Representation of Post-Communist European Countries in Cross-National Public Opinion Surveys

Kazimierz M. Slomczynski and Irina Tomescu-Dubrow

The degree of political rights and the level of economic well-being of a given country can indicate how much this country collaborates with other countries on survey research.

The democratization of political systems and the change to market economies that people in various parts of the world have experienced over the past twenty-five years have resulted in increased general interest in the state of public opinion. The heightened concern with understanding public views on socio-economic and political transformations has led to a rise in the number of cross-national surveys, both academic and commercial. However, the participation of countries in cross-national research on public opinion is very uneven, not only because of economic factors but also for political and cultural reasons—the well-developed countries of the Northwest participate more often, whereas there are many laggards in the South and East. To the extent that the excluded or under-represented countries are systematically different from those included, comparative studies are likely to encounter serious problems. Substantively, knowledge will be limited, impeding the ability to legitimately generalize findings and interpretations beyond the included regions. Methodologically, in research that treats countries as the framework for attitudes and behavior, and uses the techniques of contextual analysis and hierarchical modeling, results may be seriously biased in that the under-represented countries distort the distribution of macro-level variables.

With this in mind, the present discussion focuses on the post-communist countries of Europe and examines their representation in cross-national research projects to determine the extent to which the coverage

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is uneven, and what factors account for the inequality. Contrary to studies that examine the growth of public opinion research from the perspective of data quality and comparability of the countries included, this study analyzes why some countries are repeatedly left out or under-represented, whether the omitted countries differ systematically from those included, and what consequences are likely to occur in comparative research. To address these issues we (1) describe major cross-national public opinion surveys, indicating the share of the European post-communist countries, (2) provide information about data availability from these surveys, and (3) discuss methodological issues relevant to comparative analyses in the social sciences in general, and especially in sociology and political science.

The analysis covers the period conventionally marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) to the admission of a number of post-communist countries to the European Union (2004). The end of communism in Eastern Europe led to a significant reconfiguration of the region through processes of state disintegration, reconstruction, and the formation of new states. These changes are captured by grouping the post-communist countries of Europe into two main categories, each with two subcategories:

(A) Countries that emerged out of the former Soviet Union:
   (A1) Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova
   (A2) Baltic states: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania

(B) Countries independent of the Soviet Union:
   (B1) countries that largely maintained their state configuration after 1989: Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania
   (B2) countries that underwent significant state reconfiguration after 1989: Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Czech Republic, Macedonia, Serbia-Montenegro, Slovakia, and Slovenia.

Given East Germany’s special position following the unification with West Germany (Federal Republic of Germany), it is not included in the analysis. In addition, since the focus of the paper is on Eastern Europe, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia are also excluded. Formally they belong to Europe, but they are usually identified with the Caucasus region.

The differentiated communist legacy is important to an understanding of the current participation of East European countries in major projects involving public opinion research. Under communism, public opinion research was severely limited, especially research involving international projects. However, within the communist bloc, research on public opinion was better developed in some countries than in others. For example, in Poland, the Public Opinion Research Center was created in 1958. Until the fall of communism it produced much useful data, sometimes in cooperation with foreign organizations. In the 1970s and 1980s, academic institutions in Poland also conducted a number of surveys, and in the last phase of the communist era, the Polish government opened a new public opinion research center. At the same time, Hungary and Yugoslavia were also relatively intensively engaged in public opinion research, often applying international standards. This kind of research was allowed even in some parts of the former Soviet Union, in some instances conducted through cross-national cooperation. In contrast, before 1990, public opinion surveys were practically nonexistent in the remote republics of the Soviet Union and such countries as, for example, Albania or Romania. This differentiated communist legacy is important to an understanding of the current participation of East European countries in major projects involving public opinion research.

**Major Cross-National Projects on Public Opinion**

To examine how the post-communist countries of Europe fare in comparative public opinion surveys, the discussion will focus on two broad categories of instruments: (a) large, general, cross-national surveys, and (b) specifically East European surveys. While in many respects different from each other, these instruments are alike in that all are academically oriented, they cover a broad set of issues in the sense of a wide area of public opinion questions, they are all being continued in some form (directly or indirectly evolving into another project), and relatively large scientific production has emerged from these projects.

Large, general cross-national surveys are important in carrying out comparative analyses involving different countries, particularly comparisons of Western and Eastern Europe. The projects discussed in this paper are the World Values Survey (WVS), the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES), and the European Social Survey (ESS). With regard to election studies, only those dealing with a wide range of political and economic opinion questions will be considered. Table 1 gives a synthetic description of these four major data sources, which are discussed in more detail below.
At the beginning of the 1980s the European Value Survey was conducted in several countries (\(N_k = 12\)). This survey grew into the World Value Survey, in which more and more countries participated. Currently, the WVS constitutes a fundamental research project on public attitudes and beliefs, encompassing sixty-six countries that cover more than 80 percent of the world population. Its coverage of an extensive range of issues—from attitudes toward governments to post-materialist values—and large territorial representation make this project a useful tool for sociologists, political scientists, economists, and other social scientists.

The WVS was conducted in four waves: 1980–1983 (\(N_k = 22\)), 1990–1991 (\(N_k = 42\)), 1995–1996 (\(N_k = 54\)), and 1999–2001 (\(N_k = 60\)). National samples differ in both methods of respondent selection (from multi-stage probability sampling to quota compilation) and sample size (from \(N_i > 3,000\) to \(N_i < 1,000\), with the optimum threshold \(N_i = 1,500\)). There are obvious gaps in the fieldwork documentation. In many cases it is not even clear how the survey was conducted—whether using face-to-face interviews in the respondent’s home or questionnaires distributed to potential respondents and then collected by the staff. On the positive side, the WVS data clearly describe all variables and are accessible for analysis using standard statistical packages (SPSS, SAS, or STATA). A bibliography stemming from this project is available on the Internet.

The International Social Survey Program originated as a result of the cooperation of four institutions conducting annual surveys in their respective countries: Germany’s Zentrum für Umfragen, Methoden, und Analysen (ZUMA), the U.S. National Opinion Research Center (NORC), the UK Social and Community Planning Research (SCPR) program, and Australian National University (ANU). From 1985 to the present, thirty-five other countries joined the original four, most of them in Europe, but some in Asia (Philippines and Bangladesh) and Africa (South Africa). In practice, the ISSP questionnaires are included in more general survey schema, based on the U.S General Social Survey (GSS).


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of survey</th>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Year of first study</th>
<th>How frequently repeated</th>
<th>Number of countries(^a)</th>
<th>Sample size(^b)</th>
<th>Method of gathering data(^c)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Value Survey</td>
<td>WVS</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>I, N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Social Survey Program</td>
<td>ISSP</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>1–2 years</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>I, M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative Study of Electoral Systems</td>
<td>CSES</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1,500</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Social Survey</td>
<td>ESS</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>2,500</td>
<td>I</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Refers to the last edition (wave). Number of countries is approximate because in some cases one country is represented by two units (e.g., West and East Germany).

\(^b\)Target sample size.

\(^c\)I—interview, M—mail questionnaire, N—for some countries it is unclear what method was used to gather data.

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Comparative Study of Electoral Systems. Individual countries worldwide conduct surveys pertaining to the public’s electoral preferences. To be comparable across space, such surveys require some coordination to ensure that the research instruments are the same or equivalent. Comparative studies sometimes involve only certain regions of the world. A large set of data on electoral behavior in East European countries is maintained by the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research, University of Cologne, but since it is limited regionally, it is described in a separate section. The focus here is on
election studies conducted according to the same schema in various regions of the world.

The Comparative Study of Electoral Systems is a collaborative program of election studies conducted in more than fifty countries. In these studies, a common module of the questionnaire is included in post-election surveys of each participant country. The main questionnaire items deal not only with vote choice, candidate and party evaluations, and attitudes toward the electoral system itself, but also with general assessments of present and past economic and political conditions. In addition, the module contains a large range of socio-demographic variables. A particularly attractive feature of CSES is that survey data are supplemented by district-level and state-level information about the elections and their results.

The Web site of the CSES lists eight books, twenty-four journal articles, and thirty chapters in edited volumes. It also provides a summary of some results stemming from comparative analyses. These results deal with such issues as left-right self-placement, perceived fairness of the most recent election, and overall satisfaction with democracy.

**European Social Survey.** Substantially, the principal goal of this project is to monitor the attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral patterns of the European population primarily in the context of institutional change. However, there is another goal: to set high standards for cross-national survey research. Both goals are explained in detail in well-prepared documents of the ESS Directorate. The short description of ESS provided in the “User Bulletin” for the program is as follows:

The European Social Survey (ESS) is an academically-driven social survey designated to chart and explain the interaction between Europe’s changing institutions and the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour patterns of its diverse populations. The survey covers over 20 European nations and employs rigorous methodology. Funding for the central design and coordination of the ESS comes from the European Commission via its Foundation, which initiated the project. Funding for national data collection and coordination comes from funding agencies in participating countries.

The questionnaire includes a “core” module that remains relatively constant from round to round. It focuses on political orientations (including public trust, political interest in governance, and efficacy), social values, and economic attitudes (including attitudes toward well-being). The list of basic demographic variables is extensive, although the lack of information about job income is a serious omission. Additional modules focus on specific issues, such as immigration or gender roles.

The first round of the ESS was conducted in 2002 with the intention of repeating surveys every other year. The data from the second round, completed in 2004, were recently released. Other rounds are in preparation.

The ESS User Bulletins publish a list of papers in which data from the project are used or methodological issues of the surveys discussed. The number of bibliographical items is high (totaling more than fifty papers) and steadily growing (the User Bulletin of August 2005 lists fourteen articles).

How are European post-communist countries represented in the cross-national public opinion surveys under discussion? To answer this question systematically, Table 2 lists the frequencies with which each country participated in a given project, and the weighted sum of the participation. The frequencies reveal unequal participation in certain projects, while the weighted sums provide a measure across projects. The weighted sum was computed as an addition of the proportions in which a given country participated in each of the four projects, thus giving a theoretical maximum value of 4 and minimum value of 0.

Two aspects of the results are noteworthy. First, within the projects, representation is very unequal. For example, Slovenia participated in all thirteen waves of the International Social Survey Program, while eleven countries did not participate at all. Every country participated in at least one wave of the World Value Survey, but only Hungary participated in all four waves. Since the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems and the European Social Survey had only two waves, the range of inequality is, by definition, smaller.

In general, Hungary and Poland (in the B1 group) and the Czech Republic and Slovenia (in the B2 group) lead in terms of participation frequency. Next come the countries that emerged from the former Soviet Union (in group A), except for Moldova (in group A1).

Second, across-surveys coverage of European post-communist countries is particularly uneven because the inequalities of all of the surveys included in the analysis tend to be cumulative. In terms of the weighted sum, the Czech Republic is on top, followed by Poland and Hungary. At the bottom are Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Macedonia.

**Specifically East European Surveys**

Two “siblings” of the Standard Eurobarometer were developed to cover Eastern Europe in the type of public opinion research typical for the rest of Europe. Just
after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European Commission ordered the Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (CEE). During 1990–97 a total of eight surveys were conducted in some East European countries (see Table 3). In October 2001, after a three-year interruption, the European Commission launched a new series of surveys, the Candidate Countries Eurobarometer (CCEB) in the thirteen countries applying for European Union membership (see Table 3), which replaced the CEE. Both the CCEB and the CEEB are compatible with the Standard Eurobarometer in terms of substance and methodology.

Several other initiatives conducting surveys under the rubric “barometer” are not related to the structures of the European Union. The most important of these is an initiative called New Barometers (NB), coordinated by Richard Rose of the Center for the Study of Public Policy at the Scottish University of Strathclyde. Four projects are especially relevant for scholars studying the post-communist transition in Europe:

1. Surveys of the New Democracy Barometer (NDB) conducted in Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine. Over the period 1991–98, this
survey was conducted five times. In some instances Moldova and East Germany were included.


3. Surveys of the New Baltic Barometer (NBB), conducted in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. Since 1993, five waves of the NBB have been administered. In 2001, the NBB became part of the NEB.

4. Surveys of the New Russia Barometer (NRB) launched in 1992 and continuing to the present. These surveys are conducted with the close cooperation of VTsIOM, a leading public opinion research center in Russia.

In addition to barometer-type surveys, two other projects are worth mentioning: Election Studies of Eastern Europe (ESEE), covering 1989–2002, and Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CDEE), covering 1990–2001. Both projects concentrate on emerging democracies and the formation of a market economy. They include an extensive set of demographic variables, including social background characteristics.

The representation of East European countries in

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Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Inclusion of Countries in Surveys</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belarus</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ukraine</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moldova</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A2</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Latvia</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lithuania</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bulgaria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Hungary</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poland</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romania</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B2</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Croatia</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Czech Republic</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Macedonia</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Serbia-Montenegro</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Slovakia</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Slovenia</strong></td>
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</table>

*Includes New Democracy Barometer (NDB), New Europe Barometer (NEB), New Baltic Barometer (NBB), and New Russia Barometer (NRB).

SUM of countries’ values (frequencies of participation) divided by the respective totals (number of waves) for all five projects.

Includes studies conducted in Greater Moscow, European USSR, and European Russia.

Czechoslovakia in 1990-91.
cross-national surveys devoted to this region is displayed in Table 3. Generally, the pattern of participation resembles the results displayed in Table 2. Group B is covered best, with Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic again leading in terms of representation. However, Bulgaria is not far from these leaders, and Romania is not far from Slovenia. The surveys do a good job of including former Soviet Union members, except for Moldova. Again, this country’s coverage is low, as is the coverage of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, and Albania.

**Availability of Data and Data Archives**

Most of the data from surveys discussed in this article are available from the standard data archives: the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan, the UK Data Archive (UKDA) at the University of Essex, and the Central Archive for Empirical Social Research (CAESR) at the University of Cologne. The availability of these data from the original sources, which give more detail about the projects, is summarized in Table 4.

It is essential for East European countries to create their own data archives to store cross-national surveys. In 2002 the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) organized a workshop on social science data archives in Eastern Europe. As a result, the East European Data Archive Network (EDAN) was created. This organization helps to establish data archives and solve common problems in adjusting the East European data archives to the standards of advanced Western data archives. The GESIS Service Agency (Eastern Europe/Central Archive) is the German member of EDAN and serves as the coordinator of all activities concerning the network and its relationships with the International Federation of Data Organizations (IFDO) and the Council of European Soc-
International Projects of Misrepresentation in the region. The EDAN Web site provides a list of the national archives of Eastern Europe that cooperate within the network.

In the future the Central European Opinion Research Group (CEORG), a newly established research foundation, could be crucial in coordinating cross-national research on public opinion in Eastern Europe. The core of this organization is built around major public opinion research institutes in the Czech Republic (Centrum pro výzkum veřejného mínění, CVVM), Hungary (Társadalomkutatási Intézet, TARKI), and Poland (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, CBOS). However, the CEORG Web site already provides comparable data not only from these three countries but also from Slovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, Lithuania, Estonia, and (occasionally) Ukraine.

**Methodological Consequences of Misrepresentation in International Projects**

Extensive literature exists on the methodological issues of cross-national analysis of survey data. This article only examines issues that stem from the uneven representation of East European societies in public opinion instruments. In particular, it discusses the consequences that result from countries’ unequal participation in international projects, focusing on (a) generalizability of findings for all of Eastern Europe, and (b) inferences regarding the impact of country-level characteristics. In each case, the discussion indicates specific biases introduced by the misrepresentation of East European countries in the pool of all countries that participate in international projects.

First, and perhaps most obvious, the systematic exclusion or under-representation of some countries affects research devoted to detailed descriptions of people’s attitudes and behaviors in certain parts of the world. Not having enough survey data on, for example, Belarus, Moldova, or Albania, prevents legitimate generalization of findings and interpretations to Eastern Europe as a whole. In addition, this kind of bias is very unfavorable with respect to area studies, for the exclusion of certain countries leads to incomplete knowledge about the region.

Methodological problems related to uneven representation go far beyond these obvious points, however. They pertain especially to research that treats countries as a macro-level context for attitudes and behavior. Oriented toward finding regularities of the impact of country-level characteristics on individual-level characteristics, this type of study usually employs various techniques of contextual analysis and hierarchical modeling. Since country-level characteristics most often refer to political and economic development, the results can be seriously biased if the exclusion or under-representation of certain societies distorts the distribution of macro-level variables. Thus, the important question is whether the extent of participation of East European countries in cross-national research is closely related to political and economic characteristics.

To examine this issue, a global measure of countries’ participation in cross-national public opinion surveys was constructed by averaging weighted indexes describing the extent of countries’ participation in both large cross-national projects and specific East European projects. The formula used was: Global Index = \( \frac{1}{2} [S_1/4 + S_2/5] \), where \( S_1 \) and \( S_2 \) refer to the weighted sums (see last column in Tables 2 and 3), and 4 and 5 are the number of respective projects. For the nineteen countries included in the analysis, this global index ranges from 0.05 to 0.90, with a mean of 0.45 and standard deviation of 0.29. The Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary have the highest scores (index \( \geq 0.85 \)), the Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—fall in the middle (0.50 \( \geq \) index \( \leq 0.45 \)), and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Moldova have the lowest scores (index \( \leq 0.10 \)). The index mirrors well the differentiation of countries with respect to their participation in cross-national public opinion surveys.

An Index of Democratization and an Index of Economic Well-being were also constructed. The Index of Democratization is based on the Freedom House ratings of political rights. The average of these ratings for the period 1994–2001 was inversed, so that a high score indicates a high level of implementation of political rights. The Index of Economic Well-being is the gross national income per capita expressed in U.S. dollars adjusted for purchasing power parity.

In Figures 1 and 2, the values of the global index of participation in cross-national surveys are plotted against the Index of Democratization and the Index of Economic Well-being, respectively.

Three clusters of countries can be clearly distinguished in both figures. The first cluster, denoting high participation in cross-national surveys and relatively high levels of political and economic development, is composed of the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Slovenia. The second cluster is located in the middle of the axis identified with the index of participation in cross-national research and axes of democratization.
Figure 1. Implementation of Political Rights and Participation in Cross-National Surveys in Eastern European Countries

Figure 2. Gross National Income and Participation in Cross-National Surveys in Eastern European Countries
and economic well-being. This cluster contains Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Latvia, and Estonia. Since Lithuania scores relatively high on the index of political rights, it functions as an outlier of this cluster in Figure 1. However, it is in the center of the second cluster in Figure 2. Finally, the third cluster, denoting low participation in cross-national surveys and relatively low levels of political and economic development, is composed of Albania, Moldova, Serbia, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Croatia.

The indexes of political rights and gross national income per capita are related to each other. They have a shared variance of 50–60 percent, depending on whether these variables are expressed in their raw scores or transformed logarithmically. However, each of these variables exerts a significant effect on the index of participation in cross-national surveys even if they are mutually controlled (see Table 5, Model III). Taken together, they explain more than half of the variability in the index of participation in cross-national surveys. Thus, knowing the implementation of political rights and the level of economic well-being of a given country allows one to predict the extent to which this country collaborates with other countries on survey research.

**Conclusion**

This article examined whether reliable analysis of public opinion polls in post-communist countries is possible, given currently available data. The assessment compared international surveys that make explicit claims about providing cross-national data on the post-communist countries of Europe. Specifically, the article examined the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Program, the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems, the European Social Survey, and several specific East European surveys with respect to the presence or absence of particular European states. The discussion demonstrated that the representation of some of the European post-communist countries is not an appropriate basis for drawing substantive conclusions about the cross-national differences between the old and new Europe. Specifically, the article showed that the extent of participation in international projects is strongly related to countries’ political and economic development, as measured by the index of political rights and gross national income, respectively.

**Notes**


5. N refers to sample size: N_i denotes number of countries, and N_k denotes number of persons.


10. See User Bulletins no. 1, November 2004, through no. 4, August 2005 (www.europesocialsurvey.org).

11. Ibid.


16. See www.freedomhouse.org/ratings/index.htm. Original ratings range from 1 (highest) to 7 (lowest). For 1994–2001, data are available for all East European countries except Serbia and Montenegro. In this exceptional case, we assigned an arbitrary number 5, typical for countries experiencing deep external and internal conflicts. For all countries, taking into account the data for seven years results in a relatively stable measure of democratic progress.


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