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Estonian Public Libraries in a Rapidly Changing Society

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I have the honour to give you a brief overview about the role that libraries play in the Estonian society, how they cope with their responsibilities and what the state can do to develop libraries.

Libraries have always played a leading role in the development of the society, they are open to innovations. The function of the libraries is to constantly update information, modify it according to the needs of the society and make information accessible to the citizens in a way that is most suitable for them. Libraries in Estonia have managed to cope with the overwhelming information of the past decades quite well.

The "Fundamentals of the Estonian Cultural Policy", approved by the Estonian Parliament on September 16, 1998, include the following ideas:

"The state information system consisting of research, public and school libraries is an integral part of the Estonian national computer infrastructure.

The libraries, regardless of their type, financing sources, location, etc., operate as a global national information system, trying to ensure exhaustive, accurate and easily available

information to the population and an access, through information channels, to worldwide information resources."

The libraries in Estonia function in a network, their responsibilities being divided mainly between two ministries – the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education and Research. There is a Board for Public Libraries functioning at the Ministry of Culture which acts as an advisory body for the minister.

Public libraries are part of the public sector. The network of Estonian public libraries has been relatively stable since the creation of it in 1920-ies and their role and importance in our society has been increasing constantly. Libraries are very popular in our country, using of them is increasing.

One of our most distinguished librarians has recently said that it is most difficult to define the concept “public library”, as the requirements for public libraries are extremely diverse. The world around us has changed, and so have libraries along with it. The contemporary public library has to fulfil several tasks, some of which I shall mention.

- Libraries supporting life-long learning and e- literacy

Another activity besides the traditional library work is becoming more and more important – this is the user training and the role of libraries in teaching e-literacy to the public. Library programs are complicated and always changing, the use of e-resources requires certain skills. By teaching e-literacy to the public the libraries fulfill the role of social involvement of people in the e-environment. Possessing various databases is not an aim in itself, it is important to teach how to use them and how to secure access to the databases. The libraries play an important role in overcoming the digital split.

- Libraries as physical space

The library building has to be functionally good both for the librarians and for the clients, i.e. user friendly. The library should not so much concentrate on pursuing statistical numbers, but rather on creating conditions for working. Library as a natural part of living environment. Library as a servicing centre in the community. Several libraries (at least in Estonia) are housed in the same buildings with kindergartens, schools, local authorities, which often determines also their function and co-operation with these institutions.

- Libraries as an intellectual environment – a meeting point for different interest groups.

Traditionally several cultural events take place in or near the libraries, libraries have been cultural and social communication venues. The events need not always be targeted to large groups of people; they may also be more marginal and aimed at smaller groups sharing an interest (e.g. ex libris collectors). It is very important how we can satisfy the needs of different interest groups.

- Libraries as e-communication spots.

By communicating via e-services the inhabitants of smaller villages may also feel part of a larger community and will diminish the feeling of seclusion. Creating virtual services and conditions for diminishing dissimilarities. Places for satisfying practical needs – e.g. bank services. Possibilities to use free Internet access.

- Co-operation between different levels

The importance of international co-operation is growing. Creation of an information portal uniting all libraries in Estonia. By being an EU member state we need to secure access to all data stored in libraries for every member state, and to have access to information portals of libraries in other countries

A library can only fulfil its tasks if a devoted and innovative librarian is employed, if the local authorities and the state agree on the development principles for libraries and if the library is housed in a contemporary building. How are these issues resolved in Estonia? The role of a modern librarian has changed to such extent that the younger generation does not recall the earlier stereotype of an elderly lady with spectacles and her hair up in a bun anymore. The librarian today comprises several roles, even in the most modest village library it is not sufficient to just lend out books. The librarian has to constantly learn, in order to keep herself up-to-date. In the framework of the Professions Act (2001) it was possible to set up the standards for the work of librarian and establish a common system of qualifications.

I dare say that during the past ten years our public libraries have undergone a considerable development, which seems to continue at full speed. We have learned a lot from the experience of Scandinavian countries, but our own library system is being built based on Estonian culture traditions and local needs. During the little more than 10 years developed a need for a new type of library, which would not serve as a traditional library but also as a community centre. People come more and more to the library just to read newspapers, meet friends, study, use internet...

Geographically, the Estonian public libraries' network is a well-developed one, as there are central libraries in all counties and in the five biggest cities, whereas municipal libraries cover most of peripheral areas as well. With the de-nationalisation process at the beginning of 1990-ies, such libraries were transferred mostly to the budgets of local municipalities. In accordance with the Public Libraries Act, the state shall cover part of the amounts allocated for the library acquisitions as well as finance the remuneration for 4 librarians working for the counties, designates contributions for acquisition of library furniture and equipment as well as for information technology development.

On national level public libraries have been developed in close co-operation between the state and the local authorities. The aim has been to find ways how the network of public libraries as well-functioning information providers can be put to use most effectively under the new conditions, making use of newly opened opportunities. The services of public libraries are easily accessible for the majority of the Estonian population, in nearly every community with even 100 inhabitants there is a library. It is namely the village where the library plays a very important role; often it is the only public institution providing a service on site. The traditional function of the library, which was to educate

people and provide various cultural activities, is now supplemented with a much wider task of securing access to information sources available in the whole world, even if theoretically only. In future we should look upon the library as a hybrid library, which provides both traditional services but also access to other mediums.

Considering the fast development of the electronic environment, it is of utmost importance that libraries should start making use of electronic services. With regard to internetisation Estonia is quite on top level. The number of computers and their users is growing rapidly, but at the same time, it is obvious that in future not everybody can sit at the desk and have a whole world open on the computer screen in front of them. This has many reasons and among them, the economical ones are quite important.

It is the state's responsibility to provide possibilities in this field. With fairly little resources the Ministry of Culture has provided all public libraries with the internet access. This secures everyone with an equal opportunity to use e-services, people have been provided with free access to public information and communication with state and local authorities. The internet access is especially valuable in smaller countryside towns and villages. Let me give you an example: until the end of 2005 it is possible to consult the paper version of the periodic bulletin of legal acts and regulations that are passed in Estonia, called Riigi Teataja, in public libraries, but starting from next year the bulletin will only be available in an electronic version. The state will no longer provide public libraries with the printed versions of the bulletin not merely in order to save money, but mainly because the on-line database includes full texts of the laws and also amendments and supplements to legal acts. Librarians are trained by the State Chancellery of Estonia to be able to support library users to use this electronic database. Using Internet in libraries is free of charge for citizens, for all expenses are responsible local authorities.

An electronic information system URRAM, which is based on the joint database of Estonian public libraries, has proved to be successful. In order to be able to use this software on the spot libraries need only a web browser and permanent Internet connection. The maintenance of the software and database handling is managed centrally and this saves considerable resources. The configuration of local working place is easy and does not need any specific knowledge from the librarian. Modern web based software enables the user to book necessary books and to read briefly about their content without going to the library. Electronic borrowing no longer is a dream, it has become a reality. The monetary compensation for the authors is calculated based on the electronic borrowing system.

Co-operation between the state and the local authorities in constructing library buildings and in renovating them has been very successful. During the past 10 years every county library has finally got new larger rooms, which are designed to fit into the environment of the town. About a dozen smaller libraries still wait for the situation to improve with their buildings, this is foreseen to be resolved in the near future.

In conclusion I may say that the present situation with Estonian libraries is quite good, changes that have taken place over the past ten years have brought libraries closer to the customers. However, we shall continue looking for new initiatives and activities both on national, regional and local level.