

Heritage and beyond, Council of Europe, 179-182, 2009.
ISBN 978-92-871-6636-4

South-Eastern European Digitization Initiative, SEEDI

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South-Eastern European Digitization Initiative (SEEDI) is an international effort to develop awareness about digitization of cultural and scientific heritage in South-Eastern Europe (SEE), and to bring together:

- Archivists, librarians and curators responsible for the preservation of and permanent access to cultural and scientific heritage;
- Information technology researchers developing projects on digitization of cultural and scientific heritage,
- Scholars in the arts and humanities, social sciences, history and computer science, students and all the other interested in digitization of and access to cultural and scientific heritage.

SEEDI aims to reinforce professional competences in the region, and to foster communication with European and other international centres having similar scientific and practical interest in digitization of scientific and cultural heritage.

Digital preservation of and access to cultural and scientific heritage resources involves knowledge and techniques from a number of specialized fields – including but not limited to various branches of computer science, library and information science, museology, archival science. Practical work in this field requires up-to-date knowledge on technologies and research achievements, but also satisfying the specific needs of the local institutions. All that demands careful coordination of activities to integrate isolated research groups towards agreement on a common set of recommendations and forming real-life collaborations. Through several projects (MINERVA, MINERVA+, MINERVA eC)¹ EU-countries emphasized importance of such systematic activities and intended to discuss, correlate and harmonize work carried out in digitization of cultural and scientific content, to promote recommendations and guidelines about digitization, long-term accessibility and preservation. Unfortunately, the practice in SEE still does not match the priorities communicated at the top EU-level within the Digital Library Initiative, one of the flagship initiatives of the i2010 programme. In this region there is a rich cultural content, but still underrepresented in the electronic space; this is due to the lack of policies and systematic actions supported by the government bodies in the region. Another common concern of the regional heritage institutions nowadays is the adoption of brand-new information and communication technologies in the sector which relies on different priorities in the budgeting of cultural institutions.

To help the development of joint activities of international teams from the region and increase local capacities, a group of professionals decided to launch the South-Eastern European Digitization Initiative in 2004. SEEDI was initiated by the participants of the International Conference "New Technologies and Standards: Digitization of National Heritage 2004" held in Belgrade, Serbia, after the round table organized to facilitate future cooperation, and following the Borovetz declaration² on the development of digitization of scientific and cultural heritage in SEE (which formalized the cooperation between researchers from Belgrade, Serbia, and Sofia, Bulgaria). Currently, SEEDI involves representatives from the following SEE countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Turkey. However, from the very beginning of the initiative, many European colleagues outside the region were involved in the activities: from Czech Republic, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Russia, Spain, Ukraine etc.

The main goals of SEEDI are:

- To build awareness of the need for digitization of cultural and scientific heritage in the region of SEE;

¹ <http://www.minervaeurope.org/>

² Borovetz declaration, <http://elib.mi.sanu.ac.rs/files/journals/ncd/4/d015download.pdf>

- To mobilize the human and material resources existing in the region;
- To mobilize SEE countries to participate in the SEEDI;
- To prepare guidelines for national strategies in the field of digitization of cultural and scientific heritage, as a recommendation for the SEE-countries;
- To improve the communication between centers and people having an interest in digitization of cultural and scientific heritage and to disseminate scientific and practical information in the field;
- To create core groups of specialists, which would be able to consult, assist, monitor and develop innovative technologies and digitization projects collaborating with the local cultural and scientific heritage institutions;
- To facilitate the formation of projects in the field of digitization of cultural and scientific heritage that would include partners from the South-Eastern Europe;
- To foster collaboration between the EU and South-Eastern Europe countries.

SEEDI uses several outreach channels:

- Annual conferences, workshops and other types of meetings;
- The journal “Review of the National Centre for Digitization”³, published both on paper and in the electronic form;
- The web-site⁴, a mailing list, etc.

For the five years of its existence so far, SEEDI organised five events (Belgrade, Serbia, 2004; Ohrid, FYROM, 2005; Sofia, Bulgaria, 2006; Cetinje, Montenegro, 2007; Belgrade, Serbia, 2008). The 2009 conference will be held in Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Each of the conferences was attended by approximately 70 to 100 participants that presented their projects, experiences and concerns. Also, the conferences attracted world-wide recognized experts from the EU, USA, Japan, and Egypt as invited speakers.

“The Review of the National Centre for Digitization”, is a journal published by the Faculty of Mathematics, Belgrade, since 2002. It features special issues with the subtitle “SEEDI communications” which serve as a forum for publishing tutorials, refereed research reports and selected papers presented at the SEEDI-conferences, and other documents related to SEEDI, in accordance with the general scientific policy of the journal. In that way, the journal plays a role in promoting digitization practices and consolidating the professional community in the region and it is one of the very few

³ Review of the National Centre for Digitization, available: <http://www.ncd.matf.bg.ac.rs/?page=publications&lang=en>

⁴ SEEDI, <http://www.ncd.matf.bg.ac.rs/seedi/>

professional journals on digitization. Representatives of SEEDI participated in a number of meetings organized by the MINERVA community.

In 2006 SEEDI made a regional survey⁵ on the experience and achievements in digitization which was structured along the national research done earlier by MINERVA. This survey helped to gather data on the organizations which shape the national policies in digitization and accessibility online and on the institutions which already have done work on this area, The survey clearly demonstrates that the situation in the countries of the region vary; governmental regulation is generally not in place except in Croatia; a serious issue for the future would be the quality of resources and the interoperability; the drivers of digitisation work are most often research groups while in EU the cultural institutions play a basic role in this process. The survey was supported by the Central European Initiative, CEI⁶.

In the several years of its existence SEEDI developed as an informal network of professionals; it is worth noting that this network functions without any regular external support. The current goal of the initiative is to set up a permanent infrastructure in close cooperation with leading EU experts, which would be able to monitor new developments and trends, integrate and further develop currently fragmented local knowledge, facilitate the use of existing standards and promote the definition of best practice, preparing the SEE institutions to participate in the future EU-initiatives in the field of digitization. One of the areas for future development is improvement of professional education targeted to specialists from the region. The existence of SEEDI helps to keep in touch, but structured professional programmes are needed and would be of great benefit to the region.

The members of SEEDI believe that the strategic impact of this initiative is the mapping of local practices to bring them in line with EU standards and increasing local awareness. This would be of benefit both for the digitization field development in SEE, and for the interested parties from the EU, as well as for the citizens that will be able to get higher quality cultural and scientific heritage resources from the region. This would be made possible through the increased availability of diverse materials in electronic form, which would be presented in a more consistent way, and in addition to this, interlinked. SEEDI tries to help to make a step from small scale projects to integrated large-scale resources. If we refer to the famous saying that the trip of a thousand miles starts with the first step, SEEDI might be seen as this first step in the South-Eastern European region towards a cohesive regional presence in the cultural heritage digital resources space.

⁵ Cultural and scientific heritage inventory and digitization in South-Eastern Europe (ed. by N. Ikonov, M. Dobrova), 2006, available: <http://www.ncd.matf.bg.ac.rs/seedi/documents/documents.html>

⁶ <http://www.ceinet.org/home.php>