

The Russian book industry had actively prepared for the Bologna Book Fair which has been cancelled and is going on preparing and looking forward to the 37th IBBY International Children's Book Congress, which Moscow will host for the first time next year. How is children's book publishing developing in Russia? What support does it need from the government? We address these and some other questions to **VLADIMIR GRIGORIEV**, Deputy Head of the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communications.



Vladimir Grigoryev: The Real Spring Comes to Children's Book Publishing in Russia

The government's task today is to **encourage Russian authors, artists and publishers to think globally and to integrate more actively into the international book landscape.** *Vladimir Grigoryev*

– Mr. Grigoryev, what would you say about the current situation with children's books in Russia?

– My impression is that the real spring is coming to children's book publishing in Russia: everything is bubbling, new interesting projects are actively surfacing. I would bring to notice *Nigma, Leo, A Walk Through History, Pink Giraffe, Samokat* and some other publishing houses. This is largely due to the atmosphere of demand and benevolence that has developed around children's books and, consequently, publishing houses specialised in books for children. A new generation of parents born after the USSR has grown up. Society clearly demonstrates a healthy desire of parents to provide high quality education to their children and to encourage their want to explore the world in every possible way.

The Government is not indifferent either to the situation with children's books. It supports and implements a number of infrastructure projects designed to develop children's book publishing, it encourages young talented authors who write for children and the youth and artists working in the field of children's books.

– To what extent is the Russian children's book unique?

– Naturally, the modern children's book in Russia continues the traditions that originated in the early 20th century, in the still Imperial Russia and the early Soviet years. It is enough to remember the most talented artists of Russian avant-garde, futurism and constructivism, namely Alexander Benois, Ivan Bilibin, Konstantin Somov, Boris Grigoryev, El Lisitsky and Vladimir Favorsky. They all believed it a great privilege to work in book graphics, including children's books. Besides, the illustrated book in France experienced a real boom in the 1920s, largely due to the powerful inflow of artists who emigrated from post-revolutionary Russia.

These traditions were also preserved during the Soviet years, and our own school of book graphics was formed, which gained worldwide recognition. Let us not forget that even the masters of the underground – Ilya Kabakov, Igor Orlov, Eric Bulatov – collaborated with the best Soviet publishing houses *Malysh* and *Children's Literature* in the 1960s and 70s and illustrated texts by remarkable Russian and foreign writers and poets. Many of their works were later included in Russia's golden fund of children's books.

Today Russia has many talented young writers and artists in the children's book industry. The only skill that is scarce there is book producing, i.e. the ability to come up with a task and bring relevant texts and skills of young artists together into new authentic projects for children, which

reflect the Zeitgeist we all perceive. Another challenge for us is in the lack of competence in promoting projects on the foreign book markets.

I believe that Russia has not used enough its enormous potential in this segment of book publishing, primarily because publishers sense a barrier. They limit themselves to their own country or to Russian-speaking readers at most. However, we need to expand our horizons. Actually, a good children's project may be highly desirable anywhere, be that in China, the Argentine or the United States. It seems to me that the government's task today is to encourage Russian authors, artists and publishers to think globally and to integrate more actively into the international book landscape.

– What does Russian children's book publishing need for such integration?

– Our publishers need skills in systemic marketing. Talented people are there, we need to learn how to produce our projects successfully; we want young editors, children's books producers, to think globally and work in close cooperation with their foreign colleagues, gaining international experience in communication.

I think that the new generation of professionals in the book industry, interested in its development, is ready for a dialogue on equal footing with foreign partners; they are eager to participate in international conferences and exhibitions. This will allow us to overcome barriers and make our intellectual contribution into the treasury of global book culture. I think, that children's literature is the first area to make this breakthrough. In fact, this is why I work on these challenges with so much commitment and energy.

On the other hand, the disturbing loss of interest to reading among children is relevant for our country and the rest of the world alike. That is why we developed the *Concept of the National Programme for support of children and youth reading*, where we described the problems, but also suggested possible directions and ways to solve them. My colleagues, who contributed to the document, and I take pride in this *Concept*; we believe, it can be useful to the global book community. Our *Concept* was translated into several languages and is in public domain. We can say that it is our intellectual contribution in support and development of children reading in the world.

– Besides the *Programme*, there is a number of other projects promoting reading among children, implemented with the government support.

– The overriding goal of all our initiatives is to contribute to the nurturing of a highly educated, competent and

I take pride in the Concept of the **National Programme** for support of children and youth reading; it can be useful to the global community. *Vladimir Grigoryev*

competitive generation of Russians, who will have to respond to the challenges of our time at a high intellectual level and solve many problems that are still with us. We have created a whole range of contests and projects to identify talents – from junior school students up to well established young writers. We offer *The Living Classics* – a reading and declamation contest for 10 to 13 year-old participants (it brings together 2 million schoolchildren from all 85 regions of the Russian Federation); *Class* – a contest for teenagers of 14 to 15 years old, where its participants are invited to write a fiction story on suggested topics, evaluated by professional writers; *Kniguru* – a contest for the best literary work for children and the youth; literary prize *Lyceum* for young prose writers and poets of 17 to 30 years old. This range of contests is crowned by a number of major literary awards, including the national literary prize *Big Book*. In addition to that, regional *Schools of Creative Writing* are actively developing, where young writers can pave their way into literature, and the *All-Russian Forum of Young Writers* convenes, where we invite the best and most talented of them and where their works are discussed by leading writers and poets.

All experts note that a new talented generation of artists and writers is growing up in Russia. The only thing we need is to open the door for them, give them confidence that their work is relevant and properly present them to the international book community. It is necessary to wake them up, bring them together and allow them to create, without limiting themselves to the demands of big city bookstores or libraries in 85 regions of the Russian Federation. We should always remember that we live on the planet, where more than 1.5 billion people read Chinese, 1 billion – English, 700 million – Arabic and 350 million – Spanish, and all of them face the same challenges of maturing. When editors working with talented writers and artists start thinking in these terms, magnificent children's projects will be born.

– **How is Russia preparing for IBBY-2021 Congress? What will be in focus?**

– I wish all our publishers, editors, artists and writers attended the Congress in Moscow. For many of them, this is the first opportunity to communicate with peers from other countries and take part in dozens of professional events. It is

important that this Congress may be the first, but, let us hope, not the last event of this sort in their career. Visits to this kind of intellectual fora, which facilitate creative and professional growth, should be included in every publisher's or editor's calendar.

Naturally, Moscow will offer its best sites to IBBY Congress delegates. We plan to organise a number of exhibitions of books and illustrations, show the Moscow International Book Fair (MIBF) and open doors of the best Moscow museums. It is a pity, that the Congress convenes just for 3 days, but for those who have a couple of extra days, we are ready to show the beauty of the Russian capital and much more. As an *aperitif* or *digestive*, we plan to offer trips to St. Petersburg, Kazan, Vladimir, along the Golden Ring, to Sochi and even to lake Baikal and to Kamchatka. In any case, we will not limit ourselves to the book agenda, the event will be a befitting presentation of Russian culture and history.

– **The year 2021 will bring us another not less significant event – the First Moscow International Children's Book Fair in partnership with the Bologna Book Fair. Do you already know what will be the format of the event and its main options?**

– We are very grateful to our colleagues from Bologna for their help and participation in creating the Moscow International Children's Book Fair. As it is a start-up for us, we will hold the first event within the traditional venue of the Moscow International Book Fair. However, the Children's Book Fair will become an independent event with a separate venue and its own programme. Our friends from Bologna and we are in anticipation of this coming festival of the book.

– **What would you wish to Russian publishers of children's books?**

– Think big and trust your talents. Expand your horizons, look for new authors and new projects all over the world, translate them into Russian. However, do not keep your own talents in secret and promote them overseas. Be open to dialogue and integration, encourage intensive cultural exchange in this multifaceted and amazing world.

*Interview by Svetlana Zorina,
Editor-in-chief, Book Industry Magazine*

We are very grateful to our colleagues from Bologna for their help and participation in creating the **Moscow International Children's Book Fair.** *Vladimir Grigoryev*