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A LOOK AT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ISAD(G) IN ROMANIAN ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

Izvleček:

Uvajanje standarda ISAD(G) v romunski arhivski praksi

Leta 2009 je bil na konferenci v Radencih predstavljen prispevek, v katerem je avtor predstavil kompatibilnost standarda ISAD(G) in romunskih določil za upravljanje z dokumenti. V tokratnem prispevku avtor poudarja romunsko arhivsko urejevalno okolje in ugotavlja, kako so prakse, ki jih to okolje ureja, kompatibilne s standardom ISAD(G). Avtor kot najpomembnejše področje združevanja navaja: (a) uveljaviti princip provenience kot temelj ureditve, ki se mora odražati v popisu, (b) odreči se idealu fizične in vsebinske enotnosti v iskalnih pripomočkih, (c) razmisliti tudi o drugih vrstah iskalnih pripomočkov, takih, ki bi predstavljali ne samo popis na nivoju fonda ali združenih dokumentov, ampak tudi druge nivoje znotraj fonda, (d) izogniti se idealu »najboljšega« popisa in prevzeti dinamičen karakter arhivskega popisa, (e) poenotiti veljaven opis ustvarjalca tudi v sistemu kontrole, (f) analizirati terminološke konflikte in jih rešiti ali z uveljavitvijo novih pomenov ali z uveljavitvijo novih terminov. Avtor meni, da bo tak pristop omogočil primerno uvedbo standarda in ne samo njegovo »prilagojeno« različico.

Ključne besede:

ISAD(G), Romunija, arhivske prakse, standardizacija.

Abstract:

A Look at the Implementation of ISAD(G) in Romanian Archival Practice

Last year in Radenci the author presented a point of view about the compatibility between ISAD(G) and Romanian regulatory provisions for "records management". In the present article, his focus is on the Romanian archival regulatory environment and how the practice enforced by this environment is compatible with ISAD(G). He considers the following areas as the most important for harmonization: (a). to really enforce the principle of provenance, as the backbone of arrangement, that must be reflected by the description; (b). to give up the ideal of physical and intellectual community in finding aids, and consider the description as the representation of the fond, not of the accessions in the repository. (c). to consider the alternative finding aids, to reflect not only the fonds or file level descriptions, but also some other levels inside a fonds; (d). to avoid the ideal of a "definitive best" description and to assume the dynamic character of the archival description; (e). to unify the creator description in force and to unify it in an authority system; (f). to analyze terminology conflicts and to solve them either by getting new meanings or by adopting new terms. In author's opinion, such an approach will offer a proper implementation of the standard and not an "adapted" version of it.

Key words:

ISAD(G), Romania, archival practices, standardization.

ISAD(G) is a modern synthesis of the most relevant international archival practice. It is a great success worldwide as an archival standard and it is

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implemented mainly accompanied by the IT infrastructures for archival description. Nevertheless, as frequently happens, the standardization has some "collateral" victims in equalizing the parochial practices or even the national ones. On the other hand, the resistance of national practices many times makes the result of ISAD(G) implementation to be a sort of a mixture between local practices and the provisions of standards, between the sentence of the editors and the particular interpretation of terminology and principles.

From my point of view, ISAD(G) is a great success of archival science, and consistent with this idea I promoted its implementation in Romania too. Some remarks about the "peculiar" interpretation of the standard made me shaping my promoting discourse, pleading for a prudent approach, in order to rationally connect the current national practices and ISAD(G).

A year ago, also in Radenci, I presented the way the current Romanian archival system regulates the "records management" and if this system is compatible with ISAD(G)[1]. In this paper, I shall look over the compatibility issues between archival practices in Romania and ISAD(G). As in my previous paper, I shall present the current system, the potential conflicts with ISAD(G) and I shall suggest some solutions, by some theoretical and practical adjustments.

1.   THE BOND WITH THE CREATORS

As presented in my previous article, the creators or holders of records transfer their records to the National Archives based on control lists called inventories. In the ideal framework, these inventories would become the main finding aids (for both physical and intellectual purposes) for archivists and users; thus, in a perfect world, the access to the new accessions would be very promptly delivered to the users. Unfortunately, these inventories, as they are designed now, are not compatible with ISAD(G). Moreover, in the real world archivists have to re-process new accessions for many reasons: smoothing the overlaps, poor quality of inventories, the perfect equivalent between intellectual descriptions and physical arrangement etc. The lack of resources (time and staff) many times makes inventories to cover only the accessions they refer to, and not the entire fonds.

In a virtual implementation of ISAD(G), it is obvious it will become mandatory to re-process the records from accessions, at least in order to make some upper-level descriptions. The accession inventories should cease to be (the only) finding aids, but instead one type of a finding aid for physical control; in best situation, if they are really well done, they may be finding aids with descriptions at file/records level, accompanying the new upper level descriptions. Therefore, the archivists will have to do at least the mandatory contextual description, at fonds level and/or the subsequent ones, for identifying the sub-fonds and series from that fonds.

2.   BREAKING THE SYNCHRONISM OF PHYSICAL/INTELLECTUAL CONTROL

As I mentioned before, the lack of resources makes that many accessions containing records from a fonds to be addressed as such, with inventories that overlap or with different organization than the original fonds. ISAD(G) may offer a way out of these backlogs if the Romanian archival theory and practice give up to the

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[1]   *Popovici (2009), p. 55-60.*

ideal synchronism between the physical arrangement and the intellectual one. Currently, the ideal situation presumes that the order of the records on the shelves should be similar with the order of the files description in the finding aids. But, the description, as defined by ISAD(G), is a "representation", a sort of "ideal order" of archival material, without presuming that this order is the same at physical level. In my understanding, the arrangement of records in the repository is not necessarily identical with the arrangement of ISAD(G) representation of a fonds. Basically, the arrangement of ISAD(G) representations must reflect the original order - that would be the intellectual reconstruction of the original order[2]. But, since each unit of description is uniquely identified by a reference number, the physical location is not as important; the physical arrangement would not be mandatory for respecting the principle of provenance.

Therefore, implementing ISAD(G) may involve (not a mandatory condition although) the development of a controlling system that has a separate physical location control (by repository/shelf lists) and an intellectual/content control (by description). Such an approach may bring a set of advantages: a limited number of handlings of archival material, and a focus on description and editing finding aids, a more clear delimitation of working tasks and competences (the physical handling and the intellectual description), avoidance of renumbering the units in one fonds etc.

3.   ENFORCING THE PRINCIPLE OF PROVENANCE

Although it is presented in some theoretical Romanian archival works, the principle of provenance is not really implemented and used in the national archival methodology and practice. The main methodological regulation only mentions that archival aggregation will be arranged according to "the organizational chart f the creator or based on the processing plan of the archivist"[3]. In the next regulation, it is mentioned that, in arrangement, it is considered the *respect des fonds* (where it was maintained), emphasising further on the chronological or structural arrangement[4]. In practice, the efforts for identifying/reconstruction of the original order were otherwise minimal, because it was considered as time consuming due to the need of research and documentation. Moreover, it was noticed that a mere chronological arrangement leads to a faster arrangement of archival entities and so, to a lesser effort of the archivists. Thus, many fonds are chronologically divided in two records' "series": files and book-registers. Where the structural system has been used, only the upper levels of the larger fonds have been considered, with maximum of 2-3 levels (fonds, subfonds and sometimes, sub-subfonds), simplifying the creator's organizational chart.

ISAD(G) is based, structural and functional, on this principle, and implementing the standard in its intentions means clearly and explicitly assuming the principle of provenance in archival basic methodology. The implications might be:

a).   a more deep concern for the archivists in documenting the administrative and archival history;

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[2]   *Cook (1992), p. 65.*

[3]   *Arhivele Nationale ale României, Norma tehnică, Bucuresti, 1996, art. 24.*

[4]   *Arhivele Nationale ale României, Norme privind microfilmarea de asigurare, [1996], art. 1. 12.*

b). a more limited right for the archivists to re-arrange the records (corrupting the potential original order) and generating new arrangement plans, that reflect not as much the creator than the archivists' perspective and interests.

c). creation of many description levels (see below, heading 4), that is not limited to the structural-chronological, chronological-structural or alphabetical filing systems, and it is faithful to the organizational divisions of the creating agencies or to its functional divisions.

d). generating the hierarchical arrangement plans and not flat ones - based, inside of fonds, on artificial groupings/series: for instance, files and registers[5].

One rather classical issue rises - if this arrangement should be physical and also intellectual, or only intellectual. From my perspective, as I mentioned above (heading 2), the repository arrangement is not necessary relevant for understanding the context and the information of the fonds. The principle of provenance states, at its core, that original order, resulted in the process of creating records as by-products of the business, is the most faithful and the only real impartial and natural way of arranging records; it also allows the retrieve of information by following business mechanism. It might be enough, therefore, that the original order may be mirrored in the finding aids and be intellectually restored in order to comply with the principle. If the finding aids offer a good representation of the records intellectual arrangement, then records can be easily identified in the repository, under the mandatory condition of being uniquely identified and located by one physical call number. Of course, for the sake of perfection, in an ideal framework, with enough time and staff available, the mirroring of the intellectual representation of the fonds at the repository level would be desirable; but in our opinion, this should not be a purpose *per se*.

4. MULTILEVEL DESCRIPTION AND NEW TYPES OF FINDING AIDS

Currently, in the Romanian archival practice there are two levels of arrangement relevant for archival description: the fonds and the file. For fonds, there are general descriptions in the prefaces to the inventories (of a large quality range); for files, the inventory contains descriptions for each file. Where records are grouped also in some intermediary levels, these levels have no description of their own; so, they are rather headings of sections of the inventory and have a limited relevance in the archival description. The common elements for items from such a section might only be identified by the user from reading the files descriptions.

Implementation of the principle of provenance implies mirroring into the finding aids the fonds structure and the original order. These are, in some circumstances, more important than the file level description, because they should reflect the administrative context of creation. Hence, they might help the retrieval of relevant information, in a quicker manner than by reading hundreds of short summaries for each file. As the majority of creators are organized in a hierarchical way, the description should reflect this hierarchy, as ISAD(G) states. Thus, it the "classical" way shall not be enough, i.e. to deliver some general information about fonds and its creators, in the prefaces of the inventories; each level ought to have at

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[5] *One can notice that the ISAD(G) definition of series has no indication about the organic nature of creation; therefore, such "artificial" groupings may be considered as "ISAD(G) compliant" (which are not, in my opinion).*

least mandatory elements mentioned as such in the standard and, at the same time, only the relevant information, in order to avoid redundancy.

Such an approach also implies at least two other issues. Firstly, it appears that working in the way mentioned above, the fonds processing will last shorter. Also, it will soon make a difference between fonds, considering their relevance for research (see below, no 5). Secondly, at this time, the Romanian archival practice does not have as many finding aids types as needed for intermediate levels of description. Currently, the inventory comprises the description at the file and, ideally, fonds level, without other references to the intermediate aggregations (series, subfonds etc.). The guide comprises descriptions at groups of fonds or at fonds level. Where series or subseries shall be described? As long as not all the fonds shall be described at fond/file level, it is obvious that new types of finding aids need to be "invented". On the other hand, in an electronic archival information system, all these issues will be easily fixed within databases, where descriptions are automatically aggregated[6].

5.   THE DYNAMIC FEATURE OF THE ARCHIVAL DESCRIPTION/PROCESSING

For more than 50 years, Romanian archival methodology and practice fed themselves with the illusion of perfectionism. A fonds should be processed completely, and afterwards everything would be well arranged and secure, going until the numbering of all pages in all files. The real life proved this approach a utopia. Such an approach very much delayed the research release date for many fonds due to the severe lack of staff and time. For instance, there are still many essential medieval fonds that are still inaccessible for scientific research, 50 after the transfer into the custody of the Archives. In this way, over some geographical areas, the historical knowledge is rather darkened.

In my opinion, Romanian archival practice should give up the idea of "definitive, complete and perfect processing" and accept the dynamic character of processing/description. There is not - with very restraint exceptions - any possibility to completely process a fonds in a reasonable period of time. The right option could be, therefore, a minimum mandatory processing, with the reserve that, if the research, control etc. will require, this processing may be refined and deepened, even until the file or piece level. I consider that such an approach will shorten the time from transfer to use, directing the clerics' efforts toward the users' requests. Foremost important is that public access should not be mandatory connected with the processing of fonds down to the file level.

6.   ELABORATION OF AN AUTHORITY SYSTEM

The National Archives of Romania have implemented a national information system even since the 1970s. Determined by the best practice of information systems in that time, a controlled vocabulary was developed, with descriptors that indexed the content of described units. Simultaneously, there have been lists with creating agencies' names and rules for the authority form. There was - and there is not - an integrated authority system, nor one for creators' description.

Implementation of ISAD(G) would mean, in my opinion, assuming also the other ICA's standards; for authorities, ISAAR(CPF) is mandatory. Basically, ISAAR is the

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[6]   See, for instance, L. Cardinal et.al. (1984), p. 20; Nougaret, Galland (1999), p. 119.

second pillar of archival description and a system for describing the creators of records must be designed and articulated accordingly. The existence of authority records and files would allow the user (either researcher or archivist) to understand the activity and functions of the creator, as a first step in further understanding the institutional context of the sought information. Moreover, in a free market economy, where the internal structures are changing very often, the existence of authority files would allow also explicitly represents the issues of absorptions, divisions etc. of the creator and revealing the links among different organizational units with the series from within a fonds. It must also be emphasized that this system would imply a more profound implication of the archivist on the detailed institutional-administrative history. At the same time, it would be desirable to connect such a system to the actual creators covered by the right of inspection of NAR.

Such an approach, of an integrated system, would allow using the same information resource for description of many similar creators (schools, local authorities etc.), reducing the time needed for description and outlining in a better manner the institutional context of creating records.

7. CHANGES IN PROFESSIONAL VOCABULARY

Despite the fact that ISAD(G) is a sort of a global archival synthesis, it is obviously not as global in its understanding of different national languages[7]. It was initially published in the official language of ICA (English), and its creation was based on archival sources of different traditions, both Anglo-Saxon and Latin (French, Italian etc.). Even presuming a full agreement between authors over some meanings and scope of the standard, there are risks of misunderstanding some terms or to translate them erroneously[8].

One common example is the word "series". There have been situations when, disrespecting the principle of provenance, the Romanian archivists (and not only them!!) dismantled the original order and they created artificial groupings of records within a fonds. By a particular understanding of the definition of series from ISAD(G), these groupings - I emphasize, created in the historical archives - have been assimilated with the concept of series, which is, in my opinion, erroneous.

But there are also some other problems concerning the terminology. Due to the fact that I was involved in the translation of the ICDA standards into Romanian, I had the opportunity to identify some of the difficulties of understanding.

On the one hand, there are difficulties in finding a perfect equivalence between some terms of Romanian archival science and the ISAD(G) ones or to identify some new meanings for the already existing word. The word "description", for instance, has in Romanian the meaning "physical description" of a file or record. Another example is the word "file" that, accordingly to the standard, relates to the content, while in Romanian practice it may be also related to the volume, to the physical dimension.

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[7] I do not intent to bring any offence, but my intention here is to refer to the archival science as known in the cultural model rooted in Western Europe.

[8] One possible example is the Romanian translation of ISDIAH. In Romania, "archives" covers the whole lifecycle of records, from creation to the historical archives. When I translated "description of archival holdings", many of my colleagues understood that the standard is about the creators' holdings. The clarifications came only after the invoking of article I.3 from ISDIAH, that clearly states the standard refers to the archival institution only.

On the other hand, there are concepts that are not yet used in the professional vocabulary. For instance, the whole family of "authority…" (record, file, form etc.) was never used as such in professional language and now they should be defined, "invented". The same situation can be encountered for "multi-level description", "access points" etc.

As a bottom line, implementing ISAD(G) means also making some decisions regarding the new professional terms and/or some adjustments for older meanings. This issue is an important one, because a random decision would make understanding harder and it will generate difficulties in assimilation of the standard itself. As a consequence, it may also have a negative impact on the outcome of its implementation.

8.   CONCLUSIONS

Somebody said once that the good thing about the standards is that there are so many to choose from. At the end of the list of potential issues concerning the implementation of ISAD(G) in Romania, one may raise the question: Is it worth it? *Cui prodest*?

Of course, it is a matter of choice. One may take it, or leave it. But, in my opinion, it is worth for users and for the archivists.

As I have tried to illustrate, ISAD(G) opens the way for a more rational use of professional resources, generates more efficiency, with an obvious impact over the users' interests. One may not ask a 21st century user to waste her/his time reading tens of pages with summaries; they need access points, they need contextualising of contents. It is, in the end, the Google lesson… Professionally speaking, lack of standards means lack or at least hard communication between different catalogues that will also impede over quick and efficient use of finding aids by the researcher.

If ISAD(G) would be implemented in Romanian archival practice, this might allow the implementation of the best practice model, that has also been implemented by a large part of professional community worldwide. This would mean that some necessary practical changes would occur, adjusting some of outdated solutions offered by the national practice today. Let us mention here the principle of provenance, generally assumed worldwide, but almost ignored in Romanian practice.

We should not forget the importance of ISAD(G) as a step towards the archival information interchange at the international level, that is, a way to advertise the research potential of the Romanian archives.

The main advantage of implementation focuses on a greater flexibility in processing a fonds that leads to a better use of working staff and a quicker opening of holdings for research. In other words, it is a shift in transfer staff from production to services, a change of focus, from re-arranging the fonds for an ideal order of records towards better, more explicit and contextualized finding aids. At its turn, this change will lead to a more explicit claim of the intellectual side of the profession.

On the other hand, implementation of ISAD(G) involves some risks that must be addressed, mainly associated with the "change management". The first issue is the way new approaches will be connected to the old ones, because a brutal shift may generate incompatibilities in understandings and procedures. Secondly,

implementation of ISAD(G) must mandatory be accompanied by the training programmes for archivists, in order for them to understand the rationality of changes and implications and practical implementation issues, for avoiding the parallel working modes.

Ignoring these aspects might lead to a *sui generis* implementation of ISAD(G), that would only approximately hit the target aimed by the standard.

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