

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Croatia

14 November 2000

Croatia covers the area of 56,542 km² and has a population of 4,500,000. The country is administratively divided into 21 counties, 420 municipalities and 80 towns. There are 1,740 libraries out of which 1,098 are school libraries and 260 public libraries. The number of librarians and library assistants is estimated at 3,000. Half of them are members of regional library associations. The Croatian Library Association is the umbrella library organisation for the fifteen regional library associations.

Population:	4,501,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 3,800 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	Croatian - Serbian
Main religions:	Roman Catholicism - Serbian Orthodox, Islam
Literacy:	98% (1995)
Online:	2,14% (May 1999)

Legal context

The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (1990; amended in 2000) guarantees to all citizens freedom of expression. Censorship is explicitly prohibited. Journalists are guaranteed the right to report freely and the right to free access to information. Libraries are not mentioned in the Constitution.

The Law on Libraries (1997) requires that every municipality in the country establish a library as public service. The mission of libraries is not determined in the law. The Art. 6 states, however, that library materials and information (apparently those that a library possesses) have to be provided to users according to their needs and requirements.

Apart from the Law on Libraries, another law of considerable importance for libraries, the Law on Cultural Councils, has recently been drafted. It is expected that the law will soon be sent into the parliamentary procedure. It envisages the establishment of councils of experts who will be charged with the responsibility for the overall development of the respective fields of culture, librarianship included. The law will hopefully provide more autonomy for the professionals. It is envisaged that the present Council on Libraries, the highest body for libraries in Croatia, will take on the role of a new Cultural Council for Libraries. It is difficult to say whether the new Council for Libraries will be able to instigate changes in the present book policy in Croatia.

The Law on Public Communication (1996) affirms the principle of freedom of press and other media of public communication. Free access to information is guaranteed to journalists and they can report freely.

Publishers and editors are held responsible if the information they publish is incorrect and they can be sued. Exposure of pornographic material in public is forbidden.

The Croatian Library Association Code of Ethics (1992) affirms that librarians have to resist all forms of censorship.

Free access to information in libraries

According to the profession obstacles to free access to information in libraries are related to several factors: weak role of librarians in the collection building process, unstable publishing industry which depends heavily on state subsidies, weakness of the whole book chain, inadequate funding, equipment and spacing for libraries, and employment of non-professionals to do qualified jobs in libraries.

In the beginning of the year 2000 a new government was installed in Croatia, but the pace of the expected changes appeared to be extremely slow. The situation in Croatian libraries has not changed much and the basic obstacles to free access to information in libraries remain the same. Although the new public library standards adopted in 1999 require libraries to have an acquisition plan, no library as yet has made its acquisition policy document. Recently an acquisition librarian has been criticised for acquiring *Mein Kampf* for a public library in a town in Northern Croatia. The critique came from the members of the library board and not from the public who apparently show interest for the book. This example proves that acquisition policy document is needed, because sooner or later, librarians will have to explain and argue their acquisition policy.

Selection and acquisition processes in public and school libraries are only partly performed by professional librarians. A considerable number of book titles is purchased for the libraries by the state and/or local authorities within the national scheme of subsidising publishers. The percentage of titles provided for libraries by the state/local authorities varies from year to year. It is reported to be between 10% and 30% of the total annual acquisition for public libraries and is higher for school libraries. This means that librarians are only partly responsible for the delicate task of selection of titles.

Publishing depends on the state subsidies and the titles for which the subsidies are sought have to be approved by special committees appointed by various Ministries, such as the Ministry of Culture, or Ministry of Science and Technology or Ministry of Education and Sport. The committee appointed by the Minister of Culture, for instance, consists of seven persons: authors, publishers and librarians. The committee has been charged with selecting the titles of value that will be subsidised and will eventually come to public libraries. In spite of the good will and intentions of the committee, it is hard to believe that such a small body can really know the needs of library users in different parts of the country.

A recent investigation published in the library journal *Vjesnik bibliotekara Hrvatske* 43, 3(2000) indicates that smaller libraries in the country depend almost entirely on the state purchase of new titles. Major city and town libraries that have their own acquisition funds, and are quicker to acquire new titles, complain when they receive the same titles they have already bought. There is no coordination in acquisition between libraries and state/local authorities. The authorities refute occasional librarians' complaints, by expressing their doubts on the professional competency and capability of librarians to perform the selection and acquisition work. It should be added here that indeed smaller libraries in the country often lack qualified staff and have to employ non-professionals. According to the present Law on Libraries non-professionals employed in libraries should earn a professional degree, but since no funding for such purposes has been provided, it is not quite clear how this deadlock is going to be solved.

The situation is further complicated by the unstable publishing scene characterised in the first place by low visibility of titles in print and it is difficult to obtain an insight into the publishing output. There is no Books-in-Print catalogue and the national bibliography appears irregularly and belatedly. However, the National and University Library publishes a Cataloguing-in-Publication bulletin. A great number of new, small publishers prefer to sell their books directly, i.e. outside bookshops. The number of bookshops has diminished in the nineties and a lack of large, well-supplied bookstores is acutely felt.

VAT on books (22%) that was introduced in 1998, was reduced to 0% in 2000, but only for the final product. In publishers' opinion this reduction does not help them, because VAT regime is still applied to all phases in the book production, except the final one.

Lack of adequate space in both public and school libraries does not allow enlargement of collections. When new educational program was instituted in the beginning of the nineties in both primary and secondary schools, school libraries performed radical weeding of their collections in order to be able to acquire books that appeared in new recommended reading lists.

In the last few years the media has reported several cases of discarding of books done by librarians. The case of a public librarian in Korcula, who reportedly got rid of the unwanted books by throwing them in a dustbin, incited inflammatory reactions from the members of the public in the summer of 1997. It was assumed that discarded books were written by the Serbian authors or were translations into the Serb language, but the following investigation proved this assumption to be incorrect. The Croatian Library Association was notified about the event, but it never voiced its opinion on the matter, at least in public.

In the summer of 1998 the then Dean of Faculty of Philosophy in Zagreb ordered an undetermined number of books and periodicals written in German, Macedonian, Bulgarian, Croatian (and perhaps some other languages) to be taken away from the Faculty depot and sold as used paper. The books were inventoried, although not catalogued. The Dean apparently acted out of good intentions: he said that the books were unclean and infested and the depot where they were kept was needed for another purpose. He also added that some of the materials taken away was published during the socialist regime and could not be used at present. Although political reasons obviously were not the primary cause to discard these books, the Dean's decision reflects the attitude of the Faculty administration towards the library collections in the institution.

The library association

The Croatian Library Association (CLA) responded to the incidents reported in the media by establishing its Committee on the Freedom of Expression and Free Access to Information at its annual conference held in October 1998. Also, IFLA/FAIFE Statement on Libraries and Intellectual Freedom was translated and published in the CLA newsletter in 1999.

In September 2000 at its general conference the CLA Assembly adopted a Declaration on Free Access to Information prepared by the Committee on Free Access to Information. The Declaration has been modelled after the IFLA/FAIFE Libraries and Intellectual Freedom statement. Its purpose has been twofold: to emphasize the responsibility of the profession to provide free access to information for their users and to provide a set of principles the profession can rely on. Professionalism is emphasised throughout the text as the basic principle that regulates the behaviour of the members of the profession. It is expected that the Declaration would help the Library Association and the profession in general in

communication with the media and the public, as well as with the authorities.

The image of the librarian in the press and other media has not been favourable, due to a number of articles published in the last few years describing librarians as persons responsible for extensive book purges. in the war and post-war years. Apart from the articles where individual librarians accused of book cleansing have been named, there is a number of articles in which the library profession as a whole has been qualified as guilty of book cleansing, burning and purging.

In a recent interview for a Croatian newspapers Novi list (17 September 2000), Dubravka Ugrešić, a Croatian writer who has lived abroad since the war, says: "The fact that Croatian librarians, for instance, burned thousands of books does not distinguish them from Karadzic, who burnt the Sarajevo library. Neither is the practice of Karadzic and Croatian librarians different from the practice of the Nazi burnings". It is difficult to understand why Dubravka Ugrešić (and she is not the only one) does not distinguish between the individuals and the profession in general. On the other hand, up to now, the Croatian Library Association has not reacted in public and tried to give its view of the past events. The adoption of the Declaration on Free Access to Information hopefully offers a new opportunity to the Library Association to publicly express its opinion, to sanction its members who possibly broke the professional rules and help free the others of the heavy accusations.

In October 2000 the Croatian Library Association published a new issue of its library journal, Vjesnik bibliotekara Hrvatske, dedicated to the topic of freedom of expression and free access to information. The authors of the articles are foreign and Croatian librarians who write about censorship, free access to information in the digital environment, collection building, book weeding and disposal, responsibility of librarians to provide free access to information for their users, etc. The main purpose of this issue is to make the concept of free access to information more familiar to the Croatian librarians.