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National Library Week in Bulgaria

The Bulgarian Library and Information Association (BLIA), following the example of ALA advocacy campaigns, launched its first National Library Week (NLW) in 2006. Since then, many Bulgarian libraries and librarians throughout the country participated in the annual campaigns and developed the NLW as a major initiative encouraging librarians to work with local authorities, NGOs, and with the citizens for the visibility of their libraries in the community. At the national level, the Bulgarian Library and Information Association achieved significant results in its work with Bulgarian government and with Parliament, the most important of those being the enforcement of the Public Libraries Act in 2009.

The Bulgarian Library and Information Association (BLIA) is a national organization whose purpose is to provide leadership for the improvement of library and information services in coordination with European and international standards; to stimulate the development of contemporary library legislation and be the libraries' voice in the local and national decision-making process; to foster professional development of library and information professionals; to encourage library coordination and cooperation. It was established in March 1990 as the Union of Librarians and Information Officers /ULISO/ by an initiative group of library specialists from Sofia. Today, it is a non-governmental professional organization with over 1,000 individual and 82 collective members; and unites library and information professionals from all types of libraries as well as library-related institutions and companies. The success of the Association in all its endeavors has been based entirely on the voluntary efforts of the members of the Managing Board and on the work of enthusiastic colleagues all over the country.

In the last two decades, BLIA has proved to be a trustworthy partner and has participated in a number of international projects. BLIA has built a number of programs using knowledge and skills acquired through international cooperation, but the best example is the BLIA-organized National Library Week. During the implementation of the American Bulgarian Library Exchange project (ABLE)(2003-2006), funded by the US Department of State and sponsored by the Colorado Association of Libraries and the Iowa Library Association, BLIA representatives have participated in advocacy actions and have been acquainted with the ALA planned and organized advocacy campaign. For the Bulgarian librarians, it was completely new practice and form for winning support for libraries.

In 2005, convinced that there is need for a similar campaign in Bulgaria, BLIA prepared a project for the first National Library Week in Bulgaria. Taking into consideration its significance for library and community development in Bulgaria, the US Embassy in Sofia sponsored it. The project designed a Bulgarian model for the NLW, taking into consideration the specifics of the national political and administrative structure and defining the target groups: legislators, central and local governments, as well as the general public. Parliament members were consulted about expected impact. To support Bulgarian librarians in this new initiative, the ALA Advocacy Handbook was translated into Bulgarian and largely distributed to libraries. Branding was important – a competition was held within the library community for the slogan of the campaign and a special logo was designed.

With the NLW Bulgarian librarians wanted to advocate for the future and the slogan of the first campaign corresponded to that aim: “Libraries – Investment in the Future” in 2006 paved the way to concerted actions on library development in Bulgaria. The campaign was launched at Bulgarian Parliament with the opening of the “Contemporary Bulgarian Library” exhibit and round table discussion on library issues with the participation of the Chairman of Bulgarian Parliament and a number of MPs. It attracted the attention of both authorities and the public to libraries and their potential to be key actors in the information society, specifically in teaching Information literacy, building knowledge economy, long life learning, preserving cultural heritage, and assisting in e-government services. Nation-wide initiatives included meetings with MPs, district governors and mayors, participation of librarians in city council meetings, library open house events, meeting with authors, etc. More than 4,400 new library patrons were registered during the NLW. A number of libraries received support and additional funding by their local governments. For the first time libraries received a broad media coverage in both national and local print and electronic media. Parliament members and Ministry of Culture officials expressed their commitment to update library legislation. Last, but not least, Bulgarian government declared May 11th Librarians’ Professional Day.

The achievements of the first NLW showed that only through joint efforts librarians, elected officials and citizens can bring a difference to libraries and their communities. In 2007, the NLW “Libraries – Our Shared Responsibility” advocated that library problems are problems of society and sought public support for solving those problems. The exhibit “Vision for a Library” at the National Library (organized with the support of Goethe Institute), presented contemporary library architecture and design and attracted the attention of the public with ideas and commitment to community needs. Meeting with MPs and local authorities continued, as well as the attention of all media. The two consecutive campaigns helped librarians gain advocacy skills, increased their self-confidence, and helped them initiate investment projects for expanding library collections and renovating the buildings.

The National Library Weeks continued to bring larger public attention to libraries and, logically, the next 2008 campaign was “Libraries on the Agenda.” Its goal was to include libraries in the legislative agenda, promoting the need of a Public Libraries Act and convincing MPs, government executives and local parliaments in the necessity for its urgent adoption. Our focus event was a public lecture of Nancy Kranich on “Advocacy and Libraries.” A petition in support of the Public Libraries Act was signed by over 17,000 Bulgarian citizens, among them MPs, mayors, and city counselors). This campaign had its international dimension with the support of Romanian librarians visiting Bulgaria. As a result of the massive support, the Public Libraries Act was agreed among all ministries and stakeholders, and submitted by Government to Parliament.

In May 2009, the Act was passed by Parliament, and paved the way to modern library services at Bulgarian public libraries. The legacy of the Act presented new challenges to BLIA and the 2009 NLW was on “Libraries – Information and Communication for All,” focusing on the new library model, where books and information technologies exist together, and free access to information and services happens every day. The campaign aimed at further promoting the ideas of improving quality of life and successful integration in information society. It paved the way for the future actions of “Global Libraries,” sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, through acquainting the public with the aims of the program. This focused on the need and significance of local support; promoting the achievements of libraries and the current trends in their development; explaining the social role of libraries; and demonstrating the contribution of libraries and librarians to community development. In addition to the regular meetings with MPs and local officials and governments, librarians organized workshops on innovative library practices, demonstrations of on-line information services and the community

information centers, and discussions with young people on the “Library of the Future”.

In 2010, BLIA celebrated the fifth anniversary of the National Library Week with “The Modern Library – Your Right”, focusing on the right of every citizen to a wide array of library services provided by modern and technologically equipped libraries, the most democratic institutions for access to information. The campaign focused the attention of government institutions and all citizens to libraries and their key role in information society; in building the economy of knowledge and continuing education; the processes of preservation and access to cultural heritage; in the realization of the electronic government project. BLIA had the unique chance to have ALA President Roberta Stevens as official guest for the National Library Week. Her support to the advocacy program of the week, including meetings and discussions at the Parliament committees on education and culture, was valuable, encouraging and highly appreciated by the library community and by Bulgarian Parliament.

The noteworthy accomplishments National Library Week established it as an innovative approach contributing to the sustainable development of Bulgarian libraries and to raising the role of BLIA as a true advocate for library development in Bulgaria. Organized in their association, Bulgarian librarians are meeting the challenges of the new century and continue to work to the benefit of their communities.