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PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION OF BULGARIAN LIBRARIANS – TRADITIONS, POLICIES, PERSPECTIVES

Abstract: The present article gives an overview of the activities of the professional organisation of librarians in Bulgaria (ULIW/BLIA) by focusing on the main tasks of the organisation, its international connections and successfully completed national and international projects and programmes. Since the organisation is a part of the non-governmental sector in the country, a special attention is paid to the activities aimed at promoting civil society.

Keywords: professional organisation, association, projects, programmes, literary heritage, legislation, normative documents, BLIA

The professional organisation of librarians in Bulgaria has a relatively short history, spanning, more or less, the last three decades. The concept for such an organisation emerged in the Bulgarian cultural space as early as the 1930s and mapped out the direction to be taken when incorporating the ideas and activities of similar organisations in other countries.¹

The first practical steps towards setting up a professional organisation of librarians in Bulgaria were made in 1937, when a group of librarians organised a conference in the town of Shumen with the aim of creating a library union. The event attracted around 150 attendees who selected a governing body and appealed to government institutions for greater attention towards libraries.

¹ The first professional union was created in USA – 1876 (ALA – the American Library Association). Next come the unions in Europe – England – 1877, Austria – 1892, Switzerland – 1897, Germany – 1900, Denmark – 1905, Russia – 1905, France – 1906, Holland – 1908, Poland – 1917, etc. The first national unions in the Balkans appear at a somewhat later stage – in the 1930s and 1940s.

This appeal, however, summed up the practical activities of the association and it failed to leave a lasting impact on the library cause. The next attempt at creating a professional organisation was made in 1961 with the establishment of a Library Section within the Union of Workers in Polygraph Industry, which endeavoured to unite librarians and embraced, as its main goal, the cause of solidifying the role of the profession. Further efforts were made in 1989 to establish a professional union of librarians and information specialists as a part of several sector-related organisations – the Ministry of Culture, CMNL², CISTI³ and others. These efforts culminated in the establishment of the first professional creative organisation of librarian and information specialists in the country on May 14, 1990. The official name of the organisation – Union of Library and Information Workers (ULIW)⁴ – was officially adopted at the inaugural session. This step fulfilled the dreams and ambitions of several generations of librarians for their own professional union. Within a short period the union managed to expand and strengthen its structure, attracting more than 1,000 individual members, 45 libraries as collective members and 23 regional associations.

The professional union was established on the principles of voluntariness and equality of all members, with respect to individual interests and electability of governing bodies. The main efforts of the new organisation were directed towards the elaboration of a national strategy to underlie library policies, development and participation in national programmes, creation of a legislative base, enhancement of the social standing of the profession, modernisation of libraries through the introduction of new information technologies, promotion of research and applied research activities in the sector, establishment of a system for continuing education of specialists, creation and development of professional publications, expanded cooperation with similar organisations in the country and abroad, etc.

The biggest problem that the organisation had to face was the creation of an adequate legal base to encourage the development of libraries in the country. Working towards this goal, in 1997-1998 ULIW initiated the Bulgarian Legislation Programme with the aim of reaching a unified legislative concept for the sector. Following wide discussions in the library community, two major documents were compiled and submitted to the National Assembly for review – a Library Bill and a Bill for Mandatory Deposit of Printed Publications, Audiovisual,

² SS Cyril and Methodius National Library.

³ Central Institute for Scientific and Technical Information.

⁴ The first three chairmen of the organization were Tatyana Yanakieva (1990–1994), Maria Kapitanova (1994 –1998), and Alexander Dimchev (1998 – 2000).

Electronic and Other Documents. Two other documents were prepared in the meantime – *Library Science in Bulgaria: Collection of Statutory Documents 1878–1998 and Collection of Foreign Legislative Acts in the Field of Library Science*. After 1991, in aid of the national programme for library qualifications, ULIW focused mainly on the preparation and organisation of annual national conferences, scientific and practical conferences, seminars, round tables and other events. These national conferences developed into natural hubs for sharing new ideas, discussion of valid problems, exchange of experience and good practices and have been regarded highly positively by the community.

Another important aspect of ULIW activity was laying the foundations for beneficial cooperation with several national and international organisations. In this period, the union worked in close cooperation with representatives of the Open Society Foundation, the British Council, Goethe Institute, etc. Of particular significance and usefulness was its cooperation with IFLA and EBLIDA and numerous other professional library organisations in Europe and around the world.

The project activities of the organisation also merit attention. Several important projects undertaken after 1999 are worth mentioning – *Establishment of Book Exchange Relations between Bulgarian Regional Libraries and Libraries from Colorado – USA and Information Support for Non-Governmental Organisations*. The first project involved the regional libraries in the following cities: Varna, Stara Zagora, Dobrich, Veliko Tarnovo, Burgas and the Metropolitan Library in Sofia. The largest-scale programme undertaken by ULIW in the country was the *National Programme for the Preservation of Library Collections*. The programme was realised on the basis of a preliminary study (questionnaire) involving a total of 15 libraries – 1 national (SS Cyril and Methodius National Library), 1 university library – that of St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, 10 regional libraries, 1 community library, and 1 city library. The subject of the study was library collections of national significance comprising part of the national literary and documentary heritage – manuscripts, incunabula, newspapers and magazines, newspapers issued before 1944, regional press, and personal collections. After analysing the state of library collections on the basis of the results of the study, ULIW agreed to commence work on the following tasks: the compilation of a series of national union catalogues of manuscripts, Bulgarian incunabular books, and newspapers issued before 1944, to be available for access via the Internet, as well as the expansion and modernisation of the Laboratory for Conservation and Restoration at the SS Cyril and Methodius National Library, and development of a framework for a common microfilming and digitalization policy. *The Chance for Bulgarian libraries in the 21st century*

Project (1999) is also worth mentioning. The project, supported by the Open Society Foundation, was of major significance in developing and strengthening relations between different non-governmental organisations in the sector and, as a major focus, the relations between the Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Publishers Association.

Active work on several projects continued between 2000 and 2017. It is important to note that the abovementioned projects and initiatives were organised without the participation of the state. The transition period in Bulgaria after 1990 had a negative impact on libraries in the country. Analysing the activities of the organisation in this period, Prof. Alexander Dimchev stresses that one of the main reasons for the failure of many library-based projects and for deepening the crisis of the Bulgarian library sector in general has been the lack of adequate policies of the Ministry of Culture and other similar institutions responsible for the sector. These organizations tend to initially state their support for any library-focused initiative but later they back off from their commitments. This has led to loss of opportunities for finding reliable sponsors from international organizations and foundations. The lack of understanding from government bodies regarding the societal importance of the library and information sector has led to a situation where we are lagging drastically behind our international colleagues and peers. Over recent years, a gradual change seems to be emerging in the overall attitude towards the library sector and some activities by the government in terms of support for larger forums and conferences and other initiatives, as well as the provision of targeted budgets. In practice, financing of the library sector is effected on the basis of annual decisions of the Ministry of Culture for allocation of activities funded by municipal budgets to the local and state-delegated and determination of standards for number of personnel and standards for state-delegated activities.⁵

A very important project entitled *Legal Regulation for Libraries and Library and Information Activity in Bulgaria* was launched in 2006.⁶ This project was instrumental in drafting the Public Libraries Act.⁷ The Act was a major step towards regulation of public library activities in the country. It was based upon Bulgarian experience and took into consideration valid Bulgarian legislation, the guidelines and recommendations of the Council of Europe and experiences of

⁵ Aleksandar Dimchev, "The Bulgarian Library and Information Association – Support and Hope of the Professional Community", BLIA Online No. 5 (2016).

⁶ lib.bg/eng/proekti/zakon.htm, ifla.org/files/assets/faife/publications/ifla-world-report/bulgaria.pdf

⁷ Adopted by the National Assembly in 2009.

25 countries in the field. The project also enabled the elaboration of a package of documents, including a proposal for the amendment of the *Mandatory Deposit of Copies of Printed and Other Publications Act*, adopted in 2000, standards for university, school and special purpose libraries, as well as the Ordinance on Library and Information Services within the National Education System. Two programmes were launched between 2007 and 2008 – an MC⁸ programme under the title *Bulgarian Libraries – Contemporary Reading and Information Centres* which provided funds for the restoration of library collections, and the joint programme of MC and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – *Bill and Melinda Gates – Glob@l Libraries Bulgaria* (2008–2013), realised in partnership with Bulgarian Library and Information Association (BLIA), the National Association of Municipalities in Bulgaria, and the Ministry of Transport. The project provided support for 967 public libraries in the country and the training of more than 3,000 librarians. Its core objective was to strengthen the role of libraries by the introduction of information technologies through modernisation of libraries in order to overcome the country's lagging behind in information services and the provision of equal access of the population to the Internet. In 2012, with the support of the America for Bulgaria Foundation, a BLIA team developed and offered to libraries across the country a project titled *National Strategy and Programme for the Preservation of and Access to the Written Cultural Heritage in Bulgarian Libraries*. The project proposed urgent measures for the restoration, conservation and digitalization of endangered library collections with the purpose of preservation and provision of access to rare and valuable materials held in Bulgarian libraries for a wide range of users.

Another large-scale project of exceptional significance should be noted along with the other projects implemented by ULIW-BLIA and projects realised with state support – the Nationwide Automated Library and Information System (NALIS), realised with the joint efforts of three scientific Bulgarian libraries and financially supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation. The project was launched in 2009 and spanned a five-year period. The founding members of the NALIS Foundation, headlining the project, were the Central Library of Bulgarian Academy of Science (BAS), the St. Kliment Ohridski University of Sofia, and the American University in Blagoevgrad, represented by their libraries. The project allowed integration of academic and university library and information systems in the country and its main goal was to create a National union online catalogue for academic libraries allowing integrated searches via

⁸ Ministry of Culture.

a common web portal. In view of this objective, the founding libraries – the Central Library of BAS, the St. Kliment Ohridski University Library, and the Panitza Library at the American University of Blagoevgrad – embarked on a programme of retroconversion of catalogues. Of the three founding libraries only the St. Kliment Ohridski University Library successfully completed the conversion of its traditional catalogues within the 2009–2015 scope of the project and is now able to offer its users an electronic catalogue of more than 1,200,000 bibliographic entries.

Gradually, more than 30 libraries from across the country – both university and regional libraries – joined the efforts of the founding libraries as associated members, expanding the initial concept and laying the foundations for a National Union Catalogue. In 2015, after completion of the project, the NALIS Union catalogue contained more than 3,000,000 bibliographic entries.⁹ Along with integration of the electronic catalogues of the separate libraries and the establishment of the National Union Catalogue, there has been established the NALIS Repository which allows access to the digital collections of the founding libraries, the Ivan Vazov National Library in Plovdiv and the library of the New Bulgarian University.

Today, after more than 25 years, the professional organisation of Bulgarian library specialists can be proud of its achievements. Naturally, its path has not been without obstacles and along with evident successes there have been failures and unaccomplished dreams. Despite all that, ULIW/BLIA has established itself as a modern, strong and dynamic professional organization, an equal partner to library associations in the European Union, capable of tackling national and international programmes and projects. Another important aspect of the significance of such a professional organisation of librarians in Bulgaria is that, as a part of the country's non-governmental sector, it contributes to the development of the civil society and the constant expansion of access to information.

⁹ In 2016 the catalogue offered access to 3,562,309 titles from 40 libraries across the country.

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СТРУКОВНА ОРГАНИЗАЦИЈА БИБЛИОТЕКАРА БУГАРСКЕ – ТРАДИЦИЈА, ПОЛИТИКА, ПЕРСПЕКТИВЕ

Сажетак: Чланак даје преглед активности струковне организације библиотекара Бугарске (Българска библиотечно-информационна асоциација), стављајући акценат на главне задатке организације, њене међународне везе и успешно завршене домаће и међународне пројекте и програме. С обзиром на то да је ова организација део бугарског невладиног сектора, посебна пажња посвећена је активностима везаним за промовисање цивилног друштва.

Кључне речи: струковна организација, удружење, пројекти, програми, књижевно наслеђе, правни оквир, нормативна документа, ББИА

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