

Bulgaria/Colorado Library Partnership Interest Group
Report to CAL Board
August 7, 2004

Our 12 Bulgarian visitors (7 in Colorado and 5 in Iowa) left on May 25 to return to Bulgaria. They all arrived safe and exhausted. On May 23rd, we had a festive farewell party with music, dancing, wine, food, Bulgarian brandy, and a big cake. Library hosts, home hosts, and Bulgarian friends all attended. Pictures were taken, presents were given and tears were shed!

The Americans were also exhausted. Our evaluation of the visit by the Bulgarians, the home hosts, and the host libraries all showed that the visit was a tremendous success and also took more time and resources than had been expected. However, we have been informed that we have been funded for another round of visits; fewer this time and probably coming next spring.

I followed the Bulgarians a few days later to Bulgaria. I attended the ULISO conference (Union of Librarians and Information Science Officers – the equivalent of the Colorado Association of Libraries). Iskra Mahaylova spoke about our project. She emphasized a new role for libraries, as community information centers, providing new services, collaborating with community groups. Interestingly, a library science professor in the audience challenged Iskra, saying that no, the mission of libraries was to preserve the culture. Most in the audience of 250 supported Iskra and the discussion reflects the changes that are taking place in Bulgarian libraries. Our federal ABLE project is making a difference.

The next step of the project is training in Bulgaria in September. Bonnie McCune, Jamie LaRue, and myself from Colorado and Barbara Corson from the Iowa State Library will be presenting workshops to teams from Bulgarian libraries and to individual librarians who will be trainers of other Bulgarian librarians. While there we will try and visit some of our partner librarians.

There were two presentations by Bulgarians that I would like to share with you. The first was a power point by the Director of the Varna Library. It was a very modern take on marketing. It's being translated from Bulgarian now and as soon as I have it, I'll post it on our web site.

The other is by Miroslava Katsarova, the Director of the Razgrad Public Library in Razgrad, Bulgaria. Their partner is in Iowa. Mira was speaking about the lack of relevant laws about libraries in Bulgaria, the lack of funding of school libraries, the low salaries earned by librarians and calls for ULISO to support changes in library law. She says:

Government decree N153/07.2000 and the transforming of 11 district libraries into "regional" does not regulate the mechanism for interaction among libraries of certain area... At a regional level there is no library with methodological [continuing education] and consulting functions for other types of libraries: public, school, chitalishte [community] libraries. There is a

definite need for unifying institution at regional level, for collecting, summarizing and analyzing information and statistics from libraries, especially since these data are not required even by the National Statistical Institute since 2001... Experience has shown that at this stage of development of libraries there is a strong necessity for organizational cooperation, normatively regulated and respectively funded...

We witness the expansion of the book market, presence of more and more Bulgarian publishers and decreasing incomes of the population, growing unemployment, especially in smaller towns and even in district centers like Razgrad, where major state-run companies were closed down. In this changing social and economic situation in the country the library is the only place for reading periodicals and new books, as far as the shrinking budgets allow enriching the collections...

I state these concerns... because it is another proof for the lack of clear and consistent national policy and strategic planning for the development of the library system, facing a rapidly changing world, assigning new roles and significance of all kinds of libraries in the information society.

*If we look closely and analyze some of the contemporary laws we will find out that the term library is not mentioned at all... Very indicative of the lack of concern about these pressing problems is the following: for the school year 2000/2001, in the **Form N.1 of the Ministry of Education**, which all educational institutes fill in annually, the section dealing with school libraries and their collections is completely removed. In most schools there is no position for librarian any more, which led to closing down of school libraries even in secondary schools. Wherever they are still present libraries are being opened for an hour or two by teachers of Bulgarian, with the only purpose of completing their obligatory norm of work hours. [NB: Doesn't this sound familiar?]*

We are encountering many similar problems in our everyday practice, resulting from the lack of adequate legislation, that we can not solve alone. That's why we need a coherent system of effective normative documents for Bulgarian libraries, regardless of the relative independence of different types of libraries, which can lead to unifying of basic specific functions in the system.

More paradoxical even are the salaries of library specialists and other employees in the libraries. Average monthly gross salaries for cultural institutions are determined by obscure criteria. They are not relevant to the level of necessary education of the employees, and to the length of work experience... That is the reason why in Prof. Boyan Penev Library in Razgrad there is no position for a head librarian anymore, since the salaries fund is totally insufficient, not to talk about pay increase. Still more ridiculous is the tendency till 2005 the minimum monthly salary to amount to 150 levas, [about \$100] which is equal to the salary of young library specialist with master degree. This will lead to further losing of motivation for studying in the field of information and library subjects. Facing higher demands and modern information technologies the quality of library service will not be at the necessary high level, namely because of the lack of qualified specialists in the system.

Our fears are that with this funding, under the new circumstances libraries will be forced to turn into archives for preserving of materials and will not be able to meet the new demands for modern ways of service, and to provide more useful information.

All problems stated above and many other pending questions in Bulgarian legislation, concerning the whole library system, could be resolved only if we make common efforts and actions and speak up about the real situation of all kinds of libraries in Bulgaria. We are grateful that ULISO initiated a public discussion on the current issues in cultural policy and we hope it to grow, involving people of art and experts in the field of culture...

We call upon our legislators to follow the model of European and world legislature in the sphere of library and information service, and thus libraries will be able to find their right place in the contemporary democratic society. We hope to have an adequate acts, regulating the main principles of library management and ensuring effective implementation of our professional work, and to preserve our Bulgarian library system strong, coherent, well organized and funded.

Miroslava Katsarova - Director

Prof. Boyan Penev Library - Razgrad