

Improving the Comparability of International Migration Statistics

The Case of South-East Europe

DOI 10.17234/9789531756525.1

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Despite growing attempts to standardise and harmonise migration-related data collection in recent decades, fully comparable migration data across countries are still scarce. The differences in the concepts used in national statistics on migration are related to the history of specific countries and their historical migration patterns that shape migration policies, as well as to the availability and collection of migration-related data. Drawing on results of the international project “Managing Migration and Its Effects in South-East Europe – Transnational Actions Towards Evidence Based Strategies” (SEEMIG), this essay discusses these issues at the level of South-East Europe (SEE).

Keywords: migration, statistics, migration data, comparability, South-East Europe

Introduction

It seems that the statement “We are all migrants, the question is only how many generations back our migrant ancestry goes” describes well the dynamic of migration through historical narratives of both “traditional” and “modern” societies. International migrations in contemporary societies are embedded into the context of a globalised society, and the effects of globalisation can be seen as changes in the structure, dynamics and scope of migration movements (Castels and Miller 2009; Goldin, Cameron and Balajaran 2012; King 2010). Migration trends are also

a key point of reference for researchers, stakeholders and different publics that not only provide them with basic insight into the state of affairs in the area of migration at a given moment, but also, at least to a certain extent, enable them to forecast the future dynamic of possible changes in these trends.

It is at this point that the question of data as the foundation for observation of migration trends, as well as their future developments, becomes of fundamental importance. Although not all migration trends can be subsumed under the term of migration statistics – it would be difficult, if not impossible, to statistically capture the trend of politicization of migration – such statistics are indispensable in analysing, for example, the trends of feminisation and diversification of migration, and thus represent a fundamental element of more coherent migration theories.

The current tradition of researching comparative statistics in the field of migration is framed both in academic research,¹ combining either a theoretical or a mixed theoretical-empirical approach, as well as through more applied-oriented analyses of expert institutions at the international level. Among the most visible agencies that provide a rich pool of secondary data about international migration are Eurostat – the Statistical Office of the European Commission, the most comprehensive source of data on international migration in the EU member states; continuous SOPEMI (French acronym for the Continuous Reporting System on Migration) reports on recent trends in international migration by the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development); Council of Europe data on demographic trends, data on asylum by the European Commission's Directorate General for Justice, Freedom and Security, and the data collected by the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration as two central actors of global migration management.

Therefore, a discussion on the comparability and the necessity of providing comprehensive migration statistics is in line with the academic ambition of improving and better understanding migratory movements through statistical realities, as well as through migration policies, aiming at recording and controlling people's movements of different types across international boundaries.

Acknowledging the necessity of obtaining more comparative data on movements of people across the borders of nation-states, this essay reflects upon selected dimensions of international migration statistics. Bearing in mind that an individual migrant cannot be reduced merely to a "statistical element" in different national and transnational contexts, such as in the processes of crossing national borders and/or entering databases of national employment services, the authors hold that reliable statistical data represent the key to creating migration-related policies and measures. Moreover, policies based on systematic monitoring, observation and evaluation of

¹ See for example: Kupiszewska and Nowok 2005; Raymer and Willekens 2008.

migration trends can be seen as an effort against populist manipulations of fictitious or non-existent data and moral panics and dystopias that are grounded in a notorious belief that “a high number of migrants is threatening ‘us’”.

For this reason, recent developments in establishing common statistical recording systems of migration are discussed in this text, particularly the issue of comparability of data in various European contexts, not only in the EU, but also on the territory of South-East Europe, which has been largely overlooked in previous research endeavours. Drawing on the results of the project SEEMIG,² the text addresses the cross-national synthesis of migration-related data based on eight country reports from Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia.³ We presume that the differences in the comparability of migration-related data occur not only due to differing systems of recording migration, but also as a result of historical practices that are evident in different categories of migrants. We demonstrate that the comparability of statistical data is an ambition that, though not yet achieved, is firmly grounded in the efforts of researchers that not only summarise such data but also critically reflect upon them.

To keep records on migration: theory, trends, empirical evidence

It seems that a coherent social theory on international migration is missed by those researchers who insist on “capability of prediction” of population movements as an inevitable element of doing science itself. According to Weiner and Teitelbaum (2001: 85), these experts believe that most disciplines of social science (e.g. economics, geography, sociology, demography) seek to explain the causes of observed patterns of international migration, but their theoretical perspectives still cannot predict, for instance, the movements of refugees, nor can they forecast social implications of simultaneously evidenced low rates of fertility and high rates of immigration in a given society (Teitelbaum 2005: 210).

Various actors of “demographic engineering” also take interest in such predictions, particularly the population politics policy makers. The size of a population, its age structure, distribution and growth levels are only some of the “strategic fields”

² SEEMIG – “Managing Migration and Its Effects in South-East Europe – Transnational Actions Towards Evidence Based Strategies” was a project funded by the European Union’s South-East Europe Programme. The project aimed to better understand and address longer term migratory, human capital and demographic processes of South-East Europe, as well as their effects on labour markets, national and regional economies (project code: SEEMIG – SEE/C/0006/4.1/X; duration 2012–2014; <http://www.seemig.eu/>).

³ Although we are aware of the importance of the symbolic boundaries and the socio-political connotations behind the term South-East Europe, for the purpose of this text, we perceive this territory in terms of the South-East Europe programme area defined at the EU level that encompasses all of the eight above mentioned countries as well (view also footnote no. 2).

which are controlled and managed by national governments since “[t]here are two and only two avenues for entry into membership in a population that constitutes a nation: through immigration or through birth” (Demeny 2005: 331).

In the last three decades, particularly in the European context, migration is increasingly being discussed in the view of social repercussions of low fertility and population ageing, which are among the main demographic trends that are altering the population composition in most “developed” countries.⁴ Furthermore, already in 2005, the European Commission tried to establish the EU national governments’ attitudes towards such demographic trends with an open questionnaire in the *Green Paper*.⁵ Some questions addressed the immigration scenario as a potential response to negative social consequences of low fertility; however, it was stressed that such a scenario would not be an easy solution. Numerous questions would still remain open, as for instance: to what extent could immigration mitigate certain negative effects of demographic ageing; what policies should be developed for better integrating these migrants, in particular young people; and finally, how could Community instruments, the structural funds and the employment strategy, contribute (Green Paper 2005: 6). In the last decade, the European institutions have afforded significant attention to the economic and social repercussions of such demographic trends. As firmly stated in the European Commission’s report on population ageing in Europe: “Population and labour force ageing in particular, accompanied by a shrinking of the work force, raise concerns about future economic growth”

⁴ The demographic perspective constitutes one of prominent perspectives in analysing contemporary migration movements, however at least two other perspectives should be briefly mentioned, as they have common overlapping effects. The first perspective is based on establishing economic criteria for migration inflow, whereas such an economic justification in reality produces classifications of migrants into less wanted (or legitimate) or conditionally slightly more wanted if they fit the requirements – or better – shortcomings of the labour market. In particular cases, migrants can be accepted as “welcome” when representing “brain gain” for the receiving society. Economic prospects and benefits as well as risks that could arise from migration have been increasingly discussed in the academia and expert institutions since World War Two, but particularly since the economic crisis in 2008, when migrants became increasingly defined in public and policy discourses as an economic “threat” to contemporary nation-states. The second perspective is built around the critics of those researchers that link migration with the question of security and even terrorism, with a fundamental focus on establishing hard, well-protected external borders of nation-states. Modern nation-states of the “liberal” West have fenced themselves with walls, be they physical, electronic or bureaucratic and Europe as a union has erected electronic “e-borders” (Zavratnik Zimic 2001) nearly two decades ago. The analysis of hard impermeable borders at the external edge of the European community is therefore in line with the development of sophisticated information technologies that made border management and consequently control over mobility of the population mainly a matter of surveillance cameras, biometrics and databases regulating entry and of determining who is “legal” and who is “illegal” (Andreas and Snyder 2000; Pajnik and Zavratnik Zimic 2003).

⁵ The full original title reads: *Green Paper. Confronting Demographic Change. A New Solidarity Between the Generations*.

(European Commission 2014). In a similar vein, the recent report produced within the auspices of the European Union Committee of the Regions (2016) lists population ageing as the core long-term structural demographic change in Europe.

The European Union, as the unit of observation of migration movements, has motivated both the academic and administrative efforts for systematic and comparative investigation and monitoring the issue. Therefore, it is not surprising that the European Commission has supported recent research projects on the harmonisation of databases on migration trends in the EU and beyond, aimed at creating suitable measures for the integration migrants into societies on the basis of more accessible, reliable and comparative evidence. The 2007 European Parliament Regulation on Community Statistics on Migration and International Protection (Regulation 2007) does provide clear definitions of immigration and emigration and also lists the migration indicators that must be transferred to Eurostat. The new regulation preserved the concept of usual residence and the duration limit of one year included in the UN recommendations adopted in 1998, which defined an international migrant as a person who changed the country of their usual residence, while distinguishing between long-terms and short-term migrants on the basis of duration of their stay (UN 1998). However, because of diversification of migration types and increasing complexity of migration at both the regional and international level in recent decades, the regulation's definition of an international migrant has remained vague.

The first actions for collecting internationally comparative data on migration were tackled by researchers of a pilot project entitled "Comparing National Data Sources in the Field of Migration and Integration" (COMPSTAT) in the 5th Framework Programme between 2001 and 2002. In order to establish a meta-database of statistical datasets available as individual data on the social and economic integration of migrants and their descendants in ten European countries,⁶ the project partners reviewed various kinds of micro-datasets and statistics produced regularly by public authorities (ICMPD 2017). The project showed the uneven distribution of topics on migration in the examined datasets and, as a result, the huge incomparability of data among the selected countries (Kraler and Reichel 2010: 9).

In 2004, the 6th Framework project entitled "Towards Harmonised European Statistics on International Migration" (THESIM) was funded as a response to the EU Regulation on Community Statistics on Migration and International Protection. The project focused on five types of data (migration flows, population stocks, asylum statistics, statistics on residence permits and statistics on citizenship

⁶ The project covered eight European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland), as well as two European countries that were EU candidates at the time – the Czech Republic and Poland.

acquisition) in 25 EU member states. Similarly, as in the previous pilot project, the results showed substantial differences of certain types of administrative datasets and differences in the definitions of immigrants in the selected countries (Kraler and Reichel 2010: 9).

The subsequent project under the same framework programme entitled “Promoting Comparative Quantitative Research on Migration and Integration in Europe” (PROMINSTAT) represented an effort towards a more reliable and comparative quantitative study of European migration. Between 2007 and 2009, the project partners compiled meta-information on statistical datasets on migration, integration and discrimination, this time in 29 European countries (EU27 plus Norway and Switzerland). The project results, based on national reports and a series of comparative studies on particular topics of national data collection systems, enabled in-depth analyses of the scope, quality and comparability of statistical data collection on migration in the selected countries (PROMINSTAT 2017). Reviewing concepts, categories, topics areas and variables of various datasets (registers, censuses, surveys, etc.) at the local and national level in the selected countries, the project team identified both the repertoire of existing comparable information on migrants, their integration and discrimination, and gaps that prevented the comparison of datasets within the respective country and among the countries. For example, emigration from a given country proved to be improperly recorded because it was a common practice among emigrants not to report their residence on time, or as immigrants they reported it with a delay. As a result, data on immigrants and emigrants were either under-estimated or over-estimated. Moreover, most datasets had limited information on migration background or migration history. Information on citizenship at birth or the exact length of residence in the country before the person in question emigrated from it were rarely included in official national statistics, except for the place of birth. Such data are necessary for both the analysis of integration processes and of the reasons or motives for migration (Kraler and Reichel 2010: 70).

Finally, providing reliable and comparable data on migratory, labour market and demographic processes in South-East Europe was the main concern of the target-oriented project “Managing Migration and Its Effects in South-East Europe – Transnational Actions Towards Evidence Based Strategies” (SEEMIG) from 2012 to 2014. In addition, to better understand long-term migratory processes related to demographic dynamics and their effects on labour markets, national and regional economies, the project sought to empower public administrations to develop and implement policies and strategies by using enhanced datasets and empirical evidence (SEEMIG 2017). Compared to previous projects, the SEEMIG project focused on South-East Europe for “historical” reasons. Countries of the SEE region were, in the 19th and the early 20th century, integrated into global colonial capital-

ism in a similar manner (Melegh 2012: 420), which was necessary background information in defining types and timing of migratory movements in the area. However, analysing net migration developments in the observed time period from 1950 to 2010, the SEE region proved to be a very heterogeneous one in which four types of migratory patterns were identified. Some countries of the region that were emigrant in the 1950s and the 1960 gradually became immigrant countries (type 1), some remained emigrant (type 2) or became emigrant countries throughout the observed time period (type 3), while the fourth type included countries that oscillated between emigrant and immigrant status (Melegh 2012: 425).⁷

These types of migratory patterns were further analysed by changes in the economic and employment structure in each country, mostly in terms of the changing shares of agriculture, industry and service sector in the GDP within the time period observed, and additionally, in comparison with the world average income, all for the purpose of placing the country in question into a global hierarchy, as well. These migratory types were also reflected from the view of radical political transformations in the last 60 years (e.g. guest worker programmes initiated by Germany and Austria in the 1950s and the 1960s, or the collapse of socialist regimes all over Europe in the 1990s) to bring a socio-temporal perspective into the explanatory model of migratory developments in the region, so often limited or neglected by macro statistical analysis of migration. Yet combining the long-term macro statistics (net migration, per capita GDP) with proxy variables of economic and political changes in each country observed to improve explanation of migratory developments in a temporal perspective did require reliable and harmonised data on the issues (Melegh 2012).

Comparability of migration statistics: selected examples from European countries

Bearing in mind that migration movements were not confined to the areas within a single country, but rather formed networks at the regional level (South-East Europe), the SEEMIG project sought to provide available comparable data on migration movements as the basis for national and trans-national developmental strategies. The project, unlike previous European projects on migration statistics that addressed mainly EU member states and/or Western European countries, focused on the area of South-East Europe, where countries started to face increas-

⁷ Type 1 group includes Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Greece; type 2 is comprised of some Balkan countries such as Bulgaria, Romania, Albania, and FYR Macedonia; type 3 relates to the countries that were once the South-West edge of the former Soviet Union (e.g. Ukraine, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia); and type 4 covers Croatia and Serbia.

ing challenges related to migration statistics especially in the late 1980s and 1990s (Gárdos and Gödri 2014).

This part of the essay addresses the cross-national synthesis of data based on eight country reports from Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia, which are elaborated in a comparative report entitled: *Analysis of Existing Migratory Data Production Systems and Major Data Sources in Eight South-East European Countries* (Gárdos and Gödri 2014). The aim is not to provide a comprehensive overview of main data sources on migration, but rather to identify those features of data that hamper their comparability. In this regard, a general overview of the socio-political context in selected countries that might influence the way in which data on migration are collected is taken into account, partly drawing on secondary data sources (e.g. research articles, reports).

Considering the use of administrative data, such as the population register, the register of foreigners, the register of asylum seekers and the social security database, the report finds that the usability and comparability of such data is most effective if data sources are linked. This linkage is generally easier established in countries where the PIN (Personal Identification Number) is used in administrative records and where the official connection between the statistical offices and other data owners is legally regulated and coordinated (Gárdos and Gödri 2014). However, the populations included in population registers are not always the same as those that are included in the statistical definitions of who constitutes a migrant. For instance, in Romania, “immigrants are defined as foreign citizens, who come to Romania with the agreement of Romanian authorities to settle in the country. Emigrants are defined as Romanian citizens who choose their residence abroad in agreement with Romanian authorities. Consequently, the target populations of registers cannot cover the migrants as defined in statistical requirements as there is no information on immigrant Romanian citizens and out-migrant foreign citizens” (ibid.: 14).⁸

Depending on legislation, coverage of the foreign population is slightly different. For example, in Hungary, unlike in most countries where the population register covers all people resident in a country for more than three months, only foreigners considered as permanent residents are included in the population register (ibid.:

⁸ In a related manner, Fassmann provides the examples of Romanians of Hungarian origin entering Hungary, Moldovans of Romanian origin entering Romania, ethnic Greeks from the area of the former Soviet Union entering Greece and Bulgarians of Turkish descent entering Turkey, which are also not counted as regular immigrants in these countries. This can be attributed to the fact that these states are based on an ethnic concept of the nation that includes all ethnics, irrespective of where they live. Consequently, these border crossings are not categorised as instances of immigration of foreign nationals but as return migration of people who have always formed part of the nation (Fassmann 2009: 33–34).

18). The examples of Germany and Austria as typical guest worker regime countries in the second half of the twentieth century reflect the existing socio-political context at the time. Neither countries of origin nor destination regarded those workers as permanent emigrants or immigrants, nor did they count them as such in statistics. These workers were consistently described as the temporary resident population in the Austrian census, and from 1965 onwards, they were recorded in separate administrative statistics on “registered guest workers” rather than in the usual population registers (Fassmann 2009).

Another identified problem is related to under-estimated data on emigration in all observed countries. The reason mostly lies in a lack of incentives for self-deregistration of persons moving abroad, especially when temporary emigration is in question (Gárdos and Gödri 2014). As to the register of foreigners, foreigners with the right to free movement in the EU (EEA and Swiss citizens) and residence in a Member State are generally included in a different database of the foreigners’ register than citizens themselves. However, due to the fact that they are not obliged to enrol in the register of foreigners and/or that they frequently do not report their stay to the authorities, their coverage in registers is estimated as most likely under-reported (*ibid.*: 20).

In relation to the statistical register-based data sources, the report found that collecting and clarifying emigration data was quite problematic and that emigration was generally under-represented. Immigration related data was generally found to be lower in relevance and range in countries where immigration was perceived as a marginal issue (Gárdos and Gödri 2014).

Among the SEEMIG project partners, the European Union Labour Force Survey (LFS) was generally identified as the most useful international survey in relation to migration-related data, while the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) and the OECD’s Programme on International Student Assessment (PISA) were found to be less useful. Nevertheless, according to the interpretation of the Italian report “the hidden nature of certain groups of the immigrant population, language barriers, the particular spatial distribution of migrants, which is often not in correspondence with the sampling methodology, and potentially high non-response rate due to irregular work or irregular status” (*ibid.*: 34) generally add to the fact that immigrants are under-represented in the LFS. As to data on emigration, it was found that the LFS could be applicable to identify only short-term labour emigration to some extent. However, the definitions of the “household” and “household member” when asking respondents, for example, about household members working abroad, differ among countries, making such data quite unreliable (Gárdos and Gödri 2014).

Regarding the population covered in censuses, the EU Regulation (EC) No 763/2008 on Population and Housing Censuses defines the population covered by

censuses as the “national, regional and local population at its usual residence at the reference date”, whereby usual residence shall mean the “place where a person normally spends the daily period of rest, regardless of temporary absences for purposes of recreation, holidays, visits to friends and relatives, business, medical treatment or religious pilgrimage” (Regulation 2008).

Those who have lived in their place of usual residence for a continuous period of at least 12 months before the reference date and those who arrived in their place of usual residence during the 12 months before the reference date with the intention of staying there for at least one year shall be considered as usual residents of a particular geographical area (*ibid.*). In this way, censuses also include migrants, but there exists a difference among the SEEMIG countries in the duration limits for foreign citizens living in a country. For instance, in Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia, a period of 12 months is required. In Slovenia, only persons who have a registered permanent or temporary residence are included, regardless of their intended period of stay (Gárdos and Gödri 2014). Furthermore, it is clear that the definition of the population cannot account for the diverse and complex transnational realities that are characteristic of many forms of contemporary mobility and migration movements.

Considering nationals living abroad, the practices of the SEEMIG countries are generally uniform; temporarily staying abroad for a period shorter than 12 months is treated as belonging to the resident population (except in Austria, where the three months criterion is considered). However, in Serbia, persons who have been living abroad for more than a year but re-enter Serbia at least once a week (e.g. commuters) are also considered members of the resident population (*ibid.*: 49).

That information in censuses reflects the prevailing concerns of stakeholders is clearly evident in the case of Romania. For those living abroad, the census included a special questionnaire on basic demographic characteristics, destination country, time of their departure, reason for departure and field of work and frequency of remittances in the case of employment abroad (*ibid.*: 52). A more detailed inclusion of such issues can be attributed to large-scale emigration from Romania in the past couple of decades. Not only in Romania, but also in Serbia, which is also faced with high levels of emigration, the question about the reason for migration was included with regard to both those staying abroad and those arriving in the country (*ibid.*). Italy, where there has been a major increase in the number of foreign citizens since the 2001 census, has included the country of birth of parents, which is generally not included in censuses, to identify the group of “second-generation” migrants (*ibid.*: 53).

Migration statistics in the wider socio-political context

What constitutes migration and how it is measured is anything but a matter of consensus. As evident from selected cases, the data are not comparable; either across national borders or over time (see also Fassmann 2009). The reasons for this can be attributed to socio-political events in various nation states and to the historical development of the notion of the nation-state.

Population movements, as Teitelbaum (2005: 200) reminds us, were controlled to a much lesser extent before the creation of sovereign nation-states in the second half of the nineteenth century, when a more systematic engagement with migration issues both in Europe and in the United States began (Kreager 1997). At that time, a much greater need to gather statistical information about the national population as a whole also appeared. Population specialists strived towards the “ideal” of counting, classifying and categorising members of such national populations that were viewed as clearly bounded and separated by the borders of newly formed nation-states (Kreager 1997; Kertzer and Arel 2002; Knežević Hočevar 2011). European nation-states thus expanded control over their national populations by counting and recording births, deaths, property and property transfers, income and population movements (Chatterjee and Riley 2001: 816). Political elites perceived such a gathering of national statistics as a tool for modernising the state (Kertzer and Arel 2002), and statistics were seen as a diagnostic tool for monitoring the social and economic welfare of the national body (Krause 2001). It is therefore not a coincidence that, at the end of the nineteenth century, the first discussions on how to collect internationally comparable migration statistics also emerged among statisticians (Fassmann 2009: 24).⁹

In this vein, statistics can be viewed as a tool of “representing the complexity of the world in categories and figures attached to such categories” (Fassmann et al. 2009: 18; see also Kertzer and Arel 2002). Histories of statistics demonstrate that “statistics as a knowledge system and set of practices has evolved in interaction with political contingencies” (Rudinow Sætnan et al. 2011: 3). Who is counted as legitimate resident of a certain nation-state, and what does residence mean, are not simply technical bureaucratic questions but are among the most complex political issues (Goldschneider 2002: 71). For example, who is included in the category of foreign persons in a particular country, depends on whether the dominant citizenship policy is *jus soli* (citizenship by birth) or *jus sanguinis* (citizenship by blood) (Grieco 2002). While the concepts of foreign born and foreigner may appear similar, they actually categorise people in different ways, depending on the prevailing concept of citizenship in a particular country (ibid.). The vast

⁹ The first discussion on this issue was held at the 1891 Vienna meeting of the International Statistical Institute (Fassmann 2009: 24).

differences in nationality laws have direct consequences for the low comparability of data on citizenship and on “foreigners” across different countries (Reeger and Sievers 2009: 299).

It is quite widely acknowledged among both researchers and policy makers that statistics enable the aggregation of individual units into a larger whole and differentiate them. This can facilitate the generation of generalizable knowledge about the structure and characteristics of a population and can provide an entry of policy intervention (Kraler et al. 2015). Nevertheless, it could be argued that statistical categories do not represent social reality but construct it in a way that might influence public perceptions of selected social groups. Kertzer and Arel (2002) writing about the use of identity categories in censuses argue that such categories create particular visions of social reality by assigning all people to a single category and by conceptualising them as sharing a common collective identity with a certain number of others. They go on to argue that “rather than view social links as complex and social groupings situational, the view promoted by the census is one in which populations are divided into neat categories” (ibid.: 6).

The term migrant can thus be considered a strong form of categorization particularly for those who do not consider such a label as relevant and appropriate to their everyday lives (Gárdos and Gödri 2014), as qualitative research across different migration contexts has pervasively demonstrated. The terms second- and third-generation migrant could be particularly problematic in this respect. Life stories of individual migrants point to the gaps in statistical categorisations of migration that fail to capture the diverse and changing motives of the collocutors. An empirical distinction between different types of migration is therefore impossible to sustain. Migrants are often labelled too narrowly as either “labour” or “marriage” migrants or as voluntary on the one hand, and forced migrants on the other hand. Clearly, such narrow statistical typologies do not encapsulate the diversified nature of contemporary migration processes. A wide range of motives, often quite distinct from the statistically ascribed category, can lie behind the process of migration. Typologies, as Brettell (2000: 102) argues, present us with a static and homogenised picture of a process that is dynamic throughout the course of an individual’s life. Crosby (2006: 3) holds that “because of the way we label, define, and categorise people who move, we obscure and make invisible their actual lived experience”. In this respect, Kraler, Reichel and Entzinger (2015: 55) argue that the “production and use of social statistics differentiated by ‘migration background’, be it on the basis of demographic, sociological or ethnic criteria, not only makes these groups visible, but also manifests their very existence and creates a reinforced perception of group differences”.

Concluding considerations

The general finding that achieving comparability of migration statistics is a rather complex and challenging task is evidenced not only in academic endeavours, but also through the operationalization of such statistics in concrete practices of establishing comparable systems of recording population movements. The efforts of researchers to contribute to more reliable and internationally comparable statistical data on migration can be, in particular, traced to the last couple of decades. Such attempts are also backed by various initiatives within international organisations and institutions (European Commission, OECD, United Nations, International Organisation for Migration, International Labour Organisation – ILO, and some other agencies). The diffuse nature of data and their non-comparability due to different systems of recording them – which can be the result of different definitions produced in different socio-political contexts of nation-states – is the key feature of migration related data that nation-states record. In different national contexts, statistics do not always speak the same language.

The examples from selected countries of South-East Europe point to the ambivalences and challenges of achieving better comparability of migration movements, which is a highly prioritised area of public policies. Migration movements can be located at the intersection of at least three key public policies (migration, demographic and economic) through which the state defines its citizens, tax payers and foreigners and ensures a continuity of the national body.

In this respect, the results of the SEEMIG project confirm the need for a reliable repository of migration statistics that can also be of support to more coherent migration theories. The forecast of long-term trends as well as short-term changes in the nature of migration movements is generally based on datasets as an analytical foundation of predictions; exceptions are periods of crisis, such as migration due to radical environmental changes or sudden forced migration in armed conflicts. The lack of statistics or unwillingness to include them in the analysis leads to “imaginary migration statistics” and, in turn, to populist approaches to migration.

The need to complement existing public registers with data “from the field” is also evident. Such is the case in micro environments next to former borders of EU member states where either a high number of daily migrants (e.g. between Poland and Germany, and Slovenia and Austria, to state just two examples) and/or transnational migration (e.g. circular migration from Romania to Italy) can be observed. These cases are only partially covered by existent migration statistics, which was observed also in the SEEMIG project. Qualitatively designed research is not meant to substitute the centralised records of public institutions, but instead to strengthen their value and spread knowledge of migration and mobility practices outside the established instruments for recording them, such as, for instance, the census and

central registers. These endeavours can deepen our knowledge of motives for migration.

The use of migration statistics is, due to different definitions of main migration-related concepts and mutually incomparable databases between nation-states, often inaccurate and sometimes even problematic. This points to methodological nationalism at the axes of migration-demography-nation that is not a notion related only to romantic visions of the nation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but is embedded also in globalised migration movements into which formerly less mobile societies of socialist provenience are increasingly involved. Migration statistics are also a key component of demographic predictions, however increasing population through increased fertility of the “native population” rather than through increased immigration is the preferred solution of most European nation-states.

The need for systematic recording of migration is not in line with individual motives of migrants and the idea of the freedom of movement as one of the main pillars of the EU. In its core, the statistical gathering of migration-related data is quite ambivalent and, although highly needed at the level of public policies, can present an intrusion into the principle of freedom of movement. Population-related data restore the traceability of the individual, and abundant experiences in various migratory contexts show that migrants perceive such control over their lives as intrusive and restrictive to their freedom of movement.

Such is the example of the practices and policies used to counteract the lack of deregistration of nationals, evident in the underrepresentation of emigration in statistical data. For practical and financial reasons and in the absence of strict administrative rules, migrants may have particular reasons not to (want to) register their (e)migration (Poulain 2008). Detecting persons, to whom official mails could not be delivered, checking whose benefits are received in another country, checking persons receiving pensions in another country, etc., are all state-enacted actions that are quite problematic from an ethical and human rights point of view. It seems that finding a balance between these ethical issues and the need for further data on the basis of which policies and actions could be developed, must be sought in individual national contexts and also at the wider supra-national level.

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