

## THE 9<sup>TH</sup> CONFERENCE OF THE EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION: EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGY OR EUROPEAN SOCIOLOGIES?

LÍVIA MURINKÓ<sup>1</sup>–IVETT SZALMA<sup>2</sup>

The European Sociological Association (ESA) is a non-profit, Europe-wide academic organization with over 1,500 members. It aims at facilitating “European sociological research, teaching and communication between sociologists and between sociologists and other scientists” (ESA 2009). The association was established in Vienna in 1992, at the first European sociological conference.

The latest biennial ESA conference was held in the Portuguese capital of Lisbon, between September 2-5, 2009. The main question of the conference was whether we can look at European society as an increasingly cohesive entity or whether divisions of nation, class, ethnicity, region, gender, and so on continue to be more salient. Is there one European society or are there many European societies? Is the nation-state the most appropriate unit of analysis or are other approaches needed? Is there convergence or divergence between the regions of Europe? A particular focus of the conference was the role of sociology in understanding the European area and how sociologists from different countries and with different traditions can work together toward this end.

The aim of our analysis is to provide a special description of contemporary European sociology, based on the presentations of the 9<sup>th</sup> ESA conference. We will examine to what extent European sociological life is homogeneous, how it is structured, and which subjects attract major research attention.

The analysis is based on a database compiled by the authors of the present

<sup>1</sup> Livia Murinkó is a research fellow, at the HCSO Demographic Research Institute, and a PhD-candidate at the Sociology Doctoral School, Corvinus University of Budapest; e-mail: murinko\_livia@yahoo.com, murinko@demografia.hu

<sup>2</sup> Ivett Szalma is a research fellow at the Institute of Sociology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and a PhD-candidate at the Sociology Doctoral School, Corvinus University of Budapest; e-mail: szalma@socio.mta.hu

report. It contains the most important information about the approximately 2,500 abstracts and their first authors (hereafter referred to as presenters) as they appeared in the official Abstract Book.<sup>3</sup> The database includes all presentations at plenary, semi-plenary, and normal sessions and all posters and distributed papers (referred to hereafter as presentations). For each presentation, the following information is contained in the data set: sex, country and city of origin of the first author; the session in which the abstract was included; the type of presentation (plenary, semi-plenary, or session presentation, poster or distributed paper); and whether the presentation was purely theoretical or included empirical analysis. The number of countries analyzed in the international comparative presentations and the databases used are also recorded and represent a special focus of the present analysis.

In the following sections, we examine the first authors' countries of origin, the sessions and themes of the conference, gender differences, and the characteristics of cross-country comparative research.

## FIRST AUTHORS' COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN

The conference attracted presenters from 46 different countries from all corners of the Earth. The most presenters were from Portugal, the Scandinavian states, and big European countries like the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Russia. Several presenters came from other continents as well, mostly from North America.<sup>4</sup> Hungary was present with 22 abstracts (*Table 1*).

If we compare the number of presenters from each country to their population size, we obtain a measure of "presentation density" (*Figure 1*). The number of presentations per one million inhabitants is the highest in Portugal (35) and Finland (34). The outstanding activity of researchers from the host country is not surprising; however, the Finnish presentation density was higher than all the other countries. It is more often in smaller countries – Luxembourg, Norway, Estonia, Slovenia, and Sweden, in addition to Portugal and Finland – that the number of abstracts per one million inhabitants is higher than the average (6.6). The value of the corresponding measure for Hungary is 2.2.

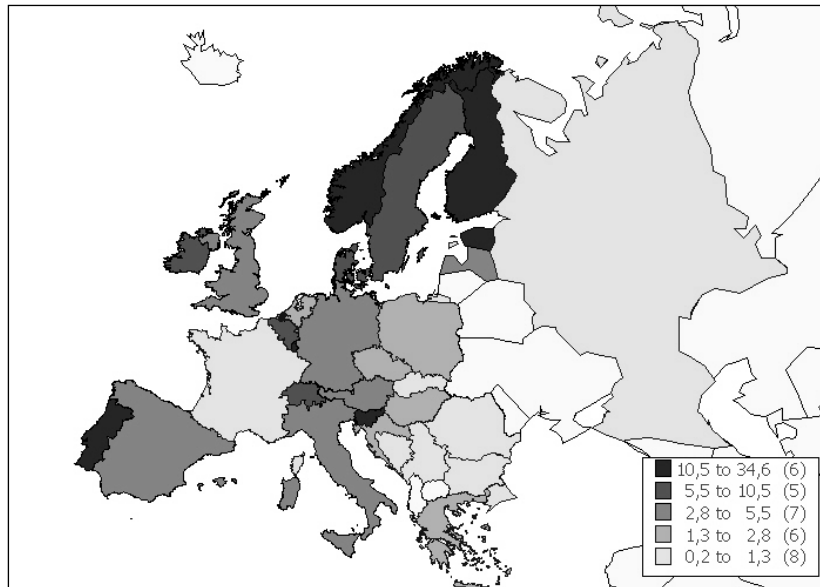
<sup>3</sup> The editing of the Abstract Book was closed on August 5, 2009. Some abstracts that are included may not have been presented at the conference. The on-line version of the Abstract Book is available at <http://esa.abstractbook.net>.

<sup>4</sup> In the forthcoming analysis, only presenters and presentations from European countries will be dealt with. Except for *Figure 1*, *Table 1*, and *Table 3*, only European countries with at least ten abstracts have entered the analysis.

**Table 1** *Number of first authors by country of origin*

Country	n	Country	n
Portugal	370	Czech Republic	21
United Kingdom	296	Canada	21
Germany	248	Estonia	20
Italy	203	Greece	20
Finland	179	Australia	14
Spain	114	Brasilia	14
Russia	113	Latvia	12
Poland	84	Lithuania	11
France	80	Luxemburg	10
Sweden	77	Croatia	8
Belgium	75	Serbia	7
Norway	74	Japan	6
USA	48	Taiwan	5
Switzerland	47	Mexico	4
Turkey	46	Cyprus	3
the Netherlands	45	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2
Austria	43	Slovakia	2
Denmark	37	Bulgaria	2
Romania	28	South-Africa	2
Ireland	26	Azerbaijan	1
Israel	25	South-Korea	1
Hungary	22	India	1
Slovenia	21	Iran	1
Total			2346

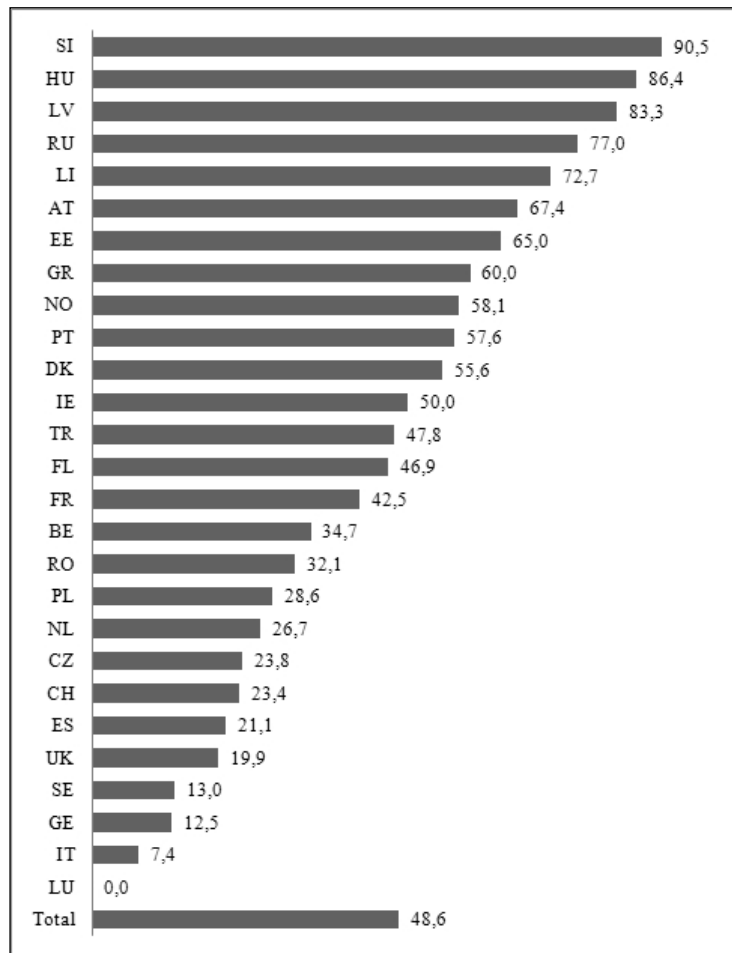
**Figure 1** Number of presentations per one million inhabitants in Europe by presenters' country of origin



Note: The source of information on the number of inhabitants: U.S. Census Bureau (2009)

The ratio of presenters who are from the capital city of their respective countries reflect the geographical distribution of universities and research institutes; moreover, it provides information on how much the discipline of sociology is (de)centralized (*Figure 2*). On the average, every second presenter is from the capital of their respective country. Sociological research is carried out more in the capitals of smaller and post-communist states: at least two thirds of the presenters are from the capital cities of Slovenia, the Baltic states, Russia, Austria, and Hungary. Bigger countries have a greater chance of being found at the other end of the scale: no more than one fourth of the researchers work in the capitals of Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Spain. However, some smaller countries also exhibit a high level of decentralization (Luxemburg, Switzerland, the Czech Republic).

**Figure 2** Ratio of presenters who are from the capital city of their respective country (by percentage)



## SESSIONS AND THEMES OF THE CONFERENCE

Each Research Network (RN) and Research Stream (RS) of the ESA – which function as independent research forums – organized separate sessions at the conference. Both the size of the sessions and the characteristics of the presentations in them differed significantly.

*Table 2* shows the total number of presentations, posters, and distributed papers in each session. Altogether, there were 2,347 abstracts in 48 sessions. The most popular topics can be found at the beginning of the list. The most abstracts were accepted in sessions dealing with the sociology of aging, culture, and youth. The topics of family and children, occupations and education, environment, health and illness, and arts and culture also attracted considerable scholarly attention.

The distribution of presenters from different countries was uneven among the sessions (*Table 3*). Labor market institutions, employment, social theory, and the sociology of health were the most popular sessions among presenters from Austria. The last topic proved to be the most popular in Denmark, Finland, and Portugal as well. Presentations from Belgium and Romania dealt with the sociology of education the most often, while Swiss and Slovenian researchers preferred the theme of family sociology. The French and the Dutch gave the most presentations regarding the sociology of arts, and likewise, German, Irish, and Slovenian researchers led the way on aging presentations, as did Hungarian and Slovenian researchers regarding the topic of the sociology of youth. Culture was the central theme among Italians, consumption among Norwegians, qualitative methods among the Polish, and sexuality among the British. Most Swedish sociologists were interested in the topics of childhood, emotions, professions and environment.

**Table 2** Number of abstracts by session

Session	n
RN01 Ageing in Europe	106
RN07 Sociology of culture	105
RN30 Youth and generation	104
RN13 Sociology of families and intimate lives	99
RN19 Sociology of professions	91
RN12 Environment and sociology	90
RN16 Sociology of health and illness	88
RN04 Sociology of children and childhood	86
RN02 Sociology of the arts	81
RN05 Sociology of consumption	80
RN20 Qualitative methods	79
RN10 Sociology of education	75
RN33 Women's and gender studies	73
RN22 Sociology of risk and uncertainty	71
RN23 Sexuality	69
RN29 Social theory	65
RN32 Political sociology	64
RN11 Sociology of emotions	62
RN31 Ethnic relations, racism, and anti-Semitism	59
RN25 Social movements	51
RN09 Economic sociology	49
RN24 Science and technology	47
RN14 Gender relations in the labor market and the welfare state	42
RN17 Industrial relations, labor market institutions, and employment	41
RS07 Memory, culture, and public discourse	41
RS04 Europe and immigration	40
RN18 Sociology of communications and media research	39
RN27 Regional network on Southern European societies	38
RS09 Research methods in ethnic and migration studies	35
RN26 Sociology of social policy	34
RS10 Socio-anthropology of trans-national migrations and migrants' families	31
Plenary and semi-plenary sessions	29
RN08 Disaster and social crisis	29
RN03 Biographical perspectives on European societies	28
RS16 Russia and its European identity	26
RS01 Sociology and disability	25
RN06 Critical political economy	24
RS13 Re-assessing class in contemporary sociology	20
RN21 RENCORE: Methods for comparative research in Europe	18
RS03 East and West in Europe	17
RS15 Rethinking intergenerational transmission of inequalities	17
RS12 Arts management: sociological inquiries	16
RS02 Dynamics and complexity of minority statuses in plural societies	15
RS08 Modernization theory. Dead or alive in the 21st century?	12
RS11 Religion and the sociology of religion in Europe	10
RS17 Sociology of celebration	9
RS06 Maritime sociology	7
RS05 Historical sociology	5
RS14 Chronic regional conflicts	5
Total	2347

**Table 3** *The most popular sessions by presenters' country of origin*

Country	Session
AT	Industrial relations, labor market institutions and employment; Social theory; Sociology of health and illness
BE, RO	Sociology of education
CH	Sociology of families and intimate lives
CZ	Ethnic relations, racism, and anti-Semitism
DK, FL, PT	Sociology of health and illness
ES, TR	Women's and gender studies
FR, NL	Sociology of the arts
GE, IE	Ageing in Europe
HU	Youth and generation
IT	Sociology of culture
NO	Sociology of consumption
PL	Qualitative methods
RU	Russia and its European identity
SE	Sociology of children and childhood; Sociology of emotions; Sociology of professions; Environment and sociology
SI	Ageing in Europe; Sociology of families and intimate lives; Youth and generation; Environment and sociology
UK	Sexuality

*Note:* Only European countries with at least 20 presentations are included. All sessions are listed in which ties occurred.

Another possible point of departure for discussing the themes of the conference is comparing the sessions with the chapters of an internationally acknowledged sociology textbook (Giddens 2009) and a comprehensive encyclopedia of sociology (Bryant – Peck 2007). One striking difference between the conference sessions and the textbook is that Giddens lays considerably more emphasis on such classic sociological problems as social structure and stratification, poverty, urban sociology, crime and other deviances, whereas the conference sessions only touch upon these themes. On the contrary, research about the phases of the life course (childhood, youth, and old age), migration, minorities and ethnicities, economy, and political studies received more attention at the conference than in the textbook.

The encyclopedia (Bryant – Peck 2007) is divided into two main parts: it discusses the traditional, “mainstream” approaches and the special and



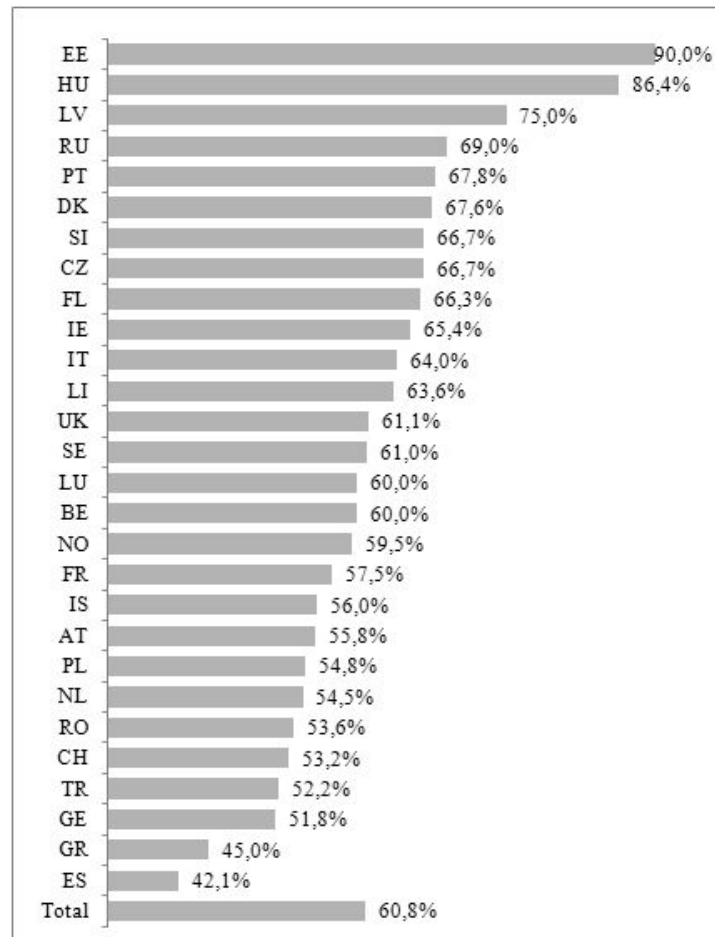
interdisciplinary branches of the discipline separately. About two thirds of the conference abstracts can be classified into the first category: research regarding social institutions (family, marriage, religion, education, politics, and economy), stratification and social structure, gender differences, ethnicity, employment, and culture; theoretical and methodological questions belong to this group. Special and interdisciplinary approaches include life course studies, the topics of arts, science and technology, environment, risk and insecurity, social crisis, consumption, emotions, and discourse and biographical analyses.

### FEMALE AND MALE PRESENTERS

There are sizeable cross-country and cross-session differences in the gender composition of the presenters. On the whole, female presenters were overrepresented at the conference: 61% of the first authors were women and the rate of men did not exceed 60% for any participating country. There were only two countries (Spain and Greece) with more male than female presenters. It was mainly the East and North European countries where the rate of female presenters significantly exceeded the average. The majority of participants from Hungary were women (86%), and this rate was larger only in Estonia (*Figure 3*).

The proportion of women and men differed also by session (*Table 4*). Female researchers were overrepresented in sessions focusing on gender, children, and family issues. On the contrary, men dominated sessions about social theory, research methodology, labor markets, economy, politics, ethnicity, and immigration.

**Figure 3** Rate of women among first authors by country of origin (by percentage)



**Table 4** Rate of female presenters in sessions where the measure is above the average (by percentage)

Session	%
RN33 Women's and gender studies	87.7
RN04 Sociology of children and childhood	84.9
RN14 Gender relations in the labor market and the welfare state	83.3
RS10 Socio-anthropology of trans-national migrations and migrants' families	80.6
RN13 Sociology of families and intimate lives	79.8
RN01 Ageing in Europe	73.6
RS02 Dynamics and complexity of minority statuses in plural societies	73.3
RS16 Russia and its European identity	73.1
RS01 Sociology and disability	72.0
RN02 Sociology of the arts	70.4
RN30 Youth and generation	69.2
RN23 Sexuality	69.1
RS12 Arts management: sociological inquiries	68.8
RS07 Memory, culture, and public discourse	68.3
RS17 Sociology of celebration	66.7
RN16 Sociology of health and illness	65.9
RN27 Regional network on Southern European societies	65.8
RS09 Research methods in ethnic and migration studies	65.7
RN19 Sociology of professions	64.8
RN26 Sociology of social policy	64.7
RS15 Rethinking intergenerational transmission of inequalities	64.7
RN11 Sociology of emotions	62.9
RN22 Sociology of risk and uncertainty	62.9
...	
Total	60.8

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CROSS-COUNTRY COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

In the case of a large-scale all-European conference whose central aim is international comparison, it is relevant to investigate the rate of cross-country comparative researches among the presentations.<sup>5</sup>

About two thirds of the presentations analyzed only one country, which usually corresponded with the presenter's country of origin (*Figure 4*). Some analyses dealing with one country focused only on some part of the country (especially in the cases of Belgium and Spain) or only on some settlements, so the focus of the researches was narrowed down further. At the same time, some presentations widened their focus by comparing immigrants from different countries. The comparison of more than five countries was most frequent among researchers who came from the Benelux and the German-speaking states, as well as from Slovenia and Hungary.

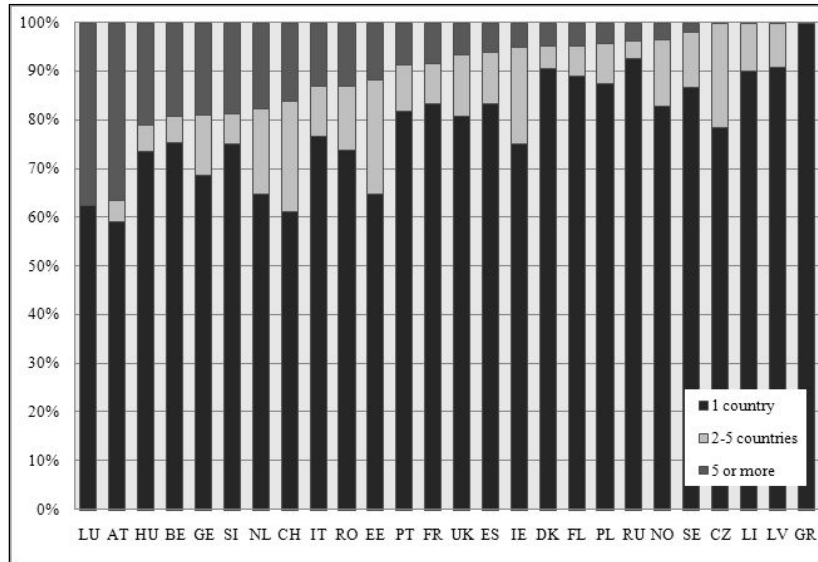
Only every tenth empirical study compared five or more countries. The rate of international presentations was highest in the plenary and semi-plenary sessions, where the explicit expectation was to adopt a European viewpoint and to reflect on the main theme of the conference. Critical political economy was the second most prevalent international session. The titles of sessions focusing on Eastern and Western Europe, gender relations in the labor market and the welfare state, labor markets, biographic approaches, and aging referred to cross-country comparison, so it is not surprising that they dealt with international questions more often than the average (*Table 5*).

We also examined which databases the quantitative studies utilized. More precisely, we analyzed how many researchers applied the following international databases in their presentations and in which sessions: the European Social Survey (ESS), the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), the European Value Survey (EVS), the Eurobarometer (EB), the World Value Survey (WVS), the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), and the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC)<sup>6</sup> (*Table 6*).

<sup>5</sup> Purely theoretical presentations are excluded from this analysis, together with those researches where the subjects are individuals or websites and abstracts that do not contain any information on which countries they examine.

<sup>6</sup> The list can never be complete, although the authors endeavored to present the most important international databases.

**Figure 4** The number of analyzed countries in the empirical research by presenters' country of origin (by percentage)



**Table 5** The rate of presentations in the most international sessions where five or more countries are compared (by percentage)

Session	%
Plenary or semi plenary presentations	83.3
RN06 Critical political economy	58.3
RS03 East and West in Europe	28.6
RN14 Gender relations in the labor market and the welfare state	22.5
RN17 Industrial relations, labor market institutions, and employment	22.2
RN03 Biographical perspectives on European societies	20.0
RN01 Ageing in Europe	20.0
RS13 Re-assessing class in contemporary sociology	16.7
RN13 Sociology of families and intimate lives	16.3
RN10 Sociology of education	12.9
RN18 Sociology of communications and media research	11.1
RN12 Environment and sociology	11.1
RN16 Sociology of health and illness	11.0
RN32 Political sociology	10.8
...	
Total	9.5

**Table 6** *The most frequently used international databases, the number of abstracts, and the sessions which utilized them the most often*

Database	Number of abstracts	Sessions
ESS	36	Sociology of families and intimate lives; Youth and generation; Sociology of children and childhood,
EB	17	Environment and sociology; Sociology of culture; Political Sociology
ISSP	14	East and West in Europe; Environment and sociology; RENCORE: Methods for Comparative Research on Europe; Youth and generation
WVS	12	Youth and generation; East and West in Europe
EVS	11	Youth and generation; East and West in Europe; Environment and sociology
GGG	3	Aging in Europe; Sociology of families and intimate lives; Youth and generation
EU-SLIC	3	Aging in Europe; Sociology of risk and uncertainty; Sociology of social policy

The most frequently used international database was the European Social Survey (ESS), 36 abstracts referred to having used it. ESS is conducted in more than twenty European countries and Israel every two years, and contains core and rotating modules. The rotating modules focused upon active citizenship and attitudes towards immigration in 2002, opinions on health and medicine, economic morality, and the relationship between family, work, and well-being in 2004, personal and social well-being and the organization of the life-course in 2006, and attitudes toward welfare and ageism in 2008.

The second most popular international database was the Eurobarometer (EB) with 17 abstracts, followed by ISSP (14 abstracts), WVS (12 abstracts), and EVS (11 abstracts).

The Eurobarometer (EB) is a series of surveys regularly performed on behalf of the European Commission, having been conducted in the member states of the European Union (earlier European Community) since 1973 with the aim of examining social and political changes. The semi-annual harmonized polls are carried out every spring and autumn.

Currently more than forty countries participate in ISSP. Besides the European nations, the U.S., Canada, Japan, Australia, Israel, South Africa,

and some South American countries take part in the project. The topics of ISSP change from year to year, and it always focuses on public opinions and social attitudes.

The European Values Survey (EVS) is conducted every ninth year (1981, 1990, 1999, and 2008) in order to measure European citizens' value choices and to examine cross-country and cross-cultural similarities and differences in Europe. The World Values Survey (WVS) is the worldwide counterpart of EVS. Even though the two projects have been coordinated by different groups of researchers and the questionnaires are not identical, the polls are harmonized.

Among the international databases, GGS and EU-SLIC were used the least frequently at the conference – only three abstracts were based on each of them. The reason for their low level of popularity may be that both are relatively new, and they focus on special topics. The GGS mainly analyzes demographic issues, and data is available on only eight countries and only yet from the first wave. The main focus of EU-SILC is income distribution and poverty.

There are differences in the popularity of the international databases by session (*Table 6*). ESS is mainly used to analyze questions related to family, youth, and children. The relatively well-attended Youth and Generation session included many cross-country comparisons, so most of the international databases appeared in this session: ISSP, WVS, EVS, and GGS. The Eurobarometer was popular among the areas of political, environmental, and cultural research. The value research programs (WVS and EVS) played a crucial role in comparisons between Western and Eastern Europe. GGS was mostly applied to socio-demographic studies, while the EU-SLIC was popular in researches dealing with aging, social policy, and risk.

## REFERENCES

- Bryant, Clifton D. – Dennis L. Peck eds. (2007), *21<sup>th</sup> Century Sociology: A Reference Handbook*, Thousand Oaks, Sage
- ESA (2009), *ESA Statutes*, [www.europeansociology.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=19&Itemid=38](http://www.europeansociology.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=19&Itemid=38), Downloaded: December 28, 2009
- Giddens, Anthony (2009), *Sociology*, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, Cambridge, Polity Press
- U.S. Census Bureau (2009), *International Data Base*, <http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idb/country.php>, Downloaded: October 30, 2009







