



August 2010

Migration potential survey: a research method born out of fear. An interview with Professor Endre Sik, professor at the ELTE University and a senior researcher at TARKI Social Research Institute

Tereza Rejšková

Abstract:

In this interview, professor Sik discusses migration potential surveys, the research methods as well as a series of these surveys carried out at the time between the collapse of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and the countries' accession to the EU, arguing that this wave of surveys was motivated by fear in Western countries.

What exactly are migration potential surveys?

Migration potential survey is a standard sociological technique which takes a representative sample of the population and formulates a simple question such as: "Do you want to migrate or not?" You compute the proportion of potential migrants (those who answered: "Yes") and that's it.

I have been involved in many such surveys as a researcher. The first such survey I was involved in was in Romania in 1991. Clare Wallace and Heinz Fassmann – both major players in the field of European sociology – later carried out several comparative migration potential surveys, in which they refined the technique. They differentiated between questions such as: "Have you ever thought of migrating?", "Do you have plans to migrate?", and "Have you made arrangements to migrate?" They considered the seriousness of the decision. The next time I did such a survey I relied on their technique taking it still further. I asked for example: "When do you want to migrate?" One of the options was "I don't know", which of course meant to me that their migration is not planned.

I later made another refinement concerning sampling. I realized that there are certain segments of society which have zero migration potential – people who are old, uneducated, living in small villages – but in a representative sample they are present. So I devised an entirely new sampling method which samples the relevant population. This means that I used the previous migration potential survey techniques but identified those segments of society with zero migration potential and left them out. This solution increased the reliability of prediction.

In 2002 the largest comparative migration potential survey was done by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in Dublin. The survey covered all European candidate countries, and used a very developed technique. But I still think that despite all these improvements, it is a volatile and simple-minded survey, because it is practically impossible for sociology to predict human behaviour.

What are the main limitations of this kind of survey?

The limitations of this kind of survey are relevant only when we analyse it as prediction. As a sociological survey in itself, it is no worse than any other sociological survey, such as surveys of xenophobia, attitudes to foreigners etc. I can analyse for example a migration potential survey to learn which part of society is likely to migrate, but its predictive power is very weak.

Are such surveys done in specific geographical areas and at a specific time?

What is a great surprise to me is that these surveys are not found world-wide, I do not know why, but I could not find any non-European migration potential research with a single profit-driven exception (a recent Gallup-poll). And if I am not mistaken, the European surveys are closely related to the collapse of communism. This was a special and unexpected situation which led to the emergence of a very big fear in the Western countries. And it was this fear that sparked the comparative migration potential research in the candidate countries and in the former Soviet Union.

How did you identify fear as the motivation?

I constructed a map showing the countries where such surveys were carried out and the countries that commissioned them. Such a map is actually the empirical proof. The West always financed it and the East was always the place where fieldwork was carried out, and primarily during the early years of post-communism and before EU accession. Media and political speeches also point to fear as being the main motivation behind these surveys. But I did not test it against media and political rhetoric analysis. Someone should do this.

So such a series of surveys could not be explained merely as a research fashion?

That would not explain the first such (and very expensive) research. It could perhaps explain why they keep being repeated but it does not explain the series of such surveys and why all the money was invested into it. Such early warning system did not exist before, and such surveys were not carried out previously in Western countries. I wonder for example whether there were migration potential surveys before Greece, Spain or Portugal joined the EU. That would be another interesting proof of my hypothesis.

When commissioning these surveys, did the policy makers forget that migration was also demand-driven and dependent on their economic needs?

I don't think they forgot. I assume they believe they have enough knowledge concerning their own demand, the missing information for them was the information about the supply – and that is where the migration potential survey comes in.

How were the results of these surveys used? Did the interpretations of the results of these surveys support the idea that Western societies really had reasons to fear?

These surveys might serve policy makers interested in large-scale migration potential in various ways. The results are official documents, and can be analysed by economists, policy makers, trade union leaders etc., and can be used in order to argue for delaying opening the labour market. This is because these surveys usually overestimate the real numbers of migrants since it is so easy to say in an interview: “Yes, I would like to migrate.” And the media also use these results, because they immediately grab this kind of information: Millions are standing at the other side of the border just eager to enter the minute it is possible.

With respect to EU enlargement, you argue that with time these surveys have been shifting eastward...

Yes, that's another empirical proof of my fear-driven hypothesis. The case of Hungary is a clear proof of the fear-driven characteristic of migration potential research. There were migration potential surveys carried out in Hungary before the country's accession. After Hungary joined the EU, there was no fear of Hungary anymore because it was already under control due to the labour market access derogations, so there was no more migration potential research funded by the West. On the contrary, the Hungarian government started to be scared of the Romania accession, so the Hungarian government commissioned this migration potential survey in Romania.

You said you found these surveys in the context of the collapse of the Soviet block and the EU enlargement that followed. Now the EU is “enlarged”, so what will be happening next?

There is no plan now for several countries to join the EU at the same time, so there is no reason for large comparative migration potential surveys. But this kind of research is not entirely gone. There is migration potential survey in Serbia and in Croatia. They are only singular cases, but the logic is still the same. It is financed from the West and the fieldwork is done in the East. Turkey is a special case, I suppose that the EU does not take its accession seriously. And I don't think that any of the CIS countries will ever join. But if they apply for membership, then I forecast they will be immediately targeted for migration potential survey.

Could it not be argued that all migration research funded by state authorities is fear-driven?

All social research is, to a certain extent. Sociology was born from the need to help solve social problems, so fear being the driving force is not surprising, but what was in this case surprising was that an entirely new research method was born from one day to the next and the second thing was that it was targeted at the unique case of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the lifting of the Iron Curtain. This sparked such a special and focused form of research.

How would you assess the current state of affairs of migration research in general?

The first thing is that there are diverse forms of migration, the major distinction can be between refugees and migrants. The refugee-focused research is quite rightly concentrating on human rights issues and social work aspects. Voluntary migrants require more sophisticated research because they are more diverse – they come from different countries and social groups, they have different reasons to migrate. IMISCOE¹ plays an important role here. IMISCOE is an EU financed institute focusing on the development of migration research, and I believe it was a good investment. They carry out good research, organise conferences and PhD thesis competition and contribute greatly to the development of migration research in Europe. So, in a way, I think migration research in Europe is well managed, but there are big differences from country to country.

¹ More on www.imiscoe.org

How do you see the relationship between quantitative and qualitative methods in migration research?

I am worried that migration research will be lacking on the quantitative side. As qualitative type of research becomes dominant – there will be nice stories, interesting articles and books – the art of quantitative research will diminish. Researchers will be less capable of doing it and also, the future does not look very promising as far as financing is concerned, not only because of the general economic crisis but also because there is an increasing hesitation regarding the value of science in general and social science in particular and that decreases the chances of high-quality large investment quantitative research, not only in migration. But I am not speaking against qualitative methods – the real solution would be to have more innovative methods, i.e. non-participant observation and experiment.

About author:

Tereza Rejšková studied sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences of the Charles University and English and American studies at the Philosophical Faculty of the same university and at the University of Kent. She is currently interested in the connection between migration and development and in migration policies in the European context.

