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## **SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF SYSTEM LEGITIMACY, INEQUALITY AND MERITOCRACY BELIEFS – A PRELIMINARY MULTILEVEL STUDY**

**DRUŠTVENI I OBRAZOVNI DETERMINATORI LEGITIMACIJE  
SUSTAVA, NEJEDNAKOSTI I MERITOKRATSKIH UVJERENJA  
– PRELIMINARNA VIŠESLOJNA STUDIJA**

**APSTRAKT** U radu se na temelju podataka iz Europske studije vrijednosti i primjenom multilevel regresijske analize pokušavaju utvrditi individualne i grupne determinante legitimacije sustava te percepcije nejednakosti i meritokracije. Kao prediktorske i kriterijske varijable u analizama korišteno je ukupno devet različitih indikatora. Rezultati pokazuju da se povezanost zadovoljstva političkim sustavom i individualnih varijabli uglavnom uklapaju u tzv. teoriju društvene dominantnosti, koja smatra da će osobe na višim društvenim pozicijama, u ovome istraživanju muškarci i obrazovanije osobe, češće imati pozitivniji stav prema sustavu. Kada je u pitanju odnos prema nejednakosti, utvrđeno je da osobe desne političke orijentacije imaju negativniji stav prema državnim mjerama smanjenja nejednakosti, a religioznije osobe, osobe nižeg stupnja obrazovanja i žene pozitivniji stav. Analiza pokazuje i umjereni utjecaj socijalističkog vrijednosnog nasljeđa, s obzirom na to da osobe starije dobi u nekadašnjim socijalističkim zemljama imaju pozitivniji stav prema obavezi društva da svim građanima osigura zadovoljavanje elementarnih potreba.

Ključne riječi: legitimacija, nejednakost, meritokracija, obrazovanje, socijalizam, Europska studija vrijednosti.

**ABSTRACT** Based on data from the European Value Study and the application of multilevel regression analysis, the paper attempts to determine the individual and group determinants of the system legitimacy and the perception of inequality and meritocracy. A total of nine different indicators were used as predictor and criterion variables in the analyses. The results show that the connection between satisfaction with the political system generally fits into the so-called social dominance theory, which holds that persons in higher social positions, in this study men and more educated persons, will more often have more positive attitudes towards the system. When it comes to the attitudes towards inequality, it was found that people of right-wing political orientation have more negative attitudes towards state measures to reduce inequality, and more religious people and people with lower education and women have more positive attitudes. The analysis also

shows a moderate impact of the socialist value legacy, given that the elderly in the former socialist countries have more positive attitudes towards the obligation of society to ensure the provision of basic needs to all citizens.

Key words: inequality, meritocracy, education, socialism, European Values Study.

## Introduction

Every social system needs some form of legitimation and social integration, even though the forms of legitimation change as the society passes through various stages (Durkheim, 1997; Durkheim, 2008; Weber, 2013). However, this process can sometimes lead to non-optimal results and reproduction of inequality (Johnson, Dowd and Ridgeway, 2006). As in other ex-socialist countries of the Eastern and Central Europe, in Croatia the transition from the socialist system to the capitalist one had been met with high hopes and expectations. However, very slow economic development, as well the difficulties in the democratic transition and development of the functioning democratic system had been followed by disappointments and unmet expectations shared by the most social strata. Educational inequalities are also widespread in Croatia (Pavić and Đukić, 2016; Pavić, 2016; Pavić and Vukelić, 2009), thus significantly contributing to the widening and deepening of social inequalities and lowering the confidence in the levels of meritocracy within Croatian society. It's not surprising that our previous research (Pavić and Šundalić, 2011; Pavić and Šundalić, 2020) has shown very low levels of meritocratic beliefs and system legitimacy justification among Croatian population. Additionally, given the theoretical assumption that social inequalities and social injustice are felt differently by various social strata and socio-demographic groups, we had also tested related differences in system legitimation and the existence of unjust inequality and meritocracy in Croatia. The results showed that retired persons and students, as well as more religious persons, have higher levels of such beliefs. Age, gender and educational predictors were not as significant. However, bearing in mind that almost all of the younger respondents in the sample were in fact students, we could not test possible age differences in a reliable way.

Given that in the aforementioned recent research (Pavić and Šundalić, 2020) we used ad hoc constructed measurement scales with relatively low levels of reliability (Cronbach's alphas ranged between 0.66 and 0.72), and that we used a convenience sample of Croatian population with limited sample size ( $N = 353$ ), the main purpose of the current study is to broaden the scope of the previous research by using the data from the European Values Study which comprises most European countries. In this way, it would be possible to compare the results from the previous study with the current study with regard to socio-demographic determinants of system legitimation, inequality and meritocracy

beliefs, as well as to test additional research questions related to the individual-level versus group level predictors. Namely, I want to make a preliminary test of the importance of the socialist legacy impact on the social values in this field, which could be broadened and extended in future studies. More specifically, given the possible value differences between the generations that are socialized in the socialist and post-socialist periods, I also wanted to test whether there is an interaction between age and the socialist legacy. In other words, it can be hypothesized that younger and older generations in ex-socialist countries could exhibit sharper value differences than their counterparts in the countries that do not have socialist history, since the older generations raised during the socialism are socialized within the social system that strongly favoured social equality and educational meritocracy, and opposed capitalism. Thus, it could be expected that these generations are less satisfied with the current political system and put greater value on equality and meritocracy.

### **Research questions**

Given the results of my recent study (Pavić and Šundalić, 2020) that indicated only moderate correlation between system legitimacy on one side, and inequality and meritocratic beliefs on the other, in the current study I also measured and analysed these concepts as separate theoretical constructs. Having in mind the remarks outlined in the introductory section, I put forward the following research questions:

1. How much variability of system legitimation, inequality and meritocracy perceptions can be attributed to individual level (persons) and group level (countries)?
2. Which individual-level (socio-demographic) variables are correlated with system legitimation, inequality and meritocracy beliefs?
3. Are the post-socialist countries different in average system legitimation, inequality and meritocracy beliefs in comparison to countries that did not have a socialist political and economic system in the period after the Second World War.
4. Is there an interaction between age (generation) and ex-socialist status of a country when it comes to their relation with system legitimation, inequality and meritocracy beliefs?

### **METHODS**

In this study, I used the integrated dataset of the European Values Study 2017 (EVS 2017). This dataset included 35 participating countries (among them 20 ex-socialist ones) with the total of 56.491 respondents. The following variables from the dataset were used as the predictor variables:

*Gender* (1 – male, 2 – female).

*Age of completed full-time education*.

*Importance of God in life* („How important is God in your life? 10 means very important and 1 means not at all important“).

*Political identification* („In political matters, people talk of ‘the left’ and ‘the right’. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking? 1 - the left, 10 - the right“).

*Ex-socialist country* (1 – yes, 0 – no) – group-level variable.

The following variables were used as the criterion variables in the subsequent multilevel analyses.

*Satisfaction with political system in own country* („On a scale from 1 to 10 where ‘1’ is ‘not satisfied at all’ and ‘10’ is ‘completely satisfied’, how satisfied are you with how the political system is functioning in your country these days?“).

*Importance of eliminating big inequalities in income between citizens* („What should a society provide? Please tell me for each statement if it is important or unimportant to you. From 1 – very important to 4 – not at all important“)

*Importance of guaranteeing that basic needs are met for all, in terms of food, housing, clothing, education, health* („What should a society provide? Please tell me for each statement if it is important or unimportant to you. From 1 – very important to 4 – not at all important“).

*Importance of recognizing people on their merit* („What should a society provide? Please tell me for each statement if it is important or unimportant to you. From 1 – very important to 4 – not at all important“).

Given that I wanted to test both individual-level and group-level predictors, and that in the dataset individuals are nested within the countries, multilevel linear regression was the appropriate data analysis method (Bickel, 2007; Hox, 2002; Luke, 2004; Snijders and Bosker, 2001; Šundalić and Pavić, 2013).

First we tested various multilevel models with system legitimation (satisfaction with political system on one’s country) as the criterion variable. Initially, we used empty model (no predictors) in order to test how much variability can be attributed to between-group and in-group variability. The empty model is based on the following two equations which comprise only intercept variability and error variance, as well as one fixed parameter (intercept)<sup>137</sup>:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$$

In our second, also random intercept model, we entered first-level predictors (gender, age, age of completed education, importance of god in life, and political identification. In order words, the model consisted of the following equations:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 Gen + \beta_2 Age + \beta_3 AgeEdu + \beta_4 ImGod + \beta_5 PolId + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$$

In the next model, also a random intercept model, in addition to the first-level predictors we also included one second-level predictor, i.e. whether the country is former socialist country or not. Therefore, the model consisted of the following equations:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 Gen + \beta_2 Age + \beta_3 AgeEdu + \beta_4 ImGod + \beta_5 Polld + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$$

$$\gamma_{00} = \delta_{00} + \gamma_{01} Soc + u_{00j}$$

In the model 4, we allowed age coefficients to vary. The following equations were therefore used:

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 Gen + \beta_2 Age + \beta_3 AgeEdu + \beta_4 ImGod + \beta_5 Polld + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$$

$$\gamma_{00} = \delta_{00} + \gamma_{01} Soc + u_{00j}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + u_{2j}$$

In the final model, we allowed age coefficient to vary within countries, and also included age X socialism interaction in order to test whether the relation of age and system legitimation is different in the former socialist countries when compared to the countries which did not have a socialist economic and political system. Thus, the following equations were used.

$$Y_{ij} = \beta_{0j} + \beta_1 Gen + \beta_2 Age + \beta_3 AgeEdu + \beta_4 ImGod + \beta_5 Polld + \varepsilon_{ij}$$

$$\beta_{0j} = \gamma_{00} + u_{0j}$$

$$\gamma_{00} = \delta_{00} + \gamma_{01} Soc + u_{00j}$$

$$\beta_{2j} = \gamma_{20} + \gamma_{21} Soc + u_{2j}$$

## Results

In the first (empty) model with legitimacy as the criterion variable, both residual (error) and intercept variance are significantly different from zero. Intraclass coefficient (ICC) amounts to 19.58%, which means that almost 20% of variability in system legitimation. No predictors were used in this model.

As can be noted from the fixed effects (i. e. structural parameters of the model) of the second model, all predictors were statistically significant, which is perhaps not surprising given the large sample size. Women are less satisfied with the political system, but this difference amounts to 0.06 points on a 1 to 10 scale, so the difference is not large. Regression coefficient of age is 0.01,

which means that with the increase of ten years of age the results on the scale rises by 0.1 points. With an increase of one year in age of completed education the average result on the criterion variable rises by 0.05 points. One point increase in importance of god leads to an increase of 0.06 points, while on point increase of political identification towards right-wing position rises the score by 0.11 points. In the second model ICC remains very similar as in the first model (21.04). Namely, explained variance between countries is even negative, probably because due to sampling methods used in the countries that participated in the study. Anyhow, it seems that the differences in system legitimation cannot be explained by the differences in individual-level predictors.

*Table 1. Multilevel regressions on system legitimacy as criterion variable*

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Fixed effects (structural parameters)					
Intercept	5.02***	3.48***	2.79***	2.70***	2.70***
Individual level:					
Gender		0.06**	0.03**	0.06**	0.04**
Age		0.01***	0.01***	0.00*	0.01*
Age of completed education		0.05***	0.05***	0.06***	0.06***
Importance of God		0.06***	0.06***	0.07***	0.07***
Political identification		0.11***	0.11***	0.11***	0.11***
Country level:					
Ex-socialist			-1.58***	-1.64***	-1.66***
Ex-socialist X age					-0.00
Random effects:					
Residual variance	5.42***	5.18***	5.19***	5.16***	5.16***
Intercept variance	1.32***	1.38***	0.81***	1.10***	1.10***
Age variance				0.00**	0.00**

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

It can be noted that in the subsequent models individual-level predictors

remained similar. When it comes to the group level predictor, it can be noted that ex-socialist countries have significantly lower average scores on the criterion variable (1.64 points in the fourth, the best-fit model). In the third model ICC amounted to 13.5%, which is significantly lower than in the previous models, even though significant variability between countries still remains to be explained. In the fourth model, ICC equalled 17.57%, while ICC of the final model remained about 17.57%.

The differences between nested models were tested by -2 log-likelihood models, having in mind that the differences have a chi-square distribution with degrees of freedom equal to the difference in the number of parameters estimated in models that are being compared (Heck and Thomas, 2010: 139). It can be concluded that the fourth model is the best-fit for the data in hand.

*Table 2. Information criterion (-2 Log Likelihood) of the model with system legitimacy as criterion variable*

Model	-2 Log Likelihood
Empty model	247772.153
Random intercept with first level predictors	188921,663
Random intercept with first-level and second-level	185144,762
Random slope (age varies)	185020.319
Random slope with age X socialism interaction	185020.078

As in the case of system legitimation, we also conducted series of multilevel regressions (five different models) with perception of importance of eliminating big inequalities in income between citizens as criterion variable. First multilevel regression (empty model) revealed that ICC amounted to 8.06%.

Fixed effects showed that all individual-level predictors are statistically significant. Women are more prone to express support for eliminating big inequalities in income between citizens (0.06), as well as older persons (0.01), persons who completed their education at an earlier age (0.02), persons who put more importance on god (0.02) and right-wing persons (0.06). Neither ex-socialism nor age and ex-socialism interaction had any impact in the best-fit (fourth) model.

Table 3. Multilevel regressions on importance of eliminating big inequalities in income between citizens as criterion variable

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Fixed effects (structural parameters)					
Intercept	1.88***	1.67***	1.76***	1.71***	1.70***
Individual level:					
Gender		0.06**	0.06***	0.06***	0.06***
Age		0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
Age of completed education		-0.02**	-0.02**	-0.02*	-0.01*
Importance of god		0.02***	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***
Political identification		-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.06***	-0.06***
Country level:					
Ex-socialist			0.16*	0.09	0.07
Ex-socialist X age					-0.00
Random effects:					
Residual variance	0.57***	0.54***	0.54***	0.54***	0.54***
Intercept variance	0.05***	0.04***	0.04***	0.06***	0.06***
Age variance				0.00*	0.00*

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

As can be seen from Table 4, in this series of multilevel regression, the fourth model was the best fit for the data that we analysed.

Table 4. Information criterion (-2 Log Likelihood) of the models with importance of eliminating big inequalities in income between citizens as criterion variable

Model	-2 Log Likelihood
Empty model	92703.091
Random intercept with first level predictors	90925.844
Random intercept with first-level and second-level predictors	90924.917
Random slope (age varies)	90850.960
Random slope with age X socialism interaction	90860.018

In the third series of multilevel regressions, the importance of guaranteeing that basic needs are met for all was used as the criterion variable. Empty model decomposed the variance in such a way that ICC amounted to 5.88%. As for the fixed effects, age was not a significant predictor, while women showed more support for this idea (0.04), as well as more educated persons (0.01) and left-wing persons (0.08). Citizens from ex-socialist countries are also more inclined towards the idea (0.24), while there is also an interaction between age and living in a ex-socialism country. Namely, older respondents in ex-socialist countries are more prone to agree that a society should secure that basic needs of all citizens are met as compared to younger generations, while in the countries that have no socialist legacy this difference goes in the opposite direction – younger generations are more likely to agree with the aforementioned proposition.

*Table 5. Multilevel regressions on importance of guaranteeing that basic needs are met for all as criterion variable*

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Fixed effects (structural parameters)					
Intercept	1.39***	1.31***	1.32***	1.31***	1.18***
Individual level:					
Gender		0.05**	0.05***	0.04***	0.04***
Age		0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Age of completed education		0.01*	0.01*	0.01*	0.01*
Importance of god		0.01***	0.01***	0.03***	0.03***
Political identification		-0.03***	-0.03***	-0.08***	-0.08***
Country level:					
Ex-socialist			0.18**	0.20**	0.24***
Ex-socialist X age					-0.003***
Random effects:					
Residual variance	0.32***	0.31***	0.31***	0.30***	0.31***
Intercept variance	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***
Age variance				0.00	0.00

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

In this series of multilevel regression, the final (fifth) was the best fit for the data that we analysed.

Table 6. Information criterion (-2 Log Likelihood) of the models

Model	-2 Log Likelihood
Empty model	94132.859
Random intercept with first level predictors	70173.899
Random intercept with first-level and second-level predictors	70115.123
Random slope (age varies)	68596.656
Random slope with age X socialism interaction	68579.304

And finally, the importance of recognizing people on their merit was used as the criterion variable. ICC amounted to 6.82%. The structural part of the model indicated that only gender is a non-significant predictor. Persons who put more value to the importance of god (0.01), right-wing persons (0.003), more educated persons (0.01) and older persons (0.002) are more prone to support this statement. Surprisingly, people from ex-socialist countries are less inclined to support this statement (-0.16).

Table 7. Multilevel regressions on importance of recognizing people on their merit as criterion variable

Parameter	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Fixed effects (structural parameters)					
Intercept	1.60***	1.85***	1.76***	1.77***	1.77***
Individual level:					
Gender		-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Age		0.002***	0.002***	0.002***	0.002***
Age of completed education		0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
Importance of god		0.01***	0.01***	0.01***	0.01***
Political identification		0.003*	0.003*	0.003*	0.003*
Country level:					
Ex-socialist			-0.15*	-0.16*	-0.16
Ex-socialist X age					-0.00
Random effects:					
Residual variance	0.41***	0.41***	0.41***	0.41***	0.41***
Intercept variance	0.03***	0.03***	0.02***	0.02***	0.02***
Age variance				0.00*	0.00*

\* p<0.05; \*\* p<0.01; \*\*\* p<0.001

In this series of multilevel regression, the fourth model was the best fit for the data that we analysed (Table 8).

*Table 8. Information criterion (-2 Log Likelihood) of the models*

Model	-2 Log Likelihood
Empty model	108237.964
Random intercept with first level predictors	81998.829
Random intercept with first-level and second-level predictors	80529.926
Random slope (age varies)	80497.359
Random slope with age X socialism interaction	80509.964

### **Discussion and preliminary conclusions**

It can be hypothesized that meritocratic beliefs and, especially, system legitimation beliefs are conceptually similar to the concept of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Fukuyama, 1995; Putnam, 2000). When we compare our results to van Oorschot, Arts and Gelissen's study (2006) on the geographical and social distribution of social capital in Europe, we come to the conclusion that macro-level social capital might be both similar to and different from system legitimacy and meritocratic beliefs. Namely, based on the EVS 1999/2000 wave data, they concluded that there are small differences in geographical distribution of social capital, with former communist countries being the least abundant in social capital. However, individual determinants of social capital are both similar and different to ours related to system legitimation and meritocracy beliefs. In both cases, more educated persons tend to have higher levels of social capital and system legitimacy beliefs. As for gender, women tend to have lower levels of generalized trust, whereas trust in institutions was not significantly different when compared to men. Catholics were less likely to trust other persons (generalized trust), as well as trust institutions when compared to non-religious people, while the difference between Protestants and non-religious people was not significant when the geographical area entered the equation (van Oorschot, Arts and Gelissen, 2006: 162).

Duru-Bellat and Tenret (2012), have found, based on the International Social Survey Program Social Inequality III (1999), that perceived meritocracy (whether persons are rewarded for their effort and abilities) is most strongly related with the level of national wealth (GDP), while there is no relation to income inequality (GINI coefficient) nor the actual educational meritocracy (correlation between tertiary diploma and income). In their study, there was no link between educational level and perceived meritocracy, the finding that they explain by possible contradictory influence of education. Namely, on the one side, higher level of education might make a person think that his/her position in

social hierarchy is well-deserved. On the other side, more educated persons might be more sensitive to injustice, and thus perceive lower levels of meritocracy in their country. In the current study, it seems that more educated persons are more inclined to have positive attitudes towards the system, while they think that it is important to recognize people according to their merits.

Additionally, Duru-Bellat and Tenret also found that older persons, persons with higher income and men perceive meritocracy to be more present in their country. Even though they strongly support education-based meritocracy, persons from ex-socialist countries more often perceive their countries as being non-meritocratic (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012: 233). Both findings are largely consistent with the results of the current study.

These findings can be interpreted within social dominance theory (Sidanius, Pratto and Mitchell, 1994; Sidanius and Pratto, 1999; Sidanius and Pratto, 2004) and system justification theory (Jost and Banaji, 1994; Jost et al., 2003a; Jost et al., 2003; Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004; Jost, Nosek and Gosling, 2008), while social dominance theory can be seen as a specific case of social identification theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 1981). Based on the results of the current study, we can tentatively conclude that persons in higher social positions have higher levels of system legitimation, i.e. that our analysis supports social dominance theory.

Aside from general socio-psychological processes which provide the basis for the above mentioned theories, it can also be hypothesized that there are differential types of political socializations embedded in various social contexts that can lead to attitudes towards system legitimation and that can be opposed to manifest rational interests of some social strata. For instance, Im (2014) showed that psychosocial dispositions, such as authoritarianism and social dominance orientation, can also lead to conservative social and political attitudes among lower class strata. Therefore, in the current study we wanted to analyse the impact of socialist legacy. When it comes to attitudes towards providing basic needs, there is a significant interaction between age and socialist/non-socialist country, i.e. the impact of older age on this issue is different in the former socialist countries when compared to the countries that did not have socialist system of governance. Thus, it seems that socialist legacy still exerts some influence on the social value system even thirty years after the demise of socialism in Europe.

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