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Are We Happy Yet? Revisiting Life Satisfaction in Eastern Europe

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Abstract: This chapter revisits the scholarship on life satisfaction in Eastern Europe. We first look at the broader drivers of life satisfaction identified in the literature. Then, we discuss the ‘happiness gap’ in Eastern Europe – the observed difference between the self-declared happiness of residents of former communist countries and the residents of other countries. Explanations for the happiness gap are considered, with a focus on Eastern Orthodox religion.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Happiness Gap, Life Satisfaction, Orthodox Christianity

JEL codes: D91, P29, Z12

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Introduction

What makes us happy? In the past few decades this question has become the focus of an ever-increasing body of research in the social sciences, including economics. An important strand of the literature has focused on how to adequately measure life satisfaction, and whether subjective well-being can be captured using surveys¹ (Kimball and Willis, 2023; Nikolova and Sanfey, 2016). Meanwhile, a different scholarship has tried to decipher how quickly people adapt to large-scale economic and political transitions (Easterlin, 2023; Graham, 2011). Do recessions and regime changes make people unhappy? And if yes, how long does this unhappiness last?

Eastern Europe is the ideal setting to seek answers to these questions, due to the profound economic and political transformations which its citizens experienced in the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The region that underwent processes of economic and political transition following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe is large and heterogeneous – from Eastern Germany in the west, Turkmenistan in the south, and the Russian Pacific coast in the east. These countries and regions are different not only historically, culturally, and religiously, but also in terms of what united them in this context – the communist past. In some of them, communism was present for a generation longer than in others – in most of the former Soviet Union since WWI, and since WWII in other regions. The style of communism was also different – stricter in the Soviet Union, more liberal in former Yugoslavia. Finally, communism was imposed by a mix of external and internal actors, where the combination of the two greatly varied - external in the Baltics, internal in Russia. The communist heritage was perceived with different degrees of hostility by the citizens of each country (Mladjan, 2018). Thus, for the researcher, treating the region as one requires caution due to the heterogeneity of its parts.

¹ This chapter uses ‘life satisfaction’, ‘happiness’ and ‘subjective well-being’ interchangeably.

Along with extreme financial hardship due to economic recessions and disrupted trade networks, the early transition years also brought significant health and psychological suffering (Brainerd and Cutler, 2005) and disillusionment with governments and market economies (Pop-Eleches and Tucker, 2017). In several transition countries, authoritarian reversals took place in the 1990s (Russia, Central Asia), with former communist elites solidifying their earlier political and economic capture. Taking stock of the transition process over the last thirty years, Djankov (2021) argues that the transition from planned to market economies has been more successful compared to the political transition in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, the divergence in democracy and political rights is four to five times larger compared to the divergence in economic freedom and ease of doing business. What is more, transitions remain incomplete or on hold in several Eastern European countries today, due to growing inequalities, poverty, and populist authoritarian leaders. Most recently, the Russia-Ukraine war has decimated the Ukrainian economy, killed thousands, and displaced millions.

Among all these changes, how has happiness fared in Eastern Europe? In this chapter, we revisit the scholarship on life satisfaction in Eastern Europe. We first look at the broader drivers of life satisfaction identified in the literature. Then, we discuss the ‘happiness gap’ in Eastern Europe – the observed difference between the self-declared happiness of residents of former communist countries and the residents of other countries which remains even after standard covariates of happiness are accounted for. Next, we delve into two of the proposed explanations for the Eastern European disparity in subjective well-being: corruption and religion. Using the latest available data from the World Happiness Report (2024), we then present new evidence suggesting that while the Eastern European happiness gap has narrowed, it has not closed yet.

Based on the discussion, we make concluding remarks and identify some promising areas for future research.

Determinants of Happiness in Eastern Europe

The literature has identified several drivers of life satisfaction which are common across countries. Much of the existing research has focused on the correlation between income and happiness, finding contradictory evidence. For instance, Jebb et al. (2018) use the Gallup World Poll (which covers 1.7 million individuals) to identify points of income satiation. They show that across the world, income satiation happens at \$95,000 for life evaluation, and between \$60,000 to \$75,000 for emotional well-being. However, for Eastern Europe and the Balkans, these satiation points are much lower: \$45,000 for life evaluation, and \$35,000 for emotional affect. Conversely, Killingsworth (2021) argues that to properly understand the relationship between income and life satisfaction, researchers should be looking at evaluative well-being (when one pauses and reflects on one's life) rather than experienced well-being (one's momentary feelings). Drawing on nearly 2 million reports of experienced well-being in the US, Killingsworth (2021) shows evidence that well-being increased linearly with log-income, without the existence of a satiation point. However, a reanalysis of the Killingsworth's article by Killingsworth et al. (2023) found a flattening pattern at \$100,000 - but only for the least happy 15% of people.

The literature is similarly undecided on the relationship between age and life satisfaction. Early research claimed that the relationship between age and happiness is U-shaped, while other work found evidence against it. Blanchflower (2020) analyzes data covering 145 countries and finds that the relationship between age and happiness is indeed U-shaped. For developing countries (236 estimates), the minimum occurs at an average age of 49.9, while for developed

countries (241 estimates), it happens at age 46.7. Among the Eastern European countries examined, the U-shaped relationship was found in all countries apart from Kazakhstan.

Even though women tend to have worse income, worse self-reported health, fewer economic opportunities, higher rates of depression, and experience more violence, a robust finding across the literature is that women are, on average, happier compared to men (Montgomery, 2022; Becchetti and Conzo, 2022). Montgomery (2022) employs anchoring vignettes in the Gallup World Poll to show that men and women use response scales differently when answering questions on life satisfaction. She finds that once the response scales have been normalized, women appear *less* happy than men on average. Other determinants of subjective well-being for women include marital status (Lawrence et al, 2019), education and health status (Djankov et al, 2016), and employment status (Blanchflower, 2020).

There is also an ongoing debate on whether long-run experiences of war affect happiness in Eastern Europe. Child and Nikolova (2020) use two different measures of World War II victimization: (1) a subjective measure based on respondents' self-reports in the 2010 EBRD-World Bank Life in Transition Survey, indicating whether the respondent, or any of his/her parents or grandparents, were physically injured or killed during World War II; and (2) an objective measure considering World War II locality-level battles from a historical atlas. Child and Nikolova (2020) find no effect of the subjective victimization measure on happiness but a positive and significant effect of the objective measure.

Why are Eastern Europeans Unhappy?

Over the previous two decades, the social science literature has identified a 'happiness gap' in Eastern Europe – a difference between the self-declared happiness of residents of former

communist countries and the residents of other comparable countries. Given the low values on the drivers of happiness (e.g., income), this gap is not surprising. But there is a puzzling complementary finding. The usual determinants of happiness (e.g., GDP per capita, life expectancy, gender, marital status, and education) do not fully explain this gap, according to standard econometric models. This means that Eastern Europeans are even less happy than expected compared to residents of other countries at similar levels of development.

The Eastern European happiness gap was first identified by Sanfey and Teksoz (2007) and confirmed with more recent data. Djankov et al. (2016) identify the existence of the gap using both individual-level data (the 2010 wave of the EBRD-World Bank Life in Transition Survey – LiTS) and country-level data (constructed from four surveys: Pew, Eurobarometer, European Values Study and the LiTS). In the cross-country regressions, Djankov et al. (2016) control for GDP per capita, life expectancy, and religious affiliation. In the individual analyses, they control for age, age squared, gender, health, marital status, education, employment status, and parental background.

In the cross-country specifications, Djankov et al. (2016) find that, on average, after controlling for a number of determinants of happiness, residents of Eastern European economies are 10.4% less satisfied with life compared to residents of other countries. Looking at data covering the early 1990s to 2014, Djankov et al. (2016) show that although this happiness gap has narrowed since the 1990s, life satisfaction levels in the post-communist world have stagnated since 2000, and there is no evidence that this happiness gap has closed. In the individual-level regressions, Djankov et al. (2016) find that the difference in happiness between Eastern European and non-Eastern European countries is around half a point (where happiness is

measured on a scale of 1 to 5). This effect is 14.4% relative to the mean of the happiness variable and explains around 0.42 standard deviations in the variation of life satisfaction.

What could explain the part of the Eastern European happiness gap that is not captured by standard covariates? Djankov et al. (2016) propose two mechanisms: government corruption and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. According to the cross-country estimates, a country's share of Eastern Orthodox believers accounts for around 30% of the happiness gap, while including country-level corruption perceptions eliminates the remaining 70% of the gap. In the individual-level data, corruption perceptions of public services are insignificant, but variables capturing perceptions of government effectiveness and whether effort and intelligence are important for success in life decrease the happiness gap by 21%. Within-country analyses using an objective corruption index (from Nikolova and Marinov 2017) and focusing on Bulgaria also confirm that corruption is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. The authors interpret these results as evidence that Eastern Europeans have grown used to petty corruption but are less accepting of government inefficiency and political bribery.

Building on a growing literature on religion as a determinant of economic and political outcomes (Mladjan et al., 2022; Nikolova and Polansky, 2020), Djankov and Nikolova (2018) investigate more deeply why those of Eastern Orthodox faith are less satisfied with their lives. Using data from the World Values Survey and the last two waves of the Life in Transition Survey (2010 and 2016), the authors show that, on average, Eastern Orthodox believers are no different than the non-religious when it comes to happiness, while Catholics and Protestants are *happier* by 1.1% – 5.8% (effects calculated across surveys and using the means of the dependent variables). Djankov and Nikolova's (2018) explanation focuses on the deep-rooted differences

between Western Christianity (which gave rise to Catholicism and Protestantism), as compared to Eastern Christianity (from which Eastern Orthodoxy originated). Western Christianity was associated with rationalism, individualism, and questioning authorities, whereas Eastern Christianity emphasized community and conformity rather than questioning authorities. According to the authors, these religious differences persisted despite nearly fifty years of communism precisely because the Orthodox ideology was instrumental in spreading and solidifying the communist doctrine. Eastern Orthodoxy provided the basis on which communist policies, such as the collectivization of agriculture, communitarianism, and control of mobility, were built and effectively enforced. Consistent with the theoretical framework, Djankov and Nikolova (2018) also find that compared to those who are Catholic, Protestant, or non-believers, Orthodox believers are more supportive of government involvement in the economy, prefer old ideas and safe jobs, have less social capital, and are more left-leaning. Those of Eastern Orthodox faith also have fewer children and are more risk-averse.

New Evidence on Happiness in Eastern Europe

The latest available data on happiness in Eastern Europe can be found in the 2024 version of the World Happiness Report (WHR) (Helliwell et al, 2024). This publication of the Wellbeing Research Centre at the University of Oxford includes data on happiness from 148 countries and territories from all over the World. Happiness is measured by respondents to the Gallup World Poll who self-evaluate their life on a scale of 0 to 10, with 10 being the hypothetical best possible life for them. The obtained scale is referred to as the Cantril ladder. In this chapter, we do not conduct a full-blown empirical analysis to test the persistence of the Eastern European happiness

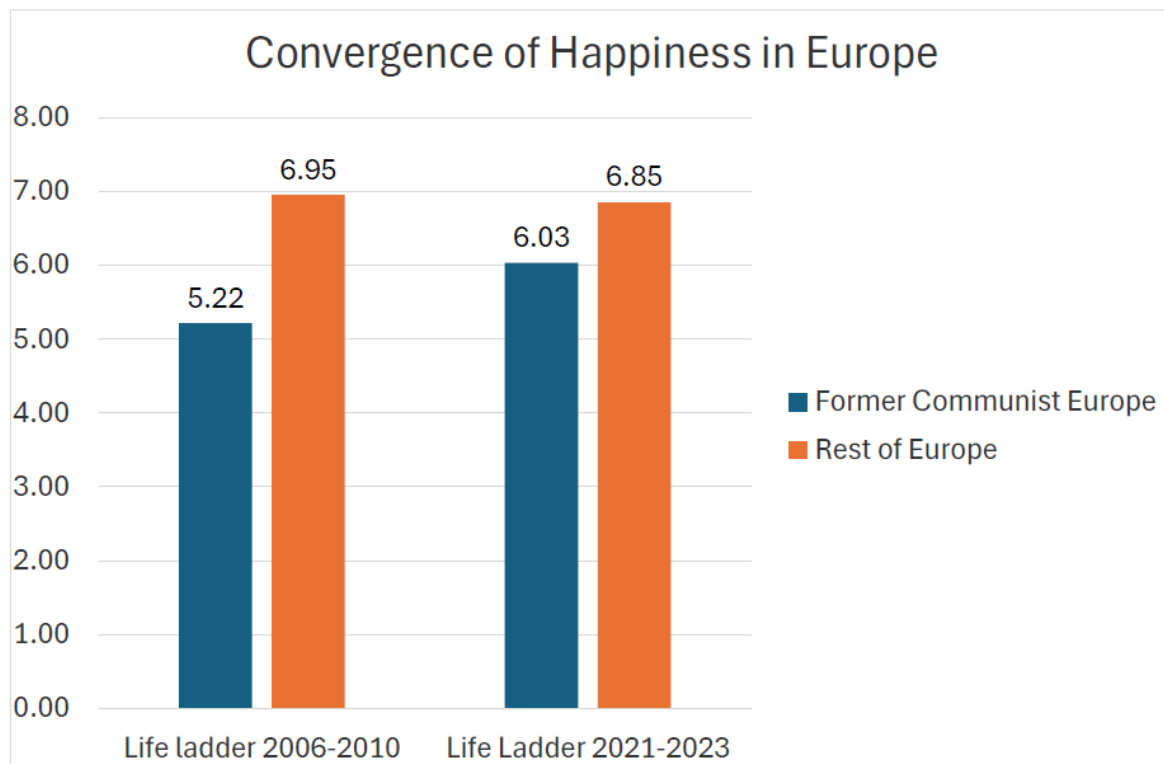
gap. Rather, to observe the most recent trends, we both present some findings of this report and conduct some descriptive analysis using the data that underlie it.

Data provided by the WHR (Helliwell et al., 2024) indicate that the happiness levels in Europe are converging and that, fortunately, the Eastern European happiness gap is shrinking. Using data that was used for regressions reported in Table 2.1 of the report, we calculate the country-specific average of the Cantril ladder of happiness in the periods 2006-2010 and 2021-2023. We then compare the cross-country averages for former communist European countries² and for the other European countries.³ Our results are presented in Figure 1. Importantly, we observe that the happiness gap has approximately halved over this time period. The Eastern European happiness level increased by 0.8, from 5.2 to 6.0, while the rest of Europe stagnated at around 6.9.

² These former communist European countries are Albania, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

³ These other European countries are Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom.

Figure 1. Convergence of Happiness in Europe



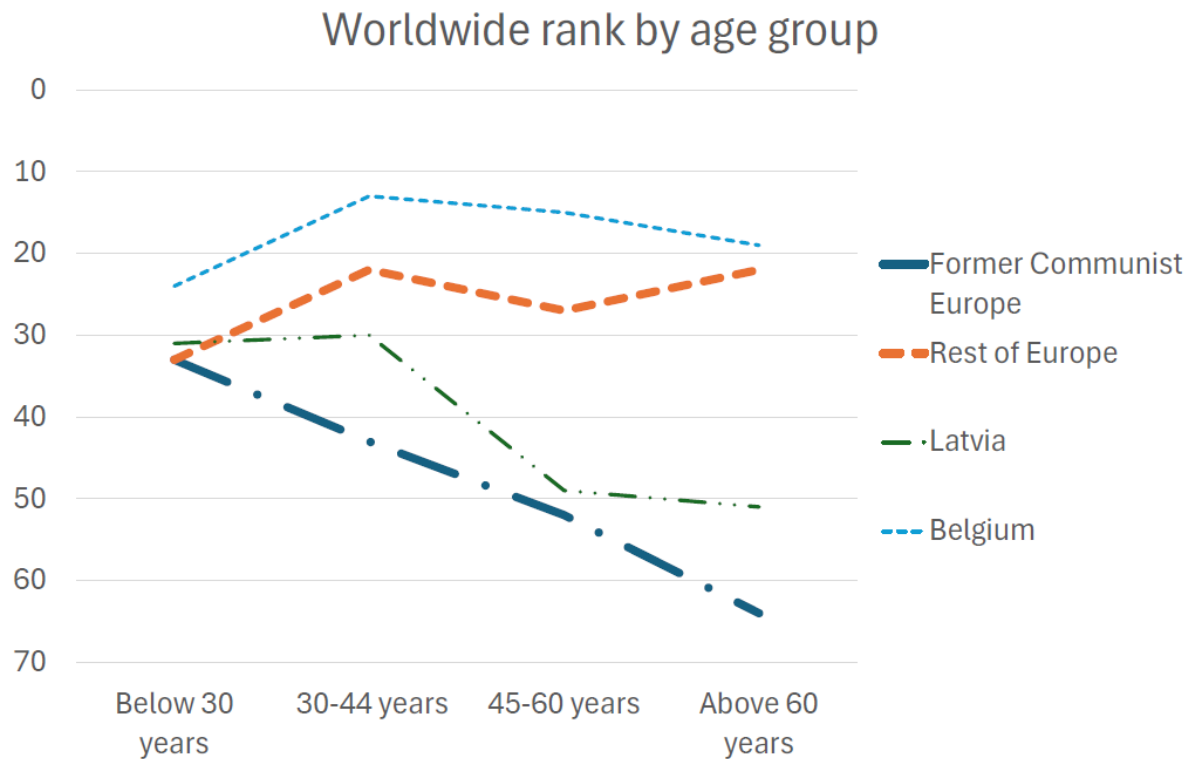
Source: Authors' original Figure calculated using data from WHR 20204.

Note: This Figure shows the cross-country average happiness score in the 2006-2010 and 2021-2023 periods. It does so for two groups of countries: European countries that had experienced decades of communist rule (former communist Europe) and those that did not (the rest of Europe). Data for individual countries used for obtaining these cross-country averages were calculated as averages of country-specific happiness scores from those years in each of the mentioned periods for which the country-specific score was available.

Moreover, the data on happiness of different age groups suggests that the convergence of happiness in Europe is disproportionately driven by the happiness of the Eastern European youth. We use data from Table 14 of the Statistical Appendix of Chapter 2 of the WHR 2024 to calculate the average worldwide rank of happiness for former communist European countries and the remaining European countries by age group. We construct Figure 2 below to show that individuals under the age of 30 in Central and Eastern Europe are now on average equally happy

as their peers in Western Europe, while the happiness level of the older generations of Eastern Europeans progressively declines with age compared to their Western European peers. For the young below the age of 30, the average rank of both groups of countries is exactly equal – 33 worldwide (based on country happiness ranking with no.1 as most happy). But, while the rank for the former communist European countries declines to 43, 52, and 64 in categories 30-44, 45-60, and above 60 years of age respectively, in the rest of Europe it remains more stable with the corresponding average ranks being 22, 27, and 22 worldwide. The same trend can also be observed for Latvia and Belgium – countries with happiness levels around the median in the two respective country groups.

Figure 2. Happiness by Age Group in Europe



Source: Authors' original Figure calculated using data from WHR 2024.

Note: We use country-specific worldwide rank of happiness in the period 2021-2023 (with 1 being the happiest country or territory in the world) to calculate the average happiness rank of different age groups (below 30 years of age, between 30 and 44 years, between 45 and 60 years, and above 60 years of age) for two groups of countries: European countries that had experienced decades of communist rule (former communist Europe) and those that did not (the rest of Europe). We also show the happiness level of different age groups for Latvia and Belgium, countries with a median level of happiness of the population from all age groups in 2023, in the two country groups – former communist Europe and the rest of Europe – respectively.

Even though the most recent data suggest that the Eastern European happiness gap has shrunk, additional data analysis is needed to explain why. The WHR 2024 suggests that the driver is the standard covariates of happiness (Figure 92 of the Statistical Appendix of Chapter

2). It plots actual happiness against happiness predicted by coefficients estimated over the period 2005-2023 using pooled OLS regressions with year fixed effects which include six likely determinants of happiness: GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption (the last four being sourced from the Gallup World Poll). For Western Europe, there seems to be no systematic pattern as to whether actual happiness is higher or lower than predicted. The same holds for Eastern and Central Europe, while in the Commonwealth of Independent States, a few more observations seem to have somewhat lower actual than predicted happiness. These differences, however, appear significantly smaller and less widespread than in Latin America and the Caribbean, where people are happier than predicted by the model, or in the Middle East and North Africa, where people are less happy than predicted. While there is evidence that much of the gap can be explained, additional work is needed.

Even if the preliminary evidence runs contrary to the findings of Djankov et al. (2016) related to religion, the Orthodox happiness gap appears to persist. The countries with Orthodox majority or significant minority have the lowest happiness levels among the former communist European countries in the 2021-23 period (including Romania and Serbia, which exceed the median life satisfaction). The new data, however, suggests that the Orthodox, even if poorer than average, are not as unhappy as before. Strikingly, the three largest former-communist Balkan nations with Orthodox Christian majority ranked in the top five in the world for improved happiness levels over the last fifteen years (Serbia with 1.9 points, Bulgaria with 1.6 points, and Romania with 1.3 points of change on the Cantril ladder). It is notable that these three either started with some of the lowest happiness scores in former communist Europe (Bulgaria and Serbia) or recently experienced a large increase in GDP per capita (Romania), suggesting that the

modeling of happiness should be modified to account for the effect of the starting level of happiness or for the experienced changes in the determinants of happiness.

The recent data also uncovers that citizens of the former Soviet republics tend to be less happy than other East Europeans. Excluding the three EU-member Baltic republics, only Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan currently have happiness levels above the median of all states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Belarus is at the median, while Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Armenia, Tajikistan, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine are all below the median. Even more striking is the ranking of these countries by the happiness of the people under the age of 30. Among all the former communist states in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, all former Soviet states (excluding Moldova and the Baltic republics) are at the bottom of the ranking (with no data for Belarus and Kazakhstan), but now with the Caucasian and Central Asian republics ranking below Russia and Ukraine. These heterogeneities, in our view, demand further investigation.

Prospects and Directions for Future Research

What are the prospects for the Eastern European happiness gap to fully close in the future? While the last ten to fifteen years have seen the narrowing of this gap, future challenges remain. Various negative aspects of transition processes have damaged the ability of Eastern European nations to converge in terms of economic and social determinants of happiness. For instance, migratory depopulation and loss of human capital (Marković and Mladjan, 2017; Mladjan and Marković, 2023) have created long-term limitations on economic growth and social capital-related determinants of happiness. Generational solidarity may have weakened (Mladjan and Marković,

2021). The war in Ukraine, through various spillover effects, is exposing the whole of Europe, but especially neighboring Eastern European countries, to great risk and uncertainty.

Based on the new research and data on happiness levels, the countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia are heterogeneous and in a process of change. In our view, the principal research questions concern an optimal model for understanding the heterogeneity across the region. Related to aggregate country data, even though WHR 2024 suggests that the model with six determinants of happiness (GDP per capita, healthy life expectancy, social support, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption) can better explain data from Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union than some other parts of the world, additional work is needed to see if this fit can be improved and in which countries it is larger. It would be important to test whether the existing models can explain the observed differences in the current happiness levels in parts of Eastern Europe that were or were not part of the Soviet Union, in the Caucasus, and in Central Asia, or whether we need additional factors to capture the uniqueness of each region. One could, for instance, study whether the observed happiness gap of the Orthodox Christians is driven by some permanent feature of their culture, as Djankov et al. (2016) propose, or whether the observed trend is a transitory phenomenon as the recent improvements in the happiness of the Balkan Orthodox Christian nations may suggest.

Mladjan (2018) argues that the post-communist transitions were post-conflict transitions, and that the motivations and sources of happiness of different ethnic groups can be better understood when historical and cultural allegiances are considered. The Roman Catholic and Protestant post-communist nations viewed Western European nations as their co-religionists, or former co-religionists, with shared heritage as perceived by nonbelievers, from whom one can expect help to achieve economic prosperity in the future. This was reinforced by a feeling of

support by Western European nations, rivals of the Soviet Union, for their independence: either in creating a state (the Baltic Nations, Slovenia, and Croatia) or in conducting foreign policy independently of the Soviet Union/Russia (Poland, Czech and Slovak Republics, and Hungary). This gave reasons to hope for a better future, potentially making people happier immediately.

For many Orthodox Christians, on the other hand, the economic and political system that they had accepted was disappearing, and the alternative was uncertain and less clear. This caused fear of the future. Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians have had communism for a generation longer than the other European transition nations, and less memory of life in a market economy. The Eastern Orthodox in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union were mostly saddened by the breakup of their countries, with millions of Russians and Serbs being left outside of their newly created states. Meanwhile, separatist movements were being supported – politically and militarily, especially in the wars for Yugoslav succession – by the Western market-based states. It is possible that the Orthodox had accepted communism more than others because it was perceived as a grass-roots movement (in the Soviet Union), united with the struggle for national liberation during WWII (in Soviet Union and Yugoslavia) or brought by a fellow Orthodox nation (i.e., by the Soviet Russians to Bulgaria, Serbia, or even Romania). As time passes, however, if economic and political transitions bring tangible benefits, then the Orthodox could accept the new political and economic system and be happy in it. Such a process could perhaps explain the rise in happiness in the last decade and a half in Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

Deepening analysis to consider within-country heterogeneity may, in turn, help us understand the variations across countries. What could, for instance, explain the observed differences in the country-specific happiness levels of different generations? Why are the young so much happier than the old in some Eastern European states? Why are the young in the

Caucasus and Central Asia less happy than their peers in Eastern Europe? To explain this, we may want to consider differences in economic opportunities for the young at the least, but potentially also the cultural differences in inter-generational relations. In a similar vein, to what extent does the happiness of men and women differ across countries? At the start of the transition, death rates soared, especially among adult men who lost their jobs and were unable to find another one, but were culturally still expected to provide for their families. Mladjan (2018) calculates that the death rate for Eastern European males above 60 years of age rose by 42% in the period 1986-1994, while that of females rose by 27%. Answering how the happiness of males and females in different age cohorts relates to the role of men and women in the respective societies, and how these roles may have changed since the beginning of the transition period, may in turn help us understand the cross-country differences in the level of happiness.

Stepping back from the existing literature, a few broader questions arise. Why do we even expect that the European happiness gap should close? Indeed, why not expect that Central Asia would converge with East or South Asia, or that the happiness in the Caucasus would converge with that of Turkey? Regarding Eastern Europe itself, is the name of Europe enough to expect such convergence? In expecting the gap to narrow, we assume integration with Western Europe. In this regard, the abandonment of communism may not be enough. If Russia and Belarus, for instance, stay outside of European integration, why should their happiness levels not follow a different dynamic? Even for countries that in some way integrate with the European Union, political and economic integration need not extend to cultural integration. Cultures are formed over centuries, and we already know that some aspects of culture affect levels of happiness, too. Finally, we view subjective measures of happiness as an indicator of well-being. But is it good to always be happy, or is it not bad to sometimes be sad instead? Could sadness

lead to self-reflection that may lead to personal and policy changes, ultimately resulting in even higher economic and general well-being? Dynamic connections between happiness and well-being could therefore be a topic for future study.

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