
Estonian Social Science Data Archives: Past and Future Perspectives

A peculiarity of the development of social sciences in the former Soviet Union, and especially in Estonia was that conducting of empirical social studies was possible from the 1960s on, while teaching of social sciences and participating in the activities of the world sociological community was hardly possible. Teaching of sociological disciplines as well as engaging of students in the research was extremely limited until the end of the 1980s.

In 1993 a team of sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and human geographers from the University of Tartu made up an initiative group for creating a data bank on social sciences and began to work out the strategy of saving and usage of the research material collected by the Estonian social scientists during the previous decades.

In summer 1994 a project for creating a data bank was presented to the Open Estonia Foundation, or more concretely to the Higher Education Support Project (HESP). The application for support received a positive response; a grant aimed at "Creating Social Science Data Bank for Modernization of Education in Social Sciences and Training in Investigative Journalism" was awarded for years 1994 - 1996.

In summer 1995 the office of the data bank was opened in the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Tartu. The data bank was officially formed as an interdisciplinary centre of the Faculty of Social Sciences in early 1996, and it began to function as a national social science data bank - the Estonian Social Science Data Archives (ESSDA).

The nine-member ESSDA Council includes three persons from Tartu University, three representatives from academic centers outside Tartu University and the same number from non-academic institutions. ESSDA co-operates closely with the Academic Union of Estonian Sociologists as well as non-academic institutions that are conducting social research.

The work done in the initial period of founding ESSDA was discussed at an international conference "Data Archives and their Functions in Social Research in Eastern Europe" held at Tartu University in December 1996.

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Representatives from 7 countries attended this conference.

In 1997 ESSDA became a full member of the European Council of Social Science Data Archives - CESSDA.

The data collection of ESSDA consists of more than 200 empirical social studies covering such research directions like opinion polls, youth and media studies, entrepreneurship, rural sociology and many more, carried out between 1971 and 2000.

ESSDA holdings are increasingly being used for academic purposes by undergraduate and graduate students as a basis of secondary analysis. It should be mentioned that up to now sociology undergraduate and graduate students have dominated among the archives customers, but there are also graduate students from the departments of journalism and political science, the Faculties of Philosophy and Medicine, and the Estonian Agricultural University situated in Tartu. Training courses based on the ESSDA's holdings have been included in the curricula of various disciplines taught at the Faculty of Social Sciences.

In 1998 ESSDA was awarded a HESP grant to introduce the Estonian Social Science Data Archives systematically in the teaching of the social sciences at the bachelor, master and doctoral levels, and in the Open University by using the facilities of the Internet and creating an electronic journal.

The use of the holdings of ESSDA for practical purposes has begun to grow considerably. Here the most important direction is to meet the needs of the institutions of public policy. Permanent contacts have been established between ESSDA and the Economic and Social Information Department (ESI) of the Chancellery of Riigikogu /Parliament of Estonia/. First steps have been made in meeting information needs of local authorities. ESSDA will be acting as a mediator between the institutions of local policy-making and the social scientists' community. In 2001 the preliminary achievement was reached to deposit state-financed surveys at ESSDA.

ESSDA's international contacts of different scope have been established with the data archives in different coun-

tries. Representatives of ESSDA have visited data archives in the United States, Sweden, Germany, Hungary, Denmark, Spain, Norway, and Finland. In April 1997 a co-operation agreement was signed with the world's largest research center of public opinion - the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut. The agreement foresees the exchange of data and training possibilities for Estonian colleagues at the Roper Center. Cooperation with the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD) is speeding up. In connection with the preparations for the creating a common database about Estonian-Finnish joint social science research projects FSD equipped ESSDA with the new www server to promote ESSDA's transition to the NESSTAR solutions in 2001.

ESSDA's home page in the Internet helps to spread information about Estonian social research to the international community.

In 1998 ESSDA moved into new rooms provided by Tartu University. ESSDA's activities have been supported by the Chancellery of Riigikogu /Parliament of Estonia/. By the help of the Open Estonia Foundation ESSDA began to compile the first Estonian social science electronic journal "Estonian Social Science Online". The assistance from the German data organization GESIS enabled the translation of a number of study descriptions of significant studies into English. In December 1998, modernized ESSDA's Internet home page was positively mentioned at the competition of civil aid and info pages organized by the OEF.

Due to the chronic lack of finances in 1999 and 2000 ESSDA could only continue the description, systemization and cataloguing of studies. In addition the second issue of the electronic journal "Estonian Social Science Online" was published. ESSDA's Internet page has steadily been improved and complemented. Mutual meetings and development of co-operation projects with colleagues from the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD) should be mentioned.

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