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RECENT ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL BOOK CENTRE WITH THE MINISTRY OF CULTURE OF THE REPUBLIC OF BULGARIA

The National Book Centre was set up in 1991 with the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Bulgaria by Act of the Council of Ministers. It is an independent juristic body with the following tasks:

- to support the publishing and the book sector in general,
- to carry out government programs in the field of books,
- to promote the opening-up of the Bulgarian book scene to the European cultural life and the international exchange of ideas and experience through the book,
- to encourage literary development and reading.

In the past years the NBC has supported over 500 publishers' projects for the publication of Bulgarian and translated works of cultural value.

The NBC works in close cooperation with the Association of the Bulgarian Publishers, The National Library, writers' and translators' organizations, leading publishers and related institutions.

The National Book Centre has been active co-organizer of the International Book Fair in Sofia which has been held every second year since 1993, as well as of the National Book Fairs that are organized annually in May and December. The NBC has also supported the presentation of Bulgarian books and literature at various international forums. For 1999 we are participating in the preparation of two major events:

- the Bulgarian presentation as a focus country at the Leipzig Book Fair (25-28 March),
- the Sofia International Book Fair in November.

For the last three years the NBC has been developing a program for the introduction of information tools for the book community with the support of the Council of Europe. It includes the building up of a database for a national books-in-print catalogue in printed and electronic form. In order to have a consistent national book policy and to support the book sector in the transition to market economy, we need a system of accumulation, processing and dissemination of information about books.

In November 1996 a Seminar was held in the city of Plovdiv, dedicated to this in which leading Bulgarian publishers, librarians and booksellers took part. A

recommendation was made to prepare a pilot edition of a BIP catalogue as a follow-up activity.

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 printed and CD-ROM format. The edition was presented at the book fairs in Frankfurt (October, 1997) where a special session was organized by the CE, and in Sofia (November, 1997) and was met with a very favorable reception. Along with the presentation and promotion of this pilot edition, we started work on a more complete catalogue which would also be available on the Internet.

For us it is clear that **it is neither possible nor necessary that the financial support of the CE should cover all the expenses of the project.** The work was directed to its gradual withdrawal from institutional support - both Bulgarian and international. The aim is to create conditions in medium term for the self sustained functioning of the catalogue. Obviously, this would depend most of all on the level of maturity of the book market. At the present critical conditions in the book industry and the general social and economic situation it would not be realistic to expect this earlier than after 3 to 5 years. More pessimistic timetables are also possible.

On the other hand, the **withdrawal of outside support for the project at this stage would practically discontinue it.** This would mean the waste of all efforts up to now. Probably after a period of time someone will have to start over the work all over again from the very beginning.

We hope that in the discussion it will be possible to make clear where and how support from the Council of Europe could be given.

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 advice 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 realize 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 program 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 organized 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 organizations.

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 suggest 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 program 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 program 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 harmonization 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.

Review of the National Book Policies, Council of Europe, Bucharest, 1999.