

PERFORM

Performing and Responsive Social Sciences

Raising the Quality of Social Science Research in Serbia



Thanks to becoming a member of the European Social Survey, researchers from Serbia can now participate in the most comprehensive global study of citizens in Europe and draw on comparative research results of 30 other countries. PERFORM was instrumental in driving this change.

Background

Serbia has never been a regular member of any comparative social-science research project implemented at a regional or European level. This has meant that Serbian scholars are all but excluded from the European research area including research consortia. The country has virtually no sets of longitudinal data that allow monitoring of social phenomena over a longer period of time or comparisons of developments within the European/global context.

This changed when Serbia joined the European Social Survey (ESS) in late 2017.

The ESS is an academically driven cross-national survey that has been conducted across Europe since 2001, under the umbrella of the European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC). The survey measures the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of populations in more than thirty countries. It is the most comprehensive international comparative survey in the field of social sciences.

In 2018, the survey will be implemented in 30 European countries, applying identical methodologies. The institutions of the European Union recognise and use the ESS as the key source to understand long-term structural transformation in European societies, as well as changes to citizen values and cultural patterns.

Challenges and drivers of change

Serbian researchers had proposed to join the European Social Survey as early as 2012. However, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development (MoESTD) would not agree to apply for membership and pay for the fee, as it did not recognise the importance of such a survey at the time and had different priorities. In addition, the academic community lacked the capacity to manage such a complex project.

Cooperation among academic institutions in Serbia is still weak. Young and mid-career researchers could be strong drivers of innovative projects; however, they are in marginalised positions within the national research system. As a result, innovations rarely find their way into the social science research system.

How change happened?

ESS data would be a particularly valuable contribution to local scientific knowledge and important evidence base for policymakers. The prospect that Serbia can become a member of the ESS with all the accompanying benefits provided sufficient stimulus to overcome the barriers and initiate the project.

A group of researchers decided to try again advocating with the Ministry to join the ESS in 2016. A major difference to previous attempts to join the ESS was the presence of PERFORM¹. In early 2017, PERFORM was invited by academics to participate in discussions with universities in and outside Belgrade, which led to the establishment of an ESS advocacy working group. PERFORM already had a strong relationship with the Ministry, and was able to support and advise the working group on how to advocate the Ministry to apply for the membership.



Meeting of researchers and government representatives in Belgrade on 1 July 2017

¹ PERFORM is a project of Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, implemented by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation and University of Fribourg www.perform.network

During the first half of 2017, PERFORM facilitated a series of meetings with social scientists, to discuss how social sciences can benefit from joining the ESS. Results were presented to MoESTD. Following further meetings and intense correspondence with the Ministry, the leadership understood the benefits that Serbia will gain from joining the ESS, and agreed to provide the required institutional and financial support. PERFORM had a central mediating role between researchers and 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.”

A gathering of almost a hundred researchers and representatives of different institutions took place in Belgrade, July 1st, 2017, confirming the commitment and support for the realisation of the project.

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 at the meeting of the General Assembly of the European Research Infrastructure Consortium.



General Assembly of the European Social Survey on 18 October 2017

The Impact



“An important benefit of joining ESS is in the improved evidence informed policymaking. Decision makers in the European Union – in compliance with the development of the model of good governance, demand that public policies must be based on relevant data instead of short-term and everyday political pressures, in order to deal with the causes and not only the symptoms of the existing problems.”

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

Serbia has become a member of the 9th round of the European Social Survey (December 2017 to June 2019). Over 100, mostly younger social science researchers from Serbia will actively participate in the survey and gain the opportunity to cooperate with their European peers.



Assistant Minister Nedovic at the panel discussion on the benefits of ESS for Serbia

The project proved to be exceptionally successful in mobilising collective energies within the academic community. A larger group of researchers will benefit from expanding their expertise on modern research methodologies and the use of new technologies. Stronger ties have been established within the national academic community, mostly through the development of horizontal linkages between young researchers working in different

institutions. The work performed so far has revealed a great enthusiasm and energy among young researchers and PhD students, which, when properly managed and structured, could be a key factor to the overall success of the project.

The networking with research institutes and consortia from the region and across Europe are of benefit to the research community in Serbia, creating new opportunities for joining other research projects and initiatives within the European Union (e.g. Horizon 2020).

In addition, thanks to the previous work of PERFORM that had contributed to the trust building between the Ministry and the social science research community, MoESTD is expressing an increasingly positive attitude towards social sciences and humanities, recognising the importance of their contribution to evidence-based policymaking.

Next steps

During the first half of 2018, the working group will prepare the field research, while the actual survey is planned for early autumn. Preparatory activities include training of interviewers, field research planning, development of a sampling plan, internal and external networking, strengthening the cross-border cooperation to form a Western Balkans research group within the ESS. ESS teams from Slovenia and Hungary will help with the transfer of knowledge and technology. The working group will also develop a communication strategy that will ensure that different audiences become familiar with the significance and benefits of the ESS research.

Additional sources

20/02/2018 [SNTV Reports on Serbia's Accession to ESS](#) (video)

06/02/2018 [Serbia Joins European Social Survey](#) (video)

27/12/2017 [Panel discussion: European Social Survey in Serbia](#) (video)

19/12/2017 [Panel Discussion on Benefits of ESS Held in Belgrade](#)

27/11/2017 [Preparation for Conducting European Social Survey in Serbia](#)

18/10/2017 [Serbia Becomes Member of European Social Survey](#)

01/08/2017 [Serbian Academic Community to Join European Social Survey](#)