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Representation of Southeast European Countries in International Survey Projects: Assessing Data Quality

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This paper deals with the problem of unequal representation of countries in international surveys, and the differences in data quality between survey projects, both obstacles to cross-national comparative research. The first part of the paper investigates international surveys on general population samples conducted in South-East Europe in the period between 1990 and 2010. Documentation of country participation in both general and region- or theme-specific survey projects shows that some countries are systematically excluded from surveys. Consequently, from comparative perspective, the generalizability of research results is not only limited but also potentially biased, omitting atypical cases. The second part of the paper focuses on the quality of surveys. It finds that the most problematic element of surveys is survey documentation, an essential component of the data. Without documentation the value of datasets, analyses using them and conclusions drawn on their basis are questionable. The proposed synthetic measure of data quality, the Survey Quality Index, could lead to setting standards for the documentation of the survey process, and thus facilitate cross-national research and allow for meaningful integration of existing survey data.

Key words: Survey methodology, cross-national research, data quality, survey documentation

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INTRODUCTION

Ideally, when conducting cross-national analyses, one would like to have data from all countries of interest collected simultaneously, according to identical methodology, following unified standards and procedures, and with uniformly high quality of survey documentation. Longitudinal research also requires equal intervals between measurements and full coverage of all countries in all measurement points. In practice, this is hardly ever the case, since the recent growth in number of academic cross-national surveys has not been frequently accompanied by greater equality in country participation or by improvement of survey quality (Heath, Fisher & Smith 2005; Smith, Fisher & Heath 2011). Failure to meet well-established requirements of cross-national research results in various sources of error and bias. As a result, data quality issues and the absence of adequate documentation are among the major problems facing comparative survey research (Granda & Moschner 2013; Schoene & Kolczynska 2014). The problem of unequal representation of countries in international survey projects limits the variation of macro-structural characteristics. Generally speaking, poorer, less developed, and non-Western countries tend to be under-researched and often lack high-quality survey data. The absence of survey data compatible with established scientific standards forces researchers to accept the data deficiencies, which closes the circle.

Country representation in surveys and data quality are important for research. The consequence of unequal representation is a host of empirical studies that systematically fail to include certain countries. Systematic under-representation does not allow for generalizing findings to particular kind of countries and thus hampers the development of social theory. Poor data quality translates into findings that are biased in an unknown but potentially critical way.

The objective of this article is twofold: (1) to document the (under)representation of South-East European countries in cross-national surveys, and (2) to assess and compare the quality of data and survey documentation in these surveys. The more general aim is to propose a standard of international survey documentation which would facilitate cross-national research and allow for meaningful integration of existing survey data.

Representation of Balkan countries in international survey projects

This study covers Southeastern Europe (SEE), defined as the following set of countries: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Greece, Kosovo*¹, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Romania, and Turkey². All these countries share certain characteristics related to either their communist past or history of Ottoman rule. Despite certain historical and cultural similarities, these 13 countries are very different with regard to the current level of economic development and quality of democratic rule. At present, some of these countries – Greece (joined in 1981), Cyprus and Slovenia (2004), Bulgaria and Romania (2007) and Croatia (2013) – belong to the European Union, while the rest (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey) are candidate countries or potential candidates.

The time scope is limited to 21 years, and covers the period between 1990 and 2010. The timing and the geographical criterion led to the selection of following international survey projects: Applicant and Candidate Countries Eurobarometer³ (ACCEB), Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe (CDCEE), Eurobarometer⁴ (EB), Life in Transition Survey (LITS), European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS), International Social Survey Program⁵ (ISSP), and the World Values Survey (WVS). These surveys are listed in Table 1⁶, while information about participation in surveys by country and year can be found in Appendix 1.

Table 1 Basic information about survey projects.

Name of survey	Acronym	Web site	Covers years
Applicant and Candidate Countries Eurobarometer	ACCEB	http://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer-data-service/survey-series/candidate-countries-eb/	2001-2004
Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe	CDCEE	http://zacam.gesis.org/webview/	1990, 1999
Eurobarometer	EB	http://www.gesis.org/eurobarometer	2004-2010
European Quality of Life Surveys	EQLS	http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/surveys/2007/eqls/index.htm	
European Social Survey	ESS	http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/	2000-2010
European Values Study	EVS	http://www.europeanvaluesstudy.eu	1991-2008
International Social Survey Program	ISSP	http://www.issp.org/	1998, 2008
Life in Transition Survey	LITS	http://www.ebrd.com/pages/research/economics/data/lits.shtml	2006, 2010
World Value Survey	WVS	http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/	1990-2007

Among the selected survey projects one may distinguish two groups of surveys: general cross-national survey projects, and region-specific projects. The first group is distinguished by its readiness to include all countries that are able and willing to meet the projects' criteria and standards, whether this inclusiveness is delimited geographically (ESS, EVS, EQLS), or not (WVS, ISSP). The second group consists of projects targeted at a pre-defined set of countries chosen according to some criteria related to the projects main theme: European transition countries in LITS and CDCEE, or EU member-states and EU-candidates in EB and ACCEB respectively. This division will be important when comparing country inclusion in survey projects, because while participation in general survey projects is, at least theoretically, open to all, in case of targeted projects some countries are *a priori* not included.

Table 2 presents frequencies of country participation in the 9 relevant survey projects, in total, as well in the two subsets: general surveys and targeted/region-specific surveys. Apart from the total number of appearances by country, the table also includes participation rates calculated as a ratio of the number of surveys the country participated in divided by the total number of surveys.

Table 2 Representation of SEE countries in general international surveys with trust item.

	General survey projects						Targeted/region-specific survey program						TOTAL		
	ESS	EVS	WVS	ISSP	EQLS	Sum	Participation rate	EB	LITS	CDCEE	ACCEB	Sum	Participation rate	Global sum	Global participation rate
No. of rounds	5	3	4	2	1	15		7	2	2	4	15		30	
Albania	0	1	2	0	0	3	0.20	0	2	0	0	2	0.13	5	0.18
Bosnia-Herzegovina	0	1	2	0	0	3	0.20	0	2	0	0	2	0.13	5	0.18
Bulgaria	3	3	1	1	1	9	0.60	7	2	2	4	15	1.00	24	0.73
Croatia	2	2	1	1	1	7	0.47	7	2	0	0	9	0.60	16	0.51
Cyprus	3	1	1	2	1	8	0.53	7	0	0	4	11	0.73	19	0.60
Greece	4	2	0	0	1	7	0.47	7	0	0	0	7	0.47	14	0.47
Kosovo*	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.07	0	1	0	0	1	0.07	2	0.07
Macedonia	0	1	2	0	1	4	0.27	4	2	0	0	6	0.40	10	0.31
Montenegro	0	1	2	0	0	3	0.20	0	2	0	0	2	0.13	5	0.18
Romania	2	3	2	0	1	8	0.53	7	2	2	4	15	1.00	23	0.69
Serbia	0	1	2	0	0	3	0.20	0	2	0	0	2	0.13	5	0.18
Slovenia	5	3	2	2	1	13	0.87	7	2	2	4	15	1.00	28	0.91
Turkey	2	2	4	1	1	10	0.67	7	2	0	4	13	0.87	23	0.73

First of all, data in Table 2 show that there are large differences in country participation within survey projects. For example, Turkey was represented in all 4 waves of the World Values Survey, while Greece and Kosovo* have not participated at all. Every survey program except the European Values Study has totally left out between 2 and 10 of the countries in the region. Generally, the leader in survey participation is Slovenia, followed by Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. The least represented country is Kosovo*, followed by most of its Western Balkan neighbors: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia.

Patterns of participation and non-participation differ between general and targeted surveys. While in the first group frequencies of participation range from 0 to the maximum and include interim values, targeted survey projects are an “all or nothing” game: countries either participate in all waves of a given program, or not at all, with few exceptions.

Moreover, because some countries are systematically not included in surveys more often than others, inequality in participation between countries is even more pronounced across surveys. Slovenia is the country with the highest participation rate as well as one of the only two countries present in all survey projects covered by this analysis. This is probably thanks to its “double status”: Slovenia is a post-transition country, the most developed of the SEE region, and a member of the European Union, which secures a place for it in both general and targeted surveys. Next come Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, followed by Cyprus and Croatia, the latter two with much lower participation in targeted East European surveys. The middle of the raking is taken up by Greece and Macedonia. Although the two countries have shared much of their history, political developments during the 20th century led them to follow different routes resulting in significantly higher levels of economic performance and European integration for Greece, and an extended period of political and economic transition in Macedonia. This explains the higher participation of Greece in general surveys and the inclusion of Macedonia in more targeted surveys. Last comes the rest of the Western Balkans: Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro, Serbia, and finally Kosovo*. Those are the countries whose road to democracy and economic liberalization was additionally impeded by ethnic conflicts and/or internal political crises.

As a result, a researcher wishing to analyze survey data on post-Yugoslav Slovenia can choose from 28 survey waves more or less evenly distributed from 1990 to 2010. Her or she will have a few less to work with in the cases of Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey. Meanwhile, survey-based research examining Albania or Kosovo* could only cover the period from the early 2000s onward.

The level of participation in major international public opinion surveys varies by country and region, as globally summarized by Heath, Fisher and Smith in 2005,

and in their sequel six years later (Smith, Fisher & Heath 2011). In a similar study Słomczyński and Tomescu-Dubrow (2006) focused on East European Countries and demonstrated that participation in cross-national surveys was negatively related to the country's level of political and economic development.

The ranking of countries presented in Table 2 confirms findings of Słomczyński and Tomescu-Dubrow (2006) in their analysis of representation of post-communist European countries in cross-national public opinion surveys in the period 1989-2004. Even though their analysis was based on a somewhat different set of survey projects and had broader geographical scope, it shows that, within the SEE region, most developed countries like Slovenia and Hungary participate in international surveys 6 to 17 times more often than the countries least represented at the time – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Albania. The comparison of rankings from 2006 and the current analysis underscores the persistence of inequality in survey participation, which means that empirical studies using data from cross-national survey projects systematically fail to cover the same countries. Because countries are left out of international collaboration projects typically because of certain political and/or economic factors, and as a result – like in the example of the Balkans – tend to differ from countries more frequently participating in these surveys in a nonrandom way. Hence conclusions about the region as a whole are being drawn on the basis of a biased sample of countries.

QUALITY OF DATA IN INTERNATIONAL SURVEY PROJECTS

Data quality may be defined as “degree to which a set of inherent characteristics fulfills requirements” (ISO 9000:2005: 7), “the correspondence to specifications, expectations or usage requirements” (Eppler 2006: 369), or finally “freedom from deficiencies” (Juran 1988: 27).

The term “data”, although typically taken for granted, requires a few explanatory words. In this analysis I define data as the dataset *and* documentation. This is because only proper documentation, i.e. codebooks, questionnaires, and methodological reports, allow the researcher to gain enough knowledge about the contents of the dataset to use it properly in analyses. Without documentation the dataset is just a table with numbers without meaning, and only proper documentation makes the numbers usable in statistical research.

There are various sets of criteria used for evaluating survey data quality⁷ to choose from. In this analysis, I combine several measures related to the quality of different stages of the survey process (Haselden & White 2001). In doing so, I rely on publicly accessible survey documentation. I work from the assumption that lack of relevant information on specific quality aspects means lack thereof, and –

in a more general sense – that the quality of data coincides with the quality and completeness of the metadata (Schoene & Kolczynska 2014). In this meaning the difference between good and bad data is as between risk and uncertainty.

Quality indicators have been divided into three groups: documentation of sampling, documentation of fieldwork, and information on documented or actual response-rates. Documentation of sampling refers to the level of detail and preciseness with which survey documentation covered the sampling process and characteristics of the sample. For the purposes of this study, I considered *sample and sampling documentation* “detailed” if it clearly identified the country’s sampled population, sampling frame and sampling method in a way that would allow replication. I classified it as “partial” in cases where countries had separate sampling descriptions, but lacked complete information. Documentation qualified as “insufficient” when only brief summaries for whole survey waves were available. *Documentation of fieldwork* includes information on questionnaire translation method, pretest and fieldwork control, as well as dummy variables indicating whether the given procedure was mentioned in the survey documentation or not.

Documented or actual response-rates refers to survey response and non-response. In the composite measure of survey quality, I abstain from using response rates or unit non-response as an indicator of survey quality, as this measure loses relevance when comparing surveys carried out using different sampling designs, specifically random sampling with and without substitution, or name- with address-based samples. At the same time, surveys cannot be “punished” for using less preferred sampling methods, because in some countries random sampling is simply not possible due to lack of access to or existence of sampling frames (e.g. Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bagić 2011). However, because response rate is an important indicator and probably the most frequently reported single measure of survey data quality, I include it in the analysis as a dichotomous variable with the value of 1 indicating that information about response rates is at all available in survey documentation, and 0 if no information could be found (e.g. EB, CDCEE, ACCEB, sporadic cases in other surveys). The second element of survey response is actual item non-response calculated directly from the available survey datasets. Item non-response is the percent of missing values, “Don’t Knows” or other “No Survey Responses” (NSR), to the question on trust in the national parliament.

Even if not included as a component of the Quality Index, response rates deserve some descriptive attention, because they are the most basic piece of information allowing the assessment of the representativeness of a given dataset. In some cases however, then the response rate is given as the final number without any explanation about how it was calculated or breakdown of the target sample, having this information may lead to more questions than answers, especially if the number is unusually high or low. Analysis of response rate distribution as well as

research practice and expert assessment suggests that response rates below 45% or above 80% should be subject to additional scrutiny. Among surveys covered in this analysis response rates below 45% were reported only once: in EVS 4 (2008) in Greece it was 33%, which for a face-to-face interview is very low, especially given the average response rate for Greece in other surveys equal to 63.8%. Cases of very high response rate exceeding 80% were more frequent: ESS 5 (Bulgaria), EVS 2 (Slovenia), EVS 3 (Greece), EVS 4 (Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro), ISSP 1998 (Bulgaria), EQLS 2 (Bulgaria), LITS 1 (Albania), WVS 3 (Bulgaria, Macedonia, Slovenia), WVS 4 (Montenegro), and WVS 5 (Cyprus). The most interesting example is EVS 3 in Greece, where apart from the 0.82 response rate figure there is missing information about primary sampling units, quota controls, or substitution, even though this information is available for other country surveys in that EVS wave (Halman 2001). In WVS 3, the technical report for Bulgaria and method of calculating the response rate suggest that there were no ineligible respondents, while WVS 3 Macedonia and WVS 4 Montenegro fail to indicate the total number of issued sample units.

For the quantitative analysis of survey quality the unit of observation is “survey *wave*country”, because all quality indicators are specific to individual country surveys within a survey program. Coding schemes are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Survey Quality Indicators and Coding Schemes.

Indicators	Coding
1. Documentation of sampling	
Sampling description	0: insufficient 1: partial 2: detailed
2. Documentation of fieldwork	
Translation method	0: none or not mentioned in documentation 1: reported in documentation
Pretest	0: none or not mentioned in documentation 1: reported in documentation
Fieldwork control	0: none or not mentioned in documentation 1: reported in documentation
3. Documented or actual response/non-response rates	
Response rate	0: no information 1: information available
Actual item non-response*	% of missing answers

* Non-response defined as refusal, don't know, no answer, can't choose, difficult to say, other missing.

Table 4 shows by-survey averages of all six dimensions of quality. The first observation to make is that many surveys are consistent as to what types of information they do or do not include in their survey documentation, and in roughly half of survey projects all country*waves were assigned the same value, as indicated by the zero standard deviation. The best and stable data quality is offered by the European Social Survey, which scored highest in all dimension and has the lowest average item non-response. On the other side of the spectrum there is ACEEB, CDCEE and EB, with low scores in all dimensions across all country*waves. Other surveys are in-between, with data quality differing between countries or changing over time.

Table 4 Data Quality Index means by survey program*.

Survey	N	Sample quality	Response rate availability	Item nonresponse	Translation	Pretest	Fieldwork control
ACEEB	20	1 (0)	0 (0)	8.00% (3.29 ppt)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
CDCEE	6	1 (0)	0 (0)	10.5% (6.78 ppt)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
EB	53	1 (0)	0 (0)	6.26% (3.49 ppt)	1 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
LITS	21	2 (0)	1 (0)	3.91% (1.97 ppt)	0.52 (0.51)	1 (0)	0 (0)
EQLS	8	2 (0)	1 (0)	4.04% (2.05 ppt)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)
ESS	21	2 (0)	1 (0)	3.38% (1.31 ppt)	1 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)
EVS	22	1.18 (1.01)	0.82 (0.40)	3.39% (2.24 ppt)	0.36 (0.49)	0.73 (0.46)	0.82 (0.39)
ISSP	7	0.57 (0.53)	0.86 (0.38)	4.34% (1.82 ppt)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
WVS	21	1.14 (0.57)	0.71 (0.46)	4.73% (2.92 ppt)	0.29 (0)	0.14 (0.36)	0.33 (0.48)
Total	179	1.30 (0.61)	0.50 (0.50)	5.28% (3.42 ppt)	0.56 (0.50)	0.39 (0.49)	0.30 (0.46)

* Variable means with standard errors in parentheses.

In order to capture the underlying construct of data quality, the Survey Quality Index was constructed using factor analysis of the six selected components: information about response rate, non-response to items on trust in parliament, assessment of description of the sample and sampling, and presence of documented

translation method, pretest and fieldwork control. Summary statistics of the six dimensions of the Survey Quality Index, as well as factor loadings, are presented in Table 5. Descriptive statistics show that the average quality of sample and sampling documentation among analyzed surveys is better than “partial”, but far from “detailed”. Any information about response rates is available for less than half of survey*wave*countries included in this analysis, which makes it hardly possible to compare representativeness across surveys. Response rate correctness is even less satisfactory due to the large number of surveys with no relevant information. Average item non-response to the question on trust in the national parliament is 5.28%, ranging from 0% in some Eurobarometer surveys and WVS 2005 in Turkey, to 23% in CDCEE in Bulgaria, 1999. A translation method was indicated in just over half of the reviewed cases, pre-test in 39% and some kind of fieldwork control was reported in 30% of cases.

The Component Loadings column contains information about the structure of the latent measure of survey quality with factor loadings being correlations between individual components and the latent factor. All correlations are high, and even the component with lowest (absolute) value, i.e. translation with 0.254, significantly contributes to the resulting survey quality measure. The most important from among the six dimensions of quality are those related to the availability of information about pretesting, fieldwork control and response rates.

Table 5 Distribution of the Survey Quality Indicators and Their Correlations with the Survey Quality Index*

Indicators	Mean	Std dev	Component loadings**
1. Documentation of sampling			
Sample quality	1.30	0.608	0.798
2. Documentation of fieldwork			
Translation	0.560	0.497	0.254
Pretest	0.390	0.488	0.912
Fieldwork control	0.302	0.460	0.744
3. Documented or actual response/non-response rates			
Response rate present	0.497	0.501	0.857
Item nonresponse (%)	5.278	3.424	-0.528

* The unit of analysis is “survey*wave*country”, N=179.

** Eigenvalue = 3.099, explained variance = 51.652%

A comparison of mean Survey Quality Index scores by survey program presented in Table 6 shows that most of the variation in data quality occurs on the level of surveys (eta-squared = 0.84). The distribution of some of those measures is far from normal, and information about the median and median absolute deviation, measures which are more resilient to extreme values, gives a better orientation in the data than just means.

The unrivalled winner in this competition is the European Social Survey with the mean and median quality scores almost 1.5 of standard deviation away from the global average. In concrete terms, all country*waves of ESS received top scores in all quality dimensions, in addition to the lowest item non-response rate (3.4%). This result confirms frequent opinions on the high standards of ESS, which is put forward as a quality benchmark for others to aspire to (e.g. Jagodzinski & Wolf 2009).

Table 6 Survey Quality Index means by survey program.

Survey	Mean	Std dev	Median	Median Absolute Deviation	N
ACCEB	-1.020	0.164	-1.020	0.124	20
CDCEE	-1.145	0.337	-1.045	0.149	6
EB	-0.769	0.173	-0.756	0.099	53
LITS	0.848	0.153	0.906	0.099	21
EQLS	1.441	0.102	1.446	0.097	8
ESS	1.474	0.065	1.453	0.030	21
EVS	0.662	0.920	1.219	0.354	22
ISSP	-0.547	0.374	-0.325	0.129	7
WVS	-0.143	0.573	0.045	0.364	21

EQLS, LITS and EVS come next, with mean scores around one standard deviation better than average. What is also of interest is that while ESS and EQLS maintain high quality across countries, EVS has seen major improvement in terms of quality assurance. In the case of EVS, the median is visibly higher than the mean, which points to the presence of some extremely low values. The worst survey projects in terms of quality are both regional studies carried out in Eastern Europe: the ACEEB and the CDCEE, with the standard Eurobarometer only slightly ahead. In those cases, the weak results translate to vague, bulk sample descriptions for all study waves, high item non-response rates (8%, 10.5% and 6.3% respectively), usually no information on other quality indicators, and even lack of reported response rate.

Mean and median values of Survey Quality Index by country (Table 7) reveal an interesting pattern: countries with low survey participation tend to have higher average or median scores than those participating more often. Specifically, the country with the highest score is Kosovo*, which took part in only two survey waves (EVS in 2008 and LITS in 2010, cf. Appendix 1). In most cases medians are much lower than the means, caused by the relatively higher number of low-quality surveys compared to those with above-average quality.

Table 7 Survey Quality Index means by country.

Country	Mean	Standard deviation	Median	Median Absolute Deviation	Number of surveys
Albania	0.636	0.739	0.906	0.313	5
Bulgaria	0.658	0.639	-0.756	0.289	24
Bosnia-Herzegovina	-0.345	1.085	0.906	0.313	5
Cyprus	-0.191	1.009	-0.756	0.265	19
Greece	0.410	1.040	0.232	0.987	14
Croatia	0.202	0.976	-0.140	0.616	16
Kosovo*	1.155	0.259	1.063	0.156	2
Montenegro	0.441	0.889	0.906	0.313	5
Macedonia	0.108	0.998	0.045	0.800	10
Romania	-0.248	1.004	-0.756	0.289	23
Serbia	0.453	0.927	0.906	0.313	5
Slovenia	-0.052	1.025	-0.325	0.696	28
Turkey	-0.146	0.862	-0.553	0.221	23

At the same time, two countries which frequently participated in surveys tend to have the lowest average and median scores – Romania and Cyprus. The explanation could be that countries with higher inclusion in survey projects – generally the more developed countries, now in the EU – have been included in the low-quality surveys from the Eurobarometer family, as well as the CDCEE study. These country averages are thus largely a consequence of decisions about what countries to include in what survey projects. To some extent, this is a derivative of political arrangements in the region, and to a much lesser extent depends on the country's characteristics, in particular its level of economic and democratic development.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

As I have shown, differences in country representation in international public opinion surveys and unequal quality of data between survey projects constitute a major challenge to cross-national research. The first leads to the less-surveyed countries being systematically left out of from comparative analyses, and – especially in case of countries without developed social research infrastructure – out of the global network of social science researchers. The consequence of the latter is a still meager body of research based on data coming from more than a single survey program. One of the reasons for the nonchalant approach to documentation quality is the lack of universally recognized (and respected) standards of quality assurance in public opinion surveys.

It is worth emphasizing that while non-participation in surveys is related to country characteristics, the variation in survey quality occurs on the between-survey level, and to a large extent is the consequence of lack of appropriate survey documentation, not poor quality indicators. A flagrant example is missing information on response rates in EB, ACCEB, CDCEE, as well as in select countries in WVS, EVS and ISSP. This lack of open access to documentation is especially surprising given the ease of information management and sharing with modern communication technologies. Due to such fundamental deficiencies in available documentation, some key aspects of survey quality, e.g. sampling design, relevance of sampling frames and response rates *per se*, could not be assessed at all, and substitutes were introduced, such as the crude measure of “availability of response rate”.

These information gaps are problematic on at least two levels. First of all, they hamper academic research, both by creating moral dilemmas for researchers on whether to use scantily documented data or not, and by affecting quality assessment, and arguably quality, of obtained results. Furthermore, without appropriate documentation researchers are not able to share feedback about data quality to survey sponsors and fieldwork teams, nor calculate survey quality measures beyond what is provided.

Specifically, the lack of response rates by country prevents researchers from controlling for survey representativeness – one of the main benefits of survey research. As Mohorko, de Leeuw and Hox write referring to the Eurobarometer surveys, “[u]nfortunately, there is no detailed information on response rates made available publicly and on a regular basis by the principal investigator, that is, the European Commission’s Eurobarometer unit. Still, there is some indication that response rates vary between countries” (2013: 4). Indeed, some reports on different issues include by-country response rate tables, with values ranging from as low as 21% in Great Britain (EB 56.1, Gallie & Paugam 2002) to as high as 88%

in France (EB 59.2, Coenders, Lubbers & Sheepers 2005 a, 2005b). Given the direct link between response rate and the likelihood of non-response bias (Groves 2006, Groves & Peytcheva 2008), these numbers alone provide sufficient grounds for concern. This problem is not corrected by providing users with different types of weights (as many as 13 in Eurobarometer datasets), because weights do not fix nonresponse bias for factors uncorrelated with weighting factors or factors with unknown population benchmarks (DeBell 2012). Additionally, weight calculation methods vary both between, and within surveys, and are rarely sufficiently documented.

Secondly, it is disturbing to realize that major components of publicly funded projects, such as complete survey documentation, are not publicly available. The deficiencies of the Eurobarometer product made available to data consumers become even less understandable considering that at least part of the unpublished information does exist, or at least existed at one point (e.g. response rates were necessary for calculation of weights), and given the massive budget allocated to Eurobarometer surveys (TED 2011, TNS 2011).

Additionally, poor or unknown data quality raises doubts as to the validity of results, and thus reduces the impact of research, whether on scientific progress or policy recommendations, the latter being an explicit goal of Eurobarometer studies (cf. European Commission Public Opinion website). At the same time, the responsibility stemming from publishing EU opinion poll data is enormous. Suffice to say that a Google.com search for only the exact phrase “Eurobarometer survey shows” on September 4, 2014, yielded 367 thousand results.

In the area of cross-national studies, discussions of quality in terms of cross-national ‘error’ and ‘quality’ have been overshadowed by the manifold aspects of ‘comparability’ and ‘equivalence’ (Harkness 1999, see also Lupri 1969). Awareness of the error is in turn an indicator of the level of scientific development (Hyman 1954: 4). Besides drawing attention to the problem of unequal survey data quality itself, the aim of this paper was to propose a minimal scope of metadata to be publicly released as part of the standard package or triad, besides the (substantive or raw) data, and paradata. A uniform way of documenting the survey process would moreover help to avoid “alarms buried in documentation” (Mohler 2013).

Naturally, the six criteria for survey assessment could – and even should – be expanded to gradually improve survey documentation standards, thus extending the scope of possible quality-related analyses. To continue the example of survey response: for researchers concerned with the quality of data used in secondary analyses, it is desirable to have access to more detailed information on response rates, e.g. by age group or type of dwelling, such as in case of the Chinese General Social Survey (Bian & Li 2012) or in form of routine extensive reports of the teams of the European Social Survey (Matsuo & Loosveldt 2013 for ESS 2010)

and the European Quality of Life Survey (Petraikos, Kleideri & Ieromnimon 2010). Other proposed measures may be developed respectively.

Using the Survey Quality Index, in the proposed or modified form, to assess the quality of released survey data, would increase the control over quality levels and thus encourage organizers and/or sponsors to pay more attention to data quality and completeness of documentation. Improved survey data would undoubtedly pay off in more valid and reliable research results and better understanding of contemporary societies.

NOTES

- 1 The asterisk refers to the following footnote: “This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.”
- 2 As Wendy Bracewell and Alex Drace-Francis state, “[t]here is no generally agreed definition of South-Eastern Europe, but there are many reasons for this uncertainty” (1999: 47). The discussion of those reasons and the various delimitations of SEE is however beyond the scope of this paper. For more on Southeastern Europe and its relation to the Balkans see e.g. Todorova 1997, or Lampe 2006.
- 3 Of the 10 ACEEB surveys carried out in 2001-2004 I selected one survey per year. Because this study is a part of a bigger research agenda dealing with political trust, the first criterion was the presence of question items about trust in state institutions. Of the two surveys that included questions about political trust in 2003 I chose the earlier one to match the spring fieldwork in the other three. The resulting surveys are: 2001.1, 2002.2, 2003.2, and 2004.1.
- 4 The first Eurobarometer survey with at least two SEE countries was Eurobarometer 62 in 2004. Of the 48 Eurobarometer surveys carried out since then until 2010, I selected one survey per year in a way that would maximize the number of SEE countries. The choice to analyze surveys selected in this way does not limit the generalizability of obtained results. The seven EB surveys are: 74.2, 72.4, 70.1, 68.1, 66.3, 64.2, and 62.0.
- 5 Consequently, of the 19 ISSP rounds with more than 1 SEE country, I chose the two surveys that include questions about trust in institutions, that is ISSP 1998 and 2008.
- 6 An additional criterion for survey selection, related to their comparative character, was the inclusion of at least two SEE countries. Another was free online access to data and at least documentation. In this way, the analysis excluded for example Central and Eastern Eurobarometer (due to lack of trust in institutions items), the South East European Social Survey Project (incomplete documentation), the Eurobarometers prior to 2004 when of the 13 countries of interest only Greece was covered, or the New Europe Barometer and data from surveys conducted by commercial institutions (no access to data or documentation).
- 7 The first enumeration was done by W. Edwards Deming, who in 1944 listed “thirteen different factors that affect the usefulness of surveys”. The concept of Total Survey Error was elaborated by Biemer and Lyberg (2003: 13-18), see also Biemer 2010, Groves & Lyberg 2010. Eurostat (2000) lists seven dimensions to evaluate survey quality: relevance, accuracy, timeliness, accessibility and clarity, comparability, coherence and completeness; see also: de Leeuw 2004. For fitness-for-use approach see: Juran & Gryna 1988. For the information systems management perspective and results of a data user survey see Wang and Strong (1996).

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Participation of SEE countries in cross-national surveys with trust in parliament item (1990-2010).

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	
Albania													WVS			WVS	LITS		EVS		LITS	AL
BiH								WVS				WVS					LITS					BiH
Bulgaria	CDCEE	EVS						WVS	ISSP	EVS		ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	EB	ESS	EQLS	ESS	EB	ESS	BG
									CDCEE								WVS	EB	EVS		LITS	EB
Croatia							WVS			EVS					EB	EB	LITS	EQLS	ESS	EB	ESS	HR
																	EB	EB	EVS		LITS	EB
																			ISSP			
Cyprus								ISSP				ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	EB	ESS	EQLS	ESS	EB	ESS	CY
																	WVS	EB	EVS		EB	
																			ISSP			
Greece										EVS			ESS		ESS	EB	EB	EQLS	ESS	EB	ESS	GR
																			EVS		EB	
																			EB			
Kosovo*																						KS
Macedonia								WVS				WVS					LITS	EB	EVS	EB	LITS	MK
																			EB		EB	
Montenegro													WVS				LITS					ME
Romania	CDCEE			EVS				WVS	EVS			ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	WVS	LITS	EQLS	EVS	EB	LITS	RO
									CDCEE							EB	EB	EB	EB		EB	EB
Serbia																	WVS					RS
																	LITS		EVS			
Slovenia	CDCEE		EVS				WVS		ISSP	EVS		ACCEB	ESS	ACCEB	ESS	WVS	ESS	EQLS	ESS	EB	ESS	SI
									CDCEE				ACCEB	EB	ACCEB	EB	LITS	EB	EVS		LITS	
																	EB		ISSP		EB	
Turkey		WVS										EVS	ACCEB	ACCEB	ACCEB	EB	LITS	WVS	ESS	EB	LITS	TR
												ACCEB					EB	EQLS	ESS	EB	EB	
																		EB	ISSP			
																			EB			