

Lifestyle | Features

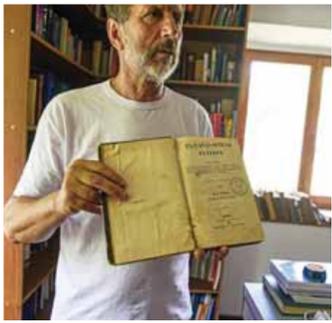


This photograph shows a view of Stevo Stepanovski's library in the village of Babino in western Macedonia. — AFP photos



A visitor looks through a volume in the library of Stevo Stepanovski in the village of Babino.

# Bookish Balkans hamlet a 'village of enlightenment'



Stevo Stepanovski shows a volume from his library in the village of Babino.

Most people packed up and left the remote North Macedonia village of Babino years ago. But Stevo Stepanovski and his remarkable collection of 20,000 books stayed put in his almost abandoned valley. The library began with Stepanovski's great-grandfather who was given his first tranche of books by passing Ottoman soldiers in the late 19th century. Along with history books and novels in the Macedonian language, there are tomes in Farsi, Arabic and Turkish along with a whole host of books in Serbo-Croat, the main language of the old Yugoslavia of which the village was once a part.

The library is home to original photographs by a journalist who covered World War I, antique maps and a Babel of dic-

tionaries covering the region's many languages. "This is a village of enlightenment and education," said Stepanovski, 72, who regularly welcomes guests with cups of coffee and shots of homemade fruit brandy in the centuries-old stone home where the library is housed. The library helped make the villagers highly literate, with an inordinately large number of them becoming teachers.

**'No house without a teacher'**

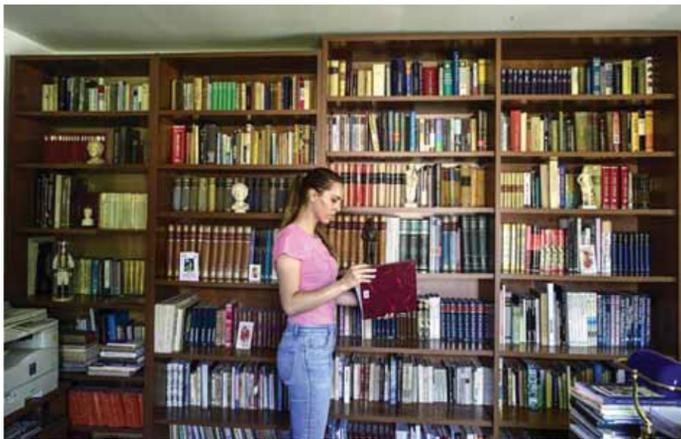
"There was no house without a teacher," according to Stepanovski. But their very learning was also the village's undoing. In the 1950s, the Yugoslav government called up the valley's teachers for a nationwide literacy drive-effectively rob-

bing the area of much of its population. Like much of this impoverished corner of southeastern Europe, North Macedonia has been clobbered by a demographic slump. The triple whammy of an ageing population, sinking birth rate and mass migration has left many villages across its rural hinterland abandoned. Babino has been hit particularly hard. Once it had more than 800 inhabitants, but now there are just three permanent residents.

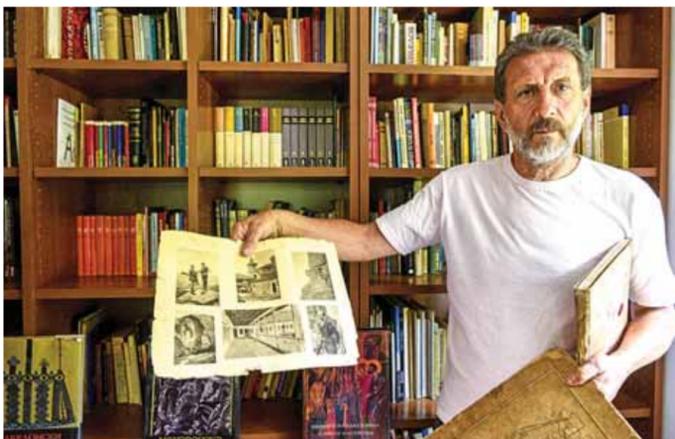
And while Stepanovski's adult children have moved elsewhere, he is determined to stay on with his books in Babino. Instead the world comes to him, with between 3,000 and 3,500 people a year visiting the library. Most come from nearby towns and villages or from neighbouring

countries, but there are also occasional travelers from Brazil, Egypt and Morocco along with a host of literary scholars and researchers.

"I am surprised titles can be found here that cannot be found in city libraries," said Goce Sekuloski, a music professor at a seminary in the capital Skopje who visited Babino recently after hearing about the place from friends. Stepanovski has also built a small amphitheatre for public readings and concerts. "We offer a peaceful mindset for people to come and sit here and experience the atmosphere," he said. "If you want to discover the magic of books... you can do that perfectly here." — AFP



A visitor looks through a volume in the library of Stevo Stepanovski in the village of Babino.



Stevo Stepanovski shows a volume from his library in the village of Babino.



## Streaming giant shines new light on Thai boys cave rescue

It is the rescue retold around the world: 12 boys, their coach, and impossible odds. Now, a new series debuting Thursday promises an intimate Thai perspective on the extraordinary effort to save 13 lives from a flooded cave back in 2018. The world was captivated by the young "Wild Boars" football team trapped inside a cave complex in northern Thailand, as an international diving team scrambled to extract them. Netflix's six-episode drama "Thai Cave Rescue" is the latest screen interpretation of the event, and comes only a month after Amazon released its feature-length film "Thirteen Lives".

Amazon's production, directed by Oscar winner Ron Howard, focuses on the life or death efforts by the divers-played by

Hollywood stars Colin Farrell and Viggo Mortensen-to reach and rescue the boys. The latest retelling seeks to take a closer look at the young players and their families. "I think the series covers some parts that haven't been portrayed enough, such as the world of the kids and their coach before it happened," said director Nattawut Poonpiriya.

The 41-year-old, perhaps best known for the award-winning Thai heist thriller "Bad Genius", said one of the biggest challenges was covering all sides of the complex rescue. The length of the series-with each episode clocking in at around 50 minutes-gave him the freedom to tell that story. "It allowed us to show the details, and really emphasize the characters and situations they were in," he said. He highlighted the pressure of accurately depicting former Thai Navy SEAL Saman Gunan, who died during the operation and was subsequently treated as a national hero, with a statue erected outside the cave.

**'We dig deep'**

While previous productions have brought the subterranean complex to life through recreations, "Thai Cave Rescue" actors filmed outside and around the actual cave itself. "It's very intense in

there," said actor Urassaya Sperbund, better known to Thai audiences by her nickname Yaya. She plays a fictionalized hydrologist battling to keep the cave's water levels under control. "It was freezing cold, and you could hardly talk through the rain because it was so hard," the 29-year-old said.

Beyond the cave, hundreds mobilized

to explore any other chance to get the boys out-from climbers searching for different access points, to teams diverting the mountain's waters. "We dig really deep into every section of the rescue team," said Sperbund. "So you will get to see how difficult it was to complete the mission, how many times we failed, and how that affected the families of the boys," she said.

Her role highlights efforts to divert water, showing how rice farmers' fields were deliberately flooded as a result. "That was a very touching scene and it's important to know that the local people also contributed a lot," she said. For actor Thaneth Warakulnukroh, who plays local governor Narongsak Osottanakorn, one of the most important things about the rescue was the sense of unity around the aim of saving the "Wild Boars" and their coach. "No matter how time flies, I hope this series will remind people about that, because sometimes we forget it," he said. —AFP



Thai-Norwegian actress of the upcoming Netflix series "Thai Cave Rescue", Urassaya 'Yaya' Sperbund speaks during an interview with AFP in Bangkok.

## 'Athena' brings French violence to Netflix

Having cut his teeth with striking music videos for the likes of Kanye West and MIA, director Romain Gavras brings an explosive vision of French inner-city unrest to Netflix on Friday. "Athena", which shows France descending into civil war following riots over police violence, has echoes of recent unsettling trends such as the "Yellow Vest" protests and the rise of the far right. The director, son of the legendary-and highly political-French-Greek filmmaker Costa-Gavras, insists the film is not trying to influence anyone. "We never really know whether films have an impact on people," he told AFP during the Venice Film Festival, where the film got its world premiere earlier this month.

"Personally, it was Marlon Brando who made me want to start smoking... but when we're filled with anger, I don't know if watching a film can stop it," he added. "Athena" plunges the audience, from its very first frames, into the rage and tumult of an inner-city suburb where riots break out over the death of a young man at the hands of the police. Fanned by the far right, the unrest drags the whole country into civil war.

It bears comparison with "La Haine", the hugely successful tale of unrest in the Paris suburbs from 1995 — though its heightened imagery has more in common with mythological Hollywood films such as "Gladiator" or "Apocalypse Now". What makes it all the more tragic is that France's strict rules, aimed at curbing the influence of streaming platforms, mean "Athena" cannot be shown in French cinemas, though it will get a limited theatrical release in other countries. "The film could not have been made without Netflix," Gavras said, while adding his "great dismay" that it will not be shown on the big screen in his home country. It is the third full-length feature by the 41-year-old director, who gained international attention with music shorts such as "Bad Girls" by MIA, "No Church in the Wild" by Jay-Z and Kanye West, and "Nothing Breaks Like a Heart" by Mark Ronson. —AFP



(From left to right) Cast of the upcoming Netflix series "Thai Cave Rescue", Varintorn Yaroojanont, Manatsanun Phanlerdwongsakul, Urassaya 'Yaya' Uberbund, Thaneth Warakulnukroh and Suppakorn Kitsuan pose for a photograph in Bangkok. — AFP photos