

STRIPPED OF ILLUSIONS?

Sociologists and political scientists have often noted the low levels of perceived system legitimacy that have characterized post-Communist societies. However, psychological analyses that focus on specific cognitive and motivational processes to explain the lack of support for the present system have been hard to come by. In an article to be published in the *International Journal of Psychology*, Dr. Aleksandra Cichocka of the University of Kent, Canterbury and Professor John Jost of New York University sought to fill this gap by examining the social and psychological antecedents and consequences of disillusionment with the status quo.

Cichocka and Jost draw on system justification theory, which seeks to understand how, when, and why people do and do not support existing social systems, sometimes even to their own detriment. The article summarizes findings from over 20 countries, including manuscripts published in English, German, Hungarian, Polish, and Spanish, many of which have been overlooked in English-language publications. A comparative analysis leads to the conclusion that citizens of post-Communist societies score lower on general and especially *political* forms of system justification, and that this distrust of the system is accompanied by decreased subjective well-being.

Cichocka and Jost consider three explanations for why support for the system remains so low in post-Communist societies and find at least some evidence consistent with each. First, some systems might be harder to justify than others: perhaps system justification in post-Communist societies is lower because the status quo is, in fact, worse. Second, when the national system lacks legitimacy, citizens might turn to other systems (such as the European Union) to satisfy their system justification motives. Third, declarations of system support might be suppressed by cultural norms of criticism, complaint, and cynicism that have long characterized Central and Eastern European societies.

Nevertheless, citizens of post-Communist societies who do regard the system as legitimate appear to possess the same psychological benefits as citizens in traditionally Capitalist societies. High system-justifiers report greater happiness, personal satisfaction, and feelings of efficacy. These results have important consequences for understanding political engagement. Historically, disenchantment with the political system has been seen as a motivator of political action aimed at changing one's situation. Cichocka and Jost suggest, however, that as dissatisfaction with the status quo rises, individuals' faith that they can affect the status quo might decline. To the extent that a declining sense of political efficacy counteracts the mobilizing effect of dissatisfaction, political engagement may be more likely when levels of system support are moderate as opposed to very low or very high.

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