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Statistical Libraries in Transition
A 2024 European Survey on Future Directions and Opportunities

Camille Beaurepaire
camille.beaurepaire@insee.fr
Bibliothèque de l'Insee Alain Desrosières
Head of Section "Valorization and services to the public"

Balázs Horváth
horvath.balazs8910@gmail.com
The Office of the National Assembly, Directorate for Public Collections and Public Education, Information Service for MPs.
Researcher

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The study presents and evaluates the findings of a 2024 survey conducted among European statistical libraries, summarizing their most important attributes and information regarding to them. In addition to outlining the current state of this specialized type of library in Europe, the authors also explore potential directions for their future development, placing particular emphasis on the relationship between statistical libraries and their parent institutions, the national statistical offices.

statistical libraries, national statistical institutes (NSIs), statistical data, digitalization, international cooperation, cultural heritage, open science, Europe, 21th century

1. Introduction

Already in the first half of the 2010s, the emergence of the online world and the growing prominence of digital content and databases began to pose a challenge for libraries that had until then primarily provided what could be considered traditional services (Kiszl, 2017, pp. 8–11; Nagy, Molnár, Kokas, 2017, pp. 66–67). Technological changes fundamentally altered library usage and required libraries to take on new tasks. This led to the increasingly frequent use of the term "hybrid library", which refers to the necessity of providing both traditional and digital library services simultaneously. New activities – or missions awaiting a response – emerged in the life of libraries, such as the growing importance of research support and its appropriate management, as well as the role of libraries in digitalization and the development of digital literacy. In the case of specialized libraries, in addition to the aforementioned tasks, potential roles also arose in the management of research data, scientific publishing, content creation and analysis, as well as archiving (Koltay, 2016, pp. 287–291; Nagy, Molnár, Kokas, 2017, pp. 68–75; Gaálné Kalydy, 2018, pp. 439–443). As a consequence of the digital "revolution", it seems increasingly likely that traditional library services (book lending, in-library use of documents, use of periodicals) will no longer be dominant in the future. Libraries and librarians will need to pay significantly more attention to the possible functions they can fulfil in order to provide high-quality information services, primarily online (Federer, 2013, pp. 298–302; Hormia, Poutanen, Forsström, 2016, pp. 9–10; Ayris, 2017, pp. 246–248).

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The effects of modernization mentioned above may have an even greater impact on specialized libraries – most of which have their origins in the 19th century – than on public libraries (Rózsa, 2018, pp. 15–18). There are numerous examples of these special collections operating as public institutions (even offering lending services), while also meeting the unique demands of their respective fields. Moreover, specialized libraries must take into account not only the trends and developments in library and information science but also the specific characteristics and evolving needs of their respective subject areas. This is essential in order to adequately serve their users and ensure their own continued operation in the future.

Among the national specialized libraries are statistical collections established alongside the official statistical services or agencies of individual states during the 19th and 20th centuries; these function as institutional or governmental libraries.[1] Originally intended for internal use, primarily to support scientific and research activities, most of these institutions now provide public services to varying extents – services that are essentially accessible to anyone. This openness represents both an opportunity and a responsibility for statistical libraries to take on larger roles in the life and operations of their parent institutions, the statistical offices (Lencsés, 2020, p. 175). The online world has accelerated and transformed the flow of information, a process to which statistical offices are also striving to adapt: the number of statistical publications issued in print has significantly decreased, while the number of publications released only in electronic format is rising accordingly. In terms of the dissemination of official statistical data, several databases[2] emerged and became dominant as early as the 2000s – a trend that is expected to continue growing in the future.[3] It is clear that statistical offices around the world have recognized the changed circumstances and conditions brought about by the digital transition and have responded accordingly. However, the precise role and position of statistical libraries within the evolving system of statistical information flow remains undefined.

A 2017 study[4] conducted in Hungary revealed that statistical libraries face significant challenges in this regard (Lencsés, 2020, pp. 176–185). Since Lencsés's research also addressed in detail the contemporary situation of European statistical libraries and their possible future roles; his work can be considered a highly important precursor to the present study. Because of the common points of his and our researches and other European connections (e.g. the close cooperation thanks to Eurostat and the long-shared history of exchanges between statistical libraries) we also focus on European institutions.

One of the main challenges for statistical libraries is that a large proportion of these institutions do not operate as independent organizational units but rather function under the authority of a department – mostly one responsible for communication – within the statistical office, staffed by only a few employees. Lencsés's study also confirmed that, essentially none of the offices (or libraries) have a targeted strategy regarding how the statistical library can assist and support the professional operations of their office. A notable risk identified for this type of library is that, in many cases, it only supports the provision of historical data and printed official statistical publications for both the office and external users, while it is unable to adequately participate in electronic information services. According to Lencsés, there are good European examples (including

"This openness represents both an opportunity and a responsibility for statistical libraries to take on larger roles in the life and operations of their parent institutions, the statistical offices"

Finland, Poland, Hungary, and Germany), but he warns that if statistical libraries do not adapt to the new conditions of the online world, and do not develop a mutually beneficial operational system together with statistical offices, they risk becoming mere historical collections and may even be completely excluded from the official information chain (Lencsés, 2020, pp. 186–187).[5]

This article aims to address several key questions regarding the current state of statistical heritage in Europe.

2. Methodological Insights: How to Survey European Statistical Libraries?

This article is based on an original database that was created for this purpose. A combined methodology was employed to collect the data. Firstly, in May 2024, a questionnaire was sent to the various European statistical libraries (on the initiative of the French statistical library). Secondly, the libraries' web portals were thoroughly explored to confirm the information provided in the questionnaires, or supplement it in the event of non-response.[6]

In total, this dual methodology enabled the provision of information for 18 libraries, eight of which responded to the detailed questionnaire. Of the 31 countries initially included in the survey, 7 were removed because they either never had or no longer have a statistical library (see the list in the Annex). The status of the remaining 6 countries remains unclear. Two of them have a statistical library, but did not answer the questionnaire and do not have an accessible web portal. For the remaining 4 countries, we have not been able to determine whether they have a statistical library. No information could thus be gathered on these 6 countries.

The questionnaire covered the following topics (see the full questionnaire in the Annex):

1. the institutional affiliation of the library and its link with the respective national statistical institute (NSI);
2. the library's human resources;
3. the library's roles and responsibilities (public services, heritage conservation, university links, digitalization, etc.); and
4. the description of the collections they hold, and their history (number of volumes, types of documents, catalogue descriptions, etc.).

A final section, which was not used in the analysis below, concerned international cooperation between statistical libraries. Therefore, the collected data is essentially qualitative, providing information on the similarities and differences between libraries in terms of their resources, missions, and collections.

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3. Outlining a Typology of European Statistical Libraries

This section attempts to provide an overview of the European statistical library landscape. Table 1 shows some of the quantitative results for a selection of libraries – comparing the number of employees and the volume of collections held.

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Table 1: Quantitative comparison of European statistical libraries

Country	Number of Employees	Shelf-kilometer (skm) of collections
Croatia	2	0.9
Denmark	2	4
Finland	3	1.6
France	19	7
Germany	10	4
Greece	2	≈1
Hungary	≈40	≈17
Italy	–	≈8
Luxembourg	4	1
Norway	2	≈1
Poland	–	≈7
Switzerland	3	5

"These libraries have large collections (particularly Hungary's, due to its legal deposit role, which is unique for a statistical library)."

Three broad categories of statistical libraries can be distinguished.

3.1 Large collections, large resources

This category includes libraries in France, Germany, Hungary, Italy and Poland. These libraries have large collections (particularly Hungary's, due to its legal deposit role, which is unique for a statistical library). They also have a relatively large number of staff, which enables them to maintain their collections and carry out a wide range of related services.

3.2 Large collections, smaller resources

This category includes libraries in Switzerland, Finland, Croatia, Luxembourg, Greece. These libraries also tend to have large collections, but operate with much smaller resources. Depending on their links with the national library ecosystem, this can lead to difficulties in the treatment of the collections, especially the old or foreign ones.

3.3 Disappearing collections, resources for digitalization

This last category includes a growing number of outliers that do not appear in Table 1, especially in the North of Europe. In recent decades, some statistical libraries have been closed: for example, in Sweden, in Belgium, and in the Netherlands. In these cases, the closure of the physical library goes hand in hand with a proactive digitalization policy, understood as a long-term budgetary measure. Some libraries on the continent, such as those in Denmark and Norway, seem to be following the same path.

These broad categories outline different paths for European statistical libraries. Although they tend to have similar collections, due to the long history of publication exchanges in the 19th and 20th centuries (see Box 1), their current means and situations do not give them the same cards to play to fulfil their different missions.

Box 1: Exchanging Statistical Publications – a Long History of Cooperation Among European Statistical Libraries

Since the 19th century and the creation of statistical bureaus and libraries in European states, statistical publications have been exchanged on the continent. The exchange of publications between libraries is in fact a long-standing practice that was revived in the 19th century (Lilja 2006). This has led to numerous postal parcels: at the beginning of the 20th century, the library of the French statistical office received around 1,500 foreign statistical publications each year (SGF 1913).

The exchange of publications has been a burning topic at the International Statistical Congresses that gathered European statisticians between 1853 and 1878 (Rózsa 2017, pp. 1068–1073.; Randeraad 2020); and then at the International Statistical Institute, created in 1885.

As early as the 1853 session in Brussels, a book stand was set up so that participants who volunteered could present works to their colleagues or deposit them for exhibition. It was not until the 1855 session in Paris that the subject of exchanges was explicitly put on the table: Alexandre Vattemare spoke in favour of a "regular system of exchange between all States of statistical documents published by governments and private individuals". Vattemare was not a statistician (but... a ventriloquist!) and had worked for twenty-five years on setting up a system for the exchange of official publications (Richards 1944), based on a large general library that would collect all documents and then distribute them to local societies.

The subject was discussed at the Berlin Congress in 1863, the Florence Congress in 1867 and the Hague Congress in 1869. After a pause in the 1870s and 1880s due to the new geopolitical context in Europe, the International Statistical Institute set up a "Committee for the regular exchange of statistical publications between different countries" in 1895, which was mentioned until 1903.

Each time, the statisticians faced similar economic and diplomatic obstacles: sending hundreds of books by post every month was very expensive for administrations with limited budgets and staff. This cost was exacerbated by the fact that there was no duty-free allowance for transit.

Despite the difficulties, a tradition of exchange was established at the end of the 19th century and continues to this day. As a result, every statistical library today has extensive collections of foreign publications.

4. The Libraries, the Collections and their History

The history of each library is closely linked to the political history of its country. The Danish statistical library was created in 1850, after the introduction of representative government by the constitutional law; the Hungarian library in 1867,[7] after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise; the Polish library in 1918, after independence; the current French library in 1946, after the "Libération" and its administrative consequences; the German library in 1948, after the Second World War, but before the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany; the Greek library in 1953, after the civil war, etc.

"Despite their differences in historical context, statistical libraries share common milestones."

Despite their differences in historical context, statistical libraries share common milestones. These include the computerisation of catalogues in the late 20th century – 1982 in France (Yvon 1994, pp. 71–76), 1997 in Poland (CBS, n.d.), 2000 in Italy (ISTAT, n.d.) –, and the establishment of digital libraries at the beginning of the 21st century (2007 in Bulgaria and Sweden, 2009 in Poland, 2011 in France and Italy, and 2016 in Croatia).

The collections held are very similar; as well as the official statistical publications of the country to which each library belongs. They include many foreign statistical publications thanks to the tradition of exchanges (see Box 1). The collections often contain rich documentation on mathematical statistics, economics and demography for use by statisticians. Most also contain documents on

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CD, DVD, or microform. Occasionally, the collections also include maps and plans (in Hungary and Croatia), archives (in Hungary and Croatia), a museum of calculating machines (in France), and more general literature for the public (in Hungary and Norway).

As with any library, these collections are subject to physical contingencies, whether in the form of relocation (e.g. 2018 in France, 2024 in Luxembourg and 2025 in Croatia) or loss of documents (e.g. fire damage in Hungary in 1944/45, and water damage in the Czech Republic in 2002).

In terms of institutional setting, most libraries nowadays form part of the administrative structure of their respective NSIs and are located within the communications department (e.g. Croatia, Finland, Germany, Denmark, Norway and France). However, there are some exceptions: the French library was formerly linked with the archiving team, and the Swiss library is located within the publishing and diffusion unit. Hungary presents an original case, as the library is administratively independent of the NSI.

5. Old Missions, New Projects: Where to Go Now?

An analysis of library questionnaires and websites provides information on the current objectives of statistical libraries in Europe. These fall into two categories: traditional missions inherited from a long history dating back to the 19th century, and new missions that have emerged over the last decade and opened up new opportunities to valorise collections. To illustrate each mission, we select sample examples from our database. While not all libraries respond in exactly the same way to these ongoing challenges (this analysis is not intended to be applicable to every specific case), our aim is to provide an overview of the current changes to the landscape of statistical libraries in Europe.

The first of its traditional missions concerns the acquisition and conservation of documents for the collections. Acquisition can take place through various channels:

- Acquisition of monographs for use by NSI statisticians.
- Acquisition of national statistical publications thanks to institutional links with the NSI.
- Acquisition of foreign statistical publications through exchange networks, which have diminished with the advent of the internet and born-digital statistical publications.
- Donations from individuals or other libraries (in France, several donations have been received from non-specialist libraries that do not wish to keep historical statistical documents).

A second, equally traditional mission involves providing services to the public and supplying documents, regardless of whether the public consists of NSI statisticians. As a public library, the Hungarian library is for instance undoubtedly one of the most involved in providing services to external audiences.

Alongside their traditional missions, statistical libraries now face new challenges and opportunities that are changing the scope of their work profoundly.

- The digital turn is opening up new possibilities in terms of access to documents, and many statistical libraries have established digital libraries (see the appendix for more information). Digitalization programmes are often based on institutional partnerships, such as those with the National Széchényi Library) in Hungary, the National Library (BnF) in France for the digital library of

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official statistics (BNSP), the European Regional Development Fund in Greece and EU grants for the Malta Blue Books. These digitalization operations cover preserved historical statistical publications and other documents of significant heritage value, including the manuscripts and archives of prominent statisticians in Hungary.

- The creation of web portals for libraries has also enabled the development of online outreach activities. For example, virtual exhibitions have been produced by the Spanish statistical library,[8] and more are currently being developed in Croatia and France. In 2023, the French Statistical Library collaborated with a YouTube channel dedicated to historical popularisation. This resulted in the creation of a 23-minute video about the history of statistics in France.[9]
- The appropriate description and preservation of historical collections remains a significant challenge for statistical libraries. When computer catalogues were adopted at the end of the 20th century, this was not always accompanied by the retro-conversion of earlier card catalogues. Several libraries are currently investing significant resources in cataloguing their collections, including foreign statistical collections in France, and historical collections in Poland. The shared preservation of collections is also a challenge. In France, for example, the conservation of economics and statistics periodicals is shared among many specialised libraries.
- The academic community is a key audience for the historical collections held in statistical libraries. Several such libraries are working to strengthen their links with higher education and research institutions in order to maximise the use of their collections. In Hungary, for example, one of the institutional missions of the library is to publish historical studies and, in parallel, welcome scholars, academic researchers and students to use and study historical statistical data. In France, several initiatives have been implemented to this end, including an annual seminar on the history of statistics, conferences and seminars for researchers held at the library, integration of the library catalogue into a shared inter-university catalogue called Sudoc, and regular presentation of the library's collections at research seminars. The German statistical library, for its part, aims to support NSI statisticians in their research work and help them publish in research journals. By other means, it aims to promote the influence of official statistics in the academic world.
- Official statistics in Europe have recently put the emphasis on a "statistical literacy" agenda, aiming at improving the understanding of official statistics by all European citizens (Radermacher, 2021). As a further development of the concept of the statistical library as an information hub, some of them have deemed meaningful to promote online data services more actively and, in parallel, to introduce and operate a user training system focused on teaching quality information retrieval and communication. The Polish library plays an important role in organising a nationwide statistical competition for upper secondary schools and exhibitions open to the public. In France, the library participates in specialised events (such as European heritage days and "Rendez-vous de l'Histoire") and produces teaching materials for history teachers.
- Another challenge concerns the transformations of the documentation missions. Various documentation services can be offered to NSI statisticians, such as access to e-journals and e-books, interlibrary loans (in Finland for example), the acquisition of research articles (in Switzerland), and strategic monitoring (in France).

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- It is worth referring to the professional recommendations published as early as 2015 by the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), which – alongside advocating for user education – placed particular emphasis on the continuous development and expansion of librarians' skills and competencies (Daland, 2016, pp. 35–38). Not only libraries and their services – statistical libraries in our case – but the librarians (or other professionals working in libraries) must also evolve in line with future needs. This transformation inevitably entails the need to adapt the education and training of librarians and other information professionals (such as data stewards) to the demands of the time. These steps are unavoidable for libraries and their staff if these institutions are to remain competitive with other providers of information services (Monok, 2020, pp. 173–177).
- The rise of AI has also transformed our relationship with data: we have entered an era in which it is not always possible to determine clearly whether a given piece of data or information is true or false. To address this challenge, effective and critical information management is becoming increasingly important – an essential skill that librarians, and especially those working in specialized libraries, must acquire (Bonn, Furlough, 2015, pp. 223–224; Gaálné Kalydy, 2018, p. 441).
- At last but not least, a final challenge for statistical libraries concerns their relations with their respective NSI. In addition to supporting research and science, studies regarding historical statistics and history of statistics conducted by the libraries can be of fundamental importance to the statistical office as well. Several libraries have embarked on joint commemorative projects with their NSIs: the Irish library collaborated with the Press Office for the 75th anniversary of the Irish NSI, and the Danish library contributed to the production of a video commemorating 175 years of the Danish NSI. The Hungarian library has also been very active in this area.

Drawing examples from our database, we thus show the diversity of current challenges and opportunities that European statistical libraries can face, often with limited means to adapt. These issues are not addressed by all libraries in the same way. However, the similarity of their collections and roles suggests that synergies should be identified and inspiration drawn from experiments elsewhere.

6. Conclusion

Based on our study, it is clear that the landscape of European statistical libraries currently is quite fragmented. Some collections are in a better position with more opportunities at their disposal, while for others these opportunities are becoming increasingly limited – ultimately foreshadowing the closure of the institution, a development we have unfortunately seen in several cases. Beyond institutional frameworks, the future of statistical libraries will be significantly shaped by how they respond to changes in the field of library science and statistics, to digitalization, the development of AI, and the rise of open science. These responses will determine what role these organizations will play in the flow and provision of (statistical) information, and whether they will be able to actively contribute to supporting the operation of statistical offices. If they do adapt to these challenges, then we have every reason to be optimistic about the future sustainability of this unique type of library.

We believe it is far from futile to engage with these extremely valuable, little-known, and unique collections, as they preserve and provide access to a part of our shared European cultural heritage. In this spirit, European statistical libraries are currently trying to work more closely together. Following the spring questionnaire survey, three online meetings of the European statistical libraries have taken place, in November 2024, May 2025, and November 2025. Our goal is to strengthen the established relationships not only through regular discussions but also through genuine, active cooperation agreements, particularly in the fields of digitalization and historical research.

Notes

[1] For detailed information on statistical specialized libraries, see: Lencsés 2020, pp. 145–188.

[2] The HCSO STADAT tables became freely accessible in 2001. Since 2004, EUROSTAT has provided free access to statistical data concerning the member states of the European Union.

[3] An excellent example of this is that the most recent Hungarian census data from October–November 2022 was no longer published by the HCSO in printed form, but only organized into a database, which is freely accessible on the institution's website.

[4] Ákos Lencsés, former Head of Department of Reference Services in the Hungarian Central Statistical Office Library (shortly: HCSO Library), conducted his PhD-research in connection with the topic of statistical data management and regulations in Hungary.

[5] A sad example of this process is the case of the Swedish statistical library, which paradoxically met the expectations set by the online world. Nevertheless, in 2016, some of its traditional services and international acquisitions were discontinued, and a large part of the collection was placed in storage, until as a result of this process, the library itself was eventually closed down by 2024.

[6] Non-response must be analysed in light of the weakened links between European statistical libraries when the questionnaire was sent out. These links were relatively strong before the advent of the internet due to the tradition of publication exchange (see Box 1), but have weakened since then. Following the distribution of the questionnaire, exchanges resumed in the form of biannual meetings. Conducting the survey again would certainly reduce the non-response rate.

[7] However, the first Hungarian government (Batthyány Cabinet) established the National Statistical Office in May 1848, but the institution was unable to operate effectively amidst the War of Independence.

[8] Instituto Nacional de Estadística. Avalilable: https://www.ine.es/uc/iCeg5hPO (Accessed: 2025.08.01.)

[9] Nota Bene (2023) *Les chiffres sont-ils "neutres"? Quelques exemples de statistiques en Histoire.* Avalilable at: https://youtu.be/NjJ58IaTmWY (Accessed: 2025.08.01.)

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