

AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT SITUATION, MAIN CHALLENGES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN SERBIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The recommendations for improving social science research in Serbia have resulted from the project *Establishing a Dialogue between the Research Community and Decision Makers with a View to Improving Social Science Research in Serbia*, carried out under the *Regional Research Promotion Programme in Social Sciences in the Western Balkans* (RRPP) between October 2011 and June 2013.

The project was realised by a Working Group and the Institute of Economic Sciences, the local RRPP coordination unit, with the support of the Serbian Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development. In 2012, after a series of working meetings and having conducted a survey of a sample of 626 respondents (which is more than a third of all social science researchers in the country), the Working Group analysed the current situation of social sciences in Serbia and defined the recommendations for its improvement. The results of the conducted survey, the analyses of the key challenges and the recommendations have been published in the study *Social Science Research in Serbia: An Overview of the Current Situation, Main Challenges and Policy Recommendations*.

Although the recommendations in this *brief for public policy* cannot solve all the social science problems in Serbia that were pointed out during the realisation of the project, the purpose of this document is to help the Serbian National Assembly, the Government, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, the academic and scientific communities, non-government organisations and international donors to overcome some of the main challenges in this area, such as:

- Scientific evaluation system
- Research funding
- Research capacity building with a special focus on young researchers
- Establishment of a social science researchers association
- Cooperation between the Serbian scientific community and policy makers

II. CAPACITY, PRACTICES AND MAIN CHALLENGES OF THE SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH COMMUNITY

- The Serbian scientific research community is quite **closed-in and self-referential**. Most papers by Serbian researchers are published in Serbian publications, their books are published by Serbian publishers, they take part in conferences held in Serbia and in nearby 'foreign' countries (Republic of Srpska, Montenegro, Macedonia) and they carry out projects funded by the Ministry of Science.

- **Inadequate funding of scientific activities**. Allocations for science from the Serbian Budget have been the same for the past few years: some 0.3% of gross domestic product (GDP), of which only 18% for social sciences, whilst private sector is estimated to have invested around 0.2% of GDP.
- **A relatively small number of social science researchers have studied or specialised outside Serbia**. A great majority of respondents working in scientific research institutions in Serbia (over 90%) have been educated exclusively at Serbian universities. In addition, a relatively small number of respondents have had the opportunity to go on study visits abroad for longer than a month. Fifty-six respondents (8.9%) have been on one study visit abroad, and forty-five researchers (7.2%) have been on two (or more) study visits.
- **Inadequate cooperation** with the researchers in the country, in the region and abroad, as well as among universities, institutes and professional associations.
- **Professional mobility** is extremely low among the researchers. Nearly three quarters of them still work in the same institution where they got their first job.
- The Serbian scientific research community is strongly committed to staying up-to-date with the scientific results and papers published in Anglo-Saxon publications. As many as 80% of the respondents can use the English language, **but less than a fifth of them can use other foreign languages** (French, German, Spanish or Russian) in their scientific research practices, which is why a large portion of scientific traditions outside the English speaking countries remain unknown.
- **The research capacities** in the fields of scientific research methodology, statistical data processing, writing project proposals, project management, use of foreign languages are underdeveloped.
- Despite all these problems, the **scope of scientific activities when it comes to social sciences is relatively high in Serbia**. According to the survey, scientific activity is very high among 16.3% of the respondents, high among 30.2% of them, average among 30.7%, and low among only 22.8% of the respondents. It was measured by the number of published papers, participation in scientific and research projects, presented papers in scientific conferences and study visits abroad.

III. SCIENTIFIC EVALUATION SYSTEM

What are the main problems?

PROBLEM 1 → **Inadequate** (demotivating) **evaluation of scientific work**. For instance, a paper published in a top international journal and participation in a top international conference are valued unreasonably low compared to a paper published in a Serbian journal and taking part in a conference in Serbia.

PROBLEM 2 → Serbian universities **do not provide enough incentive measures** for science and research or for active publication of research results.

PROBLEM 3 → **There is no strategic approach** to motivating the talented and successful researchers living abroad to return to Serbia.

What should be done?

MEASURE 1 → **Change the weighting factors for quantitative expression of research results**, primarily the following:

- For the books published by renowned international publishers, papers published in the most prestigious international journals (on the SCI and SSCI lists) and participation in prestigious international conferences should be much higher compared to their Serbian equivalents;
- As regards Serbian journals, those that do not practice 'double-blind' reviews or international section should not be on the list of 'publications of international importance verified by the special decision of the ministry' (Category M24) that brings 4 points for a published text.

MEASURE 2 → Scientists who **actively publish** in prestigious foreign journals should be additionally motivated through various incentives (salary increase, reduced teaching hours if they teach, grants for publishing in prestigious journals, grants for study visits abroad, etc.).

MEASURE 3 → **Simplify the recognition of foreign degrees and abolish the existing nostrification procedures** as outdated methods of maintaining the monopoly in the Serbian education. Make it possible for the people actively involved in research, especially for those who have obtained their PhDs at prestigious foreign universities, to collaborate with the Serbian scientific research institutions and to come back to Serbia.

MEASURE 4 → **Formulate an evaluation system** for scientific and research work that will:

- Recognise the **qualitative** in addition to the quantitative criteria, be stable in the long term and ensure predictability when planning scientific activities and publishing for the members of scientific research community;
- Change the method of evaluation when re-appointing and appointing young (and all other) university employees to include the following: (a) **evaluation of scientific work** in the appointment process; (b) **evaluation of published dissertations** as young researchers' first serious scientific research texts; (c) **evaluation of the results of expert work** in the field of practical policies.

IV. RESEARCH FUNDING

What are the main problems?

PROBLEM 1 → **Inadequate funding of scientific activity in Serbia as a whole**. There is a lack of funds for the realisation of quality scientific research (empirical research and surveys, procurement of literature, etc.) and for the publication of papers in leading international journals. Despite the fact that progress has been made, allocations for science from the Serbian Budget are modest, having remained at around 0.3% of GDP (EUR 110 million) for a few years now.

PROBLEM 2 → **Insufficient allocations for social sciences**. Only 18% of the total allocated funds from the Serbian Budget go to social sciences, which is much lower than in many countries in the region.

PROBLEM 3 → **Private sector is not motivated to invest in science**. According to the rough estimates, private sector invests only **0.2% GDP per year**. There is no strategy to increase the investment of the private sector in research.

PROBLEM 4 → Low success rate when applying for the EU funds. The success rate for the FP7 projects is currently 12.7%.

What should be done?

MEASURE 1 → Establish at least two structural funds in the budget of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development, which could become operational with 2% each of the current allocations for science in Serbia:

- **A scientific research community capacity building fund** (which would support permanent education of researchers in research methodology, statistical data processing, project proposal writing, project management, foreign languages; which would support the procurement of foreign literature in specific areas, languages, etc. and

having the key works in modern science and philosophy translated; which would support the publishing of papers in international scientific journals by paying for translations and conference fees; which would help organise scientific conferences in Serbia and improve the quality of Serbian scientific publications);

- **A fund promoting the mobility of scientists and researchers** (which would provide study abroad scholarships for highachieving young researchers, grants for study visits abroad as a form of professional development, and which would pay travel costs for those involved in writing international scientific project proposals).

MEASURE 2 → Define mechanisms to increase the investment of the private sector in science, define tax facilitations for companies in vesting in scientific research and intensify the **promotion of corporate social responsibility** and corporate investment in research projects.

MEASURE 3 → Provide **institutional assistance** to improve the capabilities of researchers and the capacities of organisations when applying for projects funded by international organisations, such as the FP7 projects. Determine **quantitative objectives** in each area and define a **system of evaluation** of scientific institutions that have succeeded in securing their place in such projects.

V. RESEARCH CAPACITY BUILDING WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON YOUNG RESEARCHERS

What are the main problems?

PROBLEM 1 → **Underdeveloped research capacities** when it comes to writing project proposals, scientific project management, academic writing, social science research methodology, use of software for statistical data processing and command of foreign languages.

PROBLEM 2 → **Lack of scholarships for young researchers** wishing to study or specialise at prestigious international universities. The young researchers accepted in study programmes at renowned universities are often unable to get full government scholarships. In this way the state easily gives up its good scientists.

PROBLEM 3 → **Lack of funds** for the publication of papers, trips to international conferences and procurement of literature. Writing top quality papers requires exchange of ideas and experiences that can often be gained only through direct contact with peers and mentors from abroad.

PROBLEM 4 → **Very few Serbian scientific journals on the SCI and SSCI lists**, frequent changes to the categorisation

of Serbian publications (and, quite often, belated the information on adopted changes to the categorisation).

What should be done?

MEASURE 1 → **Organise continuing professional development courses and seminars** on project management, academic writing, research methodology, statistical data processing software, languages. Bring visiting scholars from abroad to teach/lecture masters and doctoral courses.

MEASURE 2 → Provide grants for exceptionally talented young researchers wishing to improve academically at prestigious universities abroad (bound by contract to return and work in Serbian scientific and research institutions) and increase support for study visits of the members of Serbian scientific research community. Determine clear criteria to support the researchers whose academic development at esteemed international universities would be beneficial to the society in the long term.

MEASURE 3 → **Financial assistance to publish papers** in the country and abroad (by covering the costs of conference fees, translations, etc.).

MEASURE 4 → **Opening up the scientific research community** to the researchers, reviewers and joint projects with researchers and research organisations/institutions from Southeast Europe.

MEASURE 5 → **Provide expert, organisational and financial assistance for publishers** and their endeavours to **get the Serbian journals on the SCI and SSCI lists**. Ensure stability in the categorisation and funding of Serbian publications.

VI. ESTABLISHMENT OF A SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCHERS ASSOCIATION

What are the main problems?

PROBLEM 1 → Social science researchers are **poorly organised**. They do not make the most of the potential benefits of association, they do not discuss the problems that directly affect them often enough and, consequently, they usually do not have an opinion on certain matters.

PROBLEM 2 → **Inadequate scientific** cooperation among the researchers in Southeast Europe.

What should be done?

MEASURE 1 → **Establish a social science researchers association** of an interdisciplinary character, whose general aim would be to **promote and develop social sciences in Serbia**. Professional associations in the area of social

sciences should have a leading role in the establishment of such an association.

The **activities** of the association could include the following: organisation of conferences, symposiums, seminars and lectures; publishing and promotion of scientific and other specialised publications; keeping the scientific and research community informed (e.g. about scientific gatherings, research grants, job vacancies, etc.); participation in public debates and policymaking, etc.

MEASURE 2 → In addition to establishing a national social science researchers association, **regional professional researchers associations** for Southeast Europe. The existing framework and network of institutions and individuals formed under the Regional Research Promotion Programme in Social Sciences in the Western Balkans (RRPP) should be used.

VII. IMPROVING COOPERATION BETWEEN THE SERBIAN SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH COMMUNITY AND POLICY MAKERS

What are the main problems?

PROBLEM 1 → **Lack of articulate communication and channels for the scientific community to influence the decision making processes** both in science and in other areas of wider social importance.

PROBLEM 2 → **The priorities and needs of policy makers are not transparent enough** when it comes to analyses in certain areas. Insufficient consultations among researchers when making decisions of social importance.

PROBLEM 3 → **There is no ordered incentive system to get the scientific community involved in policy making.**

What should be done?

MEASURE 1 → When carrying out a project, the **scientific community** should initiate cooperation with the policy makers. During the project realisation the focus should be on the promotion and presentation of research results by means of fliers, brochures, policy briefs and project reports, and various communication channels such as interactive websites, discussion panels, workshops, conferences, etc.

MEASURE 2 → Policy makers should:

- Regularly inform the interested members of the public about their priorities in the area of policymaking and policy implementation, and about their needs when it comes to data and analyses;

- Support cooperation and communication with scientific research organisations by forming special organisational units for strategic analyses, by encouraging and enabling temporary transfers of researchers from the parent organisation to a state body ('secondment'), involving the members of research community in the working bodies that are important in creating public policies and by organising smaller-scale interactive gatherings (briefings, roundtables).

MEASURE 3 → **The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development** should lobby other government bodies to base policymaking on research analytics, to support the development and promote the role of organisations handling transfers and 'translation' of scientific and research data and findings into the language of practical politics.

VIII. INSTITUTIONS RESPONSIBLE FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH IN SERBIA

The Government of the Republic of Serbia should provide more funds for investing in science, at least 1 % of GDP. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia should be a key player in improving the situation in the field of social sciences by building the capacity of the Serbian scientific research community.

The National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, with the help of **Scientific Board for Social Sciences**, should pass a more stimulating rulebook for the evaluation of scientific research work, which would help raise the quality.

Universities and institutes, with the financial assistance of the Ministry, should organise **seminars** on academic writing, research methodology, use of statistical data processing software, etc.

Universities, institutes and the **NGO sector** should cooperate more closely and be more proactive in scientific research, promotion and application of scientific results.