

EXPLORING THE PROFESSIONAL FUTURE OF GRADUATES IN POLITICAL SCIENCES

LUCIAN JORA*

Abstract. *The political scientists have a critical role to play in Romania and anywhere else upon condition to provide the quantity and quality of expertise needed to prescribe professional advice, proposals and recommendations requested by the transition society, the kind of advice and expertise that an economist, sociologist, historian or statistician cannot offer. The main issue here is to create and implement true effective university programs capable of providing the graduates with the necessary effective skills to cope with their expected mission.*

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For most researchers Political Science appears as a discipline in search of its identity. Its professionals and graduates are still looking for a more stable and clear professional status. Among the factors expected to facilitate this transition most often are named the reception and integration of the methods of science into the core of the discipline and the capacity to coagulate and coordinate interdisciplinary think tanks of experts. The assertive power and the professional credibility of most political science experts came from the capacity to coordinate with other social sciences, such as statistics, economy, sociology, anthropology, and psychology.

The question on how to prepare professionals in a profession with an uncertain status is being debated among the academics more often in the last years due to the inflation of graduates. Everywhere (not only in Romania) is questionable how to promote the authentic learning, capable to prepare the graduates for the expertise needed by the potential employers. One of the biggest returns in terms of time and money invested in Political Sciences related degrees consists in the professional networks that students will succeed to develop (which will eventually, lead to a relevant job). However few, very few students actually take the time to investigate how graduate school fits into the overall career trajectory and most probably by the time they are 16 or 17 they just do

* PhD, Scientific Researcher, Institute of Political Sciences and International Relations, Romanian Academy, Bucharest, Romania; lucian_jora@yahoo.co.uk.

not have the capacity to do that without a certain mentoring which is not available in high schools.

Political scientists need to “embrace the legitimacy” of the questioning of the public value of their research. A change of perspective is badly needed in the academic field, as going outside the *Ivory tower* for any kind of promotion proceedings or vulgarization can have negative reputational effects within the academic field with basically no reward¹. Within the Romanian Academy evaluation procedures, there are no points or degree of incentives for science popularization activities or for measurable social impact of research activities provided by an individual or by an institute dealing with social sciences and humanities. Related to this there are no surveys or even the concern or awareness for the need of a survey as a way to gather systematic evidence of the costs and benefits of various forms of outreach or just about what the current and potential audience expects from political science as practiced by an academic institution.

Applying to a graduate program in SP in most cases occurs without a clear post-degree objective or with an idealist and naive view. There is a strong contradiction between the idealist view and expectation of the future profession and the real job market within the field of PS. There is no direct connection (although highly emphasised by university prospects) between a degree in political sciences and international relations and a future career in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or a counseling career in presidential or high rank government offices. Most PS faculties in Romania do not offer real practice seminars in different enterprises or the public sector as there can be usually noticed little emphasis on professional qualification suitable for the job market needs. Political science curriculum is flexible, perhaps too flexible as often it does not allow students to specialize in a sub-field. I can notice that most successful former graduates have taken advantage of this flexibility with a continuous effort to explore the field outside the classroom through participation in internships, research, and independent work. Also the same people may tell that the best way to learn about a career and potential opportunities is to talk to people who have been there. Not all professionals are willing to share their experience in a certain restricted area but nowadays with the internet anyone can go far and with the right attitude, even some of the best ranked professionals may be willing to share some ideas and give some advice.

It is essential to go out of the academic and research field and meet local professionals and practitioners within the field of consultancy in order to insure the relevance of the academic curricula in the job market. Some of the academic people are well positioned in both fields (academic and applied politics, international relations or development studies). I meet often successful political sciences graduates who gave up their Government or Foreign Affairs jobs (and career) after few months as soon as they realized that they were just not like what they were doing there. Many future PS students are influenced in their choice for a future career by some extremely successful personages, by films or books or

¹ S.F. Schramm, Caterino, B., eds, *Making Political Science Matter: Debating Knowledge, Research, and Method*, New York and London, New York University Press, 2006.

occasional events and not by a real rational choice based on relevant mentoring. For instance the so called *job shadowing* is a functional way to understand if a certain position is what you want and perhaps the only way to get acquainted with day to day work in a certain field which may prove to be or not to be for you. Usually people are best resources however the so called informational interviews may not give you the honest open minded opinion someone would expect as any professional civil servant in an informal way will provide just informal answers.

Asking the students why they proceed to study Political Sciences is always a tricky question. In US the answer is somehow easier as 8 out of 10 students usually answer they want to make Political Science as their preparatory course before proceeding to Law. Within the EU and the *Bologna Academic System* the problem becomes more complicated. Surprisingly enough, rarely any of my students (from Cluj, Oradea, Bucharest, Shandong, Singapore or Washington) answer that he or she enrolled at Political Science because he or she wants to become a political scientist as such a career path is rather fuzzy out of academia, the ambience of few academic magazines or a parliamentary cabinet as counselors. Even the term “political scientist” or its equivalent in Romanian *politolog* or *analist politic*/political analyst can cover a large spectrum of specialties from sociology to history, philosophy, journalism or just any other field having to deal in a way or another with the political phenomena².

The lack of a clear, well established professional status (perhaps in a lesser extend than other social sciences as graduates in history, literature, philosophy, etc. always have the teaching path). Political Science as a profession ideally would involve the creation of knowledge trough documentation, observation in sum academic research and the real and effective dissemination of the revealed knowledge or in other words, insuring the social impact. Taking into account the composite structure of political sciences the creation of knowledge ideally should be the product of multidisciplinary groups of scholars well harmonized. The step further in both academically results and practicality are expected from interdisciplinary research groups harmonizing academics and practitioners mixing social, behavioral sciences and administrative skills is well recognized and introduced in programming documents. However the challenges of mixing together into functional working groups academics coming from various disciplines and backgrounds as well as academics and practitioners is a tremendous provocation. Often even when interdisciplinary projects have come to an end in reality most academic results are not integrated outcomes but rather compendiums of individual works performed by individual scholars whose vision and expertise is either too general and theoretic either too narrow. The effective techniques to educate students and scholars and practitioners to work effectively in an interdisciplinary approaches are still missing in universities and post-graduate programs.

² Bogdan Voicu, Claudiu Tufiş, Mălina Voicu, *Absolvenți recenți de învățământ superior și integrarea lor pe piața muncii Raport – ANC* (Agenția Națională pentru Calificări) – 2010, pp. 28, accesat on 23.09.2013 docis.acpart.ro/uploads/noi/Studiu_sociologic.pdf

The political scientists have a critical role to play in Romania and anywhere else upon condition to provide the quantity and quality of expertise needed to prescribe professional advice, proposals and recommendations requested by the transition society, the kind of advice and expertise an economist, sociologist, historian or statistician cannot offer. Also we are confronted daily with the temperamental antipathy between theorists and practitioners. Something has to be done to bridge the gap between the *Ivory tower* and comfort zone of academics and the *narrow eyed* but reality grounded practitioners. Often the theoreticians are so focused in explaining the theoretical and conceptual origins of a certain term that the entire discourse became something fuzzy and depictable only among a certain small number of fellow academic initiates. Questions like *why, when, where, and how of things* are fashionable but often not combined or followed by what should be done, how it should be done, what could realistically be done in a certain case. The *publish or perish* dictum should be coupled with practice and action. Theories are academically and intellectually respectable repositories of knowledge as far they do not create a comfort zone and step out to be applied to solve problems. *What is your model* is the first question we have heard often on the last years in relation to social sciences research plans. Prescribed theoretic models require uniformity. Trying to achieve the parameters of a prescribed theoretical model the investigation become often a guillotine selecting and deforming the information to correspond to the shape of the prescribed theoretic model. The result may be attractive as jewel of logic but without a correspondent in a reality too complex to be integrated in matrices. For the more recent times when we have many sources available is even more risky to work with examples. Anyone may ask legitimate questions about how these examples were selected. This procedure may demonstrate almost everything. Even here we may notice a nuance. The procedure is not condemnable if the results are not pretended to be absolute.

Also the professional position of political scientists is challenged by the new communication technologies (which represents both an invaluable asset and a continuous threat). The privileged position in distributing information and knowledge to mass audiences previously in the hand of academics has been substantially reduced. Although some researchers sustain that there is a distinction between knowledge and information, between argued discourse and opinion in my opinion disseminating information require knowledge (real or pretended) and here the academics often are not in the first line (perhaps because of the elitist attitude). Valuable knowledge is plentiful accessible and most university professors had been confronted during a course or a seminar with embarrassing situations in which the students were more up to date than themselves regarding certain evolutions, with information obtained on the spot from their Smartphone. As we may well assist to a passage from an *idolatry of theory* to an *idolatry of facts* the optimum solution would be a continuous negotiation between the two levels of investigation expressed in a dialogue between the border disciplines – a dialog presented in an intelligible form for both civil servants or practitioners and the political scientists. Easy to say, but difficult to proceed as far as we do not have

a culture of working within functional interdisciplinary *think thanks* (as in the case of US) then we are still missing the proper functional institutional mechanisms and reflex attitudes to proceed in this manner.

In the job market most government civil servant positions (in Romania at least) are announced to be suitable for graduates in Economics or Law, not as some may expect Public Administration or Political Sciences. Public administration jobs (at least the entrance positions) involve often a combination between knowledge of applied administrative legislation and applied economics, public acquisitions, etc. A political science degree can contain courses in administrative law and economics applied in administration, but perhaps not enough to qualify the graduates as valid competitors to graduates in economics or administrative law.

Many graduates are disappointed when they applying for research / analyst positions at private companies they are rejected mainly because for those kind of positions that the employers are looking for quantitative expertise, financial acumen, cyber / networking experience, and many other skills graduates in PS are not familiar with. For many people the corporate related function Political Science overlaps would be communications / public affairs, but a graduate in PS usually cannot offer in communication or public affairs a comparative advantage towards a graduate in Marketing, Business or Communication. Political Science is not Electrical Engineering or Nursing to have a clear cut demand and exclusive indispensable application. However even if politics is not a science, it can be studied systematically using applied economics, applied law, professional historical data and sociological data obtained from professional applied statistics. And when it is done well, anyone can learn useful things and skills as they are requested in the real life. Having marketable skills is not necessarily the equivalent of being fairly knowledgeable about international relations theory. However being good at writing and having synthesis capacity is. That is political science needed by the job market, a market in which knowledges of political philosophy and government structure translate into the real world and the tough job market only for exceptionally gifted graduates.

Most political science curricula are still concentrated on the study of various political doctrines and this is not a bad thing unless it accentuates the theoretical structure of curricula against the applied politics and applied skills needed by the job market.

I can also notice a decreased interest among the public on the political theory (the bread of most political scientists). Perhaps nowadays most people in Romania and elsewhere are not very ideological. Social democracy, and liberalism may have been at their origins complex belief systems, each with clear cut principles, values and perspectives. Most voters know particular things about the groups they identify with, about certain political personalities and their attitude, about concrete aspects of their political doctrine (pro-eastern, pro-western, pro-nationalistic and so on) but they don't know about what is Liberal, Christian democrat or Social democrat in their doctrine. The political parties are less and less ideologically distinct.

A future employable expert in political science would ideally have taken some of the courses none of political science faculties in Romania are able to provide:

- Applied statistics and probabilities which would involve at least two semesters of calculus, differentiation, integration, probabilities, matrix linear algebra, three-dimensional calculus, differential equations.

- Probability theory, mathematical microeconomics and econometrics combined with functional computer programming skills for applied econometrics³.

- Research design skills and of course courses on how to find valid sources and how to do a real documentation on a certain subject (utilizing survey research method, comparing / contrasting ideas and information, interpreting issues and data, critical understanding components of complex problems, capacity to offer relevant perspectives, synthesis capacity for various themes from various issues)⁴.

- Planning, development, project cycle management, policy evaluation skills (making projections, organizing people / equipment / ideas, logistical thinking, conceptualizing and implementing projects, decision making) are on high demand but rarely encountered in various political sciences degree offers, perhaps mirroring the general lack of expertise in such applicable domains.

- Other potential employers especially from the advocacy groups or consultancy area insist even further on abilities such as the capacity to gather information and opinions through a variety of means and synthesize the findings into a coherent and persuasive argument, theoretical and practical approaches to political and government functions, the ability to effectively encounter criticism and opposing views, critical thinking and analytical skills necessary to solve administrative, public relations or project management problems.

- The knowledge of English is an elementary request nowadays. A good added value would be fluency in Arabic, Chinese and a rare but relevant language. The knowledge of foreign language must be an added value to the general communication and public communication skills above the average (usually presenting ideas and data clearly, influencing and persuading people / groups, mediating / negotiating conflicts, critically listening).

When it comes to the career path, the US university sites provide some of the most detailed data including a median for the average salary and available jobs every year. On the top of possible jobs is named at one end *giving political commentary on a television show* to *fundraising for your favorite political candidate*. The first case will suite nicely a political scientist but is limited to an extremely few number of available positions (even if we extend the potential job to the entire mass media) while in the second case for fund raising a political science degree may not be the only one and perhaps not the most recommended degree. Other possible career path includes teaching (undergraduate or post-graduate), working as a consultant (even with an uncertain, unaccounted, and

³ Cristina Corduneanu-Huci, Alexander Hamilton, Masses Ferrer, Issel, *Understanding Policy Change: How to Apply Political Economy Concepts in Practice*, Washington DC., The World Bank, 2012.

⁴ James Druckman, Donald Green, James Kuklinski, et al., eds., *Cambridge Handbook of Experimental Political Science*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

uncertified expertise), analyzing and forecasting political behavior (proving he is mastering both statistical data, and the proper analyzing techniques), and supporting government officials in other ways like consultants. While in US according to official reports average salary sounds attractive 87,000 per year (the source does not mention the positions and expertise of the persons upon which this data came out)⁵. In Romania and not only this kind of figure would be more difficult to obtain as political scientists / or political analysts do not appear in the registry of professions. However it can be applied for graduates in political sciences (with BA and M.A degrees) working for relevant positions (government, consultancy, mass media, etc.) who request as compulsory a University degree. While the average salary is attractive the cold shower came next when is revealed the approximate number of jobs available every year, about 1400 (again the report does not specify concretely the type of jobs)⁶. The situation is even more delicate when we consider that very rarely a certain position is specifically nominated as being dedicated exclusively for a graduated in political sciences or for a political scientists (in 90% cases is about social scientists including graduates in history, political economy, international relations, institutional marketing, management or MBA with a certain relevant experience)⁷.

A good degree in political sciences is meant to provide a graduate with a range of academic, research, intellectual and applied skills which are valuable in most government, media NGO or free lance jobs with one major condition. The graduate has to be if not outstanding, good at least above the average in order to be preferred instead of a graduate in economics or legal studies. The diversity of skills largely promoted by some Political Science programs as the main argument to attract students is too often confused with an introductory level to a certain range of domains and after all the lack of any real applicable skill as requested by the job market. It is a rather sad reality depicted in most Central East European transition countries where programs in international relations and political sciences were among the most fashionable offers by the new mushrooming private universities. It sounded good into the ears of teenagers, it requested a minimal infrastructure and it suited almost any kind of qualification in social sciences or humanities for the lecturers.

Among new graduates, the most often encountered relevant positions seem to be: Media Analyst, Cabinet Office, Research Assistant, Indexing assistant, Interpretive Officer, Policy & Legislation Implementation Assistant, Referent, Civil servant (assistant or entry level expert), Coding Clerk⁸. If I would have to suggest a something for recent graduates in the top would be to search for a professional position regardless the low payment instead of a better paid non – professional relevant position (ex-sales assistant) or even a paid volunteering

⁵ *Occupational Handbook Outlook*, United States Department of Labor-Bureau of Labor Statistics. <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/life-physical-and-social-science/political-scientists.htm>, accessed February 2015.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *The Evolution of Political Science*, APSR Centennial Volume of *American Political Science Review*. *Apsanet.org*, 4 February 2009.

position. Most often the difference in terms of money is irrelevant in terms of purchasing power, and every career has to start somewhere.

Another problem quite often encountered at recent graduates taking their first job, including positions within the Foreign Office or European Commission is that they soon realize it is not what they have expected, dreamed about and at the end what they want to do in the future. Also the advices they were given during the University years were not that valuable as most academic staff rarely have been practitioners. Probable the best time to learn about a future career is while some one is in the high school providing a basic ground for the right choice in terms of University and specialization. And probable the best way to learn about a future career in political sciences is to talk to people who are or have been in various relevant professional positions. There are always professionals who are willing to share their experiences with students or recent graduates. Distance is not an issue in the internet era. There are also professional blogs where a student or a recent graduate can ask questions and get valuable answers. It is important to know that most public institutions including the European Commission have on their internet sites published the e-mail address of the civil servants. An internship would be also an invaluable opportunity to get a taste of what means on a day by day basis a certain career and position. However in reality few internships a really what they are meant to be, a *job shadowing* experience.

In many cases the interns are not treated as real employees and are not integrated into the daily routine. Most students are reporting (even at the European Commission or various Government Ministries), their most demanding tasks as interns making photocopies. Also true that many students are not really usable or up to cope with real case professional tasks and are often seen as a burden over the head of an already crowded office. It is important to know also that around 70% suitable positions and jobs (mostly in the private and nonprofit sectors) are not advertised and people are the best resources and they have to be used well. Even in the public sector the reality is that often a job would be advertised as available for competition just as a formality requested by law usually in order to legitimize an already spotted person often a person already working on a contract base. Even on this case participating at an open competition for a job is strongly advisable for at least two reasons. First of all it would provide a certain valuable direct experience into the entrance requests, interview presentation and so one (at no costs), second, there were several cases in which the *outsider candidate* was outstanding better while the *favorite* was outstanding disappointing.

Far more people earn degrees in political sciences and the related degrees than can be employed in those fields so, being competitive is to key to succeed. Certainly a Bachelor Degree in political sciences including additional degrees are no guarantee of employment but also scary statistics who pretend that more than half of graduates under the age of 25 who have a bachelor's degree are either unemployed or underemployed or are even counting the number of parking lot attendants and bartenders with a degree, should be dismissed. From the figure is missing the amount of time a graduate spends in jobs unrelated to its qualification, as usually bartending or parking attendant are not careers but casual temporary jobs.

And it is also the inflation of graduates which count for the apparent lack of practical use for a diploma in Political Sciences. Even if the curricula as such would be adapted and modified with the best courses as identified by the potential employers there is also the balance between the demand and offer which count in any market including the job market. And here the offer is by far exceeding the demand. The field of Political Sciences / International Relations / Journalism has become, in the last decade one of the most popular degree in a country like Romania. The amount of graduates in political sciences / international relations / journalism almost matches the amount of degrees in various teaching degrees. Preparing 10,000 new teachers a year seems plausible, but is questionable if the Romanian job market really need same amount of politologists or journalists.

Any student in political sciences must be told from the first year about the personal attributes, skills and abilities requested for a particular job and the way of certain course help acquiring those skills. Within the field of political sciences it is essential to know what a potential employer need and want and here the diploma is the last think an employer would be looking for. A certain academic interest concerted in erudite scholarly work, excellent marks and academic credits must be well mixed with an interest for the practical utility of theoretical knowledge and debate or how, the results of a certain research or knowledge can be applied to meet the interests and needs of the others.

Also students or potential students must be frankly told by academics in charge with political science degrees what working in politics means. For most people it means at least in the first years of the career working as a clerk or aide unless the graduate have some specialized skill like poling or exceptional analytical or communication skills. Being a political consultant on the open market it most often involves many years of direct experience in political campaigns, advocacy, fundraising, public and private finance, etc. Also political science candidates must be told that there is no type of background that wouldn't translate into an appropriate government job. Engineers can work for European Space Agency, language majors can work for the European Commission translation service, and, graduates in Chemistry can end up as political analysts VIP or in the National Parliament. Political science analysts' jobs are, of course, highly sought-after positions, but typically, you'll work in a lower-level position first before being entrusted to give commentary or advice on the topic. A potential candidate, a student or a recent graduate must keep in mind that you can also find political science jobs in industries that might not at first seem related to political science, as the government and law affects every type of business. A recent SP graduate could get a job working at a hospital as a grant writer, managing an international restaurant chain, consulting for an insurance company, and more. The students must be told and train during the university years how to think outside of the box when looking for a job!

The ability to define a problem and contribute to its solution is highly valued in a variety of employment settings, as are skills in writing, research, and evaluation. Today's graduate can expect to change jobs a number of times / few time, and even to have more than one career, and political science is excellent preparation

for the flexibility required in this modern employment market. Agencies do not expect new employees to enter with skills or knowledge specific to the job at hand. They look for individuals who can learn quickly, work as part of a team, and have basic understanding of the policy process and the operations of the national government. Course work on the executive branch, Congress, and the courts; on the policy process; on the activities of interest groups and political parties; and on the role of the media can be valuable.

Another noticeable aspect in the last two decades is the continuous de-professionalization of certain professions, defined as the loss of a certain occupation of its monopoly over knowledge in a particular field, autonomy and public authorization and credibility. One way in which de-professionalization occurs is through the interference of non professionals or general specialized professionals. For example the de-professionalization of teachers occurs continuously through the adoption of various systems which compromise the student-teacher relationship through various on line, or distance courses, or correspondence courses or on line testing, etc.

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