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REPORT

ON THE SEMINAR ON NATIONAL BOOK POLICY, BULGARIA, JUNE 18-24.

The seminar consisted of two days of presentations on the individual aspects of the Bulgarian book sector and two days of visits to libraries and bookshops in Sliven, Burgas and Varna. The event which will be described in the report of the National Book Center of Bulgaria, was excellently organized; publicity was provided by radio and tv coverage, interviews, and press conferences.

Since 1996 when the present writer had his first opportunity to familiarize himself with the Bulgarian book business, the sector has made noticeable progress: Publishers are successfully exploring new approaches to quality publishing and application of modern technology; a few (private) modern bookstores are now in existence, and they may serve as models for future development. Particularly important are the Helikon (Burgas) and Pismena (Sofia) bookstores.

It may be stated that the National Book Center has been playing a very important, positive role in stimulating the development of the book sector. The just established National Book Council will hopefully prove another major step forward.

Discussions and visits as well as the detailed presentations at the seminar lead to a number of conclusions:

- The major and most obvious problem is book distribution. There is no major wholesaler or book distributor. There are just a handful of (functioning) bookshops, and thus the difficulty is how to get the products of currently 2,200 publishers to the customers.

- *Bulgarian Books in Print* has just been mounted on the internet in a revised version. While being an excellent technical tool to promote book distribution, it will be of limited value as long as there are hardly any bookshops. The ubiquitous book-tables usually only deal with a very limited selection (perhaps 100 titles) of the latest publications; they buy directly from publishers, without any need for further information.

- The few advanced publishers and book sellers have in the meantime developed their own inhouse information systems on different platforms. They enter the bibliographic data themselves, are not compatible with each other and look at possible cooperation with some reluctance. There is therefore a problem with the acceptance of *BBiP* for practical purposes.

- Currently the *BBiP* uses bibliographic data from the National Library. While this is a (theoretically) very sound approach, it is obvious that the Library (like most other libraries) is too slow: They have to wait for their deposit copies from the publishers, they have no experience with the needs of the trade, and the advance publication information is difficult to update as it is again dependent on the cooperation of the publishers.

- The use of the bar code for the development of the book sector is indispensable. The few existing modern book shops cannot make full use of existing technology (EPOS system) as most publishers do not even print the ISBN on the reverse covers of their books (as the rule prescribes), not to speak of the bar code.

- There is still no Booksellers Association. Such an organization is indispensable in order to foster cooperation and coordinate the development of the trade.

- Practically all book sellers are self-taught. They learn on the job, experience many ups and downs, suffer substantial losses, until they eventually make it. Therefore a training programme would be of great importance.
- A major obstacle for the further development of the trade is the high rate of VAT (20%) for books. This leaves very little potential profit for the trade (which has no capital or reserves) and encourages a shadow economy.
- The current proposal for the revision of library legislation proposes 3 legal deposit copies (instead of 20); while this is certainly a realistic step, it means a major drain on library acquisitions. They need a budget increase in order to buy those publications that they received free of charge so far.

These conclusions lead to the following recommendations for further action:

- A programme for the improvement of the book-trade (more modern bookshops and outlets) is of very high priority.
- Training courses for booksellers and publishers (including internships) are needed.
- Cooperation and coordination regarding the *BBiP* is necessary. This will only be possible if the directory will be accepted by the commercial partners, and that means if it is customized to their needs, and if they are directly and responsibly involved. Otherwise the *BBiP* will grow into a kind of second national bibliography.
- The formation of a Booksellers Association would be the best way of coordinating the existing active and progressing forces.
- Publishers should be encouraged to print bar codes on their books (the ISBN bar code is free of charge!).
- Efforts to either abolish or reduce the current VAT rate on publications should be continued. The Polish model seems particularly adequate.
- Libraries should be compensated for their losses in legal deposit copies.
- As the book sector is still lacking much of its necessary infrastructure, there seems to be a need for professional regulations. In Germany and the UK the trade has a Code of Behaviour which regulates the form and conditions of business transactions etc. This seems preferable to a law as not administrators but book professionals would deal with a problem.
- A nationwide system of easy money transfer (e.g. credit cards) would have a positive impact on the book-trade.