



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## Translating the Literatures of Smaller European Nations: A Picture from the UK, 2014-16<sup>1</sup>

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### Executive Summary

This report arises from a series of public, industry-focused workshops, interviews and other published material between 2014 and 2016, the life-span of an [AHRC](#)-funded project that explored how smaller European literatures attempt to reach the wider world. It concentrates on the variety of actors who collaborate to bring a text to an international audience. Since all work to persuade that audience to pay attention to their text, we have designated them ‘advocates’.

### Key findings:

- The widespread and enduring pessimism about the prospects for translated literature in the UK is outdated.
- Concern has shifted from a focus on the low amount of translated literature being published to questions about the diversity of literature translated.

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<sup>1</sup> The project team would welcome any comment or feedback on this report, which should be sent to Dr Rajendra Chitnis at the University of Bristol ([R.A.Chitnis@bris.ac.uk](mailto:R.A.Chitnis@bris.ac.uk)).

- The number of independent presses publishing translated literature has markedly increased in the past decade, often founded by people from corporate publishing or the financial sector with sophisticated strategies for raising their profile and establishing their brand.
- Technological advances are central to the growth in translated literature. Social media, book review sites, on-line reading groups and bloggers have transformed the notion of ‘word-of-mouth’.
- Translated literature remains a preoccupation of the educated urban middle-class, centred fundamentally on London and almost completely absent from school curricula.
- Commercial imperatives foster conservative approaches to book choices even among independent publishers, to the detriment of less familiar European literatures.
- The success of genre fiction in translation raises both hopes that this will make reading translated literature more normal and concerns that this will reduce the diversity of literature translated. An emphasis on retranslating classics rather than translating new works exacerbates the situation, particularly for smaller European literatures for which few if any works have historically attained international classic status.
- Data about the diversity of translated literature shows what is published more than what is actually read. The increasing dominance of English-language literature in both English-speaking contexts and in translation suggests that a declining diversity of voices and perspectives is not unique to English-speaking readers.
- Alongside questions about the diversity of national voices and of literary genres, male authors continue to dominate translated literature, raising questions about selection processes for translation (by publishers and other ‘gatekeepers’, including translators) or for funding or promotion (by national and international organisations or competition juries).
- The prominent phenomenon among smaller European literatures of ‘supply-driven’ translation – motivated not by reader demand but by a desire to circumvent the market or draw publishers’ attention to texts – makes texts available, but raises concerns about the proliferation of unread texts and the quality of translation and product.
- Advocates are divided between those who favour forms of intervention, particularly in relation to funding strategies, to increase the quality and profile of translated literature and those who fear the consequences of intervention for the diversity of translated literature published, including the range of literatures available to readers.

## Introduction

This report arises from a series of public, industry-focused workshops, interviews and other published material between 2014 and 2016, the life-span of [an AHRC-funded project](#) that explored how smaller European literatures attempt to reach the wider world.<sup>2</sup> We defined

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<sup>2</sup> The project team was made up of UK-based academics who, through teaching, research, collaborations with publishers, translators and cultural organizations and public events, all engage in the promotion of literatures from different ‘peripheries’: Rajendra Chitnis (Czech & Slovak, Bristol), Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen (Scandinavian, UCL), Rhian Atkin (Portuguese, Cardiff) and Zoran Milutinović (South Slav, SSEES, UCL). Our workshops took place in Bath in February 2015, at the British Library in May 2015 and the Free Word Centre in April 2016.

‘smaller European literatures’ as those written in less well-known languages that depend on translation to reach international audiences. Many of these do not come from nations that consider themselves small, whether geographically, numerically or in their historical importance, but they are generally clustered in what, from the perspective of French, German or English-speaking arbiters of cultural taste, might be considered European (semi-) peripheries, including the Balkans, the Baltic, Central and Eastern Europe, the Low Countries, the Mediterranean and Scandinavia, all of which were represented at one or more of our events. For these nations and countries, literary translation has historically constituted a central way in which these countries or nations have achieved greater international recognition and joined in (often imagined) dialogue with the wider world. While most work in this area has focused on gathering reliable statistical data, our project concentrated on the variety of actors who collaborate to bring a text to an international audience. Whether translators, publishers, literary agents, booksellers, state, international and third-sector promoters, reviewers, bloggers or academics, all combine their professional skills with the ability to persuade one another and the wider audience to pay attention to their text, and we have therefore designated them ‘advocates’. This report captures these advocates’ perceptions of the state of their industry in the mid-2010s, the opportunities and challenges before them and strategies being employed in response.

### Context

We found that the current situation for smaller European literatures represents in an extreme, concentrated form that which prevails for all translated literature in the UK. At our events, some participants rehearsed familiar concerns and *idées fixes* about this broader context. These included:

- **The low number of books published in translation compared to other countries.** We heard repeated the often quoted but never statistically documented claim that translation accounted for just 3% of books published in the UK or USA.<sup>3</sup> Our participants, however, disagreed over whether this figure could be attributed to publishers responding to a lack of reader interest, or publishers failing to recognize latent reader interest.
- **Readers’ lack of interest in translated literature.** Reports published in 2011 through English PEN’s Global Translation Initiative – [‘Flying Off the Shelves’](#) and [‘Taking Flight’](#) – captured both the anxiety that most readers are not interested in translated literature and the main arguments for why this attitude should change.
- **Publishers and booksellers marginalize translated literature.** At our first workshop, the word ‘gatekeeper’ was used in a negative sense to refer implicitly to large publishers and particularly booksellers, notably on-line booksellers like Amazon, powerful enough to control what comes onto the market or attains

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<sup>3</sup> The figure is used in the name of the [University of Rochester’s web source](#) for promoting international literature. Their publication, *The Three Percent Problem: Rants and Responses on Publishing, Translation, and the Future of Reading* by Chad W. Post, epitomizes the invective generated by the figure and what it appears to say about reading audiences and the publishing industry.

prominence, and indeed powerful enough to corner the profitable element of a field like translated literature, to its broader economic and professional detriment: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/dec/09/amazon-publishing-translated-fiction-amazoncrossing-sales>

- **Lack of status and recognition for literary translators and other advocates of translated literature.** We heard that another way in which translated literature becomes marginalized is through an enduring perception in the book industry of this work as both amateur and amateurish.
- **The threat of electronic and digital technology and the internet.** Technological developments affecting both publishing and bookselling led some participants to predict even greater homogenization of the market and express fear for the future of the book and traditional ways of reading.

A key finding of this report is that this widespread and enduring pessimism is outdated. Though the world of literary translation in general – and smaller European literatures in English translation in particular – is still marked by quixotic tilting at windmills in a utilitarian, neo-liberal economic environment, this report shows that the imagination and conviction of advocates is allied to an increasingly sophisticated ability to identify opportunities and creative strategies more than barriers and threats, and their professionalism and acumen are acknowledged and supported as never before.

### **How much is being translated?**

At our first workshop, at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution in February 2015, Simon Winder, publishing director at [Penguin Press](#) said, in relation to Penguin Classics:

There used to be an argument that the classics were complete and there was no need to add anymore. This was very prevalent about ten years ago and indeed there was a general cultural conservative depressiveness which was the idea that people aren't going to read anyway. That was a really bizarre place to be [...], a really glum environment. I think that's changed a lot.

This perception of an improving situation is supported by statistical reports published in 2015 by [Literature Across Frontiers \(LAF\)](#), a European platform for literary exchange, translation and policy debate, directed by Alexandra Büchler, which has monitored translation activities across Europe over the past two decades. In '[Publishing translated literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland 1990 – 2012](#),' Büchler and Giulia Trentacosti 'attempt to remedy the translation statistics deficit and to establish the veracity of the 'three per cent' figure' as applied to publishing in the British Isles.<sup>4</sup> The data demonstrates that literary translation in the UK and Ireland – whether assessed according to its broader definition or restricted to the genre categories of poetry, fiction and drama – indeed oscillates around the often-cited 3% figure. However, the percentage of literature-related translations calculated on the basis of the 800

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<sup>4</sup> The 2015 report follows on from the LAF 2012 report, 'Three Percent? Publishing Data and Statistics on Translated Literature in the United Kingdom and Ireland,' which was the result of a feasibility study supported by Art Council England, the Culture Programme of the European Union and the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The reports are available for download from the LAF website: <http://www.lit-across-frontiers.org/research/making-literature-travel-research-reports-downloads/> [accessed on 27/01/2017].

Dewey category over the twelve-year period is slightly higher and consistently above 4%, peaking at 5.23% in 2011. [LAF](#) also found that from 2000 to 2012 there has been a consistent increase in the number of titles (in translation) published per year from 342 titles in 2000 to 578 titles in 2012 – representing ‘a growth of 69%’. The consistent perception of workshop participants in 2015 and 2016 was that this figure has continued to rise. For Simon Winder, however, this increase was not necessarily good news:

There was a display in Blackwell’s, Oxford, the other day which said ‘Wonderful new translations’, and they all had pictures of misty scenes of Venice or horses looking mysterious and I just thought: ‘There’s no way of navigating through this’. In the bad old days, fewer things were translated but the step you had to jump was very, very high and therefore you could be fairly confident that it was a good idea. The display to me seemed worrying, there are too many books anyway. There are not enough readers and it’s a brutal business.

### **How does translated literature reach readers?**

The increase in published translated literature may be attributed particularly to the emergence in the past decade, alongside presses that have been working against the odds for many years, of several high-profile independent presses publishing translated literature. At our Bath workshop, the then chief operating officer of [Pushkin Press](#), Stephanie Seegmüller explained how, typically of the driving forces behind these presses, she and her then Penguin colleague, Adam Freudenheim, bought Pushkin in 2012 precisely because they believed that there was not enough foreign literature being published in the UK. She attributed this situation less to ignorance, cultural conservatism or lack of interest and more to publisher and bookseller timidity which was not shared by readers. The most high-profile independent publishers of translated literature, like And Other Stories or Pushkin, have managed to create something approaching a commercial brand linking a diverse range of writing, often alongside English-language writing that also fits. Seegmüller commented:

We’re running a “quirky” lottery at Pushkin, so every time we get a review where it says “quirky” about one of our books, we put a tick in the box because that’s what we seem to be doing: “quirky”. I think what people are trying to say when they say “quirky” is that they recognize what it is, but it’s still a bit strange and exotic and fun.

She noted that many of the books they publish might fall into genre categories like ‘chick-lit’ or crime fiction, but they are written from an angle that takes it away from the formulaic and towards literary adventure. Seegmüller’s remarks suggest that a niche in the reading market can be found to sustain a level of commercial success, though she maintained that Pushkin were consistently surprised by which of their books did best.

Booksellers also seem confident of tapping a market for translated writing. Another speaker in Bath was Nic Bottomley, of [Mr B’s Emporium of Reading Delights](#) in Bath, which in 2015 was voted by Guardian readers as one of the top ten independent bookshops in the world. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/jun/19/the-10-best-independent-bookshops-in-the-world-readers-recommend>

His shop has built its reputation and a growing base of loyal, returning customers particularly by promoting translated literature, not only through author events and networks of reading groups, but also through innovations like ‘reading spas’, during which the bookseller makes

recommendations, often of translated texts, based on a conversation about an individual reader's preferences and interests. This advocacy of traditional, 'slow' bookselling based on seller expertise, building relationships with customers and the availability of physical books that customers want is mirrored nationally in the [approach taken by James Daunt](#), the founder of the London-based independent chain, Daunt Books, as managing director of Waterstones since 2011. Seegmüller and other publishers highlighted the increased promotion of translated literature in Waterstones shops, with publishers like Pushkin able to mount dedicated displays that transform their profile, though some noted that it could take a lot of time and effort for a relationship with Waterstones to take off.

Alongside these traditional methods, independent publishers we met without exception highlighted advances in internet technology, access and use as central to the recent growth in translated literature. The internet allows publishers to create a profile and presence and circulate news and samples of their work cheaply to a wider audience. Even more importantly, 'word of mouth', which all identify as the primary means of spreading interest in a book, has been transformed by social media, book review sites, on-line reading groups and bloggers, many of whom display the openness to translated literature that Seegmüller and others identify. The ability to obtain a book instantly electronically is also viewed as a great benefit.

### **How diverse is the readership of translated literature?**

The above account does, however, highlight the concern insufficiently whispered at our events that translated literature is the preserve of the educated urban middle-class, what was labelled in another context during our project as the 'metropolitan elite'. We were struck by how many figures have come into independent publishing and bookselling from careers in international banking and finance. At our British Library workshop during [European Literature Night](#) in May 2015, Tony Ward, the managing editor of Lancashire-based [Arc Publications](#), which has been publishing original and translated poetry for over forty years, asserted that everything related to translated literature seemed to happen in London and that in literary translation terms, north of London was a 'desert'. He also noted the virtual absence of discussion of translated literature in schools. The project team themselves noted that the overall decline in the study of modern languages has been accompanied by a marginalization of literary study within the modern languages syllabus, especially in the state sector. Any future work on the readership of translated literature in the UK should certainly reach beyond self-selecting audiences and examine critically the extent of its potential in settings where cultural exchange is less embedded than in London and certain other cities, and, for example, among state-educated adolescent readers.

### **Are publishers of literary translation too conservative?**

We noted through our work that efforts to exploit more fully the commercial potential of translated literature fostered a perhaps unwitting conservatism that might help reach a wider reading audience, but seemed at odds with the boundary-pushing ethos of many advocates we encountered. The project's principal investigator, Rajendra Chitnis, participated in the short-listing stage of the [2015 and 2016 European Literature Night Translation Pitch](#) competitions, organised by English PEN at the Free Word Centre, and witnessed both the extraordinary diversity of texts out there waiting to be translated, and the range of inventive and inspiring



approaches that translators have devised to promote them.<sup>5</sup> When selecting the winner in 2015, however, the judges seemed to suggest that for a translated text to succeed commercially, it needed to be different but not too different from English-language competition, distinctive but not too experimental, contemporary but not too contemporary, with a clear ‘hook’ on which it could be hung. Publishers suggested to us that this rather conservative definition lay behind the fall from 59 pitches from 21 national literatures in 2015 to 33 pitches from 15 national literatures in 2016.

At our Bath workshop, professional literary translators reluctantly conceded that the least attractive ‘hook’, from a commercial perspective, was to promote the book on the cover and in publicity as a translation. More generally, the advocates whom we met often felt that the most dangerous manifestation of conservatism in the publishing of translated literature was the emphasis on genre as the ‘hook’, often to the extent of suppressing the fact that the book is translated. For them, the recent success of Scandinavian crime fiction seemed at best a mixed blessing. In a [2012 interview](#), Christopher Macle hose, whose Macle hose Press brought Stieg Larsson to UK readers, comments: ‘the success of Stieg Larsson gives every brave little publisher who goes out and publishes a book they believe in, the tiny hope that Britain could wake up just this once more and take a writer to its heart’. By contrast, Margaret Jull Costa, who characterises herself as someone ‘publishers trust to translate difficult books’, and who has seen her translations of difficult books succeed commercially, regrets that ‘publishers are so in love now with crime fiction and on the hunt for that elusive bestseller’.

### **What is the impact of a focus on genre?**

We heard from our audiences a familiar concern that an emphasis on genre might lead to a decline in the variety of translated literature published. We might equally note, however, as an example, that Macle hose followed the discovery of Larsson by publishing the Danish novelist Jakob Ejersbo’s distinctive Africa trilogy. This strategy, though relatively unsuccessful in this case, despite strong publicity, suggests a view that reading genre fiction in translation might ‘normalise’ the reading of translated literature more generally. Translators also expressed regret that commercially published genre fiction tends to suppress its status as translated literature and therefore the craft of the translator. While smaller European literatures have been seen to benefit from the current focus on genre, where a focus on translation might favour larger national literatures, they more frequently seem to fall into the category of ‘difficult books’, simply because the language and tradition they are written are less familiar or accessible to readers.

We found through our work that anxiety about quantity has been replaced among advocates by anxiety about diversity. Current studies offer limited information because they work with data about publishing, rather than sales, and therefore do not reveal how the diversity of translated literature actually being read by British readers compares with other countries. In the 2015 LAF reports, despite the apparent improvement, the UK and Ireland still lagged behind European comparisons for amounts of translated literature: in 2011 all

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<sup>5</sup> The reflections of two short-listing judges, Rajendra Chitnis and Rosalind Harvey, can be found here: <https://www.englishpen.org/pen-atlas/lost-and-found-shortlisting-for-the-european-literature-night-translation-pitch-2015/>

translations published and distributed in the United Kingdom and Ireland represented 3.16%, compared to 12.28 in Germany, 15.90% in France, 33.19% in Poland and 19.7% in Italy. At our British Library workshop, the leading German literary agent, [Nicole Witt](#), pointed out that the figures for these countries normally included translations from English which, if taken out, would produce a more directly comparable figure.

Witt's analysis highlights the ever-growing dominance of English in translated literature over other languages, voices and perspectives throughout the world. Winder argued that because English speakers 'can read from numerous cultures without translating there is much less pressure on British publishers [to commission translations]'. By contrast, in an interview with us, Susan Curtis-Kojaković argued that she founded [Istros Books](#), which specializes in south-east European literatures, precisely to battle against this view: 'We are under the impression that as so many people write in English, we don't need translations from foreign languages in order to be connected with the wider world. I don't understand why Iowa should be more interesting to me than Bucharest'. The self-selecting audiences at our workshops, populated by professional advocates of translated literature, were predictably sceptical that the diversity provided by English-language literature was adequate, particularly given the perceived cultural dominance in that context of the USA, but the Free Word Centre's 2015-16 translator-in-residence, [Marta Dziurosz](#), argued that it was incumbent on literary 'smaller' nations, like Poland, 'to present themselves as a nation that has something to say'. We noted, however, that for example in Scandinavia, a significant proportion of translated literature comes from neighbouring countries, a pattern potentially replicated in other European 'peripheries', and we might then ask whether that represents greater diversity than that available to English-speaking readers.

Dziurosz's emphasis on the need for smaller European nations to show that their writers have something to say underpinned the pitches submitted to the Translation Pitch competitions, of which in 2015, 37 of 59 came from smaller European literatures, and the competition was won by a Bulgarian novel, while in 2016, 18 of 33 came from smaller European national literatures. In both years, the short-listing panel was struck by the diversity of genres, audiences, generations and backgrounds of authors represented, and the plausibility of the pitches suggested both that the English-language market has barely begun to explore the possibilities within Europe, and that highly competent, enthusiastic translators are working across the continent to identify suitable texts.

This picture contrasts, however, with LAF's findings regarding source languages in literature translated into English. Their data show that French is the most frequently appearing, with the second, German, far behind, followed by Spanish, Russian, Italian, Swedish, Norwegian, Dutch, Portuguese and Danish. Another notable finding is that several Eastern European languages are represented by less than ten translations over the entire period, including Armenian, Belarusian, Balkan languages, Georgian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Slovak, Slovenian and Ukrainian. Apart from providing us with an understanding of the challenges involved in establishing reliable data sets, confirming the relative and comparative small number of titles translated into English, establishing the particular challenges facing the literatures of small European and especially Eastern European nations, the report also highlights a steadily growing presence of translated literature on the UK market and, not least,



the dramatic impact that smaller specialized publishers (such as Istros Books) can have on the statistics and the availability of literatures from smaller European nations.

At our Bath workshop, Simon Winder circulated the 2015 list for Penguin Classics and Penguin Modern Classics. Of 103 books, 53 had been translated into English: twenty-three from French, five each from German and Italian, four from Latin, three each from Brazilian Portuguese, Japanese and Russian, two each from Chinese and Spanish, and one each from Arabic, Celtic languages, Finnish and Norwegian. The number for French was swollen by a continuing project to publish all George Simenon's novels, while others were also not necessarily books or translations appearing for the first time. The list thus highlights a more general concern that the retranslation of classics is prioritized over the publication of works for the first time. This is a particular problem for smaller European literatures, for which few if any texts have historically managed to attain international classic status, and those that have (for example, the Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek's 1923 novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*) may permanently distort international perceptions and expectations of the literature concerned.

The challenge for smaller European literatures to break into a list like Penguin's is daunting; at our British Library workshop, both Nicole Witt and Margaret Jull Costa noted that at large publishers, it was not just one person but a team, ultimately including sales people, who needed to be persuaded to go ahead with a translated book. At our workshops, experienced translators and other advocates of smaller literatures consistently identified their targets as independent publishers with a reputation for publishing translated literature. Names mentioned included Alma Books, And Other Stories, Arc, Comma Press, Dalkey Archive Press, Dedalus, Hesperus, Istros, Jantar, Maclehose Press, New York Review, Norvik Press, Peirene Press, Portobello Books, Pushkin Press and Stork, but neither Erica Jarnes from English PEN nor Sophia Wardell from the Free Word Centre felt confident that she could provide a comprehensive list, even for the UK.

This handful of names reveals the diversity of publishing operations and motivations that networks of readers, translators and funders can, at some level, currently support. Some presses seek to promote literature from particular parts of Europe, like Istros (South Slav and Balkans), Jantar (Czech and Slovak), Norvik (Scandinavian) and Stork (Central and East European), others favour particular genres, like poetry (Arc), short stories (Comma) or experimental writing (Dalkey Archive). While all presses naturally want to reach as wide an audience as possible, Tony Ward spoke for many when he argued at our British Library workshop that success for Ark was simply making a particular text available to English-language readers, and any commercial success would serve to fund a less economically profitable venture. The often self-sacrificing, pioneering work of individual advocates seems irreplaceable for these smaller literatures, but we noted considerable scope for translators, publishers and promoters to work less in parallel or in implicit competition and more collaboratively to raise the profile of their work.

At our workshops, advocates frequently raised the perceived continuing dominance of male authors in published translated literature. This dominance was typically attributed to either male-dominated and/or unconsciously conservative selection processes, which might occur in national or supranational contexts, when texts are chosen for funding or promotion internationally, or when translators and publishers choose texts for translation and publication. In 2015, for example, Dedalus Books published an excellent, much-needed [anthology of Slovak](#)

[fiction](#), one of the small European literatures identified by LAF as lacking a significant presence in English. The anthology was commissioned from a Slovak editor, and English-speaking specialists in Slovak literature unanimously agreed that the inclusion of only one Slovak woman author constituted a missed opportunity when recent Slovak literature has been particularly blessed by critically and commercially successful female writers whom no-one would have considered out of place there. This shortcoming was addressed in a much more equal [second Slovak anthology](#), published by Parthian Books in 2017, pointedly dedicated by the female editors to their mothers. This example highlights the awareness of this problem of equality among translators and other advocates. Since our project ended, we note the announcement of the inaugural [Warwick Prize for Women in Translation](#), to be awarded in November 2017. The prize explicitly aims to ‘address the gender imbalance in translated literature and to increase the number of international women’s voices accessible by a British and Irish readership’. And as we launched our report, the announcement of the 2017 round of English PEN’s [PEN Translates awards](#) highlighted that more than half the texts to be funded were written by women. For many advocates, the key is precisely for state, supranational and third-sector funders to allocate funding that supports more equal representation.

### **The phenomenon of ‘supply-driven’ translation**

Our research highlighted that a significant proportion of the increase in published translated literature, particularly from smaller European literatures, can be attributed to translations motivated not by reader demand, but – as the independent Czech scholar and professional translator, Ondřej Vimr, described at our project conference - by a desire to supply. Supply-driven translation sometimes arises from a wish to ensure that a particular classic or favourite text is available for posterity to English-speaking readers, should they one day discover they need it. Tony Ward of Arc Publications argued: ‘It is not our job to increase percentages of translated literature, but to make available as much literature as possible for those who want it’. The strategy is, however, exploited particularly by smaller literatures more practically to reach not so much the ordinary reader as an English-speaking publisher who might take up the book and make a success of it.

This approach underpins, for example, the efforts of [Geopoetika](#), an enterprise founded in Belgrade by the Serbian publisher, translator and writer, Vladislav Bajac, who, at our British Library workshop in conjunction with European Literature Night, described how he decided to act independently after becoming frustrated with state-led mechanisms, which seemed unable to overcome embedded international prejudices towards Serbian literature following the 1990s Balkan war. His hopes of raising interest in Serbian literature to the extent of securing republication by influential international publishers with good distribution and significant market share have, however, yet to be realized. Supply-led translation aimed at attracting publisher attention is a particular focus of state funding from smaller European countries, as Gabriela Mocan of the state-funded [Romanian Cultural Institute](#) in London indicated at our Free Word Centre workshop in April 2016. In conjunction with the National Book Centre in Bucharest, the Romanian Cultural Institute supplies sample translations for example to UK publishers at meetings during the London Book Fair, in the hope that ‘eventually maybe they will lead to something’.

Those who use the method, whether state-led or independently, argued to us that this activity is surely preferable to simply waiting for the appearance of a sufficiently influential English-speaking advocate for their national literature. Indeed, 'supply-led' translation seems designed to circumvent or act in lieu of more high-profile gate-keepers, a word that came up with both positive and negative connotations during our work. At our first workshop, the word was used in implicit reference to corporate publishers and booksellers capable of controlling the market. This notion of 'gatekeeping' contrasted in later discussions with its use to describe the work of translators like Peter Bush (Catalan) or Margaret Jull Costa (Portuguese and Spanish) and of independent publishers, sometimes also agents and booksellers, who acquire a reputation for consistently identifying quality that goes far beyond commercial potential. Mocan noted, as evidence of the potential effectiveness of longer-term support for supply-led translation, that 2016 had been a good year for Romanian literature, with the publication of Mircea Eliade's *The Diary of a Short-sighted Adolescent* by Istros Books, which the influential Guardian critic, Nicholas Lezard, chose as his [paperback translation of the week in March 2016](#), and Penguin's plans to publish Marin Preda's huge 1980 novel *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*. In reference to this venture, however, Winder somewhat undermined faith in a supply-led intervention strategy by noting:

Publishing is a hopeless cottage industry, it's not serious and so where we get our ideas of what to do next is incredibly arbitrary. We have this fantastic new assistant who's Romanian and so we're doing a number of Romanian classics because she is there and if she wasn't there we wouldn't be doing them. She's a very clever person but we're taking it slightly on trust, and it turns out she's an incredibly good judge of books.

### **No better time to be a literary translator?**

Mocan noted that 'one of the biggest challenges for Romanian literature in the UK, and not only the UK, is the lack of translators', which means that sample translations are almost always produced by native Romanian speakers. A further question-mark over the efficacy of 'supply-led' translation is therefore the fact that, despite the best efforts of those involved, texts are chosen and translated in the country of origin, with potential gaps in both linguistic skill and knowledge of the target market. As LAF has shown, despite the opening-up of the former Soviet and Eastern Bloc, the expansion of the European Union and transformation of European travel, a particular challenge for some smaller European literatures remains the sometimes severe shortage of gifted native English-speaking translators for less well known European languages.

Building capacity and disseminating best practice has formed part of particularly EU and third-sector efforts to improve the professional recognition and support afforded to literary translators, and should be the priority for smaller European literatures in translation. At our Free Word Centre workshop, Sophie Wardell described how the Centre's ['Power of Translation'](#) programme supports the professional development of literary translators as artists, and combines this activity with broader work to break down cultural and linguistic barriers and encourage more people to read translated literature. She highlighted in particular International Translation Day, when 250 literary translators gather at the Free Word Centre to discuss the challenges of their day-to-day work, and the activities of the Centre's translator-in-residence. Literature Across Frontiers is a key resource for practical help to literary translators, including guidance about fees and lists of events and courses. Translators themselves are much better

connected; our project benefited from publicity generated various local and national networks of literary translators and on-line publications that promote literary translation from the translator's perspective.

A key aim of our project was to highlight the number of advocates who need to collaborate to make a translation successful. At our British Library workshop, Margaret Jull Costa highlighted the benefits for translated literature of long, trust-based relationships between translators and publishers. Though mutual respect and recognition of the collaborative nature of the process were most common, we did uncover occasional enduring tension between translators and publishers over who was 'more important', which above all reflected the personal investment and precariousness underlying both parties' work. Publishers highlighted their role in 'taking the risk', securing funding for publication and managing promotion, while translators highlighted not only their contribution in identifying and promoting the text at an earlier stage, but also their own role in securing funding. Translators at our Bath workshop suggested that it was in the broader interests of translated literature that editions of translated works were 'the best that they could be', from the quality of the translation, editing and any academic apparatus to the production and promotion of the book, all of which depended on the funds available. This provoked a striking debate between translators and publishers about whether the actual quality of translation was at all decisive to the success of a book, with publishers noting both recent and historical examples where an objectively inaccurate or stylistically poor translation had not hindered the international progress and status of a text.

### **Who funds literary translation and why?**

Independent publishers of translated literature repeatedly highlighted to us the importance for them of state, supranational and third-sector funding, without which translators could not be paid or books produced and distributed. Translators and publishers were keen both to express gratitude for support, and to wish that funding was more plentiful. The amounts, precise motivations, selection criteria and processes for this funding vary between countries and organisations, and are often not easy to establish.<sup>6</sup> We did, however, encounter anxiety among current beneficiaries that scrutiny of funding processes and calls for more precise criteria or measures of success might lead to governments, in particular, questioning this use of national budgets. At our Free Word Centre workshop, we also heard dissatisfaction, particularly from cultural attachés and national cultural centre staff, about a lack of national strategy regarding the use of funding. In some cases, panels of literary experts were bypassed by civil servants more anxious not to offend any of the publishers applying for funding; in others, on the contrary, the priorities of domestic expert panels were privileged over, for example, the prospects for international cultural promotion or commercial success.

### **Conclusion: Choreographing an Eco-System?**

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<sup>6</sup> In the wake of this project, Ondřej Vimr has secured a Marie Curie Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the University of Bristol to explore European funding for translated literature, which will attempt to map and analyse both the amounts devoted by different countries and the processes whereby funding is allocated

This debate about funding reflects two competing understandings of the prevailing situation in literary translation in the UK that emerged from our interactions with advocates. For some, the priority now is simply to preserve what Erica Jarnes of English PEN described at our Free Word Centre workshop as a diverse, fragile 'eco-system' that permits the survival, at varying levels of stability and prosperity, of many different individual and collective enterprises, genres and subgenres, sustained by a mixture of state, international, third-sector or private funding and commercial success, and the efforts of a wide variety of paid and effectively volunteer advocates. Others, however, suggest that the need for some sort of strategic intervention in the literary translation 'eco-system'. The translator Sarah Death from [Norvik Press](#) suggested the word 'choreography' for the title of our second workshop to reflect its focus on the process and participants involved in bringing a text in a less widely read language to the wider world. In discussions, however, 'choreography' became connected for some advocates with the question of whether the publication of literature in translation in the UK would benefit from better management.

The metaphor is most suited to the questions raised above about quantity and diversity. It was certainly suggested that the status or profile - and therefore strength - of translated literature and those who produce it might be better served by less proliferation and greater discrimination, leading to fewer unread texts, which might imply changes in approaches to funding and funding criteria, or a more nuanced understanding among publishers of supply-driven translation. with an emphasis on quality and suitability of the text for the contemporary English-language context. Those engaged in cultural diplomacy certainly sought a better articulated strategy for state funding, with an emphasis on quality and suitability of the text for the contemporary English-language context. In general, however, those, whether translators, publishers or third-sector advocates, who took a less measurable, more long-term view of the purpose of literary translation – to make texts available, to foster cultural exchange and dialogue – most feared the unintended consequences of intervention, above all for the diversity of languages, cultures, genres and persons represented. Less controversial were efforts to grow the 'eco-system', likely to be co-ordinated by the third sector and educators, by reaching beyond the perceived natural constituency for translated literature, exploiting multi-cultural contexts better but reaching also into less multi-cultural contexts, most obviously through the school curriculum and looking beyond the modern languages syllabus to history, geography and other cognate subjects.

An 'eco-system' is marked by a tension between competition and co-operation. We encountered many examples both of networks of translators and other advocates of translated literature, and of effective collaboration between different kinds of advocates, notably literary agents, translators, publishers, booksellers and academics, who were not competing for credit but committed to the quality of the outcome. We heard frequently how national literatures are frequently expected to compete with one another for funding or, for example, for status at the major book fairs or in publications, though we also encountered both formal and informal examples, like European Literature Night, where representatives of different national literatures or, in the case of translation workshops, translators of different languages, worked together. We noted that in the context of the funding and conduct of academic research, the smaller literatures each project investigator represented were better served individually by being brought together with others. Our project came, in the end, to embody our finding that

the strength, status and diversity of literary translation in general, and of the translation of smaller European literatures in particular, will continue to grow best where advocates find paths to cooperation and the sharing of all kinds of resources between professionals and between literatures, and develop structures that encourage that approach.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The project team would like to thank: the AHRC, our advisory board: Alexandra Büchler and Literature Across Frontiers, Sarah Death, Alex Drace-Francis, Svend Erik Larsen and Carol O’Sullivan, the British Library, English PEN, the Free Word Centre, the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, Vladislav Bajac, Nic Bottomley and Mr B’s Emporium of Reading Delights, Renata Clark, Erica Jarnes, Margaret Jull Costa, Gabriela Mocan, Stephanie Seegmüller, Michael Tate, Tony Ward, Sophie Wardell, Simon Winder, Nicole Witt, and all those other advocates for literature in translation who participated in our activities.