



Information literacy in a multicultural society: the role of libraries in present Bulgaria

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Meeting:

94 — *The importance of information literacy for multicultural populations: needs, strategies, programs, and the role of libraries* — Information Literacy Section with Library Services to Multicultural Populations and the Special Interest Group on Indigenous Matters

Abstract:

The paper examines the resources of public libraries in present Bulgaria to establish information literacy for ethnic minorities and immigrants. Its aims are: to analyze the minority needs of skills and competencies for information literacy, to research the existing legal framework, to describe best practices of Bulgarian libraries. Paper presents a draft Strategy for achieving information literacy of minorities and immigrants in Bulgaria with regards to libraries. Its major highlights are strategic planning and resource provision, e.g. legislation activities, funding sources, the role of state and local authorities in partnership with NGOs, introduction of IT, human resource development.

1. Introduction

Our paper examines the resources of public libraries in present Bulgaria to establish information literacy for ethnic minorities and immigrants. We aim to analyze the minority needs of skills and competencies for information literacy; to research the existing legal framework; to describe best practices of Bulgarian libraries; and to outline a draft strategy for information literacy of minorities and immigrants.

2. Present Bulgaria as a Multicultural Society: Ethnic Minorities and Immigrants

About one fourth of the population in present Bulgaria are members of traditional ethnic minorities - Turks, Roma, Armenians, Jews, Russians, Wallachians, and others. The largest among these is the Turkish minority (9.4%, 746,664 people) living largely in North East and South East Bulgaria. The second largest ethnic community is the Roma minority (4.6%, 370,908 according to official statistics and around 700,000 people according to unofficial sources), which is scattered throughout the country, mainly living

in cities and distributed across geographic areas due to internal linguistic and cultural differences. Fewest among these cultural communities are Russians, Jews, Armenians, Wallachians, Sarakatsani (Karakachans), Tatars and others groups, who are also scattered throughout the territory of Bulgaria. They are socially integrated and obtain all civil rights and liberties. During the post-communist period, minorities established or restored their cultural associations, periodicals, and other institutions. (Chichikova 1999; Tomova 1995)

The Bulgarian Constitution (1991) along with certain laws approved Bulgaria as nation-state, a country where there are no statutory national minorities with collective rights. Legally, Bulgarian citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian are individuals who have full civil rights including the rights to education. In 1999, the Parliament ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM, 1999) and, in the last 20 years, Parliament has accepted fundamental laws that protect cultural communities' rights.

While the Public Education Act (1991) recognizes public (national, departmental and municipal) and private schools, it does not specifically mentioned schools of ethnic minorities where students might be taught in their mother tongue. If they wish, such communities can create private schools. The Public Education Act established the Mother Tongue as an elective subject in the 1st-8th grades; such education is provided in four hours of study per week. Amendments to the Public Education Act (2002) introduced mandatory pre-school training for children of all ethnic groups. Laws on Level of Education and General Education Minimum and Curriculum (1999) have transformed Mother Tongue education from an elective study to an optional subject, with state funding, which is taught in the 1st-12th grade. Law on Protection against Discrimination (2003) protect citizens irrespective of their origin, race, sex, religion, and cultural characteristics. (Deykova 2000; Nunev 2003)

In recent years the Bulgarian government has adopted several regulations governing the education of minorities. These include the Rules for application of the Public Education Act (1999); the Framework Programme for Integration of Roma into Bulgarian Society (1999, 2009); the National Strategy for Demographic Development of Bulgaria (2006-2020); a National Plan for Roma Inclusion, 2005-2015 (2008); Guidelines for the Integration of Children and Pupils from Minorities (2002); Guidelines for the Education of Children with Special Educational Needs and/or Chronic Diseases (2002); the Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Pupils from Ethnic Minorities (2004, revised 2010); the National Programme for Pre-School and School Education and Training, 2006-2015 (2006); the Program for Development of Education, Science and Youth of the GERB Party (2009); a Regulation of Assimilation of the Bulgarian Literary Language (2009); Guidelines for Implementation and Enforcement of Delegated Budgets (2009); and A List of Protected Schools and their Supplementary Budget Allocations (2009).

In the 1990s some educational experts in Mother Tongue education in Hebrew, Armenian, Turkish, Romani (1992) and in religion (Christianity and Islam) were appointed in the central administration and in education inspectorates in the countryside. Currently, experts with ethnic minorities' origin (Armenians, Jews, Roma, and Turks) are working in different departments of the Ministry. A particular department on Access to Education and Educational Environment was founded. A Centre for Educational

Integration of Children and Pupils from Ethnic Minorities (2005) and an Advisory Council on Educational Integration of Children and Pupils from Ethnic Minorities (2004) were established too.

In the 1990s the Mother Tongue as an optional subject was introduced in secondary schools. While the study of Mother Tongue is not introduced on pre-school level yet, there are some recent attempts trying to implement it. Some pilot kindergartens are supported by NGOs. These, for example, serve groups of Jewish and Armenian children in Sofia.

The main tasks on this level are focused on the Roma population. Bulgarian educational authorities aim to remove Roma children from the ghettos and place them in mixed kindergartens with training in Bulgarian language in order to facilitate their preparation for 1st grade. Although there are good practices (for example of the Romani Baht Foundation in 2002 in town of Samokov) so far this priority has not carried out. School principals and Bulgarian parents have been reluctant to accept Roma children in mixed kindergartens. Thus, educators have observed that Roma children experience a difficult adaptation into kindergartens and Roma students do not speak Bulgarian when they enter the 1st grade.

Minorities have free access in the public schools. In order to learn their mother tongue they have to apply to the principal and to gather a group of at least 8 people. In 1991-2001, the Mother Tongue was elective subject taught only in 1st-4th grade (primary level) and had depended too much on the availability of funding from the municipalities and the will of school principals. Since 2001, Mother Tongue education is an optional subject and its study has expanded to include 1st-12th grades, 4 hours per week, and such studies are funded from the school budgets. Teaching of other subjects is in Bulgarian.

About 19.5% of Turkish children (23,000 children) learn their mother tongue in school. Training is provided with legal documents and teaching materials. The largest number of pupils studying their mother tongues lives in the towns of Kardjali, Shoumen, Razgrad, Bourgas, Haskovo, Rouse, and Silistra. Such education is met with some difficulties. Many pupils who do not speak Bulgarian at home, cannot meet the requirements of the curriculum and drop out early or are sent in special schools. The number of teachers in Turkish is decreasing due to emigration to Turkey in the 1990s. Turkish is taught by non-specialists with retraining. Some school principals and teachers of Bulgarian origin encourage children to attend another foreign language groups, but exclude those interested in studying Turkish. School authorities do not control enrolling process. (Deykova 2000; Mehmed 2002)

Only 1% of Roma children who learn their mother tongue in school. This is related to the fact that 62% of Roma children do not attend school due to poverty, lack of interest, lack of motivation of the parents, or early marriage. About 70% of Roma pupils attend segregated schools in their neighborhoods or so called special schools (special institutions for teaching children with disabilities) where the level of education is low. These schools constitute over 20% of all Bulgarian schools. Only 6.1% of Roma children expressed their desire to study Romani as their Mother Tongue. 6.8% of Muslim Roma children would prefer to enroll in Turkish classes instead of Romani. The main problems

encountered teaching Romani as a Mother Tongue are: the existence of schools with segregation; lack of mechanisms for social inclusion; unequal access to education; early dropping out; and lack of teachers and textbooks. Instead of teaching Romani as a Mother Tongue in some schools Roma Folklore as an elective subject is taught. It attracts a significant number of children. (Nunev 2008b)

Currently Hebrew learners are 850 pupils. Not all of these students are Jewish since any parent can enrol their children in Hebrew language instruction. Since 1989, Israel and the Ronald Lauder Foundation have funded the study of Jewish language and culture at the 134th Elementary School in Sofia. There, both Jews and Bulgarians are studying. Some of the subjects are taught in Hebrew. And there are plans to extend this school into a high school. The main problems facing this training are a small number of children due to permanent emigration to Israel, and a shortage of textbooks. (Levy 2003)

286 pupils study Armenian in Sofia and Plovdiv. Today, many Armenians do not speak their own language and this has led to the lack of trained teachers. Similar problems are faced here, too: insufficient number of children; inadequate quality of teaching; and a lack of textbooks.

Romanian is taught as an optional subject in the open in specialized school with intensive study of Romanian language in Sofia (1999). About two-thirds of students are Aromanians. The others study Romanian as a foreign language. Wallahians, who live mainly along the Danube and the Timok rivers, do not learn Romanian as their Mother Tongue.

Greek as a Mother Tongue is taught as an optional subject in Sliven, where children of Sarakatsani (Karakachans) study.

Over the last decade a transformation in the field of migration has been observed. Bulgaria has been transformed from a home country to a place of transit migration. Many immigrants from the Middle East, Central Asia and Africa have settled in Bulgaria. Some of these immigrants have permanent residence; others have temporary permissions; a few are refugees. The problem of their social inclusion is currently on the national agenda. Authorities believe that this can be achieved by immigrants learning the official language of Bulgaria.

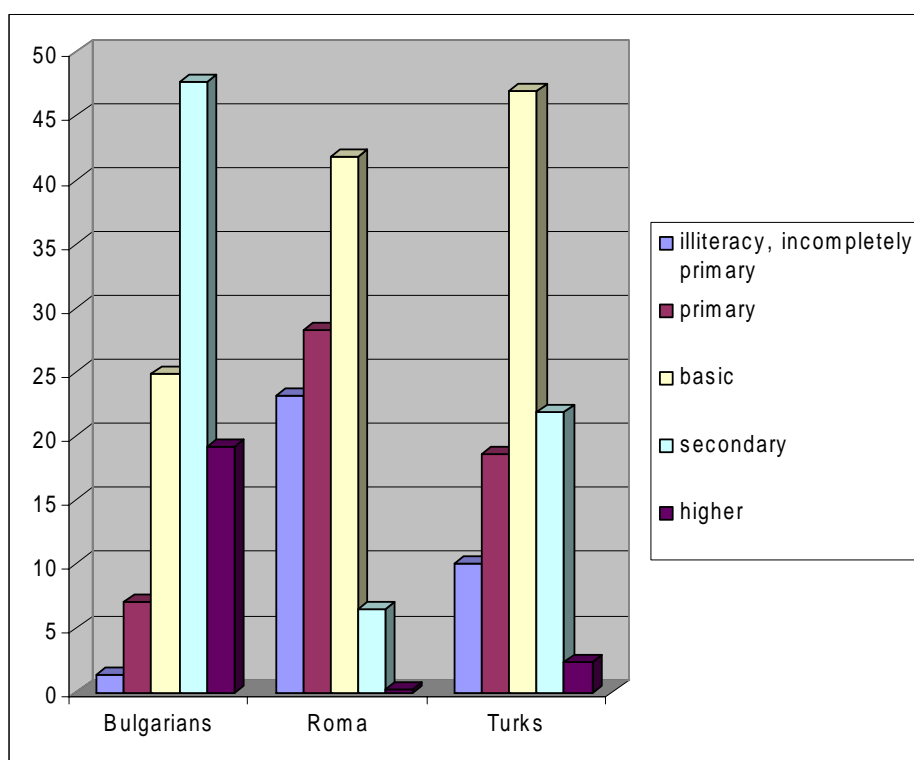
Today Bulgarian society is multiethnic and is gradually transforming into a multicultural society. Political nationalism is replacing an ethnic nationalism and social integration strategies are being built for all groups of population.

3. Ethnic Minorities and Immigrants in Bulgarian Public Libraries: Literacy and Reading

Bulgarian minorities differ in their numbers, professional occupations, educational levels and traditions, as well in their literacy.

Small minority groups (Russians, Armenians, and Jews) have their own cultural institutions and libraries. They have high literacy rates; around 100 %, which makes them totally bilingual; Jews and Armenians speak Bulgarian as their main language. Turks live as a compact group in North East and South East Bulgaria, regions dominated by this population. They are also bilingual but use the Bulgarian language at different levels of ability. Those who live in regions with compact Turkish populations, predominantly speaking in Turkish, have difficulties in communicating and writing in Bulgarian. Their literacy rate, on average, is lower than those of other minority groups.

Roma people have low literacy rates, low education levels, poor knowledge of the Bulgarian literary language, and lack reading skills. They leave school at primary level. This is due to their cultural traditions, the negative attitudes of parents towards education, poverty, remoteness from educational centres, and early marriage. Compared with other minorities, Roma have been observed to have lower rates of literacy fewer educational degrees.



4. Public Libraries in Present Bulgaria and Multicultural Society: Challenges, Initiatives, and Good Practices

The role of regional and public libraries is extremely important in the current situation. While they could provide resources and promote their use, such use is dependent on a number of social, cultural, and political factors.

First, library services to minority groups, immigrants, and refugees are highly undervalued and do not actually appear on the agenda of the libraries. This situation is linked to the difficulties and hardships faced in the library field after 1989. These disadvantages of the situation and the library field have been repeatedly outlined (Grashkina 2009; Harizanova 2010) These studies point out that:

- there is no state policy in the library field;
- there is no patronage over libraries on the part of state and local authorities;
- there is no organization to coordinate the library activities and actually represent them before the authorities of the day;
- there has been a sharp drop in funding for the library field in the country;
- new ICT implementation in libraries has been extremely slow and difficult;
- the national library network that existed before the 1990s has been virtually destroyed and the horizontal links between libraries has been disrupted;
- there are no requirements locally applied regarding educational levels and qualifications of employees in libraries;
- the existing law on libraries primarily deals with funding;
- there is a low public image of libraries;
- there is a lack of vision amongst professional librarian circles;
- the librarian community itself has not yet recognized the issues of multiculturalism.

The general condition of the library field motivates some authors to express the following: "Violated is the right to equal and free access to library and information resources and services, which necessitates the reformulation of the national policy in this sphere." (Harizanova 2010)

Second, Bulgarian society today still preserve negative stereotypes towards Roma. All other ethnic groups strongly support their social exclusion. Over the past 20 years we have observed an insufficiency of the political will to deal with the Roma problem. At the same time, governments have given peripheral attention to the education of other ethnic minorities. This is due to the processes of assimilation among Jews and Armenians and the relatively successful integration of Turks.

Third, the availability of resources about minority history and culture is quite sufficient. The Public Libraries Fund keeps books, articles, biographies, and screenplays etc., published by ethnic minorities before 1989. For example, in 1885-1944, 348 printed books were issued in Armenian, while in 1945-1989 - only 12. These are the statutes, regulations, reports, belonged to separate Armenian political, sports, cultural and social organizations, schools and others.

Especially valuable are the public libraries collections of periodicals, issued by ethnic minorities – Turks, Jews, Armenians, and Russians. For example, Turkish periodicals in Bulgaria (1878-1996) contain 145 titles. All publications in Turkish after 1944 are in Latin.

Over the last 20 years the interest in ethnic minorities and migration issues has increased. Until now over 2000 new titles (monographs, catalogs, collections, dictionaries, directories, etc.) have been published. They treat such topics as minority rights, state policy, co-habitation with the majority population, discrimination and racism, migration, religion, folklore, identity, cultural heritage, and others. Most of these publications are in Bulgarian but others are published in the original languages.

Bulgarian ethnic minorities can also find useful materials on the Web. These are the websites of their organizations, synagogues, churches and museums, or websites with summary historical or tourist information. Good examples are the these websites for the Armenian and Jewish community: the Armenian General Benevolent Union-Sofia (<http://www.agbubg.org>), the Stepanos Hovagimyan Armenian School Association (AUS) - Sofia (<http://www.aus-bg.com>), the HOM Armenian Charity Association (<http://www.arsbg.org/>), the Sofia Synagogue (<http://www.sofiasynagogue.com/>), and the Shalom Organization of Jews in Bulgaria (<http://www.shalom.bg>).

Providing library services to representatives of minority groups and immigrants and refugees is a task barely present in some public programs and initiatives. It has found a place in plans and various projects that aim to convert public libraries into community centers. These initiatives have been suggested by the Union of Bulgarian Library and Information Workers (renamed in 2009 as Bulgarian Library and Information Association, BLIA). A positive role in this direction is seen in the partnership between the BLIA and library organizations in the USA. Launched by a team of librarians from the USA and Bulgaria, the model for public libraries and information centers has the potential to turn their attention to the problems of minority communities, respectively to the understanding that they are institutions in a multicultural world.

The resolution of the National Conference on Social Responsibility of Public Libraries and their Role in a Democratic Society in September 2003 highlights the important role of local public libraries. The resolution states: “In a vast majority of small

municipalities in Bulgaria, public libraries are the only centers that comprise in their activity information, educational and cultural functions.” (Social Responsibility 2003)

Launched by a team of librarians from the USA and Bulgaria, this model supports the roles of public libraries and information centers in providing information services for immigrants and refugees. This is important because it sets the inclusion of these services as a new direction within existing activities of public information centers and libraries. Along with the rise of the publication of separate texts in diverse languages, library services for minority groups, immigrants and refugees are beginning to emerge.

One of the first examples of good practice is the ‘Aleko Konstantinov’ Cultural Community Centre in Plovdiv which is oriented towards supporting a multi-ethnic environment for the “Friends” Children’s Club Centre. The essence of the project “Information Internet Centre” (2001) is to establish an information center within the library that provides children and adolescents with free access to libraries, publishing and other databases, and administrative, medical, cultural and other information about Plovdiv City and the region, including information for new job vacancies. The creation of the center is a good example of successful cooperation between NGOs; partners with the community centers are YMCA Plovdiv - Christian Youth Association and the cultural and educational organization, "Unity". “Unity” has the task of creating conditions for meaningful spending of leisure time and development of the creativity of young people in the field of education, sports, culture and arts. “Unity” is one among a number of active NGOs working for the cultural development of ethnic groups in the city and region.

The main objective of the club center "Friends" is “the promotion of informal contacts, exploration, cohesion and creating of lasting relationships of tolerance and cooperation among children and adolescents from the Bulgarian, Armenian, Jewish Roma and other origins alike.” Support and funding for this initiative was from the OSF. (ABLE 2004) The difficult implementation of other similar projects is due to the absence of the topic from the public agenda and the agenda of the library community. For example, the National Center for Continuing Education of Librarians, which has been in operation with the BLIA since 2000, has no program that involves working with individuals from minority groups or in multicultural conditions. (Dimchev 2010)

As mentioned, financial problems are a major impediment to the implementation of initiatives in the library field. Directing funds to specific programs and projects is entirely dependent on the donator. For example, of the three projects proposed by the "Rodina Center" library in Stara Zagora the administrative management of the local municipality selected the one related to people with disabilities and abandoned others that are just as important – working with minority groups and with prisoners. (ABLE 2004)

5. Draft Strategy for Achieving Information Literacy of Minorities and Immigrants in Bulgaria

At last we would like to present a draft library Strategy for achieving information literacy of minorities and immigrants in Bulgaria. Such as strategy requires strategic planning, resource provision, and legislative activities.

A change in the Foreigners Act is need so that foreigners could obtain permanent resident's status and citizenship more quickly and easily. This would facilitate their proficiency in the Bulgarian language and access to Bulgarian educational institutions and subsequent integration into Bulgarian society.

A new strategy for educational and cultural integration of Roma is needed as well. This strategy has to be provided with financial resources in order to promote improving their literacy. The key features include funding source and clear roles for state and local authorities

A new approach is needed to introduce information technology partnerships between schools and public libraries in order to support early learning, teaching, and technical security. This would require partnerships with NGOs.

Public libraries have to work more intensively with NGOs to create public-private partnerships and attract financial resources to supply both libraries and schools with equipment and print and electronic resources. Introduction of IT also requires human resource development.

6. Conclusions

At present the Bulgarian situation shows that library work with representatives of minority groups and refugees and immigrants is a priority. The topic is entering the basic Bulgarian publications on Library Studies. The establishment of literacy programs, can be paired with – the preservation of local cultural traditions, customs, and celebrations.

On the agenda of the Bulgarian library field is the issue of creating special programs for working with minority groups and refugees and immigrants and making a radical change in attitudes toward libraries on the part of administrative authorities.

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