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Drinking under communism: Why do alcohol consumption habits in Eastern Europe differ from the west in the long-run?☆



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ABSTRACT

This paper looks into possible explanations for differences between Eastern and Western Europe alcohol consumption behaviour even twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet regime. It suggests these differences can be viewed as an expression of cultural habits. We explore different ways of defining exposure to the communist regime: using number of years a person spent under the regime and also a dummy indicator for spending formative years (18–25) in it. We find both to be strong factors in explaining alcohol consumption behaviour. We consider differences in frequency of alcohol consumption and binge drinking using European Health Interview Survey (EHIS) micro data from Eurostat. Estimations are run with ordered probit model for men and women separately. Evidence suggests a statistically significant effect of experiencing communist regimes, which is larger for women's alcohol consumption frequency than for men's. It is also the most important factor in explaining more frequent male binge drinking. These effects hold after controlling for socio-economic, country level and time characteristics. This suggests the attitudes towards alcohol consumption could be more permissive in the Eastern Bloc countries.

1. Introduction

This study analyses the effect of pre-1990 communist regimes prevailing in Eastern Europe on the drinking behaviour of individuals born and raised under this system (henceforth the Eastern Bloc). It uses two indicators of alcohol consumption – frequency of consumption of alcoholic beverages, and frequency of binge drinking (having more than six alcoholic drinks on one occasion). Our main interest is in the two variables capturing individuals' exposure to the communist regime: one indicating whether an individual lived in the Eastern Bloc between age 18 and 25, the other the number of years lived in a communist regime. We use European Health Interview Survey micro-data and include individuals from both Eastern and Western European countries. The estimation strategy employs ordered probit since the dependent variables are in ordered categories. We find drinking behaviour is significantly related to exposure to Eastern European communist regimes and subject to considerable gender differences. If we consider that drinking alcohol has negative health consequences, represented by soaring male mortality rates before and after Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign in Eastern Europe (Yakovlev, 2015; Bhattacharya et al., 2013), our findings suggest that, as well as economic inefficiency in communist regimes, further costs were incurred by living in those regimes over and above the economic effect.

Drinking behaviour in the former USSR has been subject to myriad of stories and myths, as well as serious research. Gorbachev's initiative against excessive alcohol drinking is a strong indicator of the pervasiveness of alcohol consumption in the former USSR.

☆ This paper is based on data from Eurostat, *European Health Interview Survey (EHIS), wave 1 (2006–2009)*. The responsibility for all conclusions drawn from the data lies entirely with the authors.

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Given the spread and influence of the Soviet communist regime on its satellite Eastern European countries, one might consider a connection between alcohol drinking and pre-1990 communist regimes as plausible. This paper considers exactly this connection and seeks to investigate whether the USSR and communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc countries were systematically linked to alcohol consumption. Thus, this paper contributes to the literature examining the impact of communist regimes on socio-economic life. Findings in this area suggest that low alcohol prices, neighbourhood effects, specific to communism living arrangements, and habit formation at young age have influenced alcohol consumption levels and patterns in previous Eastern Bloc (Yakovlev, 2018; Yakovlev, 2015). Other research questions include institutional changes in post-communist countries (Roland, 2002), law enforcement in transition economies (Roland and Verdier, 2003), the effect of communist regimes on redistribution preferences (Alesina and Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007), and returns to education (Münich et al., 2005). To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine how the experience of communist regime in Eastern Bloc affected alcohol consumption later in life. This paper also contributes to health economics research investigating the effect of political and social circumstances on individuals' alcohol consumption habits and well-being. The caveat of this study is the fact that we cannot say what specifically influences the drinking habits of people from the Eastern Bloc captured by the communism indicators, but we establish the link and offer possible explanations, which could be addressed further in future research.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews available literature and suggests potential influences towards alcohol consumption behaviour. Section 3 discusses methodology, Section 4 summarizes data and descriptive statistics of the estimation samples. Section 5 presents an analysis of results, while Section 6 offers a discussion of the results and concludes.

2. Literature review

Literature on the effects of various aspects of person's life on alcohol consumption is extensive and offers important insight into the issue under discussion. Closer review informs about important aspects influencing alcohol consumption, and allows us to fine-tune our empirical analysis. We do it in two sections of this paper. Below, we focus on literature, which suggests that drinking patterns in Eastern European countries are linked to communist regimes; while Section 3 discusses the literature further and uses it as motivation and justification for including various control variables into the regression specification.

The revolutionary ideas that resulted in the creation of the Soviet Union emerged in the Russian Empire. The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was the largest and most populous among the Soviet states. It was also the main source or central power for the Soviet Union and its satellite nations, which makes it appropriate to consider its inhabitants' drinking habits. Studies have shown that alcohol has a central role in Russian cultural tradition, which could help explain drinking behaviour. Russian migration toward inland Europe during World War II was a potential way for Eastern Bloc countries to be exposed to Russian native habits and Russia being a source of authority could have facilitated the adoption and spreading of these habits. Here we consider Russians as defined by country boundaries, but we exclude isolated cultural minorities (numerous there simply due to size of the country). However, we have no intention of confining the reason or source of the effect purely to Russian cultural habits.

According to Hinote and Webber (2012), vodka played a fundamental part in Russian social life; by 19th century, it was essential in rural festivals, celebrations and gatherings, mainly consumed collectively and characterized by ceremonial binge drinking. Rural, community ties were seen as very important and took precedence over the individual, creating an environment for drinking alcohol to be imposed as a social norm alongside other control mechanisms. During the late nineteenth century, much of the rural population moved to urban areas due to industrialisation and urbanization, taking along their drinking traditions to the taverns that partially assumed the function of village communes. Low priced alcohol led to more widespread and less monitored consumption, ceremonial practices became recreational and part of the routine. Towards the end of the 20th century any social occasion was related to alcohol consumption; drinking on holidays and special occasions was considered traditional and practiced by both Russian men and women (Bobrova et al., 2010).

The Soviet Union period saw opportunities for Russian alcohol consumption patterns to spread through migration, tourism and cultural exposure, such as films, both within and outside the Soviet Union. Stickley et al. (2007) mentions a large migration of Russians into other Soviet republics during the communist period. Popova et al. (2007) states that vodka drinking habits within the Soviet Union were influenced by the Russians and became more similar during the communist regime.

There are several potential reasons for the spread of the habits. Jukkala et al. observed that informal social relations like family ties and friendships can function as channels for behavioural patterns to spread, There is evidence that contact with friends increased the probability of binge drinking by the factor of 2.16 among Russian women, though this effect was not found to be significant in men (Jukkala et al., 2008). Yakovlev (2018) suggests that a close proximity to one's neighbours and low mobility throughout life, defining communist style living arrangements, likely had a significant impact on alcohol consumption, since this type of lifestyle led to all more significant life events being celebrated consuming alcohol with neighbours. Alcohol intake amongst Russians tends to be less frequent *but* with larger amounts consumed per occasion in ethanol content (Jukkala et al., 2008). For example, mean annual intake of alcohol is lower in Russia (4.6 l compared to 8.5 l in Czech Republic), and drinking frequency is lower (67 drinking sessions per year, compared with 179 for Czech men), yet the level of alcohol consumed per session is highest (71 g., compared with 46 g. for Czechs and 45 g. for Poles), the prevalence of binge drinking is also highest (Bobak et al., 2004). Similar drinking patterns probably were the reason for Gorbachev's Anti-Alcohol Campaign. Research shows that this campaign was successful in decreasing mortality rates in Russia while it lasted. Before the campaign, the country was going through a mortality crisis associated with high alcohol consumption rates. After the policy was revoked, alcohol consumption and mortality rates both climbed back up, with similar tendencies also observed in other Eastern Bloc countries (Bhattacharya et al., 2013; Yakovlev, 2015). Low prices of alcohol before and after Gorbachev's Anti-Alcohol Campaign were likely one of the main causes of heavier drinking, since estimations, based on new

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