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Review Article

Bulgarian libraries yesterday and today

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This publication presents a short review of the establishment, construction and development of the library network in Bulgaria. It emphasizes on the formation of community centers (chitalishte) and their libraries – a distinctive and democratic Bulgarian institution, which does not exist anywhere else in the world.

It presents the current status of the Bulgarian libraries; the modern library system; the legal regulations; the rules and standards applicable to the library activities and processes; the library activities of the public libraries and the services they provide to the consumers; the forms of work with readers. Special attention is paid to the technological innovations and services provided by the Bulgarian libraries nowadays, in order to be a successful mediator in the process of gaining knowledge in the modern information society.

Key words: Bulgaria, community centers (chitalishte), libraries, library legislation, library activity, innovative library services

INTRODUCTION

Bulgaria is the oldest country in Europe (established in 681 AC) with centuries-old traditions and solid experience in library and bibliography science.

The first libraries in Bulgaria and in the other European medieval countries are established around the spiritual centers (the monasteries) and the ruler's courts.

References to the existence of extremely rich library in the court of King Simeon who ruled the First Bulgarian Empire from 893 to 927 AC are made in plenty of medieval documents, including Izbornik of Prince Svetoslav of 1073, etc.

The manuscripts decorated with miniatures being part of the private royal library of the ruler of the Second Bulgarian Empire Ivan Aleksandar (1331 – 1371 AC) are especially valuable. These are the Constantine Manasses Chronicle created around 1345 (kept in the Library of the Vatican), the London Gospel of 1356 (now in the British Museum and Library), and the Tomic Psalter of the same time (now in the Moscow Museum of History).

Rila and Bachkovo Monasteries are important literary centers (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Rila Monastery

The destiny of the Bulgarian state is changing. At the end of the 14th century, it falls under the reign of the Turks and loses its political independence and the possibility to develop its letters.

We witness another upsurge in literature, establishment and development of libraries again in the 19th century with the opening of the first libraries at schools. One of the most significant school libraries of this period is the library in the class school in Gabrovo found in 1835. School libraries are our first secular libraries of public nature, although they are initially intended for the students and the teachers. Gradually,

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school libraries become public. Graduates who are interested in the novelties in public life, politics and technology also start visiting them. Such library, called “a common room”, is opened in the town of Tryavna in 1847, in the town of Lom in 1848, etc.

COMMUNITY CENTER LIBRARIES

A new era in the development of the library science across Bulgaria occurs with the establishment of the first community centers.

Bulgarian community centers are unique and one of a kind institutions across the world. Established during the period of the Bulgarian National Revival (the beginning of 19th century 1878 r.), they are the major institution for gaining, preservation and dissemination of knowledge and cultural values. Through their multiple events: public lectures, drama performances, creation of libraries and reading rooms, organization of schools, etc., they constantly enhance the cultural level of Bulgarians and create conditions for gaining knowledge, for teaching patriotism.

In community centers – these first democratic institutions existing in almost all Bulgarian cities, villages and even neighbourhoods, the spiritual and material culture of Bulgarians is raised. Community centers are not only cultural and educational institutions, but also clubs where Bulgarians, regardless of their social status, gather together to discuss and exchange thoughts on public matters of local or national interest.

With the organization of evening and Sunday schools, libraries and reading rooms, lectures, they are a kind of adult schools. As education centers, they are partisans and spreaders of the Bulgarian literature. By their example, later on the women societies were born.

The first three Bulgarian community centers in the towns of Svishtov, Lom and Shumen were found in 1856 (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The Community Center in the town of Svishtov

Tsanko Tsvetanov – an imminent Bulgarian librarian, gives a very precise definition of community centers (Tsvetanov, 1956) – “They have some broader tasks, but the library, reading, the reader is still their major component, to which they are named – chitalishta, which literally means a place where to read, or in other words – a library.” Library stock is collected with donations of the community members and public-spirited Bulgarians who live abroad.

Due to the high illiteracy rate in Bulgaria until the Liberation in 1878, printed editions are most often read aloud by teachers or other smart people, and many of the community center visitors are listeners.

Our library science after the Liberation of Bulgaria is developed on the basis of these community center libraries of the National Revival era. District libraries and later on, regional libraries are established.

Community centers and community center libraries exist even today, both in big cities and in smaller towns and villages as well. According to the Register of National Community Centers, as at 25.11.2021, 3711 community centers exist (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Service of children – users of small community center library (village of Nova Mahala)

TYPES OF LIBRARIES TODAY

As Modern library system in Bulgaria is as follows:

- Big scientific libraries: National Library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”; Central Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Science (BAS) with its 50 libraries to institutes, centers and specialized units; Central Agricultural Library; Central Medical Library

- University libraries

- Regional libraries

- Municipal libraries

- Community center libraries

- School libraries

- Libraries to ministries, other institutions and organizations (including in the private sector)

Libraries in Bulgaria are public, i.e. the access to them is unlimited for all Bulgarian citizens, as well as for foreign citizens temporarily residing in Bulgaria.

The access to libraries and the services they provide is differentiated only in terms to the libraries of ministries and other government authorities, and to school libraries and those in hospitals, prisons and private production companies and firms (Figure 4).



Figure 4. National Library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”

Legal regulations of libraries

Library legislation in Bulgaria has a long history and is subject to many changes in line with the political, public and cultural changes in the country since the end of the 19th century until nowadays.

Today, the key legal regulations in the library sector are: Law on Public Libraries (LPL), effective from 06.07.2009, and Standard of Library and Information Service.

The governing principles of LPL refer to:

- the legal provisions for the establishment, types, functions, management and funding of public libraries in the Republic of Bulgaria;
- Setting out the requirements that a public library should meet, such as opening and closing, funding, management and interaction within the national network of public libraries.

The Law set defines the types of library services for citizens, being differentiated as main and specialized services, which are provided free of charge and for consideration. The Law provides for a funding model of different types of public libraries through the introduction of alternative funding. A system of requirements to the professional qualification of the public library staff is established, in accordance with the major trends in the European libraries.

The Law is aimed at:

- Establishing stability in the library sector;
- Ensuring that libraries operate in synergy with modern trends and models;
- Ensuring that libraries are relevant to the public information needs and interests of the citizens;
- Expanding the principles of democracy in the public libraries;
- Even more active cooperation in the field of information, storage, protection and presentation of the cultural heritage.

The Law further establishes a Standard of Library Information Service – a new type of regulatory document for the Bulgarian libraries. The Standard sets out the necessary quantitative and qualitative criteria for funding and assessment of the activity of the public libraries. It determines indicators and parameters to measure the efficiency of library activity in the National Library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”, regional,

municipal and community center libraries. To the opinion of an expert from the Ministry of Culture: “The Standard gives citizens the opportunity to have equal and free access to library and information service. Furthermore, it ensures minimum resources for libraries to enable them performing their functions as set out in the Law on Public Libraries.”

Law on compulsory deposition of copies of printed editions and other works, implementing regulations: This law is one of the oldest laws within the system of the Bulgarian library legislation. The first Law on Depositing Printed Editions in National Libraries is adopted and enacted by Decree No 9 of 10.02.1897 of the Bulgarian ruler – Prince Ferdinand (1897 – 1918) and is promulgated. The system of compulsory depositing, changes during the years in terms of the number of copies and the number of libraries that receive them.

The now existing law is enforced on 01.01.2001 and is last amended in February 2019. It sets out the terms and conditions for depositing printed editions and other works in the National Library “St. St. Cyril and Methodius”. It applies to works that are created and circulated in the country or are relevant to the country, with view of being retained as part of the national cultural heritage. Furthermore, the Law provides for the terms and conditions for announcing information to the distributors of periodic printed editions and media service providers.

The Implementing Regulations to this Law defines the objects and subjects of compulsory depositing, the requirements to the compulsory copies and the terms and conditions for their depositing, distribution of compulsory copies among the libraries in the country, and the time periods and costs for depositing.

Ordinance on the storage, use and disposal of documents from the library stock: This Ordinance sets out the requirements to the acquisition and registration of library documents, stocktaking of libraries, and the obligations of librarians and the users, respectively, for safekeeping the library documents.

Standardization and standards in libraries

Bulgaria has rich experience in the development, harmonization and application of standards.

The Bulgarian national standardization system is established and starts its development in 1938 r. Today, national standardization activities are carried out by the Bulgarian Institute for Standardization (BIS). It is an active and full member of the International Standardization Organization (ISO); International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC); International Telecommunication Union (ITU); European Committee for Standardization (CEN); European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization (CENELEC) and European Telecommunications Standards Institute (ETSI).

The work related to the development of the Bulgarian standards and their harmonization with the European and the international standards is performed by the working bodies of BIS – the Technical Committees (TC). Their members comprise manufacturers, users, traders, universities and research institutes, representatives of government authorities and agencies interested in the relevant field of standardization.

Bulgarian standards in the library area are developed and harmonized by TC-16 “Archive, library and information activity”. The technical committee is created by analogy with ISO’s TC-46 “Information and Documentation”.

The Technical Committee aims to ensure standardization in the field of archival, library and information activities of the Republic of Bulgaria and their compliance with internationally accepted standards and recommendations. In view of this, Technical Committee shall have the following duties and responsibilities:

1. To analyze the state of standardization in the Republic of Bulgaria and the actual needs of standards.
2. To analyze the state of standardization carried out by international institutions and countries that have achieved high growth in the respective areas.
3. To prepare medium-term and short-term programs for development of draft standards.
4. To organize and control the work on preparation of draft standards.
5. To discuss and adopt proposed draft standards and recommend them for approval by the Committee for Standardization and Metrology.
6. To participate in the discussion and adoption of international standards in the respective fields.
7. To assign, discuss and approve changes to the current standards.
8. To support contacts with foreign partners.
9. To support the implementation of agreed standards.
10. To develop supporting documents associated with standardized activities.

➤ Bulgarian Standards Harmonized with International Standards Developed by TC 46 / ISO “Information and Documentation”

- Standards relating to International Standard Numbers and Codes of Various Objects;
- Standards related to Preparing of Different Types of Documents;
- Standards in the Field of Library Statistics;
- Standards Relating to Requirements for Document Storage and Conditions for Preservation;
- Terminology Standards (standards-vocabularies);
- Standards relating to the Handling of Documents and Records in Electronic Environment;
- Standards relating to Quality of Library Activities;
- Standards for Transliteration (Krasteva, 2017).

For the time being, there are 216 standards in total that are developed, harmonized and applied in Bulgaria in the library field. In practice, they cover all areas of library activities.

LIBRARY ACTIVITY

Public libraries cover the richest audience in terms of its features. Practically, all community members within the territory where a public library is established are its uses. The features of the region in terms of demography, economy and culture have a footprint on the library’s priorities. Its activities, products and services are intended exactly for the needs of the respective community (Popova, 2019).

Notwithstanding the library activities are divided into different structural and functional units (departments; sectors), with view of the scope and the specificity of the respective libraries, they currently comprise:

- Compiling of library documents;
- Analytical and synthetic processing of library documents – cataloguing; indexing; annotation; word processing (translations, references, scientific, styling and bibliographic editing, correction and prepress);
- International interlibrary and interlibrary book exchange;
- Organization and protection of library stock;
- Reference-bibliographic and information service;
- Service of users (reading room; lending section; including remote access of users to library documents);
- Maintaining local network and computer systems.

On the basis of abovementioned activities, the respective services are provided to users:

- Search in electronic and traditional catalogues;
- Use of library documents in reading rooms;
- Lending books for use at home;
- Reference-bibliographic and information service;
- Preparing bulletins with updated information;
- Interlibrary and international interlibrary book exchange;
- Sending documents electronically;
- Adapted services for people with disabilities;
- Access to online databases and other electronic resources, including of the library;
- Organization of clubs, lectures, summer readings, etc.
- Use of computer and multiplication equipment.

Forms of work with readers

There are three forms of work with readers implemented in the Bulgarian libraries:

Mass: Mass forms of service comprise relatively unregulated ensemble of users. The number and quality of the audience are not determined; the audience is open to new users. It is not sustainable in time. Separate categories of users to whom the library services are aimed can be distinguished within this audience.

Group: Main forms of group work are

- Club forms of work
- Educational, training and qualification initiatives
- Discussion forms and forums
- Literature readings, quizzes and evenings, and larger-scale initiatives
- Contests
- Lessons and lectures

Quite often, group work is practiced with children and young people groups.

Many libraries (both community center libraries in smaller towns and villages, and municipal and regional libraries) organise summer readings for children – outdoors and in the library buildings. During the summer holidays the children read; listen to fairytales read by the librarian; draw; play; prepare dramatic performances and plays.

An innovative form implemented by Regional Library “Zahariy Knyazheski” – city of Stara Zagora, is to organise programming workshops using the Finch robot. The robot is small and the program it is controlled with is accessible for children. This is a good opportunity enabling children at the age of 6 – 12 years to make their first steps in programming in an interesting and amusing manner.

To its youngest readers, the library offers activities with the Bee bot mini-robot (“the smart bee”).

These activities are appropriate for training of children at the age of 4 to 7 years. The control of the bee bot is quite simple, takes into account the specificities of the early child age, and comprises a few switches. Thus the children can easily study programming by setting algorithms for making specific movements and determining the direction of movement across the playing board, and the bee bot moves with lighting and sound signals.

Individual: It corresponds to the abilities of the user to adequately use the types of sources, while building-up their reading and information culture.

Innovations in the 21st century

The most common innovations implemented by the Bulgarian public libraries comprise:

- Organization of free access to collections;
- Use of the “project-based management” approach, which gives the library and other specialists the opportunity to perform both functional activities and activities related to the strategic development of the library;
- Development and regular update of their websites;
- Automation of library processes through integrated systems by maintaining freely accessible multilingual catalogue;
- Establishment of Computer Service Provision Department (or Technical Resources and Services Department) within their organization chart that contribute to their technical development and supports services in a computer and technological center;

- Ensuring secure 24/7 access to their electronic resources both in and out the internet network;

- Design and development of own digital libraries with various collections;

- Establishment of infrastructure, development and maintenance of online platforms with books for blind across the country, as well as guides for readers with special educational needs;

- Introduction of systems for access control, registration of readers and management of library and technological services via multifunctional PVC reader cards with radio-frequency identification;

- Organization of trainings on information competences through physical and virtual workshops.

In addition to technological innovations, some Bulgarian libraries offer various innovative services as well.

Library therapy is a therapeutic method that has proved to be beneficial for people suffering mental disorders, people in good medical conditions but in difficult periods of life – loss of a close person, divorce, loneliness, sense of rejection or isolation, children and teenagers who have problems at school or with their social contacts (Eftimova et al, 2021).

Regional Library “Zahariy Knyazheski” – city of Stara Zagora, offers the innovative service “appointment with library therapist” or “library therapy consultation”. It is targeted at foster families and children at risk (children and adults) who need support in overcoming specific life situations or personality crises.

The service “library therapy consultation” provides citizens with special attention, enough time to share the problem they are concerned of, conversation confidentiality, and a book selected for them personally.

Library therapists of the library:

- Are good library specialists;
- Have been additionally trained to provide library therapy consultations;
- Have mastered specific library therapy techniques to provide support to people who are in crisis;
- Have plenty of titles available dealing with various issues of life;
- Successfully orient themselves within the great number of books and the huge amount of information.

The team of library consultants selects books, the plot and characters of which correspond to the spirits and the problems of the relevant user who has sought their assistance. Thus, the reader may find the nature of their problem by themselves and analyse it. Furthermore, they see that there are other people with similar concerns and may find appropriate solution.

In 2017 Regional Library “Peyo Yavorov” – city of Burgas, won the prestigious international distinction of Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL) for its new educational program aimed at environment protection. It is based on the

use of 3D printer provided free of charge by Global Libraries Foundation – Bulgaria. The introduction of advanced technologies inspires hundreds of children to collect plastic wastes, which are then recycled and used for the creation of 3D educational models (Figure 5).



Figure 5. The recently renovated library in the city of Burgas

DISCUSSION

A great number of technological innovations in libraries during the last two years have been driven by the COVID – 19 pandemic. We can give as an example the new service of Regional Library “Stilyan Chilingirov” – city of Shumen, and Regional Library “Pencho Slaveykov” – city of Varna. They offer their readers the opportunity to loan books for home remotely and to return them at any time convenient for them, irrespective the working hours of the institutions. This service is possible with the external book loan and return stations installed at the central entrances of the libraries.

The book return station is a box where the reader drops the books they want to return to the library and on the next day these books are deleted from their reader’s card.

The book loan station (library automatic machine) comprises of programmable boxes each with electronic code lock. After making a request to the library by email or by phone, the reader receives sms-message with box number and access code. Then they should take the requested books and empty the box within 24 hours. The library automatic machine is equipped with QR quick access codes to the email or phone to request books.

CONCLUSION

We can make the following conclusion:

Today, in addition to the traditional library services, the

Bulgarian libraries deploy non-traditional innovative methods for meeting the needs of their users in terms of information, knowledge and meaningful spending of leisure time. Modern libraries make huge efforts to implement policies that will bring them closer to all generations, irrespective of their interests. The new times we live in require new operational rules – establishment of close connections and interrelationships in the field of the economic and social development and life-long learning of people at local, national, regional and global level. Libraries – as democratic institutions, are called to be the driver of the society that will inspire larger participation of citizens in the governance and will increase their social responsibility in the decision-making processes.

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