

# Kosova Libraries: Where Practical Steps Are Most Needed

by Besim J. Kokollari

## Information Professionals in a Globalized World

**Editors Note:** Kosovo has been administered since 1999 by the UN Mission in Kosovo. In this article, the author follows Albanian spelling conventions, for example, *Kosova* instead of *Kosovo*.

I am Besim Kokollari from Kosova. First, I am going to write a few words about myself: some background information and what I do. I follow with a brief section on the current situation of the library and information profession in my country. I conclude with a plan for action and progress.

I am currently enrolled in two master degrees. The first, which is almost at the end, is in curriculum, teaching and learning at the University of Calgary, Canada, which I take through distance learning. The second is in digital library learning, which I have just started, and it will take place in three European Union countries – Norway, Estonia and Italy – in a face-to-face mode. Both degrees were enabled through scholarships, the former from the Canadian International Development Agency, the latter from the European Union Erasmus Mundus program. I have also been fortunate enough to study library and information science for one semester at Simmons College, both at the Boston and Mount Holyoke campuses, through a librarian training project funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State. Early this year, I was awarded an Individual Mobility Grant from the European Union to stay for one month at the Middlesex University Libraries, London, to see how they work and what information technology they have. So, both North Americans and Europeans have been good to me. Back at home, I received my BA in English language and literature from the University of Prishtina in 2002, and I used to teach both at the primary school and the university levels. Lately, I have been mainly working for the National and University Library of Kosova.

I have been president of Kosova Librarians Association for the past two

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years. This opportunity, as well as working for the National and University Library of Kosova, has given me unique possibilities to see and be involved with the most recent library developments in the country. In the library profession, which is the focus of this article, there are two conferences organized each year. One is called “Library Week in Kosova,” the other is “The Albania-Kosova Library Conference.”

Library Week in Kosova was established in 2003. It is jointly organized by the National and University Library and the United States Office in Prishtina and is celebrated at the same time as the American Library Association’s National Library Week in the United States. It is a weeklong local event intended to improve library infrastructure, expose Kosovar librarians to new Western library developments through the shared experiences and knowledge of American and European library expert speakers, and to raise the library awareness in our community through the media.

The Albania-Kosova Library Conference was established in 2006 by the National Library of Albania and the National and University Library of Kosova. It is a rotating conference: one year it takes place in Albania, the next, in Kosova. It has a more regional purpose and a more scientific nature than Library Week. The conference fosters collaboration and standardization efforts in the library profession between the two countries, influencing other Albanian libraries throughout the Balkan region.

In addition to sharing knowledge and experience gained from those two library conferences, the National and University Library of Kosova acts as the highest library institution in the country and therefore is responsible for the maintenance of the network of public libraries in Kosova. The library also bears the responsibility for training new librarians in the job, although efforts have been irregular and not sustained. There is much to do in this direction as long as there is no library school in the country.

For our libraries, infrastructure remains a great concern. Many public libraries, mainly school libraries, some of which acted as village libraries as

well, were burnt down during the 1998-1999 war in Kosova. They have not been reestablished in post-war Kosova because most of the attention and resources have been directed toward the political solution of the final status of Kosova. This lack of political resolution has made progress difficult. Despite this uncertainty, government efforts and outside donations have equipped many public libraries in Kosova with computers and Internet access. However, maintenance, upgrades and sustainability are difficult, because work in public funded institutions is a very low paid job, averaging only 160 euros per month. Library workers have very few resources for upgrading library technology. Even so, the introduction of computers into libraries had great impact on the day-to-day work. The National and University Library implemented Aleph 500, an integrated library system (ILS), in 2005 and is exploring ways of expanding the network to the other public libraries. Digital libraries, institutional repositories – even library websites – are needed, yet are not a reality in the majority of Kosova's libraries. With the lack of a commercial or open source union ILS, the majority of public libraries still produce and maintain card catalogs. In this part of the world, we still love card catalogs, or in a better way putting it, we have still not found a way to make them part of our metadata history.

In the online ILS environment, MARC 21 is the latest metadata schema in practice for us. It was introduced in 2005 with Aleph, but has not expanded beyond the walls of the National and University Library of Kosova so far. The library community uses AACR2 and ISBD rules for cataloging, however, there is not an authoritative or full translation of any of these standards, including MARC documentation, into Albanian. There are even greater problems with the adoption of other library standards to describe library resources. Although this discussion has focused primarily on public libraries, corporate, government and other special libraries are no better in terms of standardization, although they have better infrastructure and financial resources.

Of course, these problems greatly affect access to information resources themselves, both physical and electronic. They have a direct impact on the libraries, but more importantly, on the communities they serve. However, none of these problems can prevent us from hoping and envisioning a better future for our libraries and the impact these libraries might have as models for the other libraries in the region.

Indeed, the library community in Kosova envisions a prosperous future

for their libraries. Despite the political uncertainty, people have the will to work well and are very eager to learn new things. We hope that political stabilization of the country will open up new opportunities for the library community at both the regional and world levels. Since we are a small country, it is potentially possible to develop exemplar libraries that will influence and inspire regional library development. Library Week is an example of this leadership. Its success gave birth to the idea of the Albanian-Kosova Library Conference.

Similarly Kosovar libraries could lead the way with an advanced ILS infrastructure network such as the open source PINES (<http://gapines.org/>) used in Georgia in the United States. Or they could establish an interlibrary loan infrastructure similar to that of WMRLS ([www.wmrls.org](http://www.wmrls.org)) in Massachusetts. We are a small country that requires fewer resources to build such an information infrastructure than either Georgia or Massachusetts.

How can we accomplish these goals? Not without the help of the members of ASIS&T and the international work and contributions of people like Sue Johnson. I ask you to spread the word about the opportunities for the professionals in the field to contribute to the development and improvement of Kosova libraries.

Many governments of countries around the world have invested in different projects in Kosova, some in the library field, some in other fields. ASIS&T and its members, as well as similar organizations, can act as ambassadors in their countries to advise their governments to invest in Kosova's future, that is, in the education of its people, in library service to its people, in libraries and in other information institutions. Sharing your knowledge and opportunities with Kosova's information professionals, such as the free ASIS&T membership granted to me for the year of 2007, will help us stay informed and permit us to take advantage of opportunities relevant to our situation. Libraries aim at serving the whole country, feeding the information needs of its people so that they become informed citizens of today and better planners of tomorrow. Practical and concrete steps, informed by well-defined knowledge and experience, are needed to improve the present library situation in my country. Therefore, this article is a call to the world to support the information profession in my country now, so that we can become informed citizens of the world today and contributors to a secure tomorrow. ■