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Provision of the European Union information in an acceding country

A survey of the role of public libraries in Croatia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present an exploratory study whose aim was to investigate the role of public libraries in the provision of European Union (EU) information in an EU acceding country (Croatia).

Design/methodology/approach – Study was conducted via online questionnaire in public libraries across country.

Findings – The findings revealed that majority of respondents (83.7 percent) think it is an important task of public libraries to provide citizens with materials about the EU, and that almost all responding libraries (98 percent) have EU materials. In general, respondents think that provision of EU materials in their library does not compromise its role of politically neutral institution. The results also indicate that libraries quite rarely (10 percent) maintain links to relevant EU online sources on their websites. EU collections in responding libraries are promoted actively most frequently in the library itself and on its website, and very rarely in the local media.

Practical implications – Findings are expected to be of interest to European administration in charge of the development of effective communication policies, national authorities in EU candidate and acceding countries, and information professionals in general.

Originality/value – This is the first study to investigate the role of public libraries in EU information provision in an EU acceding country.

Keywords Public libraries, Croatia, European Union, Collections, Information provision, Acceding country

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

European Union (EU) has always put high value on the promotion of active citizenship and open communication with its citizens. Nevertheless, recently it was faced with a crisis of confidence into European project. In addition, recent surveys show that the general public across the EU feels uninformed about its institutions, policies and activities (Eurobarometer, 2014). It seems that numerous information networks and initiatives, such as European Documentation Centres (EDCs), Euro Info Centres, Innovation Relay Centres, Info Points Europe, Public Information Relay (PIR) and European Public Information Centres (EPICs), which have been set up across EU did not result with as efficient information and communication infrastructure as expected.

As a result, in late 2014, a call for a new communication plan was issued and European institutions were asked to develop a new communication strategy to reconnect the people with the European project (Rouillon, 2014).

Since 1980s a number of studies have been launched to assess the EU information provision and use of European information in the long-established EU member states, but none has been conducted in an acceding country. In order to contribute to the existing body of professional literature, a major study was launched in Croatia, in the period immediately following the country's completion of accession negotiations. The aim of the study was twofold: to investigate the role of public libraries in the provision of European information in the acceding country; and to explore the citizens' attitudes, information needs and patterns of information seeking behavior in relation to the EU (Faletar Tanacković *et al.*, 2015). In this paper only results pertaining to the role of public libraries in the provision of EU information will be presented.

While all of the previous studies related to the provision of EU information focussed on the long-established EU member states, this study is specific because it was conducted in an EU acceding country. The context of an acceding country is specific because its citizens are about to enter new economic, political, cultural and educational environment where some of their established routines are to be challenged. Both in their private and professional lives they are likely to experience an increased need for diverse information about the EU. However, anecdotal evidence and occasional research (Čar, 2007; Faletar Tanacković *et al.*, 2015) suggest that official information network with relevant, up-to-date and comprehensible information on the EU in acceding countries in most cases is not established and citizens do not know where to look for required information. They are faced with enormous quantity of information on the EU, very often biased and aimed either at the promotion of the European project or its critique. In this scenario, public libraries, as public information access points, emerge as critical elements because they traditionally facilitate civic engagement and informed decision making of citizens in particular through provision of national government information.

The results of the survey into the role of public libraries in the provision of EU information conducted in Croatia, while an acceding country, are expected to be of interest to European administration charged with the development of effective communication policies, national authorities in EU candidate and acceding countries, and information professionals in general.

2. Literature overview

Although professional literature on European information provision and its uses is still relatively scarce, the topic has been addressed by academic researchers since mid-1980s (Hopkins, 1985; Hopkins and Bingham, 1987). Over the years, mainly scholars in the long-established EU countries have addressed two specific aspects of this phenomenon: EU-related information needs of citizens and patterns of EU information provision via different EU information networks. The thematic interest of this paper falls within the latter category.

The provision of EU information to the general public, in particular through European Info Centres, PIRs and EPICs, a network based in public libraries, was investigated extensively in the UK where the need for improved public access to European information has been recognized in early 1990s.

In one of the first studies Marcella and colleagues reported that public library provision of EU information was identified as an important part of the statutory

responsibility of public libraries in the UK and that in 1994 PIR, a European Commission initiative, was established with the aim of providing information about the EU to the general public. Although public libraries that participated in their study indicated an increase in the number of users of these collections, they reported inadequate EU collections, low use of electronic EU resources and challenges with maintenance of their political neutrality (Marcella *et al.*, 1997a).

In the same year, Marcella and her team compared patterns of provision of EU information in France and the UK. Among other findings, they identified public libraries as well placed to provide such service to the general public because they have professional and experienced staff, easily accessible premises, equipment and long tradition of public service in information provision. They pointed out that by 1996, 154 out of the then 176 public library authorities in the UK had joined the PIR information network, and provided European information service to the citizens on the non-profit basis. On the other hand public libraries in France have primarily cultural function, and are not bound to offer their readers a reference service, thus the role of providing EU information to the public has been taken by numerous associations and local initiatives such as youth and job centers and not public libraries (Marcella *et al.*, 1997b).

Two years later the involvement of public libraries in the provision of EU information in the UK was explored again by Cooper (1999) who surveyed the background to and the establishment of EU information networks PIRs and EPICs. Most importantly, Cooper stressed advantages offered by public libraries in EU information provision: they were already a part of the public's information seeking behavior, they offered multiple outlets at local level, they do not require costs in terms of establishment and start-up that a new network would, they offered existing information management and reference skills, they had a tradition of networking together and with other providers, and those running public libraries were keen to take on this role.

Motivated by possible introduction of European single currency (euro) in the UK, in 2002 Cousins and Muir investigated how European information, especially information on European economic and monetary union, was made available to the citizens through different types of European information units (European Resource Centres, EDCs, PIRs, EPICs, etc.) in the East Midlands region. In interviews with librarians, they found out that public libraries included in the study did not have staff wholly dedicated to the EU information service and that only one out of six EPICs had their own European budget for acquisition of EU material. Majority of respondents stated that the materials distributed by the EU to the public libraries was not appropriate (in terms of both content and format) for their users. The study of users' EU information needs was never carried out in the responding public libraries, and their EU collections were promoted only within the library and advertised on the library website. In this study respondents emphasized that it was important for public libraries to remain neutral and provide a balanced EU literature (include not only official EU material which has positive approach to European matters but also Eurosceptic publications) because their attempts to promote EU collection in their libraries resulted with complaints of being a propaganda machine for the EU. In the second part of their study, Cousins and Muir interviewed public library users about their EU information needs and related information seeking behavior. Majority of respondents (a total of 53 public library users), indicated television and newspapers as the most popular sources of current EU information and only one person said that they would go to the library when in need of EU information (Cousins and Muir, 2002).

Similar preference for readily available information sources (e.g. internet, television, personal sources, newspapers) and low use of public libraries, was reported in the survey of EU information needs among post-secondary students in Croatia. While 9.8 percent of respondents considered public libraries as the best source of European information, only 3.6 percent actually consulted local public library in their search for EU information (Faletar Tanacković *et al.*, 2015).

3. Study

In order to explore the role of public libraries in the provision of information related to the EU in an acceding country, a study was conducted in Croatia in 2013 when the country was taking final steps to become a full member in the EU. The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. Did public libraries participate in any EU-related national projects?

RQ2. Do public libraries have any materials related to the EU?

RQ3. What types of materials (thematic areas, format, language, publisher) related to the EU do public libraries have?

RQ4. How are EU materials managed in public libraries?

RQ5. How are EU materials promoted and used?

RQ6. How do librarians perceive their role in the provision of EU information for citizens?

3.1 The survey questions

The questionnaire consisted of 19 questions: 18 multiple choice questions and one Likert-like scale type question. Respondents who indicated that their library did not have any EU-related publications had to answer only six questions (five multiple choice questions and one Likert-like scale type question). The survey questions, in line with research questions, could be grouped into the following thematic sets:

- questions related to the library's participation in national projects aimed at the promotion of EU;
- questions related to the library's collections of EU publications (formats, types, publisher, language, thematic areas, acquisition, shelving);
- questions related to the promotion and use of EU information in the library; and
- questions related to the librarians' perception of their role in the provision of EU information for the citizens.

3.2 Methodology

The data were collected via online survey during a 60-day period preceding July 1, 2013, when Croatia became a full member of the EU. The period from May through June 2013 was chosen because in that period Croatia was undertaking final preparations for its upcoming full membership in the EU. Also, it was believed that by that time public libraries in the country would have already developed their EU collections, to meet the citizens' needs for EU-related information.

All public libraries in the country ($N = 204$) were sent an e-mail invitation to participate in the study, with a link to an online survey. Recommendation was made

that a survey should be filled out by a library director or a person in charge of EU collection (if they were designated in the library). After a reminder, a total of 50 valid completed copies of the questionnaire were returned (recall 24.51 percent). Data were analyzed using SPSS software for statistical analysis.

4. Results
4.1 Participation in EU-related national projects
In general, public libraries in the country could participate in two major national projects whose goal was the dissemination of information about the EU. Based on its communication strategy aimed at informing the Croatian public about the EU and preparations for EU membership, Ministry of the Interior and European Integration launched the project Europe in Croatia. The aim of this project was to inform and educate citizens about the EU and European integrations in general, with special emphasis on the EU programs and activities and Croatia's membership in the EU (Ministry of the Foreign Affairs and European Integration, 2003). Within this project an EU Info Center was opened in one of the major public libraries in the country's capital. Also, in order to decentralize the provision of EU information to citizens, 85 Euro Info Points were installed in larger towns across the country. Since libraries were recognized as one of Government's most important partners in communication with the citizens about the EU (Parliament of Croatia, 2006), next to media, non-government organizations (NGOs), academic community, etc., Euro Info Points were located in libraries as well. Euro Info Points which consisted of Internet Kiosks and Info Shelves were located in 30 public, 14 academic and two school libraries. Euro Internet Kiosks provided online access to information about EU, EU projects aimed at youth and links to NGOs related to the EU, but also a possibility to check e-mail. Euro Info Shelves displayed promotional print material (flyers and brochures) on EU integration in Croatian language (Petrić, 2005). Another program in which Croatian public libraries were invited to participate is entitled "Information on the European Union in public libraries." This program was developed by Croatian Library Association and conducted in public libraries across country from 2005 through 2008, with financial support from the National Foundaton for Civil Society Development. Its goal was to broaden the public library staff's knowledge on the EU and its information sources, and to improve the development of public libraries as information centers offering current information on the EU. The program was implemented through workshops, international cooperation (study visit to Netherlands) and publishing/promotional activities (program website, EU portals, brochures, bimonthly, newsletter, etc.) (Baršić-Schneider and Belan-Simić, 2007).

When asked about the library participation in these projects, slightly less frequently ($N = 21$, 42 percent) respondents reported that they participated in the project Europe in Croatia than in the program Information on the European Union in public libraries ($N = 36$, 72 percent) (Table I). Thanks to the latter program, in 34 (68 percent) libraries EU materials were acquired, in 16 (32 percent) libraries a contact has been made with

Project	N (%)
Europe in Croatia	21 (42)
Information on the European Union in public libraries	36 (72)

Table I.
Participation
in EU-related
national projects

other EU-related institutions and NGOs, in 15 (30 percent) libraries the staff participated in the training on the EU information dissemination and use, and in two (4 percent) the staff co-authored print or online publications about the EU.

4.2 EU publications in library collections

Respondents were then asked about the inclusion of EU materials in their library collections. Only one (2 percent) respondent reported that their library did not have any materials on the EU. All other respondents ($N = 49$, 98 percent) reported that EU materials were an integral part of their collections. Since earlier studies showed that public libraries could be accused of being a propaganda machine for the EU if they collected only official EU publications (e.g. Cousins and Muir, 2002), in the next question we asked about the origin, i.e. publishers of EU materials in library collections. The majority of respondents indicated that their collections on EU consisted of materials published by commercial publishers ($N = 38$, 76 percent) and materials published by Croatian Government ($N = 37$, 74 percent). Only 20 (40 percent) respondents stated that in their collections there were official EU materials, published by EUR-OP. Posession of materials on the EU that were published by Croatian Library Association was reported by almost a third ($N = 14$, 28 percent) of respondents (Table II).

When asked to give examples of official EU publications in their collections the majority of respondents indicated Bulletin of the EU ($N = 11$, 22 percent). To a much smaller degree, respondents listed *Treaties* ($N = 4$, 8 percent), *Official Journal of the EU* ($N = 3$, 6 percent), General Report on the Activities of the European Union ($N = 2$, 4 percent) and COM-documents ($N = 1$, 2 percent).

4.3 Types of EU materials in libraries

In the next section of the questionnaire, respondents were asked in more detail about different types and characteristics of materials on the EU in their library collections. We were in particular interested in their format, thematic areas and language. The first question, therefore, inquired about the types of print publications in library collections. In most cases, respondents indicated the possession of print monographs ($N = 40$, 80 percent), and promotional brochures and flyers ($N = 38$, 76 percent). In relation to the language of their EU library collections, the majority 48 (96 percent) indicated that EU publications in their collections were in Croatian. A total of 21 (42 percent) respondents stated that they also had EU publications in English (Table III).

Respondents were than asked about electronic resources on EU in their libraries. Interestingly, 26 (52 percent) respondents reported that they do not provide their users with access to such material. Only three (6 percent) respondents maintained a list of quality European online resources (such as europa.eu) on their library website, and two (4 percent) maintained a list of quality Croatian websites on EU (e.g. EnterEurope.hr).

Publisher	N (%)
Commercial publishers	38 (76)
Croatian Government	37 (74)
EUR-OP	20 (40)
Croatian Library Association	14 (28)
Other	1 (2)

Table II.
EU publications by publishers

More frequently respondents ($N=19$, 38 percent) reported the posession of locally available electronic publications (DVDs, CD-ROMs, etc.) on the EU.

Tha last question in this section referred to thematic areas of libraries' EU collections. Respondents were asked to choose all anwers that applied to them from a predetermined list of categories. As we can see from Table IV, in most cases ($N=47$, 94 percent) responding libraries provide access to publications with general information about the EU (its institutions and activities). They also acquire, relatively frequently, publications dealing with the education in EU ($N=30$, 60 percent), Croatia's accession process ($N=28$, 56 percent), impact of Croatia's membership on citizens' lives ($N=26$, 52 percent), human rights/equal opportunities in the EU ($N=26$, 52 percent) and economy in the EU ($N=26$, 52 percent).

4.4 Management of EU collections
This section of the questionnaire addressed issues such as methods of acquisition, promotion and location of EU materials in libraries. When asked about the methods of

	N (%)
Types	
Monographs	40 (80)
Promotional brochures and flyers	38 (76)
Reference	18 (36)
Journals and magazines	15 (30)
Language	
Croatia	49 (96)
English	21 (42)
Other	4 (8)

Table III. Format and language of print EU publications in libraries

Thematic area	N (%)
EU institutions and activities	47 (94)
Education	30 (60)
Croatia's accession process	28 (56)
Impact of EU membership on citizens' everyday life	26 (52)
Human rights/equal opportunities	26 (52)
Economy	26 (52)
Funding opportunities	24 (48)
Member states: statistical information, living conditions	20 (40)
EU market	18 (36)
Employment opportunities	17 (34)
Environment	16 (32)
EU regulations and legislature	14 (28)
Social policy	14 (28)
EU taxation and customs	13 (26)
Business	13 (26)
Forestry, fishing and maritime affairs	9 (18)
Consumer matters	8 (16)
Mobility in the EU	7 (14)
Science and research	7 (14)
Health care	5 (10)

Table IV. Thematic areas of EU collections

acquisition of EU materials, majority of respondents indicated that such material is in their libraries received as a gift ($N = 43$, 86 percent) and slightly less purchased ($N = 37$, 74 percent). Interestingly, five (10 percent) respondents reported that EU material is not actively acquired: they have an EU collection but they are not developing it in any way any more (Table V).

Those respondents who indicated that they purchased EU materials were then asked about their budgets for EU material acquisition. Majority of respondents ($N = 37$, 74 percent) reported that the purchase of EU materials was funded from the library's regular acquisition budget. Only two (4 percent) libraries secured the budget for the acquisition of EU materials from an EU project and one (2 percent) library has set a portion of its own budget especially for acquisition of EU materials.

In the next question, respondents were asked about the location of EU collections in their libraries. In most cases, EU collections are located at several locations in the library. Most frequently ($N = 31$, 62 percent) EU collections are placed in the loan collection area in the vicinity of the information desk. Also, in large number of responding libraries these collections are located in the general adult collection area ($N = 24$, 48 percent) and in general reference area ($N = 19$, 38 percent). In 12 (24 percent) libraries EU collections are located in children's department, and in six (12 percent) in the young adults' department. Four (8 percent) libraries have set up a special department for this collection.

As far as the promotion of EU materials is concerned, the majority of respondents ($N = 36$, 72 percent) indicated that they actively promote their EU collections. In most cases, for this purpose brochures and posters ($N = 24$, 48 percent) and in-house exhibitions ($N = 19$, 38 percent) are employed. In 14 (28 percent) responding libraries, occasional lectures are organized in order to make their users aware of EU collections. Only nine (18 percent) libraries have some information about EU collection available on their website. Library collections on EU are promoted quite rarely in local media such as newspapers and magazines ($N = 4$, 8 percent) and radio or TV ($N = 3$, 6 percent) (Table VI).

Acquisition	N (%)
Gifts	43 (86)
Purchase	37 (74)
Exchange	5 (10)
Not actively acquired	5 (10)

Table V.
Methods of acquisition of EU materials

Promotion	N (%)
Posters and brochures	24 (48)
Exhibitions	19 (38)
Lectures and talks	13 (26)
Library website	9 (18)
European flag onsite	5 (10)
Newspapers and magazines	4 (8)
Radio or TV	3 (6)
Not actively promoted	14 (28)

Table VI.
Promotion of EU collections

4.5 Use of EU collections in libraries

In this section of the questionnaire, respondents were first asked about targeted and actual users of their EU collections. They also had to indicate how they conducted EU information needs analysis of their users and state with which institutions in the community do they collaborate in meeting the needs of their users as related to the EU.

In most cases, targeted user groups of EU publications in the responding librareis are adults ($N = 25$, 50 percent) or all their users/general population ($N = 24$, 48 percent). Slightly less often, EU collections are targeted at young adults ($N = 18$, 36 percent). Only four (8 percent) libraries target their EU collections at children. When asked about actual users of EU collections in their libraries, most frequently respondents indicated general public, i.e. citizens in general ($N = 34$, 68 percent). However, almost half of the respondents ($N = 24$, 48 percent) reported that their EU collections were used by academic community (teachers, students, researchers). Also, EU collections are reported to be used by NGOs ($N = 10$, 20 percent), special interest groups ($N = 9$, 18 percent), citizens looking for employment ($N = 8$, 16 percent), local authorities ($N = 6$, 12 percent), local business community ($N = 6$, 12 percent) and local politicians ($N = 1$, 2 percent). Interestingly, five (10 percent) respondents stated that so far they had no queries regarding the EU, and therefore no users of EU collections, in their libraries (Table VII).

In the next question, respondents were asked about the information needs analysis of their users, as related to the EU. Ten (20 percent) respondents stated that they do not analyze the needs of their users for EU information at all. Respondents who reported that they conduct some kind of information needs analysis ($N = 40$, 80 percent), indicated that they used most often the following two methods: observation ($N = 26$, 52 percent) and analysis of the materials used by users ($N = 22$, 44 percent). Only five (10 percent) respondents employed interviews and four (8 percent) surveys.

When asked about the collaboration with other institutions in cases when they could not meet the needs of their users' for EU information most frequently respondents indicated that they collaborated with other public libraries in the country ($N = 30$, 63.8 percent). Slightly less frequently, they collaborated with the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs and European Integration ($N = 18$, 40.9 percent) and NGOs ($N = 14$, 31.1 percent). It is interesting to note that responding libraries infrequently consult EDC ($N = 2$, 4.7 percent), Information Center for European Law ($N = 2$, 4.7 percent) and European Information Centre ($N = 2$, 4.7 percent).

4.6 Librarians and the EU collection

In the final section of the questionnaire, respondents were first asked if there was a person (staff member) in their library who is in charge of EU collection and provision of service to

Acquisition	N (%)
General public	34 (68)
Academic community	24 (48)
NGOs	10 (20)
Special interest groups	9 (18)
Unemplyed citizens	8 (16)
Local authorities	6 (12)
Local business community	6 (12)
Local politicians	1 (2)
No users	5 (10)

Table VII.
Users of EU collections in library

users with EU-related queries. Results show that in majority of respondings libraries ($N=45$, 93.8 percent) there was no such person. In only three (6.3 percent) libraries a specific member of the library staff was designated to be in charge of EU collections and queries related to the EU. We were then interested to find out about the librarians' training for the use of EU information sources and dissemination of EU information. In only ten (20.8 percent) responding libraries at least one staff member had such a training.

Finally, respondents were asked to mark their level of agreement with a set of statements on public libraries and EU information in general, on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (1 – completely disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neither disagree nor agree, 4 – agree, 5 – completely agree). For ease of reading in the text the combined percentages are given (e.g. for agree completely/agree and disagree/disagree completely) and all data are provided in Table VIII. Responses to this question were given by 49 respondents. The majority of respondents think that public libraries can contribute to the elimination of communication gap between Croatia's citizens and the EU (40 agree) and that provision of EU information is an important task for public libraries (41 agree). Respondents agree slightly less with the statement that Croatian Government recognized public libraries as important partners in informing the citizens about the EU (39 agree). The lowest level of agreement is identified for the last two statements: providing access to EU information compromises public libraries as politically neutral institutions (11 agree) and by providing access to EU information public libraries enter the political scene and become a marketing tool of the EU (nine agree).

5. Discussion
The aim of this study was to explore the role of public libraries in the provision of information related to the EU in Croatian, while an EU acceding country. This section discusses the results of the study following the structure of the research questions.

The findings, based on the print survey of 50 public libraries across country, revealed that majority of responding public libraries in Croatia participated in at least one national EU project whose goal was education of citizens and librarians about the EU and European integrations. Within these projects, citizens were provided access to EU information and library staff were educated on the EU information dissemination and use.

Statements	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)
Public libraries can contribute to the elimination of communication gap between citizens and the EU	1 (2)	2 (4.1)	6 (12.2)	29 (59.2)	11 (22.4)
Provision of EU information is an important task for public libraries	1 (2)	2 (4.1)	5 (10.2)	32 (65.3)	9 (18.4)
Libraries should offer access to official EU materials but also to materials on the EU published by commercial publishers	0 (0)	2 (4.1)	8 (16.3)	36 (73.5)	3 (6.1)
Croatian Government recognized public libraries as important partners in informing the citizens about the EU	5 (10.2)	11 (22.4)	17 (34.7)	13 (26.5)	3 (6.1)
Providing access to EU information compromises public libraries as politically neutral institutions	8 (16.3)	14 (28.6)	16 (32.7)	8 (16.3)	3 (6.1)
By providing access to EU information public libraries enter the political scene and become a marketing tool of the EU	9 (18.4)	20 (40.8)	11 (22.4)	9 (18.4)	0 (0)

Table VIII.
Public libraries and EU information

The results of the study suggest that public libraries in Croatia could be relatively important actor in the provision of EU information to the citizens: all but one responding library reported that they had materials on the EU in their collections and over 80 percent of respondents think that providing EU information to the citizens is an important task for Croatia's public libraries.

In contrast to UK public libraries which received complaints about the lack of Eurosceptic EU publications because their collections were dominated by official EU publications (Cousins and Muir, 2002), in this study only a smaller proportion of library collections comprised of official EU publications which have a positive approach to European matters. Although significant amount of materials on the EU in library collections is published by Croatian Government which predominantly gives European views, the largest amount of EU materials in libraries comes from commercial publishers. This suggests that responding libraries are giving their best to develop balanced EU collections, comprised of both Eurosceptic and pro-European views. This is also supported by the librarians' view on the political neutrality of their institutions: only 18.4 percent of respondents think that by providing access to EU information they enter a political scene and assume the role of EU marketing tool.

The majority of responding libraries reported that EU materials in their collections are in Croatian, which is very important because the language used in official EU publications is often reported to be too difficult to understand (Cousins and Muir, 2002; Terra, 2010; Faletar Tanacković *et al.*, 2015). The topics of EU materials in library collections spread across different thematic areas, most significantly on EU institutions and activities, education, economy and Croatia's accession process.

In relation to the format of EU materials in the libraries, surprisingly the majority of responding libraries does not offer online access to EU information. Although public library users have free access to the Internet in their local libraries and can access EU-related websites if they wish, only a couple of libraries are maintaining links to relevant EU resources on their websites to guide their users. This practice is somewhat surprising because citizens in general prefer readily accessible online information, and libraries should have assumed a more active role in facilitating their access to quality EU information that is increasingly available online, free of charge.

Although the largest portion (86 percent) of responding libraries reported that their EU materials are acquired as gift, the importance that public libraries place on the provision of EU information to the citizens is evidenced by the fact that two-thirds (74 percent) purchase EU material either from their regular acquisition budget or from a specific European budget. Once acquired, EU materials are located in most cases on multiple locations within the library, including loan collection area, general adult collection area and general reference area. The most frequent category of users of EU information in responding public libraries are citizens, academic community and NGOs.

Although majority (72 percent) of respondents indicated that they actively promoted their EU collections, these promotional activities take place almost exclusively in libraries or advertisements of EU materials are put on the library website. Very rarely libraries promote their EU collections outside of the library, e.g. in local media which are readily accessible and are widely read by the general public. Although this kind of promotion surely cannot attract citizens who are not regular library users, in-house marketing of library services is by large employed in Croatia's libraries in general. While 80 percent of respondents stated that they carried out EU information needs analysis of their users, very rarely did they do it in direct contact with the users themselves (survey, interview). The majority reported to obtain data on users' information needs related to the EU based

on informal observation of users' behavior in the library and on the analysis of consulted material. Since users cannot consult materials that have not been previously acquired by the library, these methods are most likely insufficient and inadequate. Although in only ten libraries staff had some training in the dissemination and use of EU information, it is positive that they are willing to collaborate with other libraries, government agencies and NGOs, in serving their users. Surprisingly, only two respondents indicated that they consulted official EU information units in the country, such as EDC and European Information Centre ($N = 2$, 4 percent), when they could not provide their users with the required EU information.

Majority of respondents (83.7 percent) thinks that public libraries have an important role to play in the provision of EU information to the citizens. While on one hand they believe that public libraries can contribute to the elimination of the communication gap between citizens and EU, on the other hand they are not unanimous in their opinion about public recognition, in particular on the side of the Government, of their role in this. As a matter of fact, public libraries have been recognized officially in the country's communication strategy as one of the most important partners in communicating with the citizens about the EU (Parliament of Croatia, 2006). This suggests two scenarios: either that librarians are not aware of the relevant policy documents or that Government has not followed this strategic statement with any support in practice. Finally, while respondents most frequently disagree with the statement that by providing access to EU information public libraries are becoming a marketing tool of the EU (59.2 percent) or are compromised as politically neutral institutions (44.9 percent), almost a quarter does agree with those statements (22.4 and 18.4 percent, respectively). This suggests that librarians have mixed feelings about this and that balanced EU collections, offering both Eurosceptic information and publications that are positive about European project, are a prerequisite.

6. Conclusion

Croatia's anecdotal experience and fragmentary research suggest that the provision of EU information in an acceding country is insufficiently systematic and effective. Although national government and European Commission put significant effort into the dissemination of EU information to the general public, citizens are challenged with large quantities of information which is difficult to locate and understand. Citizens are not offered a single, well organized and easy-to-use, reliable source which would guide them to relevant, objective and understandable information on the EU (Čar, 2007; Faletar Tanacković *et al.*, 2015).

A significant contribution to the resolution of this situation could be given by public libraries which traditionally provide their users with free and unlimited access to diverse information, including the national government information, prerequistite for independent decision making and civic engagement. Although importance of public libraries within the EU information and communication network has already been recognized in long-established EU countries such as the UK, this exploratory study is the first of its kind conducted in an EU acceding country. Our study, which investigated the role of public libraries in the provision of EU information in an acceding country, revealed that public libraries in Croatia acquire diverse EU materials, mainly in local language, and that they are aware of their importance as locally accessible access point to information about the EU.

Although EU materials are in most cases acquired through gifts (most probably in the case of promotional brochures and leaflets), significant number of libraries sets

aside a budget to purchase EU materials. Surprisingly, the findings suggest that libraries did not make any significant use of increasingly available online information sources on the EU and that EU collections were promoted almost exclusively in the libraries and on their websites. If libraries were to make an effort to maintain a list of quality websites on the EU to guide citizens looking for such information, and promote their services more actively outside of the library, they would probably reach more citizens (even library non-users) who require some EU-related information.

Since findings show that official EU information, i.e. information published by the EU was acquired in responding libraries to a much lesser degree than EU materials published by commercial publishers, it could be said that the respondents' perception of public libraries as politically neutral institutions despite providing access to EU information is sustained.

While responding libraries seemed to be open for collaboration in serving citizens' information needs related to the EU with other libraries, national government and NGOs, it was indicative that they rarely made contacts with official EU information units in the country, such as EDC or European Information Centre. In order to understand reasons behind this, and some other issues raised by the study, additional qualitative research is needed. However, despite the relatively small sample of responding libraries, the limitations inherent to the methodology itself, it is believed that findings have important implications for the EU administration in charge of communication policies, national governments in acceding countries and information professionals in general.

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