

Accession of Serbia to the European Social Survey

- by ESS National Team and PERFORM



Introduction

Until November 2017, Serbia was not a regular member of any comparative social-science research project organised at a regional or European level. As a result, researchers from Serbia were practically excluded from the European research area and deprived of the opportunity to use comparative and longitudinal research data and provide high quality outputs.

European Social Survey (ESS) is methodologically and theoretically the most comprehensive international comparative research in the field of social sciences. It is conducted under the auspices of the European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). European Social Survey has been implemented bi-annually from 2002, fulfilling the highest methodological standards of research in the domain of social sciences. ESS has been recognised by the institutions of the European Union (the European Commission and the Parliament) as one of the key data sources that enables measurement and understanding of long-term structural changes, as well of changes of value and cultural patterns and practices of citizens in European societies. European Commission regularly

uses the data obtained through this research for the monitoring of social phenomena and formulation of practical policies at the EU level.

Action

The initial idea of Serbia becoming a member of European Social Survey (ESS) was created during a social science conference in Albania in 2016. Although in the past decade similar ideas and attempts were occasionally made by several researchers, this did not result in the desired outcome. In spite of the high respect for the importance of engaging in international research mechanisms, there were not sufficient capacities within the academic community to manage the entire project on their own or to receive support from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD) and other state authorities, necessary to achieve such an ambitious goal.

A few months later, in early 2017, first concrete steps for the involvement with ESS were made and several initial meetings and talks between the members of Serbian research community and the representatives of PERFORM took place in Belgrade, Novi Sad and Nis. Upon these meetings, an informal ESS working group for advocacy was established with representatives from different faculties, universities¹ and institutes².



¹ Faculty of Philosophy and Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy in Nis and Faculty of Philosophy in Novi Sad

² Institute of Philosophy and Social Theory, Institute of Social Sciences

Challenges

In the first meeting of the working group, which brought together about a dozen of interested young and mid-career researchers from different institutions, the entire venture seemed almost unrealistic. It was necessary to map stakeholders, to devise a strategy for bringing together the scattered academic community, raise the necessary membership funds, advocate for the project before important stakeholders, and animate other researchers to join in and support the process.

The general conclusion was that the academic community in Serbia is in a particularly difficult position - especially social science researchers, and that this presents the most significant challenge for the successful implementation of the project. Due to relatively low allocations of the state budget to social sciences, but also the low capacities for raising funds from the private sector, as well as the limited opportunities for participating in big international programmes, the local academic community is positioned at the semi-periphery of today's international scientific community.

As a consequence, there is a noticeable delay in taking over the innovations in the field of social science research (e.g. new methodological techniques, application of sophisticated analytical software, etc.). In addition, there is a noticeable lack of internal cooperation and networking among local institutions and research groups. The absence of cooperation and weak connections are even more pronounced when it comes to the institutions and research teams which are not part of the same umbrella institution. When established, the cooperation is usually based on personal relationships or is project-driven (rarely outliving the project itself), with questionable long-term sustainability potential. Finally a weak position of young and mid-career researchers should be mentioned, mostly due to the hierarchical structure of academic institutions in Serbia.

On the other hand, some contextual characteristics could be regarded as strengths or potentials for the realisation of this project. One of the most important ones is the absence of comparative longitudinal data that would allow social phenomena to be monitored over a longer period of time within the European / global framework. This makes the data gathered within the ESS a particularly valuable contribution to local scientific knowledge and practical policies. Moreover, a notable enthusiasm of young researchers and PhD students was a signal to the core team that there is a lot of energy which, if properly managed and structured, could lead to overall success of the project, accompanied by wider benefits - individual, organisational and societal.

Despite all perceived challenges, the aspiration for becoming a part of the international research community and acquiring new experiences, knowledge and skills, as well as the possibility to use comparative data for the production of valuable high quality scientific studies, was a sufficient stimulus to overcome the initial barriers and to initiate the project.

What made the difference this time compared to earlier attempts was the presence of a stakeholder who understands the importance of this initiative and is ready to provide necessary support, guidance and advice for successful advocacy campaign. Without technical and motivational support, advice and resources of PERFORM, it is highly likely that the initial enthusiasm would have dispersed, and that this initiative, like a number of previous ones, would have collapsed before it even started.



Key actors

The key stakeholders are young and mid-career researchers from different institutes and faculties participating on a voluntary basis as members of inter-institutional working group for advocacy campaign (performing all operational tasks), the Steering Committee³ (performing a supervisory role); representatives of the Ministry of Education, Science and

³The Steering Committee will be the key body to secure ownership of the process of participation of Serbia in the 9th Round of ESS.

Technological Development (offering institutional and financial support) and project PERFORM as a facilitator. Other actors have been engaged in the implementation of the project as well – representatives of other relevant institutions (e.g. Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia), advisers and experts from the ESS member states, as well as the official ESS support team.

Activities

During the first half of 2017, a consultative process among the Social Science Research community, aimed at starting a discussion about the potentials of raising the quality of social science research in Serbia through joining the ESS, was facilitated by PERFORM. Conclusions from this process were presented to MoESTD. After a series of meetings and intense correspondence with the representatives of MoESTD, the Ministry recognised the importance of Serbia's accession to ESS and offered to provide financial and institutional support to the project. It should be noted that, without the intermediary and facilitative role of PERFORM, it would have been very difficult for young researchers to establish this type of communication with the representatives of the Ministry. As one of the members of the Group said:

“Without PERFORM, it would not have been possible to bring the Ministry to the table.”

After the successful initial consultation with the Ministry and its informal support to the project, a conference that brought together almost a hundred researchers and representatives of relevant institutions took place in Belgrade, July 1st, 2017. The conference once again confirmed the overall support within the academic community for the realisation of this project.

A few months later, Minister Mladen Sarcevic sent an official letter to the General Assembly of the European Social Survey, requesting a membership for Serbia. On October 18th, Serbia was officially accepted as a member of the European Social Survey at the meeting of the General Assembly of the European Research Infrastructure Consortium.

A decorative graphic consisting of several overlapping, semi-transparent blue triangles and trapezoids, creating a layered, geometric effect. The colors range from a dark blue to a light, almost white blue.

We want social science research to be conducted and also published internationally, which is why participation in ESS is so significant. The transfer of theoretical and methodological knowledge from European institutions to ours, as well as the inclusion of our researchers and their training on conducting huge international surveys are of vital importance to the development of Serbian research sector.

Viktor Nedovic, Assistant Minister of
Education, Science and Technological Development

Key goals

The key goal of this project was the inclusion of Serbia in the 9th round of the European Social Survey, which will directly engage over 100 social science researchers from Serbia and provide opportunities for young researchers to cooperate with their European peers. The 9th round of the European Social Survey will be implemented in the period December 2017 - June 2019.

The accomplishment of this goal means wider gains in terms of involving the Serbian academic community dealing with social sciences in international circles, the transfer of technology, good research practices, networking, obtaining comparative and longitudinal data (this project is conceived as a long-term inclusion in the ESS mechanism), in parallel with additional capacity building and networking among the social science institutions in Serbia.

Results

- Membership in the ESS ERIC mechanism
- Establishment of stronger ties within the national academic community, mostly through the development of horizontal linkages between young researchers engaged within different institutions.
- The project proved to be exceptionally successful in terms of mobilising collective energy within the academic community and creating stronger ties between people and institutions. It has also been successful in (re)establishing trust among different stakeholders and within the academic community.
- Intensified communication and networking with research institutes and consortiums from the Region and across Europe.
- Establishment of productive communication with the representatives of the state institutions (MoESTD, Statistical Office etc.)
- Creation of new opportunities for joining other research projects and initiatives within the European Union (e.g. Horizon 2020).

Next steps

The first half of 2018 will be dedicated to the preparation of the field research, while the realisation of the survey is planned for the beginning of autumn of the same year. Preparatory activities include training of interviewers, field research planning, internal and external networking, strengthening the cross-border cooperation (with the colleagues from Albania, Romania and Bulgaria - formation of a Western Balkans group within the ESS). Support from the team from Slovenia and Hungary and the transfer of knowledge and technology have also been agreed. In addition, the development of a media strategy is planned, with an aim to enable the wider community and other relevant stakeholders to become familiar with the significance and effects of the ESS research.

Conclusion

As a result of the hard work of the members of the national ESS team, in cooperation with PERFORM, now at the end of 2017, we can say that the results achieved so far are of great value. With the official accession of Serbia to the ESS, the first phase of the project has been successfully completed and important groundwork laid for the next phase.