

# BIBLIOTEKS BLADET

## THE WHISTLE- BLOWER

Highlighting the  
problems comes  
with high cost.

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## TRUST HAS BEEN DAMAGED

Turbulence raises  
questions among  
Swedish members.

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THE IFLA ISSUE

## Fear and Loathing in The Hague

*The library world should  
have been modernised.  
Instead it was chaos.*



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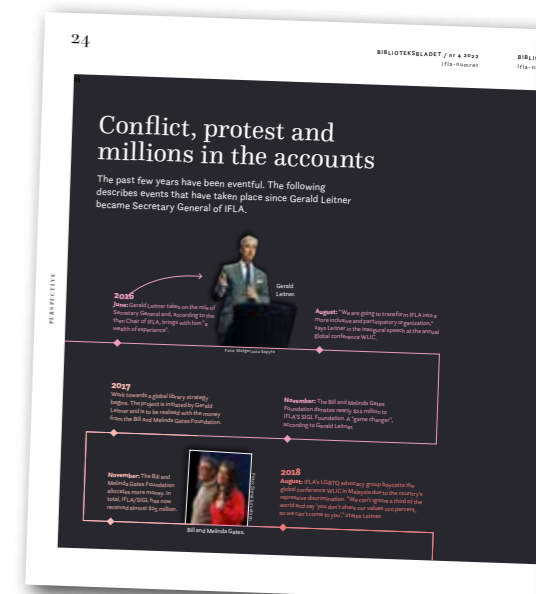
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Photo: Niklas Nyman

## Lisa Bjurwald, reporter

THE AWARD-WINNING journalist and author Lisa Bjurwald has written a report about the international library federation IFLA for this issue.

Bjurwald is the author of books such as *BB-krisen*, *Europas skam*, *Gärningsmannen är polis*, *Skrivbordskrigarna*, and more.

She is also CEO of Bite the Bullet Press.

Her upcoming release is the timely book *Slava Ukraini!* (January 2023), in which she portrays the resistance struggle of Ukrainian women during the war that will mark Europe and the world for many years to come.

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BIBLIOTEKSBLADET / N° 4/2022  
The IFLA issue

# Väck läslusten med lättläst!

Vinnare av  
Lättlästpriset  
2022



## Sommaren på Österlen

Jan är beredd på tristess när han en sommar på 60-talet följer med sina föräldrar till huset de hyrt. Men så möter han Ivar och får istället en sommar fylld av hyss, skrapår och äventyr. Är ryktena om de som bor i

trakten verkligen sanna? Pojkarna ska ta reda på sanningen på egen hand. *Sommaren på Österlen* är Mikael Bergstrands första bok på lättläst.



## Fest med förhinder

Rolf och Ingrid drömmer om en trädgårdsfest till Ingrid's födelsedag. Men hur ska det bli fint när grannen vägrar städa sitt skrotupplag till trädgård? Och hur ska de hinna nu när Ingrid inte längre är hemmafru. Kommer det alls bli en fest?

*Fest med förhinder* är varm feelgood från 60-talets svenska landsbygd.



## En jul tillsammans

Det är december och Maj och Lennart njuter av sitt första gemensamma julstök. Men Maj kan inte sluta tänka på det där Lennart sa på första advent. Om att de kanske skulle ta och gifta sig. Nog är de för gamla för det? Boken är en fristående uppföljare till *Sköna Maj* som har lovordats som högläsningsbok och som vann Lättlästpriset i år.



## Odla grönsaker inne

Du behöver varken ha trädgård eller balkong för att kunna odla. Det räcker fint med en solig fönsterbräda. *Odla grönsaker inne* berättar väldigt tydligt i text och bild hur du kan odla till exempel tomater och basilika inomhus.

Nominerad  
Årets Trädgårds-  
bok 2022  
Stockholms  
Gartnersällskap



The Swedish Library Association is a non-profit and politically independent association with the purpose of promoting libraries of the highest quality. Biblioteksbladet reflects the actions and opinions of the Association but also aims to stimulate debate by giving space to other expressions of opinion. Biblioteksbladet is publicisticly independent and is operated on the basis of Sweden's Freedom of the Press Act.



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Lätt att läsa. Lätt att förstå.

# Empty words about freedom of speech. Many expect more from a global library organisation.

**I**n April, IFLA's Governing Board announced that Secretary General Gerald Leitner had been relieved from his duties. This was at a time when an email from a Board member was circulating, testifying to a toxic atmosphere at the Federation's headquarters in The Hague, and that independent investigations into the staff's situation had been carried out. One member of the Board demanded the resignation of the Chair. What was really going on?

For any journalist, it would have been a mistake not to ask questions.

It has taken a great deal of effort to get any answers at all.

One of IFLA's core values is based on Article 19 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression. This right includes freedom to hold opinions without repercussions, and seek, receive and disseminate information and ideas with the help of all means of expression and regardless of boundaries.*

IT SHOULD BE easy to have a dialogue with an organisation that has these words ingrained in its identity. But since Biblioteksbladet published the first article on the turbulence within IFLA, the support for Article 19 has in practice turned out to be nothing but empty words.

They are just superficial sentences to which leading IFLA representatives seem to relate with alarming flexibility.

The representatives have refrained from answering questions. Instead of dispelling ambiguities, attempts have been made to have the Swedish Library Association's Secretary General Karin

Linder intervene and stop articles from being published in Biblioteksbladet, which the Association owns.

"If I don't do it, the sender is threatening to hire a lawyer," she wrote in her opinion piece in this issue.

Many people expect more from the world's leading library organisation.

IF THE PRINCIPLE of freedom of opinion and expression were taken seriously, current and former IFLA employees would not fear reprisals and not shy away from recounting what they have experienced at work.

The owner of an editorially independent newspaper would not face threats of legal action.

Also, the leadership and Board of the Federation would answer justified questions.

This issue of the Biblioteksbladet is devoted to the situation within IFLA. The image of a dysfunctional organisation, in which the removal of a leading person will hardly be enough, comes to the fore. It will probably take significantly more if IFLA is to recover.



Thord Eriksson | Publisher, editor-in-chief

BIBLIOTEKS  
**DAGARNA 2023**

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# Fear. Illness. Silence.

TEXT LISA BJURWALD | ILLUSTRATION TZENKO STOYANOV

What is happening within IFLA? In search of answers, journalist Lisa Bjurwald travelled to The Hague, where IFLA's headquarters are located. She found a culture of silence and an organisation that lacks confidence in its leaders.

# T

he city of The Hague brings to mind Slobodan Milošević and other warlords dragged in front of the International Criminal Court. However, IFLA's dismissed Secretary General Gerald Leitner has committed no war crimes, and the hearing is to take place in the Labour Court. The comments about him are not exactly flattering, and comes from people

with former or current IFLA connections, who have chosen to speak out about Leitner's rule, which now appears to have ended. According to our sources from within IFLA, those who supported him paint a different picture: "amazing", "radiant" and, indeed, "charismatic".

GERALD LEITNER joined IFLA in 2016 after being recruited from a similar role in Austria, where he was praised for his work. Leitner brought with him a wealth of experience, as it was then called. IFLA highlighted his role as former president of the European Bureau of Library, Information and Documentation Associations (Eblida), his more than 25 years of working in the library world, and his experience in the global library sector. Gerald Leitner was the perfect candidate.

But it went downhill relatively quickly. In April of this year, IFLA issued a brief press release announcing that the Secreta-

ry General had been relieved from his duties with immediate effect. It was "the only possible solution to the current situation", according to the Governing Board. The parting with Gerald Leitner was the culmination of a turbulent time that spanned several years. The working environment at IFLA's headquarters in The Hague is said to have been very problematic. Some have even described it as "toxic". In the autumn of 2021, some 20 former IFLA employees called for action, and investigations were carried out. In March, the Governing Board made a decision to relieve him from his duties.

THE HEARING of Leitner v IFLA is due to start at eleven o'clock on a Thursday in early October. The Hague, the seat of the Dutch government and of hundreds of international organisations, could not be more different from the bustling capital, Amsterdam. Much of the city centre is made up of anonymous skyscrapers and glass buildings. A typical "briefcase city" whose impenetrable façade should prove very suitable for a review by the International Library Federation.

I have travelled down from Stockholm and am in the court building 50 minutes before the hearing is to take place. It's a stormy autumn day and people are rushing in through the heavy gates of the court and on to the mandatory bag checks. There is a long queue to the metal detectors and umbrella after umbrella is stacked on the conveyor belt. I don't see anyone from IFLA or any press. However, the large building is full of lawyers, defendants and plaintiffs rushing around between the courtrooms. I get coffee from the small cafeteria. The clock is ticking.

»The staff didn't leave voluntarily, but were forced out.«

Many issues remain now that Gerald Leitner has been relieved from his duties. One of the most important involves the following: Stichting IFLA Global Libraries, SIGL, is the IFLA foundation (based at the same address and with several former IFLA chairs on the Board), which was established in 2016 to manage the millions donated by the American "Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation", the world's largest charitable foundation. Remarkably, Leitner is still Secretary General of SIGL.

How can he be forced away from one chair, but remain on the other?

Is Gerald Leitner, through his position within SIGL, actually as influential as before?

Will he be awarded the huge sum of 1.5 million euros in damages that his representative is said to be demanding for the dismissal?

It turns out that Leitner's dismissal was not conducted correctly. IFLA has not complied with Dutch law, according to information obtained by Biblioteksbladet. This has put IFLA in a position where Leitner can claim damages. According to certain sources, the dismissed Secretary General believes that IFLA was a bad employer. The Governing Board's Treasurer has therefore recommended that an offer of financial compensation be made to him.

IN OCTOBER, at the time of writing, Gerald Leitner is on sick leave and relieved of his duties. IFLA is in limbo as far as leadership is concerned:

"His contract gives him a full salary for the first year of sick leave and, I think, 70 per cent if there is a second year."

The question therefore remains

whether IFLA can appoint a new Secretary General during Leitner's sick leave, regardless of the issues around how the appointment will take place, and which people would be considered.

A leaked internal email shows that Gerald Leitner took sick leave on 3rd March this year. However, the Board meeting at which it was decided to relieve him from his duties was not held until the next day, 4th March. Did someone provide him with information that made him decide to take sick leave? According to Dutch law, it is much more difficult to dismiss a person who is on sick leave than one who is not.

ANOTHER CENTRAL issue relates to IFLA's internal culture and the well-being of its employees. If the management remains faithful to a boss who allegedly created an atmosphere of terror in the headquarters and harassed the staff, how can a change in the workplace environment be possible? Is the management even interested in an

## This is Ifla

◆ IFLA — the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions — has more than 1,500 members in over 150 countries, on all continents.

◆ The organisation's vision is a unified, global library sector that contributes to literate, informed and involved communities. This is to be achieved by inspiring, strengthening and connecting the sector.

◆ The members include institutions (56 percent), individuals (33 percent) and national library organisations (9 percent). These are mainly found in Europe (44 percent). This is followed by North America (24 percent), Asia and Oceania (18 percent), Sub-Saharan Africa (5 percent), Latin America and the Caribbean (5 percent) and the Middle East and North Africa (4 percent).



- improvement? In addition, many believe that Gerald Leitner has not been alone among the bosses in creating a bad atmosphere.

Several former and current employees at IFLA's headquarters at 5, Prins Willem-Alexanderhof in the centre of The Hague, an address shared with the Royal Library and the Museum of Children's Books, compare Gerald Leitner to an animal. Some liken him to a rooster in the female-dominated library world, strutting around as though he ruled the roost. One of the sources is careful to point out that the "hens" are not stupid. On the contrary, the women in Leitner's sphere are highly educated and intelligent, which says something about his ability to charm anyone.

Another person I speak to describes Gerald Leitner as a lion who stands out in the stylistically more modest culture, with his impressive salt-and-pepper quiff, well-tailored suits and freshly polished Italian-leather shoes:

"He smells of power and money, like a character in a cheap novel."

HOWEVER, having egocentric traits is not a criminal offence. What exactly has the dismissed Secretary General done that is so terrible, that employees are said to have quit and taken sick leave in their droves?

"First of all, it's not just him, but also the managers around him," says a source with insight, who, after much email and telephone contact, has finally agreed to meet physically at a restaurant in Holland. We can call the person by the gender-neutral name 'Kim'. Kim is eloquent, committed and very credible.

## »IFLA is driven by nepotism and corruption.«

"And the staff didn't leave voluntarily, but were forced out. Their goal is to purge everyone who has been critical of the leadership - including me."

### Why have you been critical?

"Where to start? IFLA is driven by nepotism and corruption, and they have their hooks in most of the internal staff, to be able to demand their loyalty. It means that people are scared and stay silent."

BIBLIOTEKSBLADET HAS previously reported that two investigations of the working environment were carried out by external consulting agencies. One person reveals that one investigation report had only been made available to Board members who were physically in The Hague in March 2022. After reading it on the spot, they had to return the documents.

The investigation cleared Gerald Leitner of suspicion of harassment, bullying and similar accusations. According to the same person, however, the investigation in question only exonerated him of the accusations by a single whistleblower, which is an important point: many other employees had raised their voices.

I ask my source, Kim, in Holland, in order to make absolutely certain:

### Do these investigations exist?

"Yes, and that's almost the worst part of it all," Kim replies. "We spoke out and cooperated with the consultants, we told them everything. Then all our information was ignored, and the Board now claims ►



- that there is no evidence of harassment or culture of silence. It's unbelievable."

Several sources confirm that a large number of current and former IFLA employees gave detailed testimonies to the external consultants about Gerald Leitner's behaviour and the harmful culture of the workplace. But IFLA's management has chosen to obscure the results of the investigations. In a leaked email dated 3:rd March from Danish board member Kirsten Boelt, British board member Ayub Khan and former Treasurer Perry Moree, who has now left due to health reasons, they express their dismay at the findings of the investigation – which echo the findings of the first investigation.

Thus, contrary to IFLA's official position, there has never been any internal doubt as to what the consultants' reports have revealed:

"Their conclusions, which are the result of the (24) interviews, support completely the conclusions that were mentioned earlier in the earlier report by Van den Brekel Advocaten," write the three board members.

"It is a very dark picture that is sketched, of an organisation in complete distress, with many very unhappy staff and (...) a 'culture of fear', resulting in some cases in serious health problems and people who consider leaving IFLA HQ. Words as 'toxic' and 'unsafe' are often used to describe the work situation at IFLA HQ. The situation has been going on for five years.

ALMOST ALL interviewed staff state that immediate change is necessary, but they have no confidence in the Secretary General [Leitner] (almost half of them

thinks he should be replaced, or at least no longer be responsible for the day-to-day business operations of the organization), or in the management skills of the three directors. The work pressure is described as 'insane'. (...)

The three of us think the situation is extremely serious and that the reputation of IFLA could seriously suffer from a long period of neglect of grave issues at IFLA HQ. We strongly believe that immediate action is necessary. (...)"

**Is the court case of Leitner v IFLA a chance for those affected by all this to get redress?**

"It could have been, but IFLA is represented by a person who is very close to Leitner," says Kim. "So it's all just for show, as with everything IFLA does."

The person who, according to many sources, is very close to Leitner, is Board Chair Barbara Lison — the only one on the Board who opposed the relieving of Gerald Leitner of his duties.

HOW CAN LEITNER remain in the foundation (SIGL) that manages the millions from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, when he has had to leave the post of IFLA Secretary General?

"Because they have done the same thing there as at the headquarters: removed those who raised critical voices," Kim replies. "When the management received the open question from the staff about why Leitner had not been asked to leave SIGL's Board, they simply brushed the question off, or refused to answer it at all. It is, incidentally, a common procedure within IFLA – that they simply do not answer questions that they perceive as negative or awkward." ►

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► Internal documents show that SIGL's bylaws changed after the staff criticism of Gerald Leitner. Among other things, SIGL is now named as the employer on some employees' contracts, and not IFLA. No one we speak to can explain why, other than noting that IFLA's SIGL foundation seems to be taking on an increasingly large role. SIGL is chaired by Glòria Pérez-Salmerón, President of IFLA 2017-19. Pérez-Salmerón is also said to be very close to Gerald Leitner. Leitner himself, deposed Secretary General of IFLA, is still Secretary General of SIGL.

It is not only employees who are affected by the culture of silence, notes Kim, but also Board members:

"Those on the Board who dared to be open with the truth about various Board decisions – such as the incredible salary increases for Secretary General Leitner – have been threatened with legal action."

The few Board members who did express concern about IFLA's methods had to endure being yelled at, says another person from within:

"Gerald Leitner had a special gesture where he put his head in his hands as if the others were real fucking idiots. So I think there was an element of intimidation there. But Leitner was also surrounded by a kind of cult of those in seniority positions. They thought he was absolutely amazing."

IT TURNS OUT that Gerald Leitner had a record wage increase during his time at the helm of IFLA. His predecessor is said to have received about 100,000 euros in salary per year. When Leitner took office in 2016, he received around 158,000. Given his high profile compared to that of his predecessor, this is nothing unusual in itself. In inter-

»After I left, I spent a whole week in bed, depressed.«

national management contexts, you often have to pay more for a "star".

"The first employment contract was valid for three years," our source continues. "But in April 2017, only one year after he started, he had a salary increase of 30,000 euros. Leitner's salary thus rose rapidly from 158,000 to 188,000 euros. His contract was also extended until 2024."

Then there was another leap – because when Gerald Leitner left his post last spring, his annual compensation package suddenly stood at 336,000 euros.

"So decisions must have been made between April 2017 and spring 2022 that increased the wages by a massive 148,000 euros. Who made these decisions, and where were they registered?"

The source above is very involved in the Federation's activities, one of a core gang of "about 20 people" trying to "save IFLA", as they put it themselves. Others have a desire to move on to new jobs. These have been difficult times for IFLA, notes a former key figure, Antonia Arahova, who declined to be interviewed. Arahova was the prospective Chair of the IFLA but abruptly resigned from the Board this spring due to family reasons, at the time of the announcement that Gerald Leitner was leaving his post.

The organisation needs time to "heal", as Arahova writes via email:

"IFLA's Governing Board has promised to take clear steps to handle the situation and will report to its members about this frequently and transparently. ►

- (...) I wish my former GB-colleagues all the best in their efforts to improve the situation.”

**GERALD LEITNER'S CHARM** has earned him many female fans in the library world, but it seems to stick in the eyes of many, as does his high salary and frequent travelling. According to Leitner's contract, he is allowed to travel in business class instead of economy if the flight is longer than 4 hours. This is a policy that executives at many large companies and foundations enjoy, such as IFLA's financier, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

It's hard to summarise how much Gerald Leitner has ruined other people's lives, notes a former employee who chose to resign.

”It took me six months to get over the experience of working at IFLA. I pray to God that justice will be done.”

”Leitner didn't scare me, even though he yelled at me quite a few times,” the person continues. ”But his behaviour was unbelievably disgusting. After I left, I spent a whole week in bed, depressed. Female employees were so stressed that they stopped menstruating. An elderly woman basically lost her mind.”

Gerald Leitner is said to have yelled at employees on numerous occasions, asked senior managers to fetch coffee and tea, thrown paper over a desk, and behaved ”arrogantly”. It's a leadership style that is on the border between inappropriate and downright reprehensible.

**IN MANY CASES** it's one person's word against another's, and here the management's lack of transparency – both externally and internally – has a large impact.

Withholding information about the organisation's operations from employees is not a sustainable attitude. The staff's dissatisfaction cannot be swept under the carpet endlessly. The first complaints against Leitner by the staff came to the attention of the leading persons on the Board (not the entire Board, according to sources) already in the summer of 2019. The more the employees were neglected, the greater their frustration became. Even then IFLA was characterised by an ”us versus them” atmosphere, with managers and Board members against employees.

One employee describes such strong animosity and distrust that it is ”often difficult to work properly”. Several employees have plans to quit in 2023.

”In recent years people have been resigning or going on sick leave, constantly”, said another insider. ”These are people's lives we're talking about.”

IFLA now faces the challenge of attracting new employees when the old ones quit. Sooner or later, the rumour will spread in library and cultural circles, if it has not already happened, that IFLA is a chaotic and unattractive workplace.

**EARLIER THIS AUTUMN** for example, Adjoa Boateng left the role of Chair of the IFLA Professional Council, which meant that she also lost her place on the IFLA Governing Board. According to her own statement, she has been threatened and slandered for bringing to attention the problems within the organisation. ”Lack of information, blackmail, intimidation. Rules and procedures are twisted to suit. The entire situation and story are unbelievable,” Boateng wrote, in a leaked internal email last spring. In the email, she appeals for



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ÄVENTYRET  
KAN BÖRJA

## »IFLA members need to know the truth.«

- help to save IFLA, including by calling on Chair of the Board Barbara Lison to resign.

Adjoa Boateng was scheduled to be interviewed for this article – but at the last moment she declined, seemingly out of concern for possible consequences. I tell that to my source, Kim, at our meeting in Holland. In my contact with Kim, I have often had to repeat my reassurance of anonymity and protection, and that their identity will not be disclosed.

**Several other people have expressed the same fear of speaking out. What exactly are you afraid of? What can the management do to you?**

”What can’t they do?” Kim replies. ”Anyone who is critical or questions something, basically anything, gets punished and shunned. Several employees have openly told their bosses that they felt unsafe and afraid in the workplace. After that they were mocked and it was implied that they were just imagining things.”

**A NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES** who spoke out critically during the investigation of Gerald Leitner’s leadership are said to have had their employment contracts terminated.

”Many have given up. IFLA members need to know the truth. The only option now is for the sufficient number of staff members to come together and enforce the holding of an extraordinary meeting about the future of IFLA.”

The employee who resigned and told me that it took six months to get over their

experiences, says this about the future of IFLA:

”When I worked there a few years ago, there were 22 of us. I think I was the 20th to quit. We need some sort of justice, now.”

**IN THE LABOUR COURT OF** The Hague, the clock keeps ticking. I am glad that I took a packed lunch with me. Finally, some representatives from IFLA appear. They laugh excessively loudly, as if participating in an invisible theatrical performance. It’s odd behaviour in the face of what should be an uncomfortable meeting with a dismissed boss.

However, neither the main character Gerald Leitner nor his representative are on site. It is now closer to 1 o’clock and I contact both IFLA’s and the court’s press services as well as the building’s information desk to understand what is happening. No one is able to get any information other than that the legal hearing should have started at eleven. However, the guards point out, it is not displayed on any of the screens in the courthouse: ”You must have got the day wrong.” IFLA’s team is gone for good. Is it all some kind of scam?

After five hours, I leave the court without having seen any glimpse of Gerald Leitner. No trial has taken place. Maybe he’s not even in the country, a source suggests. Another guesses that IFLA’s Board, which is said to have close ties to Leitner, has settled the case amicably. I call IFLA’s communications department again. No answer.

It is a strategy that IFLA has always used for my attempts at contacting them: silence. This is interspersed with a nonsensical response from Acting Secretary General Helen Mandl on 14:th October:

”As this is a court case, IFLA has no comment to make at this time. When we release a statement, you will find it on our website.”

Not even IFLA’s communications department, whose mission it is to assist the press, has been able to arrange an interview with any IFLA representative. This is despite the fact that we, the media, then have to resort to using anonymous sources. This kind of reticence is not good no matter what kind of company or person in power is involved. It is especially bad in the case of IFLA, which operates in a domain whose core values are freedom of expression, knowledge and information. If there is no attitude of openness, it is difficult to maintain credibility. Not least for the members.

**JULIA ZVOBGO-ROZENBOOM** was the IFLA Communications Officer, but also Chair of the ERB, the staff council, at IFLA headquarters. When she left these posts in May 2022, she handed in a long and eloquent resignation letter, in which she lamented that the Federation had failed both ethically and morally. She revealed that when the staff voiced their concerns they were met with direct mockery from the management at a meeting in April:

”Staff stated concerns about their safety regarding the Secretary General’s [Gerald Leitner’s] behaviour and the SIGL Chair [Glòria Pérez-Salmerón] chose to respond by laughing hysterically and asking us... ‘are you afraid he will kill you?’ No, the fear is about being on the receiving end of inappropriate and harmful behaviour which we’ve experienced.”

On 31 October, IFLA announced via a post on its website that the federation has



reached an agreement with Gerald Leitner. He will formally leave IFLA in the new year. Several people on the current Governing Board have seen the report with staff testimonials about Leitner. None of the Board members can be ignorant of the criticism of his leadership. Nevertheless, IFLA’s Board has chosen to release their statement as follows:

”Contrary to the rumours, Gerald Leitner has never been found responsible for any legal or contractual errors. No investigation has found any signs of fraud or harassment.”



■ *Former Secretary General Gerald Leitner, IFLA Chair Barbara Lison and SIGL Chair Glòria Pérez-Salmerón have been given the opportunity to comment on the situation within IFLA and the statements and allegations in this article.*

# Conflict, protest and millions in the accounts

The past few years have been eventful. The following describes events that have taken place since Gerald Leitner became Secretary General of IFLA.



Gerald Leitner.

Foto: Malgorzata Sopylo

## 2016

**June:** Gerald Leitner takes on the role of Secretary General and, according to the then Chair of IFLA, brings with him "a wealth of experience".

**August:** "We are going to transform IFLA into a more inclusive and participatory organisation," says Leitner in the inaugural speech at the annual global conference WLIC.

## 2017

Work towards a global library strategy begins. The project is initiated by Gerald Leitner and is to be realised with the money from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

**November:** The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation donates nearly \$22 million to IFLA'S SIGL Foundation. A "game changer", according to Gerald Leitner.



Foto: Steve Jurvetson

Bill and Melinda Gates.

**November:** The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation allocates more money. In total, IFLA/SIGL has now received almost \$25 million.

## 2018

**August:** IFLA's LGBTQ advocacy group boycotts the global conference WLIC in Malaysia due to the country's repressive discrimination. "We can't ignore a third of the world and say 'you don't share our values 100 percent, so we can't come to you'," states Leitner.

## 2019

**July:** An IFLA employee testifies on poor leadership and unacceptable working conditions. "Nobody should have to call in sick because of low mood, anxiety, and depression caused by bullying and threatening behaviour..."

**August:** The global library strategy is launched, a goal Gerald Leitner had set when he was interviewed for the job of Secretary General, according to his own statement.

## 2021

**October:** Several former employees send an email: "Staff turnover is high and sick leave is at such a high level that the Board should react." In the same month, another co-worker testifies about harassment. Two investigations are called for.

## 2020

**October:** The witness testimony in July 2019 leads to the start of all work environment-related events being documented. Management is informed that more than 80 percent of employees have experienced workplace harassment.

## 2022

**March:** IFLA's Governing Board decides to relieve Gerald Leitner of his duties.



Adjoa Boateng.

**April:** Board member Adjoa Boateng addresses the other Board members in an email: "... we are in crisis." She calls for the resignation of Chair Barbara Lisbon. A press release is published stating that Gerald Leitner has been relieved of his duties. "... the only possible solution," according to the Board.



Barbara Lisbon.

**August:** Adjoa Boateng writes in an email that she has been threatened and slandered since spring. "For speaking out, listing the facts, asking questions and being transparent, I am labelled by the IFLA President as having 'behaviour that is detrimental to IFLA!'"

**July:** IFLA members in several countries sign calls for an independent inquiry. A plan for the future survival of IFLA is presented by the Governing Board at the annual global conference WLIC.

**October:** Gerald Leitner is absent from court proceedings in The Hague. IFLA later announces that an agreement with him has been reached.

# Out of Step with the Times

There was also testimony of an outdated leadership style in his previous place of work. Nevertheless, Gerald Leitner was given the task of modernising the global library sector.

TEXT THORD ERIKSSON

**W**ith Gerald Leitner as Secretary General, IFLA would continue to grow as a dynamic, influential and global brand in the library world. This was stated by the then Chair of the Board when Leitner was appointed, just before Christmas 2015. His promise was to unleash IFLA's full potential to serve the global library sector.

BIBLIOTEKSBLADET interviewed him in connection with the sector's world congress, WLIC, in Kuala Lumpur 2018. There, he seemed to rush between the seminar rooms, always with something to say about the fact that libraries need to evolve in step with the times in order to remain relevant. Always impeccably dressed in a suit, and with language loaded with dramatic terms ("action", "change",

"risk"), he seemed set to turn up the temperature in the generously air-conditioned halls of the convention centre. It was clear that he wanted to evoke crisis awareness among the assembled library representatives from all over the world.

"To motivate people and get them on their feet, you have to use words that seem relevant. Many at the conference are managers, but there are also hundreds of thousands of people in the library world who are not interested in change," he said, over breakfast at the five-star Grand Hyatt hotel right next to the convention centre, after WLIC had just closed.

**THE STRESS** and anxiety of hosting 3,500 faithful library representatives had begun to dissipate. After breakfast, he visited the spa at the luxury hotel.



## TOWARDS THE FUTURE?

Gerald Leitner speaks at the inauguration ceremony of WLIC in Columbus, USA, August 2016.  
Photo: Ifla/CC BY-SA 2.0

So did he think that people in the library sector are too reclusive and don't realise they need to move with the times?

"No doubt a lot of people have that attitude and maybe that's one reason why we have to use such strong words to make it clear that

they have to be part of this movement," he said.

By "movement" Gerald Leitner was referring in particular to the common strategy for the world's libraries that IFLA was about to implement using a ten-year funding programme from the Bill

and Melinda Gates Foundation. He described the money as a "game changer", and the strategy as a necessary investment for the future.

He said the idea was his own.

"I was interviewed for this job and came up with it then. Fortuna- ►



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► tely, a vision for tackling the challenges of globalisation and new technologies was something that the IFLA executive committee also felt was exactly what was needed.”

WHEN HE TOOK office as Secretary General in the summer of 2016, he was already known in international library contexts. Between 2005 and 2012, he was Chairperson of the European Bureau of Library and Documentation Associations (Eblida) and had been a member of IFLA's Governing Board since 2012. In particular, he had been the managing director of the Library Association in his native Austria for almost two decades.

It was a workplace plagued by the same kind of turbulence that the testimonies from IFLA would later describe.

”In the years before 2016, there was a considerable fluctuation of staff,” writes his successor Markus Feigl in an email. ”It was also difficult to transform the operational culture from the previous very centralised management style focused on the managing director to a more collegial management style.”

This might as well have been a cautiously diplomatic summary of

»Change is, of course, constant, but when I arrived it accelerated.«

what was stated by IFLA employees.

Markus Feigl notes that he has no idea how his predecessor got his top job in The Hague. How could someone with such obviously outdated leadership ideals be tasked with making people and organisations move in step with the times?

MANY QUESTIONS about what happened at the headquarters in The Hague and how Gerald Leitner can continue to be Secretary General of the IFLA Foundation SIGL, recipient of multimillion-dollar support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, seem to remain unanswered. Since he was relieved of his IFLA duties last spring, silence has been the media strategy of the management, the Board and Leitner himself.

When the interview in Kuala Lumpur was carried out in 2018, it was just over 18 months since he

became Secretary General. It might have been too early, but the question was asked:

**What legacy do you want to leave?**

”Change is, of course, constant, but when I arrived it accelerated,” Leitner said.

Just as this article is being written, a little over four years later, an email arrives from Leitner. There is no content other than a link to a press release, in which IFLA Chair Barbara Lison announces without further explanation that his contract for the post of IFLA Secretary General will be terminated at the end of this year.



■ Gerald Leitner has been given the opportunity to comment on the statements in this article.



# The Whistleblower

Suzanne Reid was an employee representative at IFLA headquarters. She has since changed careers and recovered from the experience. IFLA she feels, however, is beyond rescue.

TEXT THORD ERIKSSON PHOTO EZILDA PÉLISSIER



**ON A NEW TRACK**

Suzanne Reid didn't return to IFLA after she recovered from her depression. She now runs a business in tourism and event in southern France.

**T**here are warnings of an autumn storm in the hilly landscape of the southern French département of Aveyron. Suzanne Reid has to windproof and rainproof her home, a 17th-century stone house that she bought a couple of years ago. Here she started a new life, far from IFLA headquarters in the Dutch administrative centre, The Hague.

In her previous role, she was responsible for IFLA's contacts with its members. Another of her workplace commitments was the post of Chair of the Employee Representation Body (ERB), a staff council which represents employees' viewpoints to IFLA management.

"I imagined that frank discussion would get things moving in the right direction. I know that many people are not comfortable speaking openly about issues, while I myself have that ability and consider it a personal asset. Therefore, I gladly placed myself as a buffer between management and staff."

**I**N JULY 2019, an employee at the headquarters sent an email to their colleagues, the Governing Board of IFLA and the important financier the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation simultaneously. The email described poor leadership and unacceptable working conditions.

"Nobody should have to call in sick because of low mood, anxiety, and depression caused by bullying and threatening behaviour. Nobody should have to cry in the toilets because of poorly-managed workload. Nobody should have to feel isolated and totally uninvolved in the workplace. Nobody deserves to be shouted at," the employee wrote.

Through the staff council, Suzanne Reid informed IFLA Secretary General Gerald Leitner that what was described could be defined as harassment and bullying, and that Dutch legislation supported the initiation of documenting events at headquarters in a special incident log.

"My intention with the log was to have a professio-

nal approach so that management would understand that we took the situation seriously. I hoped that this would create meaningful discussions about how the situation could be improved."

The log was used to collect employees' experiences of harassment, bullying and other negative aspects of the psychosocial work environment. The testimonies, according to Suzanne Reid, described shouting and threatening language, as well searching through emails, depriving employees of their professional freedom through detailed control of all tasks, and the bosses taking sole credit for the employees' hard work.

**A**T THE INITIATIVE of the staff council, a code of conduct was drawn up. Such a document had not existed before, according to Suzanne Reid, and without clear guidelines on what is unacceptable, it is difficult to argue that someone is behaving incorrectly.

The staff council also conducted an anonymous survey in which all staff were invited to participate and share their experiences working at headquarters. The findings were eventually presented to IFLA's management, but the reaction was not what Suzanne Reid had expected, or at least had hoped for.

"We recorded that more than 80 per cent of employees had experienced bullying and harassment in the workplace. I thought that what we had described would make them deeply concerned, but instead of being proactive and trying to improve the situation, their response was to attempt to dismantle the staff council, attack the code of conduct and create division among the staff."

Suzanne Reid had heard that the working environment at IFLA's headquarters was not ideal even before she started working there. She had previously worked for Liber (the Association of European Research Libraries), which is based at the same address.

"When I applied for the job at IFLA, an employee warned me of the poor work environment. I was also informed that many people were looking for jobs elsewhere."

She thought the person she was talking to was

**»We recorded that more than 80 per cent of employees had experienced harassment in the workplace.«**

being overly dramatic. Before joining Liber, she had worked administratively at the International Criminal Court in The Hague and at several large energy companies. She had experienced her fair share of undesirable behaviour – surely IFLA couldn't present a greater challenge than these other demanding environments?

But she soon realised that there was some truth to what she had been told.

"It didn't take long to realise the warnings were justified."

**S**HORTLY BEFORE the employee raised the alarm in the summer of 2019, there had been an anonymous email on the same theme. Behind the message were about 15 former employees, according to Biblioteksbladets source. "Staff turnover is high and sick leave is at such a high level that the Board should react," they wrote.

The email also included references to posts about IFLA on Glassdoor, a website where employers are commented on and rated. "The posts provide evidence that something serious is going on at IFLA headquarters and that changes are necessary," the anonymous writers claimed.

The first posts on Glassdoor about IFLA, written in 2019, included:

"I can't believe that the library community and all the great librarians are represented by an organisation with such outdated and old-fashioned values and methods." ▶

»There were even rumours that the office's e-mails were being monitored.«

INTERVIEW

► "There is a terrorist regime ruling here, this place is a real hell."

The posts continued in this vein almost without exception. In a post from February this year, the federation was compared to North Korea and the Soviet Union. The headline read: "If Kim Jong-Un ran an International Library Associations Federation".

THE FORMER employees summarised their appeals to the Governing Board in three points:

- Staff well-being must be guaranteed by the employer. "Everyone is at risk."
- Measures must be taken to ensure the long-term sustainability of the organisation. "The ongoing brain drain must be stopped."
- IFLA should not be built around the interests of one individual.

Suzanne Reid says that she understands people's concerns about how any criticism from them may affect their prospects in the labour market, but she still wishes that more people dared to share their views on how IFLA is run.

"I may sound idealistic, but I have always been convinced that people can influence their quality of life and their future by joining forces. If they are not prepared to do so, there will never be any change."

The email from the employee who chose not to remain anonymous had a real effect. The fact that the staff council reacted by creating the incident log and producing a code of conduct met with some surprise, according to Suzanne Reid. At the same time, she got the impression that it also brought hope.

"But it was always hard to tell, because so many

people feared negative consequences, or even losing their jobs."

Colleagues who had ignored her in the daytime so as not to risk being associated with her and the staff council, would suddenly get in touch in their spare time or send messages via social media to express their appreciation that someone had the courage to try to do something about the problems. However, the unpredictability of not knowing who would be supportive and who would not made her almost paranoid.

"There were even rumours that the office's e-mails were being monitored and that basic staff privacy was not being respected. Several employees claimed they felt that management had access to information that they really should not have had access to. I couldn't seem to trust anything or anyone."

THIS FEAR OF COMING forward and openly testifying about opinions and experiences is something that Biblioteksbladet also encountered during its reporting on IFLA. Suzanne Reid believes that she can stand up for what she says because she is not professionally rooted in the library world. It means she does not feel she has to kowtow to anyone in order to protect her future employment.

"I am sure that people at IFLA have been afraid to rock the boat because of their future job prospects. In the end, no one wants to be a whistleblower, and it is unusual for someone who has taken on that role to later continue on their chosen career path."

The dysfunctionality that the incident log was designed to highlight was also what made Suzanne Reid determined to leave IFLA. She describes how her well-being deteriorated, and going to work in the morning became a real struggle.

"One morning I was sitting with a cup of coffee and trying to get myself to move. But I just couldn't."

She remained in her chair for a long time, unable to do anything at all. A doctor diagnosed depression, the working conditions at IFLA being the primary factor in this diagnosis.

Suzanne Reid chose not to return to IFLA when she

#### IN DOUBT

IFLA lacks the ability to function, according to Suzanne Reid. She recommends the creation of a totally new international library association.



recovered. The period of illness and her experience in The Hague led to the career change that took her to the south of France. Today she runs a business in the tourism and event industry.

She says that she did not expect any change in IFLA. She did not think that anyone in management would be held accountable for the employees' suffering at the headquarters. But the testimonies about the situation eventually floated to the surface, and Gerald Leitner was forced out of the role of secretary general.

ON THE DAY she was photographed outside her French house, she received the news from The Hague that by mutual agreement Gerald Leitner would no longer work for IFLA in the new year. A press release about the agreement praised Gerald for his work and stated that investigations had not revealed any harassment in the workplace.

Suzanne Reid thinks the statements are remarka-

ble. Despite her connection to the initiatives that were taken after the employee raised the alarm in 2019, and her confirmation that she was prepared to talk to those who investigated the work environment, she was never contacted.

"It leads me to believe that this was all orchestrated by IFLA's Board and management." She does not feel that IFLA will now transform and become a well-functioning and healthy organisation. It is simply not possible as long as the culture of silence remains.

"I do not think that IFLA will be able to recover from this. If it were up to me to do something about the situation, I would recommend the formation of a completely new, independent international library organisation."



# Closed doors damage trust

Limited transparency and poor communication. Biblioteksbladet's survey shows that the turbulence is raising questions among IFLA members in Sweden.

Footnote: The survey was sent to IFLA's 29 institutional members in Sweden.

## THE QUESTIONS:

- 1) Is IFLA a transparent organisation?
- 2) Do you have a good understanding of the cooperation between IFLA and the SIGL Foundation?
- 3) Do you have confidence in how IFLA is led?



**KARIN GRÖNVALL**  
Head of the National Library of Sweden.

1) Due to its size and scope, we have to take into account that there are several levels and structures. I feel that the work on committees, and cooperation between the committees, is transparent. On the other hand, the Board has not been able to convey the sense of security, determination and transparency that the organisation's members have needed and should have received during a turbulent time.

2) What has been clear is that the Chair stated publicly that SIGL was created in order to minimise the taxes paid on the funds that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation contributed. The connection to IFLA, the management etc., is not clear.

”Very little transparency.”

3) KB (the National Library of Sweden) remains an institutional member and believes in IFLA as an organisation. We believe that confidence in the organisation will recover with the help of members who believe that IFLA and the sector can organise themselves in a democratic and transparent way, and make demands on the management. For continued trust, management must be open to addressing any situations that arise and communicate openly with members.



**MORGAN PALMQVIST**  
Senior Librarian, Gothenburg University Library.

1) The problems and discussions of the past year have shown that IFLA is not as transparent as expected. It is a mem-

Photo: Jann Lipka, Johan Wingborg

ber-driven organisation and must look after the best interests of its members, be transparent and inclusive. And, last but not least, it ought to create trust in the Board, which is elected by the members.

2) Very little transparency.

3) Well, there is a belief that the current Board wants to be more transparent and reliable, but they still have far to go.



**DANIEL FORSMAN**  
City Librarian, Stockholm.

1) It can be difficult to understand how IFLA works. Those who have been involved for a long time work in established structures where short cuts, roles and the ways of doing things have become the natural way of doing things. As with any organisation, it is difficult to free yourself from your own structure as needs evolve and the world around you evolves. In an international context, it is no wonder that there are differences of opinion about strategic or operational issues. Embracing these and finding structures to work with them is one of IFLA's major challenges, and today I feel that the organisation prioritises the appearance of unity, and thus transparency suffers.

2) IFLA's current operations are financially dependent on SIGL. Because an independent foundation is financing activities carried out in an association, it is of course interesting for members to understand how the two are connected and how the strategic agenda has been set. Here, in my opinion, the organisations have not been transparent enough. This

Photo: Elisabeth Ohlson, Åke Ericson

”... fairly closed and top-down ...”

affects confidence and opens up unnecessary speculation.

3) It has been a stormy time for IFLA. I think that the Swedish Library Association has acted constructively, and set a good example, by motioning that IFLA needs to improve its communication in order to become more transparent. This motion was passed by a large majority and I now expect greater clarity on how IFLA should act in the future. Confidence in the management of IFLA has been affected and Stockholm Public Library is considering not renewing its membership. However, not having our own membership does not prevent us from being active within IFLA, as institutional members of the Swedish Library Association can work within IFLA.



**ANNA TROBERG**  
Chair, DIK (trade union).

1) No, unfortunately not. The recent internal conflicts and their management have created an image of IFLA as a fairly closed and top-down organisation. It is important that as an organisation we put an end to this once and for all and are much more transparent, going forward.

2) The cooperation between IFLA and SIGL is an area that would benefit from much greater transparency. There is a lot that is unclear at the moment and of course this creates uncertainty among the member organisations, which damages trust in both IFLA and SIGL

3) ) It is clear that confidence in IFLA has been damaged by all the turbulence that has occurred. I hope the criticism is taken seriously and in the future they will



Kostnadsfritt att ladda ner

## Förintelsens minnesdag 2023

Inför Förintelsens minnesdag den 27 januari, erbjuder vi en ny utskrivbar minuställning som du kan ladda ner och sätta upp.

I minnesdagskalendariet på vår webbplats kan du lägga upp information om vad som händer på ditt bibliotek i samband med minnesdagen.

På vår webbplats finns även flera utskrivbara minuställningar på teman med koppling till Förintelsen.

**Forum för levande historia**

[levandehistoria.se/forintelsensminnesdag](http://levandehistoria.se/forintelsensminnesdag)

- ▶ actively work transparently to restore the trust they have lost. IFLA's strength is entirely dependent on a strong member commitment. We cannot afford to lose the confidence of our members.



**KARIN LINDER**  
Secretary General, Swedish Library Association.

- 1) Definitely not, it's very difficult to understand IFLA's finances, the relationship between the different levels of the organisation. Election to the Board takes place among groups of friends, clichés and non-transparency.

- 2) Zero transparency. It's really bad that there is no insight into the relationship between the two associations.

- 3) I've always wondered about the management, especially due to all the empty words. *We are IFLA* — what is that?



**LARS BURMAN**  
Senior Librarian, Uppsala University Library.

- 1) Unfortunately, large organisations with complex structures often lack transparency. IFLA could do more to be perceived as transparent. Trust needs to be restored, especially after a large crisis, and this is best done through reforms and open communication.

- 2) I have not had reason to delve into the matter, but I know the construction. I cannot say that I feel there is transparency, but I have not tried to look closely either.

”... there is no insight.”

- 3) IFLA has a crisis behind it. If activities and management work develop as promised, much of the trust can be regained.



**TORBJÖRN NILSSON**  
City Librarian, Malmö.

- 1) No, not at the moment, not even for its members. The Chair/Governing Board determines the degree of transparency.

- 2) I have not. It is a financial construction that benefits IFLA.

- 3) More transparency is needed to be able to answer that question. That's why it's a 'no'.



**MARIA HAGLUND**  
Chief Librarian, Royal Institute of Technology Library.

- 1) IFLA in general is perceived by many as administratively heavy and quite difficult to navigate.

- 2) Have not looked into the collaboration.

- 3) The new management has an important mission in creating trust in the organisation, and showing how they want to work with development through transparent leadership. The seminar at the IFLA conference in Dublin this summer, *Out in the Open: Recent Governance Developments at IFLA*, was a good first step, but more action will be needed.



## LIBRARIANS HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES IN THESE TIMES

Global tensions with war, economic instability, climate threats – in addition to internal challenges. But a historical review shows that even in past crises IFLA has managed to maintain free research and truth, as well as access to information and freedom of expression.

TEXT

ALEX BYRNE

The foundation chair of FAIFE, 1997–2003, and subsequently IFLA President 2005–2007. A retired librarian, university vice president, researcher and writer who now focuses on printmaking (alexbyrne.com.au). His career took him to leadership roles at universities across Australia, culminating as the CEO of the State Library of New South Wales in Sydney. Contributed internationally in the establishment of FAIFE, through IFLA's advocacy at the World Summit on the Information Society and in facilitating the consideration of indigenous matters in Australia.



Photo: Joy Lai

**I**FLA's recent governance challenges have been widely reported, including in *Biblioteksbladet*, and have caused considerable concern among members. They bring to mind the apocryphal Chinese curse 'May you live in interesting times!'. That saying, apparently coined by nineteenth century British diplomats, ironically reminds us that situations can become too 'interesting', developing into major crises.

Such 'interesting' events provide the daily headline stories in the mass media. As I write, today's tell of the abrupt resignation of British Prime Minister Liz Truss, of starvation in Somalia, of widespread floods in Australia and Pakistan, drought in the USA and other environmental disasters, of President Putin's declaration of martial law in the illegally annexed provinces of Ukraine, of the looming energy crisis in many countries ... and additional depressing news items. Such events are staples of the media, featured one day, forgotten the next, but nonetheless of great, often life threatening, importance to those directly affected. They demand thoughtful and determined responses at local and global levels to address their humane, political and environmental consequences.

IFLA's current challenges are being addressed by the Governing Board through its Plan for Securing IFLA's Future (IFLA 2022). As a past President, I am not in a position to comment on the current challenges but I can confidently assert that the Board will find a way through them as IFLA continues to represent and support our profession towards the Federation's 100th birthday in 2027 and beyond.

My confidence is based on my study of IFLA's history, my role in the establishment of FAIFE and my involvement in a previous 'governance crisis' in 2005. At that time, the Federation had to replace its Secretary General at short notice and the Coordinator of Professional Activities, Sjoerd Koopman, the new Secretary General, Peter Lor, and I as incoming President had to work with the Governing Board, professional units and membership to restore confidence and to refocus. We overcame that crisis and proceeded to more achievements through FAIFE, our representation at the World Summit on the Information Society, engaging with issues relating to Indigenous peoples, beginning to address the challenges of sustainability and in so many other areas.

Not only can IFLA be challenged internally but the Federation is also subject to global crises. It nearly split in the face of Nazi aggression in the 1930s and averted division through diplomacy and a focus on narrow professional issues during the Cold War (Byrne, 2007). Despite the global tension IFLA thrived, fostering dialogue, promoting collaboration and shared standards and providing effective representation at the highest levels.

**F**ollowing the collapse of the Soviet Union, IFLA established its Committee on Free Access to Information and Freedom of Expression in 1997. Welcomed by many, FAIFE's creation was opposed by representatives from some repressive regimes and criticised by others for being too 'political'. Critics held that IFLA should confine itself to such matters as standards and modes of professional

practice, leaving the principles underlying our profession for other bodies, such as UNESCO. Thanks to strong support, especially from Nordic nations and the United States, FAIFE became an established element of IFLA and continues to operate effectively 25 years later. The support of the Danish library community and the City of Copenhagen was particularly valuable as it enabled FAIFE to have a secretariat in its formative years. Support from the Swedish Library Association and its director, Christina Stenberg, helped enormously to strengthen the initiative.

**A**

quarter century later we – and the world – need FAIFE more than ever. Fake news, post truth, misinformation, propaganda and lies. Claims and counter claims rebound around the world. The excesses of Donald Trump, the propaganda of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Viktor Orbán, the war mongering of Vladimir Putin and the mischief of so many other demagogues feed conspiracy theories, disharmony and violence. The dark side of social media is evident when untruths are spread and users split into echo chambers where conspiracy theories resonate.

As individual professionals we hold fast to the principles of free enquiry, respect for others and a commitment to facts and truth. But that isn't enough. It is not sufficient to live comfortably among like-minded friends and colleagues. As information professionals we have a duty to promote the principles of accuracy, integrity, transparency and tolerance to our communities but we need to go further by seeking to counter the waves of disin-

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► formation and error that are engulfing our nations.

This is not to say that we should propagandise or enter the political fray. We should maintain our independence and integrity as we constantly draw our communities' interest towards reputable sources, established facts and well founded theories and away from rumour, misinterpretation and untruth. We can do this through our well-established strategies of drawing clients' attention to reliable information and sources. Our strategies have evolved from reading lists and displays to social media, blogs and vlogs. But our aims remain the same: to draw attention to reliable information appropriate to our client groups and to assist them in developing robust skills to distinguish good information from that which is wrong, dangerous and tendentious.

**T**aking that principled stand is seldom easy. The principled path can attract community criticism and put us at odds with our superiors and colleagues. Public librarians too often find that they are opposed by elected and administration officials, special librarians and information scientists can be disciplined by their organisations and all of us can feel pressures to conform, to 'keep our heads down'. Even jobs can be at risk and in repressive regimes, librarians and other information workers can be imprisoned or worse.

That is why we need a strong IFLA and an effective FAIFE. The declarations and statements that IFLA and FAIFE have made over the years strengthen our resolve and can cause our opponents to reconsider

their actions. Such statements as the Public Library Manifesto, the Glasgow Declaration on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom and the Internet Manifesto have the force of international declarations. Backed by a strong global organisation, they offer a bulwark against repressive actions, not guaranteed protection but a source of authority to counter attacks.

FAIFE's work over many years to promote ethical codes and behaviour across the profession has also been crucial. It has strengthened library associations and helped them to support their members more strongly. That work and other initiatives including training have helped to develop a more ethically focused profession which is better able to withstand pressures. And it has given individual professionals more resources and skills to be resolute when personally targeted. These are tremendous achievements. We should be very proud of the accomplishments of FAIFE and IFLA over the last quarter century. They have justified the foresight of those who initiated the discussion and then established FAIFE.

**H**owever, we are now in more parlous times. The spirit of optimism which followed the collapse of the Soviet empire has been replaced by anxiety which is exacerbated by the rapid spread of both accurate reportage and misinformation through mainstream, fringe and social media. The decades long face-off between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union and its vassal states has

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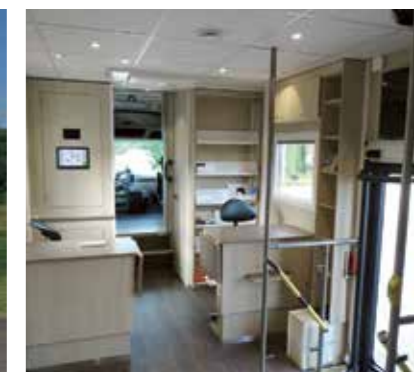
► been replaced by widespread concern about the intentions and behaviour of a resurgent China and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Both have major economic and social consequences. China has been enlarging its sphere of influence economically and politically especially through Africa and the Pacific and militarily in the waters off its coastline. Russia's annexation of Crimea, invasion and attacks on the heart of Ukraine and purported annexation of the Donbas border regions has not only caused immense death and destruction but has also had major economic consequences. Much of Ukraine's industrial capability has been destroyed, and Russian actions have kept its grain and edible oil from markets and from feeding countries in Africa and the Middle East, including some of the poorest. Restrictions on Russian gas exports are causing major energy shortages in Europe and repercussions around the world.

**F**urthering global anxiety, the world is still in the COVID-19 pandemic. The extraordinarily rapid development and deployment of COVID vaccines and anti-viral drugs accompanied by public health measures resulted from decades of investment in science and technology supported by our expertise in information management. Those strategies avoided a disastrous repeat of the Spanish Influenza pandemic a century ago during which more than 50 million people died. But the achievements of science have been undermined by the actions of government, especially in Brazil and the USA, and by the spread of false and malicious information.

Also causing great suffering and anxiety are the unprecedented consequences of climate change evident around the world. Catastrophic flooding, widespread forest fires, persistent drought and more frequent cyclones and hurricanes are taking lives, damaging homes and businesses, and destroying crops. Although there have always been periods of extreme climate events, the increased frequency and severity of the events in recent years points to climate change. Many political and business leaders opposed the long understood scientific evidence and denied that the world is on a parlous path to environmental catastrophe. The well considered work of scientists around the world and especially the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change since 1988 has received inadequate attention and often strident opposition (IPCC, 2022).

**T**hese are our 'interesting times'. We have lost some of the optimism which characterised the 1990s when IFLA moved to establish FAIFE and CLM and subsequently began to focus on emerging issues including matters relating to Indigenous peoples, the United Nations development goals and the enormous challenge of environmental sustainability. As citizens and as professionals we are all too conscious of the threats to everyday life, world peace, open communication, human rights and the environment mentioned previously.

The many challenges demand a strong response from all peoples but especially from those of us responsible information-access. It is our responsibility to ensure that our communities are well informed. ►



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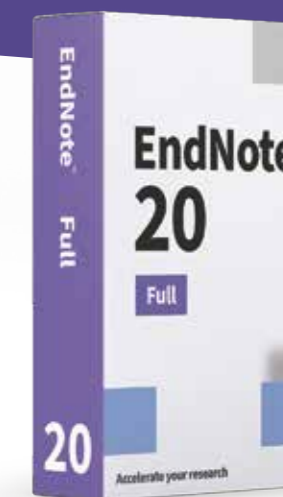


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► It is our responsibility to assist our community members to develop sound information seeking practices that enable them to distinguish reliable information from that which is unreliable and often dangerous. It is our responsibility to apply our professional skills and techniques to counter misinformation.

We can take initiatives to fulfil these responsibilities within our institutions and communities. But none of us can do this alone. We need to be able to turn to our professional associations, our library and information schools and to our global Federation to offer us the skills and knowledge to take on these tasks and the fortitude to keep trying in the face of inevitable obstacles and opposition.

**I**FLA, through FAIFE and its other specialist sections, is well placed to lead this vital work, building on its priorities of recent years and re-energising its members. The enormous range of professional interests and activities embraced by IFLA provides the capability to respond to world's major challenges. Just as important is IFLA's standing as a peak professional body in dialogue with other peak professional bodies and recognised by UNESCO, other UN and international agencies and national governments. That recognition enables IFLA to speak with authority and to support the profession in our essential work.

But no less important is IFLA's longevity and cohesion. From our past, we know that we can navigate through times of turbulence, that we can thrive in 'interesting times'. We know that we can stand together in solidarity to oppose lies,

propaganda and misinformation and to uphold free inquiry, truth and free access to information and freedom of expression. Making our profession more relevant and more valued, we can help shape the response to these interesting times.



#### Literature:

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doi: 10.1017/9781009157926



## Why is the Association fighting about IFLA? The answers are rooted in the principles of democracy and responsibility.

”Just so you know, we want everyone to just enjoy the conference. Not everyone is pleased that a lot is being written in Sweden about internal IFLA matters.”

This concludes an email I received regarding the controversies within IFLA. In another email, I was asked to take Biblioteksbladet's Editor-in-chief to task, so that the magazine would stop publishing articles about IFLA. If I didn't, the sender threatened to refer the matter to a lawyer.

It is astounding that someone from an international organisation tasked with promoting freedom of the press and freedom of expression sent an email to me, in my role of Secretary General, and, in principle, threatened legal action if this independent publication did not stop publishing articles about their organisation. The Association is now taking action following several lengthy discussions on the Board. Biblioteksbladet is part of the free press.

So why is the Association fighting about IFLA?

The answer is simple: member democracy and responsibility.

THE LAST SIX MONTHS have been turbulent, and the degree of involvement in the IFLA crisis probably reflects the general attitude towards whether we should be a member or not. Swedish librarians are divided. Some see IFLA as a good chance for continuing professional development from an international perspective, while others see

a bureaucratic organisation with outdated structures. We all perceive things differently. As Secretary General, I see great benefits from membership. For example, IFLA's office is made up of knowledgeable staff who are always ready to help with complex copyright matters. I can do without one-liners such as 'We are IFLA'.

But IFLA is based on a principle of strong member engagement, and has members from all parts of the globe, so work on its vision is justified. IFLA has recently given the impression of being a top-down organisation that offers nothing for members other than passive participation in annual meetings. This culture needs to change. A democratic organisation must have governance that everyone understands and feels involved in.

SWEDEN HAS BEEN active at several of the recent annual meetings. We have acted on the issue of membership fees, have written motions and have received strong support from other members. We have taken responsibility for shared values. But we also need to change a poor culture. Avoiding becoming engaged in conflict and allowing everything to go on as if nothing was happening is irresponsible. If you choose that path, you are abusing the element of membership that re-quires participation. Democracy does not mean that everything is always pleasant. Democracy means taking responsibility for co-determination.

Together, we will continue this work as part of IFLA. So should I take the Editor-in-chief to task? Well, we know what being an independent newspaper involves, so bring on the stupid suggestions, but that's not gonna happen.



Karin Linder is the secretary general of the Swedish Library Association.

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