

## A WINDOW TO THE EAST

Ron Hogg

*This article addresses the problems that have arisen since 1990 in the acquisition of serial publications from the twenty seven countries of Eastern Central Europe and of the Former Soviet Union. Most of the previous systems of distribution and of acquisition from these countries have altered drastically in the last six years and the BLDSC has had to find ways and means of adapting to and utilising these changes to the best advantage of its customers in Britain and the rest of the world.*

*Ron Hogg, Slavonic Eastern & Central European Acquisitions, British Library Document Supply Centre*

The British Library Document Supply Centre (BLDSC) is actively acquiring serial publications from all of the 15 newly independent countries of the Former Soviet Union (FSU) and from all of the 13 countries generally known as Eastern and Central Europe (ECE) or as the ex-communist bloc. This article covers all of these countries with the exception of the former German Democratic Republic. The aftermath of the 'collapse of Communism' in the countries of ECE and FSU is examined purely from the point of view of the difficulties encountered by staff at the BLDSC in trying to obtain serial publications from countries that were all going through a complete economic and social upheaval exacerbated, in some cases, by wars. These changes began to have significant effects on the acquisition of publications from about 1990 onwards. Most of the problems which arose have been resolved, but, when compared to most of the rest of the world, the situation is still very confused in many ways

A quick look at the figures for the volume of acquisitions tells one side of the story. In 1990 the BLDSC was obtaining 2848 serial titles from ECE and 2107 from FSU. In 1995 the figures were 1956 from ECE and 1761 from FSU - a relative decline of 31% in ECE title acquisitions and 16% for FSU; an overall reduction of 25%. The reasons for this decline are basically twofold: deselection for economic reasons of material that was not being used by our customers, and the cessation of publication of many titles following the economic upheavals in all of the countries. Subsidised publishing still exists to some extent in most of the countries concerned, especially for educational and "hard science" items, but it is on a very small scale compared to the previous blanket subsidies which were given out to publishers in those states<sup>1</sup>.

The situation from the British point of view was made worse by the fact that the two suppliers that were relied on for the bulk of mainstream publications from all of these countries (except the former Yugoslavia) went bankrupt in rapid succession in late 1993 and early 1994. That the situation is still not fully resolved can be appreciated from the fact that the leading home-based supplier of Czech publications, Artia of Prague, went bankrupt in their turn in January 1996.

The countries can be divided fairly easily by a rule of thumb into 'very difficult' and 'not quite so difficult' countries. None of them have ever been 'easy' countries as far as acquisitions are concerned!

The 'very difficult' countries are characterised principally by the lack of any significant means of acquiring material on a viable commercial basis by using the well-tryed means of serial agents. These could either be based in the country itself, in a neighbouring country or in the West. Until very recently a large number of the former serial agents based in the countries of ECE and the FSU were, of course, the external wing of the State monopoly suppliers. Numerous suppliers have sprung up within the countries, usually on a very small scale and dealing with a limited range of materials on the whole.

The BLDSC has always used a large number of exchange agreements to obtain material from the countries of ECE and the FSU. Therefore, when it became obvious that the systems were breaking down, we took the decision to expand our exchange agreements so as to ensure that we could continue to obtain the material required by our customers?

Traditional serial agents have never been very good at obtaining two categories of material from these countries - publications produced in small numbers and publications of specialist institutions. Many publications required by the BLDSC fall into either or even both of these categories. If we were acquiring this category of material from an exchange partner, often a large library or a large specialist research body, and if that partner was also publishing more general material, such as a monthly periodical available on subscription, then it was obviously better in the prevailing situation of chaos to obtain the more commercial material from the same partner.

We are very glad that we took this step, which was contrary to the received wisdom at the time. As a result, to quote one example, we were able to resolve the situation with the Czech supplier mentioned above, so that we could transfer the acquisition of the titles supplied by the bankrupt company to a large Czech exchange source with very little trouble.

At a conference held in Krakow, Poland, in 1995, several Polish and Russian librarians

expressed the opinion that the number of exchanges would decline as commercial considerations took charge, not only with suppliers but also with the libraries and institutions which were the exchange partners. This is very probably true, but as they all pointed out, the day has not yet come and exchanges will probably remain a very significant component of acquisitions from ECE and the FSU for at least the next five years. The majority of these librarians were in fact talking not only about selling publications directly to the West but also about buying them directly rather than using exchange because of the parlous state of exchange funds obtained from legal deposit duplicates and from publications of their own publishing institutes.

The countries whose publications cannot be found at all in the catalogues of commercial agents, or can be found only as a token number of the most easily obtainable titles are: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaidzhan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyszstan, Lithuania, Macedonia, Moldova, Tadjikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This makes 14 out of the 27 countries of the region!

The only viable method of obtaining periodicals on any but the most basic level from these 14 countries is by exchange. The BLDSC has exchanges with either the National Library or the Academy of Sciences Library of each of these countries. In most cases, there are exchanges with both of these institutions and with a number of specialist libraries or institutions whose publications are in demand.

We have had many difficulties in maintaining the flow of material from most of these countries because of the long lead times needed to obtain replies to any queries. The postal systems of many countries have increased their charges to such an extent that libraries found real difficulties in just paying for the postage and their budgets were running out quickly. We recommended that several of them should consolidated their service and send everything in one large parcel by ordinary surface mail rather than issue by issue by registered express air mail. It seemed better for us to be able to inform our customers that the issues would arrive eventually and would continue to arrive in the future rather than just having one or two parts and then nothing afterwards.

To a large extent these countries can now be contacted by fax or e-mail, which has solved to some extent the previously mentioned problem of long lead times for any contact but some problems still arise. Georgia, for instance, was once easily accessible by e-mail, but the hyper-inflation there has meant that there is no money to renew the leases on the lines and we have had to revert to the system as it was<sup>3</sup>. There have, however, been some remarkable successes. We negotiated a new arrangement for obtaining some Belarus items, previously obtained through a library in St Petersburg, by a three way e-mail conversation between St. Petersburg, Minsk and Boston Spa. It took one afternoon to sort out our supplies for the foreseeable future. By comparison, the last time that we had to make such a new three-way arrangement it took eighteen months by exchange of letters!

Bosnia-Herzegovina falls out of the 'very difficult' into the 'almost impossible' category of course because of the tragic circumstances of the war there. Our colleagues in the Slavonic and East European Section of the BL Humanities and Social Sciences Directorate in London have made brave efforts to obtain items from there. We have never taken many titles from that country and for all practical purposes the flow has stopped completely since 1990. We hope to be able to get in touch with librarians there both to obtain their publications and to help them to stock their libraries with our journals and books.

The other 12 countries in the field are Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine and Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

Probably the only Western agent to have a broad penetration of almost all of the commercial export market from the 12 countries mentioned above is Kubon + Sagner, based in Munich. Kubon + Sagner have an outstanding reputation for reliability, even according to other serial agents who are not well known for praising their competitors! They also unfortunately have an equal reputation for being expensive.

Each of the countries has at least one home-based serial agent<sup>4</sup>. In most cases there is competition with other home-based agents or with agents from abroad. The leading home-

based agents are, in most cases, the former state monopoly distributors, nearly all of which have now been or are being privatised. In some cases the competition from other agents is fairly nominal but in others it can be cut-throat.

In general British libraries who had actively collected ECE and FSU material had been obtaining it from Collets, which ceased to trade in 1993. A 'new' Collets has since started to trade, but has nothing like the penetration of the market that was enjoyed by the 'old' Collets because of the latter's exclusive arrangements with MezKniga, the Soviet agency with a monopoly in export distribution. Collets also managed to control most of the British market for ECE publications, with the exception of Poland. There were several distributors of Polish publications in Britain. The one used by the BLDSC, Earls Court, ceased trading in 1994.

As the writing had been fairly obviously on the wall, we had already taken provisional steps to transfer our order to Ars Polona, the Polish state export distributor. Ars Polona has been experiencing the throes of privatisation and has had to cut out some of its peripheral services, such as philatelic exports, but has managed to soldier through despite rivalry from some new Polish exporters and from competitors such as Kubon + Sagner. The BLDSC is in fact Ars Polona's largest foreign customer and we successfully negotiated some new arrangements with them in Warsaw last year during the World Congress of Central and East European Studies which was being held for the first time in one of the former communist countries.

The Czech Republic, as mentioned earlier, lost its former State distributor Artia early in 1996 due to bankruptcy. This has complicated what was already the most confused situation of the ECE countries, caused by the many exclusive agreements which individual Czech publishers and editorial boards had with Western countries, principally German, Swiss and Dutch, for the distribution of their publications outside the former Comecon states. As with all of the countries in our field, the legal deposit system virtually broke down; there were many more, often ephemeral publishers; the national bibliographic system could not really cope with the changes. Consequently, we have had to rely

on expanding some of our existing exchange arrangements to ensure the delivery of publications. We also had to encourage our partners to take part in schemes, such as that organised by the Central European University, to deliver publications to the West in bulk in order to avoid the continual, huge increases in postage rates. By not relying on a sole source, which would have been practically impossible anyway, and by using our already established contacts to find out exactly what was happening and what could be done, we have been able to plug the gap caused by Artia's departure with relative ease.

The Slovak experience on the other hand has presented few problems. Slovart, another of the former state monopolies, has come through with very little trouble - to such an extent that we have actually had to refuse some requests to start new exchange agreements as we were covering the market so well.

Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary have also followed much the same pattern as that of Slovakia with the only real difference being that their former state distributors control much less of the market. It is, therefore, essential to use some form of exchange to obtain the required material and we are fortunate in having large-scale exchanges that have been built up over many years with each of these countries. Contact with each of these exchange partners is now much easier to maintain because most of them have Fax machines and some are already on the e-mail. Problems can be solved much more quickly than in the past because of this.

The former Yugoslavia has posed probably the largest problem in terms of maintaining supply. I have already mentioned the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. When Slovenia seceded from Yugoslavia, very little happened as far as our supplies were concerned because our suppliers in Belgrade continued to provide publications from all of the former Yugoslavia.

When Croatia seceded, the whole situation changed overnight. We received many letters from Croatian publishers telling us that we had to get their publications from Zagreb and not from Belgrade. As there was no known serial agent in Zagreb, we had to write to each publisher and order their publications on a direct basis. In fact, we often had to ask them how much they were

charging, because the essential information on prices was quite frequently missing from their letters. As Croatia has developed, so have serial agents. We were able to obtain a Slovene agent in Ljubljana on the recommendation of one of these Croatian agents, as the Belgrade office had now stopped supplying Slovene as well as Croatian publications.

We are therefore in a situation with Croatia where we are obtaining a significant number of publications by direct purchase as well as the more traditional (for us) methods of using serial agents and exchange. As this system has been working for some years now with very few problems, we see little point in changing it.

All of our Macedonian publications had always been obtained by exchange, as mentioned previously. We are trying to maintain regular contact with Skopje, but they are publishing so little and communications are so slow that we are glad to receive whatever arrives at present.

Serbia and Montenegro, the remaining part of Yugoslavia, have of course been the subject of UN sanctions until very recently. The number of titles available on subscription is now only 199 compared to the 1789 of 1990 - not all the losses can be explained by the secession of the other parts of the former Federation. We hope to be able to re-establish links on a proper commercial basis with Jugoslovenska Knjiga, who had always been one of the most efficient serials agents before the tragic events in the Balkans.

Which leaves us with three newly independent states of the FSU! Latvia is a Baltic state, but, unlike the others, it not only has its own serials agents, its publications are also available through the American, German and Russian agents who also deal with Russia. Their publishing scene is not only healthy but the publications are also obtainable, unlike their Estonian neighbours who have an even more prolific publishing industry but whose publications are, for all practical purposes, only available on exchange.

The publications of Ukraine tend to be treated by most agents as a definite subsidiary to their Russian operation. The main exception to this is the American company, East View, which has a separate Ukrainian section with its own offices in Kijev. Several attempts have been made to set up a home-based Ukrainian serial agency, but I know

of none that has lasted the course and gained any significant customer base in the West. MezKniga, the former Soviet monopoly distributor, now a Russian joint stock company, supplies many Ukrainian publications (and several from some of the other FSU republics, notably Latvia) and may well prove to be a real competitor for the Americans in the future. Many Ukrainian publications requested from the BLDSC are of a very specialist nature and, therefore, are not available on subscription. We maintain several exchange agreements to ensure the supply of these documents.

The Russian Federation's publishing problems have been fully discussed elsewhere many times. With the collapse of Collet's, we had to conduct an exercise to determine the best supplier for us at the best price. Several possibilities were raised, but only three main players emerged. We chose the most cost-effective of these to service most of our need for Russian publications. We had, however, to expand several of our exchange arrangements to cover the supply of back issues missing because of the collapse of Collet's and to cover those titles that, although still being published, were in nobody's catalogue. MezKniga, mentioned previously in this article, has put itself on a much firmer commercial footing and now sends out its catalogue updates and responds to any criticism by e-mail. Its main rival is East View from America, which has now got its own world-wide web home page on the Internet with clickable ordering facilities. Both of these main players have to contend with a host of smaller agents, of which the one with the most penetration into the British market is probably Russian Press Services, also an American company. All of them must in turn compete with Kubon + Sagner for the market which exists for publications from Russia, a much larger market than for any other of the countries of ECE and FSU.

Many titles from each of these countries have died since 1990 and many new ones have emerged, often for only one or two issues. The majority of regular serial titles have carried on, even though we have had to note many, many

changes of title - running at seven changes per working day in early 1993! We believe that we have kept on top of the situation. There will always be items that are almost impossible to obtain because they do not appear in the catalogues. We have even managed to add many of these to our stock because of the close contacts that have been built up with both old and new agents and with our exchange partners. Our active participation in the largely US-based SlavLibs Slavic Librarians and the British Russian-Studies fora on the Internet has also helped to resolve many problems. We have tried to maintain our coverage and believe that we have to a very large extent succeeded in this endeavour

#### References

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2. For a much fuller discussion of exchanges, see: Zmroczek, J., The Future of Exchanges, a View from the UK, *COSEELIS Newsletter*, no. 11, October 1995.
3. Garibashvili, D. and Kiknadze, L., Republic of Georgia: State and Needs, *Proceedings of NATO Advanced Networking Workshop September 29 - October 1 1994, Moscow*. International Laboratory VEGA, Moscow 1995 (<http://www.glasnet.ru/~vega/nato/index.html>).
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