

The Deterioration of Democratic Political Culture: Consequences of the Perception of Inequality

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Abstract Using survey data from nine East European members of the European Union, I find that citizens' political and social disengagement is strongly related to their perceptions of inequalities in society. Specifically, individuals' perceptions that income and social inequalities are excessive clearly coordinates with lower levels of trust and political efficacy, as well as higher levels of both a general suspicion of others and political apathy. This is troubling as these attitudes and orientations are part of what constitute a healthy democratic political culture and thus germane to the long-term legitimacy of both national and EU governance. Further, in contrast to much of the work on inequality, this effect is neither contingent on individuals' income levels nor clearly linked to national-level economic indicators.

Keywords Inequality · Democracy · Political culture · Political behavior

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, market liberalization in the newest European Union (EU) member states of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has introduced formal income and social inequality to these states. Common macro-economic indicators suggest that CEE has made developmental progress; however, other indicators suggest that this national-level achievement may not have translated into clear and shared individual-level gains. As such, while inequality may have initially been viewed as an opportunity for these citizens to improve their life chances, increase social mobility, and augment access to broader social and economic goods, it has become

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increasingly viewed by these same citizens as an institutionalized system of excessive disparity (Kelley & Zagorski, 2004; Loveless & Whitefield, 2011; Örkeny & Székelyi, 2000).

This examination of the impact of inequality on democratic political culture shifts the proposed influence of inequality from the macro-level (objective inequality and aggregate levels of various values and attitudes) to processes as the *individual-level*. We draw from related works on trust, efficacy, and inequality (e.g., Goodin & Dryzek, 1980; Rothstein & Uslander, 2005; Uslander & Brown, 2005) that show higher levels of objective, national-level inequality leads to lower levels of aggregate optimism, weakens shared goals, fosters resentment between classes, and undermines individuals' sense of control and ability to interact with the world around them (i.e., alienation and isolation). Our contribution is to argue that individuals' *perceptions* of inequality better capture how individuals *experience* inequality and thus better explain variation in the impact of inequality on individuals' values necessary for healthy democratic political culture.

We use a one-time study designed to look at inequality in post-Communist states. Original data collection for this paper was carried out as part of the *EUREQUAL* project "Social Inequality and Why It Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and Its Citizens: Post-Communist CEE in Comparative Perspective."¹ This in-depth project was aimed at assessing the impact of inequality on individuals as it is related to the varied processes of democratization and market liberalization over the past 20 years. The countries in the study vary from current EU members to post-Soviet, quasi-authoritarian states and the design of the dataset takes this into account—seeking to maximize cross-national comparability in both individual-response measures and macro-level data. From these data, I find that individuals who see excessive amounts of inequality—in contrast to those who perceive acceptable or lower levels of inequality—exhibit clear and distinctly lower levels of trust and higher levels of suspiciousness of others. In addition, for these individuals, this creeping social atomization is accompanied by lower levels of individuals' assessments of their political efficacy and higher levels of self-reported levels of political apathy.

To explain this, I argue individuals' *perceptions* of inequality are better indicators of how individuals experience—and thus respond to—inequality (regardless of the accuracy of these perceptions). Specifically, for those who perceive high levels of inequality, immediate egocentric concerns take priority at the expense of social relations (Goodin & Dryzek, 1980). Correspondingly, social networks wither as individualism weakens shared bonds, in turn producing citizens more isolated, hostile, and demobilized. Although congruent to results at the aggregate level (Uslander, 2002; Uslander & Brown, 2005), this research better identifies for whom inequality results in the atrophy of social and political values

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of trust and efficacy, namely, those who see excessive levels of inequality in their society.

This is a troubling finding. At a time in which both national governments and the EU itself face their own legitimacy issues, the evidence from these countries here shows us what continues to work against democratic political culture. If in the specific case when inequalities are perceived to be excessive, individuals increasingly forgo democratic engagement (and the attitudinal prerequisites wither, as here), inequality and its perception is likely to be highly corrosive to long-term democratic stability and viability as it perpetuates precisely this type of political disengagement (Solt, 2008; Uslander, 2008; also Bollen & Jackman, 1985; Goodin & Dryzek, 1980; Letki, 2004). Therefore, the impact on these countries of inequality and how it is perceived is not only regionally relevant, but also salient to the EU and other new democracies as declining social and political engagement undermines the robustness and long-term legitimacy for democratic governance.

Inequality and Democratic Political Culture

The argument presented here assumes that democratic political culture is essential to the longevity and quality of democracy. There are many obvious reasons to make this assumption. A democratic form of participatory political system requires a democratic political culture consistent with it. Theoretical and empirical studies have identified a number of important elements of this political culture, some behavioral, others attitudinal, or value based (Almond & Verba, 1963; Dahl, 1989; Putnam, 1993). However, the role of social trust and cooperation as components of democratic civic culture cannot be overemphasized as without either, successful communities and democratic politics are impossible (Almond & Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 1993, 2000). Without some basic form of solidarity, inclusion, or community, even the most robust political and social institutions would find it nearly impossible to function. While trust in government (“vertical” trust) is relevant to democratic culture, here we are referring to the “horizontal” trust in others—related to social capital (Putnam, 2000), general trust (Uslander, 2002) and interpersonal trust (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Political efficacy as well lies at the core of democratic political culture and long-term democracies (Almond & Verba, 1963). Efficacy indicates individuals’ abilities to conceive of and act in their own benefit; in other words, the expectation that their actions are meaningful (a socio-psychological value, Bandura, 2001). To act in one’s own interest lies at the foundation of both our understanding of the democratic citizen as well as the democratic process. Conceptually and empirically, there are two types of efficacy, internal and external (Niemi, Craig, & Mattei, 1991). Internal (subjective) political efficacy represents how individuals assess their ability to be a meaningful and competent part of the political process; whereas, external (subjective) political efficacy estimates the responsiveness of political institutions and actors (Balch, 1974; Converse, 1972). Thus, the barest notion that citizens’ mere *potential* to engage with politics will be meaningful underpins substantive democratic political culture.

What makes both trust and efficacy valuable to democratic political culture is that their absence aptly defines civic disengagement. In other words, while we may continue to debate what exactly constitutes a “correct” democratic political culture, we do know that without trust and efficacy it would be woefully inadequate. Thus, conceptually, our investigation here includes attributes considered elemental to the self-conceptual attitudes of democratic political culture: trust (and its conceptual opposite, the suspicion of others) and efficacy (i.e., internal efficacy and a conceptual supplement, political apathy).

What Drives Trust and Efficacy?

The sources of individuals’ levels of trust include both social explanations, such as the interaction with other people, and institutional explanations, including the political, social, and economic institutions that facilitate these social interactions. The former and more frequently examined has accumulated evidence that both group participation and social interaction are paramount in explaining variation in the level of trust of individuals. Putnam (1993, 2000) has emphasized individuals’ participation in groups outside of the home in the form of membership in professional, political, or social groups. On the other hand, Uslaner (1999, 2002) suggests that interacting and intermingling with others is sufficient. Although placing different levels of emphasis on the diversity of one’s community, they—as do others in the literature (Brehm & Rahn, 1997; see also La Due Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998)—share the assumption that interaction and exposure with other people in one’s community develops trust and collective mindedness move together. Institutional explanations have struggled with clearer explanations (Almond & Verba, 1963; although see Putnam, 1993) and have largely resulted in a return to social explanations (see Stolle, 2003). Here, we adhere to this. In early examinations in CEE, scholars examined social capital (Edwards & Foley, 1998; Kunioka & Woller, 1999; Mishler & Rose, 1997a, b) and interpersonal and institutional trust (Evans & Whitefield, 1995; Mishler & Rose, 2001; Muller & Seligson, 1994). And, while some argued that interpersonal trust was projected onto, or spilled over into, political institutions (Almond & Verba, 1963; also Inglehart, 1997; Putnam, 1993), those looking exclusively at CEE arrived at the reverse conclusion (Kornai & Rose-Ackerman, 2004) or decoupled them entirely (Mishler & Rose, 2001). Thus, it is difficult to conclude with a consensus.

Individuals’ levels of efficacy, on the other hand, largely share these sources with trust such that interaction with political and social institutions is one source that facilitates their development. Rohrschneider (1999) argues that individuals are able to develop efficacy (among other political attitudes and values) through participation—i.e., engaging with democratic institutions (see also Finkel, 1985). However, socio-economic determinants have been the most frequent explanations for the development of subjective efficacy. Individual attributes and socio-economic location seem to best explain differences in individuals’ assessment of their own level of capability—most benefitting the young, educated, and male (Jennings & Niemi, 1978).

Newer research however, draws our attention to national-level explanations of both trust (although less so for efficacy). Some link economic conditions to trust, in particular inequality. Uslaner and Brown (2005) found that the level of inequality is the strongest determinant of aggregate levels of trust and thus directly relevant to civic participation (see also Uslaner, 2002). Rothstein and Uslaner (2005, p. 51) also link inequality to trust directly stating “...[it is] how well the country is doing collectively, rather than how well anyone is doing individually, leads to changes in generalized trust”. To see whether this patterns emerges here, we aggregate individuals’ responses to questions about both trust and efficacy to the national level² and correlate these with measures of economic performance and distribution.³

With the exception of GDP *per capita*, the aggregate levels of trust and efficacy fail to coordinate with national economic conditions in any meaningful way (see Table 1). This comports with the generic argument above that suggests that people are, in the aggregate, more trusting and efficacious when “times are good.” Yet, for the most part, for CEE, aggregate levels of trust and efficacy do not coordinate in a coherent manner with cross-national variation in economic performance or inequality. Is this a failure of the posited macro–micro link? No. For one reason, the literature represents work that has been done in the US and other advanced industrial democracies and we have used this, in lieu of a lacuna of relevant work in new democracies, as our theoretical basis. If however, there is a lack of coordination, can inequality be related to trust and efficacy in another way?

Solt’s recent contribution (2008) is informative by comprehensively testing three substantial theories of income inequality and democratic political engagement. For rich and upper-middle income democracies, he finds that the relative power theory does best in explaining the effect of income inequality, controlling for individual and national level economic and political factors (*ibid.*, pp. 49–50).⁴ Relative power theory states that rising levels of national income inequality depresses overall political activity (political interest, political discussion, and electoral participation) with a stronger effect on lower relative income groups. He argues that the results agree with the literature’s general expectation that income inequality affects

² Trust: ‘Most people can be trusted’. Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, (No opinion/DK). Reverse coded and includes DK’s as a neutral middle category. Subjective Political Efficacy: “People like me have no say in what the government does.” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, (No opinion/DK). DK’s to the neutral middle category. The data description is discussed further in the methodology section.

³ These include GDP *per capita*, the Gini Index, and the percentage of wealth held by the top 10 %. All variables are from 2007. Political variables, such as the ERBD transition and Freedom House scores, produced insubstantial correlations.

⁴ He also tests resource and conflict theory. The former suggests that political engagement depends on the basis of individuals’ socio-economic status, such that in the face of increasing income inequality the rich engage more as they have sufficient resources to be more politically active, and poor less. Resource theory is essentially a political participation question in which increasing levels of inequality heighten political contestation, serving as an impetus to action but again, action based on individual resources in which the rich are able to engage more fully. Conflict theory suggests that inequality increases engagement for all income levels as all groups seek to engage the debate politically. In other words, regardless of the level of income, ‘the rich’ and ‘the poor’ seek to address inequality through engagement, the former in order to restrict redistributive policies and the latter to enact them (see also Brady, 2004).

Table 1 Cross-national correlations with aggregated trust and efficacy

	Aggregated trust	Aggregated efficacy
GDP per capita	$r = 0.73$ ($p < 0.02$, $N = 9$)	$r = 0.52$ ($p < 0.15$, $N = 9$)
Gini index	$r = 0.29$ ($p < 0.45$, $N = 9$)	$r = 0.24$ ($p < 0.54$, $N = 9$)
Top 10 % wealth	$r = 0.36$ ($p < 0.42$, $N = 7$)	$r = 0.40$ ($p < 0.37$, $N = 7$)

political engagement with a particularly strong politically de-mobilizing effect on lower income groups (*ibid.*, p. 48).

If we consider this to be a specific case of a more general distribution of resources, nearly all models of engagement (i.e., attention, interest, and connectivity) account for the higher levels of participation for those with higher incomes and education based on the idea that this group is more attentive to changes in governmental policies (Bartels, 2009) or the rich are simply able to harness the resources necessary to participate more (Barnes & Kaase, 1979; Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995). This is reflected in the literature on income inequality such that inequality influences political engagement in a number of ways, but most often in conjunction with the level of income (socio-economic status) of the individual (Bollen & Jackman, 1985; Goodin & Dryzek, 1980; Solt, 2008; for CEE, see Verwiebe & Wegener, 2000). That is, the more skewed the distribution of resources, the more likely we will see disparities in engagement across socio-economic groups. As Solt writes, “[g]reater inequality increases the relative power of the wealthy to shape politics in their own favor against rival arguments that focus on the effects of inequality on citizens’ objective interests or the resources they have available for political engagement” (2008, p. 48, a linkage he describes as “self-evident”). This underscores the current understanding of the relationship between inequality and individual outcome via individuals’ levels of income.

What I suggest however is that, instead of only differentiating individuals by income levels in differing contexts of objective inequality (e.g., Solt, 2008; Uslander, 2002), subjective evaluations of inequality may be more important than the actual levels of inequality’s impact on income groups. What people perceive is more meaningful in terms of evaluating the people around them (society) as well as their own position in society and politics (Sullivan & Transue, 1999). This may still loosely cohere socio-economically, but it is their own assessment of inequality—rather than *actual* inequality—that shapes their responses. This is not a radical leap as the findings thus far here are in congruence with recent evidence that perceptions of inequality appear only weakly connected with the actual size of income differences (for the US: Bartels, 2008; Norton & Airely, 2011; for Europe: Kaltenhaler, Ceccoli, & Gelleny, 2008; for CEE: Tverdova, 2012; Loveless & Whitefield, 2011). Thus, if perceptions of inequalities can both move independently of actual economic situations and can affect individuals in a manner unconstrained by membership in income groups, they may independently connect with individuals’ social and political engagement. If so, it would be important to know how. I propose one understanding here.

Specifically, what I argue is that unlike individuals' levels of income, it is *because* of the subjective and often normative origins of perceptions that better informs our understanding of how individuals assess and respond to the level of inequality. *A priori* assumption about how individuals see objective reality may be misrepresenting individuals' understandings of what inequality is and what it means to them. In other words, cleaving groups by income to understand how objective inequality affects individuals may be less efficient in revealing what inequality means to individuals. If that is the case, we are more likely to misunderstand how inequality influences their attitudes (and ultimately behavior). Therefore, the effect of individuals' perceptions of excessive levels of inequality is likely to affect their democratic values *regardless* of how much income they have or how (in)accurate their perceptions of the actual level of national inequality.

Democratic Political Culture and the Role of Individuals' Perceptions of Inequality

Both cognitively and psychologically, high levels of inequality have demonstrated clear negative influences on individual psychological subjective well being (Diener, 2000; Kaltenhaler et al., 2008; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), self-reported health (Soobader & LeClere, 1999), individual stress levels (Aneshensel, 1992), and overall life satisfaction (in Europe, Pittau, Zelli, & Gelman, 2010). We also know from above that inequality can shape individuals' response to political and social phenomena in their societies.

Anderson (2010) argues that the origins of both trust and efficacy lie in the community in which individuals are embedded; such that, the exercise of individual capacity is community in the form of "strength in numbers." This is directly relevant as, when inequality increases, the number of competitors in one's community/society/area increases. In such situations, individuals and families find their economic and social situations more fragile creating and fostering resentment rather than cooperation between classes. Social mobility drops as inequality increases, curtailing entrepreneurial activity, increasing personal and societal economic fragility, and putting individuals and families in "defensive" economic positions. Particularly in societies with weak or young political institutions, this can produce societies in which communities shrink and social networks wither. Stability and constancy is undermined with clear labor force effects, but also the individual-level effects of alienation and isolation. Immediate or egocentric concerns take priority thus pitting one against another.

This has been demonstrated effectively in the political science literature. To Uslaner and Brown (2005), economic equality can serve as a source of trust because higher *inequality* leads to less optimism and thus less generalized trust (a "social contraction"). Secondly, high inequality reduces the notion of a common destiny between economic groups and thus trust. I agree with both as well as their extension to the former idea that generalized trust also promotes an individual sense of control, an ability to interact with the world around and make improvements. Yet, if inequality can produce these effects, and individuals' perceptions of inequality

correlate poorly with actual levels of inequality, is there potential for an independent influence of these perceptions?

I argue that there is this potential and we point out that both Solt and Uslaner—as the most significant and recent works in the literature—see it without directly identifying it. Lower income groups (classes) are more likely to be affected by inequality (for Solt, in terms of participation, 2008; and for Uslaner, trust and efficacy specifically, 2002; see also Brandolini & Smeeding, 2008; Karakoc, 2013). In fact, Solt remarks on the learned helplessness of the poor, but does not pursue that cognitive transformation idea further.⁵ However, Uslaner and Brown do (2005, p. 870), making the argument that trusts and optimism about one’s abilities (i.e., efficacy) are substantial, and stand alone, resources. They show, at the aggregate level, that higher (objective) inequality weakens individuals’ confidence that the political system is sensitive to their concerns. Their argument is that neutralizing the economic contest not only minimizes the competition among different economic classes, but also among other types of people as well (ibid.). They add that economic equality tends to defuse the “dog-eat-dog mentality”, linking people in different economic strata through a notion of “shared fate” (see also Goodin & Dryzek, 1980). In contrast, high inequality pits group against each other for limited goods. What this produces, according to Uslaner and Brown, is that individuals “...will have even fewer reasons to believe that they are the masters of their own fate [therefore] ... [i]nequality leads to lower levels of trust” (2005, p. 869).

From this, we can imagine that individuals who *perceive* they are isolated, few in number, and not having opportunities to “practice” politics, would be short on trust and subjective efficacy. In societies, where political institutions are not seen limiting these effects (for CEE, see Whitefield & Loveless, 2013), inequality can be seen outside of one’s control (other than to compete for higher wage job which is also something that cannot be completely controlled). This serves as a clear reason that individuals’ perceptions of inequality can credibly be argued to undermine one’s psychological potency to defend or provide for oneself. This dependence on the individual as the pivot point for the anti-social effect of inequality underscores the importance of the subjectivity of individuals’ perceptions of inequality. Therefore, just as we have seen above, the first casualty of perceived inequality becomes relationships with others and the second casualty, here, consequently becomes individual efficacy.

Let’s examine the fundamental premise here: individuals’ perceptions of national levels of inequality do not correlate strongly with national levels of inequality. Using the aggregate perceptions of social and income inequalities (defined fully in the methodology section below), I correlate them with the Gini index in 2007 as well as the change of the Gini from 2002 to 2007.⁶ The perception of income inequality correlates with the 2007 Gini at $r = -0.43$ ($p < 0.25$, $N = 9$) and the change in Gini at $r = -0.31$ ($p < 0.42$, $N = 9$). For social inequality, the

⁵ “Through repeated failures, these poorer citizens come to conclude that their condition is natural, destined by fate, or simply no less than they deserve...” (Solt, 2008, p. 49).

⁶ We do not expect to find high levels of correlation or significance given only 9 observations. However, there are differences between statistical orthogonality and meaningful covariation.

correlations are $r = -0.37$ ($p < 0.33$, $N = 9$) and $r = 0.17$ ($p < 0.66$, $N = 9$), respectively. I am obviously limited by the low number of observations and—like the previous conclusions about the weak coordination of aggregate trust and efficacy and macro-indicators of inequality and other economic performance indicators—do not insist on this analysis as conclusive. At the same time, the low correlations and lack of statistical significance signify, in the data on these countries here, individuals' aggregate perceptions of both social and income inequality are at best weakly coordinated with the actual level of inequality in their own country.

To be clear, I propose that even in societies with the *same amount of aggregate inequality*, individuals' different perceptions of that level affect them differently such that higher perceptions of excessive inequality create individual effects that manifest in lower levels of socio-political attitudes which matter greatly to democratic political culture. Again, the macro-argument is that societies with higher inequality tend to see a sharper difference in political engagement according to their socio-economic location (Brady, 2004; Solt, 2008). But this presupposes that individuals at all levels of socio-economic strata can assess the correct level of inequality and react accordingly. We argue that we cannot make this assumption as income serves as a weak indicator of individuals' perception and thus experience of inequality (Bartels, 2008) and that these perceptions—however (in)accurate—has an impact on their assessment of their own social and political viability. Goodin and Dryzek identify this intuition clearly in that, “[p]eople who have been rewarded more by the system are psychologically predisposed to feel better about *themselves* and about the system that has rewarded them” (1980, p. 275, emphasis ours). I simply argue that the reverse is likely accurate as well.

Given the above discussion, we arrive at the following hypotheses:

Hypotheses

H₁ Individuals' perceptions of inequality are negatively correlated with their level of general trust and self-reported level of political efficacy.

H₂ Individuals' perceptions of inequality are positively correlated with suspicion of others and political apathy.

H₃ Because inequality is often shown to be more damaging to those with lower levels of income, the hypothesized effects in **H₁** and **H₂** are likely to be stronger for individuals who report a lower level of income.

Methodology

The data for this analysis come from mass public survey data collected in 2007 in nine Central and Eastern European countries that include current EU members: Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia (EUREQUAL project “Social Inequality and Why It

Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and Its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective”).

As discussed above, principal values in a democratic society are trust and efficacy. From the data, respondents are asked first, whether “most people can be trusted” and second, “if you are not always on your guard other people will take advantage of you.” These tap complementary attitudes that include both the issue of “others” (Uslaner, 2002) and well as extending those “others” the benefit of the doubt (Putnam, 2000). Low levels of these indicators are likely to be associated with a low level of social cohesion, i.e., democratic political culture. For efficacy, I assess how individuals perceive their own capabilities within a democracy to achieve political efficacy and political potency. Again, using a complementary approach, I use two questions for efficacy. To assess individuals’ internal efficacy, respondents are asked, “People like me have no say in what the government does.” To assess individual’s levels of political apathy, as an inverse indicator of political potency/efficacy, I assess their response to the question, “Elected officials don’t care much what people like me think” (a summary of these variables is in Table 5 below).

The secondary measures—“suspicion of others” and “apathy”—are intended to buttress and complement the main dependent variables of trust and efficacy. However, both “suspicion of others” and “apathy” are sufficiently empirically independent of the main dependent variables to be interesting in themselves (see Table 2). Thus, these four measures offer us the opportunity for a multi-faceted assessment of the influence of individuals’ perceptions of inequality on values associated with democratic political culture.

The key independent variable is the perception of inequality. I am fortunate that these surveys also allow us to use perceptions of more than one inequality. In the case here, using social and income inequality, the concept of social inequality remains a debated topic despite many some to define it (Bollen & Jackman, 1985; for Canada, see Curtis, Grabb, & Guppy, 2003; for Russia, see Krasin, 2006; for Mexico, see Murphy & Stepick, 1991), or is assumed to be an uncomplicated function of income inequality (in the US, see Neckerman, 2004).

We can imagine that various perceptions of the levels of social inequality in a society would indicate an assessment of the viability of social mobility, the extent of class permeability, and an assessment of stratification in a society. If we take the perception of social inequality to represent this (e.g., opportunities available in the form of employment, education, advancement, and broader social goods), reports of high social inequality would suggest a skewed dispersion of political, economic, and social goods. In contrast, low levels of perceived social inequality would suggest that most (though not all) members of that society have relatively similar access to political, economic, and social goods. This paper does not try to deepen the edges of this concept, but rather assumes its roughly agreed upon conceptualization—and difference from the distribution of incomes—to allow its perception to affect the democratic political cultures of these countries. Recent work suggests that social inequality and its perceptions *do* differ substantially from other inequality perceptions (see Binelli, Loveless, & Whitefield, 2013; Loveless & Whitefield, 2011). In other words, while the definition of social inequality remains theoretically and empirically un-coalesced, what is *means* to individuals—that is, what they

Table 2 Main dependent variables: trust and suspicion and efficacy and apathy

	Trust	People take advantage	Political efficacy
People take advantage	$r = -0.21$ ($N = 10,092$)		
Political efficacy	$r = 0.10$ ($N = 10,093$)	$r = -0.16$ ($N = 10,092$)	
Political apathy	$r = -0.13$ ($N = 9,902$)	$r = 0.21$ ($N = 9,901$)	$r = -0.39$ ($N = 9,906$)

Table 3 Individuals' perceptions of social inequality in CEE

Percent	<i>N</i>	Too much social inequality	About the right amount of social inequality	Not enough social inequality	There is no or almost no social inequality	Don't know
Bulgaria	998	83.3	13.2	0.9	0.5	2.0
Czech Rep.	990	68.8	28.4	1.9	0.1	0.8
Estonia	1,057	61.8	30.0	1.8	1.3	5.1
Hungary	1,030	85.2	11.7	1.0	0.4	1.7
Latvia	1,001	69.5	25.9	4.3	0.5	1.8
Lithuania	1,002	71.9	18.6	2.5	1.1	6.0
Poland	1,498	63.4	26.2	3.7	2.0	4.7
Romania	1,483	44.6	44.9	5.7	1.3	3.5
Slovakia	1,032	71.1	16.2	8.3	1.3	3.1

perceive it to be—is conceptually distinct from perceptions of income inequality and thus can be argued to originate in an alternative set of objects.

Thus, the measure of social inequality used here is based on a straightforward question about social inequality that relates directly to our concern about whether respondents perceive it to be excessive. “Some people say that there is too much social inequality in our society. Others say that there is no or almost no social inequality in our society. What is your view?” Respondents were presented with a range of choices, including “too much social inequality”, “about the right amount of social inequality”, “not enough social inequality”, and “there is no or almost no social inequality” (see Table 3).

We can see that overall, a majority of people in a majority of countries “see” social inequality as there are few “don’t know’s”. Further, the perception that there is “too much” social inequality is the modal view. The greatest amounts are seen in Hungary and Bulgaria (both above 80 %), followed by Lithuania (71.9 %) and Slovakia (71.1 %). The rest (excepting Romania) are near a 2/3 majority view of “too much”. For income inequality in Table 4, respondents are asked to respond the question, “differences in income in this country are too large.” Table 4 shows that a vast majority agree that differences in income are too large (with less than 10 % in every country disagreeing to some extent).

Table 4 Individuals' perceptions of income inequality in CEE

Percent	<i>N</i>	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	DK/NA
Bulgaria	998	71.7	24.1	3.2	0.3	0.7
Czech Rep.	990	58.9	30.2	7.5	2.0	1.4
Estonia	1,057	62.0	29.0	5.1	0.7	3.3
Hungary	1,030	76.1	18.5	2.5	1.4	1.5
Latvia	1,001	64.4	28.8	3.7	1.5	1.6
Lithuania	1,002	43.6	46.7	4.1	0.5	5.1
Poland	1,498	60.1	32.8	4.1	1.3	1.8
Romania	1,483	53.4	38.3	5.0	0.7	2.6
Slovakia	1,032	71.3	22.8	2.6	1.7	1.7

Table 5 Summary of independent variables

Variable	Mean (SD)	Min/max value
Dependent		
Trust	2.94 (1.24)	1/5
People take advantage	3.81 (1.05)	1/5
Political efficacy	2.09 (0.99)	1/5
Political apathy	4.08 (0.86)	1/5
Independent		
Income	3.02 (0.92)	1/5
Education	3.01 (1.42)	0/6
Ideology	5.59 (2.18)	1/10
Gender	0.45 (0.50)	0/1 (male)
Employment	0.55 (0.50)	0/1 (employed)
Age	47.66 (17.86)	15/99
Ethnic majority	0.86 (0.34)	0/1 (member of ethnic majority)
Urban/rural	0.623 (0.48)	0/1 (Urban)

In earlier work, inequality affects individuals' levels of political involvement differently depending on their socio-economic location (Solt, 2008). Therefore, we include interactions with both inequality perceptions and individuals' level of income. Consistent with other work, other independent predictors of individuals' self-reported levels of trust, suspicion, efficacy, and apathy include individuals' level of education, their ideological position (as well as a centered, squared value to look for effects among those at either "end" of the scale, i.e., those with extreme ideological identification), gender, employment status, age, membership in the ethnic majority of their country, and their residence location (urban or rural). The texts of all the survey questions for these can be found in the [Measurement Appendix](#) and a summary of both the dependent and independent variables is in Table 5.

Each of the following models was originally run as ordered Logit regressions. However, the substantive findings were unchanged by using OLS regressions (robustness checks were run on the performance of the independent variables with no obvious issues). Given both that this analysis seeks only to provide empirical evidence for the theorized relationship and the easier presentation and interpretation of OLS output to ordered Logit, we have retained the use of OLS here. All regression coefficients are unstandardized (in Table 6).

Results of the Analysis

From the results in Table 6, the most consistent socio-economic location variable is education. For both trust and efficacy, as the central variables of interest here, education is positively and statistically significantly related to both (at 0.01 and 0.001, respectively). Similarly, respondents' self-reported level of education is negatively and statistically significant related to people taking advantage (i.e., suspicion) and political apathy (at 0.05 and 0.001, respectively). Respondents' age, excepting for suspicion, shows older respondents having more trust, but also apathy and at the same time lower levels of political efficacy (all at $p < 0.001$ statistical significance). While the latter pattern coordinates with one another (i.e., efficacy decreasing in conjunction with apathy increasing), we do not see a corresponding decrease in suspicion with the increase in trust. This latter pattern is clear for both urban dwellers (both at $p < 0.01$ statistical significance) and those that hold strong ideological positions. While these seem to have no effect on efficacy/apathy, the decrease in trust and rise in suspicion in others is clear. Of the remaining effects, employment status has no effect at all on any of the variables of interest, income combats apathy (at $p < 0.05$), men tend to have a higher level of political efficacy (at $p < 0.01$), and being a member of the ethnic majority lowers one's level of trust (at $p < 0.05$).

The above results help validate the data as they perform as expected producing similar results to previous work on both trust and efficacy. Our concern here is individuals' perceptions of inequality and what we find it both substantively interesting and robust. First of all, the perception of excessive social inequality ("too much") moves in the predicted ways with trust and efficacy (H_1) as well as suspicion and apathy (H_2). None of the other categories of the perception of social inequality emerges. This clearly differentiates the view of *excessive* social inequality from the other categories of perception as they differ from the perception of no social inequality. Similarly, the perception that differences in income are too large is both substantively and statistically significant (again, support for both H_1 and H_2). For both, individuals' self-reported levels trust and efficacy are diminished by perceptions of high inequalities and their levels of suspicion and apathy increase. This is a clear and meaningful result that highlights the effects of individuals' perceptions of social and income inequalities.

Further, and possibly as important, the effects of individuals' perceptions are *not* moderated by individuals' levels of income, in conjunction with the most recent work (Tóth & Keller, 2011). This fails to produce evidence for H_3 and thus suggests that not only perceptions of inequalities important, they may also be more or less universal (across income/class groups). For these new democracies, as new member

Table 6 Perceptions of income and social inequality: trust and efficacy

	Trust	People take advantage	Political efficacy	Political apathy
Perceptions of inequality				
Too much social inequality	−0.22*** (0.04)	0.21*** (0.03)	−0.17*** (0.03)	0.23*** (0.03)
Not enough soc ineq	−0.06 (0.09)	0.14 (0.08)	−0.04 (0.07)	−0.08 (0.06)
No social inequality	−0.19 (0.17)	0.22 (0.14)	−0.11 (0.11)	0.08 (0.11)
None	−0.11 (0.10)	−0.08 (0.10)	0.13 (0.09)	0.11 (0.08)
Income inequality	−0.06** (0.02)	0.16*** (0.02)	−0.16*** (0.02)	0.14*** (0.01)
Interactions				
Too much SI * income	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.02)
Income inequality * income	0.07 (0.04)	−0.02 (0.03)	0.03 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.03)
Socio-economic location/demographics				
Income	0.04 (0.03)	−0.05 (0.03)	0.05 (0.02)	−0.05* (0.02)
Education	0.03** (0.01)	−0.02* (0.01)	0.06*** (0.01)	−0.04*** (0.01)
Ideology	0.00 (0.01)	−0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	−0.00 (0.00)
Ideology squared	−0.01* (0.00)	0.00* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)
Gender	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.02)	0.06** (0.02)	−0.01 (0.02)
Employed	0.01 (0.04)	0.00 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)	0.00 (0.02)
Age	0.01*** (0.00)	−0.00 (0.00)	−0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Member of ethnic majority	−0.10* (0.05)	0.04 (0.04)	0.02 (0.04)	−0.05 (0.03)
Urban	−0.10** (0.03)	0.07** (0.03)	−0.02 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)
Country dummies				
Bulgaria	−0.25*** (0.06)	−0.43*** (0.05)	−0.17*** (0.05)	0.12** (0.04)
Estonia	0.40*** (0.06)	−0.86*** (0.06)	0.15** (0.05)	−0.06 (0.05)

Table 6 continued

	Trust	People take advantage	Political efficacy	Political apathy
Hungary	0.23*** (0.07)	−0.35*** (0.05)	0.01 (0.05)	−0.22*** (0.05)
Latvia	0.05 (0.06)	−0.18*** (0.05)	−0.04 (0.05)	0.12** (0.04)
Lithuania	0.27*** (0.07)	−0.54*** (0.06)	0.34*** (0.05)	0.09* (0.04)
Poland	0.27*** (0.05)	−0.16*** (0.04)	−0.13** (0.04)	0.07 (0.04)
Romania	−0.13* (0.06)	−0.08 (0.04)	−0.03 (0.05)	0.19*** (0.04)
Slovakia	0.26*** (0.07)	−0.40*** (0.05)	0.18*** (0.05)	0.05 (0.04)
Constant	2.83*** (0.16)	3.42*** (0.14)	2.67*** (0.13)	3.45*** (0.12)
R^2	0.0485	0.0903	0.0875	0.0868
Number of observations	7,407	7,408	7,411	7,309

Reported: β (SE); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; Czech Republic: reference category

states of the EU, post-communist states, and post-Soviet states, this does not bode well for maturation of democratic political culture.

Summary and Discussion

While others, such as Solt (2008) and Uslaner (2002) may be correct in identifying the cross-national differences in regards to objective inequality and its influence on individuals' attitudes and behaviors, I find here that individuals' perceptions of both income and social inequality are strongly and independently predictive of individuals' levels of interpersonal trust and political efficacy as well as higher suspiciousness of others and increased political apathy. These relationships are additionally unconstrained by individuals' levels of income.

This work does suggest that individuals in the same country—i.e., under the same objective level of inequality—not only can have different perceptions of inequality, but also that these different perceptions strongly coordinate with diverse attitudinal outcomes at the individual level. Our aim has been a better understanding of the effects of how people *think* about the distribution of the costs and benefits of society and what that means to their socio-political orientations (Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener, 1995; Norton & Airely, 2011). This research implicates individuals' perceptions of high levels of inequality as possibly leading to particular psychological states in which stress and immediate attention to the details of subsistence steal from individuals' social resources of outward engagement (as do

perceptions of scarcity, see Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). That is, “seeing” high inequality may bear on individuals—and their responses to their environment—beyond a mere matter of income in a myriad of ways that we are only beginning to understand. While further work is necessary, the evidence here accumulates under this understanding.

This analysis is about the consequences of individuals’ perceptions of inequality and does not implicate the *determinants* of these perceptions.⁷ However, other work suggests that individuals’ perceptions of inequality are largely driven by concerns about justice and fairness in society (for CEE: Kelley & Zagorski, 2004; Kreidl, 2000; Loveless & Whitefield, 2011; Örkeny & Székelyi, 2000; for Europe more broadly, see Dickes et al., 2010; Kaltenhaler et al., 2008; for the US: Bartels, 2008; Osberg & Smeeding, 2006). And, while not a direct test, this analysis does lend some empirical evidence to the notion of empirical social justice in which individuals’ perceptions of inequality are indicative of a tolerance to economic inequality, to a point (Osberg & Smeeding, 2006; Verwiebe & Wegener, 2000; Wegener, 2000). As a future research direction, one might consider the normative linkage of perceived social justice and the deterioration of democratic political culture via inequality—or the institutions that reinforce/alleviate it (see Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, & Huo, 1997).

In addition, this research contributes to the development of our understanding of how (new) democratic societies function. The CEE provides critical evidence for this question. In the region, underpinning the adjustment of state dominated economies to free market economies was the notion that social stratification and inequality would benefit society by creating gaps in labor structures, incentivizing upward mobility, diversification of labor markets, and creating new service and goods sectors. It was also argued that this inequality would be welcomed (Duke and Grime, 1997; Kreidl, 2000), particularly by those in the position to take advantage of it (Szelenyi & Kostello, 1996; Böröcz & Róna-Tas, 1995). More normatively, it was assumed that transitions from Communism’s negative legacy to marketization of these economies would increase support for the necessary inequalities of marketization (Kelley & Zagorski, 2004).

However, accompanying curtailment of access to broader social goods such as education, health care, and formerly guaranteed social measures increased financial hardships and seems to have demobilized those most affected. According to the Human Development Reports the only positive indicator for CEE up to the time of the surveys used here has been GDP *per capita* growth (annual %; 1997–2007). All other measures, including the percent of total expenditure on public health (2003–2007), the pupil-teacher ratio for both primary and secondary (2000–2007), and hospital beds (per 1,000 people, 2000–2006), have decreased.⁸ Thus, it is possible to suggest that the perception of both income and social inequalities may be taken as an effective indicator of “how things have played out.” Inasmuch as

⁷ Why these perceptions can differ so widely from reality is also an important question though we cannot offer further insight in the limited space here (although see Bartels 2008 for an excellent—and book length—examination of this question in the American context).

⁸ The United Nations Development Programme, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/ihdi/> (accessed on 8 February 2012).

distributive structures of opportunity have ossified, individuals' perceptions of disenfranchisement from the benefits of transition are likely to become increasingly significant to both social and political realities in those societies.

More broadly, the corrosion of democratic political culture portends further undesirable developments such as the deterioration of political participation and sense of “common goals” among citizens. Citizens' sense of efficacy and trust can make important differences, particularly in new democracies (Mishler & Rose, 1995; Seligson, 1980). If people feel their view, opinions, and actions are likely to have an influence on the outcome of decisions, they are relatively likely to engage in political action to make their views known. If, however, they judge that their views—and the views of others like them—are unlikely to have much impact, then they will be less likely to participate and more likely to opt out. We know that alienation from both politics and society is more common among citizens with low levels of political efficacy and/or high levels of political apathy (Almond & Verba, 1963; Lubbers, 2001). This—or any—disproportionate distribution of political competence and efficacy can function as a significant and potent political cleavage (leading to the emergence of elitism, as one example). Failure to develop and maintain these basic civic skills is also likely to produce long-term and permanent disengagement. Thus, in the form of a micro-level explanation, the individual wellsprings of trust and personal efficacy account for the most important sources of civic engagement and a healthy democratic political culture (Letki, 2004).

Finally, the assumption that (high) inequality is perceived by the rich to be to their economic and political advantage whereas it is perceived by the poor to their disadvantage through higher hurdles needed for social and political action is grounded in the thinking that inequality is only viewed in this manner (politically pitting socio-economic groups against one another). Yet here we have an example of individuals of all socio-economic groups reacting to high levels of perceived inequality similarly. We modestly propose that, in the case of the evidence here and elsewhere (Tóth & Keller, 2011), even some higher socio-economic group members can both see and feel the damaging effects of what they perceive to be high inequality, and that it may be bad for society at large. This leaves us with the unfortunate conclusion that despite the recent enthusiasms and hope for democracy and the EU in the region, this hope is undermined by individuals' growing feelings of political powerlessness and social isolation, a socio-political malaise driven in some part by their perception of disproportionate inequality in their society.

Measurement Appendix

Dependent Variables

Trust (b3b): “Most people can be trusted”. Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, (No opinion/DK). Reverse coded and includes DK's as a neutral middle category.

Take Advantage (b3d): “If you are not always on your guard other people will take advantage of you” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Somewhat disagree,

Strongly disagree, (No opinion/DK). Reverse coded and includes DK's as a neutral middle category.

Subjective Political Efficacy (f1b): “People like me have no say in what the government does.” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, (No opinion/DK). DK's to the neutral middle category.

Apathy (f1e): “Elected officials don't care much what people like me think” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither Agree or Disagree, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, (No opinion/DK). Reverse Coded and DK's to the neutral middle category.

Independent Variables

Social Inequality (b5): Some people say that there is too much social inequality in our society. Others say that there is no or almost no social inequality in our society. What is your view? Do you think that there is ... Too much social inequality; About the right amount of social inequality; Not enough social inequality; There is no or almost no social inequality?: Dummy variables with “right amount” as reference category. DK coded to missing

Income Inequality (b7): “Differences in income in this country are too large.” Strongly agree, Somewhat agree, Neither, Somewhat disagree, Strongly disagree, DK (recoded to neutral category), reverse coded so that a high scorer is agreement with this statement.

Demographics

Education (std_education): all countries were adjusted to the ISCED 1997

(0) Pre-primary level of education; (1) Primary level of education; (2) Lower secondary level of education; (3) Upper secondary level of education; (4) Post-secondary, non-tertiary level of education; (5) First stage tertiary education; (6) Second stage of tertiary education (leading to an advanced research qualification) of education.

Ethnic group (h3a): To which one do you consider that you belong yourself? (1) Majority ethnic group; (2) Group B; (3) Group C; (4) Group D; etc.... This was recoded so that the majority ethnic group is 1 and all others are 0.

Gender (o2): Coded so that male is 1 and female is 0

Employment (j1): Is the respondent currently in paid work? Coded so employed is 1 and unemployed is 0.

Age (o1): open ended response

Income (l7c): Which of the following statements best describes your household's financial circumstances: We do not have enough money even to buy food; We have enough money to buy food, but we cannot afford to buy clothes and shoes; We have enough money to buy food, clothes, and shoes and have some savings, but not enough to buy more expensive goods such as a TV set and fridge; We can buy some expensive goods such as a TV set and fridge, but we cannot afford all things we would want; We can afford everything that we would want; Do not know. DK is recoded to missing.

Ideology (e3): Many people think of political attitudes as being on the “Left” or the “Right”. This is a scale stretching from the Left to the Right. When you think of your own political attitudes, where would you put yourself? 1 = left, 10 = right, DK recoded to missing.

Urban/Rural (urbrur): Dummy variable with “1” as urban and “0” as rural

National Level Indicators

GDPpc: GDP per capita (US\$).

Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/data/>.

Gini: Gini index.

Source: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/data/>.

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