

# **Media effects on citizens' perceptions of inequality across former communist countries**

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## **Abstract**

Using data from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's Life in Transition survey, I examine what shapes people's perceptions of the level of inequality and beliefs about its fairness across former communist countries. Although a rich literature has developed examining the individual-level factors that shape people's attitudes toward inequality, less is known about the ways that macro-level institutions shape perceptions and beliefs. This paper fills the gap by examining how media freedoms shape people's understanding of whether inequality is fair and whether it is excessive. I find that in countries with free media, citizens are more likely to believe that wealth is unfair and that inequality levels are excessive. However, they are not more likely to perceive poverty as unfair. These results suggest that democratic freedoms significantly shape the way people perceive inequality and some aspects of distributional fairness across former communist countries. They point to a need for more research examining how institutions and other macro-level variables affect perceptions of inequality across countries.

## **Keywords**

Inequality; public opinion; media freedoms; post-communism

## **Introduction:**

Public opinion toward inequality has become a key area of research in political science as scholars attempt to better understand the causes and effects of rising inequality. Mass beliefs about why inequality exists and whether it is excessive have important implications for both the welfare policies that governments implement and the degree to which inequality may be politically problematic. For example, if people believe that inequality is fair because individuals are themselves responsible for their own economic status, then they are less likely to support anti-poverty policies that may lead to lower levels of inequality (Habibov 2011; Stephenson 2000; Lepianka et al. 2009; Bénabou & Tirole 2005). Additionally, if people perceive inequality to be excessive and if these perceptions are connected to beliefs about the market or governing institutions, then inequality may become a source of political instability (Loveless & Whitefield 2011). It is therefore necessary to identify how people form opinions about the level and fairness of inequality to better understand the causes and consequences of inequality.

Much of the recent public opinion research on income inequality has responded to this need by examining what individual-level factors shape people's attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. Scholars have found that individuals' economic self-interest (Cusack et al. 2008; Moene & Wallerstein 2001; Bleksaune 2007; Bleksaune & Quadagno 2003; Hasenfeld & Raftery 1989) as well as their values and belief systems (Kluegel & Smith 1986; Gilens 1999; Jaeger 2006; Papadakis 1993; Papadakis & Bean 1993; Fong 2001) significantly shape their opinions about inequality and distributional fairness. Yet while there has emerged a wealth of research on the individual-level factors that shape opinions, much less is known about what macro-level institutions shape attitudes and how institutions interact with micro-level variables. The literature consequently offers a more limited understanding of how and why opinions about

inequality vary across different political contexts. How do people living under different political regimes form opinions about the fairness of inequality and whether the level of inequality they experience is too high? What effect does political context have on people's perceptions of the level of inequality and its fairness?

This paper aims to contribute knowledge about the ways that political institutions affect opinions about inequality by examining how media freedoms affect perceptions of the level of inequality and its fairness in 28 post-communist countries. The media is an important political institution to examine when identifying what macro-level factors shape opinions about inequality because it has the capacity to shape people's awareness of inequality and its causes. Across democratic countries, people who make use of the media are more likely to be informed of unequal opportunities for the poor and are more likely to be exposed to ways in which discrimination affects poverty (Kluegel and Smith 1986, 26). A free media may therefore motivate critical attitudes toward inequality by exposing people to information about inequality. Yet in undemocratic countries, governments may prevent the media from presenting information about wealth or poverty for fear that more awareness may cause citizens to criticize the government. The level of media freedoms may consequently be an important macro-level factor shaping people's opinions about inequality.

The former communist countries of Eastern Europe and Eurasia offer an ideal context for studying whether variations in media freedoms account for variations in people's attitudes. They historically shared similar communist institutions and exhibited similar levels of income inequality under the old regime, yet they began to vary considerably in both levels of inequality and governing institutions after the communist regime's collapse (Solt 2009; Bandelj & Mahutga 2010). Variations in perceptions of inequality across countries are therefore more likely to be

associated with the different institutions that citizens experienced after communism than historical factors linked to the communist regime. The historic institutional similarities and recent variations across countries make the post-communist context a near natural experiment for studying how institutional variation is associated with public opinion toward inequality.

This paper has important implications for the public opinion literature on inequality. First, it fills some of the gap in the literature by examining how political institutions affect perceptions of inequality's excess and fairness. Much of the research examining macro-level factors that affect attitudes toward inequality has focused on how different socialization experiences affect attitudes (Alesina & Angeletos 2005; Alesina & Schuendeln 2005), leaving little knowledge about how political institutions independently affect attitudes. For example, scholars have attributed a difference between Eastern and Western Europeans' attitudes toward inequality and the government's role in reducing it to Eastern Europeans' socialization into Marxist norms and values (Corneo & Gruner 2002; Mason 1995; Arts et al. 1995). However, in doing so, they have largely ignored variations in attitudes across former communist countries. Several scholars have, in fact, identified key differences in individuals' perceptions about wealth, poverty, and inequality across former communist countries (Habbibov 2011; Loveless & Whitefield 2011; Stephenson 2000), yet they have offered little knowledge about what institutional factors may contribute to the variation. This paper fills the gap by examining how one particular institution, the media, shapes perceptions of inequality. I find that media freedoms make people more likely to believe that inequality is excessive, but media freedoms have varying effects on perceptions of whether inequality is fair. In countries with considerable media freedoms, people are more likely to perceive wealth as being unfair, but they are not more likely to perceive poverty as being unfair. Media freedoms' effect on perceptions of inequality's

fairness therefore depends on whether people associate inequality more with wealth or poverty.

In addition to contributing knowledge about the ways media freedoms affect attitudes toward inequality, this paper offers insights to the relative importance of national-level factors in shaping attitudes toward inequality. In examining what factors shape people's beliefs about whether inequality is excessive in former communist countries, Loveless & Whitefield (2011) conclude that national-level measures of inequality as well as national economic, social, and political conditions are weakly tied to people's perceptions of inequality. Although their work is an important first-step in examining the relationship between national context and individual attitudes, their findings are based on bivariate correlations between macro-level indicators and perceptions of social inequality in only twelve former communist countries. Before concluding that national level factors are largely insignificant, it is important to test the effect of national-level factors using a multi-level regression framework, which would offer more knowledge about how macro-level factors *interact* with micro-level factors in shaping attitudes. It is also important to test the effect across a wide sample of former communist countries to take advantage of the full variation in macro-level factors. Although, my results support their findings that much of the variation in people's beliefs about whether inequality is excessive is at the individual-level, I find that national context, in fact, accounts for important variation in people's perceptions of whether wealth is fair. Thus, contrary to Loveless & Whitefield's (2010) conclusion, national context appears to have an important role in shaping people's beliefs about whether inequality is fair.

Finally, in addition to examining how macro-level factors explain attitudes toward inequality, this paper contributes knowledge on how perceptions of inequality's fairness affect the belief that inequality is excessive. Researchers have found that beliefs about whether inequality is fair are a key predictor of whether people also report that inequality is too high

(Fong 2001; Loveless & Whitefield 2011). However, it is unclear whether perceptions of inequality's excess are primarily related to people's beliefs about the fairness of wealth or poverty. Levels of inequality take into account both wealth and poverty, and scholars have found that people may perceive the fairness of wealth and poverty differently (Dean & Melrose 1999, p. 35; Kluegel & Smith 1986; Mann 1973; Parkin 1979; Stephenson 2000; Stoyanov et al. 2002). In this paper, I find that while perceptions of both poverty's and wealth's fairness matter when predicting beliefs that inequality is too high, perceptions of poverty's fairness have a much stronger effect on beliefs about the level of inequality. It therefore seems that when evaluating whether inequality is excessive, people are more strongly drawing on an understanding that poverty is unfair than an understanding that wealth is unfair.

The analysis proceeds in five sections. The next section discusses the relevant literature on people's beliefs about whether inequality is fair and whether it is excessive. In this section, I present hypotheses on what factors may explain people's attitudes. I then describe the research design, data, and variables, followed by a presentation of the empirical results. The final section concludes with a summary of findings and their implications.

### **Theoretical Framework Explaining Attitudes toward Inequality**

In accord with much of the public opinion literature on inequality, this paper adopts a social constructivist theoretical framework in examining factors that shape both people's beliefs about the level of inequality and its fairness. Under the social constructivist tradition, people's perceptions of social reality form the basis for the explanations that they use to support certain policies (Burgoyne et al. 1999; Kluegel & Smith 1986; Wegener 1987; Stephenson 2002). It is important to consider people's perceptions separately from objective indicators because the

inequality that people perceive may be very different than the reality that objective indicators suggest. For example, Kenworthy and McCall (2005) show that survey respondents can rarely identify correctly whether inequality is increasing or decreasing in their country. Dallinger (2010) similarly finds that there is little correlation between people's perception of how high inequality is in their country and the actual level of inequality. Identifying what forms people's perceptions of social reality can therefore help shed light on whether and why people may be critical of inequality even when it is relatively low.

In reviewing the literature on attitudes toward inequality, I first discuss the research on beliefs about the fairness of inequality and then discuss the research on beliefs about whether inequality is excessive. I focus on both fairness perceptions and perceptions about the level of inequality because research suggests that fairness perceptions significantly affect perceptions of whether inequality is excessive (Loveless & Whitefield 2011; Fong 2001). However, while fairness perceptions appear to predict whether people believe that inequality is excessive, there is little knowledge about what exogenous factors shape people's fairness perceptions. Without knowledge about the exogenous factors that shape fairness perceptions, the conclusion that fairness perceptions affect perceptions of inequality's excess is effectively a conclusion that perceptions affect perceptions. This paper therefore identifies the exogenous factors shaping fairness perceptions to better explain what shapes opinions about whether inequality is excessive.

### *Factors Shaping Beliefs about the Fairness of Inequality*

People's beliefs about whether inequality is fair are rooted in their beliefs about why some people are rich while others are poor. People will perceive inequality as fair if they attribute wealth to positive traits and poverty to negative traits (Orkeny 2000). Thus, it is

important to begin by understanding how people explain wealth and poverty. Scholars have found that people typically characterize the reasons for wealth and poverty along two dimensions. On the one hand, people may adopt an individual view, whereby individuals' economic situation stems from their own personal traits (such as being hard working or lazy). On the other hand, people may assume a structural view, whereby individuals' economic situation stems from structural factors (such as lack of jobs or poor government policies) that operate at the societal level (Lepianka et. al 2010; von Oorschot & Halman 2000; Gallie & Paugam 2002)<sup>1</sup>. Compared to individual explanations, structural explanations for wealth and poverty are often associated with a belief that inequality is unfair. In post-communist countries specifically, people who attribute poverty to structural explanations often believe that poverty is caused by factors such as dishonest privatization, corruption, discrimination toward ethnic minorities, and unequal access to social services (Falkingham 2005; Alexeev 1999; Orkeny & Szekelyi 2000; Habibov 2011).

It is ultimately unclear whether people perceive inequality as unfair if they hold contradicting views about the fairness of wealth versus poverty. For example, people may attribute wealth to fair individual explanations and poverty to unfair structural explanations. Scholars have referred to this coexistence of contradicting perspectives as “split consciousness” (Kluegel & Smith 1986; Mann 1973; Parkin 1979; Stephenson 2002). According to split consciousness theory, people may hold contradicting views on the economic system's fairness depending on whether they are primarily considering economic possibilities for the wealthy or poor.

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<sup>1</sup> Although researchers have pointed to other possible dimensions-- including a cultural and fatalistic dimension-- these dimensions tend to be associated with the structural-individual dimension (see Lepianka et al. 2009). Fairness of other possible dimensions may depend on the extent to which people believe that either internal (individual) or external (structural) reasons are responsible for wealth or poverty.



Yet even though people may hold different views on the fairness of wealth and poverty, the literature suggests that the factors shaping opinions about these views are similar and linked to individuals' socio-economic status and socialization experiences. According to deprivation hypothesis, people who come from lower social classes tend to favor structural explanations for wealth and poverty, while people from higher social classes tend to favor individual explanations. For example, women, the long-term unemployed, and low income earners are more likely to choose structural explanations over individual explanations (Kluegel 1987; Kluegel & Smith 1986; Kreidl 2000; Lepianka et al. 2010; Bullock 1999; Orkeny & Szekelyi 2000). Similarly, people who have experienced wealth and upward social mobility tend to attribute their success to individual effort and abilities (Kluegel & Smith 1986; Wegener & Liebig 1995). Beliefs about the fairness of inequality are therefore somewhat stratified according to social position (Smith & Mateju 2010).

*Hypothesis 1: There is a negative relationship between social class status and the likelihood of believing that wealth and poverty are unfair.*

In addition to social class position, values and socialization experiences have shown to account for variations in people's inclination to offer individual or structural explanations for wealth and poverty. Kaltenthater et al. (2008) argue that the way people think about wealth and poverty is linked more to their ideas about politics and society than their economic self-interest. In the post-communist context, people's socialization into Marxist norms and values may contribute to the likelihood that they will offer structural explanations for wealth and poverty. For example, Murthi and Tiongson (2008) find that older people, who lived more of their lives under communism, are more critical of unequal income distributions than younger people. Their socialization into Marxist values may make them more inclined to adopt structural explanations

for wealth and poverty. However, although Marxist ideology may espouse structural reasons for wealth and poverty, the communist regime supposedly eliminated classes, and it attributed rare cases of poverty to negative personal characteristics of the poor (Kreidl 2000). Thus, *ceteris paribus*, people who were socialized under the communist regime may hold more individual explanations of poverty and more structural explanations of wealth than those who were not socialized under the communist regime.

*Hypothesis 2: People who were socialized under the communist regime are more likely to believe that wealth is unfair, but they are more likely to believe that poverty is fair.*

Finally, scholars find that access to information about the causes of wealth and poverty significantly shapes whether people adopt structural or individual explanations for wealth and poverty. Lee et al. (1990) find that people who were exposed to public presentations on homelessness are less likely to believe that the homeless are responsible for their own situation and more likely to believe that structural measures should be taken to improve homelessness. Kluegel and Smith (1986, 26) argue that people who make use of the media are similarly more likely to be informed of unequal opportunities available to the poor and are more likely to be exposed to ways in which discrimination affects poverty. Media exposure therefore likely contributes to the perception that wealth and poverty are unfair.

Yet while researchers have found an association between media exposure and people's inclination to adopt structural explanations for wealth and poverty, much of the research has been conducted in the United States or other developed democracies with relatively free media. It is unclear how media exposure affects fairness perceptions in countries without a free media. This is a key gap in scholars' understanding of how the media affects fairness perceptions, as the media's effect may vary depending on whether it is free to present structural explanations for

wealth or poverty that may be critical of the government and its policies. The effect of media exposure on fairness perceptions therefore likely depends on the extent of media freedoms. In countries without media freedoms, the media may be more likely to present individual explanations of wealth and poverty to make the economic system and government policies appear fair.

*Hypothesis 3: Media freedoms increase the likelihood that people perceive wealth and poverty as unfair.*

Identifying how institutions like the media influence people's perceptions of the fairness of wealth and poverty is a key step in understanding what shapes people's beliefs about the level of inequality that they experience. By shaping people's perceptions of whether inequality is fair, the media may indirectly shape people's beliefs about whether inequality is excessive. The next section explores the relevant literature on how people form opinions about the level of inequality and generates hypotheses about the ways in which the media may affect people's opinions.

#### *Factors shaping perceptions of whether inequality is excessive*

In recent years, a rich literature has developed to explore people's tolerance of inequality and perceptions of an ideal income distribution (see Rehm 2009; Anderson & Pontusson 2007; Mughan 2007). Similar to the literature examining fairness perceptions, this literature has found that people's attitudes toward the level of inequality are based on social class position and values and belief systems. People who come from higher social classes are typically tolerant of inequality because they benefit from the opportunities that inequality affords. They are consequently reluctant to support redistributive policies that would force them to forego income in order to allow for more equality (Cusack et al. 2008; Moene & Wallerstein 2001; Bleksaune

2007; Bleksaune & Quadagno 2003; Hasenfeld & Rafferty 1989). People who disapprove of market principles and who find that inequality is unfair are typically more critical of inequality and more likely to believe that redistribution is necessary to limit the high levels of inequality that they perceive (Kaltenthaler et al. 2008; Loveless & Whitefield 2011; Fong 2001; Linos & West 2003; Guillaud 2013; Groskind 1994; Luo 1998).

However, much of this research has been conducted in developed Western democracies. Less is known about distributional preferences in developing countries, and many researchers simply assume that theories and findings from developed democracies generalize to the developing world (Baramendi & Anderson 2008, 397). It is important to test whether social class and belief systems shape perceptions of the level of inequality across more varied contexts to identify whether and how country context factors may affect perceptions of inequality's excess.

In the post-communist context, the context of the market transition may limit class status' effect on perceptions of the level of inequality. Former communist countries historically experienced some of the lowest levels of inequality in the developing world (see Haggard & Kaufman 2009), yet levels began to rise considerably with the market transition. The rapid rise in inequality increased feelings of vulnerability, such that even people of higher social classes felt that market forces could jeopardize their economic security. In her analysis of support for welfare state policies, Lipsmeyer (2003) finds that Eastern Europeans respond less strongly to economic self-interest factors than Western Europeans when forming opinions about social policy because even wealthy Eastern Europeans feel that they might benefit from government efforts to limit poverty and inequality. It is therefore possible that in post-communist countries, economic status factors play a weaker role in shaping opinions about inequality because even wealthy people might be critical of high levels of inequality. Values and belief systems may

consequently play a much stronger role in shaping perceptions of the level of inequality than social class status in post-communist countries.

*Hypothesis 4: Values and belief systems have a more significant effect on beliefs that inequality is excessive than social status factors.*

In the post-communist context, the media's effect on perceptions of inequality's excess may also differ from developed Western democracies because many countries in the region lack free and independent media. People from democratic countries with a free media may have more knowledge about the level of inequality than people from countries without a free media. For example, a free media might be able to present the public with information about instances of extreme wealth or poverty, whereas an unfree media may not be able to spread information because of government censorship. The media may therefore shape people's perceptions of the level of inequality by giving them more information about the level of inequality.

The media may also act as a pathway through which fairness perceptions affect perceptions of the level of inequality. The media may directly shape people's perceptions of whether inequality is too high by presenting information about levels of inequality; it may also shape people's perceptions of whether inequality is too high indirectly by shaping people's perceptions of whether wealth and poverty are unfair. Thus, in countries with free media, people may be more likely to perceive inequality as unfair and more likely to perceive it as excessive.

*Hypothesis 5: Compared to people with frequent media exposure in countries without a free media, people who have frequent media exposure in countries with free media believe more strongly that inequality is excessive.*

## **Data and Variables**

*Data.* I test my hypotheses using data from Life in Transition Survey (2011), a cross-national survey jointly administered by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the World Bank in autumn, 2010. The survey employed a two-stage clustered stratified sampling procedure that was designed to make it nationally-representative. Survey administrators first divided countries into primary sampling units (PSUs) and selected 50 PSUs from each country (the probability of selection was proportional to the size of the PSU). Twenty households within each PSU were then systematically selected with equal probability sampling. The sampling procedure therefore generated 1,000 possible respondents for each country. However, in Russia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Serbia, and Poland, 1,500 households were selected to allow for follow-up telephone surveys conducted a year after the 2010 face-to-face-surveys.

The survey is ideal for this analysis because it is the only representative cross-national survey to be administered in all 29 post-communist countries in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. Thus, unlike many surveys that only offer data on more democratic and developed post-communist countries, the Life in Transition survey offers the opportunity to examine attitudes toward inequality across all post-communist countries. In this analysis, I include data from all former communist countries except Turkmenistan, which was omitted due to lack of data availability for key variables.

*Fairness Perceptions.* The first dependent variable is people's perceptions of the fairness of wealth and poverty. I operationalize fairness as the belief that wealth and poverty are a result of unfair structural factors. The Life in Transition survey asks respondents why they think some people in their country are successful: 1) *Effort and hard work*; 2) *Intelligence and skills*; 3) *By*

*political connections; 4) By breaking the law*<sup>2</sup>. The belief that wealth is unfair is measured through a binary variable that indicates whether the respondent reported that people succeed because of “political connections” or “breaking the law.” These response options tap respondents’ belief that unfair political and social structures are the primary factors explaining why some succeed in their country.

To measure opinions that poverty is unfair, I use responses about why some people are in need in their country: *1) Because they have been unlucky; 2) Because of laziness and lack of willpower; 3) Because of injustice in our society; 4) It is an inevitable part of modern life*. The belief that poverty is unfair is measured through a binary variable that people are in need because of “injustice in our society.”<sup>3</sup> This response option taps respondents’ belief that unfair social structures explain why some people are poor and therefore indicates whether the respondent believes that poverty is unfair.

*Perceptions of Inequality’s Excess*. In the next step of the analysis, I examine what shapes the belief that inequality is excessive. I measure this with the following question: *To what extent do you agree with the following statement--- The gap between the rich and the poor should be reduced*. Respondents report their level of agreement on a 5-point Likert scale. By asking whether respondents believe that inequality should be reduced, the question effectively taps their belief about whether inequality is too high.

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<sup>2</sup> See Appendix A for question wording.

<sup>3</sup> The response options “Because they have been unlucky” and “It is an inevitable part of modern life” are not included in the measurement of beliefs that poverty is unfair because it is not clear that the respondent perceives these factors as unfair. These two response options could be categorized as “fatalistic” explanations for poverty (Lepianka et al. 2009) and do not directly place blame on either social structures or individuals. Because they do not blame social structures for poverty (according to these responses, poverty is fatalistic), it is unclear that the respondent perceives them as being unfair.

**Table 1. Perceptions of Inequality's Fairness and Excess**

Country	Total (N)	Inequality is Unfair		Inequality is Excessive	
		Wealth is Unfair (% of respondents)	Poverty is Unfair (% of respondents)	Mean	StDv
Albania	1,055	28.8	42.9	3.767	1.055
Armenia	1,000	31.5	45.9	3.990	1.237
Azerbaijan	1,002	12.5	46.3	3.422	1.211
Belarus	1,000	17.5	27.5	3.579	.988
Bosnia & Herzegovina	1,087	37.4	64.8	3.863	1.013
Bulgaria	1,014	37.7	36.7	3.969	.933
Croatia	1,006	51.9	68.5	4.192	1.054
Czech Republic	1,007	28.7	32.4	3.648	1.041
Estonia	1,002	19.5	37.6	4.063	.974
Georgia	1,000	14.4	31.8	4.155	.695
Hungary	1,054	30.5	54.4	4.148	1.181
Kazakhstan	1,000	20.2	38.0	3.838	.911
Kosovo	1,091	39.0	71.6	4.111	.959
Kyrgyzstan	1,016	11.9	42.1	3.813	1.016
Latvia	1,007	22.0	52.3	4.210	.949
Lithuania	1,013	28.7	55.3	4.158	.878
Macedonia	1,072	55.4	62.7	4.146	.870
Moldova	1,043	10.8	42.3	3.692	1.117
Montenegro	1,013	30.5	44.0	4.154	.832
Poland	1,616	19.6	32.5	3.750	.928
Romania	1,078	26.6	43.0	3.884	1.321
Russia	1,584	23.0	53.9	3.940	1.015
Serbia	1,519	50.2	66.2	4.210	.924
Slovakia	1,011	34.2	37.6	4.074	.839
Slovenia	1,000	37.5	55.7	4.272	.962
Tajikistan	1,007	7.0	22.6	3.906	.869
Ukraine	1,559	27.6	62.9	3.888	1.196
Uzbekistan	1,500	7.8	13.6	4.027	.787

Table 1 presents the percent of respondents reporting that wealth or poverty is unfair, along with the mean level of agreement that inequality is too high for each country. Several of the region's most authoritarian countries have very few people reporting that wealth and poverty



are unfair. For example, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Belarus each have very few people reporting that wealth and poverty are unfair. However, there is more variation in perceptions across the more democratic countries. The Czech Republic and Estonia, for example, have relatively few people reporting that wealth and poverty are unfair compared to Slovenia and Croatia. Split consciousness also appears to be at play in several countries with a low percentage of people reporting that wealth is unfair and high percentage reporting that poverty is unfair. For example, relatively few Azeris, Kyrgyz, and Moldovans report that wealth is unfair, but many of them perceive poverty as unfair. On the whole, there is a higher percentage of people who report that poverty is unfair than who report that wealth is unfair. The difference suggests that people's opinions about inequality are complex and take into account the ways that both individual and structural factors contribute to wealth and poverty.

People's opinions about whether inequality is too high follow a similar pattern as people's opinions about whether wealth and poverty are fair. Some of the region's least democratic countries exhibit relatively low agreement that inequality is excessive. For example, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Belarus have very low levels of agreement that inequality is too high while more democratic countries like Slovenia, Latvia, and Croatia have high levels of agreement. However, there are also some democratic countries—the Czech Republic and Poland, for example-- in the region that exhibit low levels of agreement that inequality is excessive. Nevertheless, undemocratic countries typically do not exhibit high levels of agreement.

*Social class status.* I use four indicators of class status to measure the effect of social class on perceptions of inequality's fairness and excess. The indicators tap both people's subjective and objective class status. In addition to examining objective class status, it is important to examine

subjective class status because people's perceptions of their economic situation may inform the explanations that they use to support policies and viewpoints. Respondents may be more likely to draw on their perceived economic situation than their actual economic situation when forming opinions about inequality. Thus, it is important to consider both subjective and objective indicators when measuring the effect of social class on perceptions of whether inequality is fair and excessive. I measure all class status indicators using individuals' responses to questions on the Life in Transition survey:

- Education: Educated individuals typically have greater opportunities for earning high incomes that can place them in higher social classes. Education is measured on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1) having no formal education to 7) having completed a graduate degree.
- Employment status: Employed individuals typically have greater access to income than unemployed individuals. Employment status is measured as a binary variable indicating whether respondent is unemployed (has not worked for pay in the past year and is looking for work).
- Ethnic minority status: Ethnic minorities may face discrimination in income, education, and employment opportunities. As a result, they often belong to lower social classes. Ethnic minority status is measured as a binary variable reflecting whether the respondent's mother tongue is the titular language.
- Satisfaction with personal financial situation: Those who report that they are satisfied with their personal finances are likely to come from higher social classes with more disposable income. Satisfaction with personal financial situation is measured by the degree to which respondents agree that they are satisfied with their personal financial situation, measured on a 5-point Likert scale.

*Values and socialization experiences.* In the post-communist context, socialization into Marxist ideology may affect people's beliefs about inequality. People who adhere to Marxist values are

likely to perceive inequality as unfair and excessive, especially after the rise in inequality during the market transition. However, as explained in Hypothesis 2, socialization into Marxist values may have different effects on perceptions of wealth and poverty. In measuring whether a respondent adheres to Marxist beliefs, it is necessary to measure both the depth of people's socialization experiences under communism as well as the extent to which respondents espouse Marxist beliefs at the time of the survey. Three indicators are used to tap Marxist values and socialization experiences:

- Age: Older people were socialized into Marxist values for a longer period of time than younger people. The respondent's age is included as an indicator of Marxist socialization as well as the square of the respondent's age to account for any non-linearity in age's effect.
- Personal history with the communist party: People who were party members or whose parents were party members likely experienced deeper socialization into Marxist values than those who had no personal history with the communist party. I measure personal history with the communist party using a 4-point scale variable, indicating whether 1) the respondent was a member, 2) the respondent's parent was a member, 3) the respondent had another family member who was a member, or 4) the respondent had no personal history with the communist party.
- Market skepticism: Individuals who are skeptical of market economic systems are unlikely to tolerate higher levels of inequality and to perceive inequality as fair. The Life in Transition survey taps peoples support for a market economy by asking them to identify the statement with which they agree most: 1) "A market economy is preferable to any other form of economic system," 2) "Under some circumstances, a planned economy may be preferable to a market economy," or 3) "For people like me, it does not matter whether the economic system is organized as a market economy or as a planned economy." Market skepticism is measured as a binary variable indicating whether the respondent reported "A market economy is preferable to any other form of economic system," (coded as 0) or either "Under some circumstances, a

planned economy may be preferable to a market economy,” or “For people like me, it does not matter whether the economic system is organized as a market economy or as a planned economy” (coded as 1).

*Media exposure.* When capturing the media’s effect on people’s perceptions of the level of inequality and its fairness, it is important to consider the frequency of people’s exposure to the media. Individuals who have little exposure to the media are unlikely to be affected by it. Level of media exposure is measured by respondents’ reported frequency of following either newspapers, news broadcast on radio or TV, printed magazines, or in-depth reports on radio or TV. Respondents indicate their frequency of media exposure for each type of media on a 7-point scale ranging from daily to never. Each respondent then receives a value for media exposure based on the maximum frequency across each category. For example, respondents would receive a “daily” score for media exposure if they indicated that they followed any of the media sources daily<sup>4</sup>.

*Freedom of the Media.* Countries’ level of media freedom is measured by the Freedom House Freedom of the Press index. Freedom House rates countries on their level of print and broadcast media freedom on a scale from 1 -100. The scale is inverted so that high scores indicate high levels of media freedom and low scores indicate low levels of media freedom. Countries’ levels of media freedom are also lagged one year behind the Life in Transition survey so that 2009 levels of media freedom are included. It is important to lag the level of media freedom because the survey was conducted at different time points in the course of the 2010 calendar year. It

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<sup>4</sup> Frequency of following internet sources was not considered because Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press index did not report on the freedom of internet media in 2009.

would be unreasonable for the measured level of media freedoms, which draws on events happening later in the 2010 year, to affect survey respondents earlier in the year.

*Control Variables.* Several variables are included to control for effects that have not been specified in the model's theoretical framework.

- Country-level economic development: The model controls for the country's 2009 GDP per capita, as measured by the World Bank<sup>5</sup>.
- Sex: The model controls for the respondent's sex, whereby men are the reference category.
- Impact of the 2008 global financial crisis: Individual exposure to the 2008 crisis is included to control for the impact that the crisis may have had on people's opinions about inequality. This paper does not intend to make any conclusions about the ways that economic crises affect perceptions about inequality, and therefore the variable is included only as a control. It is measured by respondents' answer to how much the crisis has affected their household in the past two years. Response options are recorded on a 4-point scale ranging from 1) "A great deal" to 4) "Not at all."
- Personal experience with corruption: experience with corruption is included because research suggests that corruption has a significant effect on people's perceptions of inequality (Loveless & Whitefield 2011). Because corruption is not the key focus of this paper, it is included as a control variable. Respondents indicate their experience with corruption by reporting how frequently they have had to make unofficial payments or gifts when interacting with road police, requesting official documents, going to courts, receiving public education, receiving medical treatment, requesting unemployment benefits, and requesting other social security benefits. The experience

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<sup>5</sup> The country Gini coefficient was not included as a control variable because reliable data is not available for several countries in 2010. Including the Gini coefficient would therefore reduce the sample by several countries. Furthermore, researchers have shown that the level of inequality is very weakly tied to people's perceptions of inequality (Dallinger 2010; Kenworthy & McCall 2002; Loveless & Whitefield 2011). Including the Gini coefficient might therefore decrease the sample size unnecessarily. In auxiliary analyses that included the Gini coefficient, the Gini coefficient was an insignificant predictor of people's attitudes.

with corruption score is the average frequency—measured on a 5-point scale from 1) “Never” to 5) “Always”—with which respondents experience corruption across all categories.

## **Analyses**

A multi-level regression framework is necessary to estimate the effects of both the individual-level variables as well as country-level freedom of the media on perceptions of inequality because observations within countries are not independent (see Steenbergen & Jones 2002). Results from the first analyses on fairness perceptions use a multi-level logistic regression model to account for the binary dependent variables. Results from the second analysis on perceptions of inequality’s excess use a continuous multi-level regression model because the response categories are on a continuous scale. In each model, a random intercept for country and a random slope for exposure to media freedoms are included to account for any variation due to country and media freedoms that is not explained by the model.

The results in Table 2 show that most of the social class indicators similarly shape fairness perceptions of both wealth and poverty. Compared to members of the majority ethnic group, ethnic minorities are approximately 15% more likely to believe wealth and poverty are unfair. Higher satisfaction with personal financial situation significantly decreases the odds of believing that wealth and poverty are unfair. A unit increase in satisfaction with personal financial situation is associated with an 18% and a 22% drop in the odds of believing that wealth and poverty, respectively, are unfair. Being unemployed has an insignificant effect on fairness perceptions for both wealth and poverty, which suggests that when controlling for other factors, employed and unemployed people do not think differently about the fairness of wealth and poverty. Education, however, exhibits contrasting effects on perceptions of wealth and poverty. It significantly increases the odds of believing that wealth is unfair and significantly decreases

the odds of believing that poverty is unfair.

**Table 2. Perceptions of wealth and poverty's fairness**

Independent Variables	Dependent variable: Wealth is unfair		Dependent variable: Poverty is unfair	
	Odds Ratio	SE	Odds Ratio	SE
<i>Social Class:</i>				
Education	1.060**	.014	.966**	.011
Unemployed	.992	.055	1.000	.052
Ethnic minority	1.150**	.056	1.169**	.052
Financial satisfaction	.811**	.013	.771**	.011
<i>Values and beliefs:</i>				
Age	1.026**	.005	1.018**	.005
Age-squared	.999**	.000	.999**	.000
Party member	1.067**	.019	1.007	.017
Market skepticism	1.321**	.046	1.272**	.040
<i>Media</i>				
Media exposure	.881*	.042	1.013	.057
Media freedom (country)	1.001	.010	1.005	.008
Media freedom * Media exposure	1.002*	.001	1.000	.001
<i>Controls:</i>				
Female	.821**	.027	.980	.030
Crisis effect	1.071**	.017	1.137**	.017
Corruption experience	1.202**	.024	1.079**	.020
GDP per cap (country)	1.000	.000	.999	.000
Constant	.145**	.069	.472	.182
<i>Random Variation</i>				
Constant	.653	.128	.470	.113
Media exposure	.072	.020	.079	.016
N	20,065		20,065	
Inter-class Correlation	11.475%	.039	6.303%	.028

\* p <.05; \*\* p<.01

Among the values and belief system indicators, age and skepticism of markets significantly increase the odds of believing that both wealth and poverty are unfair. The effect is particularly strong for market attitudes—skepticism of markets increases the odds of believing wealth and poverty are unfair by 32% and 27%, respectively. Personal history with the

communist party significantly increases the odds of believing that wealth is unfair, but it does not have a significant effect on the belief that poverty is unfair. This finding supports Hypothesis 2 in showing that people with deep socialization experiences from the communist party are more likely to perceive wealth as unfair, but they are not more likely to perceive poverty as unfair.

While many indicators of belief systems and social class have similar effects on fairness perceptions of wealth and poverty, the media's effect differs. There is a significant difference in the media's effect on perceptions of wealth's fairness in countries with free and unfree media. A free media increases the odds that someone who frequently follows the media will perceive wealth as unfair. However, the effect does not hold for perceptions of poverty's fairness. People who frequently follow the media in free and unfree countries do not have significantly different odds that they will perceive poverty as unfair. Thus, media freedoms significantly shape people's perceptions of wealth's fairness, but they do not significantly shape people's perceptions of poverty's fairness.

On the whole, macro-level factors are more important in predicting perceptions of wealth's fairness than poverty's fairness. The inter-class correlation, which measures the variance due to country-level factors, is considerably lower for the model predicting beliefs about poverty's fairness than the model predicting wealth's fairness. When predicting perceptions of poverty's fairness, country-level factors account for only approximately 6.303% of the variation, whereas they account for 11.475% of the variation in perceptions of wealth's fairness. Thus, while perceptions of poverty's fairness are weakly linked to country-level factors, there is a substantial link between country-level factors and perceptions of wealth's fairness.

Table 2 presents regression results from models predicting the belief that inequality is too high. The first model shows results from a model without fairness perceptions, while the second



model includes fairness perceptions. Both models are necessary to determine whether fairness perceptions might serve as a pathway through which social class, values and belief systems, or the media affect beliefs about whether inequality is too high. If the coefficients change considerably when adding fairness perceptions into the model, then fairness perceptions may act as a pathway through which other variables affect perceptions of inequality's excess. However, the coefficients from both models are in fact very similar, which indicates that neither social status, belief system, nor media exposure indicators indirectly affects perceptions that inequality is too high. Instead, the models highlight variables with direct effects on perceptions that inequality is too high.

While several social status factors significantly affect beliefs about the fairness of wealth or poverty, none of the social status factors are significantly associated with the belief that inequality is too high. Although these findings contradict some of the literature pointing to social class' effect on distributional preferences, they largely support Lipsmeyer's (2003) findings on support for social policies in Eastern Europe. Lipsmeyer argues that some indicators of social class are weak predictors of support for social policy in Eastern Europe because people of all social classes have felt vulnerable to market forces during the economic transition. Feelings of vulnerability may similarly affect people's perceptions of the level of inequality. The employed, well educated, financially satisfied, and people belonging to the majority nationality may not perceive lower levels of inequality than those of lower social classes because they may feel insecure in their social status. Thus, there may not be many differences in the ways that people of higher and lower social classes perceive inequality because both feel that they could be victims of high inequality.

**Table 3. Perceptions of whether inequality is too high**

Independent Variables	Model without fairness perceptions		Model including fairness perceptions	
	Coefficient	SE	Coefficient	SE
<i>Social Class:</i>				
Education	-.010	.005	-.009	.005
Unemployed	-.014	.024	-.014	.024
Ethnic minority	-.024	.021	-.029	.021
Financial satisfaction	-.011	.007	-.003	.007
<i>Values and beliefs:</i>				
Age	.007**	.002	.006**	.002
Age-squared	.000**	.000	.000*	.000
Party member	.043**	.008	.042**	.008
Market skepticism	.064**	.015	.055**	.015
Wealth is unfair	--	--	.064**	.016
Poverty is unfair	--	--	.107**	.015
<i>Media</i>				
Media exposure	-.005	.023	-.006	.021
Media freedom (country)	-.005	.003	-.005	.003
Media freedom * Media exposure	.001**	.000	.001**	.000
<i>Controls:</i>				
Female	.057**	.014	.060**	.014
Crisis effect	.022*	.007	.018*	.007
Corruption experience	-.003	.008	-.007	.008
GDP per cap (country)	.000	.000	.000	.000
Constant	3.501**	.172	3.457**	.168
<i>Random Variation</i>				
Constant	.195	.043	.183	.037
Media exposure	.020	.007	.018	.007
N	19,625		19,625	
Inter-class Correlation	3.669%	.015	3.248%	.012

\* p &lt;.05; \*\* p&lt;.01

In support of Hypothesis 5, all of the values and belief systems indicators account for significant variation in people's perceptions of whether inequality is excessive. Socialization into Marxist values under the communism and skepticism toward markets are significantly associated

with more critical attitudes toward inequality. The significant relationship between the values and belief system indicators and perceptions of inequality suggests that values and belief systems may be better predictors of perceptions of inequality than social status factors. Thus, it appears that citizens from former communist countries are drawing more heavily on ideology when forming perceptions of inequality than social class status factors.

Although people's beliefs about the fairness of both wealth and poverty are significant predictors of people's perceptions of whether inequality is excessive, perceptions of poverty's fairness has nearly twice the effect of perceptions of wealth's fairness. The difference in the two fairness perceptions' effects shows that it is important to consider the belief that poverty and wealth are fair separately when estimating beliefs that inequality is too high. They each independently affect the belief that inequality is too high. However, people draw more heavily on their beliefs that poverty is unfair than beliefs that wealth is unfair when forming opinions about the level of inequality.

Finally, while neither media freedoms nor exposure to the media have significant effects on people's perceptions of the level of inequality, the interaction of media freedoms and media exposure is a significant predictor. Compared to people who are frequently exposed to the media in unfree countries, people who are frequently exposed to media in free countries believe more strongly that inequality is too high. Thus, media freedoms exhibit a significant effect on perceptions of whether inequality is too high.

## **Conclusion**

The empirical results from this paper imply that political context is an important factor shaping people's perceptions of inequality. People who frequently follow the media in countries with free

media are more likely to believe that wealth is unfair than those who frequently follow the media in countries without free media. Media freedoms also shape the way people perceive the level of inequality in their country. People who are frequently exposed to the media in free countries more strongly believe that inequality is too high than people frequently exposed to the media in unfree countries. These findings suggest that media freedoms significantly shape people's perceptions of inequality, making them more critical of it. They also point to the importance of considering macro-level political factors when examining what shapes people's perceptions of inequality. Future research should continue to examine what other macro-level political factors may shape people's perceptions of the level of inequality and its fairness.

Yet while the findings demonstrate that national political context matters in shaping people's beliefs about inequality, they also caution against the conclusion that national political institutions are the primary drivers of variations in perceptions of inequality. Media freedoms account for significant variation in people's beliefs about whether wealth is unfair and inequality is too high, but they do not account for significant variation in the way people perceive poverty. People who are frequently exposed to the media in unfree countries are just as likely as people who are frequently exposed to the media in free countries to believe that poverty is unfair. Furthermore, most of the variation in people's attitudes toward inequality is due to variation in individual-level factors. Thus, even though political institutions account for significant variation in people's perceptions of whether wealth is fair and whether inequality is too high, individual-level factors are the primary drivers of variation in people's attitudes.

Nevertheless, other aspects of national context may explain variations in attitudes toward inequality worldwide. Results from these analyses are based on data from 28 former communist countries that shared similar histories and socialization experiences. The sample of countries is

useful for examining the ways that political institutions affect attitudes toward inequality because it controls for the effects of many macro-level historical factors that may shape attitudes toward inequality. In doing so, however, the sample does not offer opportunities to examine how variations in historical factors are associated with variations in attitudes toward inequality. It is possible that other macro-level factors, such as colonial history, have important effects on people's perceptions of inequality. However, additional research using a more diverse sample of countries would be necessary to examine whether and how macro-level historical factors shape individual attitudes.

Some findings in this paper are therefore likely to be specific to the context of post-communist countries and may not be generalizable to a more diverse sample. For example, results show that social status factors are much less associated with perceptions of whether inequality is too high than values and belief systems. It is possible that the relative weakness of social status factors may be due to the vulnerability that people of all social classes have felt since the market transition. Indeed, Lipsmeyer (2003) argues that some social status factors do not significantly predict Eastern Europeans' attitudes toward various social policies because even people of higher social statuses feel that they may someday benefit from social programs. Many social status factors may have been weak predictors of the belief that inequality is too high for a similar reason. Even people of higher social classes may have expressed critical attitudes toward inequality because they may have felt insecure in their social position. The context of the transition to markets may therefore explain why several social status factors were not significant drivers of people's beliefs that inequality is too high.

The post-communist context may also explain why people's perceptions of poverty's fairness more strongly affect beliefs that inequality is too high than perceptions of wealth's

fairness. Stoyanov et al. (2000) find that in the midst of the market transition, people sympathized with the poor as victims of harsh circumstances. However, as market ideals began to set in, people became more tolerant of the rich reproducing their wealth. They became strongly in favor of guaranteed “floors” to protect the poor, but not nearly as supportive of “ceilings” that could limit opportunities for personal gain. It is possible that this criticism of poverty and tolerance of wealth helps explain why perceptions of poverty’s fairness are a much stronger driver of attitudes toward inequality than perceptions of wealth’s fairness. In the transition to markets, people may have begun to think of inequality as a problem driven more by unfair opportunities for the poor than too many privileges for the rich. However, it would be necessary to identify the relative effects of poverty and wealth fairness perceptions on the belief that inequality is too high in a larger sample of countries to determine whether these findings hold on a more general scale. Thus, while results from this paper shed important light on how macro-level political institutions may affect perceptions of inequality, more research is necessary to identify how a broader spectrum of historical factors and national contexts might affect public opinion toward inequality.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

Survey Item	Question and Response Wording
Wealth is unfair	In your opinion, which of the following factors is the most important to succeed in life in our country now? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Effort and hard work</li> <li>- Intelligence and skills</li> <li>- By political connections</li> <li>- By breaking the law</li> <li>- Other (specify)</li> </ul>
Poverty is unfair	In your opinion, what is the main reason why there are some people in need in our country today? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Because they have been unlucky</li> <li>- Because of laziness and lack of willpower</li> <li>- Because of injustice in our society</li> <li>- It is an inevitable part of modern life</li> <li>- Other (specify)</li> </ul>
Inequality is too high	To what extent do you agree with the following statement—“The gap between the rich and the poor in our country should be reduced”? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strongly disagree</li> <li>- Disagree</li> <li>- Neither agree nor disagree</li> <li>- Agree</li> <li>- Strongly agree</li> </ul>
Education	What is the highest level of education you already completed? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- No degree/ no education</li> <li>- Primary education</li> <li>- Lower secondary education</li> <li>- Upper secondary education</li> <li>- Post-secondary, non-tertiary education</li> <li>- Bachelor’s degree or more</li> <li>- Master’s degree or PhD</li> </ul>
Consumption expenditures	Approximately how much does your household spend on each of these items per month? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Food, beverages and tobacco</li> <li>- Utilities (electricity, water, gas, heating, fixed line phone)</li> <li>- Transportation (public transportation, fuel for car)</li> </ul>
Ethnic minority	What is your mother tongue?
Financial satisfaction	To what extent do you agree with the following statement—“All things considered, I am satisfied with my financial situation as a whole”? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strongly disagree</li> <li>- Disagree</li> <li>- Neither agree nor disagree</li> <li>- Agree</li> <li>- Strongly agree</li> </ul>
Class status	Please imagine a ten-step ladder where on the bottom, the first step,

	stand the poorest 10% and on the highest step, the tenth, stand the richest 10%. On which step of the ten is your household today?
	- [Respondent marks 1-10]
Party member	Were you or any member of your family a member of the Communist Party prior to (1989/1991)?
	- Respondent
	- Father
	- Mother
	- Other member of the family
	- Nobody
Market skepticism	With which one of the following statements do you agree most?
	- A market economy is preferable to any other form of economic system
	- Under some circumstances, a planned economy may be preferable to a market economy
	- For people like me, it does not matter whether the economic system is organized as a market economy or as a planned economy
Media exposure	People use different sources to learn what is going on in their country and the world. For each of the following sources, please indicate how often you use it:
	- Sources: newspaper, news broadcasts on radio or TV, printed magazines, in-depth reports on radio or TV
	- Frequency: never, about once a year, several times a year, about once a month, about once a week, several times a week, daily
Crisis effect	As you know, an economic crisis is affecting the whole world and our country. How much, if at all, has the crisis affected your household in the past two years?
	- A great deal
	- A fair amount
	- Just a little
	- Not at all
Corruption experience	In your opinion, how often do people like you have to make unofficial payments or gifts in these situations?
	- Situations: interact with road police, request official documents (e.g. passport, visa, birth or marriage certificate, land register, etc.) from authorities, go to courts for a civil matter, receive public education (primary or secondary), receive medical treatment in the public health system, request unemployment benefits, request other social security benefits
	- Frequency: never, seldom, sometimes, usually, always