

# The Austrian Library in Belgrade: A Space that Connects Culture, Education, and International Cooperation

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper examines the role of the Austrian Library in Belgrade as a contemporary cultural and educational center whose activities extend beyond the traditional frameworks of library functions. Special attention is devoted to the Library's program activities—literary meetings, workshops, exhibitions, film screenings, and language skills development programs—which engage audiences and promote contemporary Austrian culture. These programs contribute to the development of reading literacy, critical thinking, and lifelong learning, while simultaneously creating an open and stimulating space for intercultural dialogue, creativity, and the interconnection of diverse communities. The analysis of these activities demonstrates that the Austrian Library functions as a vibrant cultural hub that contributes to community development and strengthens cultural ties between Serbia and Austria.

**KEYWORDS:** Austrian Library in Belgrade, cultural and educational programs, lifelong learning, intercultural dialogue.

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## 1 Introduction

Libraries as cultural centers have long ceased to be an exception and have become a common phenomenon. They have established themselves globally as places that, in addition to their core functions, bring together broader

communities and provide opportunities for a wide range of cultural and educational content. As institutions oriented toward a highly heterogeneous audience, they bridge generational and ethnic divides, and through international cooperation, cultural divides as well. The Austrian Library in Belgrade operates as a special unit of the University Library “Svetozar Marković.” It was founded as part of the international initiative of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs of Austria (Bundesministerium für europäische und internationale Angelegenheiten – BMEIA) as part of a wide network that has been active for 40 years and consists of a total of 65 libraries. With its distinctive structure and diverse programs, the Austrian Library in Belgrade represents one of the outstanding examples of a library as a cultural hub.

## **2 Cultural and Educational Activities**

Austrian Libraries in host countries are not merely libraries in the narrow sense of the word, but also vibrant cultural centers. Their mission is to promote Austrian culture, science, and the German language. In addition to functioning as “academic satellites of Austria abroad,” they also serve as information and cultural centers, which, in cooperation with cultural forums and representations of the Republic of Austria in the countries in which they operate, organize cultural and scientific events and constitute an important part of Austrian cultural policy abroad (Angelegenheiten 2020, 225). The significance of these libraries is evidenced by the fact that more than one thousand cultural and educational activities are organized in them annually (according to the most recent report, a total of 1,066 events were conducted in 2024 alone (Marinkovic 2025)). In this spirit, the Austrian Library in Belgrade has developed a rich program since its founding, which is free of charge and open to all interested citizens, including those who are not members. Literary meetings, workshops, film evenings, and exhibitions are organized, and particular attention is drawn to language cafés and board game days, where German language is learned through conversation, play, and socializing in a relaxed atmosphere.

## **3 Literary Program**

Libraries hold strategic importance in the development of literacy and reading competencies, as they provide access to literature and promote a culture

of reading, and given their potential to reach a large number of people, they represent ideal venues for advancing literacy. Contemporary approaches to learning and the concept of lifelong education have led to a broader understanding of literacy, which is today defined as a set of functional and transferable knowledge, skills, and strategies developed throughout one's entire life through social interaction (Pavlović Babić and Baucal 2010). PISA defines reading literacy as the ability to understand, use, and evaluate texts, as well as the ability to reflect on the text read and to engage with it in order to achieve personal goals, develop knowledge and potential, and participate in society (Mo 2019). Reading literacy, therefore, does not entail merely the basic comprehension of written material, but also a critical approach to texts. With this in mind, the Austrian Library in Belgrade has carried out a series of activities aimed at promoting reading, critical thinking, and creative writing. These activities have included literary meetings, book launches, literary competitions, as well as workshops and competitions for writing literary reviews.

Literary meetings hold particular significance, as they provide the local audience with direct contact with contemporary Austrian literature and its authors, who have presented their new books at the Library—and in several cases, the first translations of their works into Serbian. Through readings and discussions, attendees gain the opportunity to more thoroughly understand literary currents, themes, and the social context in which contemporary works are produced, while the dialogue with authors opens a space for vibrant cultural exchange. This direct encounter and interaction between authors and audiences contributes to the broader cultural reach of such events, as literature transcends the boundaries of text and becomes a medium for intercultural connection and mutual understanding. The Austrian Library in Belgrade has to date hosted the authors: Gerhard Blaboll, Karin Peschka, Raphaela Edelbauer, Margarita Kinstner, Iris Blauensteiner, Bianca Tschaikner, Magdalena Schrefel, and Goran Novaković.

In collaboration with the Department of Germanic Studies at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, thematic literary evenings titled “Chatting about Books” (Ger. *Buchgeplauder*) have also been organized. The selection of titles reflects the intention to distinguish this event from the many similar ones, and through its informal character, to attract a younger audience and encourage participation in reading and literary discussions. The program, launched in October 2025, is conceived as a monthly series with a summer recess, and each gathering focuses on the work of a single significant author of Austrian literature. The opening two programs were devoted to the creative

work of Rainer Maria Rilke and Ernst Jandl. The program is divided into two segments: the introductory, educational and theoretical part presents participants with a brief biographical and bibliographical framework, as well as a review of the significance and reception of the featured author's work, both in the context of their own era and in the contemporary context. The second part of the program is interactive in character and involves audience participation through the analysis of the author's texts and open discussion, or through creative writing workshops. Within these workshops, participants are encouraged to write their own texts, drawing on the poetics, style, and technique of the featured author. Ernst Jandl's poetry proved to be particularly well-suited for such activities, given its unconventional form and the fact that he himself invited readers to experiment with his technique.

In April 2023, in collaboration with the Goethe Institute, the Embassy of Austria, the Austrian Cultural Forum, and the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, a literary review writing workshop was organized. The instructors were Ines Scholz from the Austrian Society for Literature (Österreichische Gesellschaft für Literatur) and Tino Schlench, a young German author, journalist, and creator of the literary blog "Literaturpalast." The workshop was divided into two parts—theoretical and practical—and as preparation, participants were assigned to read the work *Alles was glänzt*, the debut novel of the young Austrian writer Marie Gamillscheg. In the first part of the workshop, participants were introduced to techniques for the analysis and interpretation of contemporary literary works. The second part comprised a series of practical exercises, the first of which was focused on the analysis and comparative examination of different types and formats of literary reviews. For this exercise, the instructors selected three examples: one literary review from the Austrian weekly *Falter*, one from the German weekly *Der Spiegel*, and reviews published on the social media platform Instagram. During this segment, participants were engaged through discussions with the instructors, after which they had the opportunity to engage in writing a literary review in one of the formats covered, and subsequently to discuss their work with one another and with the instructors, exchange ideas, and give and receive advice and suggestions. The workshop was held at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. All participants received certificates of participation, and students of German Studies at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade were able to earn ECTS credits<sup>1</sup> as a supplement to their diploma. The language used during

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1. ECTS – European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System. ECTS credits are awarded for the student's total workload, which includes active coursework (lectures, exercises, seminars, colloquia, examinations, thesis), professional internship,

the workshop was German, which enabled direct engagement with contemporary German literature and provided participants with the opportunity to advance their German language skills at a higher and more specialized level.

Due to the great interest and highly positive impressions of the workshop participants, it was decided that this program would be repeated the following year, with Ines Scholz once again as instructor. This time, the workshop was conducted in an online format, with the aim of enabling participation from different cities. As in the previous year, participants were assigned to read a literary work selected by the instructor prior to the workshop—on this occasion, the novel *Herr Kato spielt Familie* by the Austrian writer Milena Michiko Flašar. The structure of the workshop remained unchanged, consisting of a theoretical and a practical part, and participants again received a certificate of participation.

In addition to these workshops, the Austrian Library has contributed to the development of writing skills through the organization of competitions. Participants had the opportunity to engage in writing literary reviews, as well as in literary competitions on assigned topics, submitting works in the format of short stories or poems. With the support of partners such as the Austrian Cultural Forum, the Goethe Institute, and Austrian lecturers from the University of Belgrade and Novi Sad, the Library organized six competitions—three literary and three literary review competitions. Upon the conclusion of each competition, award ceremonies were held at which participants read their works, and all received prizes for participation. Furthermore, all submitted works were published in collections issued by the Library in online format. Through these initiatives, the Library and its partners seek to provide participants with additional encouragement, ensure the visibility of their creative work, and recognize the effort invested. The program has been held annually since 2019, on the occasion of World Book and Copyright Day, and the Library intends to continue organizing these competitions each year, thereby instituting an enduring tradition of cultivating the written word and giving young people the opportunity to showcase their creative skills.

One notable outcome of the call for workshop participation relates to the structure of registered participants. Approximately one-third of workshop attendees did not belong to the fields of philology and the humanities, but rather to various disciplines within the natural sciences (Џидић and Ђелић 2022). A similar, though somewhat less pronounced, structural pattern was observable among participants in the literary competitions, and was partic-

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and independent study, and are required for the successful completion of individual courses, semesters, academic years, and the entire program of study (author's note).

ularly evident among attendees at other cultural activities of the Library. Such a diverse audience composition may be interpreted as an indicator of the Library's potential to contribute, through this type of engagement, to the formation of a broader academic and cultural community. Similar results have been observed by colleagues at other Austrian Libraries; Blaženka Klemar Bubić, head of the Austrian Library at the Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb, notes: "The numerous programs organized by the Austrian Library attract not only students of German Studies and their professors, but also students from other academic programs, as well as people who are not directly associated with the Faculty of Philosophy. In this way, contacts and friendships are established that can lead to the initiation of new collaborative projects (Klemar Bubić 2019)."

The literary programs at the Austrian Library are therefore of exceptional significance, as the Library, through the implementation of such activities, not only promotes Austrian literature, but also fosters creativity and the development of critical thinking, while building an active and internationally connected community of young authors and readers.

### **3.1 Film Evenings**

As early as 1972, the UNESCO Public Library Manifesto emphasized the need for audiovisual materials in public libraries, both for adults and for children. The following year, the Round Table on Audiovisual Materials was created within IFLA, encompassing all "non-book resources" or—according to another definition—all documents whose use requires appropriate equipment (Royan and Cremer 2004, 5). Although the Austrian Library in Belgrade formally operates within an academic library, one of its key objectives, as emphasized by its founding institution BMEIA, is to attract as broad a public as possible and to present Austrian culture to diverse target groups. In accordance with these objectives and the IFLA guidelines, the Austrian Library in Belgrade provides its users not only with access to films from its own DVD collection, but also with organized screenings of Austrian cinematic works beyond the Library's collections. Thanks to the support of the Austrian Cultural Forum, which acquires screening rights on behalf of the Library, a series of film evenings (Ger. *Filmabende*) dedicated to contemporary Austrian cinema have been organized. The screenings are free of charge and open to all interested visitors, and are frequently accompanied by a discussion of the film shown. To date, more than ten films have been screened, and the Library intends to continue this activity, given the considerable interest and highly positive impressions of attendees.

### 3.2 Exhibitions

Although the contemporary library strives to follow the needs of its users and respond to their expectations, it must not lose sight of its fundamental role as a guardian of knowledge and an educational institution in society. In practice, this means that a library should not merely satisfy the needs of its users, but also guide and inspire them, foster their personal and intellectual development through the provision of high-quality cultural content, and introduce them to subjects that were previously unfamiliar to them. Exhibition activity in libraries is not a product of contemporary society; rather, it has accompanied their development throughout history in various forms—from zoological specimens displayed in the ancient Library of Alexandria, through the so-called “cabinets of curiosities” (Ger. *Wunderkammer*) of Renaissance Europe, in which richly decorated books were exhibited alongside numerous precious objects, to the contemporary thematic and artistic exhibitions that can be seen in libraries around the world today. They serve to highlight library collections, enhance the user experience, and enable users to participate more actively in community life (Ng-He 2019), to stimulate curiosity and affirm creativity (Ng-He and Meinke 2022).

The thematic exhibitions organized by the Austrian Library fulfill precisely this role, addressing significant historical periods, notable figures, and important connections between Austria and Serbia. They are accompanied by concisely prepared bilingual catalogs (in Serbian and German) and interactive content, which render them accessible and appealing to both experts and the general public, while the compiled bibliography serves as an excellent starting point for further independent research work. Each exhibition entails the presentation of representative publications from the Library’s collections that thematically complement the exhibited content. Special emphasis is placed on younger audiences, to whom the Library seeks to present the featured themes in a contemporary and visually engaging manner through interactive or multimedia elements such as films and podcasts (Џидић and Ђелић 2022), enabling them to acquire new knowledge. Among the exhibitions realized to date, the following stand out: “Intellectual Beauty: The First Distinguished Serbian Women Educated in Austria in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century,” “Notes from Immeasurable Thirst: Franz Kafka (1883–1924), on the Occasion of the Centenary of the Author’s Death,” and “Disputed Memories: Bogdan Bogdanović (1922–2010), on the Occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Renowned Architect’s Birth.” An additional value of this program lies in the fact that the exhibitions are realized as traveling installations, which, following their initial presentation in Belgrade,

visit numerous cities throughout Serbia with the support of the Austrian Cultural Forum. The quality and relevance of these programs is evidenced by the fact that the exhibitions of the Austrian Library have been received with great interest at host institutions. This is reflected in high attendance, positive comments from local audiences, and the fact that the Library frequently receives inquiries regarding future exhibition projects that could be hosted by these institutions.

### **3.3 Language Skills Development Programs**

As an incentive for learning German and a support measure for those already studying the language, the Austrian Library has organized, in addition to the aforementioned literary programs, various activities aimed at language skills development, such as language cafés (Ger. *Sprachcafés*) and board game days (Ger. *Spieltage*). Language cafés were organized in collaboration with Austrian lecturers and interns, and participants had the opportunity to converse on various topics in a relaxed atmosphere. To ensure that participants always had a topic for discussion and could easily initiate a conversation, the organizers prepared a selection of topics that would be interesting and accessible to a wider number of attendees. At each language café, native speakers of German were also present, which provided participants with the invaluable experience of direct communication with a native speaker. These activities represent a significant contribution to the development of language competencies, particularly in situations where the language is being learned outside its natural speech environment and learners have no opportunity to engage with the language outside the instructional process.

The Austrian Library's board game days were conceived as a continuation and programmatic expansion of an activity organized by the University Library "Svetozar Marković" on the occasion of the International Games Day—an initiative launched by Jenny Levine and Scott Nicholson, with the institutional support of the American Library Association (ALA). The aim of the initiative was to reconnect communities with libraries through the educational, recreational, and social values of various types of games (AASL 2026). The concept was for libraries around the world to connect by simultaneously playing the Global Gossip Game (a version of the telephone game) online, while also offering visitors a variety of board games for use within the library on that day. The initiative, which in 2007 was first conceived as a National Games Day, grew into an International Games Day due to an exceptionally positive public response, then into an International Games

Week, and since 2022, the entire month of November has been designated as International Games Month. The University Library “Svetozar Marković” joined the initiative in 2014 with the support of the American Corner, which contributed part of its extensive board game collection and participated in the organization. Since 2016, the Austrian Library has assumed organizational responsibility for the program and integrated it into its regular annual schedule of activities, continuing the successful collaboration with the American Corner and expanding it through new partnerships with the Goethe Institute, the Austrian Institute, and the Austrian Cultural Forum, which contribute to the realization of the program by lending board games in German. Thanks to the Austrian Cultural Forum, several new board games were also acquired for the Austrian Library’s collection. Special attention is paid to the educational potential of the selected games, with a preference for those that stimulate conversation and contribute to the development of language competencies. An additional value of this concept lies in the fact that certain games are thematically designed to familiarize participants with the history, geography, and culture of German- and English-speaking countries, thereby simultaneously enhancing language competencies and broadening general knowledge in an interactive and accessible format. In this regard, the inclusion of games in German and English has further strengthened the program as a platform for informal learning and intercultural exchange, in addition to fulfilling its primary purpose of attracting users to the Library and fostering social interaction. Given that this activity has been met with an excellent response and highly positive impressions from visitors, board game days are also organized independently of International Games Month, and the program is now held multiple times throughout the year.

Both of the aforementioned activities—language cafés and board game days—represent a significant form of programmatic work aimed at connecting the community with the Library and encouraging the active participation of users. More broadly, they enable participants to connect with one another, exchange experiences, and engage in informal learning, particularly in the areas of language acquisition and improvement. Thanks to the relaxed atmosphere and the absence of formal frameworks, a stimulating environment is created in which participants communicate more readily, express their opinions more freely, and overcome the fear and inhibitions that more formal modes of instruction or institutional settings often engender.

### 3.4 Programs for Young Children

Data from studies on the long-term effects of early education point to the significant role of this approach in the development of cognitive competencies in children, while major educational reformers such as Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey emphasized the importance of the child's active participation in the learning process, a stimulating environment, and the balanced development of cognitive, emotional, and practical abilities. Early access to education and the provision of an environment in which a child's mind can develop independently in a safe and stimulating setting are therefore essential for the development of the child's intellectual and moral capacities, and libraries can support this by offering a secure, neutral space and carefully designed interactive programs. The Austrian Library has sought to include in its cultural and educational program activities intended for the youngest users, and its collection holds more than eighty books for children and young adults. On several occasions, group visits by school-age and preschool-age children were organized in collaboration with the German School in Belgrade. The program was carefully prepared in accordance with the age of the various groups and included numerous activities such as reading workshops, storytelling sessions, and interactive introductions to the function, significance, and organization of a library. For example, during readings of selected stories, children were encouraged to ask simple questions and discuss the behaviors and decisions of characters, with the aim of developing critical thinking and understanding the importance of good choices. In addition, through these programs, the Library seeks to cultivate a love of reading and nurture curiosity, encouraging new generations to experience the Library as a space of inspiration, learning, and play. Although children are not the primary target group of academic libraries, there are valid reasons for including programs intended for the youngest users when conditions permit. Ultimately, today's children are potential future university students and users of academic libraries. As Richard M. Dougherty, former Director of the Library at the University of California at Berkeley and President of the American Library Association (1990–1991), observes: "Today's five-year-old who is struggling to acquire language skills will soon be entering college. The challenges we now face will not be resolved quickly or easily. If the library is truly to become an information resource, rather than just a repository of books and journals, it is of critical importance that academic librarians become involved in the efforts of their colleagues and help children become successful readers and successful students (Dougherty 2022)."

## 4 Effects of Program Activities

One of the key challenges facing the Austrian Library in Belgrade—a challenge that is, unfortunately, not uncommon in contemporary library practice—relates to attracting and retaining audience in the long term. Given that the Library's collection consists largely of literature in German, one of the primary target groups comprises students of the Department of Germanic Studies at the Faculty of Philology of the University of Belgrade. Nevertheless, despite a carefully selected primary and secondary literature, as well as the benefits the Library offers—free membership and the possibility of borrowing up to ten publications for a period of one month—the challenge of stimulating greater interest and developing a stable community of regular users remains. One factor contributing to this situation may be the Library's physical location. Although it is located within the University Library, an institution that brings together a broad academic community, conversations with students and academic staff of the Faculty indicate that they frequently prefer to use libraries situated in the immediate vicinity of their home department, such as the library of the Department of Germanic Studies or the library of the Goethe Institute. In this context, the cultural and educational programs organized by the Library acquire additional significance, as they represent not merely a supplementary activity, but an important instrument of visibility and a mechanism for connecting with potential users. An analysis of the programs implemented to date demonstrates that it is precisely literary meetings, workshops, film screenings, and interactive language programs that serve as primary mechanisms for attracting new users. Visitors who come to the Library for individual cultural and educational programs frequently return as users of its services, which indicates that programmatic activity can play a significant role in the gradual formation of a stable reading community within the Library.

Positive effects of programmatic activities have also been observed at the individual level. Valuable insights into the significance of these activities from the perspective of participants themselves have been gathered through written and oral evaluations. A considerable number of attendees indicated that participation in the programs contributed above all to the development of their language competencies, while also enabling the establishment and strengthening of contacts beyond their usual social circles. Furthermore, the involvement of individuals who in an academic context are most commonly perceived as authority figures—such as university lecturers and library staff—in informally structured activities contributes to the development of

mutual trust and a feeling of confidence in communication, and ultimately to the creation of a pleasant atmosphere that extends beyond the boundaries of those activities.

In the area of international cooperation, the Austrian Library has, over the course of its many years of engagement, established a reputation as a reliable partner. As an initiator and participant in numerous programs, it has consolidated existing partnerships and expanded its network of new collaborators. The positive experiences and outcomes of previously implemented activities have resulted in the Library continuously receiving new offers for collaboration—whether from partner institutions wishing to involve it again in their projects, or from authors who, following successful presentations of their works at the Library, express interest in returning as guests. In addition, partners frequently recommend the Library to other institutions and individuals as a trustworthy collaborator. Such results indicate that the programs of the Austrian Library, in addition to achieving their cultural and educational objectives, contribute significantly to the development of international, as well as national partnerships, and to the expansion of a cultural network that connects a diverse audience. In the broader context, the Austrian Libraries have, for forty years, steadfastly and successfully promoted Austrian culture, particularly in Central and Southeastern Europe, where they are most widely represented. They constitute a reliable platform for intercultural dialogue and the development of cultural networks beyond the borders of individual states, foster international research, and contribute to a deeper mutual understanding of cultural traditions, which represents a prerequisite for a peaceful, stable, and prosperous Europe (Безпала 2025).

## **5 Conclusion**

Over the course of more than twenty years of existence, the Austrian Library in Belgrade has grown into a fully-fledged cultural and educational center within the expansive network of Austrian Libraries in 28 countries across Europe and Asia. Through literary meetings, exhibitions, workshops, and language programs, reading, critical thinking, and lifelong learning are fostered. These activities enable the development of linguistic, cognitive, and social competencies, while simultaneously contributing to the interconnection of cultures and creating an interactive and welcoming environment for the learning and cultural development of visitors. All of the aforementioned activities further position the Library on the map of significant cultural events in Belgrade, while through the programs of traveling exhibitions and

online workshops, they contribute to the cultural and educational offering throughout Serbia. At the same time, these activities attract new reading audiences, stimulating interest in books and reading, and thereby contribute to the formation of new generations of regular users. In conclusion, it may be noted that the Austrian Library does not neglect its traditional role either, but dedicates itself to cultivating the existing reading community and working systematically toward its further expansion and development.

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