University "St. Kliment Ohridski" – Bitola
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ISSN: 1857- 8888
DOI: 10.20544/teacher.31.05

LIBRARIES WITHOUT BORDERS: REGIONAL AND EUROPEAN COLLABORATIONS FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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Abstract

This paper explores the roles and significance of libraries as bridges for cultural diversity through regional and European collaboration. Libraries, as borderless institutions, promote the protection and preservation of cultural values and traditions in the era of globalization. Various forms of partnerships, projects, and networks enabling the exchange of resources, knowledge, and experiences among libraries from different countries are analyzed. Special attention is given to how libraries contribute to cultural inclusion and support for minority communities through joint initiatives at the European level. The paper offers recommendations for enhancing cooperation and outlining future directions for the development of library services, grounded in the principles of multiculturalism and tolerance.

Keywords: library, cultural diversity, regional collaboration, European collaboration, cultural inclusion, multiculturalism.

Introduction

In the contemporary era characterized by globalization, rapid technological development, and increased human mobility, libraries have evolved from traditional repositories of knowledge into dynamic, socially engaged institutions that actively contribute to cultural dialogue and intercultural understanding. As public spaces open to all members of society, libraries play a crucial role in promoting inclusivity, lifelong learning, and access to information regardless of social, cultural, or linguistic differences (Calhoun, 2014).

Within the European context, libraries are increasingly recognized as key actors in preserving cultural diversity while simultaneously fostering cross-border collaboration and shared cultural identity. Their mission extends beyond safeguarding cultural heritage to facilitating communication between communities and supporting marginalized and minority groups (Jakimovska-Toshikj, 2021).

This paper explores the role of libraries as bridges for cultural diversity through regional and European cooperation. Special attention is given to collaborative initiatives such as Erasmus+ programs, bilateral partnerships, cross-border cultural projects, and regional library networks. By analyzing these forms of cooperation, the study highlights how libraries contribute to cultural inclusion, intercultural dialogue, and the strengthening of European values such as tolerance, diversity, and solidarity.

Regional Library Partnerships

Regional cooperation among libraries represents a fundamental mechanism for strengthening institutional capacity, improving services, and fostering cultural exchange. In this context, collaboration is not limited to national frameworks but extends across borders, enabling libraries to share knowledge, resources, and best practices. Such partnerships contribute to the professional development of librarians and the modernization of library services (Varga, 2016).

One of the most prominent examples of regional cooperation is the Regional Network for Cultural Diversity (READ), supported by the Goethe-Institut and implemented in several Balkan countries. This initiative promotes multilingualism, supports local authors, and enhances access to literature through mobile libraries and cultural events (Goethe-Institut Skopje / LOJA, 2020–2024).

Furthermore, regional collaboration is often facilitated through international conferences and professional networks. The Library Association of Macedonia plays a significant role in this process by organizing annual conferences that bring together librarians from Southeast Europe. These events serve

as platforms for exchanging experiences, discussing common challenges, and developing joint strategies for the advancement of library services.

Such partnerships are particularly important for countries in transition, where libraries face challenges related to funding, digitization, and modernization. Through regional cooperation, these institutions gain access to international expertise and innovative practices, thereby improving their role as cultural and educational centers.

Bilateral Projects

Bilateral cooperation between libraries represents a more focused and structured form of collaboration, often supported by governmental or institutional agreements. These projects typically aim to promote cultural exchange, translation of literature, and strengthening of international relations.

A notable example is the project "Polska na Polica" (Poland on the Shelf), implemented in cooperation with the Polish Book Institute and supported by the Ministry of Culture of North Macedonia. This initiative significantly enriched Macedonian libraries with translated works of Polish literature, thereby enhancing cultural exchange and promoting literary diversity.

Beyond the donation of books, the project included a wide range of activities such as literary events, author presentations, and professional training for librarians. These activities contributed to the development of intercultural competencies among both librarians and users, fostering a deeper understanding of Polish culture and literature.

Moreover, the exchange visits between Macedonian and Polish librarians represent an important dimension of professional development. Exposure to different library systems, such as the University Library in Wrocław and specialized institutions like mediatheques, enables participants to adopt innovative practices and improve their own services (Calhoun, 2014).

Bilateral projects, therefore, not only promote cultural diplomacy but also strengthen institutional capacities and professional networks.

Participation in Erasmus+ Projects

Participation in European programs such as Erasmus+ plays a crucial role in the modernization and internationalization of libraries. These projects provide opportunities for mobility, training, and knowledge exchange, enabling librarians to develop new skills and competencies.

The project "The Library Against Bullying and Cyberbullying" represents an example of how libraries address contemporary social challenges. Through participation in training activities, librarians acquire tools and methodologies for supporting young users in dealing with issues such as digital violence and online safety. This demonstrates the expanding role of libraries as institutions that respond to societal needs beyond traditional information services.

Another significant initiative, "Sasas Jekhvar Jekh – Once… and Now", focuses on the preservation of Romani cultural heritage. By collecting and sharing oral traditions, this project contributes to the visibility and recognition of minority cultures within the European cultural space. Such initiatives align with European policies promoting inclusion and diversity (Mironska-Hristovska, 2021).

Through Erasmus+ participation, libraries strengthen their role as agents of social change, promoting equality, inclusion, and intercultural dialogue.

Cross-Border Cultural Projects

Cross-border cooperation represents a key dimension of cultural integration in Europe, particularly in regions with shared historical and cultural ties. Libraries play an essential role in facilitating such cooperation by organizing joint cultural events and initiatives.

The project "Listen to the Lake", implemented by libraries from Ohrid, Struga, and Pogradec, illustrates how cultural heritage can serve as a unifying element. By bringing together poets and artists from different countries, this initiative promotes intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding.

These projects are often supported by national ministries and international organizations, reflecting the recognition of culture as a strategic area for regional cooperation. Furthermore, they contribute to the development of cultural tourism and the strengthening of local communities.

Cross-border initiatives also provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and professional collaboration. Librarians participating in such projects gain valuable experience in organizing international events and working in multicultural environments.

COBISS and Regional Conferences

The implementation of the COBISS system represents a significant achievement in regional library cooperation. Developed in Slovenia, this system enables shared cataloguing and resource management across multiple countries, including North Macedonia.

By participating in the COBISS network, libraries improve the efficiency of their operations and enhance access to information. The system facilitates the exchange of bibliographic data and supports the development of a unified library information infrastructure in the region (EIFL North Macedonia, 2014).

In addition, regional conferences organized within the COBISS network provide opportunities for professional development and knowledge exchange. These events bring together librarians from different countries, fostering collaboration and strengthening regional ties.

Such initiatives demonstrate the importance of technological integration in modern library systems and highlight the role of digital tools in supporting cultural diversity and access to information.

Libraries and Cultural Diversity in the European Context

At the European level, libraries are supported by various policies and initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting cultural diversity. Programs such as Creative Europe and Europeana play a crucial role in facilitating access to cultural heritage and supporting cross-border collaboration.

These initiatives emphasize digitization as a key strategy for preserving cultural resources and making them accessible to a global audience. Digital libraries and online platforms enable users to explore diverse cultural content, thereby promoting intercultural understanding and education (Calhoun, 2014).

Furthermore, European policies highlight the importance of cultural inclusion, particularly for minority and marginalized communities. Libraries contribute to this goal by providing access to multilingual resources, organizing cultural events, and supporting community engagement.

In this context, libraries serve as mediators between local and global cultures, ensuring that cultural diversity is preserved while also contributing to a shared European identity.

Conclusion

Libraries in Europe play a vital role in preserving and promoting cultural diversity through regional and international cooperation. By participating in initiatives such as Erasmus+, Creative Europe, and cross-border cultural projects, libraries contribute to the development of inclusive and culturally diverse societies.

North Macedonia actively participates in these processes, demonstrating the importance of collaboration in strengthening library services and promoting cultural heritage. Through partnerships, digitization efforts, and professional networks, libraries enhance their capacity to serve diverse communities and respond to contemporary challenges.

Future developments should focus on strengthening international cooperation, investing in digital infrastructure, and promoting inclusive policies that ensure equal access to cultural resources. In this way, libraries will continue to serve as bridges between cultures, connecting past traditions with future innovations.

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