ABSTRACT

Improving European statistics on international migration: developments and examples of potential analyses

This paper will present the ongoing improvements being made to the availability and comparability of European statistics on international migration. Better statistics should allow an increased range of analyses to be undertaken with the aim of better understanding the patterns and processes underlying migration in Europe.

Migration is acknowledged to be difficult to measure. Unlike births and deaths, for which in Europe and the rest of the developed world there are robust registration systems, migration is often poorly recorded.   It is also often unclear whether a particular movement is, or should be, counted as a migration. Statistical concepts of migration, and the data sources on which the statistics are based, may be unsuited to a more mobile society. Systems for producing migration statistics have often adapted more slowly and are less flexible than the underlying population movements they attempt to quantify.

These problems are compounded when attempting to collect and to analyse migration data at European level. Over a number of years, Eurostat has expanded its collections of migration-related statistical data. However, the usefulness of these statistics has long been restricted by poor data availability and a lack of harmonisation. Key data have often been missing for a number of countries. Often, this lack of data has related specifically to certain migration-related events (in particular, emigration) and to certain population groups (often, nationals of the reporting country). Even where data were available, the use of widely differing national definitions and concepts has meant that comparisons between different countries were difficult and potentially misleading. The available statistical data on migration and population stocks could therefore offer only a limited insight into the scale and patterns of migration to, from and within Europe.

European statistical legislation adopted in 2007 attempts to overcome some of these difficulties by establishing a core set of migration-related statistical data that national authorities in the European Union Member States are obliged to send to Eurostat. Given the great variations across the EU in terms of data sources used for population and migration

statistics, the focus of the legislation has been on the adoption of harmonised definitions, concepts and reporting periods. The harmonised definitions are derived from the United Nations Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration (Revision 1) and from European legislation relating to immigration, asylum and border controls. Eurostat is currently working with national authorities to complete the implementation of this legislation. Although this is an ongoing process, significant positive effects can already be seen in terms of more complete and internationally comparable statistics. National data suppliers have made great efforts to meet the requirements of this statistical legislation and these improvements are continuing.

In addition to the main annual data on migration flows and on the citizenship and country of birth breakdown of the population, the legislation also covers data that are normally produced from administrative sources by Interior Ministries and related agencies. These data include acquisition of citizenship, asylum applications and decisions, actions taken under immigration law such as refusals of entry at the frontier and removals of unauthorised residents, and residence permits issued to third country nationals (non-EU citizens).

Based of the data collected, Eurostat compiles a range of statistical tables that are freely available on-line for use by policy makers, researchers and the general public. The improved availability of comparable European statistics on international migration is expected to help support better policy making and to assist researchers working on migration-related fields.

So far, the scope for data analysis has been limited by the problems with the data described above. As part of its work to better understand and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the data collected, Eurostat intends undertake further analyses based on the improving data to provide a more comprehensive picture of the scale, patterns and processes of migration in Europe. One area that will be the subject of further work is the examination of the relationship between the different datasets that are collected. Much analysis so far has treated the different data separately, looking for example, at changes in the numbers of asylum applications or the origins of migration flows. However, it is clear that the different migration-related processes are likely to be inter-related with common patterns – such as citizenship and destination - being found in the data.

A number of potential research questions can be identified and addressed. For example, to what extent can data on residence permits (that are disaggregated by citizenship and by reason for permit issue) help to explain changes seen in immigration flows of particular citizenships in certain destination countries? Is the balance between particular types of migration (labour migration, family formation/reunion, students) changing, and are similar changes seen in all EU Member States? Are there similarities or differences between the main citizenships of persons applying for asylum and those granted residence permits as labour migrants? Are there differences in the age and sex structure of asylum applicants as opposed to the main annual migration statistics? This paper will attempt to highlight potential future areas for further research at European level that are becoming more possible with the ongoing improvements to the data available.