

# IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



## Lithuania

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### Historical, political and economical context

Lithuania is one of the three independent Baltic States and belongs to the region, which is today referred to as Central and Eastern Europe. It has ancient and dramatic history that was often determined by its geographical situation – on the crossroads between the East and the West. Total population (September 1999): 3,699,500 (similar to Ireland); 2.5million urban residents and 1.2million rural. Ethnic Composition: 81.3% Lithuanians, 8.4% Russians, 7% Poles, 1.5% Belarussians, 1% Ukrainians, 0.1% Latvians, 0.7% others.

<b>Population:</b>	3,728,000 (1996)
<b>GNP per capita:</b>	\$ 2,280 (1996)
<b>Government / Constitution:</b>	Republic
<b>Main languages:</b>	Lithuanian, Russian, Polish
<b>Main religions:</b>	Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox, Lutheran
<b>Literacy:</b>	99% (1995)
<b>Online:</b>	6,2% (August 2000)

In 1990, after half a century of occupation and international isolation, Lithuania regained its independence. Since then, Lithuania has embarked on radical social, political, economical reforms. Transition on such a scale, although it eventually leads to market economy and democracy, has brought drastic changes to the live of all citizens and to performance of all institutions. In a short time, Lithuania has introduced the main prerequisites of a democratic society, such as multi-party system, free elections, freedom media and freedom of expression. Emergence of independent mass media has considerably widened people's choice of, and access to information.

Alongside with the remarkable positive features of democratic and independent state development, difficult economic situation, imperfect laws, and permanent shortage of funds mark the years of independence.

Free market and commercialization is one of ongoing processes and in positive terms commercialism is seen as a symbol of freedom of expression but one should be very careful about such judgement because commercialization can also bring vulgarisation and destruction of traditional national qualities.

### Media and publishing market

Independent media is one of the core prerequisites of the open society. After independence in Lithuania majority of media enterprises were privatized. Also new, independent structure of printing and distribution were created. If in Soviet times there were 4 state-owned publishing houses, today there are over 600 big and small, private and corporate publishers. In 1998 in Lithuania there were

- 415 newspapers
- 290 magazines
- 4 109 titles of books published
- 173 Radio and TV stations

Majority of periodicals, radio and TV stations are local. Electronic media landscape in Lithuania is

dominated by several Radio and TV stations broadcasting nationwide. Lithuanian Radio and Television Company is a national broadcaster, financed from the state budget. The private commercial TV stations operate three out of a four national TV networks.

National minorities have full range of freedom of expression in Lithuania. There are 35 periodicals in Russian, 9 in Polish and more than 25 in other languages: Yiddish, German, Latvian, Belarussia, etc. Non-Lithuanian periodicals are both state subsidised and privately owned. Polish speaking population has possibility for listening up to 24 hours per day to commercial radio station Znad Wilii. Lithuanian TV and Radio offers daily and weekly TV and Radio programs in Russian, Polish etc. There are two news agencies - ELTA and Baltic News Service (BNS) operating in the country. The biggest daily Lietuvos Rytas has a circulation from approximately 70.000 on weekdays to 100.000 on weekends. The second biggest newspaper is Respublika with a circulation of about 60.000.

### **Libraries: some historical details**

Idea of a public library came to Lithuania in the beginning of the 20th century and was implemented in the period between two world wars. The development of public libraries was interrupted in 1940 when Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

*Libraries in Soviet period.* During the Soviet period in Lithuania, as in other former republics of the USSR and Central and Eastern European countries, one of the principal human rights – the right to free expression and access to information – underwent drastic restrictions. One had access only to information considered as harmless to structures of totalitarian authorities. It deeply affected the very essence of the library. The main libraries had to establish secret special storage departments of "harmful" literature. Library users had access to these collections only by obtaining applications from institutions they were employed "for the purpose of science and work". In 1987 these collections numbered as follows: Lithuanian Academy of Science Library - 206,926 vol., Vilnius University Library - 89,028 vol., the National Library - 46,304 vol., Kaunas Public Library - 22,530 vol. Political censorship has deformed the theoretical basis of the librarianship. The library had to serve as a division of Communist party propaganda.

*The period of restored independence.* In late 1980s the transferring of "imprisoned" books and periodicals from collections of special storage to those accessible to general public began. This process was concluded in 1988 with the complete abolition of "Special Collections" in libraries. The act of March 11, 1990, proclaiming the restoration of the independence of the Republic of Lithuania followed by international recognition of the state had cardinal impact on Lithuanian libraries. Alongside with the remarkable positive features of democratic and independent state development, the years of independence are marked by difficult economic situation, imperfect laws, permanent shortage of funds and incapability of some librarians to get involved in going reforms.

In the beginning of the last decade, the acquisition policy in libraries was often biased and selecting publications libraries often run to extremes. Works by Soviet period authors were relinquished and discarded mercilessly. Publications of the inter-war period as well as by participants of resistance, emigrants and books on religion were acquired without any selection. The reorganisation of former mass libraries into public libraries can not be considered as simply an organisational task.

When the Law on the fundamentals of local government was passed in 1990, libraries found themselves under subordination and care of local authorities, sometimes incompetent and hostile towards cultural establishments. During 1991-95 a total of 200 local public libraries were closed. Over 200 public libraries were merged with school libraries. Financial difficulties also complicated and still complicate library acquisitions.

*Library system.* Today, library system in Lithuania consist of different types of libraries belonging to

different Ministries and other bodies. In the end of 1998 there were 3 944 libraries:

- Martynas Mazvydas National Library of Lithuania
- Lithuanian Library for the Blind
- Lithuanian Technical Library and 42 technical libraries
- Lithuanian Library of Medicine and 71 medical libraries
- Lithuanian Academy of Sciences Library
- 5 Regional Public Libraries (+ 5 to be established in 2000)
- 56 municipal public libraries with 1459 branches
- 2 318 school libraries
- 15 academic libraries
- 17 museum libraries
- other libraries.

Total staff number – 6.5 thousand. Total collection – over 100 million documents; in 1998 there were 19 379 169 visitors and 1 598 742 registered readers, i. e. 43.2% of the population.

Questions of intellectual freedom, democracy, free expression of ideas are still quite new, they are included into professional agenda recently and discussed with great interest.

## **Legal issues**

*The Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania* sets the main legal framework for the state and society. It also provides the necessary prerequisites for freedom of thoughts, information and expression, confidentiality. The Constitution states the privacy of individual (Article 22), the right to views and opinions and the right to expression (Article 25); the rights to foster national cultures, languages and customs (article 37); authors' rights (article 42); abolition and prohibition of censorship (article 44).

*The Law on Libraries* (full text in [Annex 1](#)) was introduced in 1995. It sets the system of Lithuanian libraries, defines Lithuanian library holdings and their preservation, and determines relations between libraries, financing state regulating of libraries. The purpose of the law is to ensure the right of the society to information and legal regulation of the Lithuanian library activities.

*Law on Copyright and Related Rights* was introduced in 1999 and still has to be implemented. Lithuanian librarians took part in CECUP project – European Commission Central European Copyright User Platform.

In 1998, Lithuanian Librarians' Association (see more at <http://www-public.osf.lt/~lbd/leid/angl/eindex.htm>) adopted [Ethical Code of Librarians](#).

## **Where does Lithuania go from here?**

For almost 10 years now Lithuania is moving from ideologically indoctrinated towards democratic libraries, from the philosophy of safely state-funded towards the new paradigms of pro-active and fighting library, from closed and inward oriented library towards the open, user-oriented and customer-friendly information, recreation, education and cultural centers.

Today there is no censorship or violations of intellectual freedom in Lithuania but there is a big economical crisis. Libraries are ready to act as gateways to knowledge and ideas and librarians become more and more aware of vital significance of intellectual freedom issues in their professional activities but they face big economical difficulties. Libraries are severely under-financed. They can buy only few new books or periodicals (in 1999 the situation was one of the worst: rural libraries did not buy a SINGLE copy of any new books since August!), the readers are deprived of their free choice. Libraries lack computers, Internet connection is provided only in the biggest libraries and several public libraries in the regions. The economical crisis in the country is the most severe censor. Lithuanian Library Association (LLA) is lobbying for libraries and tries to change the situation. For the first time in the recent decade, LLA is calling the professional community for *A week without culture and information* – libraries will not lend books, will not open reading halls, will not deliver information for the users during the first week of the new millennium. This is a drastic means to address the politicians to re-consider the political priorities and to ensure the basic human right – the right to information and freedom of expression.