

COBISS.Net Project: Phase 2

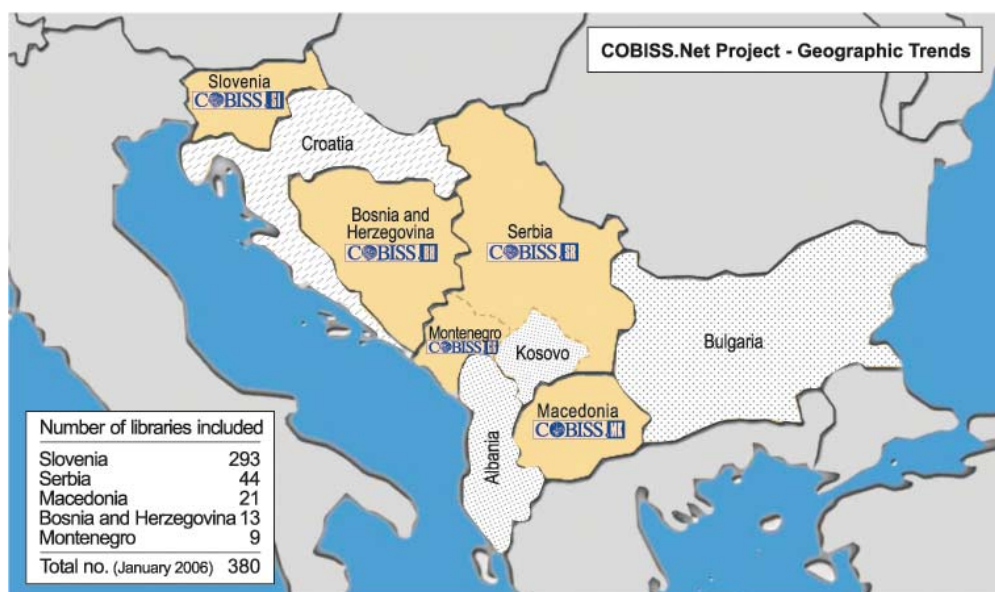
Support to Knowledge and Intercultural Dialogue

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Introduction

The library information systems and research information systems constitute an essential infrastructure of the knowledge-based information society and are indispensable in advanced education and research as well as in cultural, technological and economical development.

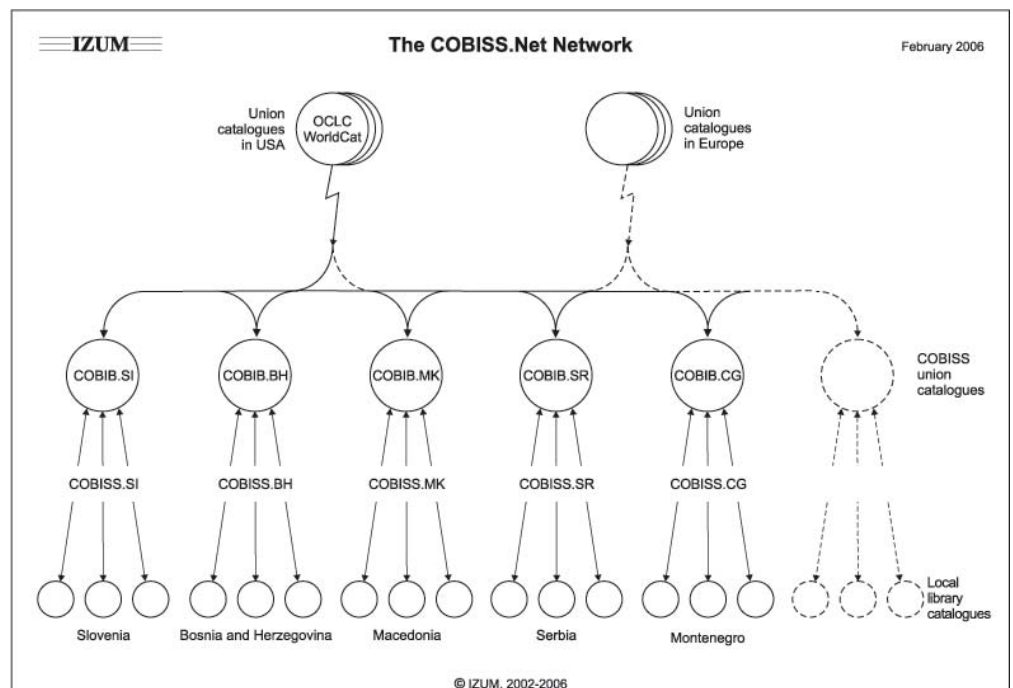
It becomes increasingly more difficult to divide libraries into those that meet the needs of scientists by providing them with information sources and services, those that meet the needs of the educational community and those that meet the needs of the culture sphere. Nowadays, library users expect information on library materials and other resources they need both for their work and entertainment to be accessible via the Internet (as more and more materials have been digitised), and not by visiting one or more libraries. The need to search various catalogues and databases may be efficiently fulfilled with an integrated library information system including all types of libraries. COBISS is a reference model of such a system with multifunctional databases.



It is no doubt that developing a national co-operative bibliographic system with shared cataloguing is the optimum goal of each country, but only few have succeeded in establishing a national library information system. In most cases, the establishment of such system is made impossible not only due to the uncoordinated automation of individual libraries using different library software, but also due to the fact that libraries belong to different ministries that fail to collaborate in the library development planning stage. Slovenia has effectively resolved most of such problems and is prepared to share the experience with other countries.

Another part of the information strategies adopted by the majority of countries is the development of national research information systems (CRIS – Current Research Information Systems). The accessibility and transparency of research results are namely essential prerequisites not only to transfer knowledge into practice but also to promote innovations. And it is indisputable that the most efficient way of managing researchers' bibliographies may be established only within co-operative library information systems. The integration of both systems is essential for the evaluation of research results.

In 1987, a shared cataloguing system was adopted by the then Association of the Yugoslav National Libraries as a common ground for the library information system and the system of scientific and technological information of Yugoslavia. The role of the information and bibliographic service, as well as that of the organisational solutions and software developer was taken over by the Institute of Information Science (IZUM) from Maribor, Slovenia.



In 2003, an agreement on the establishment of the COBISS.Net network and the free exchange of bibliographic records, created in autonomous library information systems of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Slovenia, and Serbia and Montenegro was signed. COBISS.Net (www.cobiss.net) constitutes a framework to achieve synergy effects resulting from the interconnection of national library information systems. Under the aforementioned agreement, 25,000 records were exchanged between systems free of charge already in the first year (2005), representing a powerful cost and time saving tool in library material cataloguing.

COBISS.Net effectively supports a multicultural dialogue in the region, as evident by the positive experience gained in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Project Goals

- To enhance the automation and inclusion of libraries of already participating countries in the national library information systems and in the COBISS.Net network; to provide access as quickly as possible to information on the holdings of libraries in the region.
- To attract the interest of libraries in the Republic of Albania, in the Republic of Bulgaria, in the Republic of Croatia and in Kosovo to take the opportunity to evolve more rapidly by becoming part of the COBISS.Net network.
- To harmonise cataloguing rules with international recommendations and standards.
- To set up compatible research information systems (databases on researchers, research organisations and research projects) in the participating countries in order to ensure wider access to information on research potentials and research results.
- To get competent ministries and universities of the participating countries interested in accepting, also at the level of national research policies, the concept of how to manage researchers' bibliographies within the national library information systems, thereby guarantying the transparency of research results.
- To increase the use of research results in order to stimulate innovation processes and economic and social development in the region.

Long-Term Benefits for the Region

Regardless of the institution, the activation of the regional development potential is always closely related to the development of human potentials and the cohabitation in multilingual and multicultural environments. UNESCO's regional orientation towards the so-called South Eastern European countries, the EU Framework Research Programmes (the Western Balkan countries being the target group), the Central European Initiative (CEI) and other are some of the institutional initiatives which explicitly foster knowledge and science and which have become transparent developmental factors by using COBISS.Net.

From the EU perspective, the inclusion into the COBISS.Net network may improve the homogeneity and the harmonisation of the bibliographic systems regardless of the status of the countries in the target (geographical) region in terms of EU membership or accession process. This kind of harmonisation undoubtedly provides a long-term benefit in that the mutual exchange and transparency mechanisms consolidate the geo-political space in the field of knowledge, science and culture.

Development of COBISS System and E-CRIS Application

In 1991, IZUM promoted the COBISS system (Co-operative Online Bibliographic System and Services) as an upgrade of the shared cataloguing system. After the break-up of Yugoslavia, 55 libraries from all former republics participated in the system. At that time, libraries located outside Slovenia withdrew from the shared cataloguing system. Later, however, almost all of them gradually renewed the collaboration with IZUM and are at present setting up their own autonomous library information systems based on the COBISS platform.

COBISS represents an organisational model of joining libraries into a uniform library information system with shared cataloguing, the COBIB shared bibliographic database, i.e. union catalogue, the local bibliographic databases of the participating libraries and a number of other functions of the so-called virtual library. Functioning of the system is preconditioned by:

- Standardised and shared processing of library materials and a uniform management of catalogues;
- Suitably skilled cataloguers;
- Linking of libraries via computer and communication networks.

COBISS2 and COBISS3 represent two generations of COBISS software designed for library automation and access to different databases on the Internet. The software, developed and maintained by IZUM, supports different functions of libraries and library information services, and provides user interfaces in several languages (Slovenian, Serbian, Bosnian, Macedonian and English).

COBISS.SI, COBISS.BH, COBISS.MK, COBISS.SR and COBISS.CG are designations for autonomous library information systems with their own shared bibliographic databases (COBIB.SI, COBIB.BH, COBIB.MK, COBIB.SR, COBIB.CG), currently being set up in individual countries (Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro). Within the aforementioned systems, over 380 libraries use COBISS software for the automation of their functions. The national library information systems are co-created by the library information services and the libraries participating in the shared cataloguing system.

Utilising experience gained while developing the Slovenian Research Information System (SICRIS), IZUM developed in 2005 a universal internet application E-CRIS in order to set up a research information system containing databases on researchers, research organisations and research projects. The data structure is brought in line with the CERIF (Common European Research Information Format) recommendations.

COBISS.Net is the name of a network that connects autonomous (national) COBISS co-operative bibliographic systems of different countries. From a technical perspective, COBISS software enables users to download records from any of the COBIB shared bibliographic databases and from the OCLC catalogue (WorldCat); in the future, it is planned to enable records to be downloaded also from a few other union catalogues in Europe.

What Can IZUM Offer to Libraries Within COBISS.Net?

IZUM is a non-profit organisation, a public institution, which has never pursued commercial interests, not even outside Slovenia. For almost two decades, IZUM has been present in a wider region with its professional and innovative initiatives, and over this period it has won every confidence. Within the COBISS.Net network, IZUM can provide libraries with:

- Proven organisational solutions and COBISS software support for the automation of library functions realisable under the conditions of national autonomous library information systems with shared cataloguing within the COBISS.Net network;
- Proven methodology and software to manage researchers' bibliographies within the COBISS system, and the application for setting up the national research information system (E-CRIS);
- A variety of training programmes for librarians and IT professionals and offering a possibility to obtain a teaching qualification to hold training courses for COBISS users within the national library information services;
- Annual international COBISS conferences which have become a recognised form of sharing problem-solving experience in library automation and co-operation in the region.

There is no direct collaboration between IZUM and libraries outside Slovenia but through the national library information services of the participating countries.

National Library Information Services and Their Role

As a rule, the national library information services operate within the national libraries of the participating countries. They perform the following tasks for libraries:

- Planning and co-ordinating activities related to computer linking of libraries;
- Providing and maintaining common computer and communications capacity for the operation of the system and central services;
- Providing COBISS software and manuals for shared cataloguing, local library functions and other services;
- Managing the COBIB shared bibliographic database;
- Providing professional assistance to libraries with the acquisition, installation and maintenance of computer equipment;
- Organising training and professional help to libraries and other users of COBISS software and services;
- Helping libraries with the conversion and downloading of data from other systems;
- Establishing suitability of library staff qualification for the shared cataloguing purposes;
- Organising access to foreign information services and databases under consortia agreements, if related to the COBISS functions.

Any library wishing to be included in the national library information system has to sign a Full Membership Agreement with the library information service.

Outcomes of COBISS.Net Project: Phase 1

COBISS is operational in the majority of the Western Balkan countries, developing their national library information systems within the COBISS.Net network.

Slovenia

The COBISS system and services have given Slovenia a big advantage over other countries in the region in terms of automation and linking of libraries into the national library information system. As a result, Slovenia has become one of the most developed countries of Europe in this area (<http://www.sibis-eu.org>).

Concurrently, Slovenia has also set up the Slovenian research information system (SICRIS – <http://sicris.izum.si>) which includes databases on researchers, research organisations, research groups, research programmes and projects and provides direct access to researchers' bibliographies in the COBISS.SI system.

In the COBISS.SI system, the tasks of the national library information service are performed by IZUM, the operation of which is almost entirely financed by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Based on the project called Computerised Interconnection of Libraries in BiH via the Internet, an agreement on establishing a public institution – COBISS Centre – was signed in 1998 by IZUM and five universities in BiH (to perform the tasks of the library information service within the COBISS. BH system); furthermore, an agreement on establishing the BIHARNET Centre (to be in charge of the development and management of the BIHARNET academic and research network) was signed by the universities. These were the first two institutions ever established by both administrative entities after the war. In the years to follow, considerable funds for the project were provided by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia.

By setting up the BIHARNET network with ten nodes in larger cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and with a connection to the European research network TEN-34 via Slovenia, free access to the Internet was made available to universities and libraries. The libraries that joined the COBISS. BH system were provided with the necessary equipment and over 300 librarians and IT professionals were included in various forms of training. At the beginning of 2001 after the Slovenian Donation Programme for Bosnia and Herzegovina was ceased, the BIHARNET network stopped operating, as the competent ministries could not reach an agreement on covering the costs. Most of the libraries were forced to shift to local commercial internet service providers (ISPs), some obtained access to the Internet also through the individual links of universities to the academic networks of other countries (Austria, Croatia).

In June 2001, an agreement on ensuring the conditions to interconnect academic and research networks as well as library information systems of Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was signed in Ljubljana by the competent ministries of the BiH Federation, the Republic of Srpska and the Republic of Slovenia. Again, the ministries of BiH failed to meet the assumed responsibilities. At that time, wrong management decisions of the BIHARNET Centre led to a disintegration of the BIHARNET network; today the Centre exists only on paper.

In September 2004, both the COBISS Centre and the COBISS.BH system ceased to operate because no systematic funding for its operation was made available by the competent ministries. With the financial support of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Sarajevo Canton, a division ViBBiH Centre (Virtual Library of BiH Centre) was established in March 2005 within the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina which took over the equipment and the tasks of the COBISS Centre.

After the umbrella agreement on the implementation of the COBISS system in Bosnia and Herzegovina had been signed, the COBISS.BH system was reactivated in the beginning of April 2005.

In February 2006, an agreement on building the Register of research institutions, researchers, research projects, and infrastructural investments was signed between the Federal Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Education and Science of Sarajevo Canton and the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Macedonia

The COBISS.MK shared cataloguing system was set up in 2001; in 2004 an umbrella agreement on the implementation of the COBISS system in Macedonia was concluded between IZUM and the National and University Library in Skopje. On this basis, the aforementioned library established a division VBM Centre (Virtual Library of Macedonia Centre) performing the tasks of the national library information service within the COBISS.MK system.

Over the past few years, the COBISS system supporters in Macedonia have experienced problems with the lead partners of the (failed) Scientific and Technical Information System of Macedonia projects on which they had been working for several years. Even in the last phase, they tried to introduce their own library software in Macedonia.

In the last two years, the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Macedonia has provided considerable support to ensure the equipment in public libraries in all larger cities of Macedonia. At the end of 2005, the Ministry of Education and Science announced that the preparation of researchers' bibliographies within the COBISS.MK system was mandatory. The E-CRIS.MK application to set up the register of researchers, research organisations and research projects is currently in the process of being translated.

Serbia

The efforts of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Development of Serbia for many years to introduce computer applications for a uniform shared cataloguing system in Serbia have not given the expected results. In 2001, the Virtual Library of Serbia project was developed with the financial support also provided by the Open Society Fund. At that time, the National Library of Serbia, the Library of Matica Srpska and the University Library of 'Svetozar Marković' started using the same versions of COBISS software.

The COBISS.SR shared cataloguing system was set up in 2003 after the signature of an umbrella agreement on the COBISS system implementation in Serbia by IZUM and the National Library of Serbia. The e-catalogue of the Library of Matica Srpska was integrated with the e-catalogues of the National Library of Serbia, the University Library of 'Svetozar Marković', and the Yugoslav Bibliographic-Information Institute.

A division VBS Centre (Virtual Library of Serbia Centre) was established at the National Library of Serbia and it successfully performs the tasks of the national library information service within the COBISS.SR system. Currently the union catalogue, being created by 44 libraries, contains 1.6 million bibliographic records. The Virtual Library of Serbia system continues to develop: 15 libraries are in the process of obtaining a licence to work, and the Virtual Library of Serbia Centre continues to provide training required for the work in the system.

Along with the Virtual Library of Serbia system (COBISS.SR), the BASIS software, developed by an expert team from the Faculty of Natural Science and Mathematics from Novi Sad, is being introduced into libraries in some cities of Vojvodina. The library professionals in Serbia consider the lack of a uniform approach to the development of library system as a wrong policy.

In December 2005, the University Library in Belgrade took over the co-ordination of activities with a view to setting up the Register of researchers, research organisations and research projects (E-CRIS.SR), and the libraries started preparing researchers' bibliographies within the COBISS.SR system.

Montenegro

In 2001, the COBISS.CG shared cataloguing system was set up, yet the inclusion of libraries was not going according to the plan synchronised with the Minister of Education and Science and the then Rector of the University of Montenegro. Namely, the new University Rector believed that there was no need for the academic libraries to co-operate in the COBISS.CG system. Nevertheless, due to the support given to the development of the aforementioned system by the Minister of Education and Science and the Minister of Culture positive trends have already been observed.

In the meantime, the Central National Library of Montenegro has managed to ensure organisational and staffing conditions necessary for the operation of the library information service within the COBISS.CG system. An umbrella agreement on the implementation of the COBISS.CG system in Montenegro is about to be signed. Additionally, the University Library in Podgorica has assumed a task of co-ordinating the activities to set up the Register of researchers and research organisations (E-CRIS.CG).

Kosovo

COBISS software was used by the National and University Library in Pristina until 1999. In 2002, a library expert from the United States visited IZUM as a representative of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and expressed interest in reactivating the collaboration. Unfortunately, his successors have decided otherwise.

At the request of the Ministry of Culture of Kosovo, IZUM prepared a draft project Virtual Library of Kosovo in 2003. The Ministry had it translated into Albanian and presented it to libraries. Unfortunately, more influential UNMIK advisors had affected the decision that Aleph 500 of the Israeli-American producer Ex Libris was to be installed at the National and University Library. The agreement was signed in March 2004. According to the available information, this project has not yet yielded any noticeable results. The representatives of the Ministry of Culture and of some public libraries in Kosovo, participating at the COBISS 2005 Conference, still hope that some day COBISS will be implemented in their libraries.

Croatia

After the break-up of Yugoslavia, the National and University Library of Croatia decided not to use the COBISS system any longer and entrusted the development of library software to a private business in Croatia, without having the concept of the development of the library information system of Croatia. Some of the libraries tried to continue their collaboration with IZUM (e.g. University Library in Pula until 2001) but eventually had to accept the official policy under all kinds of pressure.

In 2001, the competent ministries decided to entrust to IBM Croatia the drafting of the second phase of the implementation projects National Information System of the Libraries of the Republic of Croatia (NISKA). It is assumed that the signed agreement was never implemented, supposedly due to the fact that the project lead partners had not been acquainted with the issues concerning librarianship.

In May 2005, the National and University Library of Croatia in Zagreb sent an invitation to IZUM to take part in the tendering procedure for the selection of the qualified library software providers meeting the needs of their library. The discussions with the library representatives revealed that they were trying to solve the automation issue of their library and that they were not responsible for the automation of other libraries.

In the opinion of the library director, the IZUM's tender concerning the setting up of the library information system in Croatia, based on the COBISS platform, might lead to a different concept of library equipping. This is why, IZUM submitted its tender. But in June 2005, the tendering procedure was nullified with an unofficial announcement of a repeated tender in September. In September, however, IZUM received an e-mail stating that the tender was not going to be repeated due to the decision to purchase Voyager software package from the American provider.

In November 2005, IZUM sent a letter to the Minister of Culture and the Minister of Science, Education and Sport of the Republic of Croatia proposing to reconsider the IZUM's offer and the participation in the COBISS.Net network.

Albania

Over the period from October to December 2005, IZUM established contacts with representatives of different ministries and the Office of the Government of the Republic of Albania. They showed interest in collaborating with IZUM on the equipping of libraries, but they pointed out to the situation in some libraries that are not at all development-oriented. Later on, two representatives of the Ministry of Culture and the representatives of two university libraries from Tirana attended the COBISS 2005 Conference.

Without a previous agreement reached between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of the Republic of Albania the collaboration with libraries in Albania will probably not be possible.

Bulgaria

At the beginning of February 2006, a delegation from IZUM visited the National Library of Bulgaria and submitted an informative offer for co-operation. At the same time, the Slovenian ambassador in Budapest briefed the competent authorities in the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria of the offer.

Without a previous agreement reached between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria the collaboration with libraries in Bulgaria will probably not be possible.

International Support to Development

Libraries are aware of their mission and therefore their interest in the use of advanced information technology and in the inclusion in international networks is constantly increasing. Given that the local budgets for this type of projects are extremely tight, their realisation, at least at an early stage, depends on the international support.

Government of the Republic of Slovenia. Over the last fifteen years, the Slovenian Government has enabled Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro to start setting up, in an as organised manner as possible, their own co-operative library systems by providing direct funding, equipment or staff training, etc. It is expected that the support will continue also in the future.

OHR – Office of the High Representative. For many years OHR actively collaborated with IZUM in Bosnia and Herzegovina in an attempt to institutionalise the status of the BIHARNET academic and research network, but eventually failed to bridge political differences among the administrative entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As regards COBISS.BH, OHR showed no interest because they considered it to be a 'commercial' project of Slovenia.

WUS – World University Service – Austria. This association provided funding to different universities and faculties in Bosnia and Herzegovina for a number of projects focusing on local computer networks (also based on IZUM's designs). It, however, did not provide support for the development of the BIHARNET network as the priorities were given to individual satellite links to Vienna.

UNDP – United Nations Development Programme. UNDP was involved with BIHARNET on the initiative of IZUM and OHR. As the network with ten nodes and an international link via Slovenia had already been functioning, UNDP prepared in 2000 a complex project to invest in the development of the BIHARNET network and a commercial information infrastructure of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though there were many who considered the whole project to be pure science fiction, it received support of OHR, the rectors of some universities and of all those opposing the concept of BIHARNET and COBISS.BH. It was soon evident that the only motive for the project was the opportunity of the designer and maybe some other people to make money.

OOSI – Österreichisches Ost- und Südosteuropa-Institut. The Austrian Institute of East and Southeast European Studies from Vienna has always been very supportive of the spreading of COBISS into the Western Balkan countries. Some years ago, it financed the equipping of libraries in the Tuzla Canton and the project of including the so-called Austrian library collections in Sarajevo, Belgrade, Novi Sad, Skopje and Bitola in the COBISS.Net network.

British Council. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this international organisation has co-financed the training of librarians to use the COBISS applications and, on a partnership basis, participated in Macedonia in providing a Conference Multimedia Centre at the National and University Library.

OSI – Open Society Institute. Some years ago, this Budapest-based institute financed the computer equipping of some Macedonian libraries, but its biggest financial contribution was made for the realisation of the first phase of the Virtual Library of Serbia project – COBISS.SR.

EU – Tempus. This programme provided partial financing of the project of setting up a co-operative network of academic libraries in Serbia (including the procurement of the necessary equipment for the university libraries in Belgrade, Niš and Kragujevac). Within this programme equally co-financed was the project Creating e-Library Integrated in Faculty Information System of one of the faculties at the University of Skopje, already co-operating in the COBISS.MK system.

CEI – Central European Initiative. The Initiative co-financed the costs of the librarians from the South Eastern European countries to attend the COBISS 2005 Conference.

UNESCO-ROSTE (UNESCO Office in Venice – Regional Bureau for Science and Culture in Europe). In November 2005, a Round Table on Draft Report Accessing and Disseminating Scientific Information in South Eastern Europe was organised by UNESCO in Maribor on the initiative of IZUM. In the Report, prepared by INASP (Oxford), COBISS was identified as one of the most efficient and promising system of linking libraries in a single country. On this occasion, the participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovenia and the representatives from UNESCO-ROSTE concluded that additional workshops to discuss the ways of collecting and presenting the information on research results in the aforementioned countries should be held. As a result, in March 2006 another Round Table will be organised in Maribor under the auspices of UNESCO-ROSTE and the Office of the Slovenian National Commission for UNESCO, with the main topic being Organising information on research potential and research results.

European Commission. It is vital to intensify efforts for the European Commission to include in the development support programmes for the Western Balkan countries also the funding for the development of the information infrastructure to be set up through the COBISS.Net network. The past calls for tenders published within different programmes (e.g. CARDS, INCO) did not allow that tenders for projects on the development and maintenance of such infrastructure be submitted.

Development Assistance Instruments

Considering the experience gained so far, it is essential that for setting up both a national library information system and a research information system of a certain country different development assistance instruments are used and combined in order to:

- Ensure functioning of national library information services

Once a decision to implement the COBISS system in a country has been taken, the most challenging thing to do is to ensure the conditions for functioning of the national library information service. It should be done by:

- purchasing appropriate computer equipment (servers) and making sure that internal installations are in place;
- providing the Internet connection of adequate capacity, representing quite a big challenge in a country with low Internet penetration or only partially regulated electronic communication market;
- providing a computer classroom for training purposes;
- organising a team of five experts (librarians and IT professionals) and training them adequately to be able to carry out the tasks of the centre.

Form of development assistance: Financing the provision of space and installations, the purchase of basic equipment, staff training; in specific case also co-financing an adequate Internet connection for a limited period of time. In some countries, the level of equipment at national library information services is satisfactory.

- Raise awareness of librarians about the advantages of the COBISS system

It is necessary to correct a wrong interpretation that COBISS is only library automation software. First and foremost, this is an organisational concept of linking libraries to both a national library information system and the COBISS.Net network. The added value thus obtained exceeding the software functionality, has not been assured by any other provider of library systems (e.g. Aleph and Voyager). To be able to recognise the advantages of the COBISS system, it is of great importance that as many librarians as possible from the participating countries:

- visit libraries in Slovenia and get acquainted with their operation based on COBISS;
- take part in training programmes specifically prepared for this purpose and held at IZUM;
- attend annual COBISS conferences to exchange experience and establish friendly contacts (many friends separated by the war met again in Maribor).

Form of development assistance: Covering travelling costs, accommodation costs in Slovenia and conference registration fees.

- Provide equipment for individual libraries

Most of the libraries are financed from different budgets. The possibility for equipment investments (PCs and other peripherals) is limited as practically no national informatisation programme is available.

Moreover, the equipping of libraries may become an insurmountable obstacle as a result of those responsible failing to understand the importance of library informatisation.

Form of development assistance: Co-financing the procurement of equipment, providing internal installations and appropriate Internet connections.

- Provide training for the users of the COBISS applications

Training of the users of the COBISS applications is a demanding and permanent activity. Courses can be conducted only by adequately qualified teachers. The training of the librarians has been gradually taken over by the instructors with appropriate teaching qualification at national library information services.

Form of development assistance: Funding the training of librarians. Sometimes financial support is needed to cover the travelling costs of the training course participants.

- Set up national research information systems

The activities related to the development and maintenance of research information systems along with the databases on researchers, research organisations and research projects in participating countries (except for Slovenia) have not yet been institutionalised. Meanwhile, the university libraries of some countries have begun to set up a central 'register' of researchers, also being a prerequisite for the management of researchers' bibliographies within the national library information systems. Their efforts deserve additional support.

Form of development assistance: Co-financing the organisation activities and the initial data collection.

- Implement researchers' bibliography management in the COBISS system

On a global scale, Slovenia currently has the best organised and the most transparent system of researchers' bibliographies which provides the information base absolutely indispensable for the evaluation of the research results. The use of COBISS has thus obtained new dimensions and the reputation of librarians has also improved in the eyes of researchers. Other COBISS.Net countries have similar ambitions but the financing of the initial entry of bibliographic records poses a big problem to them.

Form of development assistance: Co-financing the creation of bibliographic records for researchers' bibliographies in national systems (payment according to the number of new records).

- Promote formal education of librarians

The staff qualification structure is essential for the development of libraries. It is therefore necessary to encourage quality university study of librarianship and information sciences. A special attention should be paid to the possibilities of the system of credits which, in line with the Bologna Process, has been introduced by a majority of educational institutions also in the territory of the participating countries.

Form of development assistance: Payment of school fees and granting scholarships to students.

Competent Ministries of Participating Countries and Their Role

It is expected from the ministries, responsible for education, science and culture to support the development of national library information systems and to assist, within their capacity, libraries in their equipping projects and training programmes so as to be able to participate in the cooperative library information system.

Restrictions and Risks

Establishing the library information service within a national library means that the latter takes over additional tasks which previously were not part of their duties. Apart from ensuring the appropriate equipment and staffing level, the employees also have to change their attitude towards other libraries. National libraries focus primarily on their own problems and, as a rule, it is not their duty (some are not even interested) to solve development problems concerning the automation of other libraries in the country. By taking over the tasks of the national library information service this attitude has to change, which is often far from being simple.

More and more libraries in the participating countries realise that it is imperative to start using advanced information technology and automate the operation if they wish to meet their users' needs. The decision which library system to use is difficult due to its far-reaching implications. The problem gets bigger if the concept of the national library information system, dictating the use of the uniform software, has not yet been adopted in the country. Moreover, the limited investments and local advisors often force libraries to accept less favourable solutions.

Other critical success factors are shown in the Table below.

	Success factors	Risks
1.	Provision of appropriate hardware and software	-lack of workstations -lack of communication equipment
2.	Provision of appropriate access to the Internet	-none, or poorly organised national academic Internet network -monopoly position held by Internet providers -insufficient Internet connection bandwidth
3.	Sufficient staffing levels and appropriate qualification of library staff	-insufficient staffing level -lack of professional skills -lack of skills to work in the COBISS system
4.	Motivation of library staff	-none or insignificant incentives
5.	Commitment by national strategic and political actors to use data from the COBISS system	-poor national policy as regards the transparent provision of information on research work -a lot of incomplete, partial and mutually incompatible solutions

CALL TO LIBRARIES OF THE REGION

Libraries are unable to efficiently function as isolated islands, so they must link with each other by placing special emphasis on knowledge and culture. In doing so, they provide conditions for dialogue and collaboration which further provides the basis for the development of not only a single country but also of the international community as a whole.

South Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans have enormous development potentials which cannot be fully realised if an appropriate information infrastructure is not provided. COBISS.Net is a joint project of the institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia and Montenegro which have taken on the responsibility for developing national library information systems based on the COBISS platform. Hitherto collaboration has yielded positive results and we, therefore, trust that the importance and future prospects of COBISS.Net are essential, both for the development of the region and for its successful integration into the EU.

This is why we invite libraries, those in the countries that have already been using COBISS as the national library information system and those in the countries of South Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans where COBISS is not yet present to reconsider their development strategies and take part in the joint COBISS.Net project. We believe that this is the way that the libraries in the region would ensure the infrastructure in order to most quickly achieve the level of library and information services offered in the EU, and to allow the exchange of bibliographic information essential for research, education and culture. What we offer are broad experience and readiness for collaboration and support.

In Skopje, 9 March 2006

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Borko Zafirovski, director

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