

**Rede bei der internationalen Fahrbibliothekskonferenz Cuxhaven  
„The role of mobile libraries in strengthening European  
democracy“**

**8 September 2023 (14:00 - 15:00)**

**Hapag-Hallen Cuxhaven**

**Speaking time: 20 - 30 minutes**

**(Stand: 28. August)**

**I.**

Dear Ms Toetzke (Katrin, Kommission Fahrbibliotheken im Deutschen Bibliotheksverband),  
ladies and gentlemen!

Thank you for inviting me to your conference here in Cuxhaven today. I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on the role that mobile libraries play in securing democracy – not only in Europe, but worldwide.

Let me start by sharing a quote by 19th century US-industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. He said:

*“There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library. A library outranks any other one thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never-failing spring in the desert.”*

This quote encapsulates the essence of the huge benefits libraries of all kinds bring to our societies: they give citizens a chance to educate themselves and make informed decisions, thereby securing the ground on which democracies are built.

## II.

- Ladies and gentlemen

In times like these, when democracies worldwide are under threat, we need this stabilising influence more than ever.

According to the latest Democracy Index of the Economist's Intelligence, the story of democracies in 2022 was "one of stagnation". This follows several years of democratic regression. Those did not just begin with the restriction of freedoms during the pandemic, but years before: the Economist labelled 2017 as the year that saw "the worst decline in global democracy in years" - and 2018 followed suit in this steady decline.

The index evaluates 60 indicators in 167 countries under the following categories:

- electoral process and pluralism,
- civil liberties,
- the functioning of government,
- political participation and
- political culture.

It then classifies each country under one of four regimes:

- full democracy,
- flawed democracy,
- hybrid regime and
- authoritarian regime.

In 2022, only 8% of the world's population resided in the 24 countries classified as full democracies – the United States was not among them. Although it is home to more than 110.000 libraries, the US lost its ranking as a full democracy in 2016, when public trust in its institutions experienced a severe decline.

It is true that Western Europe recorded an emphatic improvement in its average democracy score (from its all-time low of 8.22 in 2021 to 8.36 in 2022) and has thus returned to pre-pandemic levels. Right now, countries in Western Europe account for eight of the top ten places in the global democracy rankings and more than half (14) of the 24 nations classified as “full democracies”. The global front-runners are Norway, New Zealand, Iceland, Sweden and Finland.

However, even here in Europe our democracies continue to underperform in comparison to their peak score in 2008 (8.61).

Accordingly, even the world's arguably most stable and advanced democracies mirror the trend of slow but steady democratic decline:

- in 2017 49,3% of the world's population lived in a democracy of some sort,
- in 2018 this number stood at 47,7% and
- in 2022 it has declined further to 45,3%.

The Russian war of aggression against Ukraine as well as China's continued curtailment of freedom rights play a part in the development of those numbers. Beyond this, however, we know today that recessions like these manifest themselves in a number of different ways.

A few include:

- Decreasing participation in elections and politics,
- declining trust in institutions
- the growing influence of unelected, unaccountable institutions and expert bodies as well as
- declines in media freedoms and civil liberties.

The role of the media – and with it the role of media literacy – is not to be underestimated, when it comes to countering those developments. I believe – and research in the US as well as in the EU has documented this – that libraries can do a lot in improving and shaping this media literacy.

### III.

Public libraries are one of the very few places where information is readily available to anyone who might seek it out. And, they often exist separately from the ever-changing nature of electoral politics. Through election cycles in a community, the public library and its resources are available for those who wish to use it.

In times when 73% of citizens worldwide worry about false information and fake news, they need as much easy access to credible news and information through reputable publishers as possible. A public library fundamentally exists as a tenet of civil society. It is a communal area where any of its patrons may come and use its resources for free.

The benefits people experience from the knowledge in books, magazines and online resources that is readily available in libraries are universal.

However, access to those resources is not – and there is a very simple reason for that: Those who oppose democracy are scared of the power of free thought. They are scared of the power of words and of the impact those words have on asserting an individual existence, an individual experience and an individual live. Because there is no room for individuality in an unfree society, there is no room for books – or at least, for the uncensored publication of books.

In order to find examples of the impact this can have on a civil society, we just need to look as far as North Korea, China, Russia, Iran or Afghanistan. Yet, the sad reality is that there are also recent developments that revolve around the availability of books here in Europe and in the United States.

Just recently, the Hungarian government fined one of the country's largest bookstores for selling an LGBTQ-themed novel.

In the United States, PEN America<sup>1</sup> recorded 1477 separate instances of book bans across the country. This includes 874 book titles in 182 school districts and across 37 states.

These are worrying developments in the midst of our established Western democracies. We need to counter and prevent initiatives to ban or censor books. Libraries of all forms and sizes are naturally at the forefront of ensuring this precious freedom to read and to be informed.

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<sup>1</sup> Advocacy group campaigning against book bans and for „the freedom to write“

In order to be most effective in their continued campaign for knowledge, the freedom of thought and thereby for democracy, libraries have to reach as many people as possible.

#### IV.

This is where the critical impact of mobile libraries comes in.

Today, your conference in Cuxhaven brings more than 200 people from ten countries together to discuss exactly this critical impact. No matter, whether you are from Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Latvia, Luxembourg, Finland, Poland, Sweden, Germany or Nicaragua: Every one of you will be well aware of the difficulties that location-based library services have, when it comes to reaching people beyond the realms of their mostly urban sphere of influence. For exactly this reason, all of you are committed to the idea and expansion of mobile library services.

When we look at the development of modern media literacy and voting patterns, rural areas are in need of these mobile library services. There is no reason why those, who choose to live rurally, should be at a disadvantage when it comes to access to reliable information. Every citizen and their view on society is a critical factor for our democracy – so is their opinion and the way they arrive at that opinion.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the advantages of mobile libraries have long been recognised as manifold:

- They **promote understanding and tolerance** by offering a diverse range of books and information resources that represent different

cultures, languages, and perspectives - thus promoting inclusivity and respect for cultural diversity.

- They serve as community hubs, **encouraging social interaction, exchange of ideas** and community engagement that can strengthen democratic values and civic engagement. Mobile libraries often organise events, workshops, and educational programmes that foster dialogue and promote active citizenship.
- Mobile libraries have an easier time, when it comes to **adapting to the digital age**. They incorporate technology, offering access to e-books, digital resources, and online library services. This integration of digital platforms ensures that even in areas with limited physical resources, individuals can still access a vast array of knowledge.
- Mobile libraries leverage technology to connect individuals with information, empowering them to embrace the digital world while preserving the essence of a traditional library experience.
- They can also be **more easily customized** to meet the specific needs of communities they serve by seeking their direct input, allowing for ongoing feedback and adjustments to ensure their services align with the evolving needs and aspirations of the users.

However, like any initiative, mobile libraries also face challenges and problems that we must address. These include:

- The **availability of resources and sustainable funding** – relying solely on grants or donations can be unreliable and may limit the scope and impact of the mobile library.
- The ability to effectively **reach and target the intended audience**.

- The **connectivity to access digital resources**, especially in rural areas can hinder the delivery of online services and limit users' access to digital resources.
- The **recruitment and retainment of qualified staff members** – we need to enable mobile libraries to offer continuous professional development and training opportunities, in order to build a skilled and dedicated workforce.

## V.

So, what does the European Union do to support the successful management of these challenges?

The European Union's Work Plan for Culture 2023-2026 recognises the key role that libraries of all kinds play for Europe's democratic, social, cultural, and educational landscape.

In accordance, there is plenty of scope within EU programmes, policies and initiatives for libraries. The themes identified as EU priorities have a clear overlap with the challenges that public libraries are working on across Europe.

I welcome that, on 18 July, the European Parliament's Committee on Culture (CULT) gave the green light to a report on the future of the European book industry. The report does not only focus on ways to strengthen the European book sector's competitiveness.

It also:

- aims to ensure that more books are accessible for people with disabilities,



- promotes improvements to the circulation of books across Europe and
- discusses the challenges facing the book sector, such as the green transition, the impact of artificial intelligence and the lack of interoperability by dominant market players.

However, while the potential of libraries is clear from a sectoral standpoint, the lack of direct references in EU policies indicates that not all EU policymakers fully realise the role libraries are willing and able to play.

Let me give you two prominent examples:

1. Whereas libraries are well-positioned to contribute to the development of digital skills, the focus of the **European Education Area and the Digital Education Action Plan** lies heavily on formal educational institutions such as schools and universities. Recognition of non-formal learning spaces such as libraries is limited, and it is unclear what kind of support informal and non-formal educational institutions could benefit from under these initiatives.

This example is especially important for adults who do not have access to digital resources at home or at work, or who might not be able to undertake formal training. The European Parliament continues to push the Commission to increase its support of lifelong learning and adult education, as well as to invest in education more broadly, for example via the European Education Alliance.

2. Explicit mention of libraries is also missing from the **EU Skills Agenda and its flagship Pact for Skills**, despite aiming to promote “a culture of lifelong learning for all”.

The pact is open to public organisations thereby making public libraries eligible to participate. Targeting libraries directly would provide the Skills Agenda with a ready-made network of learning spaces across Europe. For example, allowing libraries to apply directly for Wi-Fi vouchers under the new Connecting Europe Facility could increase uptake compared to the previous WiFi4EU scheme. This way, we could remove a previous layer of administration for libraries, while simultaneously allowing them to promote an EU project.

Europe’s 65,000 public libraries, as well as mobile libraries, have a huge potential to contribute to EU objectives. As trusted spaces offering free access to information, they are well placed to lead on connecting citizens to each other.

Many policies, programmes and initiatives are relevant to libraries, but remain an untapped resource in tackling European societal challenges.

In order to effectively leverage this rich resource, the EU should consider these four priorities:

1. Work with libraries to push for increased uptake in adult education and lifelong learning, by ensuring that initiatives such as the Digital Education Action Plan focus on non-formal learning institutions and their staff, not just schools and universities.

2. Invest in digital infrastructure for local public spaces such as libraries, for example with special WiFi4EU vouchers for libraries under the Connecting Europe Facility.
3. Undertake comprehensive data collection and mapping of educational activities taking place in non-formal learning institutions. This way, policy makers will be able to better understand how they can leverage their potential, for example as part of the Adult Education survey.
4. Make it easier for libraries to apply for funding under the European Structural and Investment Funds with simplified funding streams and a more transparent process.

## VI.

- Ladies and gentlemen

*“Libraries store the energy that fuels the imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to improving our quality of life.”*

With your passionate engagement for mobile libraries, all of you enable the exact experience that the US-American writer and producer Sidney Sheldon described so eloquently with these words.

You ensure that the network of knowledge, information and critical skills can continue to grow across Europe and beyond formal education. Through this, you make a vital contribution to the successful persistence of democracy – both in your own country, but also among the wider global community.

In times, when anti-freedom forces and alternative facts agents continue to threaten our democracies, there is nothing more powerful than the knowledge and the ability for critical thought that books can deliver.

Let me thank you again for the vital work you do and wish you a successful conference here in Cuxhaven, as well as a pleasant reception later on.

Thank you!

## **Hintergrundinformationen:**

### Zum Internationalen Fahrbibliothekenkongress 2023:

- Am 8. und 9. September 2023 findet in Cuxhaven der zweite internationale Fahrbibliothekenkongress (IFBK) in Deutschland statt.
- Veranstalter ist die Fachkommission Fahrbibliotheken im Deutschen Bibliotheksverband (dbv) in Kooperation mit der Stadt Cuxhaven.
- Schwerpunkt ist neben einem vielfältigen Vortragsprogramm der fachliche Austausch zwischen den Beschäftigten in den Fahrbibliotheken sowie ein buntes Veranstaltungsprogramm für die breite Öffentlichkeit direkt im Hafengebiet und „hinterm Deich“.

### Zum dbv:

- Der Deutsche Bibliotheksverband e.V. vertritt mit seinen mehr als 2.000 Mitgliedern fast 9.000 Bibliotheken mit ca. 25.000 Beschäftigten.
- Sein zentrales Anliegen ist es, Bibliotheken zu stärken, damit diese allen Bürger freien Zugang zu Informationen ermöglichen.
- Der Verband setzt sich für die Entwicklung innovativer Bibliotheksleistungen für Wissenschaft und Gesellschaft ein.
- Als politische Interessensvertretung unterstützt er die Bibliotheken, insbesondere auf den Feldern Informationskompetenz und Medienbildung, Leseförderung und bei der Ermöglichung kultureller und gesellschaftlicher Teilhabe für alle Bürger.