

Bridge Over Troubled Waters: Bulgarian Literature in Translation 1989 - 2010

Summary of the Next Page Foundation's Study, 2011

“Translation and Transition: Bulgarian literature in translation (1989-2010): data, observations, recommendations” is the first-ever research-based policy paper on the topic, based on bibliographic data, interviews, and case studies. It also outlines translation trends over the past 20 years and suggests policy approaches towards better support for Bulgarian participation in global literary communication.

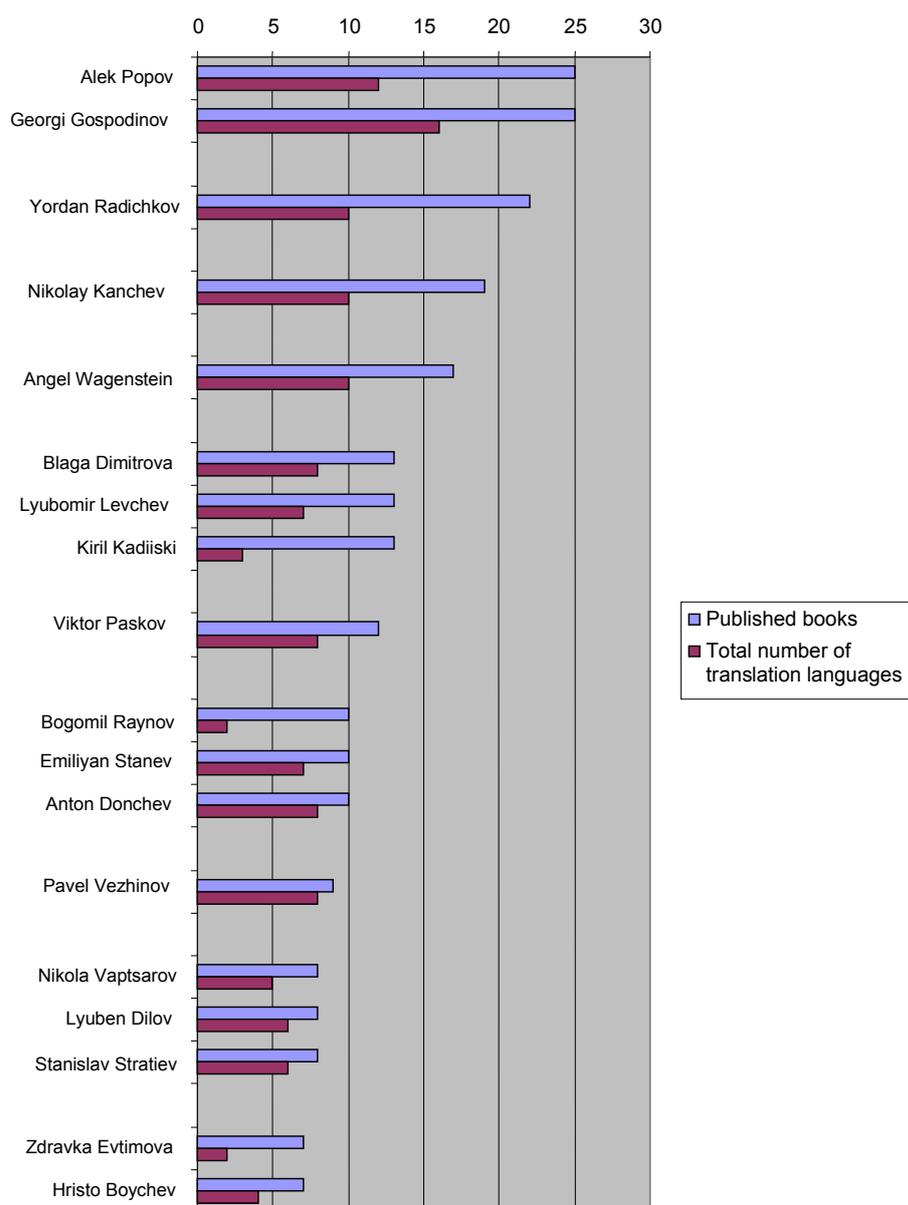
Here is a brief summary of the study and its results. The full text is available in Bulgarian only [here](#).

The study comprises the first complete bibliography of Bulgarian prose, poetry and drama, consisting of 721 titles, translated into 39 languages, and published in more than 40 countries after 1989. The data was collected from 16 European libraries, the UNESCO Index Translationum, ISBN agencies, numerous catalogues of foreign publishers, reviews in literary periodicals, and personal archives of authors, translators, and experts in Bulgarian literature.

Covering the period of the last 20 years, “Translation and Transition” explores tendencies in literary export and communication after the liberation of the publishing industry from political and ideological state control. The first few years following the fall of the Iron Curtain were still marked by the legacy of the planned economy, thus most of the translations were published as part of pre-1989 schedules and agreements between the Comecon countries. The unfreezing of the literary scene in the 90s was flavoured by a pinch of enthusiasm and euphoria, yet for a long time (until the beginning of the 21st century) the translation flow remained weak and unstable, and no mechanisms were established for presenting Bulgarian literature in the global translation market. During that period, the Bulgarian literary scene seemed enlivened by an experimental – if not rebellious – drive in the field of poetry, and did not manage to offer enough “exportable” fiction. Thus, it “gambled away” the chance to take advantage of heightened interest on the part of Western publishers.

It was not until 2000 that the number of translations from Bulgarian showed stable growth, which has lasted up until today, despite the global financial crisis of the last few years. The boom in novels written and published in Bulgarian has also initiated a new rise in the translation flow - more than 300 titles have been translated since 2000.

TOP 10 MOST TRANSLATED AUTHORS (1989- 2010)



Predictably, the list of the top ten most translated authors is dominated by both established and emerging **prose writers**. The writers with the highest number of translations into the highest number of languages over the last 20 years are Alek Popov and Georgi Gospodinov, both from the younger generation that emerged after 1989. While offering a reflexive and well-timed perspective on the totalitarian past and the transitional period, their fiction remains in step with the current trends in world literature.

All the top ten most translated authors are contemporary. Several of them, such as Yordan Radichkov, Victor Paskov, and Blaga Dimitrova (a prominent dissident and the first democratically elected vice-president after 1989), among others, played a leading role in connecting Bulgarian culture to the world after the fall of the Iron Curtain. The quality of their works and the strength and firmness of their “voices” serve as a motivation for a whole generation of literary translators from Bulgarian such as the French translator Marie Vrinat; the Italians Giuseppe Dell’Agata, Danilo

Manera, Leonardo Pampuri, and Daniela Di Sora; as well as the Polish translator Hanna Karpińska, among others.

Bibliographic research has made it clear that the list of publishers with Bulgarian titles in their catalogues presents a curious and somewhat baffling mixture of small and large companies, commercial and not-for-profit, mass-paperback and high-profile publishers.

Publisher	Country	N of publications from Bulgarian
L'Esprit des Péninsules	France	17
Makavej	Macedonia	15
Wieser	Austria	13
Voland	Italy	12
Napkút	Hungary	11
Raduga (Радуга)	Russia	8
Actes Sud	France	8
Ivy Press	USA	7

The list, however, is dominated by publishers who have a special interest in minor or “marginal” languages and literatures, no matter how “the periphery” is defined – East European, Balkan, Slavic, Mediterranean, “peninsular”, “endangered”, etc. For example, the top ten publishers include the French L'Esprit des Péninsules (17 titles), the Austrian Wieser (13 titles), and the Italian Voland (12 titles) – **all of them publicly supported and headed by missionary figures** closely connected with the Bulgarian cultural and literary scene. The profile of the most active publishers partly explains **the top ten most frequent target languages**, which include French (87 titles), Russian (77 titles), German (56 titles), English (36 titles), and Italian (31 titles). Nevertheless, one cannot predict whether this tendency will be sustained in the near future, as the long-standing crisis in the humanities and the inert policy of the Bulgarian governmental and academic institutions have gradually led to a reduction in or even the closing of Bulgarian departments abroad. As a result of this, the number of active literary translators from Bulgarian is slowly but surely decreasing.

Although the figures show a factual increase in the translation flow over the last five years, the measures taken for the promotion of Bulgarian literature abroad still seem inappropriate and ineffective. This could be attributed to a number of closely connected factors. **Bulgarian governmental and academic institutions demonstrate a lack of concern or indifference about the weak market position and informational isolation of translators from Bulgarian.** At the same time, most of the existing grant-giving and **promotional schemes are conservative** and oriented towards national culture marketing, instead of stimulating intercultural dialogue and literary communication. Due to the lack of a proactive policy, almost no synergy is observed between public and privately funded institutions nor between the various segments involved in the process,

which makes translation flow and promotion inert, discontinuous, and inoperative. Last but not least, over the last decade **Bulgarian publishers** – the main and sole literary agents at the moment – have proved their skills in following the publishing business’ imperatives when it comes to importing international titles, but are still not active and flexible enough at attracting international attention to the Bulgarian writers in their catalogues. The effects of all this can be traced in the foreign publishers’ records, in which Bulgarian titles still appear in small print-runs, and could hardly ever become steady- or good- (to say nothing of “best”-) sellers. Even more alarming is the fact that **almost none of the interviewed foreign publishers took the risk of including a second or a third title by the same Bulgarian author in its catalogue**. As a result, most of the publications are just “entries” in this remarkable bibliographic list. The real literary “events” can be counted on the fingers of one hand, and the “breakthroughs” with well-positioned publishers of literary translations are more than rare.

The methodology

The methodology developed for this study integrates quantitative analysis (statistics about the most translated authors, most active publishers and translators, as well as the most frequent target languages) and qualitative research approaches, based on more than 60 interviews with key mediators – translators, publishers, academics – who make literary translations from Bulgarian possible. The interviews covered a broad range of topics: from the “seismic zones” of title selection and “export”, to the clogged channels of literary communication; from the translators’ poor training opportunities and working conditions, to the growing deficit of information resources on the contemporary literary scene in Bulgaria. In order to reflect the complexity of its subject, the study is supplemented by **six specially commissioned case studies**, focusing on Bulgarian translations in France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Austria, and the Czech Republic. The above-mentioned countries were chosen due to their traditionally strong interest in Bulgarian literature, as well as their experience in cultivating translators, and even “schools” of translators (as is demonstrated in the Italian case).

The follow-up

Bulgaria is currently the only EU country (except England) that does not have a comprehensive public policy for supporting translations of its literature abroad and for the participation of its authors in international literary exchange. As a part of the project’s dissemination phase, the Next Page Foundation organized a round table discussion on May 18, 2011, at the Goethe Institute, Sofia, which was meant to tackle the possible strategic approaches for such a policy. Representatives from the Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, major publishers, librarians, translators, NGOs and academics debated the issues raised by the study. But while major stakeholders welcomed the Next Page approach of providing recommendations for an evidence-based cultural policy, there is currently little hope that active and adequate governmental commitment and support can be expected any time soon.

Judging from the feedback received since May 2011 to date, it seems that the study has been more enthusiastically received and more actively used outside of Bulgaria – by cultural organizations, publishers and book-event organizers, rather than in the country whose cultural policy it was meant to serve.