Introduction

In the beginning of 2010, the Program for Development of the Judicial System (PDJS) launched a three-year project focused on enhancing courts’ business practices. It was a logical continuation of the Model Courts and Courts in Partnership Program. Now, our efforts are concentrated on ensuring sustainability of the achievements and their dissemination all over the country because the courts have proved that they have built capacity for innovation, keeping up with changes and dissemination of good practices.

The idea of creating an online newsletter was born at the very beginning of this project. The newsletter will be issued every six months and it will report the results from the collaboration between the PDJS, the courts participating in the project and the Supreme Judicial Council, as well as the challenges we face on our path. Its content will be divided in several sections: Bulgarian and European legal news, past and forthcoming events related to the project’s development and good judicial practices. Some of the materials presented in the newsletter will be prepared by judges and court staff involved in the project implementation. Its main addressees are different judicial institutions, judges and staff from all Bulgarian courts, media representatives and EU embassies. The newsletter will be available only in electronic form through e-mail and on the PDJS website.

Here is a brief summary of the first issue of the PDJS newsletter. It focuses on two topics:

- the sociological survey conducted by Alpha Research on our request between April and May 2010; and
- the Training on Case Management Techniques which took place in June 2010, in the town of Hisarya, Bulgaria.

This newsletter and the project would have been impossible without the generous support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation to which we would like to express our sincere gratitude.
Citizens’ Opinions on Courts’ Performance –
A sociological survey conducted by Alpha Research

Between April and May 2010, the sociological agency Alpha Research asked Bulgarian citizens about their opinion on the performance of the courts in their cities and towns, the quality of the services and the promptness of justice. The survey presents the opinions of 1,720 persons, 860 of whom live in places with Model Courts and 860 – in places where courts have not been awarded the Model Court status. The data reflect the performance of 28 Model Courts and 36 non-Model Courts and outline the opinions about and attitudes to the work of the courts and the trends in the judicial system reforms.

As regards to the overall assessment of the court’s work, satisfaction prevails slightly, although by little, over dissatisfaction. The survey shows that the general assessment of the clients in both Model and control Courts is positive. The most obvious positive changes that contribute to the higher satisfaction of the courts’ clients are the more careful and polite service provided by the administrative staff and the lack of excessive delay of cases. Other factors relevant to the higher satisfaction levels are the faster and efficient service, better public access to information for ongoing cases, faster scheduling and completion of cases and easier and quicker obtaining of copies of court decisions.

At the same time, it must be noted that, as far as the judicial reform is concerned, the openness and transparency in the work of the courts is one of the fields where the clients see less positive results. These results seem to be more obvious to the respondents from the Model Courts and they are still less visible to the majority of the clients, especially when compared to the other changes resulting from the ongoing reforms. The aspects of the courts’ work in which the positive changes as consequences of the ongoing reforms are more visible remain administrative services and organization of work. The latter yet again shows that consecutive little steps can lead to change in the opinions and the assessment of the various relevant groups.
Case Management Techniques –

Training for judges

On 18 – 19 June 2010, a Training on Case Management Techniques took place in the town of Hisarya. A group of 23 court chairpersons and judges participated in the two-day discussions, role plays and case studies presented by the US judge Stuart Waldrip and four judges from the Sofia Regional Court and the Sofia City Court who participate in the Case Management Committee: Vladimir Valkov, Tsveta Zhelyazkova, Vladimiria Yaneva and Ivan Stoichev. The workshop meetings were dedicated to discussions of various problems related to case delay management, the judges’ role in court proceedings, time standards for different procedures, etc. All participants left enriched with new ideas and enthusiasm for implementing them.

Crystal Scales of Justice Award

On 30 June 2010 with the support of the Supreme Judicial Council, the Inspectorate to it and all courts participating in the project, the PDJS presented the application of the Model Courts and Courts in Partnership program for the Crystal Scales of Justice Award. It is organized by the Council of Europe and the European Commission and its aim is to identify and promote innovative practices in civil and in criminal matters, in respect of conduct of proceedings, court organisation and general functioning of the justice system within all Member States of the European Union and the Council of Europe. The PDJS hopes that our application will promote the efforts of the various judicial institutions to ensure the rule of law and better functioning of the judicial system in Bulgaria.

The PDJS team is ready to participate in further activities which would promote collaboration and stronger relations between all national and foreign institutions and organizations involved in the judicial reform in Bulgaria. The PDJS may provide English translations of the materials published in the newsletter at readers’ request.

Your comments, questions and information about this newsletter are welcome at office@prss-bg.org