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## **NECESSITY AND SPECIFIC CONDITIONS IN APPLYING THE BOOKS IN PRINT SYSTEM IN BULGARIA**

There is a Bulgarian saying: *It is easier to catch fish in muddy waters*. But when there are too many fishermen finally the fish itself runs out. The overthrow of the totalitarian model led most of the former socialist countries across the muddy water. Some of them proved to have wiser navigators, swam out of the muddy water and stepped on the promised European shore. Bulgaria's little boat is still only steering towards it...

I understand one may find this introduction a little strange as I have been invited to talk on the necessity of information tools for the Bulgarian book sector. But I feel I need not discuss necessity as such. I would rather talk about the recognized necessity, which is a prerequisite for the success of any venture, even when society lacks the resources to address a specific need. Here I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the cordial support of the Council of Europe and personally to Mrs. Vera Boltho, Head of Cultural Policy and Action Division, Mr. Giuseppe Vitiello, Special Adviser at the "Books and Archives" Programme and Mr. Ingo-Eric M. Schmidt-Braul, President of IBA. Without their active cooperation our first step towards modern information provision for the Bulgarian book sector would not have been possible.

In Bulgaria, as in other East European countries after the democratic changes in 1989, the withdrawal of the state from the function of being in charge of everything, including publishing, caused an immediate boom in books. The burst in bookpublishing looked particularly impressive compared to other waning sectors of the economy. It was due above all to the increase in demand and respectively offer for satisfying the decades long spiritual hunger of the nation. Only in a year or two there sprang more than a thousand private publishers which quickly overwhelmed the existing dozens of state owned dinosaurs. As early as 1992-93 private publishing was responsible for up to 90% of the book production. The peak was in 1993 when 55 million copies were produced and presumably sold. In a country with a population of about 8 million this could safely be described as a veritable trade boom. But this is also where the good consequences of decentralization and state-withdrawal from publishing end. In 1995 the total number of copies fell to 18 million, and today even a print run of 2000 is considered by many publishers as risky. The steep curve upwards (for the period '89 -'93) and downwards (from '93 to '97) has its good economic reasons. The catastrophic devaluation of the national currency and impoverisation of the Bulgarian citizens as a result of a criminal policy, especially in the beginning of this year when the average salary hardly reached a few dollars, inevitably pushed the cultural needs to the last possible place. The price of the book became unaffordable even for the more well off among the poor. After a short-lived boom bookpublishing and bookselling were among the first hit by the crisis.

Today, after the first successful steps of the government of the UDF and the restarting of the reform especially in the field of culture, the book sector has taken a first lifesaving breath. The average income has gone up and the possibilities for the book trade have somewhat increased as well. But the collapse has hardly been overcome. Once again all the actors along the book chain are facing the tough dilemma - who will survive in the conditions of reduced demand and overblown offer. For the first time in the last few years however, the understanding has been

reached that order in the state and in the market does not contradict success. The drastic reduction of print runs and the hard competition in the declining bookselling make clear the necessity of a serious market-oriented information tool which books in print-catalogues have proved to be in the developed countries.

Briefly, the factors that have led to the recognition of this necessity are:

- 1) The wavering of state monopoly in publishing after 1989;
- 2) The landslide appearance of numerous private publishers;
- 3) Free but chaotic offering of new books without serious analysis of market tendencies;
- 4) The collapse of the centralized bookselling network without any proper alternative in its place;
- 5) Complete destabilization of the country's economy, decline in the income and respectively in the consumer interest to the book;
- 6) Lack of any legislative protection for the book which is burdened with heavy taxes.

Today there is hardly a publisher in Bulgaria who is not suffering from the information chaos and lack of reliable and updated data on books. In the preparation of the pilot version of the books in print catalogue "Bulgarian Books 1997" in both printed and CD-ROM form, the willingness for cooperation became apparent among all interested parties. I hope this trend is stable and irreversible. Bulgarian publishers are well aware of the fact that the BIP catalogue will not by itself solve all the problems in the book sector. But there is a common conviction that it is an indispensable tool for its consolidation. The sooner its advantages are acknowledged by all book related professionals, the sooner "market order" will replace the present chaos. The sooner a modern system of book distribution will be installed to allow the publishers analysis-based strategies in which the BIP catalogue will play a vital part. And the sooner we will see the end of the "shady" book economy which is devoid of any legitimacy among the professionals. Practice has already proved the positive stabilizing effect of BIP catalogues on the development of national book economies, especially in countries where the former centralized bookselling system no longer exists.

Last but not least, we hope the Books in Print system in Bulgaria will have a beneficial effect on the European integration of the local book market and in the long run will increase of the Bulgarian share in the international book exchange. I could hardly express better the importance we attribute to it than our consultant, the President of IBA, Mr. Schmidt-Braul did in his introductory note: "this first edition of Bulgarian Books in Print catalogues marks the beginning of a new era in the Bulgarian book community".

The introduction of the Books in print system in any country involves adherence to the world standards but is also subject to the specific needs of the national book sector. In Bulgaria at present there is a decline in the demand and the print runs, the book distribution is functioning badly, the new titles are exhibited mainly out in the street on stalls with a life of barely a week to one month and the state budget can hardly provide any resources for the support of bookpublishing and bookselling. In that situation the BIP catalogue could turn out a major tool for the involvement of a customer neglected in the last few years - the public libraries. There are almost 8000 of them in the country but unfortunately most of them are at present lacking the financial means to acquire new books. On the other hand, despite the growth in the last few years, the landscape of publishing shows serious white areas. A new generation of readers is going to miss valuable works in the fields of literary and cultural heritage, children's classics, philosophy, history, Christianity. In the difficult transition period when the market cannot

support projects of long-term cultural policy, the only reasonable alternative we see is the creation of a National Book Fund, which will collect money both from the budget and from outside sources. Its aim will be to support the final product - the book or series of books - by sponsoring their acquisition by the libraries. The libraries will be able to order titles from the catalogue and will receive 1-3 copies free. Thus we hope to achieve at least four goals:

- 1) To fill in the library collections with quality literature;
- 2) To encourage the publication of books in areas that have not been covered sufficiently by the market-oriented publishing in the last years;
- 3) To bridge the gap and ensure continuity in the passing over of traditional and important national and world cultural values;
- 4) To help libraries shift their policies from being a passive consumer, relying mainly on the deposit and donations, to acting as an interested and in future subsistent customer of the publishers.

Every beginning is not easy and needs to be supported. We gratefully acknowledge the methodological guidance and the full financial backing of the Council of Europe for the pilot edition of a Bulgarian BIP catalogue. It was produced in close cooperation with the National Library and the National ISBN Agency. The catalogue contains 2213 titles from 425 publishers. We are aware of its incompleteness and inevitable inaccuracies. Yet we are offering it to the book community with the hope of receiving as many criticisms and suggestions as possible. The strict timetable, the absence of a reliable database and experience in compiling information from various sources not only account for most of the shortcomings but, more importantly, point to the difficulties that need to be addressed and overcome.

We have already started the preparation of the catalogue "Bulgarian books 1998" - larger both in scope and print run. In order to turn it into a practical and efficient information tool we will need the constant cooperation of the publishers, the booksellers, the librarians, all the professionals that are tied to the fate of the Bulgarian book.

And we are confident we will get it.

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