
The Library Sector in Lithuania at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to provide readers with a snapshot of the Lithuanian library sector since the year 2000. The sector functions as a modern, open, user-oriented, and professional system comparable to other library sectors in Europe. The community of Lithuanian librarians is organized in several professional associations that help in developing different aspects of library work: cooperation, supporting and expanding library activity, and coordinating mutual initiatives. The legal foundations for providing access to information, and the institutions providing information and ensuring its preservation in various forms, are set out in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania and a set of laws regulating library work. The Lithuanian Ministry of Culture is authorized to regulate state administration of all libraries in Lithuania. The library system consists of the networks of public libraries, academic libraries, school libraries, and special libraries. This paper presents the developments in each of these networks over the past fourteen years. In 2011, a “scientifically” derived strategic plan was developed, which marked a new turn in the management of the state library sector.

INTRODUCTION

This account builds on earlier work by Lepik, Macevičiūtė, and Pakalna (2013), as well as by a number of other authors—including Bulavas (2003), Gudauskas (1994), and Macevičiūtė (2009)—on libraries in Lithuania after it became an independent state in 1990. The analysis that follows also exploits data from general library statistics and other research projects to provide a coherent picture of the Lithuanian library sector today.

A short description of historical and geographical contexts will help the reader understand the recent development of Lithuanian libraries. Lithuania (Lietuva), officially the Republic of Lithuania (Lietuvos Respublika), is a northern European country situated along the southeastern shore of the Baltic Sea. It shares borders with Latvia to the north, Belarus to the southeast, and Poland and the Russian exclave of the Kaliningrad Oblast (county) to the southwest. In 2011, it had a population of 3.2 million, 83.9 percent of which were ethnic Lithuanians, with Polish, Russian, and Belarusian minority groups making up the rest of the population. Part of the Soviet bloc until 1990, in 2004, Lithuania became part of the European Union. Lithuania is situated in a region that has a troubled history, ranging from the Polish-Lithuanian state of the Middle Ages to being a neglected province of the Russian Empire in the nineteenth century. Its cultural history and heritage is as complicated and colorful as its political legacy. Lithuania's modern cultural and information institutions are the result of its complicated past, as well as the richness of the mixed traditions inherited from the different peoples who have inhabited the region.

The Lithuanian case is further complicated, in that ethnic Lithuania has two parts: Lithuania Minor (the left bank of the river Nemunas that was mainly under the control of the German states), and Greater Lithuania. This division is important for cultural history because Lithuania Minor played a huge role in the development of Lithuanian culture, literacy, book publishing, and education provision. Lithuanian history may be divided into three periods, each of which can be characterized by specific cultural features and developments in media, book, and library history (Macevičiūtė, 2009):

- *Fourteenth to eighteenth centuries: The formation of the Lithuanian super-state, its expansion and decline.* The militarization of the state and the general geopolitical situation inhibited cultural development. However, the first libraries (mainly in monasteries) were established during this period, the first private book collections were built by the Lithuanian aristocracy and rulers, and the first printing houses appeared. Lithuanian script was created and the first Lithuanian book was published, in 1547, in Lithuania Minor. Vilnius University Library was founded in 1579 as a library of the Jesuit Academy. The eighteenth century saw both the development of libraries within educational institutions and churches, and the rise of the idea of public access to libraries.
- *End of the eighteenth to the start of the twentieth century: The partition of the state, survival under tsarist Russia, and the rise of a national movement.* The Polish-Lithuanian state, including the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, ceased to exist and was divided among tsarist Russia and the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian empires (the final partition occurring in 1795). The largest part of ethnic Lithuania belonged to tsarist Russia, and

Lithuania Minor to Prussia. Vilnius University played a significant role in the education of Lithuanian authors and scholars but was closed in 1831 after an insurrection against tsarist rule. From 1864 to 1904, Lithuanian script was banned, hence affecting the development of literature, education, publishing, the book trade, and other spheres of life. Lithuania Minor served as a source of Lithuanian texts illegally imported into Greater Lithuania. The first legal Lithuanian libraries started appearing only after the ban was lifted.

- *Twentieth to twenty-first centuries (1918 to the present)*. The first independence period (1918–1944) was very important for the development of libraries because all critical elements of the library sector came into being during these years (for example, the National Library of Lithuania in 1919, the Bibliographic Institute and the national bibliography in 1928; the Lithuanian Librarians' Association in 1931, and the Law on State Public Libraries in 1936). During the Soviet occupation, the library system in many respects suffered greatly, but some positive developments also took place: the network of libraries expanded, the Book Chamber (established in 1945) commenced work on a retrospective national bibliography, and university education for librarians began in 1949, with a doctoral program established in 1952. Since 1990—the second independence era—libraries became free from ideological constraints, recovered cultural significance, and became equal members of international library networks. On the other hand, the former ideological pressures have been replaced by new challenges arising from the operation of market forces, the development of a postcommunist economy, and social changes linked to the rise of new information and communication technologies.

The following definitions are useful for following the text and main events described in the paper:

- *Library system*: The totality of the networks of various library types performing a variety of functions in the service of the same local or national (or other) community and governed by unified legislation, economic, and organizational principles
- *Library network*: A network of libraries performing the same social functions for a typical group of users, based on the same principles and supported by a professional “consultation center” (a large library responsible for consultancy in professional issues and professional competence development, such as the National Medical Library for health-care libraries and the National Library for public libraries)
- *Library sector*: In the context of libraries, a broad social system based on a common legislative foundation and consisting of several interwoven organizational networks pursuing specific though complementary goals and utilizing educational, professional, technological, and research resources provided by other, closely associated societal systems

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LIBRARY SECTOR IN LITHUANIA

At present, the Lithuanian library sector functions as a modern, open, user-oriented, and professional system comparable to other library sectors in Europe. In the quarter of a century after the restoration of independence, the library system has developed new services, expertise, models, and professionals who actively participate in shaping the libraries of the country. The drivers for the changes have been an evolving society, a fluxuating economy, the arrival of new concepts and technologies, and the will of librarians to fulfil their professional obligations.

The community of Lithuanian librarians is organized into several professional associations: the Lithuanian Librarians' Association (LLA), the Lithuanian Academic Libraries' Directors' Association, the Lithuanian County Public Libraries' Association, the Lithuanian Municipal Public Libraries' Association, and the Lithuanian College Libraries' Association. The LLA is the largest and oldest of these library organizations, established in 1931 and reestablished after the the Soviet period ended in 1989. The LLA plays the role of an integrating force for all librarians; it unites over a third of all librarians and continues to grow every year (Griškevičienė, 2011).

According to the 2012 library statistics for Lithuania, there are approximately 6,130 professional librarians practicing in the country (Lietuvos nacionalinė biblioteka [LNB], 2012). Training in library and information science (LIS) has been offered by Vilnius University since 1949. In 1991, Klaipėda University established its own LIS program. More recently, in 2013, the university discontinued the program because of low student enrollment. Since 2007, a vocational qualification in the management of library resources can be earned at Šiauliai College. There is a full array of vocational and academic LIS programs offered by Lithuanian higher education institutions, including a doctoral program at Vilnius University. The university's Faculty of Communication is the country's main research institution for LIS. Research work is carried out by the Martynas Mažvydas National Library of Lithuania (NLL) and the Department of Communications at Klaipėda University.

Significant influences in the recent process of change have been the international professional community, national and external funding agencies, and international bodies. The role of funding agencies, such as the Open Society Fund (Lithuania), the Open Society Institute, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, were essential in stimulating the creativity of librarians, teaching the art of writing, implementing projects, and, in some cases, drawing the attention of authorities to the condition and importance of libraries. International bodies like the Nordic Council of Ministers, Nordinfo, and the European Commission helped create international networks and taught how Lithuanian libraries could work

together with partners from other cultures and adapt their models and experiences to Lithuania's conditions. Close partnerships with librarians from the Nordic countries have influenced the directions of development within Lithuanian libraries. Adopting the best international practices, Lithuanian librarians have begun to thrive.

The legal foundations of providing access to information, and of the institutions providing information and ensuring its preservation in various forms, are set out in the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania. Article 25 guarantees that "the human being must not be hindered from seeking, receiving and imparting information and ideas," and article 42 obliges the state to "support culture and science, and . . . take care of the protection of Lithuanian historical, artistic and cultural monuments and other culturally valuable objects" (Republic of Lithuania, 1992). The right to receive information and the freedom of expression are ensured by the Law on the Provision of Information to the Public (Republic of Lithuania, 1996), which principally covers mass-media activity. Beyond the legal sphere, other public and private institutions are important factors in guaranteeing these rights and ensuring that they are put into practice.

Since 1990, a package of laws have been created to regulate state and private institutions concerned with the preservation of cultural heritage and with creating or delivering information products and services. Several of these laws deal with library and information services—in particular, the Law on Libraries, Law on Documents and Archives, Law on Museums, and Law on the Provision of Information to the Public. Another category of laws regulates certain aspects of information activity and has a direct impact on libraries and other information mediators: the Law on Copyright and Related Rights, Law on the Legal Protection of Personal Data, and Law on the Right to Receive Information from the State and Municipal Institutions. The Law on Information Society Services, Law on Electronic Communications, Law on Electronic Signatures, and some related legal acts apply to libraries as providers of internet services, creators of digital information, and mediators of access to information products.

The Law on Libraries was adopted in 1995 and revised in 2004. It defines and regulates the system of Lithuanian libraries, relations among libraries, rules of establishment, the financing and administration of libraries, the development of library collections, and libraries' structure and principles of service. According to the law, printed matter and any other documents must be accessible to everyone free of charge regardless of their authorship or political and ideological orientation. Each library ensures this accessibility as an institution of culture, education, and information (Republic of Lithuania, 1995).

Libraries in Lithuania consist of several types. According to the criteria for foundation and ownership, we can distinguish between state libraries and nongovernmental libraries. According to their functions and com-

munities served, it is possible to identify the following types: general-purpose libraries (National Library, county and municipal public libraries); special libraries (special governmental libraries, libraries of research and higher educational institutions, school libraries); and libraries of other organizations (including corporate, hospital, and prison) (Republic of Lithuania, 1995).

Five libraries with exceptionally valuable collections have the status of "libraries of national significance." These five are the Lithuanian Library for the Blind; Lithuanian Medical Library; Library of the Academy of Science of Lithuania; Technical Library of Lithuania; and Vilnius University Library. These libraries serve as consultation centers for their networks; they also receive legal-deposit copies of documents in the specific areas of their interest and specialization.

The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania is authorized to regulate state administration of all libraries in the country. The Library Council is an advisory body that helps to formulate the strategy of library development and library policy, define the principles of library financing, and establish the need for library education and research. The council currently consists of eleven members, delegates from both the community of librarians and the Ministry of Culture.

THE MARTYNAS MAŽVYDAS NATIONAL LIBRARY OF LITHUANIA (NLL)

Since May 30, 1989, the NLL has been the principal public and research library of Lithuania per the Law on Libraries. It performs all the functions of a national library, serving as a national archive of all publications and ensuring the preservation of Lithuanian printed heritage and publications related to Lithuania and Lithuanians that are published abroad. It is the center for the production of the national bibliography and press statistics, and the coordinator of consultation and research on library methods. In addition, it serves as an information center for the social sciences and humanities; the center for the allocation of ISBNs, ISMNs, and ISSNs; and the center for the Lithuanian Integrated Library Information System (LIBIS). It became a parliamentary library in 1991. The NLL also participates in international library activities and belongs to eleven international library associations. It has been a member of the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) since 1992 (Bulavas, 2003). It provides a variety of services for different groups of readers; provides access to information for all Lithuanian citizens, and seeks to widen this access through digitization; informs the public about the items in its collections through its online public-access catalog (OPAC); offers access to Lithuanian and foreign databases; and promotes reading and Lithuanian culture and publications. The NLL also serves other Lithuanian libraries; collects and disseminates library statistics and information about libraries in Lithuania; supports a union catalog of Lithuanian li-

braries; creates standards for library and information work; publishes library literature; and organizes courses on professional development.

The priorities of the NLL during 2012–2013 were to create and maintain the infrastructure necessary to perform the activities of the national library; acquire printed materials, databases, and other documents; develop the virtual system of cultural heritage; and ensure the continuation of the Libraries for Innovation project in public libraries (LNB, 2013, p. 3). The performance of these tasks is undertaken by 365 professional librarians.

According to its annual statistical report, in 2013, the NLL had a collection of 6.62 million physical items (down from 6.66 in 2012), 10,700 registered users (down from 12,595 in 2012), 111,900 visitors (down from 122,804 in 2012), and circulated 990,000 documents (down from 1.2 million in 2012) (LNB, 2012, 2013). Some of the main functions and new projects (for example, digitization initiatives and participation in The European Library and Europeana projects) of this library are especially important for information policy, publishing activity, and development of information services in general as well as for the development of other libraries in the country.

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

In 2012, the public library network consisted of five county public libraries (governed by their respective regional administrations); sixty municipal public libraries, with 1,295 branches in towns and villages throughout the country (governed by local authorities); and twenty libraries in museums and other cultural institutions. This is the second largest library network in the country, but it reaches the most people. The overall number of public libraries is gradually decreasing due to the closure of small branches, the integration of school and public libraries, and the reorganization of library networks. There are four public libraries per 10,000 people at present, a density that is similar to those in other Baltic states and higher than in some other European countries.

In 2002, the Lithuanian government adopted a Program of Library Renovation and Modernization for 2003–2013 (Lietuvos Respublikos Vyriausybė [LRV], 2002). This program was developed after carrying out a detailed analysis of library work, which proved that despite an adequate number of qualified staff, libraries could not serve the changing needs of the population. The Program of Modernization mainly obliged central and local governments to create the proper conditions for the work that libraries had to undertake, and to ensure that the necessary material and economic resources for their activities were available. The priorities that needed the greatest attention were the overhaul of library collections and the acquisition of databases, a vast program for building new libraries and the renovation of older library buildings, and an intensive computerization/digitization program for libraries (LRV, 2002). Another element of

this program was the development of professional competence in libraries. The program was financed by both state and local authorities as well as through different specialized programs and foundations. It also places responsibility on librarians and library management for attaining the goals set out in the program.

One of the most significant projects implemented recently within the framework of the Program of Modernization is the Libraries for Innovation initiative developed by the Ministry of Culture, the National Library, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (Bibliotekos pažangai, 2012). The most visible changes are related to library buildings and computerization as well as in the development of librarian competencies. The number of renovated and newly built libraries is growing despite the recent financial crisis; moreover, 1,264 public libraries have up-to-date computers with connections to the internet (LNB, 2012), and both librarians and library visitors can learn how to use them in eleven teaching centers. Promotional campaigns have attempted to change the image of libraries in the minds of the public. According to a 2010 survey, 79 percent of Lithuanians perceived libraries as modern institutions (in comparison with 58 percent in 2008) (LNB, 2012). There has been an upward trend of visitors to libraries in general, including public libraries, although, at the same time, there is a clear trend of diminishing use of library collections.

During 2011–2012, the number of users of libraries in Lithuania was further decreasing. There were 1,398,049 registered users (715,604 in public libraries) in 2011, but only 1,360,492 (693,025 in public libraries) in 2012. In 2012, a diminishing number of visitors was also observed in comparison with the previous year. While there were 26,361,670 visits to libraries (11,396,295 to public libraries) in 2011, in 2012 the number fell to 25,428,375 (11,200,773 in public libraries) (LNB, 2012). The downturns in both users and visits are attributable to the declining population in Lithuania due to emigration and a low birth rate.

The large number of visits to libraries (many more than the number of registered users) can be explained by new services and the role of libraries as the cultural and public center of the community. The number of users may be decreasing because of a variety of factors related to growing use of materials on the internet, competition from other information and entertainment providers, and the introduction of payments for certain public library services (for example, for the unified library card). There is evidence that nonusers do not use libraries because they believe that library collections are poor (23 percent) and that libraries do not provide the information they require (7 percent) (Kirtiklienė & Lapinskienė, 2007).

A 2005 study of libraries as a “third place” (an easily accessible, inexpensive, pleasant, friendly, and relaxing space where one feels welcome and comfortable), involving both users and nonusers, revealed that libraries are often bracketed in people’s minds with schools or universities,

hospitals or clinics. In other words, libraries are viewed as places to visit only because of necessity or obligation; they are not perceived as relaxing spaces for leisure. Some respondents compared a library to a church or cathedral, thus indentifying them as spiritual, sacred venues (Glosienė, Petuchovaitė, & Padaigaitė, 2006). At present, the popularity of public libraries is increasing due to the final stage of Libraries for Innovation, which has attracted and trained new groups of visitors to use the internet (28 percent), strengthened the role of librarians as “consultants,” and raised the profile of libraries and their role as community center. However, the “traditional” role of libraries receives a poorer evaluation; the fields deemed worst were the renewals of stocks of books (32 percent) and periodicals (28 percent) (Libraries for Innovation, 2011, p. 5).

SCHOOL LIBRARIES

The largest network of libraries in 2012, some 1,160, belonged to the Ministry of Education and Science. The category of school libraries includes libraries in basic (primary) and secondary schools, vocational schools, and higher education institutions (LNB, 2012).

The service levels and conditions of the school libraries vary widely throughout the country. Some, such as the Šiauliai Julius Janonis gymnasium library, library of the “Verdenė” (bubbling spring) school in Panevėžys, Ventupis secondary school library in Šiauliai, and A. Brazauskas secondary school library in Kaišiadorys, meet the highest standards of library work and provide attractive study environment for students, while others barely manage to get by with basic access to educational literature. Much depends on the policy of local authorities, school management, and level of support received. The problems these libraries are facing are the same as at the other types of libraries, including the shortage of funding for acquisitions; difficulties with the provision of access to a range of materials, computers, and electronic resources; and inadequate premises and equipment. These problems have been partly addressed by a recent project financed by European structural funds, the Modernization of Secondary School Libraries (2009–2013), which provided equipment, furniture, and computers to 240 participating libraries (Švietimo aprūpinimo centras, 2012).

However, the greatest problem in the school library sphere has been the lack of professional competence and low staffing levels. A study initiated by librarians and undertaken by the Ministry of Education and Science has shown that 25 percent of the libraries do not have adequate staffing, and some have no staff at all (Kryžanauskienė, 2007). The competence level, and especially computer and information literacy, was recognized as the most important issue in school libraries. In 2009, a project directed at the professional competence of school librarians was created by the Educational Development Center and its partners and funded

by the state and European structural funds. This project, called MOBIK (Improving School Librarians' Competence by Using Modern Tools), involves several stages and is directed at organizing professional training for school librarians, the provision of advisory services for them, and implementing advanced methods of library work in school libraries. It includes the implementation of MOBIS (Information System for School Libraries, a part of LIBIS) and training staff members how to use it (LR Finansų ministerija, 2010). In 2013, the first stage of the project was finished, with the following results: a database of secondary school textbooks was created; thirty consultants were trained to educate school librarians; MOBIS was updated for 250 libraries, along with the librarians trained to work with the system; and three training programs for school librarians were completed. The next stage of the project will address the following two goals: the further development of information systems for school libraries; and an increase in the variety of activities performed by school librarians in the educational process, and in the levels of librarians' participation in these activities (Ugdymo plėtotės centras, 2013). The existence of both projects—the Modernization of Secondary School Libraries and MOBIK—demonstrates that the main actors developing educational strategies recognize the value of school libraries and seek to improve their performance and competence. However, these are merely the first modest steps in the right direction.

ACADEMIC AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES

The network of academic libraries includes twenty-eight libraries at universities and higher education institutions. There are also five purely research libraries: the Library of the Academy of Science of Lithuania and libraries of various research institutes. In general, the academic and research libraries (except for the small libraries in research institutes) are mainly valued for their collections. The Library of the Academy of Science and Vilnius University Library have national stature; both have rich collections of international interest and play important roles in the country's system of libraries in general. These two libraries were housed in inadequate historic buildings until a new building for the National Open Access Scholarly Communication and Information Center of the Vilnius University Library opened its doors in February 2013 (fig. 1).

Academic and research libraries are working in many directions to ensure innovative services for their readers. Academic libraries exploit the possibilities provided by European Union programs and other funding agencies as well as EU structural funds and governmental projects. In 1997, academic libraries established the Lithuanian Academic Library Network (Lietuvos akademinų bibliotekų tinklas [LABT]), its main task being to develop a virtual space that combines traditional and e-libraries, e-publishing, and digital information services for the employees of Lith-



Figure 1. National Open Access Scholarly Communication and Information Center of the Vilnius University Library. (Copyright © T. D. Wilson, 2013.)

uanian science and study institutions (LABT, 2011). It maintains and develops the e-LAB information system by integrating project-based products (the electronic thesis database, the publications database, the Lithuanian science and research e-publishing system, and the Lithuanian virtual library), and also creates commonly used services for the automatization of library processes. At present, the network is administered by Vilnius University.

Academic and research libraries have also created the Lithuanian Research Libraries Consortium, which negotiates licences and access to databases with a variety of providers on behalf of its members. At present, all the libraries provide access to the international databases relevant to Lithuanian researchers and students.

Despite the rapid development of the infrastructure, increase of access to computers and the internet provided by universities and libraries, and the development of online services, some problems still persist, including: academic libraries cannot compete with other organizations providing more attractive work environments and salaries to ambitious professionals (especially those working in the information and communications technology, computer, and information systems fields); the funding for acquisitions is inadequate; and the provision of user-centered services is inhibited by various barriers, such as the lack of comprehensive user studies and the shortage of ongoing professional competence (Pupelienė, 2003).

Recent research shows that the innovative roles of academic libraries in publishing scholarly literature, archiving and preserving research data, providing bibliometric and copyright consultancy, partnering in research projects, and even in preserving the country's cultural heritage are, to some extent, limited by the universities' leaders' and policy developers' dominant perceptions of academic libraries as providers of information resources (Petraitytė, 2013).

NETWORKS OF SPECIAL LIBRARIES

Certain types of state libraries belong in the category of special libraries. Among these are libraries with delegated responsibility for special library networks:

- The Technical Library of Lithuania is responsible for technical libraries and has its own branches in the largest cities, Kaunas, Klaipėda, and Panevėžys. It is a library of national significance.
- The Lithuanian Medical Library is responsible for thirty libraries of health institutions and has six branches in clinics and research centers in Vilnius, Panevėžys, and Klaipėda.
- The Lithuanian Agricultural Library handled agricultural-information support for the country.

These major libraries were established during the Soviet period and underwent significant changes after 1990. The Technical Library of Lithuania is one of the biggest in the country (it holds over 45 million items), and its unique collections are of great importance to industry and research. Since 1999, the Center for Patent Information (a depository library of Lithuanian, foreign, and international patent documents) has become one of the most important features of the Technical Library. The Lithuanian Medical Library serves the needs of medical researchers, practitioners, and students and collects medical, biological, psychological, and related literature, some of great historical value. It is a depository library for World Health Organization documentation. The Lithuanian Agricultural Library used to acquire, manage, preserve, and disseminate publications and other documents covering science and technologies of the agricultural sector and related branches of the economy. It contributed to the creation of a unified information system for agriculture and an information system for agricultural science. In addition, it functioned as a national focal point for AGRIS/CARIS—the system of the International Food and Agriculture Organization. In July 2014, the government decided to close this library because its role in the agricultural information system had declined (LR Žemės ūkio ministerija [LRŽŪM], 2014).

Among other special libraries, one can cite the sixteen museum libraries and four libraries of cultural institutions that serve the needs of professional communities within their respective organizations. These libraries

are governed by the Ministry of Culture. The Lithuanian Library for the Blind (LAB) is a special status, general public library catering to the needs of people with visual impairments. The library distributes audio books and publishes books, periodicals, and other materials in Braille. In addition to its central library in Vilnius, LAB has five branch libraries located throughout the country (Kaunas, Klaipėda, Panevėžys, Šiauliai, and Ukmergė).

Although the public served by these libraries is limited, the needs of professionals that they serve and the information services they provide are of great value to their respective socioeconomic spheres. They are regulated and funded by the national ministries but also participate in the common projects and programs of all the country's libraries.

CONCLUSION

Despite the problems of development and the recent international financial crisis, the library sector in Lithuania is undergoing a modernization process. International resources, such as support from developmental foundations and European structural funds, are being used to implement the strategic decisions of governments in this important information and cultural sector.

The results of a 2004 study of the public libraries in Lithuania have confirmed that the greatest achievement of the post-1990 independence period is the putting into practice of a new conception of public library provision that is the equal of best international models and practices (Petuchovaitė, 2004, pp. 15–16). Future development will be determined by the cultural-policy and modernization strategies of central and local governments. The professional library community influences governmental decisions, but its greatest role is seen in the direct development of modern information services, increase of professional competence, and cooperation among libraries on both the international and national levels. There is no lack of creative force in the library community of Lithuania, and recent changes demonstrate that the library sector is among the most dynamic, helping to bring about social cohesion and inclusion, diminish social inequalities, and equalize opportunities to the most disadvantaged social groups. At the same time, it is supporting intellectual work in research and education on all levels, broadening the scope of services in these areas.

One of the most interesting developments in Lithuanian libraries is an attempt to base the strategic planning of library development on findings from targeted research studies. The Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Research and Education has commissioned a study of feasibility on the optimization of the library system. In December 2011, the Lithuanian Academic Libraries' Directors' Association signed a contract with the European Social Fund Agency concerning implementation of the

LiBiTOP project, which investigated potential developments among Lithuania's leading libraries, each one the center of a library network. A team of researchers studied the roles and functions of the leading five libraries of national significance (listed above), as well as the five county libraries. These ten libraries are central nodes in various library networks in Lithuania and perform the functions of leadership, coordination, and consultancy; their strategic development will affect the entire library system. The researchers employed a number of methods for data collection, as well as a "scenario-development" method for the strategic-planning part of the project. The project, which ended in September 2014, conducted a critical appraisal of libraries' performances as well as a feasibility study of strategic directions for library activity. Possible library futures and ten case studies were outlined in initial project reports (LiBiTOP, 2011–14).

On the one hand, this project and others initiated not only by the libraries themselves but also by governmental institutions are a sign of a growing understanding of the importance of libraries in Lithuania's modern information society. But on the other, they have revealed weaknesses and threats that have to be addressed in order for the Lithuanian library sector to realize its full potential.

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