

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Albania

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For nearly 45 years Albania was very isolated. As a characteristic of every totalitarian regime, also in this country a strict control exercised over all aspects of social life and in particular over "ideological institutions", including publishing houses, bookshops and libraries. State control extended to all these institutions and, as an extraordinary phenomenon, a harsh system of censorship was applied everywhere and intellectual freedom was just an empty concept.

Population:	3,401,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 820 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	Albanian
Main religions:	Islam, Orthodox Christianity and Catholicism
Literacy:	68% (1981)
Online:	0,07 (July 2000)

The fall of Berlin wall, which warned the break-up of Eastern Block, rapid changes of the political system and the way of life, invasion of new ideas, as in all C&EE countries, caused in Albania the relaxation of the grip of socialist ideology.

Since then, Albania has made important democratic reforms and has taken steps in the right direction to rejoin international community after decades of self-imposed isolation. The process of transition from totalitarianism to democracy and market economy was and continues to be very difficult. Because of the highly troubled political circumstances, the pains of transition period are being felt on all field of life. For example a grave crisis came to a head on 1997, when anarchy swept through the country following the collapse of pyramid investment schemes. The wave of destruction which rocked the country did not spare even the libraries and bookshops.

Intellectual freedom in Albanian society

Radical changes during the last decade have forced Albanian political forces to reconsider the role of intellectual freedom in society. This was an essential step in the further development of the country. Very decisive for the enlargement of democratic access to knowledge and information as well as for the guarantee of the intellectual freedom was the approval of the Constitution (1998). It is clear now for everybody that being informed is one of the basic human rights and an informed citizen is a guarantee for a democratic society.

Publishing industry

Ten years hence publishing activities were carried out by several publishing institutions, which were all state property. The books were considered "a powerful weapon" and an effective way for the all-round formation and education of the "new man" of socialist society.

It is true that publishing industry in Albania has undergone development after democratic changes. As in other C&EE countries, it was the Soros Foundation, which initiated in Albania programmes of help to the development of publishing industry, including structural aids to all actors involved in the book chain. Early actions consisted in giving paper to the free press and application of the translation scheme into Albanian of Western authors in social and human sciences. On the other hand the measures taken by the government were never absent, but a system of state support and grants designed to the national publishing industry and the book world doesn't exist and we must say that the book sector is today in a critical situation yet. The situation was complicated by the fact that privatisation has not progressed well. So whereas publishers were quick to see new opportunity and their number boosted at astonishing rate, distribution and retail system did not lend themselves to the new market conditions.

Still publishing is the most successful sector in the field of book chain. There are more than 80 publishing houses, which publish over 700 books per year. Till ten years ago no private publishing house existed. During the first years of the democratic changes there were a stagnation of publication, particularly of books and magazines. Publishing institutions almost stopped their activities. On the other hand there was a shortage of paper accompanied by difficulties in printing itself: old printing houses, outdated technology and machinery etc. As a consequence the cost of publication was very high at a time when the purchasing power had drastically fallen and the number of titles published greatly reduced. The most of these difficulties already are overcome and now the publishing sector is making efforts to fulfil better the needs of Albanian society for books and culture.

The book distribution is the most problematic link in the chain of the book industry. There is no modern distribution network. Generally, publishers use to distribute their own books. There are only two state enterprises, which distribute textbooks and literary books. There are only 1-2 serious private agencies in this field and no more than 200 bookshops, which in many cases have no permanent premises of their own and the most of them are kiosks. In many areas of the country have no bookshops.

The book trade needs a radical restructuring. The network of the bookshops is not functioning regularly. Bookshops are small in number and poorly equipped. As is mentioned above there is no Albanian Books in Print catalogue.

Actually there is not any concrete programme for the development of the publishing industry and public reading. No measure is taken to stop the reducing of the level of the reading practices or to encourage people to buy books with the help of appropriate pricing policies and VAT reductions. No idea exists for improving of the book information system (books in print catalogue and national bibliographies), which is not working well. The books in print catalogue, as an essential information tool for the book world, is completely unknown. There are not enough financial means to publish in due time the national bibliographies and other bibliographies regularly prepared by National Library and other libraries, which impinges the right of the users to information.

Book Law draft

The cooperation within the book chain is developing at a slow, but continuous pace. So the Ministry of Culture already has made the Book Law draft, which aims the establishing of book policies with an inter-sectorial point of view. As an integrated approach this law aims also the creating of new models and areas of convergence among professionals which have so far worked in isolation. The governmental book policies, envisaged in this law, consider that, through the definition of a structural framework for interaction, the whole book chain has to be reconstituted and that a huge book action in Albania is a necessity.

The libraries and librarianship

Albania has an ancient history, but it does not have a lengthy library tradition. The situation of the libraries is not on the level required. Libraries have a poor social image. They do not have the best starting position for a successful change based on the needs of the society.

This situation can be explained by the fact that the Albanian society does not value and accept the role of libraries as source for the free information. Another factor is a general lack of recognition of the important role of libraries to the public.

The fact that Albania is without a library school, or any library science program at the university level, affects the functional level of the libraries. Albanian librarians do not have the required professional skills to face the changes in library science. They do not have the necessary knowledge and experience to work under the conditions of a market economy

The international standards in the field of library science such as LCC Subject Headings, Dewey System of Classification, AACR2, ISBD, etc. are completely unknown to them.

The libraries of the past were originally organised for closed-access use; with users only having access through the catalogues. Though there is a lack of space, now they are working to organize their collection on an open access basis creating for their users halls of open stack, where new entries actually are stored.

In Albania there is a relatively extensive network of libraries. Especially in the beginning of social changes of the last decade, libraries worked in dramatic conditions. In those years, as well as during the political unrest of 1997, burning of buildings, furnishings and collections destroyed a lot of libraries.

Severe cuts to library budgets during the first years of social changes dismantled the system of public reading, created dangerous threats to the once relatively high level reading practices. The library network was almost paralysed. Library use at that moment was very low. As a result of the poor financial situation of the country there were very rare supplies. The help coming from abroad was very valuable. Albanian libraries greatly benefited especially from national and regional Soros Foundation programmes devoted to libraries

Along with the democratic changes, which have occurred in the country, the Albanian libraries attached great importance to enhancing the freedom of information and reading. The first step in this direction was the elimination of the existing restrictions concerning the use of certain categories of literature. The catalogue of restricted literature was merged with the free for use catalogue.

The road to market economy caused important changes in the concept on the role of libraries as source of information. As the main expression of this concept we can mention free and unlimited access, avoiding of any kind of ideology, closed links with other institutions of culture, efforts to provide the users with information etc.

Also in Albania the role of libraries as information provider and access point is underdeveloped. The potential of the revolution in electronic information provision is only just beginning to be explored. So the potential of libraries to stimulate

information-seeking habits in users is under-exploited. Greater attention needs to be paid to increasing public awareness of services on offer.

Actually Albanian libraries are facing several difficulties in accomplishing their basic functions. The many obstacles to their development include lack of a national strategy, poor political support, financial problems (lack of funds), lack of well-trained staff (it needs more qualification), building not suitable (lack of space), access to computer network (there is not any computer system of services and information) etc. But the social barriers are the most important. Libraries in Albania have a poor social image. In order to overcome all these barriers a modern concept amongst decision-makers of all potential of libraries is necessary. It is necessary also for them to see libraries as a public task. High priority must be given to achieving political awareness of this fact, because Albanian politicians do not know well the important role that libraries play in society. It is a sad fact that they tend to regard libraries as costs and not as an investment.

Albanian libraries used to be considered a kind of national treasury, whose main function is to promote culture as a basis of national identity. With the change of political system and the advance of the new age of Information Society, they might be forced to face the challenges and reconsider their role in the life of Albanian society. They would offer not only books or other printed materials, but also all kinds of information and the access to the new media.

The present position of Albanian libraries is not well and they have not a well starting position for a successful change under budget pressure and without a supportive national policy framework. The Ministry of Culture must have a clear and careful attitude towards libraries. It must identify what political strategies and initiatives are needed to create change at the national level. Besides, libraries themselves must change the attitudes of politicians, administrators and funding bodies towards them.

The libraries must have adequate funds to be able to serve the public. The state has taken steps to help libraries meet their financial needs, to provide annual grants for them to enable the improving of their work. But their budget is very restricted. Funds provided are insufficient. It is why libraries themselves must seek extra resources and support from several organizations, foundations etc.

Laws in relation to libraries

The existence and operation of libraries are guaranteed by appropriate legislation. The Library Law is approved in the beginning of this year, but the work for reforming library regulations is not getting underway.

The fields of freedom of expression, of access to information and of libraries are regulated in the following laws:

- Library Law No.8576/2000 states that "Libraries are institutions of knowledge and culture. Their purpose is to realize a free access to the information in every forms or versions that is depository. They gather, store, process and put at public's disposal their collections including information in service of their forming. Every citizen in the territory of the Albanian Republic, independent of race, of age, of sex, of nationality, educational and cultural forming, of social conditions, of political convictions, of religion belonging, has the right of the library service".

The Library Law is a general law, which does not include some important aspects such as the role of the libraries in the Information Society, the changes for the social image of libraries nor the establishment of a library school on the academic level as a main instrument for the development of the library science and qualified staff.

- Law on Public Libraries No.28/2000 states that "these are local, cultural, informative institutions in the region where they develop their functions. They are to be established in every town and community".
- Law on University Libraries No.30/2000 states that "every university and other faculty should establish its library. Libraries of the Universities and Faculties are in service of the educational process, of the professional forming and of the scientific activities".
- Law on Elementary and Secondary School No. 31/2000 states that "Libraries of the Elementary and Secondary School are in service of the realisation of the educational program, as well as of the professional forming of the employers of education.
- Law on intellectual freedom was approved with the Constitution of 1998 as a guarantee for the democratic society. It includes the right of the intellectuals to get jobs according to their education.

Library development strategy

Till now the Albanian libraries have worked without a supportive policy framework and no programme in the context of a national policy exists relating to their future. The Ministry of Culture must develop political strategies and initiatives in this field. A clear strategy within the appropriate legal framework, which already exists, is a necessity in advancement of library network and providing the use of book and other library's documents by all strata of Albanian society, taking into consideration the several socio-cultural categories of the readers. Such a strategy will open new horizons to the development policies on national level with the aim that even Albanian libraries be developed on European standards.

The National Library

The National Library is the biggest and principal library of Albania. It possesses a stock of over 1 million volumes of library documents: the archive of the Albanian book, the stock of Albano-Balkanology as well as technical, scientific and socio-political literature in Albanian and foreign languages. Its main task is to collect and preserve all written cultural heritage of the Albanian people.

As the main bibliographic center in the country, the National Library prepares the quarterly "National Bibliography of the Albanian Book", whose aim is to inform the public about all the books that come out in Albania, and the monthly "National Bibliography of the Albanian Periodicals". It also prepares bibliographic information concerning Albanological literature, which enters the stocks of the National Library and other libraries. Foreign literature of Albanological and Balkanological character is included in the bibliographic serial "Albanica", which is an annotated bibliography in Albanian and English. In addition, National Library supplies information on other social, technical and scientific issues on demand to institutions and scholars. In order to fulfil the needs of users for information about Albanian literature in general, apart from these bibliographic publications, the National Library publishes subject bibliographies, information catalogues and several bulletins.

The National Library offers access to its facilities for the readers and carries out lending services to all kind of users up to the age of 16. There are three service points functioning in the library, five reading halls, where periodicals and other materials, which cannot be lent to readers, are used. In all these halls the readers have access also to reference materials. The National Library renders its services to more than 4.300 readers a year and circulates about 100.000 titles. Users' interest in reading is growing compared to the early years of the nineties, when the number of the library users fell considerably.

A very great success for the National Library is the work for realisation of the project on automation. This project is being financed by UNDP, Open Society Institute (Budapest), Open Society Foundation of Albania (OSFA) and Albanian Government. The project is carrying through to the end and a LAN for 65 users as well as Internet connection is established. The selected integrated system ADLiB will make possible the connection of National Library with its homologues abroad and creation of the conditions for reciprocal profits by the information, especially concerning the unique work. National Library also will be the center for new technological developments in other libraries of the country.

Albanian public libraries

They are not well prepared to re-assess roles and resources and re-design services to respond to changing social needs. The establishing of special information services to support and improve local business activities, especially the SME-s, must be a priority. The work of these libraries can be focused more on the concept of the promotion of local life. The communities of the cities in which these libraries operate have a number of major social and economic problems such as unemployment, low educational standards and a major concentration of population from rural areas with the consequent demands on the life of the whole community. It is why there is an apparent need for public libraries here to redefine their role if they would like to survive and play an important role in new conditions of Information Society. To do this, existing public library infrastructure will be used to establish centres, which will use new information, and communication technologies to provide access to information.

The Legal Deposit

The Legal Deposit is being reformed in order to be adopted to the new market rules and, according to the existing law; all publishers are forced to send free of charge five copies of each of their publications to National Library. But the parliamentary act on legal deposit is not being respected correctly by publishing houses.

Law on Copyright

Law on Copyright no. 7564, date 19.05.1992 provides protection of moral and economic rights for literary, artistic and journalistic works, including every original intellectual creation in this domain, irrespective of the form of expression. A national copyright agency, as an association for the protection of the Authors' Rights, named "Albautor", has the exclusive juridical entity in Albania to handle the collective administration in this field. With the approval of the law of copyright and with the establishment of the copyright association, in Albania are created the necessary conditions for copyright respect according to democratic international standards.

Library Education and Training

Albanian librarians didn't know how to organize the library system and library planning, when the former centralised planning and controlling system has collapsed. They didn't have the necessary knowledge and experience of working in the conditions of free market economy. This is the reason that they looked for a fresh start. In this context, all forms of education and training were felt necessary and useful.

Albania has neither library school, nor any library science programme at the university level. In these conditions, the National Library is charged with the task of training of the librarians on the national scale. Part time courses, which last

two years, are attended by librarians without interrupting their job. Besides, systematic work for the technical and vocational training of librarians is done.

Last year at the National Library was established the Library Training Center, which will serve for the continuing education for Albanian librarians. The above center is created according to the financing received from OSI/NLP, OSFA and Ministry of Culture of Albania as a grant for the project made by National Library. With its Auditorium and Computer Class, it will realise the continuing education for all employees of the country according to their demands and present level. It will create the possibilities for Albanian librarians to continue their education by offering contemporary knowledge and skills in librarianship. This center will help the librarians especially in the field of information technologies' application in library through computer teaching classes, development of computerised process of the library (new entries, catalogues, information etc.), introduction to LAN etc.

Cooperation with foreign colleagues

Isolation from access to professional training and support and from the rest of the world has had serious consequences for the level of up-to-date knowledge and management skills among library staff. Till some years ago the Albanian librarians have had no possibility to go abroad, but after '90 some of them have been attached to foreign libraries for a short period. Also small groups of librarians have been abroad for short work visits. The experience and example of Western libraries are relevant and necessity of getting more of Albanian librarians into contact with them is of a great importance.

The including of Albanian librarians in regional or European projects, which aim the technical assistance for library development after the Western models, is also very useful. There is a specific situation in Albanian libraries, which is the result of social-economic conditions and traditions. Most problems facing are characteristic for libraries in other C&EE countries as well, but of course with their particularities and that is why it needs, side by side with the foreign assistance, the Albanian engagement and contribution. The preparation of joint projects with European colleagues in order to promote further development in the field of libraries will be a valuable assistance for their integration in the regional network.

Albanian Library Association

The Albanian Library Association / the Association of Albanian Librarians was founded in 1993 in the beginning of the transition period. It aims to play an important role in the qualification of the librarians and in the development of library system in Albania, but till now its efforts to promote professional education and to stimulate the development of librarianship, information theory and practice have been insufficient.