

Legal Information Centre at the National Library of Russia – Ten Years of Successful Work

Abstract: Elena Shishmolina writes about the foundation and growth of the work of the Legal Information Centre in the National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg, including information about its website and electronic guides.

Keywords: national libraries; law libraries; Russia; online services

Introduction

The National Library of Russia, situated in Saint Petersburg, was founded on 27 May 1795. Subsequent events in Russian history have affected the library's development. With the beginning of the digital age, the library changed from a storeroom and "a quiet place for reading" into an institution actively applying information technologies. Several departments of the library deal with legal information provision from printed sources. Supplying readers with electronic data is a function of the Legal Information Centre which opened in the library over ten years ago – on 26 October 1999.

In the early 1990s the first steps towards providing public access to legal information were made in Russia. The starting point of this process was the adoption of several decrees such as the presidential decree "On arrangement to accelerate foundation of legal information centres" and "conception of legal information support in Russia" in 1993. The beginning of the 1990s was a period when the first versions of legal databases were available to the Russian market.

The interdepartmental programme for establishing a nationwide network of legal information centres based on public libraries was adopted in 1998. Several organisations were engaged in implementing this programme, including the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation and the UNESCO Information for All Programme Russian Committee. According to this Committee¹ there are now nearly 1,400 legal information centres working in Russia.

One of the important factors showing the level of information literacy, which is closely connected with legal literacy, is both the number of internet users and the



Elena Shishmolina

penetration of the internet. According to the Internet World Stats², in 2009 there were 42.25 million internet users in Russia and internet penetration was 32.3 per cent, whereas the penetration rates varied from about 60 to more than 80 per cent in leading countries. Between 2007 and 2009 internet penetration in Russia increased from 20.8 per cent to 32.3 per cent.

During the implementation of the state policy of legal literacy promotion in the 1990s there were several problems which have only recently been completely resolved. These included the

lack of transparency of the state, federal and local authorities and insufficient levels of both legal and computer literacy. Russian legal scholar S.S. Kozlov noted:

"Contemporary Russian legislation is complex and has a multi-faceted hierarchical structure. It has many variant readings, confusions in definitions, parallelisms and conflicts as well as concurrent norms and institutions. Since the territory where it is applied is large, and because of the Federal structure of the Russian state, Russian legislation has different mechanisms to solve similar problems in various regions for various categories of citizens, and on the various levels of political hierarchy..."³

Because of this, Russia needs a stable working network of legal information centres and this network should be developed.

The Legal Information Centre

The Legal Information Centre in the National Library of Russia provides information services using modern

Legal Information Centre at the National Library of Russia

technologies to improve the legal literacy of the public and to give information support to the professional activities of specialists including lawyers, economists, ecologists, etc. Legal information is provided using electronic legal databases and there is considerable and growing information in these databases. The National Library of Russia has several partners supplying the centre with the legal information systems which include comprehensive collections of Russian legislation and articles from legal and economic journals. International treaties, to which Russia is party to are also included.

Many specialists have a legal information system in their workplace, but commercial organisations usually buy for their employees only one or two portions of a database. Legal databases which are available in the library contain all the portions including legislation from all the Russian regions. The legal database suppliers are constantly developing and offering new services for consumers. For example, visitors to the Legal Information Centre can get not only documents but also a written response to their questions by a lawyer via the internet, with the help of the library staff.

On past experience it would help if clients who need to take legal advice could first get a basic knowledge of legislation. Since the opening of the Legal Information Centre more than 40,000 people have visited it. Over 300,000 documents have been retrieved in response to requests from readers, which shows that legal information is in great demand in Russian society. Twenty to thirty people attend the Centre daily.

The Centre offers several services including:

- Assistance to people by giving legislative information so that they can petition the government or local authorities and prepare for trial;
- Learning in the use of legal databases;
- Information support to the students and professors;
- Information support to professional activities of lawyers, economists, ecologists, etc.;
- Assistance to migrants from the states of the former Soviet Union in finding information about renaming of settlements – i.e. their previous dwelling places.

After the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 the former republics achieved independence and this resulted in the renaming of many administrative and territorial entities. The citizens of the former Soviet Union who migrated to Russia attend the National Library of Russia to get information on renamed settlements.

The centre's services are most popular with students, lawyers, cultural workers, engineers and pensioners.

There are several popular topics of information requests, notably social protection for elderly and disabled persons, including their entitlement to state benefits; housing problems; consumer rights and issues relating to small businesses. The economic crisis and



Figure 1: Opening of the Legal Information Centre



Figure 2: Legal Information Centre, Reading Room



Figure 3: Learning to use legal databases

harsh conditions in the labour market mean that there is great interest in employment legislation. Some readers visit the centre to find out how to apply to the European Court of Human Rights. People involved in the



Figure 4: The New Building of the National Library of Russia

consequences of the accident at the Chernobyl Atomic Electric Power Station enquire about the availability of state benefits.

Thus, the diversity of readers' information requests is a positive factor showing good prospects for the centre's future development. The spectrum of information needs is fast widening and is not limited to legislation. Many readers' requests are at the intersection of various disciplines including history, economics, political science and law. Articles from Russian and foreign periodicals on law and economics are in high demand by researchers. Besides legal databases which contain articles from Russian periodicals, there are several other databases available in the National Library of Russia in which articles from foreign periodicals may be found, including: DOAJ – Directory of Open Access Journals, Annual Reviews, Cambridge Journals Online, Oxford Journals, SAGE Journals Online, Springer, Wiley-Blackwell, etc. Readers can find information on journals in the database Genamics JournalSeek and information on books in Global Books in Print.

The Legal Information Centre works in close co-operation with other sections of the library. Nowadays the



Figure 5: Interior of the Library's New Building

centre is a valuable source of legal and economic information for a wide range of readers, as well as an important department of the National Library of Russia.

The work of the Centre's librarians is not limited to research for legal documents and resources. As German scholar Vogel wrote, "Librarians should be a part of the learning community..."⁴. The Legal Information Centre actively participates in the students' learning process. Librarians at the centre are currently developing a textbook on legal information research methods. This survey will be distributed to major high schools in Saint Petersburg.

Guides

Often our librarians need to search for legislation relating to the states of the former Soviet Union. One of the important tasks for the Legal Information Centre is to provide internet users with guides to a wide range of resources on law and economics. We have developed the web-site: <http://www.nlr.ru/lawcenter/eng/>: which is in Russian as well as in English. As German scholars Vogel and Haug noted, "collecting and making accessible internet resources that are freely available is rapidly becoming a core responsibility of libraries"⁵.

Users can find on the website: '<http://www.nlr.ru/lawcenter/eng/> electronic guides; catalogues of links to printed publications and internet resources on law and economics. There are two guides to electronic resources: legislative resources and economic resources, and two guides to printed editions: official periodicals and periodicals. The total number of resources listed in these four guides is about 3,100, 720 of which are printed resources. A keyword search is also available.

The legislative resources on the internet guide consists of two parts – Russian and foreign resources. It provides a broad range of links to websites of the federal and local state authorities of the Russian Federation plus links to websites of international organisations, websites on legislation and government systems of different countries, law libraries, etc. There are a wide variety of specialised portals and, electronic periodicals for lawyers, economists, librarians, scientists, engineers, and employees of state and public organisations, which aim to protect the rights and interests of citizens. Visitors to the site can find details of information centres and agencies, of law firms, of universities which have law departments, and of legal information centres supplying citizens with socially significant information. The guide to economic resources via the internet gives structured information including the sites of the financial institutions of the Russian economy, analytics and economic forecasts, international agencies and financial institutions. All the journals and newspapers included in the guides are available in the library.

The number of users of the Centre is growing, with our specialists replying to requests from all the Russian regions as well as from other countries by e-mail.

The website was launched in 2001 and the number of visits has grown from 200 to more than 2,500 visits a day. Use of the English version has increased from 20 visits a day in 2008 to about 130 in 2009.

Conclusion

By integrating the library's resources with commercial databases and internet resources, the Centre is playing a part in the evolution of a central legal information service in Russia just as Russian libraries in general are playing a leading role in the building of civil society. Over recent years two federal laws which regulate public access to information have been adopted: the Federal law *On providing access to information on the activities of government bodies and bodies of local self-government*⁷, which came into force

on 1 January 2010; and the Federal law *On providing access to information on the activities of courts in the Russian Federation*. This law came into force on 1 July 2010. Basic principles, including methods of providing access to information, the rights of information users, requirements for providing access to this information, liability for violation of procedures for access to information are all fixed by these laws. However, to improve legal information provision in Russia, the following tasks still need to be adopted:

- Implementing practical measures to ensure observance of the adopted laws;
- High motivation of state authorities to create and develop centres where access to legal information is organised for the public;
- Creation of a new government programme to improve legal literacy.

Footnotes

¹<http://www.ifap.ru/>;

²<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm>

³S.S. Kozlov. (2006) O nekotoryh vozmozhnostjakh razreshenija kollizii v uslovijah pravovoy sistemy sovremennoy Rossii. *Vestnik MGTU*, volume 9, №1, 155 (On some possibilities of solving juridical clashes in conditions of the legal system of contemporary Russia)

⁴Ivo Vogel. (2008) From our own correspondent... New Developments in German Law Libraries. *Legal Information Management*, 8, 139

⁵Ivo Vogel and Dr Jochen Haug. (2007) The Virtual Law Library – a Portal in Progress for Legal Information in Germany!? *Legal Information Management*, 7, 201

⁷<http://www.svobodainfo.org/info/page/eng?tid=633200098&nd=458221824>

Biography

Elena Shishmolina is currently Bibliographer at the Legal Information Centre of the National Library of Russia, Saint Petersburg. Prior to this she worked as an information specialist in advertising.

Address

Legal Information Centre
18, Sadovaya Street
St. Petersburg, Russia, 191069