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Sanjica Faletar Tanackovic Ivana Faletar Horvatic Boris Badurina

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European Union information in an acceding country

An investigation of information needs and seeking behavior

Sanjica Faletar Tanacković

Department of Information Sciences,

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Osijek, Croatia

Ivana Faletar Horvatic

Reference Department, Zagreb City Libraries, Zagreb, Croatia, and

Boris Badurina

Department of Information Sciences,

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Osijek, Croatia

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to present the exploratory study whose aim was to investigate the information needs and information-seeking behavior of post-secondary students related to the European Union (EU) in Croatia.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 504 students enrolled in post-secondary education across country took part in this study. Data were collected through an online survey during a 60-day period preceding the Croatia's full membership in the EU.

Findings – The findings revealed the high need for information about the EU among the student population. The respondents required European information in a wide range of thematic areas and the majority of them did not feel well informed about the EU in general. Students responding required the European information both for personal reasons and for educational purposes. The majority of respondents required the EU information in order to better understand the EU in general and they faced a number of challenges when accessing it.

Research limitations/implications – Limitations inherent to the method used and the limited number of respondents. Future research should include a wider array of respondents (older citizens, professionals, etc.) so as to obtain a broad a picture as possible of information needs and seeking behavior related to EU.

Practical implications – The study offers valuable insight into the types of EU information needed by citizens (post-secondary students) in an acceding country. The survey results 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.

Originality/value – This is the first study of EU information needs and seeking behavior in an acceding country.

Keywords Students, European Union, Croatia, Information needs, Acceding country, Information-seeking

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) is a political, economic, cultural and social union of 28 member states which produces large amounts of information on daily basis. In order to offer European citizens objective and comprehensive information on its institutions and



activities, and facilitate citizens' understanding of the impact of EU policies on their lives, EU is constantly trying to reinforce its communication activities and develop adequate information infrastructure. It transparently provides information and engages in debate and discussion with citizens in national, regional and local contexts. Although significant effort is being put into the promotion of active citizenship and closing the communication gap between the EU and its citizens, in 2007 two-thirds of Europeans thought that available information on the EU was useful and interesting, but almost as many found it insufficient (Commission of the European Communities, 2007).

Although a number of studies have been launched since the mid-1980s to investigate the European information provision in several member states (primarily in the UK) the European information needs of citizens have been only fragmentarily explored. In order to fill the existing gap in literature and contribute to the current understanding of the European information provision and use a major study has been launched in Croatia in 2013. While all of the previous studies focussed on the European information needs and behavior and the provision of EU information in the long-established EU member states this study is specific because it was conducted in an acceding country. The aim of the study was to investigate the role of public libraries in the provision of European information and to explore the citizens' attitudes, information needs and patterns of information-seeking behavior in relation to the EU in a candidate country which has just completed accession negotiations. The objectives of the study were:

- to identify the importance of European information to citizens;
- to explore the extent and type of citizens' actual need for European information;
- to understand how citizens seek European information;
- to identify the barriers citizens meet in accessing European information; and
- to understand the role of public libraries in the provision of European information.

The user study aimed to focus on one hand on Croatian population in general, by studying the public library users, and on the other hand on students in higher education. Students have been internationally recognized as a user group that might have a higher than average interest in and need for European information. They have also been as identified as one of the major target groups by the Croatian Communication strategy aimed at informing the Croatian public about the EU and preparations for EU membership (Croatian Assembly, 2006).

In this paper only results pertaining to the students' information needs and seeking experiences regarding EU will be presented. The survey results 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 review

While the initial studies into the European information provision and its uses were conducted in mid-1980s (Hopkins, 1985; Hopkins and Bingham, 1987) this research topic consolidated over the next couple of decades primarily thanks to authors from the UK. Although the topic of the EU information has been relatively scarcely addressed in the scholarly library and information sciences (LIS) literature, the analysis of the existing body of literature has shown that authors have so far addressed two major

aspects of this phenomena. On one hand, scholars focussed on different aspects and patterns of European information provision and explored the roles of and challenges facing different information units in the provision of EU information. Over time, as the European information infrastructure developed and diversified, researchers investigated the role of European Resources Centres, European Documentation Centres (EDCs), European Information Centres and public libraries in the provision of EU information (Thomson, 1992; Marcella and Parker, 1995; Marcella *et al.*, 1997a, b; Cooper, 1999). On the other hand, scholars also explored different aspects of uses and users of European information. A number of studies has been conducted to explore the European information needs and behaviors of citizens (general population) and different categories of users, again predominantly in the UK.

Following the Hopkins (1985) survey which identified the lack of demand for European information and the Hopkins and Bingham's (1987) study in which they found out that the business users of European information were often not aware of their own information needs, an emerging demand for European information was revealed in several studies that followed in mid 1990s. For example, in Dudley and Tolfrey's study which focussed on European information needs among a cross-section of the public and businesses in the Hertfordshire county, UK, 18.5 percent of households surveyed had any member who had ever tried to obtain EU information. Also, in this study a significant proportion of respondents could envisage needing European information in the future. The authors of that study also found out that the major user groups of European information were the business community, the educational sector and private individuals (Dudley and Tolfrey, 1997). In their research aimed at assessing the effectiveness of public libraries (Public Information Relay) in facilitating public access to European information, Kelly and Nicholas (1996) found out that students and businesses were the major users of EU information in public libraries because schools and colleges were not meeting their needs.

Similar conclusions were reported by a research team based at Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, UK. Marcella and Baxter established that the main categories of users of EU information in British public libraries were students, school children, business people, the general public and local authority officers. In their study 92 percent of the respondents predicted a future need for European information, either for academic, professional or personal reasons (Marcella and Baxter, 1997). Furthermore, Marcella, Baxter and Parker established that only 28 percent of the respondents (public library users) had previously tried to obtain European information and that they viewed their public libraries as a natural source of European information. As far as the thematic areas of information sought was concerned, they found out that employment opportunities and business-related topics had been the most frequent. In general, their user study showed a growing actual and predicted level of need for European information, among public library users, and an increasing awareness of the potential significance of European information (Marcella *et al.*, 1997a, b).

In one of her later studies related to the European information Marcella focussed on women in the UK and their needs and information-seeking behavior. Her study showed that women valued EU information highly and that they searched for and used a wide variety of thematic categories of European information related to education and their professional and personal life. Respondents in that study indicated that they expected their EU information needs to increase in future in particular in relation to democratic participation and self-development (Marcella, 2001). In a study which aimed to

investigate whether UK population in east Midlands knew enough about European economic and monetary union (EMU) to make an informed decision in a forthcoming referendum on whether the UK should join the European single currency and to identify sources from which they received that knowledge, Cousins and Muir established that respondents did not know where to go to find European information and that they appeared to favor passive method of seeking EU information. Television, radio and newspapers were by far the most frequently consulted sources of information on EMU. Since the study was conducted in early 2000s it does not surprise that only 11 percent of respondents consulted internet for European information. However, it was surprising to find out that only 4 percent of respondents listed public libraries (European Information Relays) as a source where they looked for EU information. Interestingly, 53 percent of male respondents and only 14 percent of female respondents felt that they knew enough about EMU to vote in a referendum (Cousins and Muir, 2002). In 2007 a research group from University of Salamanca, Spain, conducted a study regarding the effectiveness of EU information policy and concluded that respondents, Salamanca residents, were well informed about the EU. Although they obtained the EU information mainly from media, there was an increasing use of the internet as the source of European information. Surprisingly, this study also showed that publications produced specifically by the EU to inform the citizens of its policies and activities were poorly used and respondents were not aware of them (Gonzalez and Hilario, 2007 according to Gonzalez and Terra, 2013).

Recognizing that the academic community is a major user of the European information, several researchers contributed to the understanding of European information needs and seeking behavior of academic and research communities. These researchers focussed in most cases on users of EDCs which have been established by the European Commission in 1963 primarily to support the teaching and research needs of academic staff and students. In 2000 Sargent, Parker and Marcella reported the results of a study of the provision of European information to the academic community in university libraries, via a case study in EDC. They found out that academic staff were more frequent and regular users of EDC than students, and that both categories of users experienced an increasing need for EU information. Students tended to visit EDC in a response to individual instances of need, as generated by a particular assignment or a problem. EDC librarians stated that the volume of academic users was increasing due to an increase in courses with a European element and they described their typical user as someone who “has an idea of what he wants but does not know exactly what he is looking for.” Respondents (academic staff and students) in this study reported that they used European collections in EDC mainly for academic purposes such as preparations for essays, dissertations, lectures and research. Respondents tended to require access to wide range of publications and subject areas (environment, agricultural information, external relations, common foreign and security policy, regional policy), and a need was identified for improved access to quality electronic resources on the EU (Sargent *et al.*, 2000).

In 2000 Conroy, Parker and Davies investigated the European information needs of Scottish secondary school teachers of a broad range of subjects (science, social science, and English) in relation to their teaching of the European dimension. Although their conclusions were based on a small sample (15 teachers and five school librarians) their respondents noted the vital importance of current and up-to-date European information and the internet and media (newspapers and in particular local press, TV) as the most useful sources of information. As far as the content was concerned, the most teachers

stated that they required factual information on individual countries and information on social and cultural aspects of the EU, for example information on the lives of young people in the rest of the Europe so that school-age pupils can make comparisons to their lives. Also, the respondents in this study indicated that the level of publications was a key issue: they noted a lack of suitable information which would be tailored to the needs of both pupils and teachers (Conroy *et al.*, 2000).

In her doctoral study Terra analyzed the European information needs and practices of academic users in an international study which included 234 respondents from EDCs in 21 European countries. Although there were some country-specific differences, in terms of the EU average, the academic work and EU research were the most important reasons for seeking EU information. Respondents indicated that internet was the best source of EU information (42 percent), followed by libraries/documentation centres (35 percent). Interestingly, newspapers and television were used only by a minority of respondents (9 percent). Respondents also believed that the most objective and reliable European information was provided by EU bodies. They preferred either information provided in documents published by European institutions (37 percent) or information provided on official web pages of EU institutions (36 percent). The respondents in this study reported that the two most important aspects of EU information was its availability in electronic format and its currency (Terra, 2010).

In the most recent study of the needs and uses of European information in an academic context, which was partially based on Terra's doctoral research, authors focussed on EDC users in Spain and Portugal. When asked about the importance that access to European information has for them, the large majority of respondents (students and teaching staff) indicated that EU information is relevant for their professional life (65 percent) and only 15 percent stated that European information is important in their personal life. In line with an earlier study conducted by one of the authors, respondents indicated that they preferred internet (82 percent) and libraries/documentation centres (70 percent) as the means for obtaining EU information. Preference for press and television was indicated by only 21 and 18 percent of respondents, respectively. When asked about the most reliable and objective sources for obtaining European information respondents indicated the information available on the official EU web sites (78 percent) and information in documents published by European institutions (68 percent). The thematic areas of European information most frequently demanded by the respondents in this study were the following: information about EU activities (49 percent), human rights (49 percent), employment and social affairs (35 percent), education and training (33 percent), and justice, freedom and security (29 percent). Finally, respondents in this study identified certain difficulties in locating the required information, such as the lack of knowledge about the information sources and specialized tools, problems in understanding terminology and the vast amount of information available on certain topics (Gonzalez and Terra, 2013).

3. Study

In order to explore the students' attitudes, information needs and patterns of information-seeking behavior in relation to the EU in Croatia a survey was launched and the data were gathered over a 60-day period preceding the July 1, 2013 when Croatia became the full member of the EU. This time period (May through June 2013) was purposefully chosen because it was the period of Croatia's final preparations for upcoming full membership in the EU and the citizens have already had the chance to establish their opinions and attitudes toward the EU and to familiarize themselves with

the sources of European information. Also this was believed to be the period when Croatian citizens would require not only the general but also more specific EU-related information.

Since the study was exploratory in nature and the large number of respondents from across the country were desired to be recruited, a survey by questionnaire was chosen to be the best method for data collection. Questionnaire, which contained 25 mostly closed questions, was piloted on eight students following which several minor changes were made. Changes related mostly to the phrasing of the questions and answers. The questions used could be classified into several thematic groups:

- questions related to the students' profile (age, gender, study level, field of study, international study experience);
- questions related to the students' perception and knowledge about the EU and importance of European information;
- questions related to the students' need for EU information (thematic areas of interest, nature of their need and life situations in which they required European information); and
- questions related to the students' access to the EU information (information sources used, elements that facilitated or hindered their access and use of European information).

Questionnaire was distributed online, via student mailing lists and official university web sites. Contacts at all seven Croatian state universities across country were asked to distribute the questionnaire to all students via their web sites and/or student mailing lists. In the end this produced a convenience sample with total of 504 valid completed questionnaires. Closed question data were analyzed using SPSS software for statistical analysis. However, due to space limitations extensive discussion of the impact of all variables on the results is not possible.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 General information about respondents

Questionnaire was filled out by 123 male respondents (24.8 percent) and 373 female respondents (75.2 percent). Eight respondents did not state their gender. The majority of respondents (76.4 percent) were between 20 and 29 years of age. Second largest age group were respondents between 30 and 44 (17.6 percent). Small number of respondents indicated that they belonged either to the age group 15-19 (4.4 percent), 45-54 (1.2 percent), 55-64 (0.2 percent) and over 75 (0.2 percent). None of the respondents belonged to the age group 56-74. In respect to their gender and age, the respondents were a representative sample of the student population in Croatia.

As far as their affiliation is concerned, the majority of respondents studied at the University of Zagreb (45.4 percent) and University of Osijek (32.6 percent). They were followed by students from University of Rijeka (8.2 percent), University of Pula (4.8 percent), University of Split (1.4 percent) and University of Dubrovnik (0.2 percent). The largest proportion of respondents were enrolled in postgraduate studies (36.4 percent). Almost a third of respondents were undergraduate (28 percent) or graduate students (27.8 percent). Slightly over 7 percent indicated that they were currently enrolled in integrated (undergraduate and graduate) studies (7.7 percent). The next question sought to find out if respondents visited foreign universities during their post-secondary education, either for short or longer periods. This information was

sought because it was believed that students who have spent some time studying abroad might have higher interest in European information. The results showed that over 80 percent of respondents did not participate in any international study exchange programs (82.8 percent). Only 86 respondents (17.2 percent) spent some time studying abroad. Table I, meanwhile, indicates the respondents' field of study. It can be seen that the greatest proportion of the respondents studied social sciences (54.2 percent). A less significant proportion of the respondents studied arts and humanities (20.7 percent) and sciences (16.4 percent).

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4.2 Perceptions about the EU and the importance of European information

This section of the questionnaire focussed on the respondents' attitudes related to their perceptions of EU and Croatia's membership in the EU, and perceptions of importance of European information to them personally. When asked if they felt that it was important for them to have access to information about EU and the accession process 175 (39.9 percent) respondents stated that it was important and 95 (18.9 percent) stated it was not important. A large majority (40.2 percent), however, could not decide whether it was important or not important for them. This large proportion of undecided respondents confirms the general feeling that students and young people in general are passive citizens and not interested very much in the politics. Interestingly, when asked about how well they were informed about the EU, and in particular about the Croatia's accession process, the majority of respondents self-reported relatively low level of knowledge of specific EU-related information: only a quarter of respondents felt informed about the EU institutions and activities or Croatia's accession process (Table II). Two earlier UK-based studies also established that relatively small proportion of respondents felt that they were well informed about the EU. For example, in Cousins and Muir's study only 38 percent of respondents felt that they knew enough about the euro to vote in an upcoming referendum (Cousins and Muir, 2002), and in Marcella's study that focussed on women, only 35.8 percent of the respondents felt that they were well informed about the EU (Marcella, 2001).

When asked about their personal attitudes toward EU respondents indicated that they were relatively worried about Croatia joining the block (mean 3.18) but that they

Field of study	%
Social sciences	54.2
Arts and humanities	20.7
Sciences	16.4
Other (e.g. interdisciplinary sciences)	6.0
Missing	0.4

Table I.
Respondents' field of
study

Knowledge about EU	Informed (%)	Not informed (%)	Undecided (%)	Mean
EU institutions and activities	25.2	41.1	33.7	2.74
Croatia's accession process	25.4	38.1	36.5	2.82
Impact of EU membership on everyday personal life	30.8	30.8	38.5	2.97

Table II.
Knowledge about the
European Union

also believed that joining the EU was a positive development for Croatia as a country (mean 3.11). Although they did not believe that joining the EU would resolve the country's economic problems (mean 2.77) they thought that it would positively impact their personal (mean 3.21) and in particular professional lives (mean 3.63). All values are presented in Table III.

Interestingly, on examining responses to this question it was established that rather than gender, age or the membership in scientific disciplines, the study level of respondents in most cases influenced significantly their feelings toward the EU. For example, postgraduate students were less worried about Croatia's membership in the EU (mean 3.01) than the undergraduates (mean 3.41). Postgraduate students were also less likely to think that Croatia's membership in the EU will have negative impact on the country's independence (mean 2.58) than did the undergraduate students (mean 3.01). Also, this user group felt more frequently that joining EU was a positive thing for Croatia (mean 3.40), as opposed to the undergraduate students (mean 2.84).

4.3 Need for European information

This section of the questionnaire sought to identify the respondents' actual need for European information and to explore the thematic areas of the required information. The largest majority of respondents (67 percent) reported that they required European information at least once in the last 12 months and about a third indicated that they did not (33 percent). The proportion of the respondents who had encountered the need for European information in this study was slightly higher than the figures obtained in the Marcella's study in which 24.6 percent of the respondents (women) claimed that they never required the EU information, and 64.8 percent of the respondents stated that they encountered the need for European information at least on infrequent basis (Marcella, 2001).

In response to this question there were some marked differences between the respondents at different study levels ($p = 0.050$), between respondents who had some international experience and those that did not ($p = 0.000$) and between respondents from different disciplines ($p = 0.035$). For example, of 86 respondents who had spent some time studying abroad 83.7 percent felt the need for EU information, while only slightly over 60 percent of those who have not spent any time abroad had required European information in the past year. Similar differences existed in the responses from the respondents at different study levels: only 61.2 percent of undergraduate students and 65.3 percent of graduate students required the EU information, as opposed to 73.1 percent of postgraduate students. Apparently, the need for the European information increases as the respondents advance in their studies. Also, significant differences were identified in the responses provided by students from

Attitudes toward EU	Agree (%)	Do not	Do not	Mean
		agree (%)	know (%)	
EU membership is a positive thing for Croatia	36.1	25.2	38.6	3.11
EU membership will positively impact my personal life	44.5	25.6	29.9	3.21
EU membership will positively impact my professional life	62.7	10.3	27	3.63
In EU Croatia will lose its sovereignty and independence	27.4	41.9	30.6	2.78
EU membership can help Croatia in solving economic problems	28.6	41.9	29.6	2.77
I am worried about Croatia's joining the EU	38.4	25.9	35.7	3.18

Table III.
Attitudes toward
European Union

different disciplines: the most significant user group of European information were respondents studying sciences (71.9 percent) and the least significant user group were students from arts and humanities departments (59.7 percent). This suggests a greater interest in the European information among students who have spent some time studying abroad, who are at the higher level of their studies and who come from natural and technical sciences departments.

The respondents who stated that they encountered the need for European information at least on one occasion in the past year ($n = 337$) were then asked about the nature of their need and the thematic the areas of EU information they required. When asked about the subject interests and thematic areas of the required EU information the respondents reported a wide variety of categories of information (Table IV), selecting from a list of predetermined categories. As shown in Table IV the largest proportion of respondents looked for the following categories of European information: employment (58.5 percent), education (52.8 percent) and statistical information and information about living conditions in EU member states, (54.3 percent) which all suggest possible interest in immigration. While a wide range of subject interests was repeatedly identified in all earlier studies by EU information users, the preference for information related to employment, business activities, education, EU institutions and activities, and human rights seems to predominate (e.g. Marcella *et al.*, 1997a, b; Marcella, 2001; Gonzalez and Terra, 2013).

Upon examination of responses to this question, in relation to respondents' gender, study level, experience of studying abroad and the scientific discipline, some noticeable and yet some unsurprising statistically significant differences have been found. For example, while there was no statistically significant difference in the respondents interest in information about employment between male and female respondents, and between those in social sciences, arts and humanities and sciences, postgraduate students expressed significantly less interest ($p = 0.028$) in information regarding employment opportunities in EU (49.5 percent) than graduate (65.3 percent) and

Thematic areas	%
Employment opportunities	58.5
Member states – statistical information, living conditions	54.3
Educational opportunities	52.8
EU institutions and activities	48.4
EU mobility	35.6
EU taxation and customs	34.7
Croatia's accession process	33.8
Funding opportunities	34.1
Regulations and legislature	28.8
Human rights/equal opportunities	26.1
Science and research – projects, funding	24.6
Environment	21.1
Economy and finances	18.4
Consumer matters/health care	14.2
EU market	14.2
Businesses	13.7
Corruption and organized crime	13.1
Social policy	12.2
Forestry, fishing and maritime affairs	8.0

Table IV.
Thematic areas

undergraduate students (63.4 percent). This confirms with their responses regarding the required information on mobility within member states ($p = 0.012$): postgraduate students were least likely to seek information in this subject category (27.1 percent), and graduate students most likely to do so (45.9 percent). This is probably due to the fact that the majority of postgraduate students in Croatia are employed full time, while graduate students will be soon finishing their studies and looking for employment.

While no statistically significant differences have been found between male and female respondents, between students at different levels of their studies and between respondents from different areas of studies, the information about educational opportunities was significantly more often sought ($p = 0.036$) by students who had already spent some time abroad (63.9 percent) than by students who had not studied abroad in the past (50 percent). Also, significant difference ($p = 0.006$) regarding their interest in information about the educational opportunities was found between respondents from arts and humanities on one hand (71.2 percent) and the remaining two groups of respondents (social sciences 48.9 percent, sciences 46.4 percent) on the other hand. Significantly greater interest ($p = 0.006$) for information about EU funding was reported by male (46.1 percent) than female (29.9 percent) students, and by respondents ($p = 0.003$) who had previously studied abroad (48.6 percent) than those who had not (29.8 percent). Similar difference was found in relation to different levels of study ($p = 0.000$): while 49.6 percent of postgraduate students had previously sought information on available EU funding, only 20.8 percent of undergraduate students had done so. Also, information about EU funding was more often required by respondents in sciences (52.2 percent), than those in arts and history (32.2 percent) and social sciences (27.1 percent). Information about research projects was significantly more frequently sought by male students ($p = 0.000$), students enrolled in postgraduate studies ($p = 0.000$), students who have studied abroad ($p = 0.000$) and respondents from sciences ($p = 0.000$). Finally, information regarding Croatia's accession process was most frequently required by students in social sciences (39.9 percent) and least by students in sciences (21.7 percent).

In order to understand the nature of their need for European information, in the next couple of questions, the respondents were asked to indicate in which life situations did they encounter a need for EU information and for what purposes did they require it. This question was based upon Dervin's (1976) typology of life situations in which individuals may feel a need for information. The largest proportion of respondents indicated that they required information about the EU to better understand (40.1 percent). The respondents also sought European information in order to solve a problem ($n = 58$, 17.2 percent), to make an informed decision ($n = 47$, 14.0 percent) and to reduce the feeling of insecurity and uncertainty ($n = 45$, 13.4 percent) (Table V). This supports Marcella's finding in the study related to women's EU information needs who established that majority of respondents who felt a need for European information required it to help them understand more about the EU than to address a working or situational need (Marcella, 2001).

Table V.
Life situations

Life situations	%
To better understand	40.1
To solve a problem	17.2
To make a decision	14.0
To reduce insecurity	13.4

As far as the context of their information need was concerned, respondents reported that they required information about the EU in the following life situation: as individuals for their personal reasons (75.4 percent), for educational or professional development purposes (56.7), in their professional role/employment (34.7 percent) and out of curiosity (30.1 percent). Interestingly, Terra (2010) and Gonzalez and Terra (2013) found out that by far the most frequent reason for accessing information by respondents in their studies was school/academic work (93 and 88 percent, respectively). Also, the proportion of respondents in their studies who required EU information for cultural/leisure purposes or out of curiosity was significantly smaller than in this study: 22 and 17 percent, respectively. This could probably be explained by the fact that respondents in those two earlier studies were users of EDCs (located at universities), and that respondents in the study reported in this paper were recruited from the general student population, regardless of their use of university libraries or documentation centres.

In responses to this question there were some marked differences between different groups of respondents. For example, European information for professional purposes was required most often by male respondents (48.3 percent), respondents enrolled in postgraduate studies (63.2 percent), respondents who had previously studied abroad (56.9 percent) and respondents who came from sciences (59.4 percent).

All respondents were then asked whether they thought that their need for European information was going to grow in the future. The large majority of respondents (78.7 percent) believed that it would grow. While only seven respondents (1.4 percent) felt that their need for EU information would decrease, 100 (19.9 percent) indicated that their needs would remain the same. Similar results, indicating the increase of respondents' predicted EU information needs in future were identified in several other studies (Marcella and Baxter, 1997; Marcella *et al.*, 1997a, b; Marcella, 2001).

4.4 *Seeking of European information*

The next section of the questionnaire sought to explore how did the respondents stay informed in general about the EU (e.g. about the most recent developments in Croatia's accession process, EU regulations and legislation, projects and so on), and how did they (actively) seek and access the European information when they last encountered an actual need for a specific EU information. The largest proportion of respondents indicated that they stayed informed about the EU in general by accidentally acquiring information, either by encountering it while routinely watching TV, listening to the radio or reading newspapers and news web sites (62.9 percent) or in casual conversations with friends and family members (42.9 percent). While a total of 172 (34.2 percent) respondents stated that they actively sought the European information in order to keep themselves abreast of new EU-related developments, 13.2 percent of respondents stated that they choose not to acquire information about the EU and that they ignored or avoided it.

When asked about the information sources they consulted in order to find the required EU information the last time they felt a need for it, the majority of respondents indicated the official EU web sites (61.4 percent). A significant proportion of respondents also preferred media sources like local news web sites (45.1 percent), TV/radio, general (37.7 percent) or EU specific (22.6 percent) and newspapers and magazines (33.0 percent). Interestingly, only 17 respondents sought the required information in EU information/documentation centre (5.0 percent) and 13 (3.9 percent) in an academic and 12 (3.6 percent) in a local public library (Table VI). Interestingly, when searching for the European information the largest proportion of respondents did not consult any of the documents published by EU institutions (58.8 percent). However,

LHT 33,1	Consulted sources	%
	Official EU web sites	61.4
	Local news web sites	45.1
	General TV/radio program	37.7
	Personal sources	36.2
	Newspapers and magazines	33.0
154	National EU-related web sites	33.8
	National government web sites	30.6
	EU posters, leaflets and brochures	26.7
	TV/radio program focussed on EU	22.6
	Documents published by EU institutions	20.8
	Documents published by non-EU institutions	5.9
	EU information/documentation centre	5.0
	Academic library	3.9
	Public library	3.6
Table VI.	Textbooks	1.2
Consulted sources of EU information	Discussion lists/newsgroups	0.6

among the used EU publications respondents listed treaties (18.4 percent), general reports on the activities of the EU (17.8 percent), official journals of the EU – L, C and S series (14.2 percent), Bulletin of the EU (13.7 percent) and COM documents (7.4 percent).

Preference for electronic resources and information available on the official EU web sites has been noted by several recent studies (Terra, 2010; Gonzalez and Terra, 2013). However, the findings of these studies, in contrast to our findings, indicate heavy use of libraries/documentation centres in the process of obtaining the EU information: 35 percent of the respondents across EU and 70 percent of the respondents in the Spanish and Portuguese study in which the respondents were recruited in EDCs. The similar low use of public libraries as sources of EU information, however, has been identified in Cousins and Muir study (2002). The use of media (e.g. news web sites, newspapers, TV) in the study reported in this paper was much higher than that in earlier two studies: press (9 percent) and TV (9 percent) in Terra's study, and press (21 percent) and TV (18 percent) in Gonzalez and Terra's study. Interestingly, in Marcella's study respondents indicated newspapers (22.3 percent) and TV/radio (17.9 percent) as better sources of EU information than libraries (11.7 percent) (Marcella, 2001). Again, these differences could be explained by the sample and method of respondents' recruitment.

Based on their actual searching experience, respondents were then asked to identify the best sources of European information. The largest majority reported that the most reliable, accurate and objective information about the EU could be obtained from documents and web sites published by the EU (87.9 percent). Significant number of respondents believed that such information could be acquired in media – TV/radio, newspapers, news web sites (68.5 percent), through nongovernmental organizations – NGOs (52.5 percent) and in European documentation and information centres (42.7 percent). Other sources were indicated in much lower frequencies, including public libraries (9.8 percent). (Table VII). This is partially supported by Terra's (2010) and Gonzalez and Terra's (2013) studies who found out that, according to their respondents, the information available in official EU documents and on the official EU web sites were listed as the most reliable and objective sources for obtaining information on the EU. However, in contrast to their study which identified libraries and documentation centres as second best sources of EU information, in our study libraries were rarely

used and recognized as important sources of reliable, objective and accurate EU information by relatively insignificant proportion of respondents

The next question sought to identify the significance of specific aspects of the European information that respondents valued most in its access and usage (Table VIII). The most important aspects seemed to be related to the inherent characteristics of the information itself: that information is accurate (mean 4.82), that information is current (mean 4.67) that information could be understood (mean 4.61) and that information is objective (mean 4.53). A little less significant aspects of the European information for respondents was that it was easily accessible (mean 4.44) and applicable to their personal situation (mean 3.82). The importance of up-to-date information and information available in electronic format was noted both by Conroy *et al.* (2000), Terra (2010) and Gonzalez and Terra (2013).

Respondents were then asked to identify obstacles that made their searching for and use of EU information difficult. Interestingly, out of 337 respondents, only 66 respondents did not face any problems (19.6 percent) and the large proportion reported a number of challenges they faced (Table IX).

EU
information in
an acceding
country

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Best sources	%
EU web sites and documents	87.9
Media	68.5
NGOs	52.5
EU info and documentation centres	42.7
Personal sources	10.7
Public libraries	9.8
National government	8.6
Political parties	1.5

Table VII.
Best sources of EU
information

Important aspects	Mean
Information is accurate	4.82
Information is current	4.67
Information can be understood	4.61
Information is objective	4.53
Information is easily accessible	4.44
Information is applicable to personal situation	3.82

Table VIII.
Important aspects of
EU information

Challenges	%
Large amount of information	38.3
Do not know where to look for information	30.6
Do not know how to express their information need	24.6
Difficult to assess the currency and accuracy of the acquired information	23.7
Difficult to assess the objectivity of the available information	21.7
Information is in English	14.8
Difficulties in understanding terminology	14.5
Difficulties in physical access to information	13.9
No challenges	19.6

Table IX.
Challenges in
accessing EU
information

In most cases, they had problems in dealing with large amount of information (38.3 percent) and they did not know where to look for information (30.6 percent). Significant proportion of the respondents did not know how to express their information need (24.6 percent) had problems in assessing the currency and accuracy of the acquired information (23.7 percent) and found it difficult to assess the objectivity of the available information (21.7 percent). These findings are to a significant degree supported by Gonzalez and Terra's study. For example, in their study almost 30 percent of respondents had difficulties in handling large amount of EU information and as much had problems in understanding the available information. Almost 40 percent did not know how to express their information need precisely. In Terra's (2010) initial study the largest proportion of respondents indicated the large quantity of EU information, difficulties in understanding EU terminology and not knowing how to find EU information as the most important reasons that made accessing EU information difficult.

5. Conclusions

The aim of the study was to explore the students' attitudes, information needs and patterns of information-seeking behavior in relation to the EU in a candidate country which has just completed accession negotiations.

The findings from the study indicate that students as a specific user group experience heavy interest in and demand for European information, primarily for their private reasons but also for educational and professional development purposes. This survey has found that 67 percent of the respondents required European information at least once in the past year. The findings also demonstrate that respondents recognize the potential significance of EU information and feel that it is important for them to have access to information about EU. However, only a quarter of the students responding felt that they were well informed about the EU.

The study also revealed that the students' information needs cannot be simply categorized and their enquiries about the EU refer to a large number of subject areas such as employment and education opportunities, statistical information and information about living conditions in EU member states, general information on EU institutions and activities, and mobility within the EU. Based on the results obtained in the study it can be said that the typical European information user in this study is a postgraduate student of technical or natural sciences who has spent some time studying abroad, and who seeks European information not so much to solve a specific problem or reach a decision related to the EU but to understand it better in a more general or theoretical way.

The findings support the continuing importance of the internet as relevant and easily accessible source of European information. For example, while over 60 percent of the respondents consulted the official EU web sites and 45 percent consulted local news web sites in order to obtain the European information, only 3.9 and 3.6 percent visited academic and public libraries, respectively. Interestingly, when assessing the most important aspects considered in the process of accessing EU information respondents tended to value more the accuracy, currency and objectivity of the information than its (physical) accessibility. The results of this survey also demonstrate that the largest proportion of respondents face some kind of difficulties in accessing European information. The majority of students responding had problems in dealing with the large quantity of available information and they did not know where to look for it.

Finally, the survey identifies the growing need for European information among respondents, in an acceding country, and indicates that a wide range of European

information should be targeted and made accessible, both intellectually and physically, to a wide range of user groups in both member and non-member countries.

Future research should involve investigating the European information needs and information-seeking behavior of a larger and more varied sample (older citizens, professionals, etc.) so as to obtain a broad a picture as possible of information needs and seeking behavior related to EU and among respondents in other acceding countries to allow for comparison.

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About the authors

Dr Sanjica Faletar Tanacković obtained her PhD in 2009 from the Zagreb University. Her research interests are in convergence of cultural heritage institutions, library services to the underprivileged and human information behavior. Dr Sanjica Faletar Tanacković has published in refereed *LIS journals* and teaches at the Department of Information Sciences at J. J. Strossmayer University, Croatia. Dr Sanjica Faletar Tanacković is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: sfaletar@ffos.hr

Ivana Faletar Horvatic is a Reference Librarian at the Zagreb City Library, Croatia. Her research interests are in new technologies in libraries and services to the underprivileged. She graduated from Department of Information Sciences at the Zagreb University in 2009.

Dr Boris Badurina obtained his PhD in 2010 from the Zagreb University. His research interests are in new technology and media implementation effects on libraries and other heritage institutions. Dr Boris Badurina has published in refereed *LIS journals* and teaches at the Department of Information Sciences at J. J. Strossmayer University, Croatia.

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1. Faletar Tanacković Sanjica Sanjica Faletar Tanacković Sanjica Faletar Tanacković is an Associate Professor at the Department of Information Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia. She obtained her PhD in Information Science in 2009 from the Zagreb University, Croatia. She is a member of the Editorial Board for the *Libellarium: journal for the research of writing, books, and cultural heritage institutions* and a co-director of the biennial international conference *Libraries in the Digital Age (LIDA)* which has been organized since 2000 by Rutgers University, USA, Zadar and Osijek University, Croatia. Her research interests are user-centered library services and human information behavior. Faletar Horvatić Ivana Ivana Faletar Horvatić Ivana Faletar Horvatić is a Reference Librarian at the Zagreb City Libraries, Croatia. Her research interests are new technologies in libraries and services to the underprivileged. She graduated from the Department of Information Sciences in Zagreb, Croatia, in 2009. Mićunović Milijana Milijana Mićunović Milijana Mićunović is a Research Assistant at the Department of Information Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Osijek, Croatia. She obtained her PhD in Information Science in 2012 from Osijek University, Croatia. Her research interests are social aspects of ICT, open software and technologies, digital media. Department of Information Sciences, University of Osijek, Osijek, Croatia Zagreb City Libraries, Zagreb, Croatia . 2016. Provision of the European Union information in an acceding country. *Library Hi Tech* 34:3, 454-467. [[Abstract](#)] [[Full Text](#)] [[PDF](#)]