



The Perch Pod Episode 43 Has COVID Accelerated Border Closures and a Little Bit about Albania with Mary Shiraef

Jacob Shapiro:

You're listening to the Perch Pod from Perch Perspectives. Hello listeners, and welcome to another episode of the Perch Pod. As usual I'm your host, I'm Jacob Shapiro. I'm also the Founder and Chief Strategist of Perch Perspectives, which is a human centric business and political consulting firm. Joining me on the podcast today is Mary Shiraef, she is a graduate student in Comparative Politics and Political Theory at the University of Notre Dame.

Jacob Shapiro:

Her work examines processes of migrant integration and identity politicization. I had reached out to Mary who I don't know, maybe over a year ago to have her on the podcast. And she was just beginning an interesting research project about how border closures were affecting COVID 19, and she's completed some of that data and had some of it published. So she was good enough to come on and share some of the surprising and insightful aspects of that data with us. She also let me pick her brain about some of her doctoral research on what she's doing in Albania and the Greek minority in Albania, which I thought was interesting and hopefully you guys will think is interesting too.

Jacob Shapiro:

Otherwise, hope everybody's taken care, staying healthy. You can check us out at perchperspectives.com for more information on the services we offer. If you want to subscribe to our free newsletter or find out anything more about us. You can also always write to us at info@perchperspectives.com if you have questions, comments, concerns, or you just want somebody to read your thoughts about life, it's what I do. I go through all the emails and I read them, I'm always there. So otherwise take care of cheers and let's get onto Mary. Mary thank you so much for joining the podcast, it's a pleasure having you here.

Mary Shiraef:

It's really great to be here.

Jacob Shapiro:



We've been trying to do this for a while, and I'm glad our schedule is finally linked up to do it. And we're going to start by talking about some research that you recently or got published in nature, which congratulations on that, it's extremely impressive. And to me, the takeaway from your research was really interesting and really thought revoking. It was this idea that you guys have and I'll let you well... How about let... Before I say anything, explain just kind of what you have been researching and when this project started.

Mary Shiraef:

Yes. So before when you reached out, I was just launching this project. So I was flattered because it's always great when somebody else is interested in your work. But I didn't know anything, so that was why I was launching a project, I was pretty overwhelmed by the pandemic and especially by the number of border closures that were popping up all around the world. So I decided to start counting them and I wanted to visualize them in a map first, just kind of see what's going on over time. And then I realized this data doesn't exist. No person is collecting this information systematically, so I might have to do that. And that's when I reached out to my colleagues and my former students and asked if they would be willing to help me start doing this systematically.

Mary Shiraef:

And I got 20 responses in a couple of days, of people just willing to volunteer their time for this social good project. So yeah, we have been working on it for a year now, more than a year. And we just got published in the Nature portfolio under Scientific Data, which is great. This publication venue we sought because it publishes data sets that are supposed to be important for research that's happening right now and for future pandemic research. So yeah we were not published in Nature, I love that we get that stamp, but we were published in Scientific Data, which is under the Nature portfolio. And did I answer your question?

Jacob Shapiro:

You did, and I mean it's all nature to me, so that's fine.

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah. No I love it and yeah.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah, I think you should just take it and run with it. But am I correct in saying that were you guys tracking borders inside countries at all? Or was it primarily just looking at borders between states?

Mary Shiraef:

We focused on international border closures. So there are not any projects to my knowledge that cover county level, internal closures that have filled that data set. I think there's been some projects that started, but that just would take more time than we had.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah, and probably would break the internet with the amount of data you'd have to collect. And so tell me what the key takeaway was or what the most surprising takeaway was from the data that you guys have been gathering.

Mary Shiraef:

Sure. So the key takeaway that I'm interested in right now is that several, I say several like more than 200 of these border closures are still in place. And initially I kind of expected that they would be reversed and many of them were, but we still see new border closures in the past couple of months. And I'm watching the ones that haven't had an end date recorded and trying to see what's going on there. And I think I mentioned this to you. Before we ran analysis on the border closures with SARS-CoV-2 spread as our outcome variable and tried to see if these foreclosures were actually leading to a reduction and spread, which is the idea.

Mary Shiraef:

And we set it up in such a way that we can compare countries that have similar underlying factors, healthcare capacities that sort of thing. And we looked at it every which way, and just have not found border closures to correspond with a reduction in SARS-CoV-2 spread. So we use some other projects data for other types of policies like lockdowns. And for lockdowns we did find a pretty clear correlation and the data between lockdowns being introduced two weeks later, three weeks later, a pretty clear sharp reduction in recorded spread. So that's what we're working on now, and that's what's under peer review at the moment, so I can't claim it with any certainty until we hear back. But it seems like we have a pretty strong case that the border closures themselves didn't lead to a reduction in spread, but lockdowns did have some sort of effect.

Jacob Shapiro:

It's a pretty remarkable conclusion, and I feel like it kind of goes against... Well I hate the phrase common sense because it's not common and it doesn't actually mean anything. But when you look at countries like say New Zealand, which had both a pretty strong lockdown policy domestically, and then closed its borders pretty tightly or even a place like Vietnam although we can talk about how Delta complicates all the data that you've been gathering maybe a little bit later on. But help me figure out how that sort of anecdotal or more qualitative data like a story about New Zealand. How does that fit in to what the types of data that you're gathering? Because it seems to me that in some cases stopping international travel would theoretically keep COVID 19 out and your data is saying no that's actually a faulty assumption.

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah. So I mean I agree from a high level if you actually could close all of the borders at the same time and reduce human movement across them for a virus that travels from human and human, that would have an impact. So what we did is we kind of organized our data in such a way that we have complete closures. We have partial closures, and we also have under the category of partial closures bans that



were introduced specifically targeting country that had really high levels of COVID spread. And we also have other types of policies, which completely are counterintuitive like banning countries based on their citizen, banning incoming travelers based on their citizenship status instead of their travel history sort of thing.

Mary Shiraef:

So we actually looked at it by subtype to see if maybe complete closures worked, maybe the targeted bans worked at countries that had a reduced COVID spread. And we just couldn't find that correlation to bear out, so it's not that we thought it was impossible for these policies to work. I think the most likely outcome I expected would actually reduce COVID spread was all the island countries closing their borders. However, even with island countries we don't really see that at the aggregate level, the bans corresponded with SARS-CoV-2 spread.

Mary Shiraef:

So I think the timeline matters, we haven't really broken it down as systematically as I would like to by island countries that introduced it early, early, early in the timeline and those that did not. Maybe those ones did, but at the aggregate level, I think the takeaway away is that a border closure on its own is not enough. So I am not totally familiar just from the news New Zealand's approach, but I believe that they not only close their borders, but also have lockdowns and all sorts of other targeted measures. So something of that nature is the next kind of research question that people can post to our data set.

Jacob Shapiro:

Is another potential assumption or conclusion based on your data that sort of official border closures are don't work as well as maybe countries think they do, that maybe the world is even more globalized than we were thinking about it before, and that we should think about borders as just more porous in general, because the closures weren't actually stopping flows of humans or...

Mary Shiraef:

Yes. I think that's a very good point. And you can also break this question down in our data set because complete closures sounds like the border closed overnight but in reality there always has to be some sort of exception. So every single country that introduced complete border closure had some sort of exception for trade, some sort of exception for essential workers, humanitarian aid had to get through. So there was always some sort of essentials level exception, there was also countries that were accepted. So we allow in our data set up to 10 countries to go through for complete closures, because this is just how the boarder closures were operating in practice. And then other exceptions, there were also exceptions for workers coming through all these sort of things on the ground level were, I think harder to implement than we think.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah, for sure. I mean the entire pandemic has been an implementation nightmare in some ways. I know you said that you guys still have work to do in terms of sort of time lapsing the data and thinking



about it in terms of timeline. But I was wondering if the emergence of Delta or if different variants in general changed things appreciably in what you were gathering and what you were observing and whether there are any even preliminary observations or conclusions you can make about sort OG COVID and Delta COVID, which seems to be a very different animal.

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah, no. So we definitely saw a drop in border closures before Delta was known and I guess it became prominent around July, and after that we did see countries responding, introducing border closures again and also rolling back kind of just requiring the vaccine to enter the country. So there was a pretty large response to that, and it's also been delayed for some countries just colloquially I haven't looked at it that specifically lately. But I believe countries that had really low testing capacities and low healthcare capacities are just now kind of responding to Delta.

Mary Shiraef:

So that impacts me specifically because my research is based in Albania and I'm planning to return. And when I was first visiting Albania in July, it was like there was no pandemic at all, people didn't wear masks, it was very straightforward to pass through the border. And now I understand that when I go through, I'll need to show my vaccine card and I believe the country also just rolled back in personal classes for universities. So it very much feels like 2020 all over again in these parts of the world.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. And in some ways, here in New Orleans, we were very early on in the Delta wave and it's starting to go down it is so contagious that it seems to burn through the population pretty quick, but while it does it's kind of a big deal. But did the international border closures, I guess it didn't affect COVID 19 whether it was Delta or not. I mean the basic point of your research at the end of the day is that doesn't matter about the contagiousness of the variant doesn't really matter, all that doesn't matter. What really matters is that the international border closures by themselves were not really successful in lowering COVID 19 cases. Is that a fair way to sum it up?

Mary Shiraef:

Yes. I mean that's my takeaway from the data if we're asking at a country level, then certainly countries were concerned with the Delta variant and the amount of breakthrough cases with vaccinated populations. So I think that explains some of the new border closures being reintroduced. But yeah, so far I infer from the data that it's not the most effective response once the virus has already entered your country it doesn't seem to make a difference to introduce a new kind of blanket complete closure against incoming travel.

Mary Shiraef:

I think reductions make sense, but yeah, I'm kind of holding off on making large sweeping claims because I haven't compared introducing border closures with other policy combinations. And I don't know if a combination is the right answer or if just a lockdown for the next pandemic, which hopefully is



in 100 years, maybe just lockdowns would be more effective than dealing with international travel at all. So one thing that's interesting to me is that the World Health Organization advised against these international border closures. Number one, I'm saying that they probably don't work more than introducing screenings at the border would, but also because of the immense impact on trade. And despite that advice, nearly every country in the entire world introduced a border closure around March, 2020. And since then there's been 1600 border closures. So one kind of interesting takeaway is that nobody listened to the World Health Organization at all on that.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Although, that's complicated, right? Because the World Health Organization's initial takes on COVID 19 were pretty wrong when you look at them and they were pretty wrong because they were trusting that the Chinese were being honest about the data that was coming out. Now I'm not one of these crazies who thinks that the Chinese manufactured COVID 19 in a lab, but when you do go back to sort of late December, early January, 2020, when Chinese social media is starting to pick up on, hey something weird is going on here, and China's giving some indications that there is some kind of disease in there, but they're telling the WHO ah it's not that big of a deal. Like we really think we have this under control and we're going to be able to handle it. We're not that worried about it.

Jacob Shapiro:

I think in some ways that poison the world with the WHO because as people saw what was beginning to happen, and I think there was a lack of trust. And I mean you know this better than anybody, probably once fear kicks in a population, governments are really... It's hard for them to do much, especially if you're in a democracy because people are afraid and you have to react to that fear and rationality and things like that don't really apply when it gets to that case. So I think some of that has to affect what the WHO is going to do forward. And I'm not saying that to rag and the WHO by the way. If anything, it shows us the need to kind of build up the WHO and make it even stronger so that it has the right data collection tools and has the right perspective to do things. But I wonder if that had an effect on it.

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah, no I think that I agree with that trust was eroded in the World Health Organization at the early stage of the pandemic for a variety of reasons, some of which I agree with in some of which I don't. But I just thought it was interesting that they were super clear about international border closures, not being something that countries should do. And that to me was watching the number of border closures roll out across the world was the clearest indication that nobody listening to this organization anymore.

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Yeah. Well what can you do? Like you said, I hope there's not another pandemic for another hundred years, but that's probably not the case. Before we sort of dive into Albania let me pick your mind about other things. Is there anything about the data itself that I haven't asked you that you want to be sure to talk about or you want listeners to know about?



Mary Shiraef:

Sure. So I think that the category visa bans is something to watch. So I've taken the approach of gathering the data first and also looking at the health impacts of the policies. But what's next on my agenda as a of political scientists is to ask whether some of these policies were introduced for political reasons. And I think the category of visa bans will be telling in that regard. So especially policies that don't relate to countries that have high amount of COVID spread, but are really targeted against specific countries populations, and don't have end dates. I would invite listeners and researchers to take a look at that category and help me try to explain why those policies are still in place.

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, hopefully we'll be able to get you some help with that. Moving on, tell us a little bit about what are you up to in Albania of all places?

Mary Shiraef:

Okay. So my PhD started three years before the pandemic came to the world, and I was interested in the formation of the Greek minority identity in Albania. I was interested in the Greek minority diaspora around the world, but I became interested in it in Southern Albania because of this really fascinating policy where the dictator essentially allowed some groups to keep their identity and others, he removed all their rights. Whether closing their schools, taking down road signs and punishing people for saying that they're Greek.

Mary Shiraef:

And that policy was rolled out in 1945. And it was kept in place for the duration of the dictatorship, which Hoxha died in 1985. And the regime collapsed around 1991. So I'm measuring essentially the impact of this policy across generations. And the marker that I'm using is what people name their first child, which is pretty much the only mark of control that families had under the dictator for expressing their identity. And the other thing that I've learned recently by going to cemeteries in this region is that people also will add crosses at their family's grave or a water bottle to mark the Muslim identity. So I'm essentially capturing the outcome of this policy by taking pictures of graves.

Jacob Shapiro:

It sounds like an interesting thing to be doing to be [inaudible 00:21:47] seen around Albania taking pictures of graveyards. Do you ever run into any trouble with people asking you what on earth you're doing?

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah, So there's an interesting sort of person that hangs around cemetery and it's always kind of weird. But I usually am with a local guide who will explain to the person that I'm a researcher and I'm using the data properly. And it's usually fine, obviously out of respect I won't take pictures of graves if somebody's

there mourning but there's a lot of villagers and not a lot of people around. So it's pretty straightforward.

Jacob Shapiro:

What if any anything, so I mean you talked a little bit about the dictatorship and Albania and the regime collapse. Do you have any thoughts about the current Albanian government? I mean Edi Rama is... I would call him a controversial figure. He generates a fair amount of opinion I think when you bring him up. Do you have any feelings about him or about Albania's attempt to get into European Union or anything like that?

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah, so I'm interested most I guess in Albania's entry to the European Union and I haven't written or designed my contemporary chapter yet. So that's not on my agenda at the moment, but there will be a contemporary chapter. It's just, yeah, not well rounded at all yet.

Jacob Shapiro:

Well, that's okay this is a place for non well-rounded thoughts and ideas to come out in some ways, but yeah, no we won't push you on that.

Mary Shiraef:

No it's all right. So I think the contemporary component will be less about the current government and more about the population, and so my kind of hypothesis for my research for my dissertation is that the Hoxha era policy and the dictators policy toward the Greek minority and toward minorities in general in Albania will forge a not only ethnic identity that we can measure, but also shape political attitudes.

Mary Shiraef:

So after I collect this cemetery data, I'm going to register a pre-analysis plan that kind of states my exact hypotheses, and then I'm going to roll out a survey, hopefully in person, but we'll see. And the survey will actually measure political attitudes left and right, and see if my hypothesis is right, that the groups that did not receive the designation to maintain their identities become more likely to be right wing. And those who receive this communist designation, that you can keep your minority as long as you become communist. I think that actually those groups of people will transmit more leftist attitudes. But yeah, we'll see. The data will bear out.

Jacob Shapiro:

That's interesting, and you sort of already alluded to religion and that interesting thing about the crosses versus the water bottles and things like that. Has there... I guess you're also going to be looking at whether there's a distinct change in that assume that the communists had a... Took a rather dim view of religion, which is interesting in a country like Albania, which it's majority Muslim, isn't it?

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah. So historically majority Muslim with a pretty strong contingent of Christians, as well as some Catholics. And yeah it's an understatement that the Albanian Hoxha era regime took a very strong. They actually banned religion in 1966, I think it's one of the only countries to actually ban religion. And so that marks the second portion of Hoxhas regime, which became much more harsh and still implemented the same policy toward the minority, you could still be Greek but you could no longer express orthodoxy.

Mary Shiraef:

So yeah, I think there's not a lot of information on this, there has been surveys that are great in Albania but the census for instance in 2011 was highly contested because Greeks weren't really allowed unless they were inside the minority zone to register themselves as ethnic Greeks. And there was a fine if you said you were Greek outside of the zone. And the general information that I've seen either marks a resurgence in religion in Albania, which corresponds to other post communist states or it says Albania is a very atheist state.

Mary Shiraef:

Because of their experience with this regime, which did mark out differences or erode differences in religion and just give people a really atheistic perspective. However, I don't know if that's the case, that's kind of what I'm asking is how long it's possible for an identity to be transmitted only at the family level, under conditions of a dictatorship and the water bottle thing is new to me because I don't have a Muslim background and I'm not sure if that's something that Muslims do around the world or if that's just something that happened in Albania, because it's so understated as a way to express your identity.

Jacob Shapiro:

Do you... I assume it's pretty hard to get a sense of how large the Greek minority in Albania was. Is that correct?

Mary Shiraef:

Yes. So that's also a small contribution of my dissertation. I don't know that there's been a count of the Greek minority since maybe 1913, when the Greek state did it. What I am doing to try to get a realistic count is I've accessed the 1930 registry, and it doesn't tell me whether people are Greek or Albanian, but I can tell by the names because Albanian names have a different etiological background than Greek names do. So I'm having an RA who's Albanian kind of tell me which ones are Albanian, and I'm going through and saying from my Greek background, which ones are Greek and also taking from the classics Greek, you can see all these ancient Greek names pretty distinguishable. And there are of course overlaps and lots of families were intermarried at the time. And lots of names were used in both Albanian and Greek. So, sorry I'm losing my train of thought. Remind me of your question.

Jacob Shapiro:

No, I'm on the train with you. I was asking whether there's good data on the size of the Greek minority Albania.

Mary Shiraef:

Sorry, I'm telling you what I'm doing. So in 1930, I'm gathering the breakdown of what I think will be the best possible measure for the Greek minority as well as intermarried families and Albanian Muslim families. And then 1945, there's a census that Hoxha took and that's in the archives, which I'm going to access in a week. And I'm not sure that it's going to be as helpful as the 1930 census, but if it has first names in there, that'll be really helpful. And then the actual 1945 to 1985 is a black box, there's a lot of missing persons and it's just really hard to measure. So that's where my cemetery idea comes in. I think it's one of the best measures what somebody names their kid during a period that there's not a lot of other information. So that's where the cemetery data comes into track over time. How names were impacted by the policy.

Jacob Shapiro:

Since the situation was so about Albania. Is there another... I mean were the Greek minority leaving? Were they going back to Greece? Were they blocked from doing that? Was there a stigma inside Greece against Greeks coming from Albania? Is that of any help to you at all there as well? Or does that not really help give a clear picture of what's going on?

Mary Shiraef:

Yeah. So you mean migration as a measure.

Jacob Shapiro:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Mary Shiraef:

And what do you mean during the dictatorship?

Jacob Shapiro:

Yeah. Well I was thinking in your black box period. But in general, I mean if things were so bad in Albania, I would think that the Greek minority would want to get out of dodge.

Mary Shiraef:

Yes.

Jacob Shapiro:

And that they would be welcome in Greece, but maybe that's not a... Maybe I'm missing something.

Mary Shiraef:



No you're right. That it's a good measure, but so we do have pretty good data on that. Part of my design actually rests on what Hoxha did at the border between Albania and Greece, which is, he is the first one to enforce it. And so I'm comparing not only people who experienced the policy in Albania, but I'm also capturing this data across the border in Greece, because before you could just freely move back and forth, and many people did, but overnight he essentially... Anybody who lived in Kosovo, anybody who lived in Greece could no longer enter Albania, and of course people escaped but we have a record of that, most of that is available in a report.

Mary Shiraef:

And yeah, it's very interesting, I mean what it helped me do is establish my case for the design, because if you speak to people in Albania about the Greek minority policy, they would say we were repressed. We weren't actually able to access it as our human rights were oppressed. But a part of my design rest on the fact that they did actually receive rights, whereas people outside the minority zone did not. And you have these defect during the Hoxha period coming out and saying I'm in the Greek minority, and yeah our rights were actually recognized. And also we wanted to leave because it was a horrible regime. So those sort of testimonies do exist, but they're very few and far between.

Jacob Shapiro:

Fascinating. All right, cool. Well, Mary thank you so much for coming on the podcast and enlightening us and hope your research continues go well. We'll have to have you back on soon.

Jacob Shapiro:

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Jacob Shapiro:

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