision

We believe that words are powerful, and can engage diverse viewpoints to contribute to the well-being of societies.

Our Mission

By providing English-language speech and debate tournaments, student leadership opportunities, and international programming to Bulgarian students, the BEST Foundation promotes critical thinking skills and free thought so as to foster a community of engaged, democratically-minded citizens who are committed to creating a bright future for Bulgaria.

Our Programs

BEST accomplishes its mission through the following activities:

- Regional, national and international speech and debate tournaments for high school students in Bulgaria and the larger Balkan community
- Trainings for high school students, coaches, tournament judges and volunteers
- Professional development through internships with the BEST management team and the Student Leader program, a formal year-long leadership development program for experienced BEST participants

Our Impact

Though no two experiences through BEST are alike, the following characterizes significant patterns of change experienced through participation in BEST's programming:

- 1) Exposure: Through BEST, participants are exposed to new ideas, views, and perspectives.
- 2) Conviction: Participants then begin to care about certain idea(s) that they have been exposed to.
- 3) Education: Once they find an idea they care more about, they begin to learn more about this idea, and become more critically aware of what is going on.
- 4) Action: Based on what participants have learned and care about, they take action. Action can take many different forms.

What *BEST* Does

Our Programs

BEST accomplishes its mission through the following activities:

- Providing speech and debate tournaments to Bulgarian students
- Supporting teachers and coaches with curriculum and trainings
- Creating student-centered leadership opportunities
- Developing students' connections between local and global issues and ideas
- Fostering a network of citizens who envision and are working toward a bright future for Bulgaria



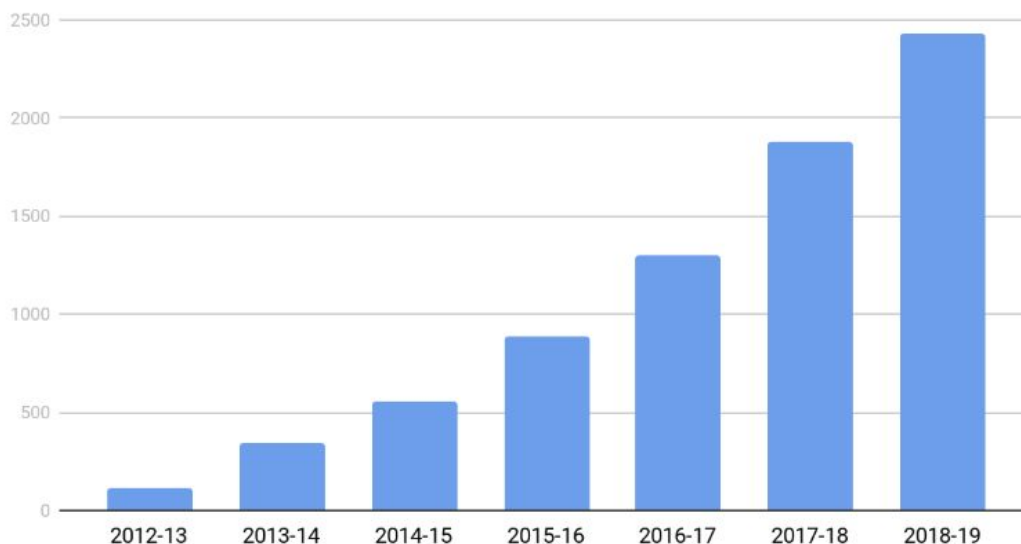
2018-2019 Program Impact

BEST experienced its **sixth straight year of growth**. Since the first tournament in April 2013, student participation in BEST tournaments have increased by more than **650%**.

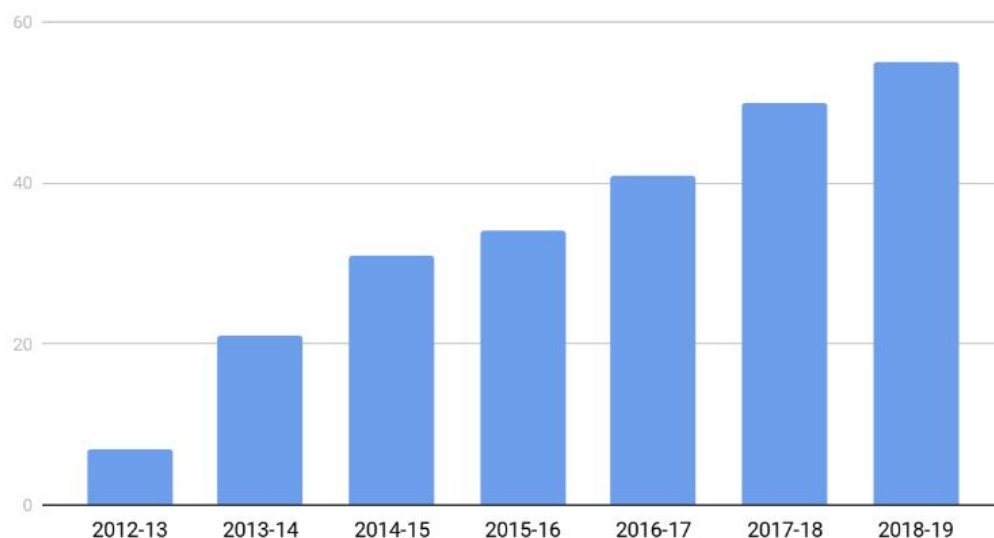
In 2018-2019 alone, we engaged nearly **1200 students, coaches, and volunteers** from **55 high schools** and **27 out of 28 regions in Bulgaria**. The charts below only emphasize the tremendous demand for BEST's programs in the country.

Since the first tournament in April 2013, we estimate that **over 3,000 people** have participated in a BEST program.

Unique students engaged since the beginning of BEST



Team count over the years



2018-2019 Program Reach



Speech and Debate Tournaments and Trainings

BEST held 6 fall regional coaches trainings, 4 regional tournaments, 1 special tournament that provided Bulgarian and international students the chance to compete in an oratory competition in Bulgaria, and 1 year-end national tournament.

Our tournaments and trainings involved:

- 896 unique competitors in Original Oratory, World Schools Debate, Prose, Poetry, and Duo
- 186 volunteer judges composed of BEST alumni, college students, and professionals

Student Leaders Program

BEST had 52 young leaders graduate its Student Leaders Program this year. SLs participated in a weekend retreat to learn team management, fundraising, and leadership skills in the Fall of 2018. Throughout the year, they helped coach younger students, represented BEST at tournaments, and completed community projects.

2018-2019 Program Highlights

Balkan Voices 2019

BEST held its second-annual Balkan Voices tournament and had its largest attendance from students all over the Balkans. This year the Balkan Voices tournament had **108 students representing 20 unique schools from 7 countries**. This makes the tournament the largest international tournament BEST has ever held in Bulgaria. The tournament was a wonderful success, but it would not have been possible without the generous support of the Regional English Language Office (RELO) at the U.S. Embassy in Belgrade, Serbia.

The tournament was a great opportunity for students to watch and support other **students from Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Romania, and Serbia** exchanging and sharing ideas! The aim of the tournament is to provide students from all over the world with an opportunity and platform to address a problem, raise awareness, or rally support for action. BEST was proud to have their platform be used to welcome students to think creatively about topics they were passionate about.

Balkan Voices also included programming that aimed to foster a sense of community amongst participants and showcase the host institution, the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG). From karaoke to lectures from AUBG professors, Balkan Voices helped provide students with a cross-cultural experience that enabled them to substantially connect with students from other countries and gain new perspectives.

BEST's vision for creating the Balkan Voices tournament illustrates the power that speech and debate has to bridge different people and countries together through public speaking to make an impact in the Balkans. Balkan Voices is divided into a novice and varsity categories to ensure that the students are competing against students within their own English and experience level. **The winners for the 2019 Balkan Voices tournament were: Lena Ibishi (novice) and Kamelia Peykova (varsity).**

Lena represented the Prishtina High School in Kosovo (pictured left) and Kamelia represented the Geo Milev Foreign Language High School in Dobrich, Bulgaria (pictured right).



Highlighting BEST Voices: Hristina Todorova

BEST Alumna - "Ekzarh Yosif I" Foreign Language High School, Lovech

Since 2014, Hristina has worn many hats within the BEST community. From a competitor to a Student Ambassador to an intern, and now as the Student Leader Coordinator, Hristina has been a part of nearly every facet of BEST. She is still deeply involved in her former high school's team in Lovech and continues to contribute to BEST's mission of creating a space for critical thinking, public speaking, and creative expression. Hristina is a great example of what it means to be a part of BEST!



"I always want to believe in a better tomorrow. In today's society more and more people are breaking out of the mold, finding themselves and shaping their personalities the way they want to, rather than the way that others try to make them.

Freedom of choice, voice, and creation - this is what BEST inspires in students. There is nothing that makes me as happy as seeing how BEST speech and debate tournaments change the viewpoint and the life of regular teenagers from across Bulgaria.

I love my country. But this does not mean that I do not see all the things that are not working properly. That is why discussion and critical thinking are important for creating change. **BEST provides a platform for those discussions.** For example, with Oratory topics most problems students talk about require a solution, and many choose the same solution: education. Students understand that giving people information about ALL the options that exist around them is crucial, especially for young people that are often afraid of things that they know little to nothing about.

By informing, intriguing, and letting people express themselves and share their opinions, BEST plays a huge role in shaping the minds of young people and their growth into well-rounded adults. I know that this process happens because it happened to me.

I was just fourteen years old when I attended my first BEST tournament. I was more anxious than I had ever been because I did not know anyone besides my coach and a few girls on my team. But now, almost six years later, **I am a better educated, more confident, literate, and flexible version of myself because of BEST.** Most importantly I got engaged in the idea of a community that supports people and pushes them not only to accomplish their goals or win awards but also to learn more every day. Every speech you write and every debate you prepare for makes you explore new viewpoints and you have to read and listen. Every community project (that either helped the environment and/or society we live in) matters. Every voiced societal problem that BESTies spoke about in their speeches is important.

After all my time spent as a competitor and intern, returning to be a Management Team member feels more than natural. I used to be obsessed with BEST in high school and it was a phase I grew out of. **But being part of a community dedicated to love, sportsmanship, respect, and knowledge is not something you grow out of.** It's a sense that grows in you instead. And you grow with it. With every smile, tear, travel, memory, story, and performance... you become richer. And bigger.

Dear BEST, thank you. **Together we will build a better tomorrow."**

Highlighting *BEST* Voices: Stanimir Stoilov

BEST Alumnus and Former Intern – Bertolt Brecht Language School, Pazardzhik



It all started in 2013 when the incredible Ettie Nikolova announced that she was looking for students to join a new speech and debate club, BEST. **At that point, little did I know I was about to embark on a journey which, six years down the line, has been one of the most transformative in my life.** Frankly, in the beginning I wasn't really sure what I was meant to do or how to do it properly. I attended my first tournament in December 2013 at SELS when BEST was still BFL and it came as such a big surprise, shock even, that I was not upset when my team did not make it past the preliminary debate rounds (back then in the Karl Popper style). **It was this moment that made me realise BFL was so much more than a competition.**

Over the years, BFL/BEST has taught me a whole host of things, but perhaps the most important one is that when you are supported and work hard, you can achieve ANYTHING you want.

Seeing the strong friendships formed through participating in tournaments, the successes of my fellow BESTies, and the joyous spirit in the air all filled me with an energy that nothing else had before. The more I got involved in the community, the more positive and satisfied I felt from the fact that **I was part of a group of people so driven to bring about change and make the world a better place, each in their own unique way.** The creativity, poise, eloquence, and humility of everyone lit a million fires in me, which have ever since inspired me to face every challenge that comes my way and not give up.

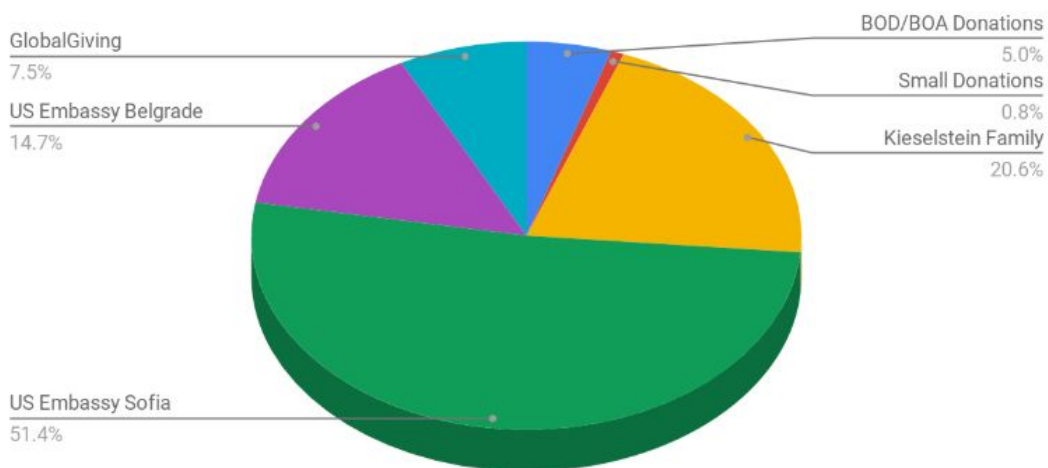
When BEST announced they were looking for a student to join the team as an intern, and I jumped at the opportunity. After not having any hope of getting the position, I found myself doing a job which I absolutely loved for the organisation that had done so much for me. **It seemed fitting that I would give back knowing how much I owe to BEST.** It's safe to say that my year as an intern was the best (surprised at myself I went on for so long without a pun) and to see the impact BEST had on students continue to expand was the biggest reward I could ask for. **There isn't a day that goes by when I am not grateful for the opportunities this FAMILY has given me, for all the incredible people I've met, and for restoring my faith in a generation most are likely to dismiss.** Coming back as a judge at BEST tournaments, I still feel the same excitement as I did back in 2013 and I don't think this is ever going to change. **As for the future, I would love nothing more than being able to see BEST continue changing lives!**



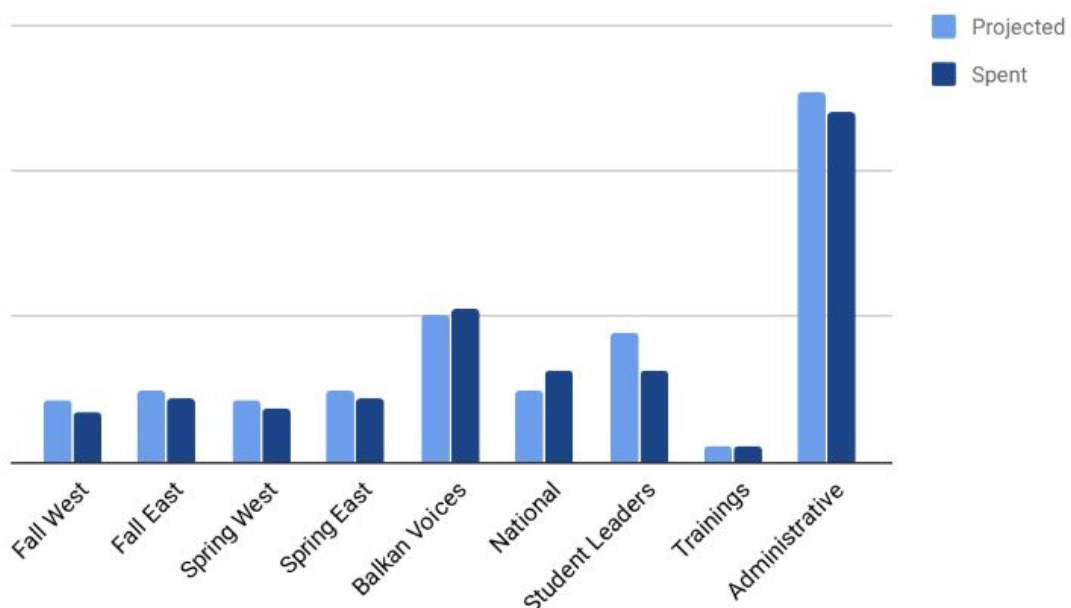
2018-2019 Financial Snapshot

We are immensely grateful to all our supporters for making our 2018-2019 programming possible. Our largest sponsor, the US Embassy in Sofia, helped us hold three regional tournaments, one national tournament, and the Student Leader Wrap-up Seminar. The US Embassy in Belgrade is another large sponsor of BEST and made our Balkan Voices initiative reach the most people since its conception. With their support, we reached over 100 students in the Balkans. Our long-time supporters, the Kieselstein family, maintained their sponsorship for our initiatives, namely the Student Leader Training and program. We covered various administrative costs using money raised from our first-ever crowdfunding campaign on GlobalGiving, as well as various donations.

2018-2019 Income breakdown



2018-2019 Expenditure breakdown



Governance

Board of Directors

Chair

Juliana McMillan-Wilhoit

Members

Anna Fuselier
Reid Furubayashi
Alex Kieselstein
Athena Lao

Board of Advisors

Ivan Dimov
Tyler Donahue
Ronald Harvey
Mark Leonard
Val Nikolov
Tzvetelina Nikolova
Michael Pelehach
Angela Rodel
Claire Sagstuen

Management Team

Executive Director

Lazar Lazarov

Assistant Director/BEST-Fulbright Fellow

Faith Brown

Coordinators

Dayana Baleva
Gabriela Ilieva
Daniel Ivanov
Nathan Jacobson
Tajia Moertle
Thomas Petrino
Keegan Scott

Interns

Maria-Yoana Donkova
Gergana Kirilova
Bozhidar Klouchek
Nikolay Petrov
Hristina Todorova



Partners



FULBRIGHT



Camp Golden Gate



KINSTELLAR



МИНИСТЕРСТВО
НА ОБРАЗОВАНИЕТО
И НАУКАТА

*Inspired? Help make **BEST** even better!*



Incorporation

BEST is registered as an organization for public service activities in Bulgaria.

In the US, BEST is incorporated as a non-profit and has a 501(c)(3) status in the state of Minnesota. For donations made from the UK, GlobalGiving has provided fiscal sponsorship for BEST since March 2019.

Donate to BEST

For lean organizations like ours, every donation counts! Help us continue our mission to provide a unique and much-needed community for Bulgarian youth to discover the power of words.

Individuals can donate to us in the following ways on our website: <http://bestfoundation.bg/support-best/>

- Give US and UK tax-deductible donations
- Give through our PayPal account

Organizations can partner with BEST to provide educational opportunities for Bulgarian youth. Contact us for more details at info@bestfoundation.bg.



For more information

Email: info@bestfoundation.bg

Website: <http://bestfoundation.bg>

Facebook: [@BESTFoundationBulgaria](https://www.facebook.com/BESTFoundationBulgaria)

YouTube: [BESTFoundationBG](https://www.youtube.com/BESTFoundationBG)

Mail:

BEST Foundation c/o

Fulbright Commission

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