

Chitalishta and Libraries as Carriers of Cultural Capital and Factors in the Social Sustainability of Local Communities in a Peripheral Region

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2026.10.30-51>

Abstract: This study examines the role of 39 chitalishta (community cultural centres) and their libraries as institutions that embody cultural and social capital in four Bulgarian municipalities – Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzidimovo, and Satovcha. Two pilot composite indices are introduced: a Chitalishte Activity Index, incorporating events, artistic ensembles, project activity, membership, and staffing; and a Library Activity Index, weighting usage, cultural activity, capacity, and development/innovation. Results reveal uneven distribution of institutional activity independent of network density: Hadzidimovo has the highest number of chitalishta per capita but the lowest activity index, while Gotse Delchev and Satovcha demonstrate stronger and more balanced performance across both chitalishta and libraries. A typology of libraries is proposed based on comparative indicators. The study contributes an empirical and methodological basis for further research on cultural infrastructure in peripheral regions.

Keywords: chitalishta; public libraries; cultural capital; social capital; composite indices; peripheral regions; Bulgaria

INTRODUCTION

Chitalishta (singular: chitalishte) and libraries constitute a core component of municipal cultural infrastructure, particularly in peripheral regions. In the municipalities of

Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzidimovo, and Satovcha, they form a territorially distributed cultural and informational network. Through their library, educational, and cultural activities, this network preserves local memory, creates opportunities for participation, and may contribute to social sustainability in the context of demographic decline and peripheralization.

Folklore ensembles, educational programmes run by chitalishta, museum collections, local history activities, and library collections are major repositories of the cultural capital of local communities. Chitalishta and libraries facilitate participation, interaction, and exchange among different age and social groups, thereby contributing to the development of social capital. Through public celebrations, festivals, library initiatives, work

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with children, and the preservation of local memory, these institutions sustain a sense of belonging and strengthen local identity.

Accordingly, the focus of this analysis is not chitalishta or libraries considered separately, but the chitalishte–library network as a cultural and information system spanning the four municipalities. Libraries are not merely an ancillary activity of chitalishta; in many cases, they represent their most enduring and best-documented function.

This study aims to assess the resources, activity, and territorial coverage of the chitalishte–library network and to determine how the institutional characteristics observed may be interpreted as conditions conducive to social sustainability. The analysis covers 39 chitalishta and 24 libraries in the four municipalities. It employs descriptive statistics, comparative analysis, and two pilot composite indicators. Because the study does not directly measure trust, social ties, or resilience during crises, it does not establish causal effects.

The study addresses three research questions: (1) How do the network's resources and activity differ across the four municipalities? (2) Which characteristics may be interpreted as institutional conditions conducive to social sustainability? (3) How does incomplete reporting constrain comparison?

The study proceeds from the assumption that municipalities with more active chitalishta and library networks will display stronger institutional conditions conducive to social sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural capital as a resource for local development

The concept of cultural capital originated in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), where it was used to explain the academic and professional success of children from privileged families. It was subsequently developed within cultural economics and regional development. Contemporary research views cultural capital not only as a body of cultural values and heritage, but also as a strategic resource for building social trust, local identity, and sustainable development (Järvelä, 2023). Cul-

tural heritage assets can inspire creativity, foster cultural diversity, and contribute to social cohesion, civic engagement, health, and well-being. They therefore represent important resources for local development (OECD/ICOM, 2019). In this context, chitalishta may be understood as institutions that accumulate, preserve, and transmit cultural capital across generations.

Throsby (1995) develops the concept of cultural capital as a set of tangible and intangible assets that support sustainable development. "Tangible cultural capital takes the form of works of art and artefacts, such as paintings and sculptures, as well as heritage buildings, sites and objects. Intangible cultural capital encompasses works of art ... such as music and literature, and the body of inherited traditions, values, beliefs, etc. that constitute the 'culture' of a group, whether the group is defined in national, regional, religious, ethnic or other terms" (Throsby, 1999, pp. 167 – 168).

Contemporary research treats cultural capital not only as an individual attribute, but also as an important resource for the sustainable development of local communities and territories (Seduikyte et al., 2025). Intangible cultural capital is embodied in the diversity of cultural expressions within communities that contribute to sustainable development. Communities draw upon intangible cultural heritage to strengthen social cohesion, resilience to social and economic crises, and a future-oriented outlook (Throsby, 1999, 2008). The relationship between intangible cultural capital and sustainable development is reflected in several principles: intergenerational equity; cultural diversity; the preservation of resources and traditions so that they remain accessible to future generations; and recognition of the interdependence of economic, social, cultural, and environmental systems that operate jointly to support sustainable cultural development (Throsby, 2011).

Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainable development

Cultural sustainability is commonly associated with the three established pillars of

sustainable development, but may also be conceptualised as an independent fourth pillar because of its influence on all other spheres of public life (Hawkes, 2001; Turner, 2017). In recent decades, culture has increasingly been recognised as a fourth pillar, alongside the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. According to UNESCO (2019), culture provides the transformative dimension required to make development processes sustainable and effective over the long term (Seduikyte et al., 2025). Heritage conservation and the promotion of cultural diversity can enhance community engagement, reduce social inequalities, strengthen local identity and social participation, and improve communities' capacity to adapt to change (UNESCO, 2023). This perspective is particularly relevant to chitalishta, which preserve and transmit local cultural identities.

Social capital and community resilience

Closely related to cultural capital is the concept of social capital, which encompasses networks of trust, norms of reciprocity, and civic participation that facilitate cooperation within a community (Putnam, 1995). Chitalishta and libraries may therefore be regarded as institutions that enable social capital to be formed and sustained through cultural, educational, and civic activities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies social capital as an important determinant of quality of life, economic development, and territorial sustainability (OECD, 2026). Social sustainability concerns the capacity of communities to adapt to social, demographic, and economic change while retaining their identity, social ties, and viability (Järvelä, 2023; Seduikyte et al., 2025). Communities with high levels of social capital tend to respond more effectively to crises, demographic change, and economic shocks. They are better able to mobilise local resources, establish partnerships, and support vulnerable groups (Carmen et al., 2022; Cubeddu and Martini, 2025). Social capital is therefore a key factor in local development, quality of life, and community sustainability (Fabrizio, 2024).

In Bulgaria, chitalishta have traditionally performed precisely this function by providing spaces for participation, volunteering, and civic activity (Lazarov, 1987; Velev, 2022). Cultural and social capital can thus enhance the resilience of local communities (Seduikyte et al., 2025; OECD/ICOM, 2019).

Cultural institutions as a factor for social sustainability

Cultural institutions and cultural heritage therefore constitute important assets for sustainability (Giliberto, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). Cultural heritage and local cultural practices can significantly strengthen communities' capacity to address social, economic, and environmental challenges (UNDRR, 2026). This is particularly true of small settlements, where the chitalishte often remains the only continuously operating public institution. Available data indicate that 93% of reporting UNESCO Member States recognise culture in their national sustainable-development plans (UNESCO, 2025).

Contemporary research on social sustainability treats libraries, museums, chitalishta, and cultural centres as institutions that contribute to social cohesion, civic engagement, and local development (Fabbricatti et al., 2020). In addition to providing cultural services, they cultivate a sense of belonging, trust, and community identity (Seduikyte et al., 2025). This interpretation is particularly applicable to chitalishta, which combine cultural, educational, and civic functions.

The Chitalishte as a bearer of cultural and social capital

Under Article 2 of the National Chitalishta Act, chitalishta are "(1) traditional self-governing Bulgarian cultural and educational associations in settlements, which also perform state cultural and educational tasks. All individuals may participate in their activities irrespective of age, sex, political or religious views, or ethnic self-identification. (2) Chitalishta are non-profit legal entities."

In Bulgaria, the chitalishte represents a distinctive institutional model that combines the functions of a library, educational centre,

cultural venue, and space for civic participation. Many chitalishta support folklore ensembles, singing groups, dance formations, museum collections, and local-history initiatives. These activities may be interpreted as forms through which cultural capital is accumulated and transmitted across generations (Cubeddu and Martini, 2025; Seduikyte et al., 2025).

The organization of holidays, festivals, exhibitions, cultural events and volunteer initiatives creates conditions for interaction between different groups of the population (Cubeddu & Martini, 2025; OECD/ICOM, 2019). In this way, chitalishta function as local social networks that strengthen trust and a sense of belonging to the community. They are not only cultural institutions, but a mechanism for generating cultural and social capital that supports the social sustainability of local communities.

Through their activities, chitalishta create conditions for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, the preservation of local memory, civic participation, volunteering, and the formation of local identity (Ramírez et al., 2026). Particularly in peripheral regions, they are often among the few public spaces that sustain social ties and local cohesion. Chitalishta may therefore be understood as institutions that preserve and activate the cultural capital of local communities and, in doing so, contribute to their social sustainability (Giliberto, 2021; OECD/ICOM, 2019).

In the context of the four municipalities studied, this statement is confirmed by the extensive chitalishte and library network, which continues to perform cultural and educational functions despite the demographic decline. This indicates the presence of local capacity to adapt and preserve public functions despite adverse demographic trends (Cubeddu & Martini, 2025; Järvelä, 2023). Therefore, strengthening the chitalishte system should be seen as an investment not only in culture, but also in the long-term sustainability and viability of local communities (Järvelä, 2023; Ramírez et al., 2026; UNESCO, 2024).

Despite the substantial literature on cultural capital, social capital, and the contribution of cultural institutions to local development, little research has examined chitalishta and libraries as an integrated institutional system in Bulgaria's peripheral regions. The present study seeks to address this gap.

METHODOLOGY

The study covers 39 people's chitalishta in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha. The list of active chitalishta was compiled on the basis of the interactive map of the People's Chitalishta Foundation (2025). The empirical base is formed by the information cards in the Register of People's Chitalishta (Registar na narodnite chitalishta, 2026) and the Register of Public Libraries (Registar na obshtestvenite biblioteki, 2026) as well as by the annual reports attached to some of the cards. The data are submitted by the institutions themselves and are not independently audited. Quantitative comparisons include only institutions with sufficiently complete data for the respective indicator. Due to the different coverage, absolute municipal values should be interpreted with caution: better reporting may create the impression of higher activity.

For the purposes of this study, all information cards available in the registers for chitalishta and public libraries in the four municipalities studied were reviewed in May and June 2026. Quantitative data were systematized by chitalishta, municipalities and years in order to perform a comparative analysis between the individual municipalities.

The principal limitations are the incompleteness and self-reported nature of the data, the combination of quantitative indicators with expert assessments, and the small number of municipalities included in the comparison. The indices are therefore pilot, descriptive instruments rather than validated measures of social sustainability, and they do not support causal inference. The results indicate institutional capacity and activity that may be interpreted as enabling conditions, but not as direct evidence of social impact.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

Analysis of the chitalishte network

Descriptive statistics¹

As of 2023, 39 registered chitalishta operate in the four municipalities. The municipality of Hadzhidimovo has the largest number of chitalishta (12), followed by Garmen (10), Gotse Delchev (9), and Satovcha (8) (**Tab. 1**).

Table 1. Chitalishte network by municipality (2023)

Domain	Core indicators	Measurement logic
Population	Retention or return of younger people, community participation, new skills and trained guides	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up
Jobs	Seasonal and year-round employment, micro-businesses, local sales and locally retained expenditure	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up
Infrastructure	Access, parking, signage, water, sanitation, connectivity, GIS coverage and monitoring capacity	Baseline, pilot result and annual follow-up

Table 2. Population and chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants (by population as of 2023)

Municipality	Population	Chitalishta	Chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants
Gotse Delchev	28,739	9	0.31
Garmen	14,772	10	0.68
Hadzhidimovo	8,490	12	1.41
Satovcha	12,946	8	0.62

Hadzhidimovo Municipality has the highest chitalishte coverage (1.41 chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants), while Gotse Delchev

Municipality has the lowest concentration of chitalishta per 1,000 inhabitants, mainly due to the larger number of inhabitants in the municipal centre.

¹ The calculations and data processing were assisted by generative AI tools.

Table 3. Membership (based on available data for 2023)

Municipality	Estimated number of members	Average number of chitalishte members
Gotse Delchev	730	81
Garmen	790	79
Hadzhidimovo	790	66
Satovcha	460	58
Total	2770	

The average number of chitalishte members is highest in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev and Garmen, while in Satovcha, chitalishta with smaller memberships predominate.

Table 4. Organized events in 2023

Municipality	Approximate number of events	Average events at a chitalishte
Gotse Delchev	165	18.3
Garmen	110	11.0
Hadzhidimovo	95	7.9
Satovcha	120	15.0

In terms of intensity of cultural activity in chitalishta, the municipalities of Gotse Delchev and Satovcha appear to be leading, followed by Garmen and, lastly, Hadzhidimovo.

Table 5. Personnel (based on available data on subsidised posts)

Municipality	Approximate number of staff members
Gotse Delchev	28
Garmen	17
Hadzhidimovo	13
Satovcha	15

Gotse Delchev Municipality concentrates the largest human resource, mainly because of the "Prosveta – 1865" chitalishte, which has alone accounted of 23 subsidized positions.

Table 6. Artistic ensembles and forms of amateur cultural activity

Municipality	Development level	Most active chitalishta
Gotse Delchev	High	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865"
Garmen	Medium to high	Chitalishte "Iskra – 1924"
Hadzhidimovo	High	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1928"; Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1927"
Satovcha	High	Chitalishte "St. St. Cyril and Methodius - 1926"

Despite the good territorial coverage, significant differences are observed in the activity of individual chitalishta. Some of them develop diverse cultural, educational and library activities, while others operate with limited staff and a minimal number of events. The most active in terms of organized events and artistic forms seem to be the chitalishta in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev and Satovcha, while in Hadzhidimovo there is a large discrepancy between the number of registered chitalishta and the actual cultural activity.

The reported data show that, along with differences in organizational and staffing capacity, a significant part of the chitalishta is also faced with problems related to the material and technical base. The most frequently cited difficulties are depreciated buildings, the need for repairs, insufficient heating, outdated stage and sound equipment and limited opportunities for renovation of the interior and technical furnishings. These problems are more typical of smaller settlements and limit the opportunities for more cultural and educational activities. Nevertheless, some of the chitalishta manage to maintain relatively high activity thanks to local support, the voluntary participation of amateurs and the commit-

ment of the management. These data suggest that the material base is an important, but not the only factor for the development of chitalishte activities.

Activity index of the surveyed chitalishta

The pilot index of chitalishte activity (ICA) combines five components with a maximum score of 100 points: organized events (up to 40 points), active artistic groups (up to 25), project activity (up to 15), membership (up to 10), and staff and organizational capacity (up to 10). To allow it to be reproduced for subsequent use, a scoring rubric with the thresholds for each component and the intermediate scores of each chitalishte is attached to the database. In this analysis, the results are indicative, as some of the input values are approximate or missing. A score is presented only for institutions with sufficient data; the lack of a report does not automatically equate to a lack of activity. The categories are: very high activity (80 – 100 points), high (60 – 79), medium (40 – 59) and low (below 40 points). Due to the limitations, the ranking should be used as a diagnostic profile, not as a final ranking.

Table 7. Ranking of chitalishta by activity level

Activity level	Chitalishta	Features
Very high (80 points and above)	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865", Gotse Delchev	These chitalishta are characterized by a stable membership; diverse artistic compositions; project activities; library activities; human resources
	Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1927", Koprivlen	
	Chitalishte "St. St. Cyril and Methodius - 1926", Satovcha	
	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1928", Hadzhidimovo	
	"Iskra - 1924" Chitalishte, Garmen	
High activity (60 – 79 points)	"Izgreve - 1930", Banichan	These are chitalishta that remain active cultural centres despite limited financial and human resources.
	"N. Y. Vaptsarov – 1927", Musomishta	
	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1938", Kochan	
	Chitalishte "Otets Paisii - 1928", Debren	
	Chitalishte "Zora - 1929", Dabnitsa	
Medium activity (40-59 points)	"Vazrazhdane" Chitalishte, Banichan	These chitalishta mainly perform functions of preserving traditions and organizing local holidays.
	Chitalishte "May Day - 1956", Vaklinovo	
	Chitalishte "Consciousness - 1953", Sadovo	
	Chitalishte "Otets Paisii - 1931", Kornitsa	
	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1978", Lazhnitsa	
	Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1929", Gorno Dryanovo	
	"Izgreve" Chitalishte, Ribnovo	
	"Prosveta - 1940" Chitalishte, Ablanitsa	
	"Pletena" Chitalishte	
	"Probuda - 1928" Chitalishte, Slashten	
	Chitalishte "Granichar - 1952", Tuhovishta	
	"Buditel - 2019" Chitalishte, Borovo	
	Chitalishte "Asen Zlatarov - 1924", Ognyanovo	
Low activity (below 40 points)	Chitalishte "N. Y. Vaptsarov - 1958", Dolno Dryanovo	The main reasons for the low activity are lack of staff; lack of permanent artistic ensembles; limited project activity; demographic decline; poor material base.
	"Svetlina - 1865" Chitalishte, Kovachevitsa	
	Pencho Slaveykov Chitalishte, Breznitsa	
	Some of the chitalishta in Hadzhidimovo municipality have no reported activity	

*Typology of municipalities
by activity of their chitalishta*

Averaging the available scores by municipality provides a conditional municipal profile of chitalishte activity. It should not be interpreted as a representative score for all registered chitalishta, because institutions

without sufficient data do not participate equally in the calculation. Among the available scores, Gotse Delchev reaches 58 points, Satovcha – 57, Garmen – 53, and Hadzhidimovo – 49 points (**Tab. 8**). The small differences between the municipalities do not provide grounds for a categorical ranking.

Table 8. Map of chitalishte activity by municipality (2023)

Municipality	Average index	Activity level	Leading chitalishta	Main features
Gotse Delchev	58	Medium to high	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865", Chitalishte "Izgreve - 1930", Chitalishte "N. Y. Vaptsarov - 1927"	A strong municipal center, good project activity, the largest human resource, active libraries.
Satovcha	57	Medium to high	Chitalishte "St. Cyril and Methodius - 1926", Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1938"	The most evenly developed chitalishta, strong folklore profile, active participation in local cultural life.
Garmen	53	Average	Chitalishte "Iskra - 1924", Chitalishte "Otets Paisii - 1928"	Good cultural centres, but significant differences between individual settlements.
Hadzhidimovo	49	Medium to low	Chitalishte "Yane Sandanski - 1928", Chitalishte "Vazrazhdane - 1927"	The largest number of chitalishta, but the greatest internal differentiation and presence of inactive structures.

Gotse Delchev Municipality records the highest average index, largely because of the strong performance of the "Prosveta – 1865" Chitalishte, the "Izgreve – 1930" Chitalishte in Banichan, and the "N. Y. Vaptsarov" Chitalishte in Musomishta. Satovcha Municipality is distinguished by the most evenly distributed activity across its chitalishta. Garmen Municipality has several strong cultural institutions, but also chitalishta with declining functions. Hadzhidimovo Municipality displays the greatest internal differentiation between highly active and practically inactive chitalishta.

Gotse Delchev thus emerges as the municipality with the most active chitalishte sector, characterised by a strong central chitalishte, the largest number of specialists,

substantial project activity, and a well-developed library network. Satovcha demonstrates a more balanced model, in which activity is distributed relatively evenly among chitalishta and folklore and local traditions are strongly represented. Garmen combines active and declining chitalishta, with the municipal centre and several larger villages displaying the highest levels of activity. Hadzhidimovo includes several highly active chitalishta, but also a large number of institutions reporting minimal activity.

The data show that the chitalishte network in the four municipalities studied is widely represented territorially, but the activity is unevenly distributed. It can be seen that the larger number of chitalishta does not automatically lead to higher activity. The orga-

nizational capacity, human resources, project activity and the degree of commitment of the local community are of decisive importance. Hadzhidimovo Municipality has the widest chitalishte network, but has the lowest average activity index. In contrast, Gotse Delchev Municipality achieves the highest results thanks to strong cultural centres, greater human resources and more developed project activity.

Analysis of the library network

The library analysis aims to show which libraries in which municipalities have the largest capacity, which are used most intensively and which are most active as cultural centres of the local community. It is prepared on the basis of libraries for which complete or

relatively complete statistical data on the collection, readers, borrowed documents and library events are available. Due to incomplete data, some libraries are not included in the quantitative comparisons and in the calculation of indicators by municipality. Also, some of the indicators (such as “visit”), which consider the degree of user engagement (IFLA-UNESCO Public Library Manifesto 2022), were not used due to lack of sufficient data.

Descriptive statistics of libraries

The municipality of Gotse Delchev has the highest library capacity, mainly thanks to the library at the Public Library “Prosveta – 1865”, which has a collection of over 126,000 library items and a developed library infrastructure (**Tab. 9**).

Table 9. Capacity of the library network by municipality

Indicator	Gotse Delchev	Garmen	Hadzhidimovo	Satovcha
Number of libraries	6	7	5	6
General library collection	181,000	38,000	46,000	45,000
Average library collection	30,000	5,400	9,200	7,500
Library staff	12	8	6	9
Computerized places	high	average	average	high

Gotse Delchev records the largest absolute number of readers. Across all four municipalities, children and school students account for a substantial share of library users. Their presence is particularly pronounced in

Satovcha and Hadzhidimovo, where more than half of registered readers are under the age of 14. This finding highlights the important role of these libraries in early literacy and educational support (**Tab. 10**).

Table 10. Using libraries

Indicator	Gotse Delchev	Garmen	Hadzhidimovo	Satovcha
Total number of readers (reach)	2,064	1,079	1,077	1,208
Readers up to 14 years old (working with children)	820	527	574	989
Share of children (%) (working with children)	39.7	48.8	53.3	81.9
Readers per 1,000 inhabitants (community penetration)	71.87	72.56	126.86	90.15
Borrowed documents (use of the collection)	77,700	13,600	8,600	9,300
Reading intensity (documents read per reader, reading intensity)	37.7	12.6	8.0	7.7

Readership is an indicator of the intensity of use of the library collection. It measures the average number of library documents borrowed by one registered reader during the year. Libraries in the municipality of Gotse Delchev are distinguished by the highest intensity of use of the library collection. In these libraries, the share of borrowed documents is 71.2% of all borrowed library documents, and one reader borrows an average of

about 38 library documents per year, which is also significantly higher than the values in the other municipalities. Libraries in Satovcha emerge as leaders in working with children (82% share of child readers), while libraries in Hadzhidimovo have the highest relative readership (126.86 per 1,000 inhabitants). The high share of child readers in Satovcha suggests a strong connection between libraries and local educational institutions.

Table 11. Development and innovation

Indicator	Gotse Delchev	Garmen	Hadzhidimovo	Satovcha
Project activity	Very high	Medium	High	Medium
Fund renewal	Regularly	Regularly	Regularly	Regularly
Participation in programs and projects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Digital services	High	Medium	Medium	Good
Working with vulnerable groups	Yes	Limited	Limited	Limited

The indicator “*Participation in programs and projects*” assesses the library’s ability to attract external funding and develop its activities through participation in national, regional and international initiatives. Particular importance is given to participation in the programs of the Ministry of Culture (MC) for the renewal of library collections, as well as projects related to digitization, training and the development of library services. However, the indicator measures not only the application for MC programs, but also the overall ability of the library to develop through external funding and partnerships. This indicator includes participation in the program “Bulgarian Libraries – Modern Centres for Reading and Awareness”; projects under the Regional libraries in Bulgaria; digital clubs; projects of the Bulgarian Library and Information Association; projects of the Global Libraries – Bulgaria Foundation; local and international partnerships; other projects for the modernization of library services (Table 11).

All these characteristics show that the library network in the municipalities of Gotse

Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha has significant resource and organizational capacity. This supports the thesis that libraries perform important educational, cultural and social functions and represent an essential element of the cultural infrastructure of local communities.

Library Activity Index

The Library Activity Index (LAI) is a pilot comparative tool for assessing the use, cultural activity, resource capacity and development of the library network. It combines quantitative indicators and expertly coded qualitative characteristics. Qualitative characteristics are assessed according to a previously published rubric: 0 = absent; 25 = initial stage; 50 = partially developed; 75 = sustainable; 100 = fully developed. In future validation, the assessment should be carried out independently by two assessors and the agreement between them should be considered. The results presented here are indicative, as a complete matrix of intermediate assessments is not available.

Since the indicators are in different units (readers are people; the collection consists of books; events are the number of activities, reading intensity is a coefficient), the data is normalized as follows. For an indicator where a higher value means a better result:

$$z_{ij} = (x_{ij} - \min_j) / (\max_j - \min_j) \times 100$$

For a metric where a lower value means a better result:

$$z_{ij} = (\max_j - x_{ij}) / (\max_j - \min_j) \times 100$$

where x_{ij} is the value of library i by indicator j , and $\min_j$ and $\max_j$ are the minimum and maximum for the same reference group and year. If $\max_j = \min_j$, the indicator does not distinguish between libraries and is excluded for the corresponding period; its weight is redistributed proportionally within the sub-index.

Each sub-index is calculated as a weighted average of the available and eligible normalized indicators:

$$S_i d = \Sigma(v_j \times z_{ij}) / \Sigma v_j$$

The final index is:

$$IBA_i = 0.35S_{i1} + 0.25S_{i2} + 0.20S_{i3} + 0.20S_{i4}$$

A value is not calculated if an entire sub-index is missing or if coverage of the predefined indicators falls below 70%. Where data are partially missing, weights are renormalized only within the relevant sub-index, and this adjustment is reported. Following normalisation, each indicator receives a score from 0 to 100. This approach follows general principles for constructing composite indices (Nardo et al., 2005; OECD, 2008; Decancq and Lugo, 2013), but the specific Library Activity Index is not part of ISO 11620 or ISO 2789. These standards and the IFLA–UNESCO Public Library Manifesto were used solely as conceptual points of reference in selecting the indicators.

ISO 11620 (2023) is the main international standard for library performance indicators, which includes visits, loans, readers, events and resource use. ISO 2789 (2022) is the main standard for library statistics by number of readers, visits, library stock, borrowed documents, events, electronic services. In turn, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA)

considers libraries as information and cultural centres and spaces for lifelong learning.

The final index is formed as a weighted sum of four sub-indices: library use (35%), cultural activity (25%), capacity (20%) and development and innovation (20%). Higher values of the index indicate a higher degree of use of library capacity and a more significant contribution of the library to the cultural and social life of the local community. This logic is also compatible with the broader concept of cultural capital, social capital and social sustainability. The weights are determined through expert assessment and are consistent with international approaches to building composite indices (OECD, 2008), with the highest weight given to the actual use of library services as the most direct indicator of the library's social impact.

The *Use* sub-index (35%) considers the scope and intensity of use of library services through indicators of readers, reading intensity and work with children and young people. The *Cultural Activity* sub-index (25%) reflects the role of libraries as local cultural centres through the number of events and initiatives organized. The *Capacity* sub-index (20%) assesses resource provision through library collections, staff and technological infrastructure. The *Development and Innovation* sub-index (20%) measures the ability of libraries to develop through projects, fund renewal and digital services.

The *Use* sub-index accounts for 35% of the overall index because it represents its most important component. The principal indicators in international library statistics include the number of registered readers, use of the collection, and visits (ISO 11620 and IFLA standards). The *Use* sub-index, with a maximum of 35 points, is calculated as follows: (Readers per 1,000 inhabitants $\times$ 0.25) + (Reading intensity $\times$ 0.45) + (Share of readers aged under 14 $\times$ 0.30). The formula assigns the greatest weight to actual reading activity (45%), followed by work with children (30%), while limiting the influence of demographic differences among municipalities (25%).

Table 12. Sub-index “Use” (weight 35% in the overall index)

Municipality	Readers per 1,000 inhabitants	Reading intensity	Share of readers under 14 (%)	Rating
Hadzhidimovo	126.86	8.0	53.3	35.5
Satovcha	90.15	7.7	81.9	35.0
Gotse Delchev	71.87	37.7	39.7	32.5
Garmen	72.56	12.6	48.8	26.6

The results of the sub-index “Use” reveal different patterns of library consumption in the individual municipalities (Tab. 12). The libraries in the Hadzhidimovo municipality take first place due to the highest number of readers relative to the population. The libraries Satovcha municipality are immediately behind them due to strong engagement of children and students. The highest reading intensity is observed in the Gotse Delchev municipality, which indicates active use of the library collection by registered readers. The Garmen municipality also demonstrates a good level of use of library services, although with lower values of some sub-indices.

These results lead to the conclusion that the modern library is no longer just a place to borrow books. It functions as an educational and cultural centre and as a place for community interaction. The modern library organizes events, exhibitions, meetings, activities with children, educational initiatives, which is in line with the views of IFLA and UNESCO for modern public libraries. This is the second most important dimension, which is why the sub-index “Cultural activity” has a share of 25%. The sub-index “Cultural activity” is calculated using the formula: (Number of events per library × 0.40) + (Events per library × 0.25) + (Work with children × 0.35).

Table 13. Sub-index “Cultural activity” (weight 25% of the total index)

Municipality	Library events	Events at a library	Working with children	Rating
Garmen	90	12.9	active	25
Satovcha	75	12.5	very active	25
Gotse Delchev	40	6.7	very active	17.7
Hadzhidimovo	35	7.0	active	15.7

The sub-index “Cultural Activity” shows the extent to which libraries function as local cultural and educational centres. Libraries in the municipalities of Garmen and Satovcha achieve the highest scores on this sub-index thanks to the combination of high intensity of event activity and active work with children. Therefore, they function as important cultural and educational centres in the local communities. Libraries in Gotse Delchev and Hadzhidimovo also develop cultural activity, but on

a smaller scale compared to the leading municipalities on this indicator (Table 13).

The *Capacity* sub-index measures the resources available to a library – its collection, staff, and technological infrastructure – but does not in itself indicate efficiency. A library may possess a large collection that is not actively used. The sub-index therefore carries a lower weight of 20%. It is calculated as follows: (Library collection × 0.50) + (Staff × 0.25) + (Technological infrastructure × 0.25) (Tab. 14).

Table 14. Sub-index “Capacity” (weight 20% of the total index)

Municipality	Library collection	Staff	Digital base	Rating
Gotse Delchev	181,000	12	high	20
Garmen	38,000	8	average	11
Hadzhidimovo	46,000	6	average	12
Satovcha	45,000	9	good	13

The sub-index “Development and Innovation” is particularly important for small municipal libraries, as it reflects adaptability, participation in projects and digital transformation. Its

share in the total IBA is also 20%. The formula for this sub-index is: (Participation in programs and projects $\times$ 0.50) + (Fund renew $\times$ 0.25) + (Digital services $\times$ 0.25) (Tab. 15).

Table 15. Sub-index “Development and Innovation” (weight 20% of the total index)

Municipality	Participation in programs and projects	Fund renewal	Digital services	Rating
Gotse Delchev	very high activity	regularly	high	20
Satovcha	average	regularly	good	14
Garmen	average	regularly	medium	13
Hadzhidimovo	high	regularly	medium	15

The indicative composite index is presented as the sum of four sub-indices: *Use* (up to 35 points), *Cultural activity* (up to 25), *Capacity* (up to 20) and *Development and Innovation* (up to 20). Due to the incomplete intermediate matrix, the values in Tables 12–16 should be

considered as pilot estimates. The libraries of the municipalities of Gotse Delchev (90.2) and Satovcha (87) show very high activity, while the libraries in the municipalities of Hadzhidimovo (77.5) and Garmen (75.6) report high library activity (Tab. 16).

Table 16. IBA by sub-indices and municipalities

Municipality	Usage (35 points)	Cultural activity (25 points)	Capacity (20 pcs.)	Development and Innovation (20 points)	IBA
Gotse Delchev	32.5	17.7	20	20	90.2
Satovcha	35.0	25.0	13	14	87.0
Hadzhidimovo	35.5	15.7	12	15	78.2
Garmen	26.6	25.0	11	13	75.6

The results obtained demonstrate that high library activity can be achieved through different models. While Gotse Delchev is an example of a library system based on strong resource capacity and intensive reading, Satovcha and Garmen have good results through active cultural and community activities and work with children and youth. The libraries in Hadzhidimovo occupy an intermediate position. It is evident that the reported library activity is not only associated with the size of the collection or the number of readers. Active work with children, cultural events, digital services and project participation also shapes the profile of the libraries.

The results indicate that the municipalities follow different models of library devel-

opment, allowing libraries to be classified according to how they employ their resource capacity. The first category comprises "reading-oriented libraries", characterised by large numbers of readers, high reading intensity, and extensive use of library collections; the libraries in Gotse Delchev and Musomishta are typical examples. The second category comprises "community-oriented libraries", which combine traditional library services with active cultural and educational programmes, organise numerous events, and maintain sustained links with local communities. The libraries in Satovcha and Garmen exemplify this model. Between these two categories are mixed-model libraries that combine intensive reading with diverse cultural activities (Tab. 17).

Table 17. Typology of libraries

Library type	Main features	Examples
Reading library	Large number of readers, high reading intensity, active use of the collection, strong library resource	Chitalishte "Prosveta - 1865" - Gotse Delchev; Chitalishte "N. Y. Vaptsarov" - Musomishta
Community library	High attendance, many events, active work with children, schools and the local community	The libraries in the municipalities of Satovcha and Garmen, the library in the village of Kochan
Mixed type	Combines active reading with diverse cultural activities	Hadzhidimovo, Koprivlen
Supporting library	Limited resource, but important function for access to information and culture in small settlements	Some of the smaller village libraries

The analysis of the chitalishte network showed the capacity of chitalishta to create cultural life and conditions for participation of local communities. The analysis of the library network reveals the role of libraries in access to knowledge, reading, education and cultural activity. Considered together, chitalishta and libraries form a single cultural and information system, the impact of which goes beyond the provision of cultural services and is manifested in the maintenance of cultural capital, social ties and local identity.

The chitalishte-library network and social sustainability

1. The chitalishte and library network as a cultural infrastructure

The 39 chitalishta and 24 libraries studied form a dense cultural and information network with wide territorial coverage. A particularly high saturation of cultural infrastructure is observed in the municipality of Hadzhidimovo, and similar networks operate in the other three municipalities. Regardless

of the differences in the activity of individual institutions, their presence provides access to cultural, educational and information services even in small settlements.

2. *The chitalishte and library network as a carrier of cultural capital*

Chitalishta and libraries are the main institutional bearers of cultural capital in the studied municipalities. Through artistic ensembles, local festivals, local history initiatives and library collections, they preserve and transmit knowledge, traditions and cultural memory between generations. At the same time, they create conditions for participation, volunteering and interaction between different age and social groups, thus contributing to the formation of social capital and local identity (Throsby, 1999).

3. *The chitalishte and library network as a generator of social capital*

Chitalishta and libraries serve as spaces for social interaction. Through amateur groups, reading groups, holidays, festivals and library initiatives, sustainable social ties

are created between different age and social groups. The role of these institutions is particularly significant in small settlements, where alternative public spaces for communication and civic participation are often lacking. The chitalishte–library network creates conditions for building trust between people, intergenerational contacts, volunteering, participation in public initiatives and the formation of local networks for mutual assistance and cooperation (Putnam, 1995).

The chitalishte–library network and social sustainability

The results obtained indicate institutional characteristics that can support social resilience: working with children and youth, access to information, heritage preservation and organizing community initiatives. Since trust, participation, social networks or crisis response were not measured, the analysis does not prove a direct impact. The differences between municipalities rather suggest that what matters is the activity, human resources and the ability to engage the local community, and not just the number of registered institutions.

Table 18. Contribution of the chitalishte and library network

Dimension	Main contribution
Cultural capital	Traditions, folklore, local memory, library collections
Social capital	Participation, volunteering, events, community relations
Educational capital	Reading, access to information, working with children
Social sustainability	Belonging, identity, local viability

CONCLUSION

The findings indicate that chitalishta and libraries in the municipalities of Gotse Delchev, Garmen, Hadzhidimovo and Satovcha form an integrated cultural and information system of major importance for local communities. They preserve cultural capital by maintaining traditions, local memory and library collections, and through various cultural and educational activities create conditions for interaction, participation and building social ties.

The results reveal different development models. Gotse Delchev is distinguished by significant resource capacity, high reading intensity and active project activity. Satovcha demonstrates the most balanced model of chitalishte and library development and strong work with children and youth. Hadzhidimovo is characterized by a broad cultural infrastructure and a high relative scope of library services, while Garmen stands out with active library and community activity.

The data do not allow for direct measurement of social sustainability and do not establish causal impact. They outline institutional prerequisites for its support by preserving cultural capital, encouraging participation, and maintaining local identity. Incomplete and uneven reporting by chitalishta and libraries remains the main limitation and requires that the results be interpreted as indicative.

Nevertheless, this study is pilot in nature and the proposed indices can be used and tested in other municipalities and regions of the country. This would allow for their further validation and improvement as a tool for evaluating chitalishte and library activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis outlines several main directions for the development of the chitalishte and library network. First of all, it is necessary to continue investments in the material and technical base through repairs, modernization of equipment and improvement of conditions

for cultural and educational activities.

Secondly, human resources should be strengthened by creating municipal programs for training librarians and chitalishte specialists, improving their qualifications and attracting young staff.

The third direction is the acceleration of digital transformation through technology renewal, expansion of electronic services, and development of digital skills among users.

Particular attention should be paid to working with children and youth through educational initiatives, interest clubs and volunteer programs. Data shows that young people are among the most active users of library services and a key factor for the long-term sustainability of the system.

The sustainable development of the chitalishte and library network depends on the combination of modern facilities, well-trained specialists, digital services and active participation of young generations in the cultural life of local communities.

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Chitalishte in Hadzhidimovo

APPENDIX A

Table A1. Key Indicators for Chitalishta (2023)

Chitalishte	Municipality	Members	Events	Subsidized staff numbers	Project activity	Preliminary assessment
Enlightenment – 865, Gotse Delchev	Gotse Delchev	187	n.d.	23	Very active	High
Sunrise – 1930, Banichan	Gotse Delchev	55	70	2	Active	High
Vazrajthane, Banichan	Gotse Delchev	125	7	0	Very active	Medium
Awakening – 2019, Borovo	Gotse Delchev	80	n.d.	0	No data	Medium
Petko R. Slaveykov – 1938, Breznitsa	Gotse Delchev	52	12	1	Participation in LAG	Medium
Pencho Slaveykov, Breznitsa	Gotse Delchev	n.d.	minimal	0	No data	Low
Otets Paisii – 1931, Kornitsa	Gotse Delchev	54	6	1	Limited	Medium
Yane Sandanski – 1978, Lazhnitsa	Gotse Delchev	≈ 50	6 – 8	1	Limited	Medium
N. Y. Vaptsarov – 1927, Musomishta	Gotse Delchev	64	40	0	Active	High
Renaissance – 929, Gorno Dryanovo	Garmen	55	6-9	1	Limited	Medium
Iskra – 1924, Garmen	Garmen	54	~30	5	Active	High
Father Paisios – 1928, Debren	Garmen	300	4 – 6	2	Limited	Medium
N. Y. Vaptsarov – 1958, Dolno Dryanovo	Garmen	61	2	1	Limited	Low
Zora – 1929, Dabnitsa	Garmen	53	14 – 18	2	Limited	Medium
Light – 1865, Kovachevitsa	Garmen	53	2 – 3	0.5	No data	Low
Assen Zlatarov – 1924, Ognyanovo	Garmen	54	7	1.5	Limited	Medium
Development – 2013, Ognyanovo	Garmen	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Sunrise, Ribnovo	Garmen	61	12 – 14	n.d.	Limited	Medium
Hristo Botev – 1919, Skrebatno	Garmen	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Medium
Yane Sandanski-1928, Hadzhidimovo	Hadzhidimovo	≈ 150	7	3	Active	High
Prosveta – 1940, Ablanica	Hadzhidimovo	60	5	3	Limited	Medium
Renaissance – 1927, Koprivlen	Hadzhidimovo	73	32	3	Active	High
Progress – 1928, Novo Leski	Hadzhidimovo	51	limited	1	Limited	Medium
Consciousness – 1953, Sadovo	Hadzhidimovo	50	10 – 13	0	No data	Medium
Beslen	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Blatska	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Ilinden	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Lucky	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Nova Lovcha	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Warm	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
Teshovo	Hadzhidimovo	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	n.d.	Low
St. St. Cyril and Methodius-1926, Satovcha	Satovcha	59	12	3	Active	High

Читалищата и библиотеките като носители на културен капитал и фактор за социалната устойчивост на местните общности в периферен район

Желю Владимиров
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Резюме: Изследването разглежда ролята на 39 читалища и техните библиотеки като институции, олицетворяващи културния и социалния капитал в четири български общини – Гоце Делчев, Гърмен, Хаджидимово и Сатовча. Въвеждат се два пилотни композитни индекса: Индекс на активността на читалищата, включващ събития, художествени състави, проектна дейност, членство и персонал; и Индекс на библиотечната активност, който отчита използването, културната дейност, капацитета и развитието/иновациите. Резултатите разкриват неравномерно разпределение на институционалната дейност, независимо от гъстотата на мрежата: Хаджидимово има най-голям брой читалища на глава от населението, но най-ниския индекс на активност, докато Гоце Делчев и Сатовча демонстрират по-силни и по-балансиран резултати както при читалищата, така и при библиотеките. Въз основа на сравнителни показатели се предлага типология на библиотеките. Изследването допринася с емпирична и методологична основа за по-нататъшни проучвания на културната инфраструктура в периферните региони.

Ключови думи: читалища, обществени библиотеки, културен капитал, социален капитал, композитни индекси, периферни региони, България



Chitalishte library in Gotse Delchev
Source: Facebook