

Survey report: Impact of COVID19 crisis on the field of political science

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Introduction

The emergence of Covid-19 outbreak has deeply affected the professional and intellectual life of all the European academics. Political scientists are not stranger to this. Yet, they represent a potentially crucial type of knowledge-holder to face the post-pandemic «terra incognita», because of two reasons basically. Political scientists are indeed familiar to «crisis management» since they study and teach about decision making processes, elite-mass interaction and interdependence. Secondly, they are used to methodological hybridation. Therefore, they would be more prepared than other communities to change their routine and to join inter-disciplinary enterprises coping with the post-pandemic scenario.

This survey was intended to detect the attitudes of such a potentially vital and proactive academic community, addressing three interconnected aspects in particular. At first, we tried to explain the degree of “professional adaptation” for teaching and learning activities as well as for EPSs research agenda. Secondly, we investigated the way in which EPSs perceived their social role during the pandemic. Finally, we aimed at measuring the degree of “awareness of change” of the scientific community, in order to provide a reasoned assessment of the overall coherence among EPSs in tacking a clear view about their role after the pandemic.

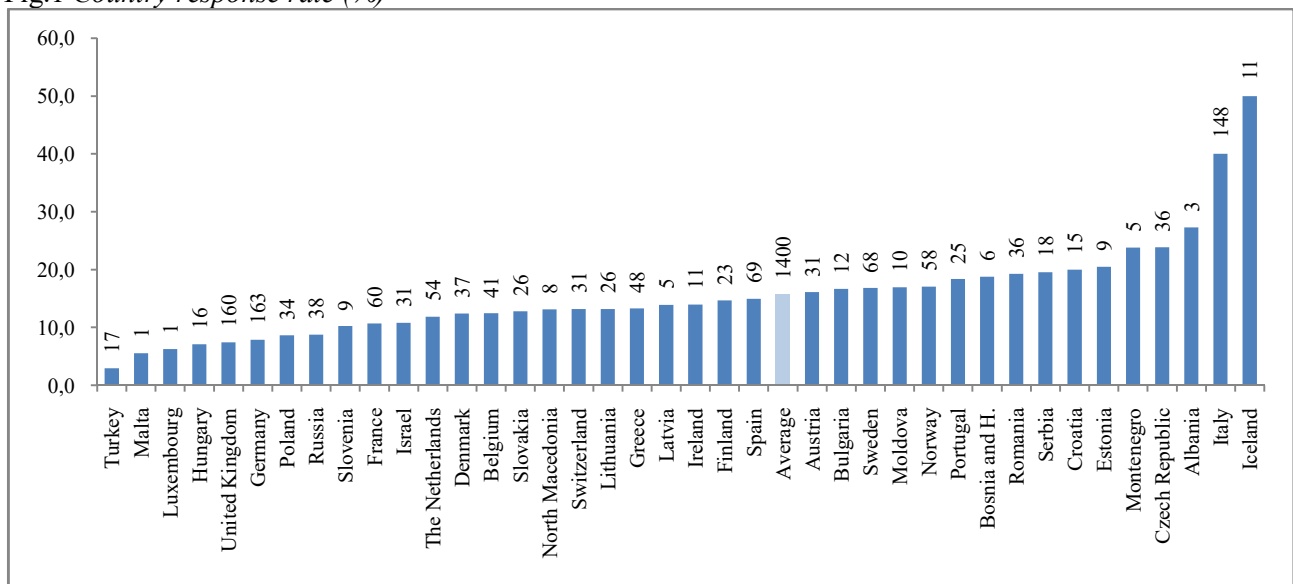
The CAWI Covid survey has been addressed to the PROSEPS contact file of political scientists including more than 11,000 persons from 37 European countries plus Israel and Turkey¹, was launched on 9 October 2020 and closed on 4 December 2020 after three reminders. We collected 1400 full questionnaire responses, with an average response rate of 11.5 per cent (but highly differentiated among countries, as shown by figure 1 below) which increases at 12.7 per cent if we exclude from the 11,838 units sample the invalid and rejected contacts and the unsubscribed. In this regard we consider our sample to be sufficiently representative of the EPSs population.

The following section presents the main findings of our survey questions on the basis of the three different analytic dimensions mentioned above (professional adaptation, perception of the

¹ The data have been collected between summer 2017 and fall 2018 by the numerous PROSEPS National supervisors and their teams on the basis of few specific criteria: when available: *legal criteria* (e.g. national accreditation schemes; ministerial regulations); when official /legal criteria did not exist (as in most of the considered countries) (I) Institutional affiliation *or* PhD in Political Science *and* (II) research record *or* teaching activities.

social relevance of political science and awareness of change) and controlling for four binary variables which are assumed to affect EPSs' attitudes and perceptions: at the individual level we look at gender and academic seniority (namely full and associate professors *vs.* all the residual categories: lecturers, researchers, post-docs etc.), while at the country level we consider the stringency of anti-Covid measures adopted² and the general level of development (Human Development Index, HDI 2020, based on life expectancy, education and per capita income indicators).

Fig.1 Country response rate (%)



Professional adaptation of European political scientists

Table 1 below suggests an overall picture of “professional adaptation” of EPSs, although the costs are evident: the absolute majority of respondents states that working online and alone has been difficult, but they have been able to fulfill most of their duties and plans, while a quarter of European scholars has perceived a serious negative impact of COVID-19 on their profession or they even stated that it was virtually impossible to achieve an ordinary standard of professional life. This is particularly true in case of female scholars with respect to male scholars, as women were probably invested by the major burden of the domestic duties during the periods of lockdown, school closures etc. Instead, the work of senior professors appears on average less affected compared to non-seniors. As far as the country level is concerned, the professional change appears

² We look at the average value of the Oxford stringency index (ranging from 0=no anti-covid-measures, to 100=max stringency of anti-Covid measures) in the period that goes from 1 January 2020 to 4 December 2020 (closure of the survey) The index is unfortunately not available for Macedonia, Malta and Montenegro, but these countries only accounts for a dozen cases in our dataset.

relatively more widespread in the countries where anti-Covid measures were stricter, but also in countries presenting an HDI above the average.

Tab.1 <i>To what extent has your professional life changed during the pandemic?</i>	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score ≥ 50 ³	HDI \geq average ⁴	Total
My professional life has not changed very much.	15.4	21.9	19.2	18.7	19.9
Working online and alone has been difficult, but I have been able to fulfill most of my duties and achieve most of my plans	55.9	57.8	54.9	55.4	56.7
My professional life has been seriously affected by the lockdown.	23.3	15.6	20.5	21.4	18.9
It has been virtually impossible to achieve an ordinary standard of professional life.	5.4	4.6	5.5	4.5	4.5
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>519</i>	<i>652</i>	<i>824</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>1400</i>

However, the level of adaptation changes significantly according to the type of activity considered. Table 2 below shows that adaptation of research-oriented activities was much less demanding than online teaching. Here a generational divide emerges: on average, senior professors (who are also likely to be older and less familiar with new technologies) had apparently more problems in implementing distance learning procedures and substituting in-person meetings with online activities, while they are probably more used than other categories to write papers, reviews and essays at home, which is however the less demanding activity for all the respondents. As expected reconciling new working conditions with private life was more demanding for female and early career scholars compared to male and senior scholars. Instead, country variables do not show very clear trends.

Tab.2 <i>How much demanding has been (very + somewhat demanding):</i>	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score ≥ 50	HDI \geq average	Total
Implementing online teaching and distance learning procedures	75.5	78.3	78.0	77.7	76.3
Substituting in-person meetings with online activities (for research and administrative work in your university)	59.4	61.2	57.3	58.8	58.1
Reconciling new working conditions with your private/family life	62.1	53.1	60.2	56.9	57.3
Contributing to the development of your discipline by organizing online recruitment and assessment processes	46.1	44.6	46.5	42.7	44.7
Writing papers, reviews and essays at home	45.5	33.7	42.8	41.0	39.9
Participating in online webinars and conferences to stay connected with the scientific community	55.8	50.6	51.1	55.2	52.0
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>519</i>	<i>652</i>	<i>824</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>1400</i>

³ 14 countries out of 39 have an index equal or above 50: Germany, Belgium, Greece, Russia, Moldova, Turkey, France, Albania, Spain, Ireland, United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy, Israel (from the less to the most stringent).

⁴ 15 countries out of 39 have an index above the average: Luxembourg, Slovenia, Israel, Austria, Belgium, United Kingdom, Finland, Denmark, The Netherlands, Sweden, Germany, Iceland, Switzerland, Ireland, Norway.

As far as mobility is concerned, limitations on research activities and visiting abroad have been the most penalizing according to EPSs, followed by the inability to attend international conferences (see table 3). Instead, less than 10 per cent respondents quote the inability to hold international meetings to plan research projects and cooperative teaching activities as the most penalizing constrain, but this percentage rise to 12.5 per cent for female scholars.

<i>Tab.3 Which of the following COVID-19-related constraints has had the most penalizing effect on your life as an academic and a scholar?</i>	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score \geq 50	HDI \geq average	Total
Mobility limitations on research activities and visiting abroad.	43.4	44.6	48.5	45.7	43.6
Short-term mobility limitations on teaching at and visiting other higher education institutions.	15.0	17.3	16.5	16.2	17.8
Inability to attend international conferences.	26.6	25.8	24.0	25.2	26.5
Inability to hold international meetings to plan research projects and cooperative teaching activities.	12.5	10.6	9.1	9.1	9.9
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>519</i>	<i>652</i>	<i>824</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>1400</i>

<i>Tab.4 Did you reshape your research and dissemination agenda to investigate COVID-19-related issues?</i>	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score \geq 50	HDI \geq average	Total
I did not reshape my agenda.	46.8	44.6	45.3	55.0	46.5
I partially reshaped my agenda, since I was interested to know more about COVID-19.	43.7	43.7	44.2	35.8	42.5
I reshaped my agenda because my department/institution decided to cover COVID-19-related issues.	6.0	6.0	5.8	5.1	6.1
I drastically reshaped my agenda to cover COVID-19-related issues.	3.5	5.7	4.7	4.1	4.9
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>519</i>	<i>652</i>	<i>824</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>1400</i>

Reshaping their own research agenda to cover Covid-related issues is another important aspect of “adaptation”. Table 4 below shows that only a tiny minority of EPSs have drastically changed their professional agenda during the pandemic, with a prevalence of male and senior professors. However, personal interest seems to be more relevant than institutional drives in reshaping the agenda, especially for respondents working in “less developed” countries. Still, almost the absolute majority of EPSs did not reshaped the agenda, with scholars from “more developed” countries largely above the average. In this regard, we could advance two different interpretations: on the one hand, the lack of adaptation may be the sign of the predominance of a “pure” perspective of the discipline, especially in those countries where it is supposed to be stronger. Thus, the fact that political scientists’ research agenda is substantially disconnected from the most pressing problems faced by the society (Stoker 2010) would make them not very oriented to “sacrifice” their own interests in order to chase the latest trends. On the other hand this apparent disconnection from “big-world events” may be a consequence of the scarce visibility and relevance

of EPSs in the public debate, which also implies scarce involvement in high level debates on reality and consequences of the pandemic. Still, in more developed countries, it is not necessarily linked to the weakness of political science, but may be also a consequence of a conscious choice of EPSs to withdraw in their “ivory towers”.

That said, it is extremely important to detect more specifically which Covid19-related activities have been undertaken by the 53.5 per cent EPSs who stated they have reshaped their research agenda because of the pandemic. Table 5 below shows that Covid19 offered first of all “academic incentives”: the absolute majority of EPSs who has undertaken Covid-19-related activities in the course of 2020 did so by writing reports, articles and volumes on political effects of the pandemic. Still, EPSs also engaged in less “typical” activities including media engagement and policy advising. Not surprisingly, male are more active than women in most of the Covid19-related activities mentioned below, but women are proportionally (slightly) more represented in institutional task forces, maybe because of formal requirements of gender balance. Moreover, women are also more likely to engaged in other types of Covid19-related activities. As expected, senior professors are much more active than early-career scholars, especially in terms of participating in the debate on pandemic-related issues in traditional media. As for the country level, the type of activity doesn’t seem to significantly change due to the stringency of the anti-Covid measures. Yet, it’s interesting to notice that while EPSs from the most affected countries are more likely to write on the pandemic, they appear (slightly) less likely to participate in task forces, as if a more dramatic situation would not leave space for advisors other than health officials, hard scientists, managers and economists.

<i>Tab.5 What COVID-19-related activities have you undertaken in the past months?</i>	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score ≥ 50	HDI \geq average	Total
Writing reports, articles and volumes on political effects of the pandemic	51.1	59.3	59.9	57.9	57.5
Participating in the debate on pandemic-related issues in traditional media (newspapers, radio, television)	30.8	43.5	34.1	29.9	35.5
Actively contributing to discussions about the effects of the pandemic on social media and blogs	24.6	29.9	26.6	28.0	26.8
Producing data sets and data infrastructure on the pandemic’s impact, which will be shared with the whole scientific community	19.9	25.5	22.6	29.0	23.6
Participating in institutional task forces and offering advice to committees and working groups along with other knowledge holders	21.7	21.3	17.5	19.2	19.0
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>276</i>	<i>361</i>	<i>451</i>	<i>328</i>	<i>749</i>

Perception of the social relevance of political science

As for our second analytic dimension, the first thing that becomes evident according to our data is that the majority of EPSs trust hard scientists, though part of the respondents reproach them to have caused a certain confusion because of too disparate opinions but also because of the inability to communicate clearly. Still, the absolute majority of EPSs denounce that the management of the pandemic has given too much voice to hard/natural scientists as compared to social/political scientists, although only a minority (27 per cent) agree with a much more “radical” statement such as: the crisis has undermined the role of the social sciences.

However, it is interesting to notice that EPSs from the most affected countries are proportionally more convinced that hard/natural scientists had too room with respect to social/political scientists. This is consistent with what we said in the previous sub-paragraph about the fact that EPSs working in the most affected countries are less involved in task forces. In sum, political scientists are not excluded from the management of the pandemic, but they are more likely to have their voices heard when the situation is (more or less) under control. Instead, they are probably considered unable to face the immediate health emergency, which implies a subsequent/secondary role compared to other experts. This means that there is a high level of awareness of the different social role and advisory role of political sciences respect to hard/natural sciences when this type of crisis happens.

Tab.6 <i>To what extent do you agree with the following statements (somewhat + completely agree)</i>	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score \geq 50	HDI \geq average	Total
It would be better if hard scientists gave their opinions to institutions confidentially instead of publicly.	15.6	18.6	18.3	12.5	17.8
Public interventions by hard scientists have been clear and effective.	51.9	50.9	53.3	59.7	52.9
The opinions of hard scientists have been too disparate and have caused confusion.	47.0	45.7	46.9	34.7	45.9
Most hard scientists are competent but unable to communicate clearly.	35.9	35.1	35.6	25.6	36.5
The management of the pandemic has given too much voice to hard/natural scientists as compared to social/political.	54.5	54.1	56.6	49.1	53.6
The crisis has undermined the role of social sciences	29.3	29.7	28.4	19.6	27.0
Political scientists have a lot to say about how to deal with the pandemic, but they are not sufficiently present in the mass-media system to play a strong role.	66.1	61.0	65.1	60.1	62.0
In my country, political science is not strong enough to have a role in the public debate.	49.5	50.4	58.4	37.1	51.3
Political scientists are much too litigious and fragmented to represent a credible community in the public debate on COVID-19.	42.4	48.5	49.1	40.7	47.7
<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>519</i>	<i>652</i>	<i>824</i>	<i>729</i>	<i>1400</i>

But what are the main reasons for this (perceived) insufficient public role played by political scientists in the pandemic? According to 62 per cent respondents this is due to a scarce weight in the mass-media system, and this is especially true according to female scholars and EPSs from the most affected countries. 51 per cent focuses on the weakness of political science in the respective countries, and this percentage goes up to 58 per cent among respondents from the countries above the threshold in the stringency index of anti-covid measures. Still, almost half of the respondents actually blame their own professional community, seen as too litigious and fragmented, for the scarce engagement and impact in the public debate on COVID-19. In this regard, curiously, men appear to be much more (self-)critical than women.

Again, respondents from “more developed” countries show very different perceptions compared to colleagues from “less developed” countries, as the former are much less critical both towards hard scientists and the social role of the PS community.

Awareness of change and expectations for the future

As for the third analytic dimension our data suggests that almost half respondents (especially women) are convinced that political scientists have become aware from this experience that they should increase their role as policy advisors and policy experts (see table 7 below). Moreover, even an 85 per cent argues that political scientists should work more frequently in multidisciplinary teams and think tanks in order to strongly contribute to decision-making processes, and the same percentage states that political scientists will all have to deal with policy-related questions in the years to come. In fact, the pandemic is expected to produce important changes in the academic work even in the long run: 61 per cent respondents (with an over-representation of women and EPSs from the most affected countries) agree that fundraising and resource distribution method will dramatically change, while 54 per cent argue that pre-print and real-time results will become more important than time-consuming monographic works and peer-reviewed journals.

Interestingly, respondents from “more developed” countries are largely below average for all the response options presented in table 2 below, as though they do not see the pandemic as catalyst of change and a reason to rethink their profession. Conversely, scholars from “less developed” countries –where PS is likely to be less institutionalized– are those expecting the major changes. In this regard the pandemic can be seen as a threat for such a “fragile discipline” in their own countries, but it may be also an opportunity to force a change to secure its surviving.

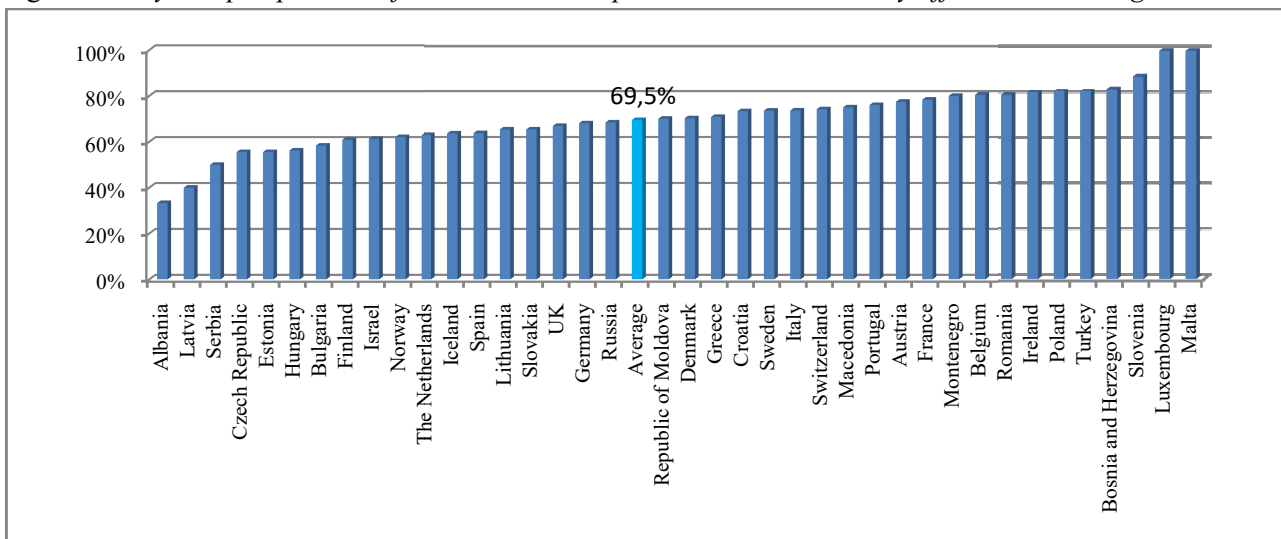
Still, awareness also pass from rethinking academic mobility and international cooperation. In this regard, EPSs seem highly aware about the poor chances to go back to pre-pandemic

standards in terms of mobility. In fact, 70 per cent are convinced that the current mode of international cooperation will have to change in the long run, with quite strong differences among countries (see figure 2 below) which however don't seem to be linked to the stringency of anti-covid measures adopted. Instead, the categories who are more likely to be professionally endangered by mobility limitation (female, early career scholars and respondents from less developed countries) are also more pessimistic about the chance to go back to the former situation (see table 8).

Tab.7 To what extent do you agree with the following statements (somewhat + completely agree)	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score \geq 50	HDI \geq average	Total
Political scientists should work more frequently in multidisciplinary teams and think tanks in order to strongly contribute to decision-making processes.	85.8	83.4	85.8	77.4	84.7
Political scientists have learned from this experience that they should increase their role as policy advisors and policy experts.	51.3	47.1	46.9	38.7	46.1
We will all have to deal with policy-related questions in the years to come.	87.7	82.8	85.1	79.6	84.7
Fundraising and resource distribution method will dramatically change.	68.0	58.8	65.0	51.7	61.4
Experiments will be more important in all scientific contexts.	46.6	47.9	45.2	37.8	46.7
Pre-print and real-time results will become more important than time-consuming monographic works and peer-reviewed journals.	55.6	54.1	53.4	51.7	54.4
Total (N)	519	652	824	729	1400

Tab.8 Do you think that the current mode of international cooperation will have to change in the long run?	Female	Senior professor	Stringency score \geq 50	HDI \geq average	Total
Yes. Mobility and perspectives of international cooperation will be seriously affected in the long run.	76.3	66.3	70.4	68.0	69.5
No. I do not think there will be long-term reductions in mobility and international cooperation.	22.7	32.8	29.2	31.4	29.9
Total (N)	519	652	824	729	1400

Fig.2 Mobility and perspectives of international cooperation will be seriously affected in the long run.



Conclusions

Our survey suggests an overall picture of “professional adaptation” of EPSs but the costs are evident. Their research agenda partially changed in response to the pandemic, and a number of respondents engaged in Covid-19 related activities, even beyond the normal borders of the typical academic work. This is probably linked to a widespread awareness of the pandemic impact on the profession, which is expected to have effects even in medium-long run. Of course, we cannot be sure that this awareness –which seems to warn EPSs about the necessity of coming down from the “ivory tower” and, above all, to increase its applied dimension– will automatically translate in “professional adaptation”, even because of a generalised perception of the social (ir)relevance of political science. Still, the challenge of the pandemic may be seen as a motivation to try to face and solve this limit, which is nonetheless more a contextual problem than something ascribable to the flaws of the PS community. Besides, adaptation is probably seen as a necessity for (professionally) surviving to all the changes that the pandemic will produce in the long run.

Up to now EPSs have shown a “reactive adaptation” to the contingent effects of the Covid-19 challenge: “pure research” has been less endangered than teaching and dissemination but the most painful aspect of lockdown is the missed opportunities for conferences and research abroad; half respondents did not change their research agenda, which can be both a sign of resilience and lack of adaptation; most respondents also show rather rational attitudes that translate in coherent and “scientific” points of view with regard to the pandemic and reasonable trust in (Hard) Science; female, early-career scholars and respondents from countries with lower HDI appear generally more affected by the consequence of the pandemic compared to male, senior professors and respondents from “more developed” countries. However most EPSs are also skeptical about the chance to go back to pre-pandemic standards in mobility and international cooperation, and they show a self-critique on visibility of political science, lack of eclecticism and low interdisciplinary attitude of the community. In this regard it is interesting to notice that respondents from countries with higher HDI seem to be more inclined to support the *status quo* of political science, while on the contrary the pandemic is seen as a serious challenge but also as an opportunity to rethink political science especially in those countries where the discipline is supposed to be weaker (namely countries with lower HDI). Still, also other categories who are supposed to be weaker in the academia (namely female and early career scholars) are more likely to see the pandemic as a potential threat for the discipline (for instance by dramatically affecting the fundraising system) and consequently as catalyst of (professional) change. All these things considered, we can say that the awareness of the long-term effects of Covid-19 mainly translate in a quest for a new social role for the discipline, in order to secure its survival.