

---

# Democracy and Libraries: Modernizing and Rebuilding Bulgarian Libraries with US Support, 1990–2014

DINCHO KRASTEV AND NIKOLA KAZANSKI

---

## ABSTRACT

Traditionally libraries, including and perhaps especially Bulgarian ones, are very conservative institutions. Libraries indeed have many reasons to be conservative, but this does not mean that they have been inactive. They have to find the proper *modus operandi* in order to act appropriately, responsibly, and for the greater good of society. Through funds, grants, and projects, Bulgarian libraries have begun recovering. This is not to say, however, that they do not have more work ahead of them. The National Academic Library and Information System (NALIS) and the American Bulgarian Library Exchange (ABLE) projects helped pull libraries in Bulgaria out of the ashes and brought them into the twenty-first century. The aim of this paper is to briefly trace the development of Bulgarian libraries over the course of the last twenty-five years. Throughout this period, there were two decisive factors influencing library development: the rapid expansion of information technologies, and, at the same time, the acute social and economic crisis besetting the country that impeded its modernization of library science.

“I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library.”  
—Jorge Luis Borges

An analysis of the current state of affairs of a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary field like library information science presents various difficulties. The study can be conducted from a number of viewpoints: phenomenological or historical, technological or sociological, futuristic or traditional, each of which is colored to varying degrees by the researcher’s own point of view. Ultimately, though, the result of any scientific study is presented in terms of an analytical evaluation. This does not mean that the

assessment of the changes taking place in this area is explicit; on the contrary, the evaluation process itself is more or less of an implicit nature. In this regard, any serious analysis of the problems at hand should consciously take into account the given system's anchorage in the social and technological realm, something that this study attempts to do. An overview of the subject of information science and its applications is so broad-ranging and fuzzy that, in practice, it stops short of being *science* in the narrow sense of the word. In fact, information science as a product of human culture is perhaps the most telling modern example of the character of human civilization as a continuous attempt to cope with *entropy*, understood in the widest sense of the word.

All of these factors reveal the recent impact of information science on society and demonstrate the rapid expansion of the ways in which media provide access to information. These developments require a re-envisioning of the institution of the library, as well as a more modern approach to library science in which the traditional limitations regarding access to information, collections, records, standards, and formats are overcome. Thus, in today's age, the principal question to be answered in the field of library science is this one: To what an extent can libraries (including Bulgarians libraries) adapt to this new reality, while maintaining their place in the sphere of information science? Looking back now, we can confidently say that the modernization of Bulgarian libraries over the better part of three decades would not have been possible without the generous assistance provided to us by leading US libraries, organizations, and foundations. Let us examine how it all developed.

### LIBRARIES IN BULGARIA

Libraries in Bulgaria have always been described as a kind of fairytale—unfortunately, however, not a very enchanting one. After the end of totalitarian rule, the prerequisites for the development of libraries were deplorable. Bulgaria found itself the poorest country in the former Soviet Bloc, which is why the transition continues to be the most challenging and inconsistent in Eastern Europe. Bulgarian libraries have been neglected, and national tradition has been ignored. With a dedicated and overqualified staff and disintegrating budgets, Bulgarian libraries suffered—a suffering that came from a lack of funding and absence of modern technology and effective organization and management.

Over the years, there has been hope. The first sign of it was the establishment of the Bulgarian Library and Information Association (BLIA) in 1990. From the beginning of its existence, it proved to be one of the rare professional bodies in Bulgaria free of any political influence. This truly democratic organization became the firm and substantial basis for the transition of Bulgarian libraries. Over the next few years, the BLIA aims to

- create an accessible environment for enhancing qualifications of library specialists;
- create prerequisites for the professional development and well-informed library community;
- assist and support technological and organizational processes in libraries;
- foster the preservation of written cultural heritage; and
- strengthen the international presence of BLIA.

### US SUPPORT

A great leap in the progress of Bulgarian libraries was the creation of the America for Bulgaria Foundation (ABF), funded in 2008. This US\$400 million foundation assisted in strengthening democratic society in Bulgaria, helping the country to realize its full potential as a successful and modern European nation. The main goal of the ABF was to strengthen the public library system in Bulgaria. As a result, the BLIA launched a project called Advancement and Sustainable Development of the Library Sector in Bulgaria. The project was implemented with the financial support of the ABF.

The first significant US initiative in support of Bulgarian libraries after the fall of communism was in 1991: a donation from the US Center for Democracy. This \$65,000 grant focused on eight major Bulgarian libraries and consisted of the provision of books fundamental to laying the foundation of a democratic society. The grant ceremony was held in 1992, with the president of the Center for Democracy, Allen Weinstein, in attendance.

Also in 1991, the Open Society Fund in Sofia launched a library-assistance program, with funds totaling more than \$150,000. This money was spent on library equipment, subscriptions for periodicals, acquisitions of literature, handling book donations from the United States, and internships for Bulgarian library specialists (1991–2002). In 1992, over \$250,000 was given to the Libraries and Specialized Literature program. The hope was that this money would improve both national and community library facilities. The funding was also to help the development of Bulgarian libraries as modern information and cultural centers (Open Society Fund, 1991, 1992).

### THE AMERICAN–BULGARIAN LIBRARY EXCHANGE

At this time, one genuine initiative of US library bodies and the BLIA brought new ideas to Bulgaria. The project was named the American–Bulgarian Library Exchange (ABLE). It began in 1996 as a campaign of “partnering libraries” run by Nancy Bolt of Colorado Libraries and Iskra Milhailova of Bulgaria (Bolt, 2002, 2004). The main goals of this project were to

- increase the capacity of Bulgarian libraries in providing online community-information services to local government offices and Bulgarian citizens;

- improve increase understanding and support by Bulgarian government and community leaders for the role of libraries in a democratic society;
- utilize partner libraries as a means of sharing information about the two participating countries; and
- develop a continuing network of Bulgarian and US libraries seeking additional funding through philanthropic sources to upgrade the computer capacity of Bulgarian libraries (ABLE-ULISO Survey, 2005).

In examining these goals, Rebecca Miller Banner (2008) found that the partners shared cultural as well as professional information, which fostered understanding about each other's country and its culture—an important side benefit of the project. Through ABLE, leading US library theory and practice became a model for Bulgarian libraries.

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation grant that was completed shortly after 2008 was made possible precisely because of the strong foundations of the ABLE program. The program allowed Bulgarians to develop and modernize their libraries and practices in the most innovative and progressive ways. The ABLE program raised awareness, trained librarians, strengthened the profession, and paved the way for the Gates Foundation's Global Libraries program.

### THE GLOBAL LIBRARIES PROGRAM

The Global Libraries program was established after the successful implementation of ABLE. The Glob@l Libraries–Bulgaria Program aims to provide easy and equitable access to information, knowledge, communications, and electronic services in public libraries via free use of the internet and other information and communication technologies, and to enable Bulgarians to become integrated in the global information society, improve their quality of life, and enhance civil-society development.

This program was a joint venture of the Bulgarian ministries of Culture and of Transportation, Information Technology, and Communications; the United Nations Development Program, the Bulgarian National Association of Municipalities; and the Bulgarian Library and Information Association. Global Libraries was funded by a \$15 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. In Bulgaria, Global Libraries is designed to facilitate access to information, knowledge, communication, e-contents, and community services through Bulgaria's public libraries network. The country has a unique partnership platform for the program, which unites two government, two nongovernment, and one international entities.

Glob@l Libraries–Bulgaria chose a successful communication strategy and proactive approach in presenting the program, which resulted in library applications being received from 92 percent of Bulgaria's 264 municipalities. The indicative list of target libraries included a total of 1,676 public libraries throughout the country. The experts worked out six different packages for library IT equipment support. The packages were

defined to reflect the different needs of libraries in terms of population size and free space available for public computers. A total of 840 libraries applied for inclusion in “Stage 2009” of the program. The library needs assessment found that 51.5 percent of interviewed library staff did not have library qualifications, and that 43 percent had no computer literacy. These findings indicated that library staff needed to undergo targeted and structured training in order to be able to provide quality services to library users. The collected and analyzed data are strategically important for the Bulgarian public institutions in their efforts to design a national information strategy and plan the future development of the country’s public libraries network.

Within five years, the program succeeded in increasing library usage throughout the country and helped Bulgarian citizens integrate into the global information society. The project provided free information and communication technology equipment and internet use for the public in 960 public libraries throughout the country. Approximately three thousand library workers from 1,600 libraries were trained in IT skills, library management, and modern library services. With the combined efforts of local communities and the key program partners, Glob@l Libraries–Bulgaria helped modernize the country’s public libraries, striving to establish an image of the “new library.”

Ideally, the project provides a free innovative package of services, including computers for library users; access to the internet and online information; locally significant e-content; e-services; computer and information literacy training for users; design and implementation of community-support projects; a space for community initiatives/events; responses to specific user needs (such as the needs of children, the unemployed, and entrepreneurs, among others); a user-friendly environment; and client-oriented librarians.

The Global Libraries program of the Gates Foundation is working toward making available knowledge and information to many more people. This was a tremendous opportunity for the United States to breathe new life into Bulgarian libraries as well as into the cultural and spiritual life of what is an ancient country (Glob@l Libraries–Bulgaria Program, 2008–2012).

## THE NATIONAL ACADEMIC LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SYSTEM

The crowning achievement of assistance and cooperation programs that the United States has offered Bulgarian libraries is the National Academic Library and Information System (NALIS). Founded on April 15, 2009, the NALIS Foundation was established with the indispensable support of the ABF. Also in 2009, NALIS funds acquired the necessary software platform.

The first stage of the project was the creation of local networks in more than fifty university, special, and regional libraries in Bulgaria (*Building and Development of the National Automated Library and Information Network* [NALIN], 1993). The project was further implemented in 1994 with a large donation of scientific literature from the American Sabre Foundation. With NALIN (the predecessor of NALIS), three important tasks were achieved: the first was the automation of the Center for National Bibliography at the National Library of Bulgaria; second was the new IT room at the Central Library of the University of Sofia; and the third task that NALIN achieved was the Compact Disk Program for eight large scientific libraries.

In 1995, the country's libraries fund continued the expansion of NALIN with the aim of building a unified library information network. Another future goal was to enrich the existing library collections in more than thirty libraries with valuable scientific literature through the American Sabre Foundation's Project Hope (*National Automated Library and Information System*, 1998). The fund also financed internships of Bulgarian librarians in the US Library of Congress and the American Library Association. Support was also provided for the national reference catalog of Bulgarian books that was established with the NALIN project. During the following year (1996), both the preservation program and the thriving exchange program with US library institutions were extended (*National Program for the Preservation of Library Collections*, 1997). Unfortunately, in the years to follow, the Open Society Fund abruptly switched priorities and the Libraries Program was cut back and eventually discontinued in 2003. The NALIN project itself fell victim to the cuts and thus its library information system never saw the light of day (*Librarianship in Bulgaria*, 2007).

The next phase of the project was the integration of the founding libraries' catalog records. At the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, there are fifty libraries, and at the University of Sofia and the Panitza Library at the American University in Bulgaria, there are twenty-seven. The NALIS union catalog was made available to the public in late September 2010. Three years later, the NALIS network comprised thirty-two associate members in Bulgaria: nineteen university libraries, eight academic libraries, and five large public libraries.

The main objective of NALIS has been its and the NALIS Primo library catalog's development. Other goals for the project are to

- integrate the Bulgarian National Library's and university and academic libraries' BIB records and the data from some of their rare collections;
- integrate the BIB records of some major Balkan academic libraries;
- increase efforts for the popularization of the NALIS project—namely, negotiations with the largest Bulgarian online bookstores regarding establishing business partnerships so that Primo catalog users would be given the option to purchase inquiry-related titles;

- implement and develop the DigiTool/Rosetta module for the management and preservation of all digital collections;
- increase the DigiTool/Rosetta collection (from the digital collections of member libraries, as well as from the digital data of some international and European Union [EU] projects); and
- continue to download outstanding BIB data from all member libraries on an ongoing basis, current subscriptions for periodicals and the online resources of member libraries annually, and the ePrint resources of member libraries.

On a broader scale, the technological platform developed and maintained by NALIS can potentially serve as a ready IT solution to a number of challenges that Bulgarian museums and archives are now facing. This is why the NALIS Foundation is open to various forms of partnerships and project initiatives with these cultural heritage institutions. NALIS should play a leading role in the future National Digital Library, which has been widely discussed, designed, and approved by the BLIA. As of March 2014, NALIS has reached three of its main goals:

- Its Primo catalog contains 2,364,150 records (from thirty-two major libraries), granting access to vast amounts of online editions and digital data.
- Its founding libraries have been digitizing their catalogs since June 2010.
- Two of the founding libraries and one other associate-member library commenced utilizing the DigiTool software module with great success.

These achievements are the result of careful preparation: the development of a model for the description of digital objects and of digital collections; a program for preparing metadata to their respective images; the configuration of the DigiTool normalization rules and the mapping of the MARC 21 metadata in Dublin Core; the synchronization between ALEPH and DigiTool; the improvement of the DigiTool GUI; and the development of a program for the conversion of metadata from MARC/DigiTool in LIDO/ESE Europeana.

Although significant steps have been taken in the right direction, the current state of electronic library information systems in Bulgaria still does not allow all library users to check for the availability, or even the existence, of publications in non-NALIS member libraries. This is due to incompatible formats and standards of the differing software platforms. The universal adoption of a unified, standard catalog—already successfully implemented by NALIS member libraries—and its availability online will offer tremendous benefits to all users of library services in Bulgaria.

NALIS holds an annual conference to discuss what is going on in Bulgarian libraries—what is working and what still needs to be done. In

previous conferences, the main topics have focused on “modern library structure” and “the digital library: technological and social problems.” Leading library and information professionals and managers—such as Robert Darnton, librarian of Harvard University; David Ferriero, archivist of the United States; Richard Ovenden, librarian of the Bodleian Library of Oxford University; and Deanna Marcum of the Library of Congress—have been among the conferences’ keynote speakers.

The NALIS project aims to continue to bridge the existing gap in the electronic library information systems in Bulgaria—more precisely, to allow any library user to check online the availability of a publication in associated member libraries. Until now, the project dealt with technologically oriented objectives, which were achieved well ahead of schedule. It introduced current standards and best practices for the first time in the history of the library and information sector in Bulgaria. Over time, it has become clear that NALIS is the standard-bearer, a model of the most advanced level of information service, that has taken the necessary modernization steps along the path of future development and growth, which all other institutions in the industry will have to adapt sooner or later. The NALIS project must ensure that all new information practices and standards lead to a modern culture of information services in Bulgaria, without which the results already achieved will lack stability and sustainability. The main objective of the NALIS project now, apart from the ongoing software development to which it is dedicated, is to use technology to benefit society. Its goal is to achieve a significant, sustainable social good by capitalizing on its already achieved technological innovations and investments.

For a variety of historical and sociocultural reasons, in Bulgaria, the transition from one centrally implemented and administered model, no matter how efficient and modern, to a more organic and grassroots culture requires more time and a longer sustained effort than in more developed countries. This is why NALIS will continue its work and efforts in attaining a critical mass of acceptance and use before it can become a stand-alone program. The road ahead is clear. Following it will entail further expanding the ranks of institutions actively using modern information practices and contemporary standards—those introduced by NALIS—which are prerequisites for any industrialized, modern country today, as well as ensuring their more active participation in the development and strengthening of the organization.

There are also strong external factors contributing to the positive development of this process. Many of the official obligations and commitments of Bulgaria to the EU can only be executed in the presence of a modern information structure akin to the one introduced by NALIS. Unfortunately, its achievements and technological innovations in Bulgaria are still the exception rather than the rule.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

Different reasons, including economic ones, have made it likely that universities, research institutions, and corporate entities will always need an information purveyor to find and obtain information and meta-information in whatever corresponding shape, standard, or format required. Libraries still have an important role to play, with their established traditions and solid know-how, and yet there exist so-called risk-averse instincts. This is a counterproductive strategy in today's open and dynamic information environment. The virtual information world has become globalized and increasingly democratized, and thus if the local social and political environment is neither ready nor willing to adapt quickly, libraries will clearly be among the losers. This is the academic equivalent of "sink or swim."

Thinking about the future of the institution of the library as a whole, one might recall a portion of the Talmudic text of Genesis:

Twenty-six attempts preceded the creation of the world and all of them were unsuccessful. The world of man came into being from the remains of these attempts. It is too fragile and it easily could be transformed, ruined into the Void. "Let's hope this attempt will be successful"—God said after the creation and this hope has been the eternal companion to the history of the World and Mankind, underlying from the very beginning that history is marked by uncertainty and relativity. (Neher, 1976, pp. 155–156)

## REFERENCES

- ABLE-ULISO survey on library automation and electronic resources in the participating libraries. (2005). American–Bulgarian Library Exchange. Retrieved November 21, 2014, from <http://www.ableportal.bg/profiles/Survey.html>
- Bolt, N. (2002). A Bulgarian and Colorado library project. *International Leads*, 16(2), 1–2.
- Bolt, N. (2004). The ABLE project: American/Bulgarian library exchange. *International Leads*, 18(4), 7–8.
- Building and development of the National Automated Library and Information Network (NALIN)*. (1993). Sofia: Open Society Foundation.
- Librarianship in Bulgaria*. (2007). Sofia: ULISO and Open Society Foundation.
- Miller Banner, R. L. (2008). *The intercultural transfer of professional knowledge in international partnerships: A case study of the American–Bulgarian library exchange*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Emporia State University.
- National Automated Library and Information System—six years later: An analysis of the state and trends in the development*. (1998). Sofia: Open Society Foundation.
- National program for the preservation of library collections*. (1997). Sofia: ULISO and Open Society Foundation.
- Neher, A. (1976). The view of time and history of Jewish culture. In Paul Ricoeur et al. (Eds.), *Cultures and time* (pp. 155–156). Paris: UNESCO.
- Open Society Institute Sofia. Retrieved November 21, 2014, from <http://www.osf.bg/?cy=29&lang=2> [Annual Reports 1991, 1992].
- Reports on the Glob@I Libraries–Bulgaria program. (2008–2012). Access to Information for All. Retrieved November 21, 2014, from <http://www.glibulgaria.bg/en/reports>

---

Dincho Krastev was the executive director of the NALIS fund in Bulgaria. He held the MS and PhD degrees from Moscow State University and attended training sessions in Germany, the United States, and United Kingdom. He taught at the St. Kliment Ohridski of the University of Sofia University during 1970–1973 and 1977–1986, and in Torun, Poland, since 1996. From 1992 to 2013, he served as the director of the Central Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Recently, a new five-year project of his had been approved by the America for Bulgaria Foundation for the integration of the Bulgarian academic library information systems. He participated as national coordinator in numerous other international projects and was the author of many articles in library information science published in both national and international journals. Regrettably, Dr. Dincho Krastev died on January 5, 2015, before this paper was published.

Nikola Kazanski holds degrees in international relations (1974), library and information sciences (1981), and a doctorate in philology (1985), all from the University of Sofia. He has been the chief information officer of the Central Library of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences since 1991 and an associate professor of information sciences at the same academy since 1996. He participated in training sessions at the European University Institute Florence (1993), British Library (1994), Danish Library Administration (1995), College of Europe in Bruges (1996), Bibliothèque Nationale de France (1997), and National Library of Portugal (2003), among others. He is also a special informal adviser to the British Library and the US Library of Congress, as well as a tutor for the Bulgarian–American Fulbright Commission and the University of Library Studies and Information Technologies in Sofia.