

Serbian Librarians on the Road: 1000 Kilometres to 1000 Ideas

By Dr Bogdan Trifunović

The **Serbian Library Association** (SLA) is the oldest library association in Serbia and one of the biggest cultural associations in the country, with over 650 individual and collective members in 2017. The SLA is a member of **IFLA** (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) and **EBLIDA** (European Bureau of Library Information and Document Associations) and regularly collaborates with the numerous other associations in the region, in Europe and the United States. The Association was established on December 14, 1947 in Belgrade, so 2017 brings a jubilee for the SLA, marking the seven decades of successful work for the Library and Information Science and profession in Serbia. This year in December the SLA will organise its XIV annual conference, which will also include a celebration ceremony in the name of its jubilee.

The Governing Board of SLA made a decision that in a year of an important jubilee, new projects and actions should be initiated, which could work for the goals of advocacy, awareness raising, development of librarianship in Serbia or for the development of SLA itself. Knowing that **2017 IFLA WLIC** (IFLA World Library and Information conference) will be in Wrocław, Poland, the SLA Governing Board discussed in 2016 possible means of organising Congress attendance for SLA members on a broader scale. The idea of sending a bus full of librarians to Wrocław emerged as the most realistic during those discussions. In the past, IFLA congresses that were organised in Europe gathered the largest groups from Serbia. The most visited Congress was Milan, Italy, in 2009, due to the relative closeness of Italy to Serbia. Because of high costs of attending IFLA WLIC on other continents or even in more expensive European countries, few librarians in Serbia could afford to go and experience IFLA WLIC and all of the learning opportunities that it offered.

The fact that the IFLA Congress in 2017 will be in Poland is an excellent opportunity for librarians from the Southeast of Europe to present themselves, their libraries and work in front of an international community. From the north of Serbia to Wrocław is only 1000 kilometres of road, and the standard of living and prices in Poland are comparable to those in Belgrade. The SLA seized this opportunity, announcing in early 2017 to their colleagues in Serbia that the Association is starting an initiative or project 'Librarians on the Road: 1000 Kilometres to 1000 Ideas' (The authors of the slogan and project are Vesna Vuksan, a member of the SLA Governing Board and one of IFLA International Leaders 2016-2018, and Dr Bogdan Trifunović, President of SLA.). This exciting initiative would bring a bus full of librarians, members of SLA, from Serbia to IFLA WLIC in Wrocław in August 2017. A poster of the initiative was made by Vesna Vuksan and published extensively in publications and online.

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Librarians ON THE ROAD

1000 km = 1000 ideas!
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Shortly after, an international marketing campaign was started through online communication, mailing lists, the Facebook page of SLA and via Twitter posts (hashtags #LibrariansontheRoad #1000Ideas). The internationalisation of the campaign was undertaken in an effort to raise the awareness of the global library community to this idea and the Serbian Library Association. This proved to be a good choice, as in response the SLA has had many emails of encouragement and support (including one from the President of IFLA), congratulations, tips for the trip, suggestions about possible libraries and places to visit along the way, etc. A formal letter of support and invitation to Poland and WLIC was issued by the **Polish Librarians' Association**.

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The SLA is promoting the initiative through the slogan '1000 Kilometres to 1000 Ideas', emphasising its twofold meaning. Firstly, members of the SLA will get a free ride on the road that is roughly 1000 kilometres long, to cover the distance from Serbia to Wrocław and IFLA

WLIC. And, secondly, at the same time this will be a professional group visit to libraries in the countries through which the group will pass during the week-long journey, both ways. The bus will take the group through the countries of Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic and Poland. The whole initiative is an opportunity to exchange knowledge, ideas and practices between international and Serbian librarians, thus '1000 Ideas'. It is hoped these ideas will emerge during the journey and that much of what is learnt will be applicable to the members' libraries back home. The SLA have prepared a submission detailing the project for the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Serbia hoping for co-funding the costs of renting a bus and two drivers. At the time of writing of this article the decision of the Ministry is still unknown, but it must be said that the initiative will not be compromised even in case of a negative decision.

At first the response of colleagues in Serbia was lacking in enthusiasm. It was felt that during the time of economical difficulties, budget cuts, and overall shortages for everything but the necessities in libraries, it was not realistic for the association to organise such a project, nor to gather enough interested colleagues for the bus trip because of high costs. The main obstacle is the high registration fee, which libraries in Serbia rarely pay for their employees. Nevertheless, members of the Governing Board pushed the idea, promoted it, and encouraged librarians to participate at WLIC with their paper and poster proposals and to apply for **IFLA grants**.

Partially thanks to this effort, by the end of April 2017, the list of interested colleagues is longer than the planned number of places. Among those who want to be in the bus branded with the names of SLA, IFLA and WLIC, Belgrade and Wrocław, are the names of the authors of three accepted Congress papers, five posters, and six volunteers with grants from IFLA WLIC 2017, as well as at least one member of the IFLA Section Standing Committee. This group of travellers/librarians come from national, academic, public, and special libraries in Serbia, so various types of library institutions will be represented. At the same time the group itself will be able to share knowledge and discussion on virtually every topic of LIS theory and practice in Serbia with colleagues during the journey.

Parallel to the abovementioned the SLA was working on securing library visits and contacts with colleagues in the countries that will be visited during the trip. So far (end of April 2017) we have negotiated visits to three libraries and are waiting for an official confirmation for the fourth. The libraries that will open their doors for the Serbian librarians and provide professional tours free of charge are the University Library in Bratislava – the oldest and biggest research library in Slovakia, the Moravian Library in Brno – the second biggest library in the Czech Republic, the John Paul II Municipal Public Library Opole – one of the most modern public libraries in Poland built in 2010, and the Silesian Library in Katowice – the main library in Silesia, in the southwest of Poland. Such a variety of excellent libraries will provide fruitful ground for the colleagues from Serbia in examining various types of libraries in Central Europe.

Although the project '1000 Kilometres to 1000 Ideas' is still underway, with the full promise of its results not visible for a couple of months, there is no doubt that this has been a great experience for the team behind it and for the Serbian Library Association in general. When the project was made public, we had comments like: "I'm jealous that we here do not have such ideas". This speaks volumes about the impact we have created out of nowhere. As time goes by, any skepticism diminishes and what seemed several months ago like a just another

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wishful idea is now becoming a visible reality. In fact, the energy around the project is making some of the participants feel like bold librarian-adventurers, able to unite behind a common goal against the barriers of overly traditional thinking.

Dr Bogdan Trifunović is the president of the Serbian Library Association
predsednik@bds.rs