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GOVERNMENTS LOVE BOOKS (ELECTRONIC BOOKS, TOO!)

Another line of cooperation with the Council of Europe has been the program **Governments love books (electronic books, too!)** undertaken by the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the Association of German publishers and booksellers. It includes a review of the Bulgarian book policy, initiated by the report of Mr. David Kingham. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the British expert for his unbiased and wide-ranging view on the present situation, for his good intentioned approach and his helpful recommendations.

I felt deeply pleased with Mr. Kingham's assessment of the possibilities of the Bulgarian book sector. I quote: *"Bulgaria has all the ingredients of a successful book industry, a high level of literacy, a strong tradition of book authorship, readership and ownership and entrepreneurs willing to take risks in a very difficult economic climate."*

Bulgarian publishers do not expect "allowances" from the state, but they have the right to expect a jointly designed national policy. A policy, which takes into account the various cultural and economic aspects of the book sector and its free resources for integration with the respective European and world structures.

One of the main recommendations in the report is *"that a National Book Council be set up to draw up a National Book Policy, to introduce a Book Law and to monitor and advise on all matters relating to the book"*. The Ministry of Culture, the National Book Centre are already in the process of constituting such a council. Respected and responsible figures from the book community and the state administration will be invited to sit on that panel. I hope the National Book Council will start its work very soon so that we shall have more and varied opinions, taking into account the interests of as wide circle of people as possible.

The drawing up and the carrying out in practice of a National Book Policy we see as a task more difficult and more time-consuming. It relates not only to the state and regional administrations, but also to the society as a whole. Given the harsh economic conditions in which we have to realise the changes, it is only natural, that we concentrate first of all on the national priorities. The National Book Centre aims at uniting the efforts of leading Bulgarian literary and art scholars, historians, philosophers, theologians, and of course publishers in producing a multi-volume series, presenting the fundamentals of the Bulgarian written culture through the centuries and up to the present. The idea is to support not so much the publishing project, but the books themselves by offering them to the libraries in the country free of charge.

Let me point out one more very serious problem – the book distribution. The state bookselling chain collapsed under pressures of the free market. The new private publishers, on the other hand, did not manage to amass the necessary capital, or to

train new sellers adapted to the changed conditions. It is evident that the book industry will be greatly threatened if we do not find ways to stimulate one of its most important components – the adequate market. At present we unfortunately do not possess sufficiently accurate and reliable statistics on the condition of the actual book market. That is why I accept fully the recommendation in the report that *“the Council of Europe could encourage the co-ordination of a programme for the setting-up of bookshops”*. A professional survey would provide concrete details of the book distribution picture and the training of personnel would be very helpful for the building up of a distribution network comparable to contemporary standards.

On the 16 and 17 of November last year the First National Conference for the Book was held at the National Palace of Culture in Sofia. It was organised by the National Book Centre in cooperation with the Association of Bulgarian Publishers and The Soros Center for the Arts. The participants: publishers, booksellers, translators, writers, printers, librarians and scholars - discussed the various problems and expressed their deep concern for the survival of the Bulgarian book. The conference was approved as a helpful initiative to improve relations and provide better awareness inside the book community. The publication of the materials from its work is under way. The Conference adopted a final document, a Declaration which was publicised by the media and was sent to the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister, the Chairman of the National Assembly, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Culture and Media, as well as to other authorities and organisations.

The Declaration points out the cultural and social value of the book. It underlines its importance for the literacy and intellectual development, for personality building and creation of positive civic motivation. The economic aspects of the book are also seen as vital both the cultural sector and for the society in general. On behalf of the Bulgarian book community, the Declaration appeals for the formation of a coherent national book policy and suggests that:

- The Ministry of Culture set up a National Book Council which would advise the government on important issues connected with the book;
- The National Book Council offer a national book policy and a national programme for the book which would be open to public debate;
- Actions are taken for the fulfillment of obligations under international agreements which have been signed by Bulgaria;
- A reduction of VAT for books is introduced;
- Information tools are developed and introduced along the book chain;
- A national programme for easier access to books and reading is promoted, including support for libraries and book selling;
- Introduction of digital technologies in publishing is encouraged and supported;
- A state funding is provided for the publication of Bulgarian and world literary and scientific classical works;
- Legislation is reviewed and changes are suggested where needed with the aim of harmonisation with the European best practices and the drawing of a unifying Law for the Book.

Just like any other sector in transition, the book sector in Bulgaria has as many problems as there are participants in it. So it is important that we and our European colleagues see the problems in their real light. This will mean that we could jointly

search for and find the necessary solutions. This will mean that we are coming more and more close to the practical European integration.

Press conference given jointly by the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the German Publishers and Book Traders Association on the initiative "Governments love books (electronic books, too!)", relating to the Bulgarian book policy – International Book Fair, Frankfurt, 08.10.1998.