

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Georgia

14-11-2000

Population:	5,442,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 850 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	Georgian
Main religions:	Georgian Orthodoxy, Islam, Russian Orthodoxy
Literacy:	99% (1995)
Online:	0,4% (July 2000)

Dissolution of the Soviet Union affected libraries in Georgia exactly in the same way as in any other NIS country. The centralized system no longer existed and libraries had to face numerous problems on their own: budget shortage, meager salaries for librarians and even that not paid for months, no collection development, unheated buildings, no interlibrary loans, etc. In this horrible period librarians of Georgia demonstrated indeed amazing devotion to their profession and if today there still are libraries, this is thanks to librarians, who continued working unpaid. Library managers were mostly concentrated on a modest task of getting money from relevant authorities to subscribe at least for newspapers and thus provide population with up-to-date information. The most devastating for libraries were the civil war and natural disasters in Georgia in the last decade during which several libraries were burnt and/or ruined in Tbilisi and in Western Georgia. According to the poll of 1989 there were 8000 libraries and 11000 librarians in Georgia, while now there are about 4674 libraries and 8000 librarians.

The chart below shows, which type of libraries were influenced the most:

N	Type of libraries	Figures in 1991/92	Figures for January, 2000
1.	Libraries under Ministry of Culture	4100	2300
2.	High school libraries (Min. of Education)	3476	2067
3.	Libraries of Academy of Sciences system	48	44
4.	Technical libraries	160	163
5.	Health libraries (Ministry of Health)	39	39
6.	Higher education libraries	19	24
7.	Agricultural libraries	42	10
8.	Special libraries for disabled	13	10
9.	Prison libraries	17	17
10	TOTAL:	7914	4674

It is still unknown how many villages were left without schools and libraries. Starting with 1990 there are no more outreach library services, which means that population of mountainous regions is left without any library services at all.

Even those libraries, which are open and functioning, cannot provide customers with new books according to their needs, with coverage of wide scope - there is no money for acquisitions. All relatively new holdings available in Georgian libraries are either gifts or donations from different persons or organizations from abroad.

Legislation on libraries

Georgian legislators adopted two laws on libraries in Georgia in 1995: one is for the National Parliamentary Library of Georgia and another for the rest of the libraries. Among other issues, it is said in the both laws that

" The main principles of functioning of the libraries are:

1. Political and religious neutrality;
2. Equal rights for library customers;
3. Free access to information existing in libraries".

Internet access in libraries

There is only one library in Georgia for the time being, which provides Internet access to customers: it is the National Parliamentary Library. There are two public Internet centers in this library, formerly known as Georgian State Central Public Library. One is sponsored by U.S. government and offers services free-of-charge and another is a collaborative project with a local ISP, which provides users with time at computer for a nominal fee. Several large Tbilisi libraries have limited number of computers and some of them with dial-up Internet connections for staff use only. If for Tbilisi libraries the main problem for providing public access to the Internet is lack of computers in the libraries, the main obstacle in the regions is deteriorating telecommunications infrastructure. Nevertheless, several commercial Internet service providers along with some international donor organizations working towards broadening connectivity in Georgia have recently expanded their activities to the regions. In November 2000 three regional public libraries - in Kutaisi, Poti, and Batumi will be hooked to the Internet and start providing free public access to the Internet. There also is an ongoing library project funded by the U.S. government, which will enable creating the first library network in Georgia. The National Parliamentary library will be connected with four regions of Georgia and there will be the electronic data exchange upon its completion by the end of 2001. Meanwhile, 50 Georgian librarians were taught how to use the Internet at the CPE courses conducted by AIS in 1999. Based on the courses, the Regional Training Center for librarians and information specialists have been established under the guidance and sponsorship of Network Library Program at Open Society Institute in Budapest. Also seminars and regular sign-up courses, conducted by IREX-run Internet Access and Training Program have been suggested to those interested in learning the Internet.

The first free Internet access and training centers for wide public were established in 1998 in 2 libraries (National Parliamentary Library of Georgia and Central Scientific Library of Georgian Academy of Sciences) by joint project of IRAX IATP program and LAAG (Library Automation Association in Georgia).

Since January 2000 Georgian libraries have access to EBSCO database of more than 3000 electronic journals (the project EIFL sponsored by Open Society Foundation, <http://soros.epnet.com/>).

Intellectual Freedom

As for the Intellectual Freedom, this is the only field in libraries, which benefited from the crash of the Soviet Union. It is worldwide known about existence in the Soviet Union of the so-called "special funds" in libraries - books and periodicals kept in special stacks and forbidden for customers. Whatever was considered harmful for the Soviet ideology needed special permit to be read. By the end of the Soviet regime, during "perestroika", the order to open "special funds" for broad public came to libraries.

Intellectual Freedom issues, as they exist under the guidance of IFLA/FAIFE, are not yet known by the broad public or taught at the Library Department. The only opportunity Georgian librarians have to get acquainted with these issues is at the continuing education course offered by the Association of Information Specialists. Library Bill of Rights, Freedom to Read, Code of Ethics for librarians, and other issues have been translated into Georgian language and included in the Manual of Continuing Education for librarians and Information Specialists. For more information on AIS and the Intellectual Freedom course offered, please see the following web site: <http://www.ais.org.ge>

There are two more library associations in Georgia besides AIS: Library Automation Association of Georgia (LAAG) and Georgian Library Association. All three associations collaborate when needed though each of them has their own fields of activity.

Libraries in Georgia are receiving such little attention from the government and mass media, that it could be said that the intellectual freedom is not violated in libraries, which does not necessarily mean, that it is not violated countrywide. During the classes of the Intellectual Freedom one of the participants demonstrated to the instructor a textbook for the 4th grade of a secondary school printed in 1997 (!). One paragraph of the text was blackened in the best traditions of the Soviet censorship, which means that the publisher was ignorant to this event. This example demonstrates that there is a lot that should be done in this direction: Intellectual Freedom Committee should be established, intellectual freedom issues should be discussed at regional and local conferences, ties between libraries and publishing houses should be increased, etc.

AIS, which is a national member of IFLA will continue promoting issues on intellectual freedom as it has already started doing so. LAAG has translated into Georgian language and published following documents:

1. "UNESCO Public Library Manifesto" (1996, Printed version with English-Georgian-Russian texts delivered to main libraries in Georgia),
2. ALA "Library Bill of Rights" (1999, <http://www.acnet.ge/~library/newspaper/number1.htm>)
3. IFLA/FAIFE "Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom" (2000, <http://www.acnet.ge/~library/newspaper/number3.htm>)

The IFLA Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom will be included in the course of the Intellectual Freedom Issues conducted at the Regional Training Center. Georgian libraries will be ready to invent a common policy on Intellectual Freedom "before the censor comes".