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Political perceptions: a view from Croatia

A summary report

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Abstract

One of the participants in the research project, initiated by the LTR Section, on political perceptions on public libraries, is Croatia. The interviews with policy makers show the challenges, creativity and changing views of constructing a modern public library infrastructure and service.

According to the Law on Libraries (1997) public libraries in Croatia are established and funded by the local municipalities. However, the Ministry of Culture helps by funding special programmes and services, what includes purchase of books, equipment and computers for libraries. The Ministry also provides support when a new library building is opened. Normally the matching fund scheme applies i. e. the Ministry provides 50% of the sum needed and the local municipality has to take care of the rest. The Minister of Culture is advised on library matters by the Library Council, a professional body composed of representatives nominated by Minister of Culture, Minister of Science and Technology, Minister of Education and Sports, Assembly of University Rectors, and Croatian Library Association.

In February 2003 five civil servants in the Ministry of Culture responsible for libraries or for a broader field that includes libraries were approached for the interview; three responded affirmatively, two of them refused to be interviewed. Two professionals,

the president of the Library Association and the president of the Library Council, were also interviewed. All the respondents agreed that interviews were recorded on the tape. The questionnaire provided by Professor Bob Usherwood for the IFLA international study was translated and somewhat adapted. In this summary four issues of possible interest originating from the responses obtained have been presented.

1. Distrust of librarians

Since the Ministry of Culture is responsible for the whole book sector, its policy aims at supporting both national publishers and libraries by providing subventions to publishers who in return have to send a certain number of their books to public libraries. The selection of the titles to be supported is performed by the Council for Books, an advisory body to the Ministry, composed mainly by publishers. Public librarians do not know in advance what titles and in what number of copies they will receive and consequently no public library in Croatia has a written and consistent acquisition policy. In smaller municipalities librarians are quite satisfied with the books provided by the Ministry of Culture, since often their local budget does not include funds for the new acquisitions. Sometimes they do what they can: having received three or five copies of a Croatian classic, they pay a visit to a local bookshop and trade the superfluous copies for some other titles their users show more interest in. Some of our respondents have clearly shown their disapproval with such acts of disrespect committed by librarians. Also, more than one respondent in the interview had implied that librarians could not always be trusted to make the best selection of books for their users. Fear was expressed that if librarians were free to select the titles for their collections they could possibly enter into suspicious “deals” with local booksellers. Allegedly, such cases occurred in the past, before the present policy of the state purchase of books was introduced more than twenty years ago.

2. Autonomy of libraries

Another issue of concern for the civil servants interviewed seems to be the relation between libraries and the “open universities”, institutions which organise various educational and recreational courses for adults. Prior to the introduction of the present Law on Libraries public libraries in smaller towns and municipalities used to be a department of the open university and some of them still are. Reluctance to let public libraries become autonomous institutions was observed in the answers of several respondents.

3. Membership fees

Membership fees are paid by users of public library services in Croatia (ca 50 HRK annually; ca 7 EUR). All the civil servants interviewed agree that the membership fee should be paid. On the contrary, the professionals believe that basic service, such as borrowing books from libraries must be free of charge. It should be kept in mind that at present membership fees contribute significantly to libraries’ budgets and if free of charge membership is introduced, the local authorities or the state would have to procure extra funds.

4. The importance of libraries

Although all of the respondents agree that public libraries are important institutions for the citizens they serve, the majority of them do not believe in their capacity to make a difference in their communities. Civil servants respondents see public libraries mainly as tools for promoting literacy. They insist that valuable books should also find their place in libraries and not only the popular reading and understand their own role as guardians of the quality. The fact that librarians have been trained to select titles for their collections that would serve the needs of the users does not seem to have an impact on their opinion.