

The Serbian Citation Index: Contest and Collapse

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The Past

Ten years ago, a poster titled *The Serbian Citation Index: context and content* was presented at the ISSI conference held in Stockholm (Šipka, 2005). *Serbian Citation Index (SCIndeks)* was at the time a pioneering effort to build a comprehensive, open access citation index of Serbian scientific journals with three missions: local *dissemination* of research findings in the open access mode, global *promotion* of the Serbian science, and objective *evaluation* of national journals, institutions, and researchers.

Started as an ambitious project of the group of enthusiasts and volunteers in 1990s, SCIndeks has become truly embraced nationally during the 2000s. In the period when Serbia was represented in the Web of Science (WoS) with only three journals, SCIndeks was recognized as a tool to enhance the public accountability, visibility, and quality of local journals. *Centre for Evaluation in Education and Science (CEES)*, SCIndeks developer and publisher, started receiving full financial support from the Serbian Ministry of Science (SMS), both for the maintenance of SCIndeks and for publishing the *Journal Bibliometric Report (JBR)*. The report is published annually and contains the national impact factor and almost 20 other bibliometric indicators for over 300 journals covered by SCIndeks. JBR is used for journal rankings and, indirectly, as a data source for the evaluation of individual researchers, their promotions, and tenures.

The Contest

The role and importance of a national citation index cannot be evaluated outside the global scientific information market. The first test for SCIndeks was the recognition and perception of Serbian journals by the major international database providers. After Elsevier's Scopus and Google's Scholar appeared in 2004, Thomson Reuters' indexing policy has also changed radically. The question was whether the CEES efforts to improve the visibility and quality of local journals would result in increased number of titles accepted for indexing in WoS and Scopus. Figure 1 shows the number of journals published in Serbia and three neighbouring countries indexed in WoS and Scopus. All countries have managed to improve their visibility in international databases, but the Serbian progress is only slightly ahead of Bulgarian and far behind Romanian and Croatian. Neither Bulgaria nor Romania has national citation

index or a repository of national journals. On the other hand, Croatian journals are presented in the *Portal of Scientific Journals of Croatia* and the *Croatian Scientific Bibliography*, both funded by the government, but having limited functionality compared to SCIndeks, especially regarding the support for journal editors, evaluators, and science policy institutions. It seems that the mission to promote journals through SCIndeks has failed or at least has not succeeded in lowering a potential bias in inclusion policies of the major database providers.

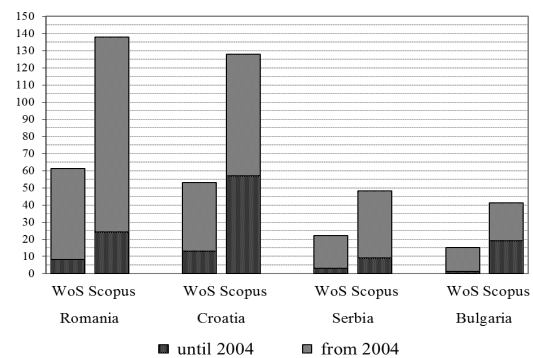


Figure 1. Growth in the number of WoS and Scopus journals published in Serbia and three neighbouring countries.

Another, and perhaps the more important contest, was carried out at the local (political) level. Every assessment brings the risk of conflict of interest. If such an assessment influences the allocation of funds and promotion and tenure decisions, the risk is even higher. Although the government supported CEES financially, it did not fully uphold the practical implementation of CEES reports on the quality of national journals (Šipka, 2014). Journal rankings based on impact measures and SCIndeks data were often altered by the ministerial committees in order to favour the very journals whose editors were members of those committees. In some cases, worst ranked national journals were given the status of international ones. At the level of individuals, it would mean that a candidate for promotion would earn points sufficient for a position of assistant professor by publishing two articles in a bottom-ranked local journal or a journal that was not even accepted for indexing in the national citation index.

The Collapse

In 2014, SMS has ceased to finance both the JBR and SCIndeks. In 2015, the effects of that decision have become visible in the form of significantly reduced SCIndeks coverage. A large amount of data were taken offline and became inaccessible to the users of SCIndeks and other web services, such as Google Scholar. Table 1 shows the amount of this "information market disturbance".

Table 1. SCIndeks data available online before and after the cut of funding.

<i>No. of</i>	<i>Apr. 2008</i>	<i>Apr. 2014</i>	<i>Apr. 2015</i>
journals	357	411	56
abstracts	82.876	151.027	19.900
full texts	23.421	58.068	12.172
references	917.567	2.078.642	335.344

As a response to the CEES' "strategic move", SMS has decided to continue using SCIndeks data for evaluation purposes and to finance JBR after all. However, all journals are now required to pay the indexing fees, including some additional costs for options like the full-text availability, cited reference search and cross-linking within SCIndeks. In short, a communication failure between CEES and SMS anticipates the start of a "natural selection" process for the majority of Serbian academic journals and the collapse of the open science idea in Serbia.

One aspect of this collapse is the fact that tens of thousands of papers written by the authors from Serbia are no longer available online and that additional costs are required for them to reappear. Another equally relevant issue is the profile of journals currently accessible through (what was) the national citation index. All of those journals are willing (or able) to pay the indexing fees, but just a few of them were previously classified as leading national journals. An example of this obvious compromise is the fact that although the diversity of affiliations within journal issues was strongly encouraged by both the national regulations and earlier SCIndeks inclusion guidelines, CEES indexes several journals with the majority of papers written by the authors affiliated with the journal's publishing institution.

The Future

Under the current circumstances, SCIndeks can no longer be considered to be the national citation index. The question is who should be concerned with the fact that it has become a mere commercial product with the special status at SMS. The state is surely a loser in this scenario being unable to claim and protect at least the metadata whose production it financed for several years. As for the Serbian scientific community, its future reactions are maybe not that hard to predict. A certain segment of this community has already expressed their opinion on

this matter through the acts of various interest groups opposing the implementation of evaluation methodology based on SCIndeks data. On the other hand, an increasing number of researchers from Serbia are shifting the focus towards international journals, both when publishing and citing journal articles (Pajić & Jevremov, 2014). The evaluation of national science is hence being either spurned or entrusted to the international publishers and their reviewers. In this context, national citation index is becoming a costly repository whose functionalities will not be missed much by researchers or journal editors. More than 300 Serbian journals are now available online and none of them relies solely on SCIndeks when it comes to the visibility. Although some editors are satisfied with the combination of journal's personal website and free Google Scholar services, the growing number of Serbian journals are also being available through other databases and repositories, such as the *Directory of Open Access Journals*, *ERIH PLUS* or *EBSCO* databases. What was conceived as a joint effort to truly promote Serbian science has turned into an "every man for himself" strategy ten years after.

Conclusion

The basic idea of a national citation index was fully justified in the period of domination of Thomson Reuters' citation indices. But this domination is not nearly as strong as it was before, mainly due to the emergence of Scopus and Scholar. We can consider *SciELO* (now hosted by WoS) as an example of a successfully realized "peripheral" citation index. If this was achieved by covering some 1,200 journals from 12 different countries, then SCIndeks and its 400+ journals tell us how justified is the idea of a national citation index and how ambitious it should be. SCIndeks and its fate is the fate of any self-sufficient and rigid science policy institution, but also the fate of any scientific community that is simply too confined and too small. Too small to neglect the inevitable globalization of science, too small to rely on the integrity of its own members to ensure the quality control, and finally too small to satisfy its own ambitions.

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