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**PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR THE BULGARIAN BOOK IN
THE CONTEXT OF BALKAN AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dear Colleagues,

Since the unification of Europe started, the word *integration* came into fashion. The term *joint-project* acquired an almost magical force, especially as regards the financial backing. And this would have been a wonderful development, if integration were acknowledged not only in its leading economic dimension, but also in its cultural-historical aspects. Without them, integration - instead of being a way to the long-desired free community of peoples - is easily turned into a profitable arena for smart bureaucrats - European and our own.

We in the Balkans have been for centuries in the same boat, or in the same yoke, for that matter. But, alas!, we have too often acted like the eagle, the crab and the fish from the well-known fable. For centuries our historical fates have been woven together and any attempt to study them apart would be doomed to failure in advance. Unfortunately, in the past as well as even today, the fire and sword have been the tailors of our destinies. And those who wrote the histories more than often followed in the footsteps of the political and military strongmen of the day, instead of judging fairly the present or the near past.

Even a brief comparison between the works of the historians and the writers will convince us that the true history can be found not so much in the official volumes of science, but in the words of the Balkan classics. The books, where these words are kept, are the indestructible bridges between our peoples. It is over these bridges that the path lies for any one with the mission of unification.

Here, on the Balkans, we have a good saying: If you need help, provide it yourself, and then God will help you, too. Today we have the real opportunity to build together the foundations of an integrating Balkan book policy. There is no doubt that the more our book communities get together, the more understandable our common problems will become and the easier it will be to overcome the differences between us.

Our kind hosts' initiative is a very important step towards getting to know each other better. It can set the basis for our future common activities. At this stage we should get a clearer picture of the book situation in each country, to exchange experience and try to help each other where possible. For this purpose I shall try to present to your attention a general picture of the Bulgarian book sector from the time of the change in 1989 to day.

For the last nine years bookpublishing developed in Bulgaria on its own. Despite the lack of consistent protective state policy. Despite the burden of high taxes. Despite the throwing out of the

book from the bookshop literally out in the street, on makeshift stalls. The bookpublishing went its harsh way to existing on market principles without the supervision of the state. Today we can say that the publishing sector does not need any serious reform. But this is not true of the entire book sector. It has its old unsolved problems and - alas! - some newly created ones. Before I focus your attention on them, let me briefly go back to their roots.

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 **upward** (for the period '89 - '93) and **downward** (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 1997 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. So, after a short-lived boom, bookpublishing and bookselling were among the first hit by the crisis.

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 took 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.

Ever since it was established in 1991 as an autonomous legal person and a non-commercial organisation within the Ministry of Culture, the National Book Centre has set as one of its main tasks to promote and support the opening-up of the Bulgarian book scene to the Balkan, European and world cultural life, to stimulate the international exchange of ideas and experience through the book.

An important step in this direction was the revival of the Sofia International Book Fair, which is held every two years. After its 1993 and 1995 editions it became clear that efforts were needed to build up a system of accumulation, processing and dissemination of information about books. In this we received understanding and support from the Council of Europe.

In November 1996 a Seminar was held in the city of Plovdiv, dedicated to the “Information Tools for the Book Community”. Leading Bulgarian publishers, librarians and booksellers took part. The general conclusion was that the further introduction of the ISBN and the creation of a national Books-in-print catalogue was essential for the development of the Bulgarian book sector at this stage. A decision was made to prepare a pilot edition of a BIP catalogue as a follow-up activity after the seminar.

In 1997 the National Book Centre, in close collaboration with the National Library, prepared and published a pilot version of a BIP catalogue “Bulgarian Books 1997” in both printed and CD-ROM format, each in 500 copies. The edition was presented at the book fairs in Frankfurt (October 1997) where a special session was organised by the CE, and in Sofia (November 1997) and was met very favourably.

Along with the activity for the presentation and promotion of this pilot edition, we started work on the more complete catalogue for 1998 which is to be realised in printed and CD-ROM format, and will also be available on the Internet.

In the preparation of the books-in-print catalogue “Bulgarian Books 1998”, 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 creation and utilisation of 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. 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.

Dear colleagues,

We are all aware of the invasion of the Internet and the new communication technologies in all spheres of our life. This makes the information vacuum in the Balkan book sector even more inadequate. European countries like Germany, Hungary, Poland, and the Check Republic, have already developed unified databases serving the publishing and the book market on national level. If we unite our efforts and start working together on the information tools for the book sector in our countries, in a year or two we could be able to offer a Balkan web-page with a joint Books-in-Print catalogue, and with other various information on the Balkan book sector.

The Bulgarian National Book Centre is ready to become a coordinator in such a joint project. We would be pleased to discuss any suggestions for its preparation and realization.

The interest towards the literature of the neighbouring countries has been very high in Bulgaria. Dozens of works by Balkan writers has been translated and published in Bulgarian. But in the last few years the market pressure on the serious book has had an unfavourable influence in this respect as well. I expect that similar tendencies are noted in the most of the countries in our region. That is why I feel we should think, along with the information and book exchange, on the creation of conditions for permanent presentation of the national literatures in each of our countries. A wonderful example in this respect is the Balkanika Foundation, which combines the efforts of seven Balkan publishing houses. Its President Nikolay Stoyanov will acquaint you with its aims and the results achieved so far at one of our next meetings. I would like to draw your attention to the possibility of designing a Balkan cultural agreement in this field. A part of the state subsidy for the book publishing in each country (where they exist) could be put aside for the promotion of Balkan literatures.

I am convinced that if we jointly prepare a long-term programme for the presentation of our literatures we will meet with the understanding and support of our governments. And once the programme has official public scope and support, it will be very likely that we will receive financial backing from international organisations and other interested institutions or persons. But all this will not be possible if we do not have a regular information exchange about the literary developments.

That is why I feel that now the moment is suitable to set up a periodical publication in the respective language editions. There is no need to reinvent the bicycle. The magazine UNESCO Courier is a good example. We could address the national commissions for UNESCO in each country with a proposal for a literature magazine **Balkan Courier** to be published twice a year under an international editorial board. In this way we can use the experience and the popularity of this existing prestigious publication and promote the literatures of the Balkans not only among our own countries but also throughout Europe and the world.

Dear colleagues,

I understand that to some of you my suggestions could seem impractical or even utopian. But we all as people devoted to the letters remember very well that in the beginning was the Word. And that somehow someone has to start somewhere. **So why not we - all of us present here?**

Thank you for your attention.

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