

## European Documentation Centres in Recent Financial Crisis: Good Practices and Lessons Learned

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### **Abstract:**

*The mission of the European Documentation Centres (EDCs) is one of involvement and contribution in European integration and cooperation through liaising with the academic community and communicating with the public, at the regional and local level. In this context, the EDCs serve as a reference point for obtaining information and expertise about EU integration, institutions, activities and policies in all EU member states. They collect and develop resources as EU local libraries on-site, and archive electronic documents. They also provide targeted coaching and training courses on the European databases and resources, and provide consultation sessions with the public on relevant topics. Usually, EDCs work closely and develop cooperative tools as national networks. They also establish synergies and organize activities with the Europe Direct Information Centres (EDICs) and Team Europe scientists, as members of the wider Europe Direct network, helping the local community to connect with the different dimensions of the EU. In Greece, most of the EDCs created in the 90's, in order to support the establishment and functioning of the European single market. They are predominantly located at Universities and research institutes, working at a department in their libraries. During the recent financial crisis, Greek EDCs, as well as Centres in other countries, have worked in a profound and demanding way in order to support their target audience and act as European information relays, regarding especially economic and financial information. This paper examines the services and information tools offered by EDCs during the years of crisis, the actions and initiatives undertaken, the synergies developed and the strategy followed. Special emphasis is given to best practices and lessons learned. This research is based on the findings of a related questionnaire, which is distributed to EDCs in countries of European South, such as Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, etc. In this*

*framework, the paper aims at highlighting the added value of EDCs' input as an official EU information network.*

**Keywords:**

European Documentation Centres, European information, Economic and financial crisis, Economic and financial information

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## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this survey is to examine the services and information tools offered by the European Documentation Centres (EDCs) during the years of the financial crisis, the actions and initiatives undertaken, the synergies developed, and the practices and the strategy followed. The research is based on the findings of a related questionnaire, which was distributed to EDCs in all EU member states, focusing however on the countries of European South, such as Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, etc. In this framework, the paper aims at highlighting the added value of EDCs' input as an official EU information network, which involves and contributes to European integration and cooperation through liaising with the academic community and communicating with the public at the regional and local levels.

## **2. Background**

The European Documentation Centers were firstly created in 1963. They are the oldest of the networks set up by the European Commission (EC) to support the European idea of a unified Europe through official information. The EDC status has been mainly attributed to universities and institutions of higher learning and research, under a specific agreement between the European Commission and the host institution. The main purpose was “the creation of a documentary and information infrastructure covering Europe as a new subject for studies” (Katsirikou & Rigakou, 2017, p.2). Thus, the network's mission has been to promote and consolidate teaching and research in the field of European integration.

As a result, the majority of EDCs have been operating inside academic or research libraries<sup>1</sup> in order to host the Community documentation. At the same time, there have been EDCs hosted in academic departments of European or Legal Studies. All Centres automatically receive, free of charge, one printed copy of most EU periodical and monograph publications, the Official Journal, COMM documents, annual reports, pamphlets, statistical publications, etc. This information covers all policy areas of EU activity, such as agriculture, trade, energy, transport, education, economic and monetary affairs, community law, etc. It is important to underline that EDCs were never awarded any direct operating grants by the Commission.

Until the end of the 90's, EDC attribution, management and coordination were the responsibility of Directorate-General for Education. In 2001 the responsibility was transferred to the Directorate General for Communication (DG COMM). The main reason was to bring every European citizen closer to European affairs by providing free access to information on the activities of the EU, as the treaties of Maastricht and Amsterdam specified. Consequently, EDCs started to be addressed not only to academics and researchers, but also to the general public.

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<sup>1</sup> Some parliamentary libraries were also acquired the status of EDC.

A few years later, the broad EU enlargement of 2004 led to the creation of Europe Direct, a new, single platform for all EU information suppliers. Europe Direct included three decentralized networks which operate locally: European Documentation Centres, Europe Direct Information Centres (EDICs) and Team Europe Speakers<sup>2</sup> (European Commission 2004, p.13). At that time a new EDC Agreement was signed by both EC and host structures for all Centres. Representations of European Commission in EU Member States<sup>3</sup> have been responsible for “for keeping a well-functioning EDC network with a good geographical spread in each member state” (Katsirikou & Rigakou, 2017, p.3)

Various support services from EC were offered to EDC staff such as intranet, annual meetings at national and European level, training seminars, staff exchange projects, EDC national coordinators, working groups. etc. “Over the years, the EDC network...has provided a bedrock on which expertise in EU documentation has grown” (Watson, 2017). The rapid technological developments in the information landscape and the shift from print to electronic format of official publications and documentation were great challenges for EDCs. Important information tools have been developed for the users: online catalogues of EU publications, repositories and archives about the EU, current awareness services, websites, newsletters, e-journals, etc. Documentation training and specialized reference services, user coaching, social media, and information literacy courses on official websites and databases supplement the work of the EDCs as crucial multipliers and assistants in disseminating EU information.

Networking is another important aspect for the Centres. Numerous cooperative projects have taken place between EDCs at national and European level. Discussion lists, working groups, information tools and databases are examples of networking<sup>4</sup>.

In 2015, DG COMM launched a Pan-European Working Group of EDCs on the topic “EDCs looking to the future”. In the proposed revised mission statement, EDCs are characterized as a professional and neutral information service concerning the EU (European Commission, 2016).

### **3. New EDC Partnership Agreement**

After long-lasting discussions, a new partnership agreement was sent to all EDCs in May 2018, following the decision to renew and upgrade the status of the Network. In the revamped mission of the EDCs Network, it is clearly stated that EDCs serve as a reference point for obtaining information and expertise about EU institutions, activities and policies, they collect and develop resources, as EU local libraries on-site and archive electronic documents. However, they also contribute to the communication about the EU with the objective of enhancing communication with citizens, in particular the academic community. In detail, the new objectives are the following:

- encourage and facilitate the study and research of EU policies, initiatives and actions
- provide expert advice on searching for EU information sources and documents
- organize and promote debates on Europe, particularly Citizens’ Dialogues, conferences, seminars, visits to the European institutions

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<sup>2</sup>Network of expert speakers on EU affairs (lawyers, consultants, academics)

<sup>3</sup>Until 2007, EDCs were created both in EU and non-EU member states. That year the responsibility was transferred to DG for External Relations and EDCs were renamed in EUi (European Union information).

<sup>4</sup> Eurodoc discussion list is an excellent example of EDCs networking. Started in 1993 from UK, it was expanded not only to all EU member states, but also outside EU.

- work closely with Europe Direct Information Centres and Teal Europe helping the local community to connect with different dimensions of the EU
- develop web-based information and on online presence.

This new approach encourages EDCs to develop their outreach potential and undertake initiatives which reach an audience that otherwise may have not been exposed to library resources or services regarding official EU information

#### 4. Survey Methodology

One of the most important methods of evaluating the quality of library services is the survey method. A well-structured questionnaire was used for the data collection process, according to probability sampling: specifically the simple random sampling method, which is a completely random method of sample selection. The survey’s questionnaire included nominal and Likert type questions regarding: (a) the usage of tools and services provided by EDC around Europe, (b) the view of respondents about events and synergies that organized by EDC, (c) the way that information was provided to EDC users in the period of crisis and (d) demographics. A pilot study to check the reliability of the items of the constructs (and the conceptualization and operationalization of questionnaire construction) took place at the Central Library in Patras University. Reliability test Cronbach a (Alpha) was good with Cronbach a > 0.7 for all constructs.

The data collection process was initiated by sending questionnaires electronically to all EDCs in Europe based on the contact details in the Europe Direct webpage of EUROPA<sup>5</sup>. The data collection period was from 20/5/2019 until 10/6/2019. The sample was the staff of EDCs. The final sample consisted of 122 (out of 332) EDCs. More specifically, the number of EDC staff was from 1 to 6 persons (with a mean of almost 2 persons). Statistical analysis, both descriptive and inferential, using SPSS, was conducted to find the key measurements and to deeper explore the various associations. Countries in European Union with EDCs are 26, with all EU Member States except Lithuania and Luxembourg having one (European Commission, 2018).

We received answers from 24 countries, presented in Table 1. It is worth mentioning that the entire Greek network of EDCs participated in the survey as well as a big majority of the Italian EDCs network (27.9%). There were no answers from Malta and Slovakia (Table 1). In this paper, “EDC(s)” refers to the EDC(s) of survey respondents.

Country	EDC	Frequency	Percent
Austria	10	2	1.6
Belgium	5	2	1.6
Bulgaria	10	2	1.6
Croatia	7	1	.8
Cyprus	2	2	1.6
Czech Republic	8	4	3.3
Denmark	7	1	.8
Estonia	3	1	.8
Finland	9	4	3.3

<sup>5</sup> Europe Direct webpage in EUROPA: [https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/meet-us\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/contact/meet-us_en)

France	37	8	6.6
Germany	31	7	5.7
Greece	10	10	8.2
Hungary	12	5	4.1
Ireland	5	2	1.6
Italy	48	34	27.9
Latvia	2	1	.8
Malta	1	0	0
The Netherlands	2	1	.8
Poland	18	4	3.3
Portugal	11	5	4.1
Romania	10	6	4.9
Slovakia	4	0	0
Slovenia	2	1	.8
Spain	35	11	9.0
Sweden	11	4	3.3
United Kingdom	32	4	3.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 1 : National participation of EDCs

## 5. Survey Results

### Demographics

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show some demographics of EDCs that participated in the survey. The majority of EDCs are located in University premises (34.4%) or in the Department of Central library (33.6%).

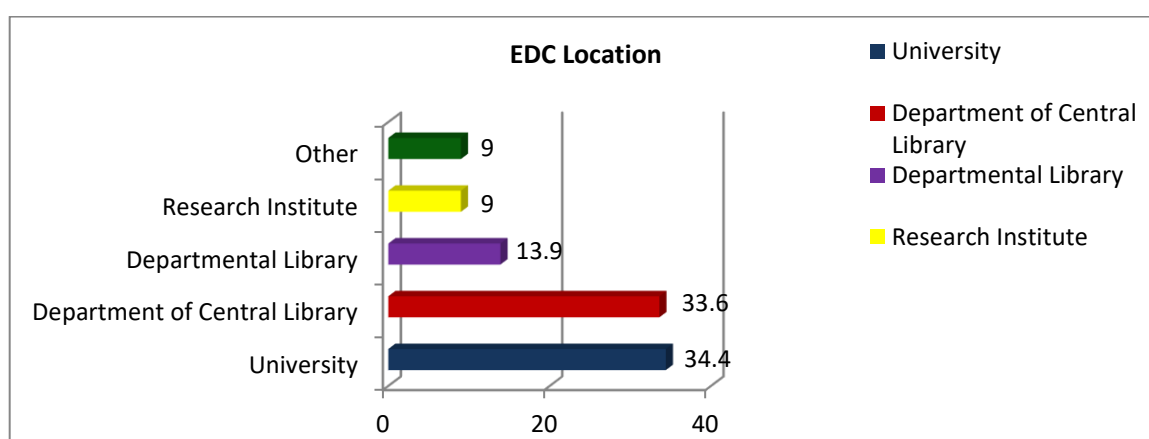


Figure 1: Percentage of EDC Location

The EDCs audience with the highest amount are the members of Host Institution Community (94.3%).

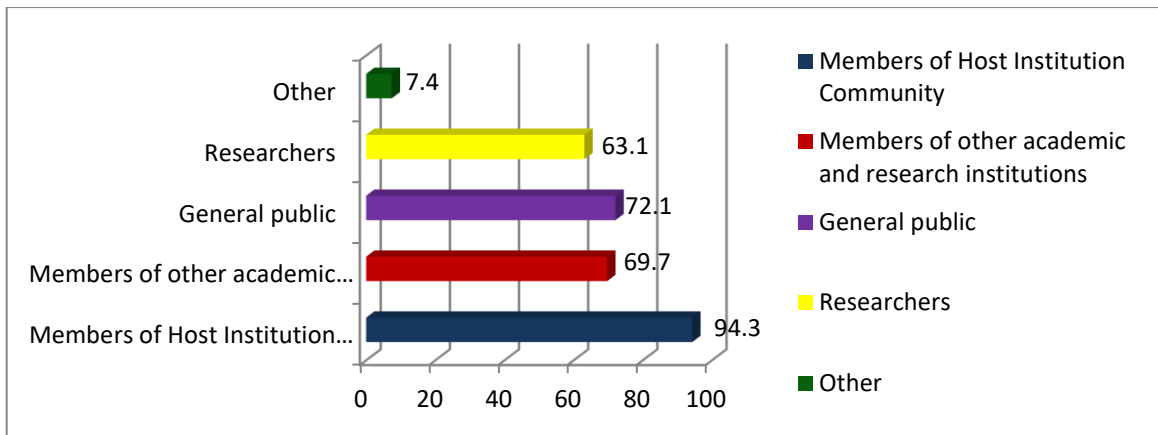


Figure 2: Type of EDC audience

Most EDCs in the sample have signed the new agreement with European Commission (52.5%) with a high percentage (32.8%) still under negotiation.

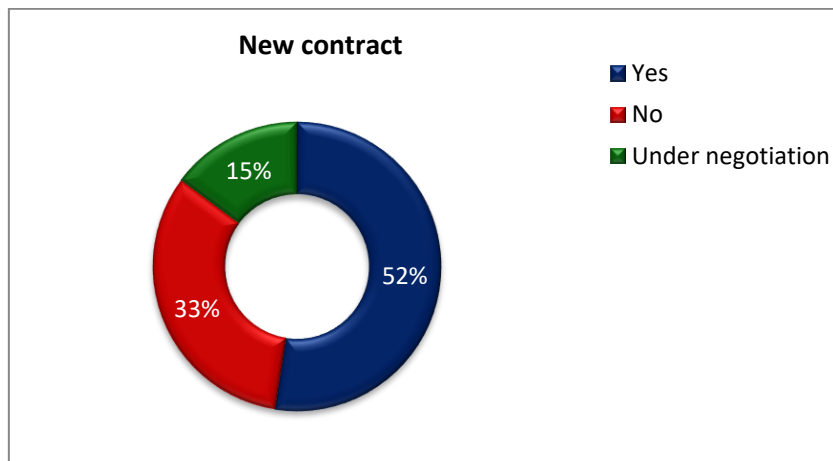


Figure 3: Percentage of new EDC Agreement

### *Main area of interest*

The most popular area of interest for the EDC audience is “Law, Legislation and institutional issues” (50.0%)

Area of interest		
	Frequency	Percent
Economic & Financial Issues	20	16.4
Education & Culture	9	7.4
Environment	2	1.6
Foreign & Security Policy	5	4.1
Humanity Aid & Civil Protection	4	3.3
Law, Legislation & institutional issues	61	50.0

Research & Innovation	9	7.4
Social Affairs & Human Rights	10	8.2
Other	2	1.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 2: Percentage of main area of interest

### Sources of information used by EDC

Figure 4 shows that the main source of information used by EDC are official EU Publications (96.7%). Also, a very important source are official EU websites (94.3%), followed by books and scientific journals (86.1%).

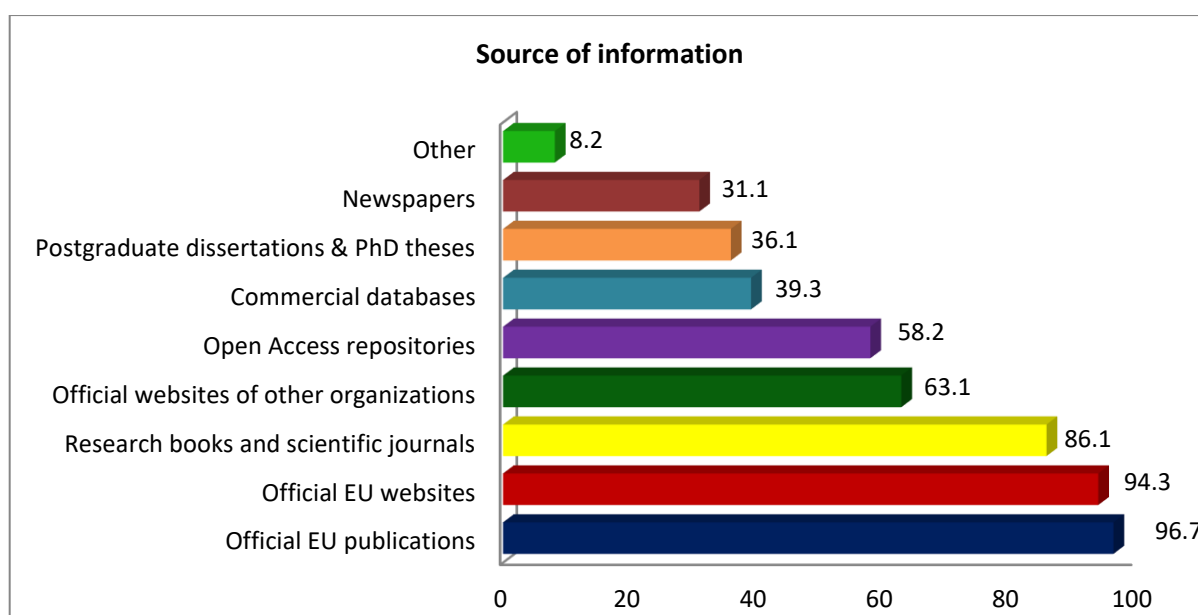


Figure 4: Percentage of sources of information used by EDC

The official website of other organizations that are most often used is for the OECD, with a percentage of 39.5% (Table 3). According to the respondents, a high percentage of EDC users (38.4%) frequently visit official websites of other organizations for their information.

	Frequency	Percent
IMF	5	4.1
OECD	36	39.5
UN	22	18.0
Other	59	38.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 3: Percentage of official websites of other organizations

### Information and communication tools offered by EDC

Figure 5 shows the percentage of information and communication tools offered by EDCs. Results indicate that the library catalogue is the most common information tool offered to users with 91.0% (respectively) of the total sample. EDC websites are the second offered tool (75.4% of total sample). Social media, discovery services and thematic database/repository have also high percentages. Low usage percentages have wiki, RSS feed and other sources of information.

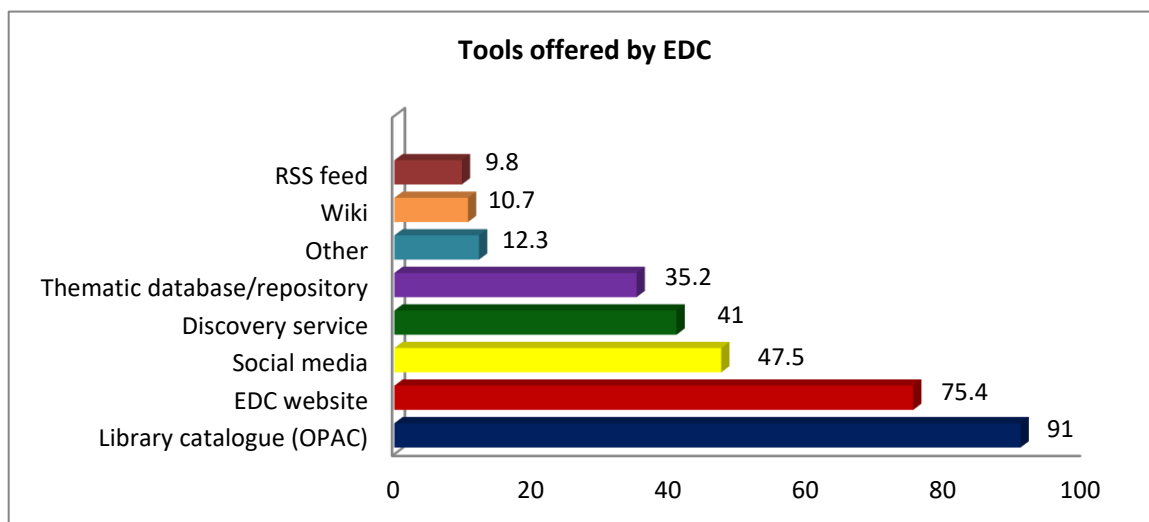


Figure 5: Percentage of information and communication tools offered by EDC

### Social media

The most popular social media of EDCs use is Facebook that scores the highest comparatively to other social media, with percentage of 50% (Table 4).

EDC social media		
	Frequency	Percent
Facebook	61	50.0
Flickr	2	1.6
LinkedIn	2	1.6
Twitter	17	13.9
YouTube	1	.8
Blog	7	5.7
Other	32	26.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Table 4: Percentage of type of social media used by EDC

### Services offered by EDC

EDCs offer a lot of services to users, which are shown in the Figure 6 below. Access to Internet and reading rooms have the highest level of usage, with percentages of 86.1% and 84.4% respectively of the total sample. Promotional EDC material (66.4%), ask a librarian (65.6%), loan (60.7%), interlibrary loan (60.75), dissemination of EU informative material (59.0%), bulk order of EU publications (56.6%) and training for users (56.6%) also have high usage



percentages (respectively) in the sample. The relatively low usage percentages are the followings services: selective dissemination of information (SDI), mailing lists, newsletters, and other services.

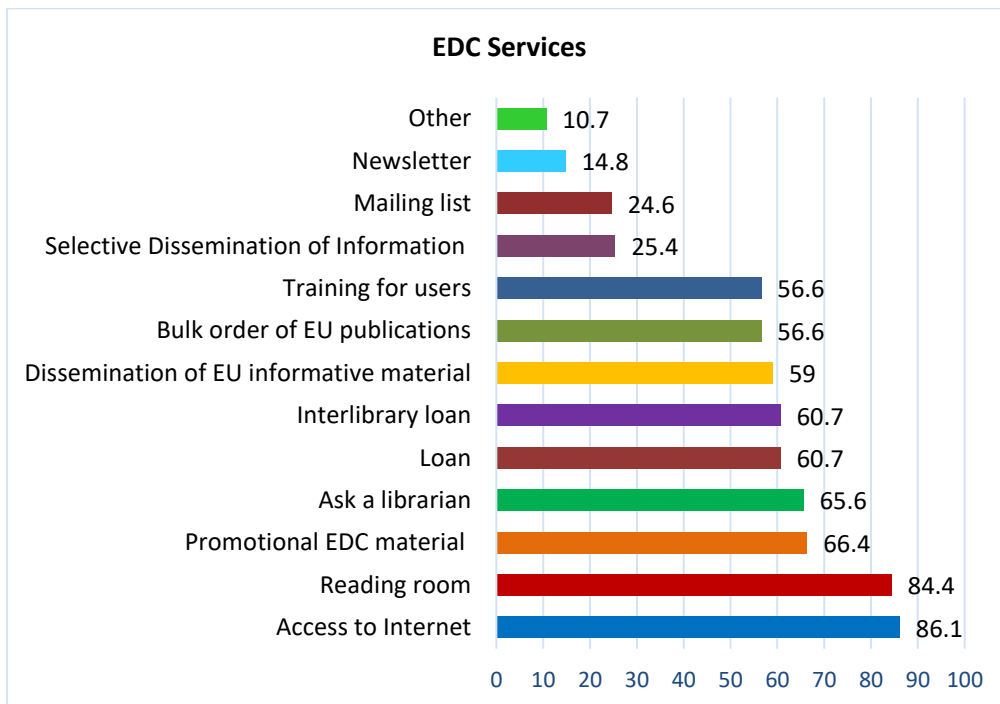


Figure 6: Percentage of services offered by EDC

### ***Main activity area of EDC***

Table 5 shows the views of the respondents on the main activity area of EDC. The majority of EDC personnel believe that the most important area of action is the organization of events about EU topics. This variable has the highest level with mean value of 3.19 (1-5 scale, 1= not at all, 5= very much). The sample believes that EDC organizes coaching & training courses for European sources (mean 3.14), provides economic & financial information (mean 2.85) and consults the public on relevant topics (mean 2.69).

EDC's main area of action		
	N	Mean
Provides economic & financial information	122	2.85
Organizes coaching & training courses for European sources	122	3.14
Consults the public on relevant topics	122	2.69
Organizes events about EU topics	122	3.19
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	<b>122</b>	

Table 5: Mean value of EDC's main area of action

### ***Types of EDC events***

In the last years, there was an inception in the organization of EDC events around EU member states. Organizing events has been considered as very important for the promotion of EU information. Figure 7 shows the type of events organized by the EDCs. Seminars are the most popular event organized by EDCs (59%). Another popular event is the organization of conferences (56.6%).

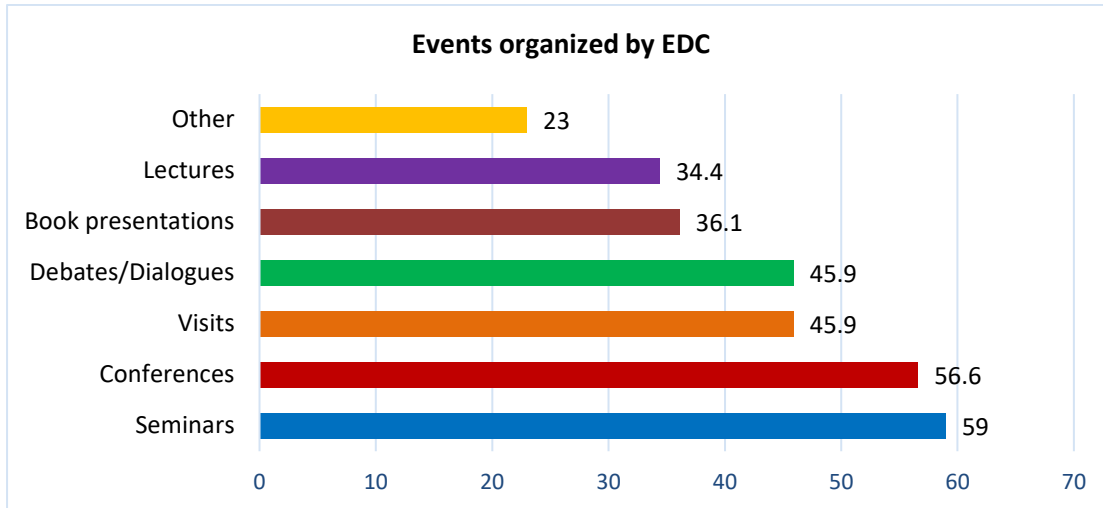


Figure 7: Percentage of events organized by EDC

### ***EDC Cooperation***

Table 6 presents the mean ratings for all items about EDC cooperation, according to the opinion of respondents. They believe that “EDC cooperates with other EDCs in the country” very much, with mean value 3.66 (1-5 scale, 1= not at all, 5= very much). They also believe that “EDCs cooperate with European Commission and/or other EU institution in the country” very much (mean 3.44). The respondents also said that “EDCs cooperate with EDIC(s) in the region/country” (mean 3.05) and that “EDC cooperates with EDCs in other EU countries” a little (mean 2.03).

<b>Cooperation of EDC</b>		
	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
EDC cooperates with other EDCs in the country	122	3.66
EDC cooperates with EDIC(s) in the region/country	122	3.05
EDC cooperates with European Commission and/or other EU institution in the country	122	3.44
EDC cooperates with EDCs in other EU countries	122	2.03
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	<b>122</b>	

Table 6: Mean value of EDC cooperation

According to the respondents, a small percentage of EDC (18.9%) received funding from the EU to organize an event or to fund a project. During the survey, the respondents were asked to describe their most important cooperation. Table 7 shows the answers and the most popular is the cooperation with other EDCs in the country with percentage 9.8%. It is important to mention that a big percentage of respondents did not answer this question (70.5%).

<b>Important cooperation of EDC</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Exchange of initiatives and experience	2	1.6
Citizens' Dialogues	3	2.5
Panels on actualities in law and competition policy	1	.8
Young multipliers seminars	1	.8
Organise lectures by experts	2	1.6
Cooperation with EDCs in the country	12	9.8
Research	1	.8
Exchange with EDCs, national and international training seminars	1	.8
Creating and maintaining EU-Grey Literature database	1	.8
Trainings	1	.8
Events	7	5.7
Spain-European Union Digital Archive	3	2.5
Cooperates with European Commission and/or other EU institution in the country	1	.8
Missing value (999) – No answer	86	70.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 7: Percentage of important cooperation**

### *Types of questions from public*

Table 8 presents the percentages of main type of questions from public. The most frequently asked question is about EU policies (32.8%). The users ask a lot about EU legislation (30.3%), as well. They ask less for general publications (18.9%) and for practical issues such as life, studies, travel, etc. in the EU (14.8%) or about doing business in the EU (3.3%).

<b>Main question from public</b>		
	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
General publications	23	18.9
EU legislation	37	30.3
EU policies	40	32.8
Practical questions about life, studies, travel in the EU	18	14.8
Questions about doing business in the EU	4	3.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>100.0</b>

**Table 8: Percentage of main question from public**

### *Aspects of EDC and economic crisis*

Table 9 presents the mean ratings for all items about the EDCs and the economic crisis. The respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on some aspects about economic crisis and EDCs in a 5 Likert scale (1= strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree). They strongly agree that “the EDC network provides a professional and neutral information service concerning the EU” (mean 4.56). They agree that “EDCs can play an added-value role in the provision of European information as members of the EUROPE DIRECT network” (mean 4.34), that “EDCs can play an important role in confronting EU fake news” (mean 4.07) and that “EDC staff has participated in seminars in recent years” (mean 3.97). They are neutral with the opinion that “EDC synergies have been enhanced during the crisis” (3.20), that “The crisis has affected the synergies with EDCs at national and/or European level” (3.10) and that “The information search for economic and financial issues has increased in recent years” (3.04) and that “The use of EDC has increased in recent years” (2.93).

<b>Aspects of economic crisis and EDC</b>		
	<b>N</b>	<b>Mean</b>
The crisis has affected the synergies with EDCs at national and/or European level	122	3.10
The use of EDC has increased the recent years	122	2.93
The information search for economic and financial issues has increased in recent years	122	3.04
The economic crisis has affected the information search for economic and financial issues	122	3.11
EDC staff has participated in seminars in recent years	122	3.97
EDC synergies have been enhanced during the crisis	122	3.20
EDCs can play an important role in confronting EU fake news	122	4.07
EDCs network provides a professional and neutral information service concerning the EU	122	4.56
EDCs can play an added- value role in the provision of European information as members of the EUROPE DIRECT network.	122	4.34
<b>Valid N (listwise)</b>	<b>122</b>	

**Table 7: Mean value of aspects about economic crisis and EDC**

### *Greece*

EDCs in Greece and Cyprus employ one person, similar to most countries around Europe. In France half of the EDCs employ two persons. In Italy and Portugal the EDC staff is typically more. Most Greek EDCs are located in the Central Library (50%) or in a departmental library (20%), and in Cyprus as well. In Cyprus all EDCs have signed the new agreement. In Greece only a small percentage (30%) have signed and a big percentage is under negotiation. In Italy, most EDCs have signed, or are under negotiation, which is also the case in Spain, Portugal and Romania. In Greece the most popular EDC audience are members of the host institution community (students, professors, etc.) who are most interested about law, legislation and institutional issues (40%). Facebook is the most popular of social media both in Greece and Cyprus. Practical questions about life, studies, travel in the EU interest MOST the Greek

audience of EDC. Visits and seminars are the events that Greek EDCs organize the most. None EDC in Greece has taken any fund.

The most important area of action for Greek EDCs is the consultation of public on relevant topics (mean 3.8). According to the opinion of Greek sample, EDCs cooperate with other EDCs in the country a great deal, with mean value 3.50, which scored the highest for this question. The staff of Greek EDCs believe that EDCs can play an important added-value role in the provision of European information as members of the Europe Direct network (mean 4.30) and that EDCs network provides a professional and neutral information service concerning the EU (mean 4.20).

## **6. Discussion**

The data of the survey were collected with great success, in a methodologically sound way. This was achieved due to the valuable assistance of liaison staff in the surveyed EDCs that completed the survey in time. This idea of solidarity and help is the main driving force behind the EDCs Network during its long existence. The sample was 122 EDCs from most member states of the united Europe, although our original target was the south. It is worth mentioning that this was a pleasant surprise, as the sample was more representative. The data collection was implemented electronically and the sampling was reliable.

Most of the EDCs that participated in the survey had signed the new EDC Partnership Agreement, which gives emphasis to synergies and outreach activities. According to the findings of the survey, organizing events on EU topics is considered to be the main area of action for EDCs nowadays. Seminars and conferences have been so far the most popular events. It seems that the Network is moving to broader outreach actions benefiting from the new institutional framework.

The results also reveal the strong aspect that EDCs network has provided a professional and neutral information service concerning the EU in the period of crisis. Working mostly in an academic library's environment, the Centres have developed and offered specialized information tools and services, including OPACs, websites, discovery services, repositories, wikis, and RSS feeds. Of course, social media, especially Facebook, are also used. Along with physical infrastructures, the EDCs provide a set of services such as SDI, mailing lists, reference service, newsletters, etc. Although the main target group is academia, EDCs also offer their services to guide the general public through the maze of European information.

In this framework, it is justified for the respondents to believe that EDCs can play an added-value role in the provision of European information as members of the Europe Direct network, and that they can also play an important role in confronting EU fake news. In the conclusions of the Citizen's dialogues and consultations (European Commission, 2019), it is stressed that "...disinformation could undermine the democratic process. Citizens would appreciate more information about the Union to help them better understand and influence decisions". This can be a new challenging task for EDCs world.

During the recent financial crisis, EDCs managed to continue their national cooperation and their cooperation with EU institutions in the country. Both practices are considered of great importance. EDCs also participated a lot in seminars. However, cooperation at European level was affected at a greater extent.

Taking into account that no funding is available for all the above mentioned actions, the EDC staff turns out to be the power of the Network, of course with the continuous support of both interested parties, European Commission and host structures.

## 7. Conclusion

To sum up, the survey analysis indicates that EDCs are aware of the challenges they have to face but also of their assets in an era of financial crisis. It is an established official EU network which offers qualitative and up to date information tools and services to both academia and general public. In addition, a huge opportunity is now presented for EDC professional expertise: to foster further synergies, develop their outreach potential, and to share in the efforts of communicating effectively across a whole continent, and thus serving the people and values of a United Europe.

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