ESS ROUND 10 FIELDWORK IN SLOVENIA IN TERMS OF COVID-19

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Abstract:
The article presents the circumstances of the fieldwork phase of the European Social Survey (ESS) round 10 in Slovenia, which took place during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021. It is an exceptional situation, making it very difficult to conduct a survey based on a personal interviewing approach, especially when any other solution was not viable. The national team was faced with several additional tasks related to carrying out fieldwork activities in exceptional circumstances. The article presents the dynamics of the epidemic in Slovenia and the necessary measures to conduct the survey. Two primary objectives were pursued: data quality assurance despite the aggravated circumstances, and ensuring the safety of respondents and interviewers from possible risk of contact. The first was ensured by using all available tools and approaches as under normal pre-pandemic circumstances; while for the second we introduced a series of measures that went beyond the national safety measures (which were in many ways similar to those in most European countries). The ensuring of risk-free contact and additional motivational training among interviewers, also played an influence on the first objective (the quality of the data); namely, no significant hesitation or fear of possible infection was perceived among the respondents during the fieldwork. One of the critical points that prevailed in the decision to start the fieldwork in early autumn 2020, was having at least two months of pleasant weather conditions, which allows a significant part of interviews to be conducted outdoor, which would significantly reduce the possibility of risky contacts between the interviewer and the respondent. The sharp deterioration of events with the outbreak of the second wave dictated that the survey had to be conducted in two batches. This posed some new implementation requirements for researchers. The results of the sample realisation of two fieldwork intervals and the outcome of the ESS in Slovenia – the first among ESS countries that successfully completed the fieldwork round 10 (ESS 2020) – are also presented.


ESS round 10 preparation

The European Social Science Survey (ESS-ERIC) is a reputable cross-national survey that has been conducted every two years since 2002, and was formally recognised in 2016 as an ESFRI Landmark project. This means its methodology has proven to reach the highest level in cross-national general social surveys design (Malnar & Kurdija, 2010). It is an elaborated research project where more than half a million, one-hour personal interviews have been conducted throughout the ESS participating countries. Slovenia has been one of the key participating countries that actively contributed to shaping the survey and, as a full member, has participated in all rounds since the beginning of the project.
The initial aim of the ESS is to collect data within a cross-nationally, acclaimed methodology that meets the highest quality standards. In this respect, national implementations are expected to run uniformly within the defined methodological framework, which would minimise implementation inconsistencies that may affect differences in data quality between countries. Great efforts have been made to maintain this established research infrastructure at the required rate over these years. The constant search for a balance between possibilities and quality requirements in a diverse space of European countries is a daunting task in itself. Given the exceptional circumstances brought about by the global Covid-19 pandemic, the survey's objectives are even more challenging to achieve.

Like many other social activities and organisations, the Covid-19 pandemic, with all its consequences, has also hit the field of empirical social research hard. The fundamental methodological postulate of the ESS is conducting face-to-face interviewing, i.e. communication in direct contact between the interviewer and random people from the population. Restrictive measures to curb the spread of Covid-19 have negatively affected interviewing or even made it impossible to carry out the whole range of tasks necessary for the survey. All of a sudden, we had found ourselves in highly complicated circumstances, however, we wanted to maintain the quality and efficiency in conducting the ESS in Slovenia, and while response rates decline has been registered almost everywhere, Slovenia has been one of the countries where the ESS response rate was maintained or even increased in the last few waves (round 7, 8 and 9). Maintaining the response rate at the national level is one of the vital ESS objectives (Kurdija & Vovk, 2018; Vovk & Kurdija, 2019).

So, how to maintain the quality and keep to the schedule at the same time? Any delay (in terms of waiting for more favourable conditions) could only prolong the uncertainty or even mean that the survey would not be feasible at all. In this respect, early preparations seemed crucial to us, as they opened up more implementation options and different scheduling solutions.

Pandemic circumstances

At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic in the Spring of 2020, our initial idea was to become fully prepared to carry out the fieldwork for R10 within the already established schedule – from September to December. We hoped that the second pandemic wave would come somehow later or will not even be so severe to prevent the face-to-face survey from being conducted. Therefore, during the first half of summer 2020, all our efforts went in the direction that everything necessary should be prepared by the end of August. This would enable us to meet the conditions and be ready to launch fieldwork if the circumstances by the end of the summer would allow us to. Our starting point was also that we had an excellent epidemiological situation after the first wave since there were no new cases of the disease for almost two months.

Although more cases started to reappear later during that summer, we still hoped to find a 2 – 3 month 'time window' that would allow us to complete the fieldwork. So the plan was to start as early as possible in September. Reports from other state institutions, which also conducted surveys in that period (late summer), showed that matters were proceeding quite normally, despite the new cases emerging every day.

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1 The Public Opinion Research Centre (at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University in Ljubljana), with its decades of experience and an efficient team organisation conducting cross-national research projects, has overseen the ESS implementation in Slovenia in all its aspects. Its concern for a high-level implementation of all required survey tasks is particularly expressed in its work on the ESS.
One of the critical points that we all relied on was to make the most of the opportunity to conduct the interviews outdoors. Starting early would mean having at least two months of such conditions. Conducting interviews outside buildings, on terraces, in gardens, parks, courtyards and atriums is a fairly common possibility in Slovenia. A further option included the outdoor parts of bars and restaurants that had enough space and privacy to carry out the interviews.\(^2\) With all that in mind, the national team decided to take action and take advantage of the still manageable pandemic situation and the pleasant weather conditions.

Fieldwork began in mid-September with three interviewer seminars. Just at the time of our second seminar (late September), national Covid measures were further tightened due to the slightly worsening epidemiological situation. According to safety measures, we also adjusted the security requirements for our interviewers.

The general measures in force at that time in the country included the following:

- The use of a protective mask was mandatory when moving and staying in all enclosed public places or spaces, regardless of the distance provided.
- The use of a protective mask was also mandatory when moving and staying in open public places or spaces if it was not possible to ensure at least a 2-meter distance between people.
- Upon entering an enclosed public space, it was mandatory to disinfect your hands with a disinfectant containing at least 60% alcohol.

In order to protect the respondents and interviewers and show ourselves as a professional research institution with a responsible attitude towards the pandemic circumstances, we even exceeded current national measures. The safety requirements that we set for our interviewers during interviewing and the contact with the respondents comprised:

- Encouraging outdoor interviews where possible.
- Ensuring a minimum distance of two meters during the interview.
- Using multiple sets (5) of show cards in zip bags. Where the used set could not be used again for at least 48 hours. The respondent themself took the cards from the zip bag.
- Using medical footwear covers in the case of interviewing inside the apartments.
- Interviewers using disinfectant (70%) before and after the interview.
- Using protective mask during the interview.

Moreover, we added the crucial rule to reduce the risk of transmitting infections among interviewers:

- During fieldwork, we contacted all interviewers regularly about their health condition and possible Covid-19 symptoms (fever, dry cough, tiredness, sore throat, headache, loss of taste or smell). In the case of any of these symptoms, we would ask the interviewer to temporarily suspend fieldwork activities for at least ten days.

We also made it clear to all interviewers that in the case of violations of the agreed rules or any irresponsible behaviour in this regard, such an interviewer would be excluded from all further fieldwork activities. Interviewers were aware that respondents could also report them for any irresponsibility. Being professionals, most interviewers understood that such irresponsibility would lead them to be banned from their current fieldwork activity and endanger their

\(^2\) Another option to overcome the fear of personal contact risks is video interviewing, which, unfortunately, in our case did not attract any interest among the respondents.
involvement in our future projects. All interviewers readily accepted all the agreed safety measures. While, of course, interviewers could become infected even when not interviewing – we are happy to say that no interviewer was infected during fieldwork.

Launching fieldwork

We launched fieldwork activities on September 18, 2020 in relatively low Covid-prevalent conditions. About 60, mainly professional, interviewers were engaged. As previously in Slovenia, we used an individual sample from the Central Population Register with a known target person. The gross sample was enlarged from the standard 2,100 to 2,400 sample units due to responsiveness uncertainty regarding the pandemic context. We sent personalised advance letters as an invitation for survey participation with an additional note about our safety measures during the interview. We also used the established (conditional) incentives policy with a 10-euro gift card (from a major retail chain in Slovenia) for all the participants. The specificity of round 10 was also the recruitment for the Cronos-2 ESS web panel. It was carried out at the end of the main ESS questionnaire, which extended the interviewing by 5 – 10 minutes.

Our main concern was the extent of hesitation we would find among respondents, since the situation was still far from normal compared to previous rounds. Luckily, there were no noticeable signs of people being more reserved or hesitant after the first few weeks. Our record shows that in the first few weeks, the share of refusals was mainly in line with round 9. In the first month, the survey was running under relatively favourable circumstances, and the result we achieved during that time was excellent. But as the figure below shows, things became complicated.

Figure 1
Number of Covid-19 infected by days

The above chart of the growth of daily-confirmed cases infected with the coronavirus shows that the number of infections skyrocketed at one point. Due to the significant increase of infections, officially declared epidemic and additional tightening of measures, all fieldwork activities were suspended on the 19th of October. The whole country was stuck in a complete lockdown (with prohibited movement between municipalities and some other restrictive measures). Clearly, we had to pause all fieldwork activities indefinitely.
Circumstances dictated that we had to run the survey in two batches. After the outbreak of the second wave of the pandemic, we hoped that the fieldwork pause would only be temporary and that we would be able to continue working no later than the beginning of the new year. However, the second and third pandemic waves caused several months of lockdown, which prevented fieldwork activities until late spring. The graph shows that, given the scale of the epidemic, we chose the best possible time window for the realisation of the ESS round 10 fieldwork.

The first batch ran between the 18th of September and 19th of October 2020, and the second batch, after the decline of the third wave of the pandemic, from the 1st of June and the end of August 2021. During the first part (which lasted for one month), we gained 666 completed interviews (about 30% of the final estimated response rate); in the second part, we achieved 586 interviews (about 28% of the final estimated response rate). According to our preliminary calculations, the final response rate for R10 is 58%. This is slightly less than in the previous rounds which took place under much more favourable circumstances, but we still estimate our result to be satisfying.\(^3\) From a structural point of view, the populations of the first and second part sub-samples are pretty much comparable regarding the sample frame characteristic (gender, age and education)\(^4\), which, regarding the circumstances, also allows specific intertemporal comparative analyses.

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\(^3\) We should also take into account that we increased the initial sample size, where the conditions and available time for fieldwork completion did not allow us to achieve higher final number of completed interviews.

\(^4\) For complete structural uniformity, however, special weights can be applied to sub-samples.
This overview of the specifics of the ESS round 10 in pandemic circumstances can be concluded by highlighting one interesting comparison between ESS round 10 and round 9. One of the measures we agreed on with the interviewers was that, if possible, the interviewing should be conducted outside any enclosed spaces (on terraces, in gardens, parks, courtyards, atriums,
gardens of a pub etc.). It not only reduced the risk of transmitting the infection but (according to the interviewers) also contributed to a slightly more relaxed communication in the conditions of increased concerns of possible pandemic consequences. The change in interview location was obvious. There is a notable difference in favour of the option ‘outside the apartment, somewhere nearby’ compared to ESS round 9 in 2018. In normal circumstances, interviews are almost entirely conducted in respondents' apartments.5

Conclusion

This overview aimed not to present the methodological characteristics of the implementation of the ESS round 10 in Slovenia, but to describe the circumstances and experience we had in Slovenia (the first country that completed the fieldwork) during the Covid-19 years of 2020 and 2021. At that time, which was extremely hard for the face-to-face survey 'industry', a considerable number of new ideas and reflections on possible alternatives emerged, e.g., how to continue with the project and how to maintain the quality and comparability of the data. We believed that switching to any different mode scenario (after we were already halfway through) would bring further disadvantages and risks to data quality. Considering all possible solutions, our team firmly stood by the position that we would not deviate from the established face-to-face approach, even at the cost of postponement. This, unfortunately, did occur since we were forced to pause the fieldwork. It was also immediately apparent that we would have to deal with a significant time gap – a consequence that we accepted from the beginning while insisting on the current approach method. The main disadvantages of the time gap were that the efficient interviewing flow was interrupted, the arranged appointments would sometimes be forgotten, the interest in already agreed appointments could significantly decline, the social context could change (which could affect the consistency of the data) and last but not least, reviving fieldwork activities required quite some effort. Also an online refreshment seminar for interviewers was necessary. A complex letters correspondence strategy for the respondents of different types (statuses) had to be designed, where the situation's complexity was explained with added motivational notes about the importance of the study. So, the interruption of the fieldwork brought about some additional organisational and methodological issues. On the other hand, the consequences of an objectively urgent time gap in the data collection phase also allowed some unique intertemporal analyses. The possibilities of comparing the two sub-samples, separated by a relatively large time gap, enabled us to get some interesting insight into possible changes in attitudes related to the ongoing pandemic. Namely, the dynamics of the pandemic and widespread vaccination throughout this period had resulted in a whole range of social tensions that had brought some changes in attitudes, and some notable differences in the understanding of how we should deal with the pandemic and the social crisis it caused.

5 Given the methodological requirements for conducting personal interviewing (it should take place in a quiet environment with as few distractions as possible), this is the most common situation.
References

