

Urmas Paet

Minister of Culture of the Republic of Estonia

BEING DIFFERENT TOGETHER OR ARE THERE ANY ADVANTAGES IN BEING TOGETHER?

Not too long ago, discussions in the ten European countries were weighing up pros and cons of the European Union. In the Baltic states, one aspect of the discussions was joining the new diversity or as the EU opponents said voluntarily giving up independence and freedom. Referenda opened the door to the European Union but brought us not back to Europe because we had never left there in the first place.

Fifty compulsory years as the member of the Soviet Union could extinguish neither the Estonian people nor Estonian culture. The more important is our consistent efforts now when the opportunities are in our own hands. We should do everything to maintain the uniqueness of our cultures and to develop them further.

Libraries as the important bearers, gatherers, conservers and mediators of the national memory are invaluable. Even now, when the electronic information does not know boundaries and spreads very rapidly and access to it is theoretically unlimited, libraries as institutions have not disappeared from the cultural landscape. Here, we will not discuss the relation between and the future of the traditional printed knowledge and the new electronic one, but should say one thing that the book as such will remain and the library as its mediator too. At the same time, the library has a new role in providing the access to electronic information, in mediating and organising it.

Estonia can show how the world is opening to people through libraries.

What is the relation between the usage of new and old media, how many people do only use e-information and why? How precisely do we know it today? How much can the library educate the user, to teach him/her to use all opportunities to search and find necessary information - in the right time, place and form? The role of the librarian in organising the information, guiding and helping the user is becoming more and more important. Libraries are the promoters of life-long learning.

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. Therefore, Ministry of Culture's one of the most important priorities has been the initiative for providing internet access to all public libraries. Today, I can say that most of the Estonian public libraries have a good permanent Internet connection along with respective hard- and software. People have been provided with free access to

public information and communication with state and local authorities. The project has been going on for three years and it has been implemented in close co-operation with local municipalities.

As all public libraries are in some way financed by tax payers' money they have to offer the best possible public service. In the rapidly changing world where the importance of economic efficiency and business is constantly increasing, it is the state's duty to do something important for its citizens, to promote their education and development.

Even in the future libraries' responsibility will be providing access to relevant information. Mediating the databases and services that are not free of charge will only be possible in co-operation with several libraries, groups of libraries or even on the state level. The world practice shows the vitality and efficiency of special syndicates in using the available means and offering users the maximum amount of information. Estonia has also chosen this way by participating in international projects and purchasing licences to Estonian libraries. Joint procurement of electronic research information has received support from the state budget and the amount of available research information (the number of research magazines and databases) as well as the extent of access has significantly increased (e.g. Science Direct is now available in all four bigger Estonian universities).

Today, the life is becoming more and more international as well with respect to economics as politics. Even the accession to the EU brings along an ever-complicated network of rights and responsibilities, opportunities and necessities. Our destiny is to a great deal determined by the fact how we will cope in this system.

As to culture, the EU leaves us quite free hands. At the same time it does not impose any responsibilities either as it does in some other fields. If we have a binding responsibility to allocate a certain percentage of the state budget for military purposes and to assure that certain economical decisions will be taken, then the finances allocated to culture, among others also to libraries, depend directly on local decisions. How important is the access to information considered to be; how far the influence of investments made in Estonia can be foreseen; how clear can one evaluate the effect today and in several years? In addition to the development of public library IT (but they are altogether 557) the priority is also given to allocating money from the state budget for purchase of documents. Together with the money allocated by the local municipalities, it was slightly more than 42 kroons per citizen in the year 2003. In 2003 the holdings of Estonian public libraries increased by 517 554 documents. Last year we also increased significantly the amount of money allocated for the purchase of documents. The focus was on children literature. We have further plans to increase the sum in 2005. The nominal price of books is constantly raising and people are only buying reference literature and therefore it is extremely important that all literature that is published would be available in libraries.

At the same time, it is important that our libraries would be able to follow what is happening in the EU, to join solutions and projects that already exist and to be ready to

initiate new ones. How well do we know what has been done with the EU means until now and what is being done right now, how well do we know the opportunities to get additional financing etc.?

Several EU decisions regulating the field of culture, among others also the work of libraries, are due to economical criteria and initiative for these comes from other circles. In view of this, the more important it is that libraries and their representatives would be ready to participate in discussions, to explain and to defend their position, and as the practise has proven by this to defend the interests of common people. Here I mean the active work of EBLIDA, which is the umbrella organisation representing the interests of the libraries in the EU, in discussing several directives and protecting libraries' rights. We are glad to note that our Latvian colleagues are already members of EBLIDA.

Do not we have opportunities for co-operation on a new level in this situation? I mentioned earlier in my speech the syndicates working for acquiring electronic information. Have not somebody thought that purchasing a regional database, i.e. one database for several countries would be sensible? What could be the information development projects where we could apply for joint financing within the EU.

Co-operation is very important also on the state level and Estonian libraries have a long-term co-operation experience. First, I would like to underline the co-operation in the implementation of IT solutions that with respect to both the integrated library system INNOPAC and introducing and developing the union catalogue ESTER based on INNOPAC which has been done by the research libraries and the two bigger public libraries. Another remarkable initiative that I would like to mention here is the foundation of a digitisation centre where now three libraries (The Estonian National Library, the Archive Library of the Estonian Literature Museum and the Academic Library of Tallinn Pedagogical University) are digitising old newspapers from microfilms and are compiling a joint database named DEA.

The result of the third initiative remains to be seen, but right now a joint information portal for library services is being created the final cause of which is to offer users one search environment for searching information from both electronic catalogues, article databases and information services so that the user could search from all chosen databases simultaneously.

As to public libraries, the development of the information system URRAM based on a joint database has proven to be very efficient. Today, more than 200 public libraries have joined this Internet based information system. The Ministry of Culture is responsible for administration of the particular database.

Should we not think more about how to introduce ourselves to others and how to bring others nearer to our users? Here the libraries have much work to do. Not just to acquire printed works and provide access to their holdings through interlibrary lending, but also arrange exhibitions and put information on the Internet etc. It is important that that library homepages would be understandable also for those who do not speak

Estonian because through homepages it is possible to access our invaluable collections and databases.

Coming back to books, couldn't we have a library that would more thoroughly work with the acquisition of Latvian, Lithuanian printed materials and that would provide information about them? A similar collections could also be in Latvia and Lithuania. One can always say that all publications may be ordered from the spot, but how and where to find information in the easiest way, where to ask for advice. Interlibrary lending is probably the most rapid and cheapest way not speaking about that that in an Estonian-scale country it is quite easy to get a required book. I believe that such a collection would also be beneficial to us, not speaking about Lithuanians and Latvians who are living in Estonia. We would provide similar support to Estonians living abroad and those who are interested in Estonia.

Here the state should also provide support as it does for teaching Estonian in foreign countries. In June, people who are engaged in the latter gathered in Tartu in order to discuss how to develop and support mediation of Estonian language and culture abroad.

The librarian has a special role in today's rapidly changing situation. He/she should have high qualification, be innovative, versatile, operative and a good communicator. At the same time we should hope that being a successful operator on the Internet the librarian will not forget his/her culture. In many rural areas, the library is the only culture and information centre, the only place for communication and joint activities.

History offers us many examples where those people who wanted to do something together and were ready for it gathered around libraries. I am very glad to note that during the last decennium all county public libraries have moved to new premises. They have either a very new building or a side building. Furthermore, almost 400 smaller public libraries have got bigger premises. The state support for this has been substantial.

Being a window to the world, we should never forget that the window belongs to the room or the house we live in – to our home. We can look out only if we revere our home.