

***Mobile Libraries of the Future – An Open Path to Users – 17th Croatian Conference on Mobile Libraries and Bookmobile Festival with International Participation, Virovitica Public Library, June 5–6, 2025.***

On June 5 and 6, 2025, the City of Virovitica became a place where knowledge and the beauty of the written word arrived on wheels – hosting the *17th Croatian Conference on Mobile Libraries and the Bookmobile Festival* titled “*Mobile Libraries of the Future – An Open Path to Users*,” organized by the Commission for Mobile Libraries in cooperation with the Commission for Public Libraries of the Croatian Library Association and the Virovitica Public Library.

– This is a Croatian conference with an international character. We are welcoming not only European representatives but also guests from the United States. Among them are librarians from Spain, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Hungary, Serbia, Estonia, and of course, Croatia. Over 100 librarians attended the event, which is held biennially in Croatia—the previous edition was in Split. With this event, Virovitica joins the ranks of major cities, alongside services that are far older than ours. The Bookmobile Service of the Virovitica-Podravina County was established in 2023, and that was the reason for this hosting – this great conference and festival – the largest, most attended, and most important library event ever held in Virovitica – said Robert Fritz, Director of the Virovitica Public Library.

The aim of the Conference and Bookmobile Festival in Virovitica, as organizers reiterate, was to improve and promote mobile libraries. The gathering emphasized the importance of bookmobiles in providing access to library services, developing reading habits, and supporting lifelong learning, while also encouraging the establishment of new services in areas where they are still absent.

– This year’s theme, “*Mobile Libraries of the Future – An Open Path to Users*,” reminds us that new challenges and opportunities lie ahead. Many highlighted that the arrival of the bookmobile meant much more than access to books – it brings a sense of connection, recognition, and community presence. For them, the bookmobile is not just a vehicle with shelves, but a sign that they are not forgotten – that they are included in the flow of knowledge, culture, and the attention of the community. In this light, we should also view the recently published Development Program for the Network of Mobile Libraries in the Republic of Croatia from 2023 to 2032, which for the first time provides a framework for planning, encouraging, and maintaining bookmobile services on a national level. This document is not a final solution to all needs but certainly represents a turning point – a sign that this valuable service is entering a new era with greater visibility and support – said Silvija Perić, Senior Librarian and Head of the County Development Service for School and Public Libraries. Today in Croatia, 16 bookmobile services operate with a total of 19 vehicles, partly thanks to EU project “*Reading Towards an Inclusive Society*,” and the need for mobile library services in our country is growing every day.

Nina Obuljen Koržinek, Minister of Culture and Media, officially opened the 17th Croatian Conference on Mobile Libraries and the 11th Bookmobile Festival in Virovitica on Thursday,

June 5. In her opening address, Minister Obuljen Koržinek emphasized that more than 10 million euros from national and European funds have been invested in the development of Croatian librarianship, with visible results.

– In our mandate, we have invested in the construction or renovation of more than 25 libraries across Croatia. For the first time, we have adopted a National Plan – a strategic document for the development of the Bookmobile Service – one of the priority directions in the overall development of librarianship. In the last financial period, we secured 12 new bookmobiles from European and several from national funds.

Our goal was to initiate bookmobile services in counties where none existed before, as this is a vital service enabling books to reach those citizens without easy access to a library – emphasized Minister Nina Obuljen Koržinek.

– The Conference focuses on the role of mobile libraries as accessible, inclusive, flexible, and resilient forms of library services that respond to the needs of contemporary communities. The opportunity to contribute to the topics and outcomes of the Conference and Festival, as well as provide logistical and host support, strongly motivates us. This enthusiasm will undoubtedly be incorporated into the proactive future activities of our service and applied to our regional user community – highlighted Director Robert Fritz, thanking the founders, sponsors, commissions, and all other participants for the excellent organization of this major library event in Virovitica.

A particularly ceremonial part of the opening program was dedicated to those often unseen but most deserving of the fact that bookmobiles reach locations across Croatia – the bookmobile drivers, who, together with librarians, make up the crews of these traveling libraries. On stage in Virovitica, they received applause in recognition not only for the kilometers driven to Croatia's most remote areas but also for sharing everyday life with children and adults and bringing an entirely new world on wheels. After the opening, a Round Table followed titled "Mobile Library Vehicles – Challenges and Opportunities for the Future".

The program continued on Friday, June 6, at the Technology and Innovation Center in Virovitica, with a professional program where domestic and international bookmobile services presented their work, programs, and innovative approaches. Professionals exchanging best practices, experiences, ideas, and challenges, while also discussing the beauty of this profession. Before the professional part of the Conference, the Commission for Mobile Libraries awarded recognition for 10 years of dedicated and successful fieldwork to Dražena Rajsz of the Public Library "Petar Preradović" Bjelovar, and for 25 years of bookmobile service to Boris Pleić of Rijeka City Library.

The keynote presentations began with:

- "Bookmobiles and Outreach In the United States" by Cathy Zimmerman, Executive Director of the Association for Bookmobile and Outreach Services from Eldridge, Iowa, USA.

- Annika Marsh, Head of the Estonian bookmobile “Katarina Jee” from Tallinn, presented her service in the talk “Estonian Mobile Library: Past, Present and Future,” showcasing sustainable and modern bookmobile solutions.
- From war-torn Ukraine, Lyusyena Shum, Head of the humanitarian foundation “Land of Libraries” and Executive Director of the National Interests Network ANTS, Kyiv, delivered a powerful presentation “Mobile Library Services as an Opportunity for De-occupied Regions of Ukraine to Access Library Services,” sharing moving wartime experiences and how mobile libraries became one of the most effective solutions for access to books, educational resources, and information.
- “Mobile Libraries as a Key to an Inclusive Future: Analysis and Development Guidelines” was presented by Klaudija Mandić, Chair of the Croatian Library Association’s Commission for Mobile Libraries, based on a survey conducted on mobile library services in Croatia in 2024.

The submitted presentations were also held:

- Sílvia Campillo i Ferret and Marta Sala González from the Barcelona Public Library Network, Spain: “Connecting Communities: Bookmobiles in the Anoia Region.”
- “Mobile libraries: access and innovation from rural to urban for the future of all generations” by Ksenija Trs from the Maribor Library, Slovenia.
- “The Bookmobile Service of Virovitica-Podravina County: A New Mobile Library with Diverse Content” by Elena Marošević from the Virovitica Public Library.
- “Monitoring and Evaluation of the Mobile Libraries Network Development Program in Croatia” by Dunja Marija Gabriel from the National and University Library in Zagreb, prepared with Nada Radman from Zadar City Library.
- “Sveti Duj moj, čuvaj bibliobus svoj!” [Dear Saint Domnius save our library bus!] presented by Petra Skelin Giljanović, Lucrezia Odrlić, and Ana Gruica from the Marko Marulić City Library Split.
- “20th Anniversary of the County Bookmobile of the Rijeka City Library” by Ante Ledenko of Rijeka City Library.
- “Challenges in Reorganizing the Bookmobile Stop Network” presented by Sara Semenski and Davorka Licitar, prepared with Nika Čabrić from Zagreb City Libraries.
- “Reading on Wheels – Activity Implementation” presented by Katja Čamić and Karla Hegedić from Novi Marof City Library.
- “Visit to the City Library and Bookmobiles in Gothenburg” presented by Valentina Mikec from the “Fran Galović” Koprivnica Library and Reading Room.
- “The Croatian Library Association as a Partner in the Project ‘European Learning Libraries’” presented by Dunja Marija Gabriel from the National and University Library in Zagreb, prepared in cooperation with Jasenka Pleško, President of the Croatian Library Association.

During the Conference, posters of mobile libraries were exhibited – international libraries from Spain, Serbia, Bulgaria, and Slovenia, and 17 posters from Croatia. Participants voted

for the best poster of the 17th Conference, with the winning poster titled “Babies in the Bookmobile” by Ana Salopek from the Vinkovci City Library.

## CONCLUSION

The Conference highlighted the key aspects and achievements in the development and operation of mobile libraries, with a focus on long-standing experience, the importance of human resources and equipment, the diversity of programmes, public visibility, and a user-centred approach. It was concluded that bookmobile services in the Republic of Croatia are experiencing continuous growth and maintain a long-standing tradition (e.g., the celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Rijeka City Library’s Bookmobile Service).

Furthermore, professional staff and adequately equipped vehicles – that is, bookmobiles – were recognized as essential foundations for the effective operation and further development of bookmobile services.

The Conference once again demonstrated and emphasized the importance of a wide range of activities such as literary events, storytelling sessions, and creative workshops, which enrich the bookmobile offer and encourage active user participation.

The importance of media presence through reports, articles, and broadcasts on television, radio, and digital platforms was also acknowledged, as it contributes to raising public awareness of the value of mobile libraries.

One of the most important takeaways from the Conference was undoubtedly: The user at the centre of service delivery.

It was emphasized that users are at the heart of all efforts and activities of mobile libraries, which ensures the relevance of services and their alignment with the needs of the community.

And finally – what to say? While impressions are still settling, the numbers speak louder: over 100 participants from Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary, Spain, Estonia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and the United States took part in the two-day international Bookmobile Conference and Festival.

With the participation of 17 vehicles from all 16 Croatian bookmobile services—gathered together for the first time—and a vehicle from Bulgaria, we brought together the largest number of bookmobiles ever at a Croatian Bookmobile Festival. More than 500 children and adults from Virovitica and its surroundings visited the Festival.

Thanks to all sponsors, supporters, good people, and volunteers whose efforts made this international gathering of mobile librarians in Virovitica even better. The good reputation of Virovitica’s hospitality has spread far beyond our borders.

You can see the atmosphere at the Festival and conference at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zIppsZXo08c>

(Marija Lovrenc, Dora Jagarinec, Silvija Perić, Klaudija Mandić, Robert Fritz; photo R. Kulej, K. Toplak, M. Turkalj)