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CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS FOR ARCHIVES IN EUROPE

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Challenges and Solutions for Archives in Europe

Societal factors, judicialisation and above all information technology have influenced the archival field in the latest years. The traditional activities of the National Archives were to be custodian of national records, to provide government with access to archives and to serve as an armoury for historical research. Towards the middle of the 19th century, historians approached archives to use the historical sources in a more systematic way. They were arranged by subject and all went on undisturbed until the principle of provenance was officially introduced.

Archives in general are characterised by continuity. From the 16th century onwards, we are normally able to follow the activities of the central state power. Thanks to comprehensive and continuous information systems of for instance church, taxation authorities and armed forces, we can trace the interaction between state and individuals from early 17th century until our time. This would not have been possible without good paper quality and stable logical systems for the information. With electronic archives, special measures have to be taken. This fact has given substance to a new scientific discipline, archival science, and considerable strength to a new approach to international co-operation.

Europe in the early 1990's

But the professional background is not at all a sufficient explanation for the expanding international archival co-operation in Europe during the last decade of the 20th century. The period 1989-1991 will always be regarded as an important period in European history. Increasing attention was given to a particular European concept both within politics and within the cultural sphere. Under pressure from events in the Persian Gulf, the continuous reform process in Central

and Eastern Europe, the recognition of the Baltic states, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the civil war in former Yugoslavia, important steps were taken towards a new definition of the co-operation within Europe.

The situation promoted ideas on a common foreign and security policy within the European Community. The meeting in Maastricht in December 1991 seemed to pave the way for a European Union with common rules also for economic and monetary politics. Negotiations with the EFTA states went on and agreements were signed with some states of the former Eastern Europe.

The Council of Europe was highly affected by the new situation. The question of further enlargement of the membership of the organisation was given highest priority. For the states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe a high level of democratic maturity was the condition for participation and it was to be the task of the Council of Europe to set the standards.

The aim of this paper is to give a short account of the situation in the European archival community at the beginning of the 1990's, to follow the development towards a European archival programme managed by a regional European body within the framework of the International Council on Archives and to study the professional priorities.

The impact on archives

Since its start, the professional organisation for the world archival community [ICA](#), dedicated to the preservation, development and use of the world's archival heritage had been successful in avoiding politicisation. In Europe, the organisation had been able to stand outside the East-West confrontation. Its profile had been strictly professional. Still the development could not go on without also affecting archival politics, but to which extent and how was difficult to predict. One question raised by many was how to define "Europe". For some Europe was the Europe of the then twelve members of the European Community. For some it was the geographical Europe, reaching from the British Isles to the Urals. For some it was equal to UNESCO Europe, including USA, Canada and Israel. Finally few meant by Europe the developed countries of the world, normally called the "North".

It is evident that those who discussed professional questions within a narrower European concept defined specific European problems as those which were related to countries belonging to the European Community. It was no contradiction, however, to the idea that there was also in the field of archives a European identity and a need to pursue aims defined within the cultural and political tradition of Western Europe.

The political events placed archivists from several countries in a new situation related to the need of adapting professional attitudes to what is required in a democratic, non-totalitarian society. In 1992, the Section of Professional Archival Associations (ICA/SPA) raised the question of a code of ethics. This was prepared after wide consultation, adopted by the international archival community and later on published in a great number of languages. Following a request from a Central European country, the section also initiated the question of guidelines on the formation of a professional archival association and it was decided to start work on a model constitution for

such associations.

The effort to create a forum for European Archival Co-operation

An informal group of 12 national archivists within the European Community met in 1989. The group undertook to prepare a proposal to the Council of Ministers of Culture to invite the European Commission to set up a group of experts with the task of examining to what extent a greater harmonisation of archives policy within the Community was desirable. The aim was to find out the forms of a European archive policy. Early priority was given to questions concerning access to archives; conservation and restoration; use of modern technology in records and archives management; compatibility between automated systems. It was foreseen that the growing European integration would lead to a transfer of decision making from national to intergovernmental institutions, a basic change within national records creation; particularly interesting, as one of the most important tasks for the National Archives is to support government administration.

The EC Council of Ministers endorsed the proposal in November 1991. As an outcome of this the report *"Archives in the European Union"*, called the "Black Book", was published in 1994. As was pointed out in the foreword, the work had started between two important events: the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989 and the entry into force of the Treaty on European Union in November 1993.

Similarly, contacts were taken between representatives for National Archives of states not belonging to the Community, particularly Sweden and Switzerland. The aim was the same as had been stressed by the archivists within the European Community, to promote archival co-operation, but also to widen the work to include European states in general. At the same time there was a growing awareness of the problems concerning archives in states which had been affected by the political changes in Eastern Europe since 1989.

It was found that the material needs were great, but above all that the new democracies had to be supported by a legal framework, where archives had a role. There was particularly a need for guidelines for access to records, declassification and records management. It was decided to set up a working group with the aim of organising transfer of know-how and discussing matters related to archives in countries of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. It was agreed to approach the Council of Europe to find out the possibilities of building up an archival program for this part of Europe.

These needs were well known after the close contacts between ICA and the National Archives of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. For the last couple of years special meetings of Central and East European Archives had been organised, first in Prague, then in Budapest. The priorities were confirmed at the third meeting of Central and East European Archives in Krakow in November 1992. Particular attention was given to questions concerning the position of National Archives in the new democratic constitutional system; the construction of a new legal framework, and the question if such a system could be based upon existing rules or must be renewed; the need to establish training courses; the approach to private archives such as the political party archives; the procedures in cases of privatisation and finally the current question

concerning transfer of archives between independent states.

Thus the co-ordination of European affairs followed two lines in the early 1990's: the increasing professional archival co-operation particularly within the West European states and the efforts to promote co-operation between West European states and the states of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Aims of Co-operation

The Co-ordinating Board for European activities was established in 1992. Among the topics which were discussed were the role of the Board in promoting professional training, a new volume on archives legislation, the question of an automated European database on archival legislation, a code of ethics and the problems concerning transfer of archives.

As can be seen from the account given above, there was at this time a growing interest in professional co-operation in Europe but also somewhat different views on topics and priorities. The report of the EU expert group identified different themes for co-ordination and co-operation: records management: appraisal and disposal; the material preservation of archives; the practical conditions of access to archives; national legislation and access to archives; the management and storage of computerised archives; the exchange of archival information and computer networks between the Member States; the training of archivists and recognition of diplomas; private archives. The "Black Book" not only listed these themes but also recommended some actions to be undertaken. They were mentioned in order of priority:

- movement of cultural goods - administrative co-operation in the archival field;

- physical and material conservation of archives;

- records management: appraisal and disposal;

- access to archives;

- training and mutual recognition of diplomas;

- private archives and initiatives by associations and research centres.

At a meeting in June 1994 the Council of Ministers of the European Union expressed an interest in the report and took note particularly of following actions, which should be carried out in co-operation with "non-governmental organisations such as the International Council on Archives":

1. Organisation of a multidisciplinary forum to be held on problems of the management, storage, conservation and retrieval of machine-readable data.
2. Exchange of students and archivists in the field of education and training.
3. Preparation of a practical guide to procedures in the Member States and in the institutions for user-access to their archives.
4. Preparation of a publication intended to disseminate research findings concerning the preservation and restoration of archive documents and material.
5. Publication of information about the content of archives.

The task of the co-operating non-EU members was basically to promote archival co-operation, but also to widen the effort to include all European states. A thorough discussion led to a first effort to find a matching programme between Western and the former Eastern Europe. The Council of Europe was identified as an important partner in the development for an archival programme directed at the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

A first formal approach to the Council of Europe was made in 1992, when the ICA drew attention to the problems arising from the transformation from a totalitarian system towards democracy. The need for a legislative work concerning freedom of information and access to archives was stressed. The ICA declared its willingness to offer professional support to overcome the consequences of the transformation, to establish a modern legal system in Central and Eastern Europe and also to facilitate solutions to problems connected with changes in sovereignty.

The first confirmation of a growing partnership with the Council of Europe was an archival project worked out in 1993 under the title *"Proposals for the preservation, modernisation and improvement of archives"*. Already in the first lines of the memorandum the relation between the new initiative and the political development was indicated:

"The end of the political division of Europe in 1989-1990 has given rise to a lot of cultural problems, which the Council of Europe has to face in order to fulfil its mission in the new

circumstances. Because of the firm liaison between the restoration of rights and democratisation of institutions on one hand and the vital interest of all European nations to preserve its memory on the other, the archival field has come to be included in the responsibilities of the Council of Europe".

Co-operation with the Council of Europe

A base for co-operation with the Council of Europe has been the Access programme. An expert consultative meeting in Strasbourg in 1997 produced an outline of a European policy on access, a Draft Recommendation on **Access to Archives**. Reports on the programme have been given at various conferences. It was strongly supported at the Edinburgh CITRA in 1997, at conferences organised in Warsaw and Moscow the same year and by the European Summit on Archives in Bern in 1998.

The present situation is that the Council of Europe has not yet adopted the Draft Recommendation, but that the result will most likely be two different recommendations. One has been worked out by the Cultural Committee and is a modified version of the original Draft Recommendation. It will be limited to archives transferred to archival institutions. The other has been drawn up by the Working Group on Access to Official Information, part of the Committee on Human Rights, and will be applicable to information or - from an archival point of view - current records. The two recommendations are complementary and will together form the final recommendation on access to archives.

The co-operation with the Council of Europe also includes a number of ongoing or planned follow-on projects from the draft recommendation on access to archives, e.g.:

- The **Comintern Project**, which is a co-operation between Russia, the ICA and particular states, aiming at scanning inventories of the archives of the CPSU.
- "**Reconstitution of the memory of Poland**", a project aiming at a survey of the sources to Poland's history 1772-1945 that are preserved in other countries.
- A CIS project worked out by Russia and other CIS states aiming at a system of databases for state archive funds.
- Conferences held in Warsaw, Moscow, Bucharest, Sofia and Dubrovnik 1997-1999 with the purpose of examining the particular situation concerning archival heritage in Eastern and Central Europe, co-operation between archivists and historians in the information era, the various political cultures and administrative traditions in Europe. The conference in Dubrovnik led to the "*Dubrovnik declaration*" concerning co-operation between archives in the former

Yugoslavia and the establishment of archival legislation in the region based on the Council of Europe recommendations.

Co-operation with the European Union

Contacts with the European Union have included programmes such as the [DLM-Forum](#) and other conferences concerning electronic records or co-operation between archives, libraries and museums. The DLM-Forum, abbreviation for 'données lisibles par machine' or 'machine readable records', is an effort to create a multidisciplinary forum in the framework of the Community in the problems of management, storage, conservation and retrieval of machine-readable data. The starting point was the already mentioned report of the EU expert group on archives. Public administrators, National Archives as well as representatives from industry and research were invited. The forum has organised a number of conferences and has published best practices, reports and studies.

One aim for the near future is the development of a reference model for managing electronic documents and records in public administration. It takes account of the life cycle of the document, current records as well as historical documents, and benefits from several ongoing activities in EU member states. Another aim is better contacts with the ICT industry. It is supposed that the establishment of best practices in the management of electronic information in public administration will encourage the ICT industry to exploit the field of electronic documents, records management and digital archiving as a new and viable market. A third aim is the realisation of a European training programme for administrators and archivists on electronic document and records management. This programme, the so-called **E-TERM**, draws on the experience of different archive schools and other specialist bodies in Europe.

Important details in the management of electronic records are matters relating to authenticity, standardisation, legal problems concerning definitions of fundamental terms like "public document", introduction of digital signatures, questions concerning information loss in connection with constant conversion of data carriers or migration of data to new generation software or storage formats.

Funding is also one of the major questions for electronic document projects. One of the aims of the DLM-Forum is therefore to improve the distribution and application of information on funding. A number of projects have already been financed by EU programmes such as **INFO2000, IDA2, LEONARDO and ISPO**. One of the successful projects sponsored by the EU is the **EUAN project**, linking Scotland, Italy, Sweden and The Netherlands in an effort to develop standards for the exchange of information.

The Implementation of the 1995 Directive on data protection and all its implications concerning privacy versus access, the EU Green Paper on Public Sector Information in the information society, the Paper on Access to Official Information, and the complicated rules concerning copyright have been discussed thoroughly. They are also well known amongst our colleagues in the library world. Some efforts have been made to reach a common approach based on individual national interests.

The European Union Green Paper on Public Sector Information

In 1996 a process started within the European Union leading to the publication of the so-called Green Paper on Public Sector Information in the Information Society. The aim was to show how information within government departments and other public bodies could be used to provide benefit for citizens and business in Europe. It was felt necessary to standardise or facilitate access to information held by Governments not only to increase the freedom of information per se, but also to increase the competitiveness of European business in relation to, above all, the USA.

The Green Paper does not use the term *access* in a political or ideological context. It is concerned with access to information from an operational point of view⁽¹⁾. The paper pays attention to the copyright issue, but only from the point of view of economic interest. It mentions two reasons for the public sector to protect its information: it may be a source of income, and the public sector bodies may wish to maintain the integrity of content⁽²⁾.

The Green Paper also discusses the issue of privacy. The reference is the 1995 Directive on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data. Like the Directive, the Green Paper tries to achieve a balance between integrity and access but in a way which raises difficulties for those who regard preservation of information from public bodies as a fundamental tool for democracy, or as an issue which archives for example, can handle in a professional way within a legislative framework with reasonable limitations to immediate access⁽³⁾.

The UNESCO Information Society Programme

UNESCO is a traditional partner for the archives, even if the impact of the organisation on European affairs is not decisive. Article 1 of the UNESCO constitution assigns to the organisation the task of promoting free flow of ideas by word and image. Programme IV, where activities concerning archives and libraries are found, gives priority to freedom of expression, to communication and information tools to support dialogue between citizens and public authorities, "thereby", according to the programme text, "enhancing democratic government"⁽⁴⁾.

For the last six months, efforts have been going on to merge the two information programmes of UNESCO, the General Information Programme (PGI) and the Intergovernmental Informatics Programme (IIP). Both cover libraries and archives. The new UNESCO "Information for All" Programme, drafted last April, will be circulated amongst member states during the coming months and submitted to the Executive Board in October 2000.

The starting point is Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "*Everyone has the right of opinion and expression, this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers*". Against this background, however, the draft programme gives too much attention to cyber space and modern information technology and shows too little interest in preservation of information, quality of data and access to traditionally stored paper-based information, which still dominates libraries and archives all around the world⁽⁵⁾. But the programme will still be an

important framework for the co-operation between UNESCO and the archival community.

Other programmes

The second European Summit on Archives was organised in Berne in 1998. The theme was "*Common European Archival Heritage*", focussing on the problem of obtaining access to cross-border archives. The Summit also considered the draft recommendation on a European policy on access to archives. Plans for an [European Archival Network](#) (EAN) were presented.

In order to enhance a European approach to archival matters and to introduce an alternative in the debate concerning claims on archives - a question of great political importance since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the revelations concerning the Russian Special Archives with masses of documents taken during the Second World War and the several crisis in the Balkans, particular attention has been given to the term Common Archival Heritage. Discussions during 1997-99 have aimed at having ongoing European archival projects put in a wider context, as well as creating new projects within it. An overall concept, "*Common European Archival Heritage*", is being formed by a number of sub-projects concerning archives which are related to more than one state.

One of the board's central objectives has been the establishment of "*standards for a democratic minimum*", i.e. to determine areas where archival standards are lacking and to clarify the position of archive services within public administrations. The Council of Europe recommendation is an important part of this concept. An inquiry into the status of archive services in Europe has been carried out, and reports have been discussed by the Board and during conferences in 1998 and 1999.

A special European summit was organised in Reykjavik in 1999 in order to examine the need for changing the structure for archival co-operation in Europe. Attention was also given to the organisation of the ICA as a whole. One result will be the change of ICA/EUR into one or several regular regional branches in Europe. The alternatives have been one branch for the entire region - Europe in the UNESCO sense from Vancouver to Vladivostok - or separate branches for geographical Europe, North America and the CIS area. Now the European colleagues in general and with some exceptions welcome a European branch restricted to geographical Europe and focussing on three main areas: the European Union, East-West co-operation and South-East Europe or the Balkans. There is also a positive view on the creation of a separate branch for the CIS area on condition that the strong links with the European branch could be upheld. The proposed change can be seen as another logical step in the development of archival co-operation in Europe from 1992 onwards.

Footnotes

1. European Commission Green Paper on Public Sector Information in the Information Society,

COM/1998/585 on "Public Sector Information: A Key resource for Europe"

2. Green Paper **III.6**

3. Green Paper **III.7**

4. UNESCO Draft Programme and Budget 2000-2001, **30 C/5, Paris 1999, p 145**

5. UNESCO's draft "*Information for All*" Programme, published on **19 April 2000**