

The Moral Legacy of Communism: An Age-Period-Cohort Analysis of a Radical Societal Transformation

Plamen Akaliyski

University Carlos III of Madrid

Raül Tormos

Center for Opinion Studies (CEO), Government of Catalonia (Spain); and Open University of Catalonia

This study examines the legacy of Soviet-style communism on the moral beliefs of Central and Eastern European societies. Research on cultural values (Akaliyski et al., 2022) indicates that ex-communist countries oriented towards the EU tend to follow the cultural trends in Western Europe but at a slower speed which further widens the cultural gap between them. Has this process also taken place in the domain of moral beliefs? Has the intentional effort of communist regimes to eradicate religion and replace it with communist ideology succeeded in creating a new type of secular morality and how the revival of religiosity in Central and Eastern Europe after the fall of communist regimes is changing the moral landscape of these societies? To what extent are the moral developments of ex-communist societies the result of sharing the all-encompassing transformative experience of communism in their past or of traits that can be acted upon such as adhering to institutional agreements, improving income inequality, privatization, reducing corruption, or fostering prosperity? How is Russia's challenge to the moral authority of the West (Headley, 2015) and the resulting culture clash (Akaliyski & Welzel, 2020) affecting the developments in Europe at large?

To answer these questions, we use the Morally Debatable Behaviors Scale (Harding & Phillips, 1986) fielded in the World Value Survey and the European Values Study (WVS-EVS integrated dataset). Nationally representative data ($N=800$ to 5000 per country) are available from 1981 to 2021 in intervals of between nine and five years, with the majority of the countries surveyed for the first time around 1991. A factor analysis of that scale yields two distinguishable cross-cultural dimensions of morality (Vauclair & Fischer, 2011): attitudes towards (1) dishonest-illegal and (2) personal-sexual issues. The first one comprises items capturing the level of permissiveness regarding homosexuality, prostitution, abortion, divorce, euthanasia, and suicide. The second one pertains to attitudes such as cheating on taxing, accepting a bribe, claiming benefits one is not entitled to and using public transport without a valid ticket.

We use these dimensions to explore whether it is possible to discern a moral syndrome specifically affecting ex-communist societies when compared to other world regions with different political-institutional and historical legacies. Using an age-period-cohort approach and hybrid random effects within and between models (Tormos, 2019; Tormos, Vauclair & Dobewall, 2017), we study if the imprint of communism has travelled beyond the generations that directly experienced it during their formative years. We also explore cohort trajectories over time to examine for trends such as an eventual backlash among

older generations, who have been socialized to contribute to a vastly different kind of society and may stumble in their adaptation to the new political and economic realities. Regarding period effects, we model the impact of time invariant and time varying contextual factors in the socioeconomic domain (such as the GDP per capita and income inequality), institutional/political domain (like joining the EU, corruption levels, crime rates and state fragility), and historical legacies (predominant religion and former empire membership).

Our study has implications for understanding the lasting consequences of radical societal transformations such as the adoption of communism and transformation back to market economy and liberal democracy, which succeeded to different degrees in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe. We draw conclusions for the future of Europe as a continent undergoing an unprecedented level of political and economic integration while being challenged by deeply rooted historical legacies that question its shared moral foundations.

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