Moldovan Public Libraries Emerge to Address the Needs of a Multicultural Population

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Abstract:

The Republic of Moldova is a small country in Eastern Europe with a complicated history and a mix of languages and cultures. Gaining independence in 1991, Moldova remains a country in transition and one of the poorest country in Europe. While intercultural relations are currently peaceful, issues of culture remain sensitive due to overarching geopolitical threats and divided opinion on the country's connection to its Soviet past. Although Romanian became the national language in 1990, language is a still a point of contention for many Moldovans, as 75% of the population calls Romanian their native language and 16% claim Russian. Moldova also harbors two breakaway territories, Transnistria in the east and Gagauzia in the south, which have recently held referendums regarding their allegiances with their own country. In the midst of this complex environment, libraries are emerging as neutral junctions where the needs of the multilingual and multicultural community can be addressed. With recent government and foreign investments in libraries, Moldovan libraries are undertaking rapid change. Communities are redefining their libraries as community centers that offer services and digital access to their diverse constituents. Moldovans, particularly in rural areas, need a neutral that is open to the needs of all citizens of distinct cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. This paper highlights the principles and practices that Moldovan libraries are employing to address their complex and sensitive multicultural environment. Moldovan libraries are now adopting new technologies, ideas, and practices that promote integration and community development. Moldovans are only recently discovering that libraries can be a resource to help them connect with family members working abroad, find information about employment and education opportunities, and offer training on basic IT skills. With government and NGO partners that are increasingly understanding the power of public libraries, Moldova has the opportunity to unite around these public spaces, using electronic resources to adapt to a multicultural population, and bring together disparate groups around common aspirations.

Keywords: Libraries, Community, Diversity, IT, Moldova

INTRODUCTION

Moldova is a country with a mix of cultures and languages and overlapping and conflicting perspectives. Within this multicultural and a multilingual environment, Moldovan public libraries are modernizing and developing into community centers through the implementation of IT, new library services, and national and international partnerships. In nearly every corner of the country public libraries have emerged as neutral spaces, rising above societal complications to address the needs of a diverse population. These libraries are driven by their respective librarians who are inspiring change in their communities by creating new services and programs that help develop all sectors of the population. From prenatal classes to IT skill development for young girls to helping the unemployed look for work, modern librarians are finding creative ways to address the social issues that affect the communities they live in. In a country that is in many ways still searching for an identity, Moldovan libraries are learning to value the diversity of its citizens and create an open space for all. With all the challenges facing the country, the modern Moldovan library is impacting society and culture by bringing disparate people closer together.

MOLDOVA CONTEXT

The Republic of Moldova is a small country in Eastern Europe with a rich history influenced by a number of different rulers and kingdoms. In the 20th century Moldova was almost equally influenced by Romania and Russia, eventually gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Since independence Moldova has been an economy in transition from communism to a mixed economy and is one of the poorest countries in Europe. These economic factors further complicate the needs of their transient, multilingual, and culturally diverse society who have allegiances to different segments of their past.

As a brief explanation of the history, the Moldovan lands have been part of the Ottoman Empire (1512-1878), Bessarabia as part of Russian Empire (1812-1918), Romania's Moldavia (1918-1924), the independent Moldova ASSR (1924 - 1940) and the USSR or Moldavian SSR (1940-1991).

Moldova made the Romanian its official "state language" in 1990, and returned to the Latin script in 1991, at that time replacing the Cyrillic borrowed from Russian. Often the Romanian language is referred to has Moldovan or Moldovian, but is virtually is the same language as Romanian. According to the 2004 census, 76% of the population calls Romanian their native language, 11.25% claim Russian a native language, and 16% use Russian for daily use[1]. Many Moldovan, regardless of their native language, speak or understanding Russian.

Moldova has two autonomous regions with distinct languages and cultural differences from the rest of the country. A region in the south called Gagauzia has a population with Turkish roots who speak a Turkish dialect (Gagauz), Russian, and some Bulgarian. On the left bank of the Dniester river between Moldova and Ukraine is Transnistria, a self-proclaimed independent territory after a short war with Moldova in the early 1990s, whose official state languages are Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan (spelled in Cyrillic).

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[1] Source: Moldova National Bureau of Statistics, http://www.statistica.md/pageview.php?l=en&id=2234&idc=295

As a public institution in an economy that is privatizing, the Moldovan public library is adapting to a diverse population with unique needs. This opens an opportunity for the library to find itself at the heart of the community by addressing shared societal challenges that transcend language and culture.

HISTORY OF LIBRARIES IN MOLDOVA

Libraries in Moldova have historically been perceived as centers with a close tie to community, history, culture, and language. The first library in Moldova opened in 1832 - when Moldova was still called Bessarabia - and the first public library opened in the capital Chisinau in 1877. Today Moldova has a sizable number of public libraries in relation to the size of the country and per capita, with approximately 1380 public libraries and 1221 located in rural areas. The majority of libraries are primarily funded by local public authorities and employ only one librarian each.

The Soviet Union included the library as part of a set of public services offered in each community along with the city hall, the house of culture, and the public school house. Many of those public libraries set up during the USSR are still in existence but have had little financial support or public attendance. According to a 2012 assessment, 60% of the 1291 libraries in Moldova were in need of physical repairs[2].

During the Soviet Union, libraries were viewed by the public as cultural centers that spread specific views or ideologies. Libraries were limited to certain approaches and librarians were mandated by the government to use specific methods to promote a shared popular culture with little concern for minority interests. If other cultures were addressed, the library organized one-time events and activities. For example, the library often spearheaded a local day or festival to recognize the unique languages spoken in their community. Some libraries celebrated community ethnicity through events based on books or poems written in different languages. Other libraries held community initiatives that spotlighted the unique qualities of dance and music from traditional Bulgarian, Gagauzian, and Moldovan ethnicities. While these events may well have strived to celebrate the unique qualities of people within a particular community, they often cast a spotlight on the divisive nature of cultural difference and neglected to address the day-to-day needs of a modern multicultural society. Many of these events continue to be presented using these traditional practices regardless of community need for more modern approaches to multiculturalism.

Moldovan libraries must either change with the times or cease to exist. The library system can build on the concept of the traditional library - using the devoted librarian network and broad reach to develop thousands of community spaces to gather new users. With today's the challenging circumstances, Moldovans are in need of a community space that is able to support the demands of all cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Librarians are primed to modernize to further bridge community understanding and help communities find common ground.

MOLDOVAN LIBRARIES UNDERGOING CHANGE

Moldovan public libraries are benefiting from recent national and international attention and investment, spearheaded by significant support from the Novateca program. Since 2012 Novateca has supported the modernization of library services that are responsive to

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[2] Source: IREX report: *Access to Information through Public Libraries in the Republic of Moldova*, March 2012, www.novateca.md

community needs through technology, training, and the development of partnerships. Novateca is working nationally with key partners such as the Ministry of Culture to equip over 1000 libraries and train over 1500 librarians over the course of seven years. The program supports national library leaders and regional and village public libraries in expanding access to technology and new library services in small and hard to reach communities. The modern public library in Moldova is becoming an open, free, and welcoming space for every member of the community to access to more relevant resources and information.

Beyond the development of modern and community-relevant services, public libraries are beginning to emerge as neutral community junctions to address the needs of the diverse population. Moldovan librarians are adopting new technologies, ideas, and practices that promote community integration. With motivation from Novateca and key Moldovan librarian leaders, librarians are developing an array of new services in health, education, communication, economic development, e-government, and digital inclusion. Some examples include:
- Librarians consulting new library users to use Skype to connect with their family members abroad at no cost, allowing families at home to stay in touch with family members who are working or studying abroad;
- Libraries training unemployed persons to develop CVs and online job applications, allowing technically disadvantaged citizens to have an equal chance at a job;
- Rural high schoolers using free library computers to practice online for their baccalaureate exam, giving them more opportunities to compete with children in cities who have more educational advantages;
- Librarians establishing partnerships with local medical centers to bring health classes to young pregnant women, fostering a greater understanding of prenatal health practices and methods for taking care of their bodies and their future children.

By bringing people together to build skills, knowledge, and support, the library is helping communities become stronger, healthier, and more peaceful, prosperous, and connected. Public libraries and librarians are recognizing the potential in creating community spaces with reactive and inclusive programming for the changing community. Moldovan libraries going through this transformation are implementing the latest innovations in the library field, particularly in the areas of, a), IT access; b), professional development of librarians; and c), partnership development.

a. IT Access

Many Moldovan public libraries are offering free access to computers and the internet to their community for the first time. In 2010, prior to the start of the Novateca program, 147 out of 1380 (10.6%) libraries had computers with access to the internet[3]. According to national data from the Ministry of Culture the percentage of rural libraries with access to information was even lower, with 5.5% of all Moldovan libraries having an internet connection.

Now in 2015, just over 400 libraries (29%) offer free public access including approximately 94% of those in rural areas. The number of libraries is projected to expand to 700 by the end of 2015 and to 1000 by the year 2018.

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[3] Source: IREX report: *Access to Information through Public Libraries in the Republic of Moldova*, p 25, March 2012, www.novateca.md

IT in the library can act as a leveler, giving internet access to those without the technology or experience using it. But for IT in the library to be successful, librarians must have the proper training to appropriately support the new tools and services. With IT as a core service, libraries have the ability to greatly expand their collections and therefore create many more opportunities for their users regardless of age, gender, or background.

Interestingly children are often the first to flock to a newly equipped library: hovering around the screens, sharing time, and waiting their turn at the keyboard. The children are drawn to videos and games, but also use the computers to do their homework and to speak with parents abroad. Because children are eager to learn new technology, it is not unusual to find children who are young library volunteers supporting the librarian in her new acquisition of IT skills.

E-government services is another particularly relevant area of growth and support that libraries can offer their communities. The Moldovan government has become more active in the past few years in offering their services online. These services are allowing citizens who have difficulty in traveling to the capital with the opportunity to more easily pay taxes and obtain necessary government documents. Free internet in the local public library gives all citizens - particularly the marginalized - the opportunity to directly access government services that they could not easily access before.

With new equipment, librarians are learning ways to best serve and attract new users of various ages, background, and experience. The library in the Moldovan city of Balti presents a specific example of how new IT services are being developed for new library users. The population in Balti is 52% Moldovan/Romanian, 24% Ukrainian (primarily speaking Russian), and 19% Russian; 17.3% of the population is of pensioner age. Considering the diversity of this community, the library chose to offer IT training courses in both Russian and Romanian as well as specific courses for older adults. Members of the pensioner community are learning new word processing skills, internet search techniques, and ways to connect to their families using media and communication tools.

b. Librarian Professional Development

Until recently, professional development opportunities for Moldovan public librarians were limited. Trainings at the national level were infrequent or unavailable to those outside of the capital. Rural librarians received little support and practiced the same methods of work for many years.

With the expansion of computers and the internet, the Novateca program is offering trainings and other types of professional development to librarians to help them support new services in their communities. Librarians are trained - many for the first time - on computers and the internet. They are learning computers skills that help them support their community in relation to IT and access to digital resources and information.

Librarians are also learning the key components of a modern library through the development of space, collections, new library services, partnerships, technology, users, and data collection. As most rural libraries were not exposed to new library models, the trainings gives them examples on ways they can start to change their library. Librarians are learning to listen to their community - users and potential users of the library - and to reach out to community members to address their diverse needs.

In a training on the development of new library services, librarians are encouraged and guided to create services and to offer their computers for more than just IT access. They are given examples of library services and programs developed around the world in addition to examples from Moldova. They are shown how much can be done with scarce resources. They are coached to create a new library service action plan that will help them promote and share their services with others.

It is imperative that librarians are trained on how to conduct community needs assessments. A needs assessment helps librarians reach out to others who may not have yet entered the public library. Librarians are taught on different methods to gather information including surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews. Even though a librarian is part of a community, she or he is encouraged to look at their village or town in a new way in order to seek out new users and partners.

An example of librarian outreach comes from a village public library in Bravicea, in the Calarasi region. Local area farmers expressed interest in learning how to grow walnut orchards, a potentially profitable yet particularly complicated business that requires specialized knowledge. The library met this need by creating a weekly group that brought farmers together to conduct internet research and to participate in seminars and tutorials on how to plant and grown walnuts. They also research funding opportunities, to support an investment in new or expensive agricultural business endeavors. The library is helping support new agro-business through training and coaching on IT for a new group of library users.

As valuable new services are created across the country, librarians must work together, learn from each other, and reach out to partners to develop new ideas to offer more services in the library. Through the trainings, librarians learn how to create partnerships that are instrumental in bringing in more resources for the community.

c. Partnership Development

Modern Moldovan public libraries must learn how to work with national and regional partners to further develop the concept of the library as a community center. Libraries are beginning to work with government institutions, NGOs, and private businesses to bring more services to their users. These institutions are increasingly understanding the power of public libraries have in reaching citizens and their own target audiences.

Libraries are seeking out local partners to support the development of new library services, particularly in the areas of business, education, and IT. For example, the TEKEDU project is a local NGO leading disadvantaged youth in IT training courses and activities in the library. Young people are trained in basic website development and design skills and create a website for a local organization. An offshoot of this program is a project specifically targeted for young women to develop their interest and skills in programming, as women are not prevalent in the IT industry. TEKEDU offers opportunities to disadvantaged youth who lack opportunity in their towns and villages to learn IT skills and build towards a potential career in IT.

Moldova experiences a high rate of migration, with an estimated that 29.4% of households with one or more family members working abroad[4]. As a result, services in migration are greatly needed across the country. A positive example of a national partnership is with the Nexus program, which seeks to help people of all backgrounds have a safe and efficient migration process. Through the program, libraries are sharing resources, including online materials and referrals, to help users learn more about migration and the risks involved in working abroad.

Libraries are also reaching out to each other to develop partnerships that promote diversity exchange. An example of cross-cultural partnership occurred between the northern towns of Telenesti and Comrat, which is located in Gagauzia. The Telenesti Regional Library and the Comrat Children's Library created the project "Different Cultures, Same Country". The project arranged an exchange for the participants from Telenesti raion to visit Comrat and for Comrat participants to visit Telenesti. Each visit included visits to the libraries and programs with traditional and modern dancing and poems in Romanian, Gagauzian, Turkish, and Russian. The trip was a project developed by the library directors and came to fruition through a small grant. The exchange encouraged librarians to learn more about other libraries, to establish friendly relationships, and to share cultural values among librarians and youth from the two regions of Moldova.

CONCLUSION

Moldovan public libraries are finding a place in the current multicultural and multilinguistic environment. IT access, new professional development opportunities for librarians, and local and national partnerships are driving libraries to meet the needs of citizens. With librarians at the lead, public libraries are offering new community-relevant services that are positively impacting individuals and entire communities. New models and examples are emerging each day and librarians must share and learn from one another to continue to adapt to the modern world. The library is not only developing into a place of acceptance, but growing into a community center that drives societal change and benefits all Moldovans.

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[4] Source: *Driving Innovation in Circular Migration, Migration and Development in Moldova*, Oct 2014, Nicolaas de Zwager, Ruslan Sintov