

“SOCIAL ARCHIVES” – NEW APPROACHES AND CHALLENGES

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The Archives State Agency of Bulgaria is the institution responsible for the preservation of the archival heritage of the country.¹ At the same time its main task as an archival institution is to provide facilities and face the necessities of the users of archival material referring to public access to the documentary heritage.

Aiming to keep its “traditional” users on one hand, and to attract new users, facing the challenges of the new information environment from another, in 2012 the Archives State Agency created an archival platform. The platform, named “The Archives are Speaking”, carries out one of the strategic goals of the Bulgarian archival institution.² A platform conception was created referring to: domain www.archives.bg, common architecture and functions giving the opportunity to publish documents about the important periods of the history of the country or key institutions. The tendency is to add a new thematic collection on the platform each year, i.e. to enrich the platform with new thematic sites and increase the number of the published on-line documents part of the documentary heritage. The necessity of creating an internet platform is unconditionally shown by the numbers on the on-line users of archival information compared to the number of the “traditional” users at the archives’ reading rooms. The total number of users of archival information in 2012 is 98533 and 92635 is the number of those who visited the thematic sites of the Archives State Agency. The total number of the users of archival information in 2012 is 170 087 and 151 362 of them were visitors of the archival sites of the agency.

In comparison the total number of users of archival information in 2013 is 132 601 and the data shows a constant tendency of increasing numbers of the users of thematic sites which in 2012 were 126 594. In 2013 the number of the visitors of the users of archival information is 218 696 and 198 029 were the users of the thematic sites. The permanent trend in the increase of the number of the on-line users is well observed in 2014 as well. The total number of the users of archival information is 86 928 and only 3164 of them visited the reading rooms at the state archives whereas the number of the visitors of the archival platform is 83 764. The total number of the users of archival information since the beginning of 2014 is 140 017 and 130 420 of them registered as on-line visitors of the sites of the Archives State Agency.

The main idea of this internet portal, following the trends in the use of archival information is to face the users interest and fulfill the necessities of the public to share documents related to the Bulgarian history and part of the documentary heritage of the archival institution on the internet.

Since 2012 till present were created six internet sites part of the platform “The Archives are Speaking” developed in a way to easily add records and information, rearrange the categories, i.e. to represent and cover the demands and necessities of the users of archival information.

Proceedings of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party 1944-1989³

In the years after the collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria in the autumn of 1989 till present days being an European Union’s member state the records of the Bulgarian Communist party enjoy a continued interest of journalists, scientist and researchers and the general Bulgarian public. The last urged us to create the first thematic site on the archival platform on the

documents of the Bulgarian Communist party. More than 60 000 pages of Proceedings of the Political Bureau as well as 84 803 pages of shorthand records of the Plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party are presented on the site. In general the published archival records during 2012 and 2013 is almost 212 000 pages.

In the context of the European experience on data protection and provisions of the Bulgarian legislation part of the data considered as sensitive was not published (personal data of agents of the State Security Services and of non-public figures or information on the health status). What is certain that under the Bulgarian archival legislation framework there is public access to the mentioned records and the users can read them at the reading rooms of the Archives State Agency.

The information on the site is presented in two separate categories – plenary meetings of the Central Committee and the Political Bureau. The records are arranged in decades and the public and secret proceedings are presented separately. Brief biographic notes of the main figures, information on the international situation and the time when the decisions were taken is published for the users of the site. The released on site archival photos enrich the published documentary collection along with bibliography on the documentary heritage and historical development of Bulgaria during 1944-1989. The visitors of the site in 2012 were 24 000, in 2013 - 17 950, and from the beginning of 2014 till June their number is 11 815.

Militaries died in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913)⁴

On the occasion of the centenary of the beginning of the Balkan War commemorated in 2013 we created a site, part of the platform “The Archives are Speaking” and dedicated to the militaries died in the Balkan wars of 1912-1913.

Restoring the memory of the died militaries, the Archives State Agency aimed to recover the broken line of the family history, connecting contemporary relatives to their ancestors who died one hundred years ago. Lead by the ambition to revive the memory of the heroes the Archives State Agency decided to publish at its maximum a list of the died Bulgarian militaries in the Balkan War. The site aims to direct the public opinion not only to the battles and battle fields, but to lead the public attention to the image of the real heroes, as well as to aid in the process of the reconstruction of scenes and pictures of the so important for each of us family history. The information published on the site provides the opportunity to perform a historical and demographic research and research in the field of the family history without even entering the reading rooms of the archives. The published list is compiled on the basis of preserved and used lists at the State Military Historical Archives at the Archives State Agency. The lists were compiled in the 1930s by the representatives of the “Military museums, monuments and graves” department at the Ministry of War with the assistance of the General Staff of the army at that time and the managements of the municipalities. From the four types of lists, preserved at the State Military Historical Archives, was selected the general list of Bulgarian militaries died in the wars of 1912-1913 compiled in alphabetical order. The release on the internet a list including as much information as possible on the number of the died Bulgarian militaries in the Balkan war with different search options (place of birth, name, surname search option) gives to the thousands of the inheritors the possibility to find out about the place where their ancestors were killed and to learn more about their family and national history. The visitors of the site in 2012 were 24 000, in 2013 - 24 061, and for the first half of 2014 the number comprises of 15 206. The comparison of the data shows a stable tendency of keeping the interest of the users of published records on the site.

The Jewish Community in Bulgaria⁵

The third thematic site part of the platform of the Archives State Agency “The Archives are Speaking” is dedicated to the Jewish community in Bulgaria. It was developed in 2013 commemorating the 70th anniversary of the saving of the Bulgarian Jews. The creation of the site was determined by the importance of the act of saving of the Bulgarian Jews – acknowledged by the Bulgarian and world public and the constant users’ interest toward the documentary heritage enlightening the activities of the Bulgarian citizens and the representatives of the Bulgarian political elites. The issues related to the fate of the Jewish community during the Second World War are of research interest not only for the Bulgarian scientists, journalist, politicians and etc, but comprise a big part the published material on the history of the Second World War all over the world.

The published on site letters, proceedings and photos trace the coexistence of Bulgarians and Jews from the middle of the 1930s and outline the cultural and social parameters of the community within the boundaries of the “other home” and outline the main stages in the creation of the Anti-Semitic legislation in Bulgaria and the activities of the authority legislative and executive in the solution of the so-called Jewish question. A special place is given to the protests of the Bulgarian public showing the support of the representatives of the Jewish community. Selected and widely documented is the saving thousands of Jews from Europe, given a transit visas which at that historical period could be considered with the word saving and freedom. The saving of 48 398 human beings is an unique achievement result of the efforts of the Bulgarian citizens and political representatives.

The presented on-site documents refer to the period 1939-1944 and are divided into five thematic categories: “The Jews in Bulgaria until the beginning if the Second World War”, „Authority Executive in Bulgaria 1939-1944“, „Authority Legislative in Bulgaria 1939-1944“, „Public activities against the Anti-Semitic policy in Bulgaria 1940-1944“ and „The Saviors“. The exclusively interesting records, presenting the dynamics of the events of the Second World War in the context of the participation of the Bulgarian public in the saving of the representatives of the Jewish community in details, is enriched with photos, depicting moments of the everyday life of the representatives of the Jewish community in Bulgaria. The visitors of the site in 2013 were 2 899, and from the beginning of 2013 till the end of June they are 2311. There is a tendency of increasing the users’ interest on the published on-line records and the importance of the event in general provoked the creation of the English translation of the site.

Police Files of Public Figures before 1944⁶

The interest and to face the necessities of many representatives of the Bulgarian public on the history and the activities of public figures from the near past was the reason that provoked the creation of a new site on the archival platform. This led us to the creation of the site “Police Files of Public Figures before 1944”. On-line we have published records, once part of the archival collection of the Ministry of Interior providing information on 26 important Bulgarian public figures, writers and “party grandeurs”. With no doubt of great interest to the public is the file of the person who was leader of the Bulgarian Communist party for almost 35 years – Todor Zhivkov. Along with the files of the politicians Todor Zhivkov, Valko Chervenkov, Traycho Kostov and G. M. Dimitrov, we included files of the most popular Bulgarian writers and poets such as: Nikola Vaptsarov, Yosif Herbest, Mladen Issaev. We have included and the files of the main figures participated in the take over against Zhivkov – the generals Ivan Todorov –

Gorunya and Tsvyatko Anev. The police files comprise of different kinds of documents – letters of advice, cover letters and even records that are not related to the person at all, as well as blank documents. On site were published a selected part of the records, part of the police files which were appraised by the archivists as very important and providing information on the person and completely enlighten its activities during the historical events. The visitors of the site in 2013 were 22 081 and for the first half of 2014 they are 6971. This is the only site of the archival platform where the number of visitors diminishes and the users' interest in the published documents decreases.

Photoarchives.bg⁷

The next site which became part of the platform of the Archives State Agency "The Archives are Speaking" was "Photoarchives.bg". We aimed to create a site which provides fast and easy on-line access to the users of archival information to parts of the huge photos, preserved in the archives. It is intended to every one interested in Bulgarian history and the way to picture Bulgarians former generation everyday life.

On the site "Photoarchives.bg" were published almost 40 000 photos (pictures and postcards), which in chronological order follow and reveal moments of the Bulgarian history since 1930s and 1940s till present. The published on-line pictures represent in thematic order persons, places and events of the political life in Bulgaria as well as illustrate moments of the everyday life and this makes the published material an important source in the process of reconstructing the daily round of the Bulgarian society which is a trend in the new history studies all over the world. All the selected photos are part of the archival heritage, preserved and registered in the Bulgarian archives. Our wish is to create and maintain a dynamic site, providing the opportunities to enrich and develop its content. That is why we gave the users the possibility to make comments on the published photos, add copies of pictures from their private collections to the different categories, and the opportunities of crowd sourcing and recognition of places. This option is valid for the site category "Unidentified". Also the users can provide information on the recognized places and persons as well as to add supplementary tags. The users of the site have the opportunity to request a digital copy of a picture on-line. "Photoarchives.bg" is enjoying enormous popularity not only of the Bulgarian users and the visitors of the site from the beginning of 2014 till June is 28 210.

The People's Court 1944-1945⁸

The last site that we created on the platform "The Archives are Speaking" reveals part of the documentary heritage, providing information on the activities of the People's Court. This was the institution that sentenced people related to the government of Bulgaria during the Second World War. The users' interest kept by the necessity of detailed and critic view of the events from near past were the reason for the creation of this site. The idea is to reveal by publishing digital records an important number of the numerous records, created during each trial, organized by one of the members of the People's Court. On site we published records providing in a finished state data on the personality and its activities but also reveal the trials of each of the members of the court.

The site about the People's Court is a long-term project which will cover the thirteen members of the Sofia court. The first stage of the project refers to publish on-line documents about the first

members of the court and the sentences of the Regents and the government and the second members of the court sentenced the members of the National Assembly. The records refer to each members of the People's Court grouped as follows: name of the defendants and all the related documents, and records referring to the court activities, records on the legal proceedings as well as documents on the court present activities.

The team of archivists who performed the selection of the document to be published on the site selected those records that completely reveal the activities of the institution. The rest of the archival records could be read at the reading rooms of the Archives State Agency. The visitors of the site from the beginning of 2014 till June were five times less than the number of visitors interested in the published on-line photos on the "Photoarchives.bg".

A future initiative of the Archives State Agency referring to the on-line release of documents, part of thematic site part of the platform "The Archives are Speaking" is the digital project "The Wars of Bulgaria 1885-1945" dedicated to the two world war conflicts and the participation of Bulgaria, as well as to commemorate the anniversaries of the Bulgarian wars lead to achieve the union of the Bulgarians. It consists of the following thematic sites: "Bulgaria in the First World War", "Bulgaria and the Second World War", "Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885-1886" and the existing site dedicated to the military casualties in the Balkan wars during 1912-1913. The time to fulfill the project is to years and the creation of thematic site, dedicated to the military history is set not only for the engaging of the archival institutions in the international initiatives commemorating the centenary of the First and Second World Wars. It is also to respond to the ongoing interest of the Bulgarian public to different issues of the historical development of Bulgaria and the tendency of great interest in the field of family history.

The site "Bulgaria in the First World War" will be developed in two stages: the first one refers to the preparation for the on-line release of lists of awarded Bulgarian officers, soldiers and officials who had participated in the war. The lists are part of the documentary collection of the State Military Historical Archives – Veliko Tarnovo. On the site will be published other documents on the topic, preserved at the Central State Archives as well as part of the archival collections of the State Archives. The documents provide information on the Bulgarian participation in the war conflicts, the idea on the fulfillment of the national ideal – the union of the Bulgarian nation within the Bulgarian boundaries, as well as data on the consequences lead the to the national catastrophe. The second stage refers to the release of the lists of the died militaries and public access at the end of 2015.

The sites "Bulgaria and the Second World War" and "Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885-1886" will be for publishing on-line lists of died militaries, preserved at the State Military Historical Archives – Veliko Tarnovo as well as documents part of the archival collections of the State Archives containing information on the Bulgarian participation in the wars, courses of actions and the consequences for Bulgaria. The site should be ready by the end of May 2015 and the documents revealing the history of the unification of the Principality of Bulgaria with Eastern Rumeliya followed by the Serbo-Bulgarian War of 1885-1886 will be available for the users by the end of September 2015.

To publish documents on the internet is one of the activities to achieve the strategic goals of the Archives State Agency in long-term plan. The on-line access to digital images of archival records part of the digital archive of our national archival institution guarantee the popularization and the use of documents out of the reading rooms.

To publish an enormous number of documents comprising the archival heritage of the Archives State Agency is of interest of scientists and specialists as well as of the general public interested in a certain degree in the Bulgarian history. The number of the Agency's site visitors vastly exceeds the number of the so-called "traditional" users of the reading rooms. The data analysis on the number of visitors shows that an important part of the archival activities in the field of

providing services is to give on-line access to archival records and the involve the users in the archivists activities such as identification of persons, places and etc. The observations show that even at this starting point the site of the archival platform are used as a supplementary instrument in History lessons where the possibility to visualize the near past makes the “story” easier to comprehend and interesting for the students.

Notes

¹ Law on the National Archival Fonds. In: State Gazette, issue 57, 13th July, 2007.

² http://www.archives.government.bg/uploaded_files//STRATEGY_DAA_2013_2015_eng.pdf

³ <http://archives.bg/politburo/>

⁴ <http://archives.bg/balkanwars/>

⁵ <http://archives.bg/jews/>

⁶ <http://archives.bg/policefiles/>

⁷ <http://archives.bg/photoarchives/>

⁸ <http://archives.bg/narodensud/>