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# Stripped of illusions? Exploring system justification processes in capitalist and post-Communist societies

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Sociologists and political scientists have often observed that citizens of Central and Eastern Europe express high levels of disillusionment with their social, economic and political systems, in comparison with citizens of Western capitalist societies. In this review, we analyze system legitimation and delegitimation in post-Communist societies from a social psychological perspective. We draw on system justification theory, which seeks to understand how, when and why people do (and do not) defend, bolster and justify existing social systems. We review some of the major tenets and findings of the theory and compare research on system-justifying beliefs and ideologies in traditionally Capitalist and post-Communist countries to determine: (1) whether there are robust differences in the degree of system justification in post-Communist and Capitalist societies, and (2) the extent to which hypotheses derived from system justification theory receive support in the post-Communist context. To this end, we summarize research findings from over 20 countries and cite previously unpublished data from a public opinion survey conducted in Poland. Our analysis confirms that there are lower levels of system justification in post-Communist countries. At the same time, we find that system justification possesses similar social and psychological antecedents, manifestations and consequences in the two types of societies. We offer potential explanations for these somewhat complicated patterns of results and conclude by addressing implications for theory and research on system justification and system change (or transition).

**Keywords:** System justification; Ideology; Legitimacy; Political participation; Post-Communism.

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Václav Havel, the dissident playwright who became the first President of the Czech Republic in the post-Communist period, was once asked how he had felt during the public meetings of 1968 that sparked the movement of opposition to the Soviet regime. He responded that he had experienced, first and foremost, joy and satisfaction. Then he continued:

But I also felt a strange sadness. It was a sadness that came from the spectacle of people who were bound by the ruling ideology clarifying for themselves, after twenty years of rule, things that had been clear to everyone else all through those twenty years. The sadness came from the very reasons for my joy. (Havel, 1990a, p. 97)

Havel aptly characterized the conundrum facing citizens of post-Communist societies. On one hand, a bright new

future seemed possible for the nation (and the region). On the other hand, it was painful to bear witness to the disintegration of familiar, longstanding institutions and ideologies.

The early 1990s in Central and Eastern Europe ushered in freedom from Communism and, with it, extremely ambitious social, economic and political aspirations for the future. Most observers would have predicted that the free market system, which was greeted enthusiastically at the outset, would enjoy the support of citizens of formerly Communist countries for years to come. This, however, is not what has transpired. Compared with more traditional Capitalist democracies in the West, citizens of Central and Eastern Europe have expressed considerable disillusionment with the “new” system (e.g., Kluegel, Mason, & Wegener, 1995; Markova, 2004; Wojciszke,

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2007). Faith in the old system was fatally shaken, but it is far from clear that newer ideological confidences have risen to fill the void. Or, as Havel (1990b) summed up the post-Communist dilemma: “People have passed through a very dark tunnel at the end of which there was a light of freedom. Unexpectedly they passed through the prison gates and found themselves in a square. They are now free and they don’t know where to go” (p. 10).

## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Sociologists and political scientists have often noted the low levels of perceived system legitimacy that have characterized post-Communist societies (e.g., Czapiński, 2011; Kluegel, Mason, et al., 1995; Markova, 2004; Tworzecki, 2008). 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 (but see Hunyady, 2002, 2009; van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010; Wojciszke, 2007). In this article, we seek to fill this gap by reviewing research on system legitimation and delegitimation from a social psychological perspective, occasionally supplementing our review with public opinion data and findings from neighbouring disciplines in the social sciences.

The basic framework for this article is derived from 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 (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). We start with a brief summary of major findings from various Capitalist countries. Generally, these findings are consistent with the notion that people are motivated to defend, bolster and justify the social, economic and political systems on which they depend. Afterwards, we consider research on system-justifying beliefs and ideologies in post-Communist countries with the aim of determining: (1) whether there are robust differences in the degree of system justification in post-Communist and Capitalist societies and (2) the extent to which system justification in the two types of societies possesses similar social and psychological antecedents, manifestations and consequences.

To this end we summarize research findings from over 20 countries, including manuscripts published in five different languages (English, German, Hungarian, Polish and Spanish). We also cite previously unpublished data obtained from a recent public opinion survey focusing on the legitimation and delegitimation of the social and political system in one of the largest post-Communist countries, namely Poland. Our approach allows us to synthesize findings from diverse sources, many of which tend to be overlooked in English-language publications. Regrettably, attempting to cover such a vast array of materials necessitates some degree of over-simplification.

While we acknowledge the rich and varied historical and cultural backgrounds of specific nations in Central and Eastern Europe (as well as those of Western Capitalist nations), we seek to extrapolate commonalities, focusing on shared rather than unshared characteristics of both types of societies.

## SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION THEORY: EVIDENCE FROM CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

System justification theory, which was originally formulated by Jost and Banaji (1994), proposes that just as individuals are motivated to hold favourable attitudes about themselves and the social groups to which they belong, they are also motivated to hold favourable attitudes towards the social, economic and political systems in which they live and work (see also Jost et al., 2004; Jost & van der Toorn, 2012). As noted by Sidanius and Pratto (1999), such systems are more often than not organized hierarchically—with some individuals and groups controlling or dominating others (even in ostensibly egalitarian systems, such as Communism). Therefore, the system justification motive typically leads members of the system to defend and perpetuate social and economic forms of inequality, even if the inequality is disadvantageous to the self and/or in-group (e.g., Henry & Saul, 2006; Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Olson, Dweck, Spelke, & Banaji, 2011).

Presumably, individuals engage in system justification because it satisfies a number of basic psychological motivations. To begin with, justifying the existing system can satisfy individuals’ epistemic needs by allowing them to believe that they are operating in a stable, familiar, predictable, controllable environment. In this way, system justification serves to reduce feelings of uncertainty, randomness and uncontrollability (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Kay et al., 2009). Second, system justification satisfies existential motives by helping individuals to cope with potential threats. Thus, it maintains the conviction that the status quo is not only predictable but also safe, reassuring and benevolent (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003; Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007). Finally, system justification satisfies relational motives by providing people with a sense of belongingness and shared reality with valued others, including friends and family members (Jost, Ledgerwood, & Hardin, 2008). In principle, a sense of shared reality can be achieved by subscribing to virtually any type of belief system. In practice, however, there are reasons to think that relational motives are especially likely to inspire commitment to system-justifying ideologies, insofar as it is easier to establish shared reality and ideological conformity with respect to traditional, mainstream ideas that are congruent (rather than incongruent) with the status quo.

Although epistemic, existential and relational needs are thought to contribute to a general preference for system justification (e.g., see Hennes, Nam, Stern, & Jost, 2012), individuals are expected to differ in the extent to which they are motivated to justify a given system that affects them (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost et al., 2010; Kay & Friesen, 2011). Exposure to criticism or threats directed at the legitimacy or stability of the social system—as demonstrated in Israel (Jost, Kivetz, Rubini, Guermandi, & Mosso, 2005), the U.S. (Kay, Jost, & Young, 2005) and Germany (Ullrich & Cohrs, 2007)—as well as feelings of system dependence—as demonstrated in Canada (Kay et al., 2009) and the U.S. (van der Toorn, Tyler, & Jost, 2011)—and perceptions of inevitability in the U.S. (Kay, Jimenez, & Jost, 2002) and inescapability in Canada (Laurin, Shepherd, & Kay, 2010) tend to activate or increase the motivation to justify the societal status quo.

### System-justifying ideologies

System justification motivation can be manifested in various ways. The most direct manifestation is the explicit endorsement of ideologies that defend, bolster and justify the status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Major et al., 2002; Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994). Which ideologies are to be considered system-justifying (vs. system-challenging) may differ (at least somewhat) as a function of specific features of the social, economic and political context. However, according to system justification theory, there is a specific set of belief systems that have in common the fact that they contribute moral and intellectual legitimacy to the societal status quo (Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Examples of system-justifying ideologies in contemporary Western societies include meritocratic belief systems (which assume that individual attainment is [in practice] based purely on merit—talent and motivation—rather than luck or preferential treatment); the protestant work ethic (which promises that industriousness and related virtues will always be rewarded); the American Dream (which holds that everyone in the U.S. has a fair and equal chance to succeed and prosper); the belief in a just world (according to which people get what they deserve and deserve what they get); fair market ideology, which assumes that market-based procedures and outcomes are not only efficient but fair and just; and political conservatism, including support for traditional norms, values, and institutions and tolerance of hierarchy and inequality (e.g., see Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003; Jost, Glaser, et al., 2003).

Ideologies such as these tend to be fairly widespread among members of society. Importantly, they are

often endorsed not only by individuals with power, prestige and privilege (i.e. those who directly and unequivocally benefit from maintaining the status quo). Members of disadvantaged social groups also sometimes engage in system justification, even when this means legitimizing inequality and policies that work to their own disadvantage (e.g., Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; O'Brien, Major, & Gilbert, 2012). It would appear that system justification addresses the same set of epistemic, existential and relational needs for members of disadvantaged as well as advantaged groups. A counterintuitive implication of system justification theory is that those who are especially disadvantaged by and dependent upon the status quo are sometimes its most ardent defenders, as demonstrated in the U.S. (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; van der Toorn et al., in press). Enhanced system justification on the part of the disadvantaged may be driven by the need to reduce cognitive dissonance associated with participating in a system that is personally costly (e.g., Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001; Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003; but see Brandt, 2013, for a critique of this idea).

One of the most striking demonstrations of this phenomenon was provided by Henry and Saul (2006), who studied children belonging to different ethnic groups in Bolivia, which is one of the poorest countries in the world. Results revealed that—compared to high status Spanish descendants and mixed-race Mestizos—the lowest status group of Indigenous Bolivians was least likely to criticize the government and most likely to believe that the government takes care of all of its citizens.<sup>1</sup>

### Internalization of the status quo

System justification tendencies are manifested not only in explicit, declarative support for regimes and ideologies. Insofar as it serves to satisfy basic psychological needs, individuals (more often than not) internalize the norms, values and practices associated with the current system. As a result, the disadvantaged frequently internalize their position in the social order. In other words, they embrace (in some respects) their assumed inferiority and even perpetuate it in various ways. For instance, research conducted in the U.S. has demonstrated that members of low status groups such as women (among others) exhibit a sense of “depressed entitlement,” expecting lesser compensation and even “paying themselves” less than men for work of equal quality (e.g., Blanton et al., 2001; Jost, 1997; Major, 1994; Pelham & Hetts, 2001). O'Brien et al. (2012) demonstrated that priming men and women with system-justifying beliefs exacerbates the gender gap with respect to perceived entitlement.

<sup>1</sup>This study was conducted in 1999, 6 years prior to the election of Evo Morales (a Mestizo) to the presidency of Bolivia.

The internalization of the social order is also reflected in individuals' attitudes towards the social groups to which they do and do not belong. When system justification motivation is high, members of disadvantaged groups are likely to engage in out-group favouritism—"the expression of an evaluative preference for members of a group to which one does not belong" (Jost et al., 2004, p. 891; see also Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002). Out-group favouritism among the disadvantaged has been observed in a wide variety of intergroup contexts. Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald (2002) found that whereas African Americans exhibited strong in-group bias at an explicit level, their implicit attitudes revealed a very different pattern. Nearly half of African American respondents exhibited a tendency to favour the White (European American) out-group (see also Ashburn-Nardo, Knowles, & Monteith, 2003; Jost et al., 2004; Livingston, 2002). Implicit out-group preferences have also been observed with respect to poor (vs. rich) people (Rudman, Feinberg, & Fairchild, 2002), ethnic minorities (vs. majorities) in the U.S. (Jost et al., 2002) and Chile (Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002), gay men and lesbians (Jost et al., 2004), and many other disadvantaged groups (e.g., see Jost et al., 2002, 2004).

### Complementary stereotyping

One way in which individuals seem to cope with potentially negative views of themselves and their groups is by endorsing "complementary stereotypes" (Kay & Jost, 2003). Stereotypes are not merely reflections of group attributes; they are also justifications or rationalizations of the target group's position in society (Allport, 1954; Jost & Banaji, 1994). In the case of complementary stereotypes, members of advantaged and disadvantaged groups are regarded as "possessing distinctive, offsetting strengths and weaknesses" (Kay & Jost, 2003, p. 825). Such a belief system encourages the assumption that every group in society is receiving a fair share of benefits and costs, whether there are downsides to being privileged or perquisites associated with being underprivileged. For instance, men are often seen as more competent but less warm than women, and the rich are sometimes seen as less happy or honest than the poor. Experiments conducted in the U.S. and Canada demonstrate that exposure to statements claiming that positive and negative characteristics are distributed more or less equally across social groups makes people feel better about the status quo (e.g., Jost & Kay, 2005).

Such complementarity is a core feature of paternalistic and envious stereotypes—seemingly ambivalent beliefs about social groups that serve a system legitimizing function (e.g., Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2007). Envious stereotypes are typically reserved for higher status groups, which tend to be perceived as competent but cold. Paternalistic stereotypes, on the other hand, assume high warmth but low competence of a low status group. The most common example of paternalistic attitudes is probably benevolent sexism—a conviction that women "ought to be protected, supported, and adored," which "implies that they are weak and best suited for conventional gender roles" (Glick & Fiske, 2001, p. 109).

Jost et al. (2005) demonstrated in various societal contexts that complementary stereotyping increases under conditions of heightened system justification motivation. In Italy, for instance, perceptions of large (vs. small) status differences between Southerners (lower status) and Northerners (higher status) were accompanied by complementary stereotypes, so that Northerners were seen as more agentic than Southerners and Southerners were seen as more communal than Northerners. These stereotypes, in turn, were associated with greater system justification. Parallel results have been observed in the U.K., American and Israeli contexts (e.g., Jost, Burgess, & Mosso, 2001; Jost et al., 2005).

### Palliative function of system justification

By satisfying psychological needs of both the advantaged and disadvantaged, system justification serves a palliative function by "making people feel better about their situation regardless of what this situation may be" (Jost & Hunyady, 2002, p. 146). By believing that they live in "the best of all possible worlds" (Leibniz, 1710/1985, p. 228) members of both high and low status groups may experience a short-term boost to their subjective well-being, manifested in terms of increased positive affect and decreased negative effect. In the simplest terms, justifying the status quo has the potential to make people feel happier and more satisfied.

The palliative effects of system justification have been observed frequently in Western societies. In a study by Jost, Pelham, et al. (2003), endorsement of meritocratic ideology predicted greater satisfaction with one's economic situation for rich and poor respondents (see also Kluegel & Smith, 1986).<sup>2</sup> Several studies suggest that subscribing to the protestant work ethic and the belief in a just world are associated

<sup>2</sup>We are not suggesting that preferences for a meritocratic system (as opposed to, say, a nepotistic or plutocratic system) are in themselves system-justifying. Rather, we are suggesting that processes of system justification are involved in the endorsement and espousal of ideologies which assume (in their purest form) that—in terms of actual societal practice—social and economic outcomes are distributed only on the basis of considerations of merit (hard work, talent, ambition, preparation, etc.) and that luck and preferential treatment play no meaningful role whatsoever.



with greater life satisfaction in the U.S. (e.g., Blood, 1969) and Portugal (Correia, Batista, & Lima, 2009). Napier and Jost (2008) observed that in 10 countries (including Finland, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the U.S., as well as two post-Communist countries, namely the Czech Republic and Slovakia) the differential endorsement of meritocratic, system-justifying beliefs helps to explain why conservatives are happier than liberals. These results have been replicated repeatedly (e.g., Choma, Busseri, & Sadava, 2009; Schlenker, Chambers, & Le, 2012, see especially their Tables 1 and 5).

At the same time, not everyone benefits to the same degree from engaging in system justification. Members of disadvantaged groups face a trade-off between the psychological benefits of system justification and the social costs associated with supporting inequality. This is because system justification is in conflict with motives for self and group justification for those who are disadvantaged by the status quo (Jost et al., 2001; see also O'Brien, Mars, & Eccleston, 2011). For instance, Jost and Thompson (2000) demonstrated that the justification of inequality was associated with decreased neuroticism and increased self-esteem for European Americans, but it was associated with increased neuroticism and decreased self-esteem for African Americans (see also O'Brien & Major, 2005). In a sample of low-income respondents, Rankin, Jost, and Wakslak (2009) observed no differences between European and African Americans with respect to the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs. For poor Whites, system justification was associated with positive affect, life satisfaction and a subjective sense of security, meaning and mastery. For poor Blacks, many of these effects were considerably weakened or even reversed. Thus, the psychological benefits of system justification seem to be unevenly distributed in society.

### System justification as a “positive illusion”

Insofar as system justification fosters perceptions of personal control while exaggerating the favourability of the system, it may be understood in terms of “positive illusions” (Taylor & Brown, 1988). That is, perceiving the social system through rose-colored glasses may reflect a more or less adaptive form of self-deception. Or, as Lerner (1980) put it, believing that that the world is a just place is a “fundamental delusion.” For those who are relatively advantaged, system-justifying beliefs may simply reflect the ideological elevation of a good situation. For those who are disadvantaged, such convictions may reflect false consciousness, defined as “the holding of false or inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one’s own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or the group” (Jost, 1995, p. 400). The notion that system

justification may reflect some degree of self-deception has received empirical support. In several U.S. samples, belief in a just world, fair market ideology and political conservatism have been found to correlate positively with individual differences in self-deceptive enhancement (e.g., Jost, Blount, et al., 2003; Jost et al., 2010).

### Normativity of system-justifying ideologies

There is evidence that, at least in Capitalist societies, expressions of system-justifying beliefs are socially desirable. Alves and Correia (2008) asked Portuguese students to complete a just world scale (Dalbert, Montada, & Schmitt, 1987) in a manner that would convey either a positive or negative social image. Results revealed that participants scored significantly higher on the belief in a just world in the positive (vs. negative) image condition. In a separate study, participants were asked to evaluate a person who expressed either strong or weak endorsement of just world ideology. In line with predictions, believers in a just world received more favourable evaluations than did non-believers. These results indicate that expressions of just world beliefs are *injunctively normative*, insofar as they are approved of and perceived as socially desirable (Alves & Correia, 2010; Dalbert et al., 1987; Lerner, 1980; Loo, 2002).

Thus far, our review of the research literature on system justification theory has focused largely on data from relatively well-developed Capitalist democracies—with the notable exception of a study of Bolivian children (Henry & Saul, 2006). The Western skew of this data base has been cited as a limitation of theory and research on system justification processes (Wojciszke & Mikiewicz, 2012). In the remainder of this review, we seek to overcome this limitation by focusing on studies conducted in post-Communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

### EVIDENCE OF SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION IN POST-COMMUNIST SOCIETIES

As we have already noted, citizens of post-Communist societies exhibit a general distrust of social and political institutions and dramatically lower levels of system legitimacy, in comparison with citizens of traditionally capitalist societies (Czapiński, 2011; Kluegel, Mason, et al., 1995; Markova, 2004; Tworzecki, 2008). Does this mean that system justification theory is simply inapplicable to Central and Eastern Europe? It seems unlikely. In this section, we review insights gleaned from research on ideology and system justification processes conducted in Central and Eastern Europe, supplementing our review of the social psychological literature with public opinion data.

In particular, our review incorporates previously unpublished data from the 2012 Polish System Justification Survey, which was conducted in April 2012 using the ARIADNA internet research panel (Cichocka & Jost, 2012a). The survey matched the structure of the population of Polish internet users with regard to sex, age, education, size of hometown and the use of leading internet services (as reported by PBI/Megapanel, March 2012). The sample of 501 internet users consisted of 50.7% women, with ages ranging from 15 to 68 ( $M = 33.33$ ,  $SD = 13.37$ ). The survey included measures of general system justification (Kay & Jost, 2003;  $\alpha = .83$ ,  $M = 2.82$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), political system justification (Jost et al., 2010;  $\alpha = .59$ ,  $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) and political alienation (three items, e.g. "People like me have no influence on what the government does," based on Korzeniowski, 1994;  $\alpha = .70$ ,  $M = 5.34$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ). We measured political orientation using three items adapted from Carney, Jost, Gosling, and Potter (2008;  $\alpha = .44$ ,  $M = 4.95$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) with respect to general, cultural and economic conservatism (e.g., "Where on the following scale of political orientation [from extremely liberal to extremely conservative] would you place yourself [overall, in general]?"). The survey also included indicators of subjective well-being, including self-reported happiness (e.g., "I am happy,"  $M = 5.84$ ,  $SD = 1.95$ ) and internal self-efficacy (e.g., "There are many things in my life that I cannot influence," reverse-scored,  $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 2.03$ ). We draw on this data set to illustrate various points about contemporary post-Communist societies and to offer comparisons with traditionally Capitalist societies.

## Cross-national comparisons concerning the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs

### Scores on system justification scales

The simplest and most direct way of comparing system justification in Capitalist and post-Communist societies is to focus on studies in which the same (albeit translated) system justification scales were administered in different countries. While more sophisticated comparisons would require extensive cross-cultural research involving nationally representative samples in the nations of interest, the examination of mean levels of system justification in various samples gives us a general sense, at least, of how the strength of system justification tendencies might differ across societal and cultural contexts.

To facilitate comparisons of system justification levels in traditionally Capitalist vs. post-Communist regions we decided to review studies that administered the general (Kay & Jost, 2003; see Table 1), economic (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Table 2) and political (Jost et al., 2010;

Table 3) system justification scales in various societal contexts. We included all studies reporting scores on at least one of the three system justification scales. For the most part, these studies were identified through the use of PsycINFO, Google Scholar and other search engines. We also incorporated data from experimental studies in which results from a baseline or control condition were reported. We supplemented the list with analyses based on data from four semesters (2010–2012) of the New York University (NYU) Introductory Psychology questionnaire battery, which is administered to undergraduates at the beginning of every semester. In total, we obtained scores from 50 samples, 16 of which come from post-Communist countries. In Tables 1–3, we describe sample characteristics and report descriptive statistics concerning system justification scores. To enable comparisons between different samples, we rescaled each group mean, dividing it by the scale range to create an overall index of system justification. For each type of system justification (general [Table 1], economic [Table 2] and political [Table 3]), we compared the index for post-Communist and traditionally Capitalist societies.

With respect to studies conducted in post-Communist societies, general system justification scores (Kay & Jost, 2003) were lowest in Wojciszke and Mikiewicz's (2012) study and highest in a recent survey of Polish students by Skarżyńska and Henne (2012), as shown in Table 1. In the Capitalist context, the lowest scores were observed in Italian samples (Mosso, Briante, Aiello, & Russo, 2013; Pacilli, Taurino, Jost, & van der Toorn, 2011). In a study of perceptions of distributive justice in the workplace, Van der Toorn et al. (2010) directly compared scores on system justification between college students in Hungary and the U.S. Results revealed somewhat lower levels of system justification among Hungarian than U.S. respondents. It can be discerned from Table 2 that only one study conducted in a post-Communist context administered Jost and Thompson's (2000) economic system justification scale (Jaško, 2011). This Polish sample scored slightly below the scale midpoint but squarely within the range of scores observed in the U.S. context, where substantial variability has been observed as a function of race and other demographic factors. Based on the data summarized in Table 3, scores on *political* system justification (Jost et al., 2010) were near the scale midpoint for U.S. college students but were slightly lower for Polish respondents.

Overall, quantitative analyses based on the mean-by-range index revealed a statistically significant difference between post-Communist ( $M = 0.43$ ,  $SD = 0.03$ ) and traditionally capitalist ( $M = 0.51$ ,  $SD = 0.08$ ) samples with respect to general system justification (see Table 1),  $t(32) = 2.94$ ,  $p = .01$ , Cohen's  $d = 1.32$ .<sup>3</sup> Even clearer

<sup>3</sup>For all statistical analyses reported in the manuscript, a .05 level of significance was used.

**TABLE 1**  
A cross-national summary of general (or diffuse) system justification scores

Scale	Source	Data collection year	Sample	Scale range	M	SD	M/r
SJ	Pacilli et al. (2011)	2008	70 Adult lesbians, Italy	1–9	2.68	1.21	.30
SJ	Pacilli et al. (2011)	2008	142 Adult gay men, Italy	1–9	3.00	1.24	.33
SJ	Mosso et al. (2013), Study 1	2013	544 High school students and undergraduates, Italy	0–6	1.77	0.93	.40
SJ	Wojciszke and Mikiewicz (2012), Study 1	2005	1133 Adults (nationally representative sample), Poland	1–5	1.98	0.60	.40
SJ	Cichocka and Jost (2012a)	2012	501 Internet users, Poland	1–7	2.82	0.98	.40
SJ (3 items)	Bilewicz et al. (2009)	2009	979 Adults (nationally representative sample), Poland	1–5	2.07	0.92	.41
SJ	Skarżyńska and Radkiewicz (2012)	2011	840 Adults (nationally representative sample), Poland	1–7	2.92	0.74	.42
SJ	Van der Toorn et al. (2010)	2007	114 Students at Eötvös Lorand University, Hungary	1–9	3.80	1.16	.42
SJ	Skarżyńska (2011)	2008	1024 Adults (nationally representative sample), Poland	1–7	3.02	0.97	.43
SJ	Cichocka & Jost (2012c), Wave 1	2012	592 Internet users, Poland	1–7	3.07	1.05	.44
SJ (7 items)	Ullrich and Cohrs (2007), Study 1 <sup>cc</sup>	2004	40 Adults, Germany	1–6	2.70	0.75	.45
SJ	Skarżyńska and Henne (2012)	2009–2010	197 Students of public universities, Poland	1–5	2.40	0.60	.48
SJ	Rankin et al. (2009)	2005	27 Low-income Black adults, U.S.	1–9	4.38	1.00	.49
SJ	Yoshimura and Hardin (2009)	2008	235 Kansai University undergraduates, Japan	1–9	4.41	1.06	.49
SJ	[NYU battery]	2011 (spring)	450 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.41	1.17	.49
SJ	Van der Toorn et al. (2010)	2007	108 Students at New York University, U.S.	1–9	4.45	1.22	.49
SJ	[NYU battery]	2012 (spring)	410 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.47	1.22	.50
SJ	[NYU battery]	2011 (fall)	485 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.48	1.18	.50
SJ	Hennes et al. (2012)	2012	182 Internet users recruited via Amazon MTurk, U.S.	1–9	4.49	1.57	.50
SJ (7 items)	Ullrich and Cohrs (2007), Study 3 <sup>cc</sup>	2004	27 Students from Philipps University in Marburg, Germany	1–6	3.00	0.59	.50
SJ	Jost et al. (2012), Study 3 <sup>cc</sup>	2008	29 Members of Nation Union of Teachers, U.K.	1–9	4.52	1.21	.50
SJ	[NYU battery]	2010 (fall)	477 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.53	1.28	.50
SJ (7 items)	Ullrich and Cohrs (2007), Study 2 <sup>cc</sup>	2004	83 Adults, Germany	1–6	3.06	0.71	.51
SJ	Rankin et al. (2009)	2005	124 Low-income White adults, U.S.	1–9	4.64	1.27	.52
SJ	Ho et al. (2012), Sample 7	2009/2010	528 White internet users recruited via Amazon MTurk, U.S.	1–7	3.67	1.11	.52
SJ	Jost and Kay (2005), Study 2 <sup>cc</sup>	2003	22 Undergraduates from UC Santa Barbara and Stanford University, U.S.	1–9	4.88	1.52	.54
SJ	Phelan and Rudman (2011)	2009	297 Rutgers students, U.S.	1–9	4.88	1.18	.54
SJ	Carter, Ferguson, and Hassin (2011)	2009	229 Adults, U.S.	1–9	5.03	1.38	.56
SJ	Lammers and Proulx (2013), Study 1 <sup>cc</sup>	2011	22 Tilburg University undergraduates, the Netherlands	1–7	3.94	1.06	.56
SJ	Caruso, Vohs, Baxter, and Waytz (2013), Study 1 <sup>cc</sup>	2010	13 Adults, U.S.	1–7	3.99	1.19	.57
SJ	Lammers and Proulx (2013), Study 2	2011	98 Tilburg University undergraduates, the Netherlands	1–7	4.12	0.83	.59
SJ	Mosso et al. (2013), Study 2	2008	297 High school and university students, U.S.	0–6	3.37	0.85	.62
SJ	Sibley (2010), Study 2	2009	447 Adults, New Zealand	1–7	4.38	0.82	.63
SJ (4 items)	Sibley (2011)	2011	6980 Adults, New Zealand	1–7	4.44	1.05	.63

*Note:* SJ = General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003). Studies are listed in order of increasing values for *M/r* (sample mean divided by scale range). Because NYU batteries are administered twice a year (once each semester), we specify the semester in which each data collection occurred. We included data from an experimental study only if the manipulation exerted no significant main effect on system justification scores. Otherwise, we present data from the control (baseline) condition for that experiment (indicated by the superscript <sup>cc</sup>). To facilitate comparisons with other samples, we computed the *M/r* indices for the Mosso et al. (2013) studies after rescaling responses that they could range from 1 to 7 (instead of 0–6). We excluded data from Study 5 of the Caruso et al. (2013) because it used a scaling format that was very different from that used in all other studies included in our review. Nevertheless, when we rescaled responses from that study and recalculated all statistical comparisons we obtained extremely similar results to what is reported here.



**TABLE 2**  
A cross-national summary of economic system justification scores

Scale	Source	Data collection year	Sample	Scale range	M	SD	M/r
ESJ	Hennes et al. (2012)	2012	182 Internet users, U.S.	1–9	4.29	1.28	.48
ESJ	Jost and Thompson (2000), Study 4	1996	122 Black students of University of Maryland, U.S.	1–9	4.33	0.80	.48
ESJ	Burris, Rempel, Munteanu, and Therrien (2013), Study 1	2011	168 Undergraduates from a large university in Ontario, Canada	1–9	4.41	0.99	.49
ESJ (15 items)	Jaško (2011), Study 1.1	2010	128 Adults, Poland	1–9	4.56	0.93	.51
ESJ	[NYU battery]	2012 (spring)	408 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.59	1.03	.51
ESJ	[NYU battery]	2011(fall)	483 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.65	0.97	.52
ESJ	[NYU battery]	2011 (spring)	450 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.78	0.91	.53
ESJ (7 items)	Jost et al. (2012), Study 1	2008	108 New York University students, U.S.	1–7	3.72	0.80	.53
ESJ	[NYU battery]	2010 (fall)	475 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.81	0.97	.53
ESJ	Jost and Thompson (2000), Study 4	1996	364 White students of University of Maryland, U.S.	1–9	4.92	0.90	.55

*Note:* ESJ = Economic System Justification Scale (Jost & Thompson, 2000). Studies are listed in order of increasing values for *M/r* (sample mean divided by scale range). Because NYU batteries are administered twice a year (once each semester), we specify the semester in which each data collection occurred.

differences emerged with respect to political system justification (see Table 3); citizens scored lower in post-Communist ( $M = 0.44$ ,  $SD = 0.03$ ) than traditionally Capitalist societies ( $M = 0.50$ ,  $SD = 0.01$ ),  $t(9) = 3.84$ ,  $p = .004$ , Cohen's  $d = 2.68$ . We were unable to conduct comparisons involving economic system justification because data existed for only one post-Communist sample. More definitive conclusions would require more closely matched samples and more sophisticated meta-analytic strategies. Nevertheless, these informal comparisons provide some indication that citizens of post-Communist societies are less likely to regard the social and political system as fair and legitimate, in comparison with citizens of traditionally Capitalist societies. At the same time, there is substantial variability in system justification scores across studies and respondents.

### **Comparisons of other indicators of system justification**

Although scores on standard system justification scales afford the most appropriate basis for comparison, several studies conducted in the post-Communist context have employed measures that have been taken to indicate system support in Western contexts, including (1) correlations between perceived and desired states of the social system as well the endorsement of (2) the belief in a just world, and (3) meritocratic ideology and endorsement of the protestant work ethic. We summarize the results of studies using these methods before turning to other studies that focus on processes of system disengagement,

such as political alienation (Seeman, 1959) and cynicism (Berkics, 2007).

*Correlations between “what is” and “what ought to be”.* One way of thinking about system justification is in terms of the Panglossian rationalization that we are living in the “best of all possible worlds” (Kay, Jost, Mandisodza, Petrocelli, & Johnson, 2007). System justification, in other words, is associated with a tendency to see “what is” as “what should be” (Kay et al., 2009). To create an indirect measure of system justification, Wojciszke and Mikiewicz (2012) asked Polish participants to rate a number of social groups (such as lawyers, politicians and pensioners) in terms of their material wealth and social status (operationalized in terms of perceived influence in society). Specifically, they were asked how well off each of these groups “are” and how well off they “should be.” These ratings were correlated for each individual, thereby creating an index of system justification, with positive correlations indicating greater legitimization of the status quo and negative correlations indicating delegitimation. This indirect measure was positively correlated with scores on a Polish translation of Kay and Jost’s (2003) general system justification scale,  $r(99) = .30$ ,  $p = .01$ . With respect to social status judgments, the perceived-desired correlations were positive for most of the sample (65%), indicating an overall system-justifying tendency. However, the pattern of results was quite different for beliefs about material wealth. Here, the actual-desired correlation was negative for 85% of participants. Similarly, negative correlations between perceptions of wealth and deservingness were

**TABLE 3**  
A cross-national summary of political system justification scores

Scale	Source	Data collection year	Sample	Scale range	M	SD	M/r
SJ <sup>#</sup> (1 item)	Cichočka and Jost (2012b)	2009	979 Adults (nationally representative sample), Poland	1–5	1.98	1.04	.40
SJ <sup>#</sup>	Jaško (2011), Study 2.1	2010	124 Jagiellonian University and AGH University of Science and Technology students, Poland	1–9	3.73	1.36	.41
SJ <sup>#</sup>	Jaško (2011), Study 1.2	2011	74 Adults, Poland	1–9	3.88	1.35	.43
PSJ	Cichočka and Jost (2012a)	2012	501 Internet users, Poland	1–7	3.06	0.86	.44
SJ <sup>#</sup>	Jaško (2011), Study 2.2	2010	250 Adults, Poland	1–9	4.10	1.18	.46
SJ <sup>#</sup>	Jaško (2011), Study 1.1	2010	128 Adults, Poland	1–9	4.14	1.47	.46
SJ <sup>#</sup>	Jaško (2011), Study 1.4	2010	316 Jagiellonian University and AGH University of Science and Technology students, Poland	1–9	4.30	1.13	.48
PSJ	[NYU battery]	2012 (spring)	407 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.31	1.22	.48
PSJ	[NYU battery]	2011 (fall)	483 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.46	1.12	.50
PSJ	[NYU battery]	2011 (spring)	450 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.55	1.18	.51
PSJ	[NYU battery]	2010 (fall)	473 New York University undergraduates, U.S.	1–9	4.58	1.28	.51

*Note:* SJ<sup>#</sup> = General System Justification Scale (Kay & Jost, 2003) modified to refer to the political system. PSJ = Political System Justification Scale (Jost et al., 2010). We included data from an experimental study only if the manipulation exerted no significant main effect on system justification scores. Studies are listed in order of increasing values for *M/r* (sample mean divided by scale range). Because NYU batteries are administered twice a year (once each semester), we specify the semester in which each data collection occurred.

obtained in a nationally representative survey conducted in 2004 by the Polish Public Opinion Research Center (Wojciszke, 2007). Thus, in the Polish context at least, when it comes to material wealth many citizens see “what is” as “what should never be” (with apologies to Led Zeppelin).

One explanation for the predominantly negative correlations between perceived and desired perceptions of wealth was suggested in a follow-up study conducted by Wojciszke and Mikiewicz (2012). Using an experimental design, the researchers measured liking for a target person after independently manipulating perceptions of his or her social status and wealth. Whereas high status targets were evaluated more positively than low status targets, the opposite was true when it came to wealth: rich targets were evaluated more negatively than poor targets. Negative evaluations of rich people were mediated by perceptions of harmfulness. That is, respondents saw rich individuals as more harmful and selfish than poor individuals, and these perceptions predicted more negative evaluations. Positive evaluations of status, on the other hand, were mediated by perceptions of competence. It is not entirely clear whether these beliefs about the characteristics of rich and poor reflect complementary stereotyping (Kay & Jost, 2003) or simply the perception that material wealth is associated with corruption and the exploitation of personal connections—a perception that seems to be fairly pervasive in some post-Communist countries,

including Hungary (Hunyady, 2009; Kriedl, 2000), the Czech Republic (Kriedl, 2000), Estonia (Stephenson, 2000) and Russia (Kriedl, 2000; Stephenson, 2000).

More detailed comparisons involving perceptions of wealth and poverty in Capitalist and post-Communist societies are facilitated by the International Justice Project (Kluegel, Csepeli, et al., 1995), which involved large-scale social surveys gauging the attitudes of citizens in the U.S., U.K., West Germany, the Netherlands and Japan and comparing them with the attitudes of citizens in Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary, East Germany, Estonia, Slovenia and the former Czechoslovakia. Kluegel, Csepeli, et al. (1995) focused on societal (i.e., system-level) vs. individualistic explanations for others’ economic situations. Societal explanations for wealth included “having connections,” “having more opportunity,” and blaming the economic system for allowing the rich to “take unfair advantage.” Such attributions may reflect the perception that wealth and success have been obtained illegitimately. Individualistic explanations included talent/ability, hard work and dishonesty. Both types of explanations were prevalent in both types of societies, but respondents from post-Communist countries (except for East Germany) tended to evaluate wealth more negatively, believing that it was associated with dishonesty rather than hard work. With respect to perceptions of poverty, individuals in post-Communist societies were more likely than those in traditionally Capitalist societies to blame the system, but

they also tended to endorse individualistic attributions for poverty (such as drunkenness and immorality). The fact that citizens from Capitalist and post-Communist societies subscribe to both societal and individualistic explanations for economic standing may indicate some degree of attitudinal ambivalence, insofar as they seem to justify inequality and, at the same time, question its legitimacy.

*Belief in a just world.* The belief in a just world is considered to be a “fundamental delusion” that—like the religious belief in karma—leads people to assume that nearly everything that happens in life is fair and that people therefore deserve the outcomes they receive (e.g., Lerner, 1980). According to Lerner and Miller (1978):

The belief that the world is just enables the individual to confront his physical and social environment as though they were stable and orderly. Without such a belief it would be difficult for the individual to commit himself to the pursuit of long range goals or even to the socially regulated behaviour of day to day life. (pp. 1030–1031)

Based on Lerner’s (1980) conception, the need to believe in a just world is fundamental because it is essential to the maintenance of the individual’s sense of security and well-being. The delusional aspect reflects the idea that it is both false and defensively motivated (cf. Benabou & Tirole, 2006).

Whereas citizens in Western societies are reluctant to relinquish just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980; Rubin & Peplau, 1975), such beliefs are not as prevalent in post-Communist societies (Macek & Markova, 2004; Wojciszke, 2004). Just before the fall of Communism, Doliński (1991, 1993) found that Polish undergraduates scored substantially lower on a Just World Scale than did students from the U.S., U.K. and Taiwan. Perhaps low scores are to be expected immediately following the transition from a totalitarian system. More surprisingly, recent studies do not suggest much of an upswing in just world beliefs, despite increased freedom and economic development. A representative survey of Poles in 2005 revealed very high scores on a “Belief in Injustice of the Social World” Scale (Wojciszke & Borkowska, 2007), with an overall mean of 4.40 on a scale that ranged from 1 to 5. Sample items include: “There is no justice in the world nowadays,” and “The rich or powerful never get punished for their misdeeds.” These findings are broadly consistent with other evidence from Central and Eastern Europe (Berkics, Kóbor, & Karácsonyi, 2006; Hunyady, 2009; Schmitt et al., 2008).

It is important to point out that the *need* to believe in a just world and the belief itself are distinguishable (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Lerner, 1980). Low scores on the just world scale do not necessarily mean that respondents lack the motivation to regard the world as just and predictable.

It is rather that the need to believe in a just world is more likely to be satisfied in some circumstances than others, insofar as the belief is more difficult to sustain in social contexts in which reward and punishment systems are experienced as capricious or arbitrary. Consequently, one would expect that the belief in a just world would be diminished in nations with poorly functioning legal and political systems and for members of social groups who face discrimination and prejudice and find it difficult to receive fair treatment and opportunities for advancement. Thus, African Americans score lower than European Americans on just world scales (Furnham & Procter, 1989) and Catholics score lower than Protestants in Northern Ireland (Glennon, Joseph, & Hunter, 1993).

In Capitalist societies, the belief in a just world appears to serve a system-justifying function (Hafer & Bègue, 2005; Jost et al., 2001; Kay & Jost, 2003; Oldmeadow & Fiske, 2007). Recent evidence from post-Communist societies tells a similar story. For instance, Berkics (2007) observed a significant positive association between scores on belief in a just world and general system justification scales in a sample of Hungarian adults. Wojciszke and Mikiewicz (2012), too, found that the perception of society as generally unjust—as measured with the Belief in Injustice of the Social World Scale (Wojciszke & Borkowska, 2007)—was negatively associated with system justification in Poland.

*Meritocratic ideology and protestant work ethic.* According to data from the World Values Survey, approximately 60% of Americans believe that poor people are lazy and lack will power and that hard work pays off in the long run, whereas only 30% of Europeans hold these beliefs (Benabou & Tirole, 2006). Conversely, 60% of Europeans believe that it is difficult to escape poverty and that success is determined by luck rather than effort, whereas only 30% of Americans do (Alesina, Glaeser, & Sacerdote, 2001). There is a close correspondence between patterns of public opinion and actual levels of redistribution within each type of society (Alesina et al., 2001), suggesting that the beliefs either influence or are *post hoc* justifications of public policies. Although efforts to implement meritocratic principles in post-Communist labour markets have been made, support for meritocratic ideology is fairly weak in this region (Mason, 1995; Lewicka, 2006; but see Van der Toorn et al., 2010). This is somewhat surprising, given that meritocratic arguments provided one basis for criticism of the socialist system (Jasiecki, 2010).

In an article addressing adolescents’ beliefs about justice, Flanagan et al. (2003) proposed a distinction between “security societies,” in which the state directly addresses citizens’ economic needs by providing social welfare, and “opportunity societies” that accord a much smaller role to public investment. In security societies,

justice is generally understood in terms of equal outcomes for all, whereas the principle of equity, which holds that outcomes should be proportional to one's input, prevails in opportunity societies. According to Flanagan et al. (2003), post-Communist countries (Russia, Bulgaria, Hungary and the Czech Republic) have tended to remain security societies, whereas the United States and Australia have long been opportunity societies. Unsurprisingly, adolescents from the two types of societies seem to differ in their perceptions of the system. Whereas American and Australian adolescents tend to believe that their societies are based on meritocratic principles, adolescents from post-Communist societies are more likely to expect a "package of social entitlements to citizens" (Flanagan et al., 2003, p. 721).

These results are by and large consistent with data from the 1992 Social Inequality Module of the International Social Survey Project (Kunovich & Slomczynski, 2007). Immediately after the fall of the Communist system in Eastern Europe, meritocratic attitudes were more enthusiastically endorsed in Western countries (the U.K., Canada, Australia, New Zealand) than in post-Communist countries (Hungary, Poland, East Germany, the former Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, with Russia showing the lowest levels of meritocratic endorsement). Interestingly, citizens from three Western countries (Italy, Norway and West Germany) were also fairly dismissive of meritocratic principles, suggesting a pattern of public opinion that is more complex than a simple Capitalist/post-Communist distinction would suggest.

Scepticism about meritocracy and the protestant work ethic in post-Communist societies is understandable given the nature of the relationship between work effort and payment in the socialist system. The socialist system guaranteed full employment, with wages that were fairly equal and not particularly tied to individual skills, effort or merit—regardless of whether employees were "standing up or lying down," as the popular Polish saying had it. Thus, Hunyady (2002) has suggested that a principle of "contraselection" (whereby the system promotes and rewards those individuals who are especially ill-suited to lead) was perceived by many Hungarian employees. None of this is to suggest that the workplace was chaotic or unruly under the socialist system; on the contrary, order and stability were carefully maintained. Nevertheless, some citizens in Communist states developed disdain for work effort, insofar as it rarely seemed to produce positive outcomes for the individual (Doliński, 1993).

At the same time, a study of public opinion in the Czech Republic suggested that individualistic and meritocratic values have been endorsed more enthusiastically than egalitarian values over the past 20 years (Smith & Matějů, 2012; see also Gavreliuc, 2012; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997). Despite some misgivings, citizens of post-Communist states continue to believe that a market-based economy is crucial for economic development in the region (Arts &

Gijsberts, 1998; Karpiński, 2010; Mason, 1995). These conflicting results do not allow us to make clear judgments about the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs in post-Communist countries, and it is important to keep in mind that the relationship between system justification and meritocratic ideology might well depend upon specific features of the societal context.

*Political alienation and cynicism.* A number of additional comparisons between Western and post-Communist states are afforded by studies of political alienation. According to Citrin, McClosky, Shanks, and Sniderman (1975):

To be politically alienated is to feel a relatively enduring sense of estrangement from existing social institutions, values and leaders. At the far end of the continuum, the politically alienated feel themselves outsiders, trapped in an alien political order; they would welcome fundamental changes in the ongoing regime. By contrast, the politically allegiant feel themselves an integral part of the political system, they belong to it psychologically as well as legally. Allegiant citizens evaluate the regime positively, see it as morally worthy, and believe it has a legitimate claim to their loyalty. (p. 3, emphasis added)

Defined in this way, political alienation is virtually the opposite of system justification. To investigate the nature of the empirical relationship between political alienation and system justification, we analyzed data from the 2012 Polish System Justification Survey. A hierarchical regression model included gender, age, education, size of hometown and political orientation as adjustment variables in Step 1 and both general and political forms of system justification in Step 2. None of the adjustment variables exerted a significant effect on political alienation,  $F(5, 495) = 0.36, p = .88, R^2 = .004$ , but both general ( $B = -0.54, SE = 0.06, \beta = -.42, p < .001$ ) and political ( $B = -0.41, SE = 0.07, \beta = -.28, p < .001$ ) system justification were significantly and negatively associated with political alienation,  $F(7, 493) = 48.97, \Delta R^2 = .41$ .

Seeman (1959) distinguished five fundamental aspects of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation and self-estrangement. There is a good deal of evidence suggesting that citizens in most post-Communist states experienced a strong sense of alienation, frustration and pointlessness in the early 1990s, immediately following system change (Mason, 1995). In Poland, feelings of powerlessness, estrangement and political disorientation were especially acute during the system transition period (Korzeniowski, 1993, 1994; Radkiewicz, 2007). It may be that alienation was an unavoidable result of the collapse of the legitimacy and stability of the Communist system, as Havel (1990a)



suggested in the passage we quoted at the beginning of this article.

Closely related to the concept of alienation is social cynicism, which may be defined very broadly as “a negative view of human nature, a biased view against some groups of people, a mistrust of social institutions, and a disregard of ethical means for achieving an end” (Leung et al., 2002, p. 292). It would seem that such views are especially prevalent in post-Communist societies (Boski, 2009) and are associated with decreased subjective well-being (Bond et al., 2004). Berkics (2007) described political cynicism as the opposite of system justification. Whereas system justification involves a fairly optimistic, favourable view of the social system as a whole (Napier & Jost, 2008), social cynicism involves the opposite—negativity and pessimism about the system. At the same time, social cynicism is probably an independent construct that is often related—but not equivalent—to low system justification. It is important to point out that (1) active forms of system rejection, such as those involved in protest behaviour (e.g., Jost et al., 2012), can be sincere, constructive and idealistic—and thus far from cynical, and (2) it is possible to be a cynical supporter of the status quo (e.g., defending corrupt institutions and practices as unavoidable if not just).

### **System-justifying processes in the post-communist context**

Most of the studies we have summarized suggest that the overall degree of system justification is lower in post-Communist than traditionally Capitalist societies. The difference seems to be especially acute with respect to the perceived legitimacy of the political system. However, the possibility remains that the motivation to justify the system operates more subtly and indirectly in post-Communist societies. Here we highlight research findings that bear on a wider range of system-justifying processes and outcomes in post-Communist societies. We also address the theoretical and practical question of whether the social psychological antecedents and consequences of system justification are similar to those typically obtained in Western societies.

#### **Responses to system criticism**

Some of the most compelling evidence for the existence of system justification motivation comes from research on defensive responses to system criticism or threat (e.g., Banfield, Kay, Cutright, Wu, & Fitzsimons, 2011; Jost et al., 2010; Ledgerwood, Mandisodza, Jost, & Pohl, 2011). In a study involving Hungarian citizens, Jost, Blount, et al. (2003) exposed participants to passages criticizing either the former (Communist) or current (Capitalist) system. Interestingly, both types of system

threat increased justification of the current economic system—but only for participants who scored relatively high in self-deception. These findings suggest that (as in Capitalist societies) support for the free market system is partially motivated by defensive concerns.

### **Complementary stereotyping**

The 2009 Polish Prejudice Survey included several items that facilitate the analysis of complementary stereotyping with respect to ethnic minorities in Poland (Bilewicz, Bukowski, Cichocka, Winiewski, & Wójcik, 2009). Results revealed that perceptions of ethnic minorities as *warm but incompetent* or *competent but cold* were positively associated with system justification scores, as hypothesized. These results are consistent with the notion that complementary stereotypes of social groups contribute to the perceived legitimacy and stability of the status quo (e.g., Glick & Fiske, 2001; Jost & Kay, 2005; Jost et al., 2005; Kay & Jost, 2003).

Other studies have focused on negative evaluations of those who are wealthy in post-Communist societies (Hunyady, 2009; Kriedl, 2000; Stephenson, 2000; Wojciszke, 2007; Wojciszke & Mikiewicz, 2012). Such results are typically interpreted as reflecting system delegitimation, insofar as citizens presumably regard the system more negatively to the extent that the rich are seen as corrupt and dishonest. At the same time, it is conceivable that these evaluations reflect complementary stereotyping, so that an “illusion of equality” is maintained by representing those who are poor as more honest or moral than those who are rich (see Kay & Jost, 2003). More direct evidence of the system-justifying function of complementary stereotypes in post-Communist society comes from experiments by Kay, Czapliński, and Jost (2009), who found that leftist respondents in Poland exhibited stronger support for the societal status quo following exposure to complementary (“poor but happy,” “rich but miserable”) representations, whereas rightists exhibited stronger support for the status quo following exposure to non-complementary (“poor and dishonest,” “rich and honest”) representations.

### **Palliative benefits of system justification**

It would appear that the endorsement of system-justifying beliefs serves a palliative function in post-Communist as well as traditionally capitalist societies. For instance, several studies conducted in Poland reveal positive correlations between system justification and subjective well-being (Cisłak & Skarżyńska, 2010; Dziugiel & Cisłak, 2010, cited in Cisłak & Wójcik, 2011; Skarżyńska & Henne, 2008). Dziugiel and Cisłak (2010; cited in Cisłak & Wójcik, 2011) found that the relationship between system justification and subjective well-being in Poland was mediated by feelings of

personal efficacy and personal coherence. In addition, system justification was related to perceptions of other people as trustworthy and benevolent (Wojciszke & Borkowska, 2007). Napier and Jost (2008) included data from the Czech Republic and Slovakia in their study of the relationship between right-wing ideology and self-reported happiness and found that it was mediated by the endorsement of meritocratic beliefs.

We used the 2012 Polish System Justification Survey to investigate the relationship between system justification and self-reported happiness in Poland (Cichočka & Jost, 2012a). We included demographic variables (gender, age, education, size of hometown) and political orientation as predictors in Step 1. The model was marginally significant,  $F(5, 495) = 2.02$ ,  $p = .07$ ,  $R^2 = .02$ , and political conservatism was the only significant predictor of happiness ( $B = 0.18$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .01$ ). In Step 2, we added both general and political system justification to the model,  $F(7, 493) = 3.30$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $\Delta R^2 = .03$ . General system justification scores were indeed positively related to feelings of happiness ( $B = 0.35$ ,  $SE = 0.12$ ,  $\beta = .18$ ,  $p = .004$ ). In this model there was no reliable association between political system justification and happiness ( $B = -0.06$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $\beta = -.03$ ,  $p = .68$ ).

We also observed that—as in U.S. samples (Jost, Nosek, & Gosling, 2008)—political conservatism was a significant predictor of system justification ( $B = 0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.04$ ,  $\beta = .11$ ,  $p = .02$ ;  $F(5, 495) = 2.67$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $R^2 = .03$ ). And, replicating previous work in Western societies (e.g., Napier & Jost, 2008), the effect of conservatism on happiness was reduced when system justification was included in the model ( $B = 0.15$ ,  $SE = 0.07$ ,  $\beta = .10$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Bootstrapping analysis (Preacher & Hayes, 2008) confirmed that general system justification significantly mediated the effect of political conservatism on happiness (95% CI: 0.004–0.068; 10,000 bootstrap samples; unadjusted  $\kappa^2 = .02$ , Preacher & Kelley, 2011).

The notion that system justification has palliative consequences is also supported by studies that measured system legitimation and delegitimation in other ways. In a representative survey of Romanians conducted in 2005, Cernat (2010) observed that support for the (democratic) government in power and rejection of the previous system were positively associated with subjective well-being. Endorsement of the belief in a just world was positively associated with subjective well-being in research conducted in Hungary (Dalbert & Katona-Sallay, 1996) and Slovakia (Dzuka & Dalbert,

2006). Conversely, political alienation in Poland was associated with pessimism, anxiety and depression (Korzeniowski, 1993).

### **System rejection and system change in post-Communist societies**

Relatively weak levels of support for the status quo in post-Communist societies might inspire some hope for change on behalf of those who have been disappointed by the harsh economic realities ushered in by the Capitalist system. Along similar lines, Jost et al. (2010) conjectured that:

The system justification goal will finally be abandoned when justifying the system no longer satisfies epistemic, existential, or relational needs. This may occur when the status quo itself offers no stability or certainty or may even be regarded as a source of threat rather than reassurance, or when it has become counter-normative to stick with an old regime when a new one is gaining in popularity. Under circumstances such as these, the motivational impetus of system justification tendencies would be low and people might even work to change the status quo. (pp. 13–14)

Consistent with this general idea, three studies conducted in the U.S., U.K. and Greece confirmed that decreased system justification was indeed associated with greater willingness to engage in both disruptive and nondisruptive forms of social protest and collective action (Jost et al., 2012).

Findings such as these might suggest that dissatisfaction with the status quo would motivate increased political participation in the post-Communist region. This does not seem to have transpired so far: consistently low levels of political engagement are reported in the region (e.g., Mason, Nelson, & Szklarski, 1991; Tworzecki, 2008). Moreover, political alienation—although it is related to low system justification—does not seem to predict political participation (Korzeniowski, 1994).<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, political cynicism is generally associated with political *disengagement*, such as abstinence from voting (Bynner & Ashford, 1994) and a failure to take constructive approaches to the solution of social problems (Bond et al., 2004).

A plausible explanation for the lack of a clear relationship between system-level attitudes and political participation is that system delegitimation might be

<sup>4</sup>We included questions about disruptive and nondisruptive forms of political participation in the Polish System Justification Survey (Cichočka & Jost, 2012a). However, the analyses did not yield clear conclusions. We found that political system justification was negatively associated with most forms of activism—in line with the results of Jost et al. (2012). At the same time, general system justification was positively associated with disruptive forms of political participation, as well as some forms of nondisruptive participation. These inconsistent results may be attributable to the fact that we asked respondents about engaging in various forms of political behaviour rather than their willingness to take action on behalf of specific causes or movements (which may be motivated by pro- or anti-system sentiments).

accompanied by low levels of political *efficacy* (Long, 1978). Those who are alienated might be dissatisfied with the system, but they also feel helpless and have no confidence that they are able to affect meaningful political outcomes. Feelings of political efficacy are essential for political participation (e.g., González et al., 2005; Mannarini, Legittimo, & Taló, 2008; Zimmerman, 1989). However, many citizens of Central and Eastern Europe continue to feel that it is impossible to change things (Gavreliuc, 2012; Kochanowicz, 2004; Mason, 1995). Presumably, *some* degree of system justification is required for the individual to believe that the system will be responsive to the needs, interests, and efforts of its citizenry. In the 2012 survey of Polish internet users, we found that feelings of efficacy were indeed positively associated with general and (to a lesser extent) political forms of system justification (Cichocka & Jost, 2012a).

Believing that individuals have little control over their fates and outcomes in post-Communist societies (Gavreliuc, 2012) has been tied to a sense of “entitlement” with respect to governmental provisions (Lewicka, 2001). Such expectations that the government will take care of its citizens are generally quite different from system justification tendencies, which—at least in the Capitalist context—are typically manifested in terms of faith in meritocracy and a commitment to work hard on behalf of the system (Ledgerwood et al., 2011). A sense of entitlement to governmental benefits, on the other hand, may be accompanied by the conviction that “others” should take action on one’s own behalf (Lewicka, 2001). Low system justification in post-Communist societies, then, might be associated with higher expectations of governmental support and, at the same time, decreased political participation (Kochanowicz, 2004; Lewicka, 2006). Feelings of entitlement (and tendencies to complain about the system) are associated with political alienation, low self-esteem and personal dissatisfaction (Żemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowski, 2009). These findings suggest that entitlement beliefs (in relation to the government) should not be considered system-justifying in the post-Communist context. It may also be the case that citizens of post-Communist societies exhibit signs of “depressive realism” (cf. Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Gavreliuc, 2012)—as well as apathy, disengagement and perceived helplessness when it comes to changing the status quo. Future research in Central and Eastern Europe would do well to explore the causes and consequences of political efficacy more directly as well as the bases of accuracy and inaccuracy when it comes to the perception of system changeability.

For the most part, empirical research on system-justifying processes in post-Communist societies produces patterns of results that are quite similar to those typically obtained in Western societies. For instance, we observed fairly clear evidence of motivated system

defence in response to system criticism or threat; complementary stereotypic differentiation between groups that are higher and lower in social standing; and palliative benefits of endorsing system-justifying beliefs and ideologies. However, the existing research fails to replicate the clear negative relationship between system justification and participation in protest and other forms of collective action observed in the U.S. context. We will return to this issue in exploring directions for future research.

### EXPLANATIONS FOR LOW LEVELS OF SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION IN POST-COMMUNIST SOCIETIES

Studies addressing the palliative function of system justification clearly demonstrate that legitimization of the status quo is associated with happiness and greater life satisfaction, as well as other positive social and psychological outcomes. Given all of these hedonic benefits, it may be useful to consider why support for the system remains so low in post-Communist societies. At least three explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, may be suggested. First, some systems might be harder to justify than others. It is possible that system justification in post-Communist societies is lower because the status quo is, in fact, worse, in these societies. Second, it is possible that when the political system lacks legitimacy, citizens might turn to other social systems in order to satisfy their system justification motives. Third, overt declarations of support for the system might be suppressed by cultural norms of criticism, complaint and cynicism that have long characterized Central and Eastern European societies.

#### An unjustifiable system?

System justification, as we have already noted, has the potential to satisfy the individual’s basic epistemic, existential and relational needs by strengthening the conviction that one lives and works in a predictable, safe and supportive environment (Jost & Hunyady, 2005; Jost, Ledgerwood, et al., 2008). By internalizing and adhering to the principles that govern the overarching system, individuals can develop a sense of self-efficacy, controllability and security. From a social psychological perspective, it is probably no accident that certainty, transparency, and accountability promote trust in system-level authorities and institutions (Sztompka, 1998).

In a well-functioning democracy, internalizing the norms of the system enables citizens to make predictions about the future and link their efforts to reliable outcomes. By contrast, an authoritarian regime functions arbitrarily and makes it nearly impossible to learn the rules governing the system and to develop a sense of efficacy or control over one’s outcomes (Arendt, 1973; Markova, 2004).

In such cases, the need for system justification may exist, but it is unlikely to be satisfied adequately. Post-Communist societies, we have seen, are characterized by persistently high levels of anomie (Ådnanes, 2007; Gavreliuc, 2012; Korzeniowski, 1994; Sztompka, 1993), defined as “a feeling that the world and oneself are adrift, wandering, lacking of clear rules and stable moorings” (McClosky & Schaar, 1965, p. 19). Research on the psychological correlates of social anomie reveals that it is related to cynicism, alienation, and political impotence, as well as poorer life satisfaction, greater anxiety and pessimism (McClosky & Schaar, 1965). The state of anomie thus resembles the psychological state of “learned helplessness” (Seligman, 1975), which may have been acquired under the old system but is difficult to overcome in the new system.

In fact, some individuals living under Communism might have developed a defensively pessimistic belief in a predictably *unjust* socio-political system (cf. Furnham, 1993). For instance, Doliński’s (1993) study of Polish students suggested that believing in the injustice of the system may have served an ego-protective (i.e., self-handicapping) function, even though such beliefs also implied low self-efficacy. It is possible, in any case, that perceiving the system as entirely *illegitimate* is preferable to perceiving it as generating random, capricious outcomes (e.g., Kay, Shepherd, Blatz, Chua, & Galinsky, 2010).

Presumably, economic crises and instability—along with high rates of corruption before, during and after the transition to Capitalism—also contribute to scepticism about the legitimacy of the present system. Overall, we suspect that citizens of post-Communist societies are, to some extent, torn between nostalgia for the old (frustrating but familiar) system and the newer Capitalist system that has been taking hold but has brought with it completely new problems and challenges.

### The justification of alternative systems

If the overarching political system clearly fails to meet its citizens’ basic needs, people are likely to “look elsewhere” to satisfy their system justification motivation. We have observed that the discrepancy between respondents from post-Communist and traditionally Capitalist societies seems to be greater with respect to political system justification than general (social) system justification. It is also possible that citizens of post-Communist societies would defend and justify higher order political systems, such as the European Union (E.U.). Despite the international economic crisis presently facing the Eurozone, the E.U. enjoys greater trust and legitimation than the national governments and legislative bodies of its member states (Eurobarometer, 2011). Furthermore, Jaško (2011) found that Polish citizens

scored higher on a measure of E.U. system justification (adapting four items from the Kay & Jost, 2003 scale) than they typically score on measures of national system justification. Legitimizing the E.U. system may help to satisfy the epistemic, existential and relational needs of those post-Communist countries that are part of the EU-27, and it might even serve a similar (anticipatory) function for people in other countries who aspire to membership in the E.U.

System justification motivation can be also satisfied through ideological investment in religious institutions. Religious belief systems and practices provide a subjective sense of coherence, predictability, order, security and belongingness that may be comparable to the provisions of other more secular forms of system justification. Religious dogma provides rules, norms and guidance for the conduct of individual lives and enables adherents to believe that they live in a society that is orderly, legitimate and just (e.g., see Jost et al., 2013). There is evidence suggesting that ideological commitment to political and religious institutions are both capable of addressing the individual’s epistemic needs for control and predictability and are therefore psychologically substitutable (Kay et al., 2010). Public opinion surveys reveal high levels of religiosity in at least some parts of the post-Communist region (with some noteworthy exceptions, such as the Czech Republic; White, Miller, Grødeland, & Oates, 2000). However, direct evidence for the notion that most individuals place their trust and confidence in either God or the government has yet to emerge in the post-Communist context (cf. Kay et al., 2010).

### Normativity of complaining about the system

A final explanation for the apparent lack of system justification can be derived from research on social norms. In Western societies, expressions of system-justifying beliefs are socially normative (Alves & Correia, 2008, 2010), and expressions of system criticism or complaint are counter-normative (e.g., Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2007; Kaiser, Dyrenforth, & Hagiwara, 2006). These patterns may be related to more general norms of communicating optimism and satisfaction in these societies (Doliński, 1993). In post-Communist societies, however, pessimism, fatalism and “cultures of complaining” are more prevalent than optimism and the profession of satisfaction with one’s own life (Doliński, 1993; Sztompka, 1993; Szymków, Wojciszke, & Baryła, 2003; Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005).

Research on Polish culture in particular suggests the existence of a social norm that supports negativity—that is, a tendency to perceive the world as malevolent rather than benevolent (Lewicka, 2006; Wojciszke, 2004; Wojciszke & Baryła, 2005). Although Poles report being



reasonably happy with their personal lives, they routinely complain about social and political events (Wojciszke, 2004). A norm of negativity has also been observed in other post-Communist societies, including Hungary (Hunyady, 2009) and the Czech Republic (Macek & Markova, 2004). It is a popular Hungarian adage, for instance, that “an optimist is a person who is poorly informed.” One fourth of Hungarian survey respondents reported becoming more depressed and pessimistic over the past 5–10 years (Hunyady, 2009). To the extent that negativity might reflect unfortunate realities, citizens of post-Communist societies may exhibit “depressive realism” (Alloy & Abramson, 1979)—as opposed to “positive illusions” (Taylor & Brown, 1988) or “false consciousness” (Jost, 1995).

Consistent with the “culture of complaint” thesis, some evidence suggests that cynicism and negativity are socially reinforced in Central and Eastern Europe. A Polish study, for example, revealed that interaction partners who complained about politics and social services were seen as nicer and more intelligent, in comparison with more upbeat conversational partners, and the interactions themselves were perceived as more genuine and valuable (Szymków et al., 2003). If it is true that social cynicism and alienation are socially desirable ways of relating to the system, any system-justifying tendencies that might arise are likely to be inhibited and suppressed by a culture of complaint. This possibility is consistent with empirical observations that the tendency to complain is negatively correlated with general system justification (Skarżyńska, 2009) and positively correlated with perceptions of the world as unjust (Wojciszke, 2004). While such observations do not support causal inferences, it seems reasonable to suggest that negativity norms would contribute to lower levels of system justification, at least when it comes to explicit declaration.

### ARE SYSTEM JUSTIFICATION LEVELS RISING IN POST-COMMUNIST SOCIETIES?

Although certain indicators of perceived justice and system legitimacy point to lower levels of system justification in post-Communist than traditionally Capitalist societies, some evidence suggests that the discrepancies are shrinking as the “new” status quo consolidates. For instance, panel data from Poland reveal that satisfaction with the current system has been increasing over the last two decades (e.g., Czapiński, 2011). And, as noted above, survey data from Poland indicate that general system justification scores collected between 2008 and 2012 were a bit higher than in 2005 (see Table 1).<sup>5</sup>

This is not to say that nostalgia for the old system has entirely vanished (cf. Hogwood, 2000). According to a Polish survey conducted in 2010, 64% of respondents evaluated their lives before the transition to Capitalism positively, whereas only 7% evaluated them negatively (Prusik, 2011; cf. Boski, 2009). In 2000, 61% of Polish respondents stated that their lives had been easier before the transition (Czapiński & Panek, 2000). Although this figure dropped to 41% in 2009 (Czapiński & Panek, 2009; Prusik, 2011), these percentages seem high given the intensity of antipathy toward Communism immediately following system change. Perhaps gradual changes are to be expected. Research on long-term shifts in societal norms and values suggests that changes take place very slowly from one generation to the next, insofar as children’s life experiences are substantially different from those of their parents (Inglehart & Baker, 2000; Schwartz & Bardi, 1997).

There remains, in other words, considerable ambivalence about the present and former systems in post-Communist societies, at least when it comes to aggregate levels of public opinion. Both the free market and socialist economic systems receive some ideological support, suggesting that these societies remain torn between a historical allegiance to their socialist legacy and the more recently established capitalist system. The simultaneous affirmation of egalitarian and meritocratic ideologies is sometimes characterized as a form of “split consciousness” (Arts & Gijssberts, 1998; Kluegel, Csepeli, et al., 1995; Van der Toorn et al., 2010) that may reflect cross-generational differences in experiences and values (Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Attitudinal conflict—and nostalgic sentiments about the former system in particular—seem to be greatest for those who are relatively low in social or economic status (Arts & Gijssberts, 1998; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Smith & Matějů, 2012). Such individuals may experience a conflict between ego and group justification motives that contribute to egalitarian preferences, on one hand, and system justification motives to support meritocratic ideology associated with Capitalism, on the other (Jost et al., 2001). Over time—as the Capitalist system becomes the only one that citizens are personally familiar with—it is conceivable that even those who are relatively disadvantaged will come to embrace it more unequivocally, as in the West (e.g., Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003). Along these lines, the results of a nationally representative survey of Romanian citizens by Cernat (2010) found that socio-economic status was *inversely* related to satisfaction with capitalism and democracy as well as trust in and support for various political institutions, including Parliament, the presidency, and the government as a whole (cf. Brandt, 2013).

<sup>5</sup>At the same time, public opinion data from Hungary suggests that societal optimism and faith in the system decreased from 2008 to 2012. During the same period, feelings of pessimism and injustice with regard to politics and economics increased (Hunyady, 2012).

## DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

### What is the opposite of system justification?

Our review of studies conducted in post-Communist societies leads us to conclude that there are at least two different ways of conceptualizing low levels of system justification from a social psychological perspective. One possibility is that—when the political system fails to satisfy epistemic, existential and relational needs—individuals might derive some modicum of comfort in perceiving the system as predictably malevolent and unjust (e.g., Doliński, 1993; Furnham, 1993). While this “solution” is unlikely to satisfy existential needs for safety and security, it might provide some semblance of certainty, confidence and a shared sense of social reality (consistent with the “culture of complaint”).

Another, quite different possibility is that low system justification would be linked to perceptions of the social or political system as sanctioning outcomes that are completely random or meaningless (e.g., Kay et al., 2010). Such perceptions are likely to be accompanied by subjective states that are symptomatic of social anomie and political alienation (Citrin et al., 1975; Korzeniowski, 1994; McClosky & Schaar, 1965; Seeman, 1959; Sztompka, 1993), which would suggest that important psychological needs, such as those that underlie system justification motivation, are entirely frustrated. The cognitive-motivational analysis of system delegitimation requires (and deserves) further theoretical and empirical elaboration. We hope that the present article takes a first step in the right direction.

### System justification and political participation: A curvilinear relationship?

Studies conducted in Western societies suggest that low levels of system justification encourage participation in collective action and other efforts to remedy injustice and effect social change (see Jost et al., 2010, 2012; Wakslak, Jost, Tyler, & Chen, 2007). So far, this result has not been replicated in research carried out in the post-Communist context, providing an opportunity to develop a more sophisticated theoretical model of the relationship between system justification and political participation. We may speculate that system justification exerts two opposing effects on political engagement. On one hand, system justification should be negatively related to political engagement, insofar as system justification reflects or contributes to a decreased *desire* for social and political change (i.e., satisfaction with the status quo). On the other hand, there is reason to think that system justification would be positively associated with a sense of political efficacy, insofar as some degree of faith in

the system is needed to believe that the system will be responsive to individual efforts to “reform it from within”, and this should encourage rather than discourage political engagement (cf. Skarżyńska & Henne, 2012). Because of these two opposing processes, motivation for political participation might be greatest at intermediate (rather than very high or low) levels of system justification (cf. McGuire, 1985, for a parallel argument concerning other social psychological variables). We have indeed obtained some tentative support for the hypothesis that a curvilinear (i.e., quadratic) relationship holds between system justification and normative forms of political participation. Analyzing data from the 2009 Polish Prejudice Survey, we observed that citizens who endorsed political system justification to a moderate extent were indeed most likely to vote in political elections. Similarly, we re-analyzed data from a study of U.S. college students and discovered that the likelihood of signing a petition against the governmental bailout of Wall Street was greatest at intermediate levels of economic system justification (Cichocka & Jost, 2012b).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this review we have sought to shed much-needed social psychological light on system justification processes in post-Communist European societies. We concluded that system justification seems to possess similar social, cognitive and motivational antecedents and consequences in Capitalist and post-Communist societies, sustaining the broad applicability of the theory. At the same time, direct comparisons of system justification scores and levels of endorsement of various system-justifying beliefs and ideologies suggest that support for the system is indeed lower in post-Communist societies. Such results may be understood, at least in part, in terms of cultural norms of negativity and complaint that remain prevalent in Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, there is evidence that system justification is generally on the rise in post-Communist societies, as the consolidation of the Capitalist system proceeds apace, and nostalgia for the former system seems to be on the decline.

Our analysis of the social and psychological concomitants of low system justification suggests that the dispelling of ideological illusions about the system might serve the goal of accuracy, but it probably carries with it a number of pitfalls. As Elms (1976) put it, the “perception of government maltreatment is one example of how an effort to evaluate one’s world as accurately as possible, and to organize one’s observations into a meaningful model of reality, can lead to alienation” (p. 22). The lack of system justification is associated with a variety of negative social psychological consequences, including decreased subjective well-being. Unfortunately, it would appear that low levels of system justification do

not necessarily inspire attempts to change the frustrating circumstances of the present. Further research is needed to determine the nature and extent of system justification that may be considered optimal from the standpoint of subjective—and perhaps objective—well-being. This is a daunting scientific challenge that would require us to discover ways in which basic needs for security, control and belongingness could be satisfied without fostering an exaggerated sense of dependence on or subjugation to a social system that might well disappoint us, perhaps even profoundly—as so many have throughout the course of human civilization.

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