



Political democracy, economic liberalization, and macro-sociological models of intergenerational mobility



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ABSTRACT

Building on the previously investigated macro-sociological models which analyze the consequences of economic development, income inequality, and international migration on social mobility, this article studies the specific contextual covariates of intergenerational reproduction of occupational status in post-communist societies. It is theorized that social mobility is higher in societies with democratic political regimes and less liberalized economies. The outlined hypotheses are tested by using micro- and macro-level datasets for 21 post-communist societies which are fitted into multilevel mixed-effects linear regressions. The derived findings suggest that factors specific to transition societies, conventional macro-level variables, and the legacy of the Soviet Union explain variation in intergenerational social mobility, but the results vary depending which birth cohorts survey participants belong to and whether or not they stem from advantaged or disadvantaged social origins. These findings are robust to various alternative data, sample, and method specifications.

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1. Introduction

The year 2016 marked the 25th anniversary of the dissolution of Soviet Union and the beginning of revolutions which overthrew communist governments. The collapse of these authoritarian systems meant the end of one of the largest experiments in de-stratification, in the history of humankind: that of the forceful distribution of equalized societal rewards (Ganzeboom and Nieuwebeerta, 1999). There is a consensus in current scholarly literature that transition has increased inequality in income distribution (Alam et al., 2005; Gugushvili, 2015a), but much less is known whether or not these trends are also reflected in the intergenerational equality of opportunities. Intergenerational social mobility, a classical topic in sociology (see Sorokin, 1927), refers to rates of movement upward or downward in the prevailing stratification hierarchy. Social stratification, in turn, can be understood as a tendency for the prevailing structures of inequality to persist over generations. If life chances primarily depend on ascribed factors rather than achieved ones, they cannot be considered as earned or chosen, and hence are inherently unjust. Intergenerational status reproduction, therefore, represents one of the most fundamental forms of ascriptive inequality.

There is no unified theory that would suggest how macro-level developments shape social mobility regime in post-communism. The industrialization thesis perceives economic development as a facilitator of social mobility (Treiman, 1970). The transition from communist to capitalist systems caused a decline in economic output for many countries,

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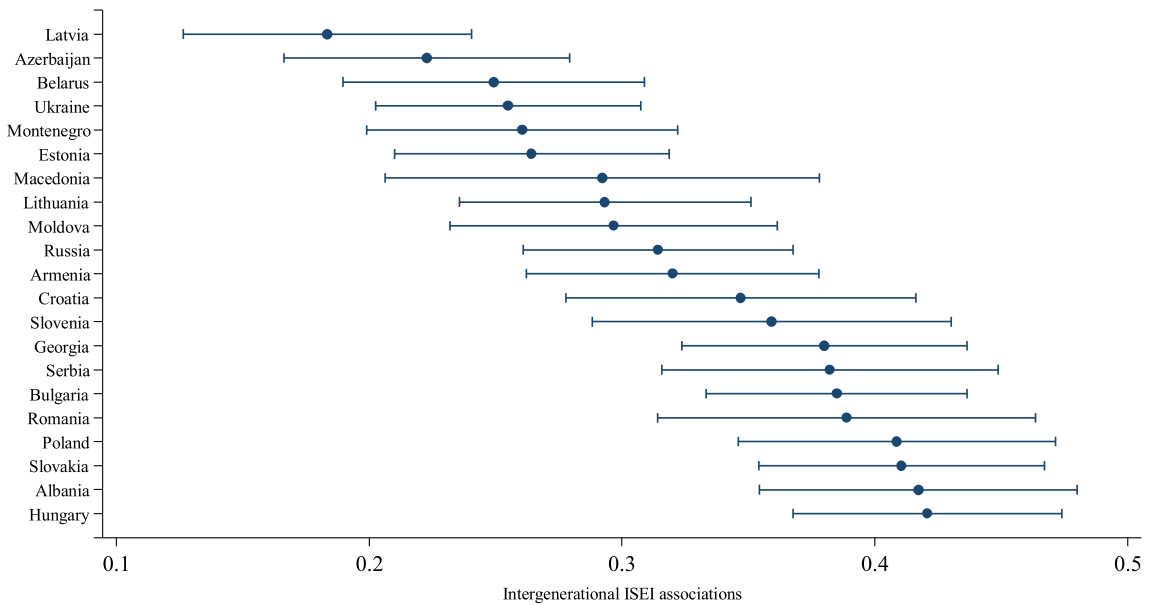


Fig. 1. Intergenerational ISEI associations from country-level OLS regression models.

Notes: Bars show 95% confidence intervals based on robust standard errors.

Source: Author's calculation based on data from European Values Study (EVS, 2010).

which, if the latter theory is correct, had to intensify intergenerational status reproduction. Considering the region's growing economic inequality, the so called 'resource approach' in stratification literature also posits more intensive stratification in intergenerational occupational attainment. It is reasonable to believe that with wider income gaps, it is easier for the rich to provide their children with advantages that the poor struggle to afford (Andrews and Leigh, 2009). The relationship between intergenerational mobility and income inequality, known as 'the Great Gatsby Curve', could be mediated by access to higher education and the financial returns on education (Jerrim and Macmillan, 2015). Another line of thought suggests that migration is positively related to social mobility. Many post-communist countries are characterized with the high levels of both emigration and immigration (Mansoor and Quillin, 2006). Migration may disrupt the existing system of social hierarchy because migrants are typically separated from their countries of origin, which can weaken intergenerational status reproduction among these individuals (Hodge, 1973; Lewin-Epstein and Semyonov, 1986; Yaish, 2002).

Limited, if any, comparative and systematic research exists regarding the covariates of social mobility in post-communist countries, despite being highly relevant for academic and public policy realms. This research can have implications beyond those for post-communist societies, because when a government's active promotion of intergenerational equality of opportunities has not been seen to lead to adequate results, relations between policies and outcomes must also be questioned in the context of advanced welfare democracies (Wong, 1995). The existing research gap can be explained by the tendency of researchers to concentrate on individual country-level studies rather than broader, fundamental questions related to intergenerational communist and post-communist mobility. Empirical research is also restricted by the limited availability of comparative datasets that cover most, if not all, transitional societies, making it difficult to compare results among post-communist countries with findings from other industrialized nations. Major studies on covariates of social mobility do not provide adequate understanding of the post-communist region. The most influential works investigating macro-sociological explanations of differences in social mobility across countries only include a handful of post-communist states – mostly new EU members and Russia (Breen and Luijckx, 2004; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992; Yaish and Andersen, 2012). This is particularly regrettable because the communist experience can be considered as an 'experiment' from which we could learn more about the fundamental nature of social mobility and its covariates (Simkus, 1995).

Before we start speculating about potentially relevant explanatory factors, it is important to ask how much variation in social mobility do we observe in post-communist Central and Eastern Europe? Fig. 1 illustrates that the rates of social mobility, measured by β coefficients from country-level ordinary least squares (OLS) models on the association between respondents and their parents' International Socio-Economic Index of Occupational Status (ISEI) scores,¹ vary considerably among the depicted 21 countries. The low values of coefficients suggest that offspring's status is not strongly determined by their social origins, while the high coefficients indicate that significant intergenerational status reproduction takes place. The

¹ ISEI scores vary from minimum of 16 (individuals with the lowest status such as farm laborers) to 90 (individuals with the highest status such as judges).

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