

Article

The Demand for the Right to Read: The Habits And Propensities of Bulgarian Digital Readers in Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The last two decades of advances in communication technologies have led to significant changes in the field of book publishing, such as the emergence of e-books, the vast expansion of online sales, and the new methods that users use to browse and experience digital texts. The possibility of accessing and sharing any public text (music, video, etc.), from any given device, has also challenged the existing international copyright laws, and indicated the need for a better and more effective legislative framework in the form of treaties between countries, in order to protect each other's copyright works. This study analyzes the historical, economical and legislative circumstances of the Bulgarian book publishing industry, often criticized along with other Eastern European countries, for being unable to prevent copyright piracy on its territory. The study also provides an insight into the propensities of e-book readers in Bulgaria, the disadvantages they have as users of a language spoken by relatively few people, as well as the dysfunctional relations between the state on one side, authors and publishers on the other, and readers as an interested third party.

Bulgaria: Fahrenheit 451

On June 22nd, 2010, in a tactical operation, the GDCOC¹ (General Directorate Combating Organized Crime) broke into the office of the popular Bulgarian website *chitanka.info*, confiscating a computer and arresting its owners. This act ignited an immense public backlash expressed in numerous posts and articles, from publishers, media experts, book bloggers and reviewers, mere avid readers and Internet drama addicts. This shocking

raid against an e-book library, which uploads and shares books for no charge (but also without paying copyright fees to publishers), that seemed more suitable for a raid on a narcotics lab or a terrorist cell, enraged the Bulgarian public for many reasons, the most widespread being the overall tolerance of the judicial system towards actual organized crime. Many saw this operation as a symbolic attack on the “reading people”, a brutally offensive act against a cultural life that was itself barely surviving.

Niki Rusinovski, author at the popular website for culture webcafe.bg, came out in defense of chitanka.info on the very same day, with a passionate article named “*Bulgaria: Fahrenheit 451*”, equating the shutting down of its servers with the *auto-da-fé* described in Ray Bradbury’s famous novel. He pointed out that tens of thousands of books scanned by volunteers and uploaded on chitanka.info for no profit had been erased, and that many of the titles had not been in circulation for decades, while others had been provided free of charge by their authors. Rusinovski, like several other defenders of the integrity of the website, advocated that chitanka.info is simply an online library, and that libraries are not against the law.

Another major critique against the GDCOC operation was, that it followed a complaint made by the Association “Bulgarian book” – the non-profit organization of the Bulgarian publishers, book sellers and literary agents, the Union of the Bulgarian translators, as well as several of the major book publishers. The complaint concerned significant financial losses due to criminal activity, but instead of taking legal steps and mounting an action against chitanka.info, the unnamed publishers were accused of having misused their influence and personal connections in order to organize the raid. Respectively, GDCOC’s special unit fell under a cloud of suspicion concerning the role of lobbying and serving private interests in its activities.

The case of chitanka.info brought to the fore the long delayed discussion about the outdated copyright laws in Bulgaria, the lack of e-books on the market, the non-existent dialogue between state and publishers (as well as between publishers and readers), the origins of which can be traced back to the morbid practices of the nationalized book publishing industry during the Communist era.

The Book in Ottoman Bulgaria and After

The fact that Bulgaria was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire throughout the period of Early Modernity has played a crucial role in the history of the Bulgarian publishing industry, which, in comparison to the rest of Europe, was put on hold up until the mid-nineteenth century, and accordingly, the introduction of the concepts of authorship and copyright was significantly belated. This process was additionally complicated due to the

low levels of literacy and the small numbers of schools². During the Ottoman period, the Bulgarian press and publications were, without exception, printed outside of its ethnic territories – first in some Italian and Wallachian cities, where books in Bulgarian had been printed sporadically in the 17th and 18th centuries, and later, in places with a significant number of Bulgarian immigrants and students, such as Odessa, Belgrade, Izmir, Constantinople, Bucharest and Leipzig, where the earliest forerunners of Bulgarian journalism and the periodic press appeared. These were often short-lived, poorly made, and suffered a constant shortage of funds, but played an immense role for the formation of the “national idea” and the Bulgarian liberation movement in the 19th century³.

A major change occurred in every aspect of the social and cultural life of this predominantly agricultural and rural country, after its liberation in 1878, when Bulgaria’s first constitution was written. Historian Vasil Zagorov points out that, with the adoption of the constitution, three important improvements in the economic relations occurred: the formation of professional categories; the regulation of labour relationships; and the establishment of a number of marketing principles. According to Zagorov, despite its liberal nature when it came to the freedom of speech and of the press, the new constitution gave the author a role whose functions were closer to the concept of authorship suggested by Michel Foucault – in which its functions are directly related to the legal responsibility of the author as a subject of punishment – than to the one provided by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, that is, of an actor who achieved a financial independence thanks to the mechanical printing and circulation of their texts.

Unsurprisingly, the first years of modern Bulgarian book publishing were often marked by the blurred lines between the roles of author, translator and compiler. The pressing need for the new state to produce its own national literature, led to a quite liberal adoption and appropriation of foreign works. However, if we take a closer look at the history of copyright laws, before the first Berne Convention in 1886, this was not unprecedented, but rather was a fairly common practice. Previous copyright treaties between countries had been sporadic, which had forced many authors to raise their voices in defence of their moral rights over their works abroad.

In his essay “Collins on International Copyright: From ‘A National Wrong’ (1870) to ‘Considerations’ (1880)” Graham Law traces the public dispute between Wilkie Collins and the American publishers, whose practices the author openly described as “piracy”, together with other less flattering epithets. Along with an analysis of the circumstances, the written evidence, and the tedious process that eventually brought the United States to join the realms of international copyright law, Law also makes two important points. First is that “the growth of liberal-democratic ideas during the nineteenth century ensured that copyright protection would often be seen, like duty on paper, as both a restriction of free

trade and a 'tax on knowledge'". Second, an understanding of the Anglo-American copyright conflict cannot happen "[w]ithout taking account of the tensions between interests of authors as individuals, publishers as a class, and the people as reading public".

This corresponds with David Saunders' notion, that even "authorities such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault have not spoken with a single voice" on the question of authorship. In his book *Authorship and Copyright*, Saunders aims to "do justice to the historical positivity of certain legal-cultural arguments relating to authorship", since "to treat the law of copyright as a positive law, whose most important trait is its alterability ... is to recognise it as an independent and variable phenomenon of culture and to address the historical particularity of its objects and means". In short, the copyright makers must be aware and take into consideration the historical and cultural characteristics of different countries. Only a few cultures had legal systems for print literacy or printing technology when the first copyright laws were introduced, and at that time, the interests and the needs of the rest of the world were not taken into account. Saunders states that when it comes to copyright law, there is an inevitable overlapping between the legal and the cultural sphere.

To shift the focus to more marginal cultures, it is fair to assume, that what, in his well-known work of the same name, Ian Watt describes as "the rise of the novel" reflecting the "great power and self-confidence of the middle class as a whole" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, suggests a gradual process, supported by a steady though hierarchical spread of literacy within the more developed nations. However, that was not exactly the case for most of the newly formed nations after the decline of the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. The governments and the populations of these fresh actors on the European political and economic scene, had to leap from Late Medieval times into Modernity with just the nuclei of a formed middle class, industry, infrastructure, or commercialization of writing. A major and highly anticipated challenge for these new nations, including Bulgaria, was to educate the majority of their population, and to create libraries, institutions and literature at a very fast pace. This sometimes required the prioritizing of national goals, over international practice.

In the spirit of the formation of international copyright law as a "comparative framework of micro-histories of the different legal-cultural environments" suggested by Saunders, Bulgarian authors and publishers, whose main function was chiefly that of being *subjects of punishment* in the first decades after the Liberation, exercised their moral rights over their works through warning inscriptions. These inscriptions gained legal weight only in 1896-1897, when a set of new laws was enacted defining piracy and plagiarism. This was a whole decade after Bulgaria signed the First Berne Convention. Following the timeline of Bulgarian copyright micro-history, Zagorov points out that the

state did not really bother to comply with the Convention up until 1929, when the Rome Revision was signed, despite the fact, that as a losing side in the First World War, Bulgaria had to adopt its first Copyright law much earlier – in 1921. Even after the Rome Revision, the copyright of foreign authors was rarely observed, as Bulgarian publishers were unlikely to attract the attention of their overseas colleagues. The practice showed that the beneficiary of translated works was the translator, unless a different claimant objected to this right. A common assumption was that paying foreign copyrights would be a sudden death for their small businesses and would be a heavy burden on the publishing industry in such a small market. The publishing landscape, however, would dramatically change in the mid-1940s.

The Book in Communist Bulgaria

In 1944, a coup d'état in Bulgaria toppled the monarchic government and established a Communist regime that lasted until October 1989. Immediately after seizing power, the new Communist government started a prompt and complete nationalization of all private assets, bringing them under the ownership of the state, and under *the name of the people*. The State's publisher *D. Blagoev* monopolized the book publishing sector in 1947, after an official directive forbade the publication of books and textbooks, and all 169 publishers existing at that time were nationalized. A year later, an ordinance for the liquidation of all private publishers was issued and all companies had to give in their property, capital and inventory to the liquidator – the state's book publisher *Nauka i izkustvo* (which translates as *Science and Art*).

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the foundations of a national policy for book publishing and distribution were set, as an important tool for the Communist Party's ideological activity, concerning the forming of individuals with a proper communist mindset, and the affirmation of the socialist society. Heavy sets of the complete works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, as well as communist manifestos and speeches from the party's congresses, sat neatly displayed, but probably never read, in ordinary people's homes, as an evidence of their affiliation with the current regime. These publications were printed in circulations unprecedented in numbers, along with the works of ideologically suitable Bulgarian authors. The main positive of the centralized publishing policy was the low price of books, which, combined with the easy and free access to universities for both men and women, raised the level of literacy among the population up to 99%. This was especially beneficial for women's literacy.⁴

It is important to acknowledge the immense influence on, and the complicated relations of translated literature with the formation of Bulgarian national literature. Nikolay

Aretov uses the term *dispersive* to describe the approach that allows translated literature to be taken into “consideration in separate scattered moments” of a particular literary history. This approach, which can be observed often within *major* literatures and languages, is also present within small literatures⁵, with a more short-term effect, but at a higher frequency.

In the 1950s, translated literature in Bulgaria was entirely dominated by Russian authors, as the ideological policy of the country in that period was strictly dictated by the Soviets. Although the existence of censorship was officially denied by the Communist regime, and there was no institutional body that imposed it, the censorship process was achieved on multiple levels and was self-regulated by different organizations. In his book *Censorship under Communism or the Banning/Allowing Regime* (2018), the theatrical critic Romeo Popiliev argues that the *de jure* repudiation of censorship in Bulgaria, turned it into a double censorship, as even its own existence was erased.

The mechanism of *de facto* censorship was accomplished through a complicated process of approval of each potential publication. Approval of publishing plans was executed by the Committee of Science, Art and Culture (CSAC), inner editorial collectives, unions of authors, critics and translators, as well as the so-called *kulturtreger* or *bearers of culture* – acknowledged and trustworthy figures, close to or part of the Party’s elite. This was especially obvious when it came to the literature translated from languages other than Russian. One condition for the publication of Western, and other, literature was that it must have been already published in the USSR, which would guarantee that it would be in accordance with the official ideology imposed by the Soviets. Each title was also accompanied by a lengthy preamble that aimed to solidify the argument for publishing it, and to instruct the reader how to properly interpret the supposed proletarian agenda hidden in the content. Identifications of class struggle or critique of Western Imperialism were blown out of proportion by the editors in order to justify the translation of a work.

Many times parts of a book deemed inappropriate or controversial could fall under the censor, but the book would still be published, as was the case with the immensely popular novel *Shogun* by James Clavell. A chapter set in a *geisha* house fell under the so-called *soft censorship*, and was entirely removed as it was considered too explicit for a general audience, but a machine-typed amateur translation of the said chapter circulated throughout the 80s, and even beyond, until a complete issue finally was published in the year 2000. Many beloved works, like Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, and most of the novels by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, met a similar fate. The draconian control of the officials over all media was, in some cases, evaded by dexterous dodgery, either by the editors, or by the public in symbolic acts of practicing their right to free speech.

In sharp contrast with the concept of copyright, the most common method to avoid

the official publishing machine was the grassroots practice of *samizdat*. The term is a portmanteau of two words, meaning *self* and *publish*, which are used similarly in both Bulgaria and the USSR. A few prominent dissident Soviet authors' works circulated through illegal, and often pricey scripts, typed or carbon copied, the most notable names being Mikhail Bulgakov, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Vladimir Bukovsky. The last summarized the *samizdat* practice as "I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend time in prison for it myself".

A noteworthy *samizdat* example in Bulgaria was the 1968 book *Lyuti chushki* (meaning "Chili peppers") written by the poet and satirist Radoy Ralin, and illustrated with caricatures by Boris Dimovski, which was a collection of modernized epigrams, where witty folklore proverbs were applied to communist terminology and slogans. The book had just reached the bookshelves, when the Prague spring protests started to unfold. Several works, including *Lyuti chushki*, were declared as subversive and were withdrawn and pulped. The reason given was one of the illustrations of a pig with a pigtail looking like handwriting, in which some *kulturtregers* recognized the signature of the longtime dictator, and head of the Party, Todor Zhivkov. Only 2,000-3,000 of the 40,000 originally printed copies managed to get to their readers, but the public demand turned it into a must-have apocryphon, reproduced through various methods – by hand or old cyclostyles, tracing paper, heliographic copies, and later, printers and Xerox machines.

Despite the censorship apparatus, the 1970s were a golden age for translated literature in Bulgaria. The book historian Prof. Ani Gergova provides valuable statistics about the ratio between Bulgarian and translated titles throughout the decades. In the 1940s, out of 1,925 books 597, or 31% of the titles, were translations. Details about what language they were translated from are lacking, but it can be assumed that the majority of those published after September 1944 were translated from Russian. In the 1950s the production and publication of books doubled, but the percentage of translated works dropped to 12.1%, with 264 titles translated from Russian, 19 from English, 22 from French, 17 from German, and 62 not specified.

Data for the 1960s is missing, but by the end of the 1970s 1,094 titles, or 23.8% of the total books published, were translations. Out of the 1,094 translated titles, 331 were from Russian, 77 from English, 44 from French, and 48 from German. Although the original languages of the remaining 594 titles were not specified, during this period, for the first time, many young translators from the Spanish language entered the ranks of the national publishing establishments, and quickly began to translate Spanish, Latin American and Portuguese authors, especially those from the genre of Magical Realism. This invasion is not a coincidence, since the 1960s and the 1970s were in the very midst of the Cold War and the attempts by the Eastern Bloc to expand its influence over Central and South

America. After the Second World War, Bulgaria's interior policy was strictly conducted and synchronized with the vision of the Soviet leaders and all diplomatic efforts were re-directed towards "friendly developing countries" with pro-left or socialist governments. One such country was Cuba, after Fidel Castro took the post of prime-minister. As part of COMECON, the Council For Mutual Economic Assistance of the countries of the Eastern Bloc, Bulgaria opened its markets to Cuban goods. And it was not just Cuba – by the mid-1970s trade contracts were signed with 15 countries in Latin America. Economic and scientific collaborations were established with governments whose politics were clearly anti-American, and this led to a significant international exchange of students and experts in different fields.

Although these relations were happening entirely in the context of the Cold War and its ideological burden, as long as it lasted, the collaboration with Cuba proved to be of great benefit for both sides. Apart from the economical investments, there were significant advances in cultural exchange. In 1961 Sofia University opened the first Department of Spanish philology in the country, with the help of instructors from Cuba. Until that moment there were just a handful of people with a good knowledge of Spanish, but only a few years later the first translations of major Latin American authors were published.

From 1974 until its final years in the early 1990s, one of the most influential publishing establishments, *Narodna kultura* (meaning "People's Culture") was focused almost entirely on contemporary translated fiction and created a selection of highly praised and in-demand works from all over the world. This carefully controlled opening to different cultures and literatures not only cultivated generations of Bulgarian readers seeking for diversity and quality, but it also trained dozens of young editors and translators in their craft, and these were the people who later became the first private publishers after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

The centralization of Bulgarian book publishing was not only financial and ideological, but also geographical. The ordinance of liquidation of all private publishers in 1948 also led to the closing of all book stores, which meant that the distribution system had to be rebuilt from scratch. The bigger cities, which used to have their own cultural and publishing life, now had to wait and rely on the Party's headquarters in the capital of Sofia for the spread of books, movies, newspapers and artists, in slow concentric circles from the center, to the provinces' major cities, and then to the smaller towns, just like any other goods provided for the population. The legacy of this centralized system affects the distribution of books in the countryside even today, as most big cities still cannot overcome their dependence on the center.

A notable case of a provincial publishing establishment that managed to break through the restrictions of its regionality, and to gain national recognition from its

readers, is *Georgi Bakalov*. Established in 1960, in the sea capital of Bulgaria – the city of Varna – the publishers had moderate success with nautical themed fiction and non-fiction. That changed in the late 1970s, when one of its translators, Milan Asadurov, with the help of friends, managed to import a selection of 300 science fiction novels from the USA. This story has become anecdotal among Bulgarian publishers, and well illustrates the obstacles editors and translators had to encounter in the name of the book and the reader. The parcel containing the subversive works was confiscated by the Committee of State Security, the Bulgarian secret services during the Communist era, but after a few months of interrogations, bureaucracy and knocking on numerous doors, Asadurov managed to prove that all the titles he imported has already been published in the USSR by the renowned Moscow state publisher *Molodaya gvardiya*, and eventually a large proportion of the confiscated books were returned to him. What he failed to mention to the authorities though, was the fact that the whole editorial staff of *Molodaya gvardiya* was fired a few years prior for spreading “ideological diversionism” - a term used in communist countries to define the manifestations of a non-communist worldview due to the direct or indirect influence of anti-Soviet “bourgeois” or “Western” ways of thinking - with the very same books. Helped by the talented illustrator Tekla Aleksieva, Asadurov conceptualized the whole series as the *Biblioteka “Galaktika”*, and in the span of 10 years, from 1979 until 1989, managed to publish 100 titles by authors such as Arthur C. Clarke, Ursula Le Guin, Clifford Simak, Sakyo Komatsu, Douglas Adams and many others. Often testing the boundaries set by the dominating socialistic ideology, *Biblioteka “Galaktika”* became an instant favorite with the public, and many of its titles had circulations of over 100,000 copies, in a country with a population of 9 million.

Due to Gorbachev’s policy of Perestroika, and the shaky situation caused by the raise of ethnic tensions in neighboring Yugoslavia after the death of Josip Broz Tito, by the end of the 1980s the whiff of change could already be scented in the air of totalitarian Bulgaria. Sporadic commoners who happened to be owners of cassette radio recorders and VHS recorders, a marker for luxury among the Party’s elites, became the first medium of the retrogressive Western culture for the masses. Smuggled tapes and cassettes brought the forbidden music, cinema and pop culture of the last decades right before the end of the Communist regime in Bulgaria on November 10th, 1989 – mere hours after East Germany decided to let waves of refugees leave for West Berlin through the Berlin Wall.

The Book in Post-Communist Bulgaria

The transition from a planned and centralized economy into a market economy led to the breaking of the state’s monopoly over book distribution and the established system of

bookstores, stands in schools, factories and mobile book stands, that supplied smaller cities and villages. Almost overnight the majority of the bookstores were closed in anticipation of the initiated privatization of previously nationalized properties. Many collaborators of the state publishers, already aware of the coming big changes, quickly started registering their own private companies, buying rights for books, and making contracts with printing mills which were the state's property just until yesterday. The distribution of books left *brick-and-mortar* establishments and went onto the streets, while publishers started doing business from the phones in their homes, and selling hundreds of thousands of copies from the backs of rented trucks. Those previously involved in the official distributing system now had the know-how and the connections to continue the book publishing trade without the centralized control of the Party's committees and, this time, for their own profit. The speed at which books were translated, printed and sold, under the unfailing demand for works that it had been previously unthinkable to publish, led to a book publishing boom in the first years after the collapse of Communism. In those unpredictable and exciting times, just one or two unsellable titles stuck in the warehouses could put any novice entrepreneur out of business in a matter of days. The lucky survivors are currently also the owners of some of the biggest publishing houses in Bulgaria, and among the founders of the Association "Bulgarian Book".

The 1990s were dominated by a new trend in local book publishing – that of the Western bestseller. According to many publishers, just the presence of a relatively famous Western name on a paper copy guaranteed quick sales, to the extent that a publisher allegedly put the name of James Hadley Chase on a mediocre crime novel by a less popular author. The frenzy for profits led to a significant decline in the quality of selection, translation and production all at once. In 1996, the famed literary agent Carmen Balcells apparently became appalled by the quality of the Bulgarian issue of *Of Love and Other Demons* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a book dedicated to her by the author. As a result, she put a veto over Garcia Marquez's copyright for Bulgaria, which was lifted only after her retirement in 2010. Unsurprisingly, pricey second-hand copies of the Colombian Nobel Prize laureate's most famous works, often in perfect condition, and still smelling of fresh ink, kept appearing at the opened book markets for another decade, supplied by a mysterious, never exhausted source. Meanwhile, 1997 brought a new financial crisis for Bulgaria, in addition to hyperinflation, which considerably affected the purchasing ability of even the most avid readers.

The Bulgarian publishing sector entered the new millennium in a relatively stable state, given the financial turmoil a few years prior. As the country was looking forward to its forthcoming membership in the European Union, its state policy for culture and education, however, remained poorly defined, if not non-existent. Subsidies for regional and

community libraries were granted irregularly, and the whole book publishing industry was left on its own. The Association “Bulgarian Book” tried to engage public opinion over the controversy around the Value-Added Tax (VAT) on books which, at 20%, is one of the highest in Europe⁶ and, unlike most EU countries, is not returned to the industry as subsidies, but goes back into the national treasury. This forced book publishers to gradually raise the prices of books to the extent that they can be compatible with those of other European countries. For example, the price of Haruki Murakami’s *Norwegian Wood* in paperback edition in Bulgaria has doubled since its first publication in 2005, from 4.50 Euros to 9 Euros, while its current price in the UK Amazon is the equivalent of 7.80 Euros. The minimum wage, however, is still the lowest in the EU, currently standing at 331.89 Euros per month⁷.

These statistics have a significant effect on the purchasing power of the Bulgarian reader. Facing the harsh reality of the high prices of books and the low living standard, the 66% of working adult Bulgarians, who still manage to purchase at least one book per year, often look for alternative sources in order to exercise their sacred rights to read. Digital books seemed to be such an alternative, but Bulgarian publishers delayed their debut as long as possible, afraid of the predictions that digitalization would be the end of the paper book.

Digital Books in Bulgaria

This is the historical and economical setup in which chitanka.info appeared at the end of 2005, as a space where books in Bulgarian are uploaded and can be read or downloaded in different formats (fb2, zip, epub, txt.zip and sfb.zip) for free. The purpose of the website was to create a well-organised library of scanned and edited texts, with easy access for Bulgarian speakers from all over the world, as since 1989 the country has been experiencing a massive emigration and brain drain crisis. The site is a non-profit venture relying on volunteer work and donations, and advertisements are not allowed on the website. Initially, the books uploaded on chitanka.info were pre-1989 titles, mostly fiction, that had been out of circulation for a long period of time. Gradually, more and more new titles were included – some scanned, some typed – while others were uploaded directly by their authors for no profit. It was also the first online library that provided books that could be read by text-to-speech programs for people with visual impairments. Circa December 2017, the site contained 38,532 files for download, according to the data published on their web-page.

Chitanka.info is far from being the first space for online sharing of books in Bulgaria to be targeted for violation of the copyright laws. Other popular websites like bookbg.net,

which were offering scanned books for a certain fee paid by SMS, were closed by the police for illegal activities. In the case of *chitanka.info*, however, the founders insist that their project is a non-profit digital web library and as such, it should be treated according to a paragraph of the Bulgarian Copyright Law, stating that intellectual works can be distributed by libraries, schools, archives and such, without the consent of the copyright holder in cases when it is not for commercial purposes⁸. In his article, “Copyright abduction online”, Todor Hristov analyses the public debate about the 2010 raid of *chitanka.info* by GDCOC, and “the particular methods through which the actors articulate their quasi-legal rights”. He also argues that “the debates on online publishing split copyright into property rights and access rights, (which) allows for the abduction of copyright by government agencies, justifying their intervention”. In the Bulgarian media space, the case of *chitanka.info* was often compared to the 2005 lawsuit “Authors Guild, Inc, v. Google, Inc.” where the Authors Guild, initially supported by the Association of American Publishers, claimed that the development of the *Google Books Search* database is an infringement of their copyrights. The Association “Bulgarian Book” referred to this long-running lawsuit as an example from international law, that when a major company is unable to prove its actions do not violate the copyright law, this by default should mean that they do violate the law⁹.

The raid on *chitanka.info* aimed to permanently shut the site and intimidate its collaborators, but it only managed to do that for a day, as the site was restored on another server, and several days later its content appeared on the torrent tracker *The Pirate Bay*, clearly showing that the influence of and the support for the project were far bigger than the opposite side had anticipated. As a consequence, readers, bloggers, media experts and press criticized the abuse of power executed by major publishers, and the dubious intervention of GDCOC. It was also an indicator of the sensitivity of *chitanka.info*’s users and their awareness of their rights.

The topic of copyrights and fair-use continued to pop up as the protests against the signing of the controversial Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) intensified in 2012, with Eastern European countries being particularly active in the demonstrations. A few months later Association “Bulgarian Book” sent a letter to its members announcing that the cyber crimes division of the FBI was interested in *chitanka.info*, and that the titles by American authors uploaded on the website should be reported by the publishers, whose rights had been violated. The letter was published on the Association’s website and, as a result, access to all American titles on *chitanka.info* was restricted for a month.

The feud between *chitanka.info* and the Association did not seem to be reaching anywhere near its end, but a few changes were made, since many supporters of the project also pointed out that there should be some form of regulation, which would

guarantee that the publishers' copyrights for distribution have not been violated. Currently the *chitanka.info* repository does not store books published less than five years ago, and this resolution came after the continuous threats and a series of shutdowns initiated by the Association "Bulgarian Book". One of the most disappointing aspects of their conflict appeared to be the total lack of dialogue on the part of the Association, although attempts were made multiple times to initiate such a conversation, not only by *chitanka.info*, but also by other online media.

Compared to 2009, when almost the only access to digital books in the Bulgarian language was through unofficial channels, by the end of 2019 the e-book market had increased significantly. The circumstances of the 2020 global pandemic and ubiquitous lockdowns additionally pushed Bulgarian publishers to focus more on their digital catalogues. One of the first companies to publish e-books along with their paper editions was *Colibri Books* and, up to date, they are the leaders in the market with 713 digital titles by the end of August, 2021. They were also the first to start selling Bulgarian books through *Amazon.com* and *Apple books*, although the selection of titles on these platforms is very limited – just 69, out of a catalogue of nearly 2000 titles, can be purchased on *Amazon*. Another major seller of e-books is the biggest distributor and owner of one of the biggest bookstore chains, *Helikon BG*. By the end of August 2021, their website offered 4,140 digital issues, of which 3,037 are literature (fiction and nonfiction), and 1,103 e-magazines.

Most of the Bulgarian e-books sold by publishers and websites use Digital Rights Management (DRM) as a copyright protection for their content, which usually is not compatible with Kindle. However, Kindle is the most sold eReader on the Bulgarian market, and with a discouragingly limited choice of books in Bulgarian on *Amazon.com*, Kindle owners have very few options: to remove the DRM of the book, which requires for them to have certain technical skills; to purchase the desired book from *Amazon.com* in a language different from Bulgarian, which requires certain language skills; or, to look for alternative sources where the book is uploaded in Bulgarian and in a compatible format that can be converted and downloaded on their device.

Different statistics show that between 1.1 and 1.85 million Bulgarian nationals have left the country in the space of the last three decades. The most recent data is from the national census from 2011, and is based on the information released by the Bulgarian diplomatic missions around the world. It is estimated that there are close to 250,000 people who identify as Bulgarians, or claim to be of Bulgarian descent, and are permanent residents of the US. The numbers for Germany, Spain and Great Britain for the same year are, respectively 263,000, 127,000, and 100,000. It is safe to suggest that a significant percentage of the more recent immigrants speak Bulgarian as their first language, and have also completed some levels of their education in Bulgaria. This is a premise for a high demand

for books in Bulgarian from overseas – a demand that without a doubt substantially exceeds the supply.

Digital Readers in Bulgaria

So far very little research has been carried out on the reading and purchasing of digital books in Bulgaria. Usually, questions about digital books are included in larger surveys on reading, but they are seldom analysed separately from those concerning paper books. One national survey about citizens' access to art and culture, conducted by *Alpha Research* and published in May 2018, shows that 66% percent of the interviewees had read at least one book in 2017, which is a 9% increase compared to a similar survey conducted in 2014. There was no information about how many of these 66% are potential digital readers or own an eReader, but we can at least assume that the majority of the respondents own at least one device – smartphone, tablet, PC, laptop – on which they can have access to e-books. A more recent survey can be found in the “Annual Report on Youth for 2019” conducted by the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the Republic of Bulgaria, whose target audience was young people from all over the country, between the ages of 15 and 29. A sample of 1,400 responders gave information about their living conditions, economic, career and health status, along with responses about their behaviour. When asked about the *active* and *passive* ways to spend their free time, most of the respondents indicate watching TV, listening to music, and being on the computer as their *passive* leisure time occupations of choice. Only 30% chose *reading a book* as their response, while a massive 41% admit that they do not read at all. Out of the 30% of young and new adults who read, 21% indicate that they read e-books on their devices. And while 5% were purchasing their own e-books, the rest admit that they use sources where books can be downloaded for free. The reporters also pointed out an interesting correlation between the self-estimated general satisfaction with life of the respondents and reading – the percentage of respondents who read books on a regular basis among those who also feel satisfied with their financial and living status, seems to be much higher than among the unsatisfied. This, combined with the widely discussed on Bulgaria's media PISA report from 2018, which revealed a noticeable increase of functionally illiterate students, who are unable to “use reading, writing, and calculation skills for their own and community development”, clearly shows a deep crisis in the educational policy of the Bulgarian institutions, which has left the initiative for cultural and scholastic growth for its citizens to “each man for himself”.

In order, at least partly, to fill the gap left by the shortage of more detailed studies, and to get a better grasp of the habits and propensities of the Bulgarian digital readers, a

survey was designed for the purpose of this paper. The survey aimed to outline the demographic profile of average Bulgarian e-book readers, to explore what type of digitized books they read, what kind of devices they use, what are the most popular go-to platforms and what type of e-books they prefer to read. With the aim to collect as many responses as possible, the questionnaire designed for the survey was shared on the private Facebook group “Elektronni knigi” (meaning “Digital books”), which, with its over 47,000 members, is one of the biggest online spaces dedicated to e-books for Bulgarian speakers. Related to the total population of the country, the members of “Elektronni knigi” represent an estimated 0.676% part of all Bulgarian citizens permanently living within its borders.

Within the span of one month, between August 15th and September 14th 2021, 1,753 participants, or 3.73% of the group’s members, took part in the survey. Eighty-five, or 5.07% of all respondents, were excluded from the final results as invalid, due to unanswered questions, or because they failed to fulfill some of the main criteria of the survey. Further analysis of the remaining 1665 respondents who completed the questionnaire, was able to provide detailed information related to the demographic profile and behavior of Bulgarian e-book readers.

The results show that the highest percentage – 47.5%, or 790 of all respondents – were females between the age of 36 and 55 (fig. 1), followed by females between the age of 21 and 35 – 22%, or 367 respondents. Females over the age of 56 represent 15.9%, or 266 respondents, and males between the age of 35 and 55 were 5.6%, or 93 out of all respondents. In total 89.5%, or 1490 of all respondents were females, 10.3%, or 171 were males, and 0.2%, or 4 respondents preferred not to specify their gender.

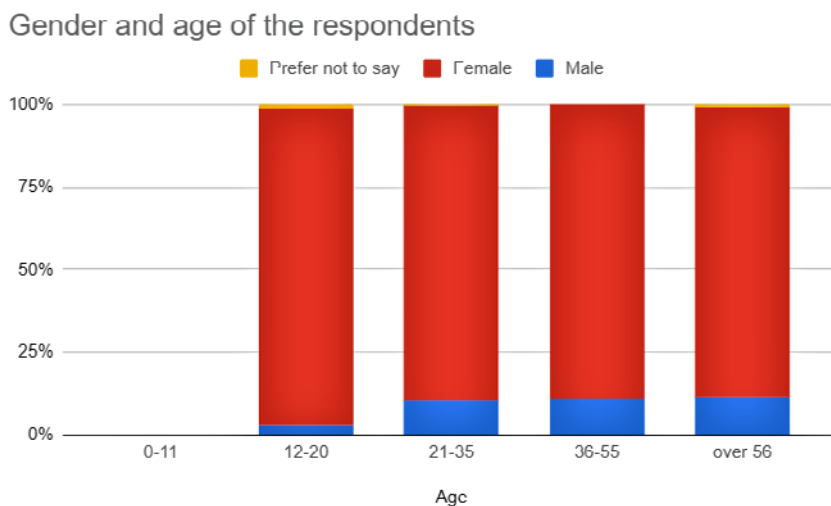


fig. 1

In terms of the respondents' level of education, 73.8% state that they have a university degree, 19.7% a high-school diploma, 5.4% respondents a qualification form vocational schools, and 1.1% an elementary school diploma (fig. 2).

Education

1665 Respondents

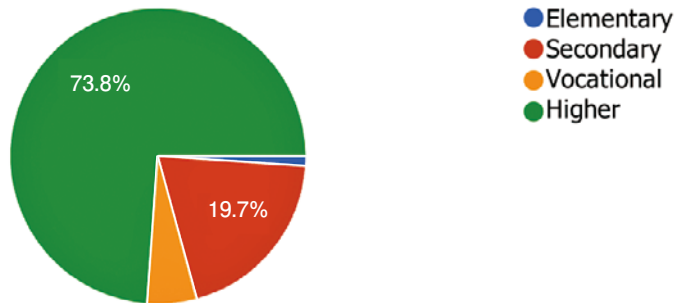


fig. 2

In the following question the respondents indicated whether they reside in Bulgaria or overseas. The results show that 93.2% reside in Bulgaria, 6.3% reside outside of the country, and approximately half a percent of the respondents preferred not to specify where they live.

Figure 3 illustrates the frequency of reading from electronic devices: 53.9% of the respondents read e-books every day; 23.5% read e-books 2-3 times per week; 13.5% read e-books a few times per month; and 9.1% rarely read e-books. The fifth option, "I don't read e-books", was used as a trap question, and the respondents who chose it were included in the invalid answers.

How often do you read e-books?

1665 Respondents

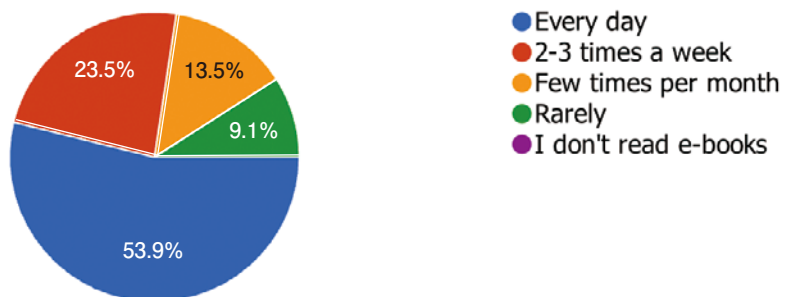


fig. 3

One of the objectives of the survey was also to examine whether any change in the attitudes towards e-books had occurred between April 2020 and August 2021, as an aftermath of the multiple lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic. To the question “Have your reading habits regarding e-books changed in 2020/2021?”, 16.8% indicated that they started to read and purchase more e-books than before. 73.5% didn’t find any change in the number of e-books that they purchased and read, while 9.8% could not estimate if any changes had occurred during this period.

Further, the survey was composed of multi-select multiple-choice questions that aimed to establish what devices and platforms were used by the respondents, as well as what type of digital books they preferred. More than half of the respondents, or 62.6% indicated, that they use eReaders such as Kindle, Nook, Kobo or Poketbook, but a further breakdown shows that a significant number of the eReaders’ owners (66.6%), also rely on smartphones and tablets, and/or computers and laptops for reading, along with their eReaders. The respondents that rely only on a smartphone/tablet to read e-books are next with 28.6%, followed by 6.3% of those using both a smartphone/tablet and a computer/laptop, while only 4.1% rely only on a computer/laptop as their main reading device. There seems to be no significant difference among the age and gender groups when it comes to the different devices they use – eReaders are as evenly widespread among the 21-35 year olds, as they are among the respondents over the age of 56. The same tendency is observed with those respondents who reside abroad.

To the question “Which file formats do you use to read e-books?” 4.9% of the respondents chose the option “I cannot say”, while 59.1% seem to use more than one e-book file format, with a clear preference towards EPUB, PDF and MOBI (fig. 4).

Which file formats do you use to read e-books? (multiple choice answer)

1665 Respondents

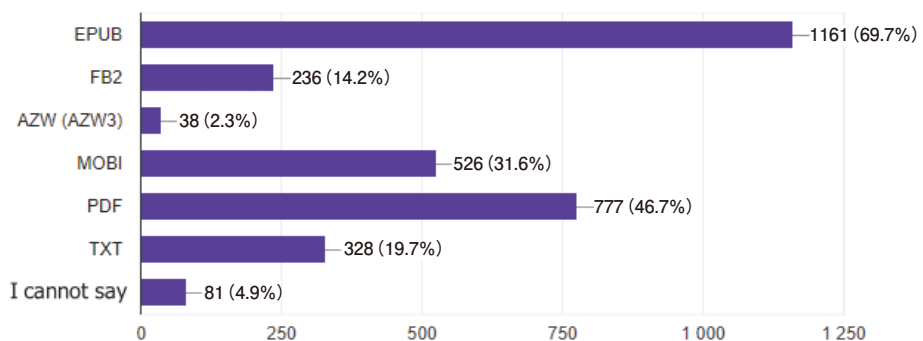


fig. 4

The next question – “Where do you usually purchase/download/borrow your e-books from?” – seems to reveal the most interesting information about the purchasing and non-purchasing habits of Bulgarian e-book readers. The multi-select multiple-choice question was composed of nineteen possible answers, which included some of the most popular e-book stores, both global and Bulgarian, such as Amazon.com, Apple books, Kobo, Barnes and Noble, Google Play, Helikon, Biblio, etc., open access sources such as Open Library and Project Gutenberg, as well as online libraries. Alongside them, four popular sources for the free download of e-books were given as possible answers – chitanka.info, Readbg.com, Rulit.me and peer-to-peer sharing. There was also an option given for those who prefer not to reveal their main resources, and 4.4% of the respondents chose it as their answer.

Chitanka.info dominates as the most popular platform for e-books in the Bulgarian language, as 81.9% of the respondents indicated that they use it for downloading free digital books. For 226, or 16.6% of them, chitanka.info is the only e-books source, and almost half of them only use e-readers as their main device. Another 45.1% of chitanka.info’s users also additionally use Rulit.me and peer-to-peer sharing groups as their go-to platforms for the downloading of free e-books. The rest of the responders combine chitanka.info with open access sources, and purchases from official websites and online stores.

Some of the respondents used the open-ended section of the questions, not to add alternative sources, but to leave small comments. A female respondent from the age group over 56, who likes translated modern classics and romances, writes that her kids download books on her Kindle for her from “some websites”. A male respondent from the same age group, who reads classics, crime novels and autobiographies on his smartphone/tablet, shares his doubts whether people actually pay for e-books nowadays. A female, age 36-55, comments that she will gladly buy newly published books in Bulgarian, if only they were available on Amazon, but until then, along with Amazon.com and the Bulgarian online store Biblio, she also uses chitanka.info, Rulit.me and peer-to-peer sharing.

Peer-to-peer sharing in different online forums and interest groups is the second most popular resource for e-books, used by 52.6% of the respondents. Third, with 42.5%, comes the Russia-based website Rulit.me, which offers over 640,000 digital titles in 42 different languages, including Bulgarian. Started at the end of 2014, Rulit.me currently has almost 13,500 titles in Bulgarian, most of which can be downloaded for free. And unlike chitanka.info, Rulit.me was not affected by the restrictions imposed to the Bulgarian website, as many of their books are relatively newly published titles.

Online stores have a hard time to keep up with the competition of platforms for free downloads, but even with its limited range of Bulgarian titles, Amazon.com manages to engage 9.8% of the respondents, followed by 9.2% for the various publishers’ websites,

and 6.2% for the biggest Bulgarian distributor Helikon BG.

Further analysis of the collected data shows that 36.3% of the respondents read e-books in more than one language, with English indicated by nine out of ten foreign language readers. Nearly half of them also indicate Russian as their second or third language. Fourth, fifth and sixth, and much more modest in numbers, are French, German and Spanish.

For “What type of e-books do you read?”, 95.1% responded with “Foreign authors translated into Bulgarian”, 54.7% responded with “Bulgarian authors in Bulgarian”, and 31.5% responded with “Foreign authors in their original language”.

The majority of the respondents, or 96.3% indicated that when it comes to e-books, they prefer to read mostly fiction, while 27.3% also read non-fiction (politics, history, philosophy, etc.); 19.2% also read textbooks and educational literature; 14% read e-books connected with their professional occupation, while 11% indicated dictionaries and encyclopedias.

When it comes to fiction, crime novels and thrillers seem to be the most popular genre (65.8%), followed by world classics (59%), modern classics and contemporary fiction (57.3%), romances (55.7%), and sci-fi and fantasy (43.6%).

Conclusions

The habits and propensities of Bulgarian digital readers often seem to be in a state of conflict with the international copyright legal framework, and Bulgaria has been regularly listed among the countries that experience constant challenges and issues when it comes to the enforcement of copyright laws regarding online and broadcast piracy. From the point of view of international copyright lawmakers, this may seem like a lack of will on the part of institutions and the executives, that only benefits the unscrupulous copyright violators. However, the brief review of the history of intellectual property legislation showed that the implementation of copyright law was not achieved in an instant, but was rather a slow, step-by-step negotiated process, that often has been met with resistance. It is also obvious, that in the past a national agenda many times has been prioritised over international legislation, and that the cultural and historical aspects of any given environment should be taken into consideration when laws are made.

This is especially true for developing countries, which are often put in the position of a *subject of punishment* for their consumption of the cultural import from another foreign and dominant culture. Smaller nations, or smaller languages, rarely have the capacity to produce national art or literature that can make an impact on the world scene. They are more focused on the conservation of their own heritage, identity and locality, while at

the same time trying not to fall behind more developed societies. This might cause some social processes to develop faster, or slower than others. This is exactly the position in which chitanka.info is at the moment – balancing on the fence between legality and illegality, supported by a small paragraph of the Bulgarian copyright law. It is just a matter of time before new measures will be applied against the beloved online library; however, there will not be an adequate replacement for it, at least not in the near future. Without the likes of chitanka.info, consumers who own eReader, will have an advanced piece of technology, just like their English-speaking or German-speaking counterparts, but their choices regarding the content will be much more limited. We must also acknowledge the fact that excessive usage of platforms for free e-books is not an exclusively Bulgarian phenomenon, as can be seen from the example of Rulit.me. In the case of a complete shutdown of chitanka.info, digital readers will simply migrate to other platforms and follow the Bulgarian e-books in their exile.

Endnotes

- 1 During the raid GDCOC was still operating under its former name, abbreviated as GDBOP (ГДБОП). The day after the servers of chitanka.info were seized, the site was restored at a new address – chitanka.gdbop.info.
- 2 Up until the 1840s education in Bulgarian towns was taking place entirely in self-organized elementary schools, which were either Greek, or Greek-Bulgarian. Historically, Greece had a similar fate to neighbouring Bulgaria, and after gaining its independence in 1829, the country became a mediator for modern Western ideas, especially, the concept of the nation-state. This led to a Hellenization of the newly formed Bulgarian intellectual stratum throughout the 1830s. Everything abruptly changed, however, when the Russian Empire intensified its influence over the Southern Slavic nations in the Balkans, in an attempt to gain access to the Aegean sea. Subsequently, a significant number of prominent Bulgarians went to study in Odessa, and started promoting and cultivating the ideal of the Bulgarian state and identity.
- 3 Within the few decades before the Liberation in 1878, local initiatives, as well as a few foreign organizations, started establishing elementary and secondary schools among Bulgarian communities. In her comparative gender study on the history of Bulgarian education in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, Krassimira Daskalova points out how the establishment of the first Bulgarian secondary school for girls in 1863 illustrates the “interplay between nationalism, modernism and emancipation of women”. The school was organized chiefly “in order to oppose the foes of Orthodoxy and our nation”, following two American Evangelical missionaries, who founded a school in their mission that focused specifically on girls’ education.
- 4 After 1878, women’s education gained significant support, but it was highly motivated by the assumption that women should “become a man’s good companion” as stated by poet and

politician Petko Slaveykov. In her 1999 book *Literacy, Letters, Readers and Reading in Bulgaria from Transition into Modern Times*, Kassimira Daskalova also provides detailed information on legislation concerning education and the advance of literacy in Bulgaria. Despite all efforts of self-organized schools, until 1879 a mere 5-6% of the population could read and write. In 1900 the number increased to 29.81% (44.96% for men, and 13.97% for women); in 1934 – 79.6% for men, and 52.2% for women; 1946 – 85.51% for men, and 68.56% for women.

- 5 Bulgarian literary critics often use the wording *major* and *small literatures* to describe, situate or differentiate Bulgarian literature within the context of world literature, with *major* being represented by the literatures of languages that had established their influence over other cultures, which also have a long literary history, and universally recognized works or authors – English, French, Russian, German - and to some extent Spanish, Arab and Chinese. *Small literatures* are mostly limited by the significantly smaller number of the readers native to the language in which they were written. They usually have a very small impact on major literatures and evolve in relative isolation. These notions should not be confused with the concept of *minor literature* suggested by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, regarding a literature that does not come from a minor language, but is rather one “which a minority constructs within a major language”.
- 6 As part of the economic stimulus for small businesses during the 2020 pandemic, the Bulgarian government decided to temporarily decrease the VAT on books’ sales from 20% to 9% from July 1st, 2020, with the intention to eventually make the change permanent. This measure, however, does not seem to have had a major effect on the publishing sector, mainly because it benefits solely the distributors of books, while other expenses, such as copyright purchases, editorial and printing expenses, are still taxed the same as before. This creates a great challenge for the smaller publishers, who do not have their own distributing channels.
- 7 The information about minimum wages in Bulgaria is published by the European Statistical Office (Eurostat), and has been most recently updated in June 2020.
- 8 Art. 24(1) 9. (amend. - SG 99/05, in force from 10.01.2006) permits the “reproduction of already published works by publicly accessible libraries, educational or other learning establishments, museums and archive institutions, with educational purposes or with the purpose of preservation of the works, unless serving for commercial purposes”.
- 9 In 2014 the lawsuit was dismissed, as the actions of Google were deemed to fall under the copyright law governing “fair use”.

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