

Znews

When will Vietnam be the 'Guest of Honor' of the Frankfurt Book Fair?

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To become a Guest of Honour, a country must demonstrate cultural identity, organizational capacity, a mature publishing ecosystem, and national commitment.

The Frankfurt Book Fair - the world's largest publishing event, each year, more than 7,000 publishing units from 100 countries and hundreds of thousands of visitors gather here to trade, introduce books, find partners and spread culture. And in each book fair, the Guest of Honour is always the most prestigious position - where a country is given the opportunity to tell its cultural story to the world. In 2025, the Philippines was chosen as Guest of Honour for the first time, after nearly a decade of persistent preparation. Previously, Indonesia took on this role in 2015, paving the way for Southeast Asia on the international publishing stage. These two journeys give Vietnam many valuable lessons, if we really want the exhibition booth named "Vietnam Pavilion" to shine in Frankfurt one day.

Indonesia: Starting from a national vision

To be selected by Frankfurt, Indonesia did not just submit an administrative dossier, but also implemented a national cultural plan. The government assigned the Ministry of Education and Culture to coordinate with the Indonesian Publishing Association (IKAPI) to build a "National Committee" consisting of writers, translators, artists, publishers, businesses and diplomats.

They set a clear goal: not just "going to the book fair", but "bringing Indonesian literature to the world". During the two years leading up to the 2015 book fair, Indonesia invested in translating and publishing nearly 200 works into German and English, and organized dozens of seminars, exhibitions and exchanges with European publishers.

Their theme that year – "17,000 Islands of Imagination" – was a proud cultural statement, transforming the 2,500 square meter space of the Indonesia Pavilion into an island of light, music and words. The event led the German press to call Indonesia "Asia's emerging literary phenomenon".

Of course, not everything was smooth sailing. Lack of translators, budget constraints, and cultural differences were the difficulties they had to overcome. But most importantly, Indonesia proved one thing: To go far, you need a national vision, not just a publishing project.

Philippines: Courage comes from quiet preparation

If Indonesia is the drumbeat that opens the way, then the Philippines is a story of perseverance. Since 2015, Senator Loren Legarda – who is considered the "national cultural architect" – has persistently promoted the "Philippines in Frankfurt" project. She worked with agencies like the National Book Development Board (NBDB), the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs to develop a detailed plan over several years.

When the Philippines was officially chosen as Guest of Honor 2025, they were ready. The theme they chose – "The Imagination Peoples the Air" – was inspired by José Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*,

symbolizing the spirit of creativity and freedom. They brought to Frankfurt not only books, but also music, photography, architecture, performance art, and a cultural space “In the City” – spread throughout the city of Frankfurt.







Guests and publishers visit the Guest of Honor booth of the Philippines. Photo: Frankfurt Book Fair.

About 900 books, 100 authors and more than 70 cultural and artistic events were carefully planned. At the same time, they launched the website philippinesfrankfurt2025.com to introduce authors, copyrights, videos, events - a "digital hub" for the world to access Philippine literature.

What is special is that, throughout the preparation process, they considered this project as a national mission, not just for the publishing industry. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, embassies, cultural organizations and private enterprises joined together. And it was that consensus that helped the Philippines "bring its imagination to the world" in the true sense.

Lesson for Vietnam: Can't go it alone!

Looking back at those two stories, we can see a common denominator: To become a Guest of Honor, that country must demonstrate its cultural identity, organizational capacity, mature publishing ecosystem and national commitment. This is not just an opportunity to sell copyrights, but also an opportunity to tell the national story through the language of literature, art, technology, education and creativity.

Vietnam has great potential. We have a thousand-year history, a rich literature, a rapidly changing publishing market and a generation of young, energetic authors and publishers. But to step onto the world's biggest stage, potential alone is not enough.

To be selected, we must start now with a systematic and long-term strategy.

6 things Vietnam needs to do from today

First, establish a "Frankfurt 2030 National Committee". This must be an inter-sectoral agency including the Ministry of Culture - Ministry of Foreign Affairs - Department of Publishing, Printing and Distribution - Vietnam Publishing Association - along with cultural enterprises and large book companies to coordinate the entire plan for 5-6 years. This should be considered a national cultural project, not a public service activity.

Second, launch the program "Vietnamese Literature in Translation" (V-LIT). Following the I-LIT model of Indonesia, Vietnam needs to establish a translation support fund, invite international translators, foreign editors, and organize translation workshops. The goal is to have at least 150 Vietnamese books translated into German and English in the next 5 years.



Mr. Nguyen Tuan Quynh - Member of the Executive Committee of the Vietnam Publishing Association - at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2025. Photo: NVCC.

Third, build a “Vietnam Pavilion” - a cultural story with a theme. Not just bring books, but need to tell the “Vietnam Story” in the synthetic language of art, music, film, design, and folklore. A theme like “Vietnam - The Story of Flowing Words” will both inspire and represent a new creative spirit.

Fourth, expand international media. Create a digital platform like vietnamfrankfurt2030.com in three languages (Vietnamese - English - German), update authors, books, videos, exhibitions, events. Collaborate with Deutsche Welle, BBC Culture, Publishing Perspectives... to promote the image of Vietnam as a “Creative Nation in Asia”.

Fifth, train a team of translators and international publishing managers. There can be no “literary export” without human resources who understand both Vietnamese culture and world publishing standards. Universities and cultural institutes should open courses on “Literary Translation and International Copyright Management”.

And finally, mobilize the power of the private sector. From banks, airlines, technology corporations to tourism businesses - all can participate in sponsoring and accompanying, because this is a project that benefits the national image. Indonesia and the Philippines both mobilize multi-disciplinary resources, both saving the state budget and increasing professionalism.



Vietnamese delegation at the Vietnam Book Space, Frankfurt Book Fair this year. Photo: Department of Publishing, Printing and Distribution.

From “going to the book fair” to “bringing Vietnam to the world”

The Frankfurt Book Fair is not just a place to display books, but a forum for global knowledge, copyright and culture. Being a Guest of Honour means being given a rare opportunity to tell the world: who we are, what we are thinking and where we want to go.

If Indonesia has told the story of 17,000 islands, the Philippines is bringing imagination to the world, then Vietnam can absolutely tell the story of a country that is changing, creative and humane. But to do that, we must start today - with a long-term vision, synergy and the belief that: books and culture are important soft power of a country.