THE LIBRARY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM
OF THE SOROS FOUNDATION FOR AN OPEN SOCIETY

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"The library is an oasis of silence, a place of retreat among books and, implicitly, of meditation; a place where time goes by slowly and nothing seems to happen". The consistency in this myth is questioned, indeed, as are all the other social, cultural and political matters in Romania in this decade.

Basic changes in libraries and librarianship are not rigorously determined by political mutations nor by this obsessive "transition" period. They belong to the worldwide information explosion and development of information technology (or vice versa, if you like). The library has ceased to represent a lifeless repository of documents and has converted into an active nucleus of accumulation and dissemination of global information. In the Romanian context, as in all post-totalitarian societies, this evolution has been impetuous, almost violent, similar to the sweeping effect of air bursting in through suddenly opened windows. There are many problems this fundamental change of library mission creates on a practical level. Not only sophisticated, expensive equipment and new acquisition policies confronted with high prices are required plus change of locations but a shift in outlooks, attitudes and mentalities and a new approach to the library profession.

Material resources in Romania are extremely poor and there are no signs that the government will include libraries among priorities. On the other hand, the pressure of change, the need for information are extremely high. The need is noble and sublime yet ... "the price of milk has gone up again, so has gas and electricity as well and there are no subsidised medicines available... One still has to wait.. maybe next year!". Under

these conditions, the only solution, valid not only for libraries, is resource development by donation, joint projects financed by the European Community or by other national and international institutions and foundations. In addition it is completely wrong to consider this as a sole solution specifically for Romania or other East European countries. Many large West European and American libraries have been sponsored and supported by Charity foundations or cultural and scientific non-governmental programs. The impact and efficiency of these programs have been varied both from the source and the beneficiary point of view. In our case, many came, observed, promised and then left; the Soros Foundation is one of the few that stayed.

This is an attempt to analyze the Library Assistance Programs of The Soros Foundation for an Open Society, from a triple viewpoint of coordinator, jury member and beneficiary.

General Presentation

The Library Assistance Program is consistent with the overall strategy of the Soros Foundation for an Open Society. The revival of Romanian civil society, weakened after decades of totalitarianism, implies a necessary change of social, cultural and spiritual life. Building a vigorous and dynamic open society is strongly affected by the absence or confinement of information sources, lack of communication, obstruction of information, and of free circulation of ideas and values.

The strategy of the Library Assistance Program was initiated in 1993, based on a study of the Romanian libraries' development perspectives, focusing mainly on the libraries' ability to cope with changes imposed by transition towards a democratic society. Both the study and the strategic plan were discussed in November 1993 by the future members of the first National Board of the Program, the other program coordinators and the Director of the Soros Foundation for Romania. This strategic plan was aimed at identifying different fields where financial support would work most effectively. These distinctive categories would subsequently turn into separate programs within the National Program for libraries. Specific working approaches were determined for each of these categories,

at least for the first three years. At the same time, the possibility of modifications was established according to the libraries' evolution and needs. The Regional Library Assistance Program (covering the whole East European area) and other international and national institutions and organizations was approached for extra funds and professional expertise.

In 1993 the Library Assistance Program started with three categories: (1) Support for books and current serials acquisition; (2) Support for inter-library telecommunication and automation of libraries; (3) Support for Training in Librarianship and Library Higher Education. Starting with 1995 they have become distinct programs.

Since this study is not intended to generate a report on the activity carried out within this program but rather an analysis of its receptivity and efficiency, we will mention at this point that the above categories have been adjusted as appropriate to needs, strictly observing the Foundation's essential concept of openness.

It is important that, before dealing with the impact each of these categories achieved in the world of libraries, the general principles and functions of the National Library Assistance Programs should be clarified, since they illustrate the working strategy of the Soros Foundation itself. A jury of specialists, librarians with experience from the whole country, decides on the strategy of the programs and examines and approves the applications received. They are uniformly selected to encompass all the country areas. The first national jury was composed of seven members. At present it comprises eight members. The programs are administered by the special coordinators of the Soros Foundation branches in Bucharest, Iaşi, Cluj and Timişoara. The jury is renewed every two years. The meetings are carried out bi-monthly when applications submitted by libraries to the local Foundation branches are discussed. At least one week before the meetings, each member of the board receives copies of all the registered applications. The budget is decided for each meeting and represents a specific percentage from the annual budget. It is a confirmed decision that no application exceeding $ 10,000 can be accepted at the national level. If the submitted project requires a much higher budget, and if the board considers this particular project to be important, efficient and to have a potential great impact in the field of librarianship, it is sent to the Regional Library

Assistance Program of the Open Society Institute, Budapest, for subsequent analysis. The grants supported by the Regional Program can reach $ 100,000. Procedure of the application entails specific forms to be completed by each library with details of the title, content and goals of the project, anticipated results and required budget (including costs and price offers). In addition to the completed form, the application must also include a short description of the respective library with data on its past year's activity, a letter of support from the patron institution and three confidential recommendations. The best applications are selected on an open competition basis (except for the dedicated support program for books and periodicals acquisition). The projects can also be partially accepted or postponed until the next meeting when minor deficiencies have been found, but which do not justify immediate rejection. Evaluation criteria generally include the following facets: who will benefit from the project and to what extent? How large and important the particular library is? Will the project have a great impact and an efficient result? Is there an honest involvement of the patron institution or of other sponsors?

A. Support for books and current serials acquisition.

The fact that collections in Romanian libraries have been seriously depleted by official policy over almost half a century is already well known. The natural development of Romanian collections, many of them extremely valuable, was seriously impaired, alienating them from the everyday international flow of information.

Recent publications of foreign publishing houses covering all fields have also been poorly represented in Romanian library collections, few libraries having the financial resources to acquire them. Access to current serial publications has been limited also denying readers continuous and current information essential to scientific and research activity.

Another main objective of this Library Program is assisting the educational process with the acquisition of the most important and recent reference materials concurrent with the progress of knowledge.

Program description

The Program for Library Assistance was initiated in the fall of 1993 and included the Support for books and current serials acquisition as a separate chapter. At the beginning, it functioned as a distinct part of the same program but, beginning in 1996, it became a completely separate entity, with its own strategy and budget.

The idea to provide financial support for information resources development arose from the impoverished state of Romanian collections, identified by the National Board as critical. Other attempts were also made by different Donation programs for East European libraries by many Western foundations and institutions: WorldVision, The World Bank Volunteer Corps, The Brother's Brother, The Volkswagen Foundation. The initiative of The New School for Social Research from New York must be considered as remarkable since they offered the receiving libraries the possibility to generate their own selection, in accordance with their own needs. However, generous as these programs were, they did not function on a constant and permanent basis and therefore could not cover the continuous need of modern foreign publications in Romanian libraries. The idea of an independent program, with its own budget and flexible enough to allow the libraries to follow their own acquisition policy, became more and more evident. Even if the financial support granted by this program covered only a certain part of their budgetary needs, and has not been automatically provided for all Romanian libraries, but on a competitive basis, the Support for books and current serials acquisition represented reliable and ongoing assistance.

The budget for collections development has been granted only for important foreign publications edited during the last 10 years and only for those titles that have not been translated into Romanian. The editions published after 1990 have been seen as high priority issues. Single subscriptions to current serials of high scientific value, following new modern standards have been the only periodicals approved for subscription. The books and serials have been ordered by the Soros Foundation through prestigious foreign booksellers such as Blackwell's and with the Book Foundation from Bucharest. The materials ordered and paid

for by the foundation have been delivered directly to the client libraries addresses.

The budget allocated for acquisitions support, $ 180,000 in 1994 and $ 125,000 in 1995, was divided into two categories: financial support for foreign books and serials, dedicated to previously assigned libraries from important academic centers, and support granted to all library categories on a competitive basis respectively.

Dedicated support for books and current serials. After an intensive study of conditions in Romanian libraries, the board decided to set up a pilot program, functioning as a distinctive and independent category, that would offer a special amount granted for three years (two years, thereafter) to a number of previously selected libraries. These institutions were given their own budgets allocated by the board, and were given the opportunity to choose titles according to their own information needs.

For the selection of the libraries and academic centers for this pilot program, the National Board evaluated their importance in the educational field, the extent to which they covered the readers' need for information, and the geographical area they served. The libraries and academic centers selected by the board were:

1. The National Library of Romania, Bucharest
2. The University libraries in Cluj
3. The University libraries in Iaşi
4. The University libraries in Timişoara
5. The University libraries in Bucharest
6. The County Library, Galaţi
7. The Academy Library of Bucharest
8. The County Library, Braşov
9. The County Library, Baia Mare

[N.B. University libraries included the Agriculture, Medical, Technical University etc.]

In their title selection, the libraries were advised to follow a certain priority order of fields, previously determined by the board: reference materials, social sciences, natural and applied sciences,

economics, agriculture, literature, linguistics, literary history and criticism, modern languages, art and culture, medicine.

As a consequence of the pilot program in 1994 and 1995, the most significant 29 academic and public libraries in the country (12 in Bucharest, 6 in Cluj, 5 in Iaşi, 3 in Timişoara, 1 in Braşov, 1 in Galaţi, 1 in Baia Mare) were given a unique opportunity to acquire an important number of recent foreign publications.

Support for books and current serials acquisition by open request. The access to information is an essential issue in every social background or geographical area. In addition to the libraries selected for the dedicated pilot program, all other library in the country were given the opportunity to request financial assistance in order to purchase the most important works published abroad and fundamental for the public they served. Their applications, including essential data on their library activity and community served, were analysed comparatively using criteria previously established. The libraries selected were granted sums requested, within the budget settled for this program.

This category of library assistance, based on an open request system, widened the scope of libraries able to acquire for their collections, significant foreign materials. The Library of the Technical University in Petroşani, the University Library in Suceava, the county libraries from Oradea and Brăila are only a few examples.

At this point, we must mention an additional contest organized for valuable reference materials donated by the National Library Support Program in association with the Regional Library Assistance Program of the Open Society Institute, Budapest. Thus, any university or county library or any Academy library could compete for one of the 7 sets of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 21 sets of Encyclopaedia Universalis or 3 sets of the art encyclopaedia Franco Maria Ricci, with a total value of $ 62,935. The contest was open to all the above mentioned library categories, with only one limitation regarding the art encyclopaedia where, obviously, the special art libraries had absolute priority.

The large number of participants -- 72 libraries applied for one of the encyclopaedia sets -- demonstrates the high level of professional interest in the acquisition of such important reference works. At the same

time, the librarians' enthusiasm towards the Foundation's offer proved even a greater success, as compared with the program's initial stages where there was distinct signs of apathy. Now sets of these reference works have been included in the library collections of Focşani, Târgovişte, Bistriţa, Constanţa, Hunedoara, Craiova, Arad, to mention only a few of the contest winners.

Results of the financial support granted to Cluj academic center by the Library Assistance Program. In Cluj, the librarians' response to the Soros Foundation Library Assistance Program was remarkable. Aware that such a program would have a beneficial effect on the quality of information services offered to the public, they instantly applied at the program initiation.

Due to the high academic, scientific and cultural prestige of this center of tradition, the university libraries from Cluj were also selected by the dedicated Assistance Program in second place, after the National Library. Many libraries of the most important higher education institutions had the opportunity to enrich their collections and offer direct access to important and valuable foreign publications. In fact, the main beneficiary of this program was the entire academic community of Cluj of over 35,000 students, teachers, doctors and researchers. The "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library, the libraries of the Technical University, the Academy of Visual Arts, the University Library of Agricultural Sciences, the Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy and the Academy of Music were granted $ 65,987 for 389 books and 74 serials in total.

In addition to the libraries that benefitted from dedicated support, an important number of other public and special libraries from Cluj also applied for open request assistance. In 1994 and 1995, the libraries of the Chemistry Faculty, the Institute for Isotopic and Molecular Technology, the Institute for Archaeology and History of Arts, the "Octavian Goga" County Library, to mention only some of them, enhanced their collections with $ 30,914.

The recently established College of Library and Information Science at the "Babeş-Bolyai" University also received important financial support to acquire current publications in the field of librarianship. The information science materials, selected on this occasion, will offer the

students and teaching staff a valuable basis for their studies and will help the present librarians in their continuing training process.

The value of all the books and periodicals included into the collections of Cluj libraries with the assistance of the library program has now reached $ 99,600. Thus, the librarians' efforts to develop their collections in conjunction with their readers needs have been significantly supported by SOROS financial grants, at a time when official currency resources remain inadequate.

B. Support for inter-library telecommunication and automation of libraries

This is the present name of the program that formerly operated as "Modernization and automation of libraries".

The main objective of this program is financial assistance offered for the following types of projects:

- updating the library services, access to foreign databases;

- automation of libraries to provide a quicker and more efficient access to stock already existing in libraries and for a better service to the public;

- inter-library telecommunication between similar types of libraries to create local area networks (LAN) or among branches of a library and its main location;

- building union databases, cooperating through national and international exchange and loan of publications;

- digital imaging of rare books and local and national collections to improve access and also to prevent their physical deterioration.

Institutions that intended to make or had already made their own investments in this field and who had already found additional financial sources were among the first in order of priority to receive these grants. To provide continuous progress, the board decided to also accept projects perceived in two phases and to finance them over two consecutive years (as a rule, the Soros Foundation does consider projects of libraries that have already received financial support in the previous year). Because of the high prices of automation projects, the Soros Foundation did not cover all

costs exclusively, but instead agreed to participate in financing them together with local government or programs of the European Community, like TEMPUS or PHARE. Starting in 1996, the Regional Library Assistance Program welcomed projects up to $ 100,000, on a competitive basis with other projects from East European countries.

The projects financed by this category of library assistance program rose from $ 106,186 in 1994 to $ 116,355 in 1995. The budget for 1996 allocated $ 155,000 for library automation and updating.

During 1994 and 1995, 71 valid applications were received and 44 different libraries benefitted through financial support. The successful institutions served various types of communities in cities situated all over the country, not only in important traditional academic centers. Almost half of the 44 approved applications were only awarded partial grants but still, 12 of these libraries received over $ 5,000:

- "Octavian Goga" County Library, Cluj - $ 27,000 for additional technical equipment to support the library automation process;

- Central University Library, Timişoara - $ 26,500 to acquire a library automation system within the TILINE networking project;

- Central Library of the Technical University, Timişoara - $ 26,500 within the same TILINE network project for Timişoara;

- County Library of Satu-Mare - $ 9,950 for an automated system and a computer;

- Library of Romanian Academy, the Engravings Division, Bucharest - $ 9,280 for digital imaging equipment;

- Central Library of the University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Cluj - $ 8,080 for equipment and network software updating;

- Central University Library, Iaşi - $ 7,190 for additional technical equipment in automating the Public Relations Division;

- National Library, Music Division, Bucharest - $ 6,990 for specific equipment;

- University Library, Ploieşti - $ 6,250 for additional automation equipment;

- University Library of Baia-Mare - $ 5,990 for a xerox machine, computer and printer;

- Timişoara branch of the Library of Academy - $ 5,760 for computing equipment;
- Library of "Transilvania" University, Braşov - $ 5,120 for library automation.

The geographical distribution of the 44 granted libraries was: 16 in the area covered by the Iaşi branch of the Soros Foundation, 15 from Cluj area, 10 from Bucharest area, and 5 from Timişoara area. The national distribution of the grants regarding the type of libraries is: 25 academic libraries (the highest number of applications but the lowest percentage of acceptance), 9 county libraries, 4 Academy Library branches, 6 libraries belonging to other research institutions, including the "Biblioteca" journal.

The actual use of the donated equipment has been evaluated mainly by discussions with the project managers or by visits of board members to some of these libraries. The direct and immediate assessment of the efficient use has been difficult due to the complexity of automation processes and the time needed to implement them. On the other hand, almost half of the amounts granted for 1994 and two thirds for 1995 have been only paid for in the second half of 1995. No complaints were registered concerning the board activity and decisions. A stimulating element is the fact that libraries from small towns (Huşi is only one example), are interested in automating their libraries and apply for financial support with well structured projects, while some large libraries from important centers still hesitate.

Beside the increase of interest in automation and communication, some of the program achievements are: (a) expertise and consultancy offered to the beneficiary institutions by the board members, the staff of the Soros Foundation and its external collaborators; (b) the availability of passing interesting projects requiring large finance input over to the Regional Library Assistance Program.

C. Support for librarians' training and library higher education

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Reform has been relatively easy to achieve in the first two fields with appropriate funds and easy to plan from a financial point of view. However training and library education planning requires more than just financial support. Such a program should coherently comprise activities based on the main routes of professional training together with a reconsideration and awareness of the profession and a change of mentality and conception according to European standards. This program had to take into consideration that a library undergraduate program had only been reintroduced in 1990, the first class graduating in 1995. In addition, 99% of present librarians have a university degree in all fields **except** library and information science. They were trained *in situ* without ever having been given an overall perspective of their profession. Without this integral knowledge in the field of librarianship many Romanian librarians lack self-respect, motivation and desire for change. Under the Soros Foundation's constant principles for openness, several lines of action were initiated for further training in librarianship:

Training courses in librarianship in Cluj, Iaşi and Timişoara organized with the cooperation of the British Council. The courses were run by Sally Wood-Lamont (University Library of Edinburgh) and Ioana Robu (MSc in Librarianship and Information Science, Robert Gordon's University) based on modern topics of librarianship and information science. The courses were structured in 3 sessions by one week : each session dealt with specific issues: cataloging and classification, library management, automation and reference etc. Foreign librarians from important libraries in Great Britain were invited as guest lecturers. The overall number of participants exceeded 300.

Seminars organized by The Soros Foundation: The seminar *Managing Changing in Libraries* - Braşov, 1995 - organized with the collaboration with the Open Society Institute who appointed Sheila Ritchie, consulting lecturer of the British Library Association. There were 22 participants, directors and heads of departments, selected through a contest. The seminar *International Programs to Support Libraries* -

Bucharest 1995, with the help of the Council of Europe attracted 18 participants from Romania, Republic of Moldavia and Bulgaria, selected through a contest. The seminar *Automation in Libraries - Bucharest 1996*, in co-operation with The library Associations of Great Britain and Canada had 15 participants selected through a contest.

Training programs abroad. Visits to libraries in Great Britain - 1995: 6 participants, selected through a contest; a 3 months visit to The Library of Congress in Washington, USA: 1 participant, in competition with applicants from the Eastern Europe.

Participation in International Scientific events: The LIBTECH Seminar - Great Britain 1994: 8 participants, selected through a contest.

Partial financing for individual participation at International Scientific events: over 20 librarians. These grants were financed from the budget of library programs, and were not included in the special program of the Soros Foundation for visits abroad.

The Foundation also supported financially the organization of the annual conferences of the two library associations from Romania, ABIR (Asociația Bibliotecilor de Învățământ din România) and ABBPR (Asociația Bibliotecarilor din Bibliotecile Publice din România), and other scientific and professional events in this field. We can also mention here the co-financing of the seminar *Curriculum Development for Library Higher Education* - Cluj, Feb. 1996.

The total amount of money for this program was: $ 21,615 in 1994, $ 52,950 in 1995 and $ 55,000 has been approved for 1996. These are supplemented by about 20,000 $ by the Open Society Institute and the Council of Europe. As seen above, only part of these funds are offered to open individual applications, the rest being utilised by the Foundation programs. We should mention here that these projects are in competition with the whole budget of the program, and there is no *ab initio* preference for the projects initiated by the Foundation.

From a "quantitive" point of view, the training program is the largest, supporting approximately 400 applicants. The "quality" assessment is extremely difficult, as it raises the question of what can be considered "quality": professional quality of the participants, hierarchical position in the library and therefore their power in making decisions, the capacity of

assimilating and disseminating what is new ? In several instances the suitability of certain participants in specific projects has been questioned. In others, the participation of all library managers has been claimed as absolutely necessary in order to produce an efficient and practical impact. However, no-one can be forced or denied participation, therefore control is not absolute. At the beginning especially, there was some hesitation and even suspicion regarding the Soros Foundation's goals. This was quite natural in the circumstances of the newly acquired freedom, when many people were afraid to be trapped again in yet another closed situation. This fear was reflected by the frequent question: "How can *they* give me something without asking for anything in exchange ? There must be something hidden!" However, the plain fact is that the Soros Foundation has the most accessible and the most wide-ranging library training program open to all Romanian librarians, even if it is not the only one and not totally perfect.

Conclusions

We have to keep in mind that the three categories have been separate branches of the Library Assistance Program run by the Soros Foundation for an Open Society, but they functioned in a continuous interconnection, absolutely necessary for a realistic reform strategy. There are some simple statistics reflecting this fact: more automation projects have been initiated by libraries whose staff participated in these courses and seminars. Likewise, the libraries that have already been automated have been more able to utilize their book and serial collections and therefore the efficiency of the Acquisitions' Support Program has been very high.

As we have already mentioned, the Library Program's initial phase was marked by an obvious lack of enthusiasm, even a lack of interest. The absence of former access to these kind of programs and also distrust in their efficiency goes a long way to explain this reaction. After sustained advertising of these programs and their results, the libraries soon took the initiative and applied. Moreover, their strong desire to obtain these grants

showed a high degree of professionalism in preparing these projects and willingness in carrying them out.

Besides the financial assistance, important if we realize that it is carried out with only one man's money (!) and not with funds offered by state budgets or by the European Community, one aspect still has to be pointed out: the Soros Foundation "opens" new directions and possibilities for librarians to achieve their potential professional status and persuade society that they are really necessary to its development.