



# Post-communist democracy vs. totalitarianism: Contrasting patterns of need satisfaction and societal frustration



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## ABSTRACT

Frustration/satisfaction under the post-Communist democracy and under the pre-1989 Communist authoritarianism were studied in the Czech Republic in 2008 using a nationwide sample of 1093 respondents and an original Societal Frustration inventory. The patterns of frustration were contrastingly opposite: The past was dominated by the memory of oppression, of curtailed self-actualization yet fulfilled basic needs. In contrast, current democracy allowed for free self-actualization but the intensity of the current frustrations has exceeded the past frustrating memories. Main current complaints included a) general insecurity, lack of fulfillment of basic needs; b) corruption, low political culture, decline of civility (rudeness, envy, and ethnic intolerance). The results and their discussion help to explain the psychology of Communism, post-Communism, transition, and democratic consolidation.

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## 1. Introduction

Our study attempts to bring an insight into a society which underwent transition from Communism to democracy. The focus is on frustration and satisfaction of significant societal needs. Using empirical data, we wish to document various levels and patterns of frustration/satisfaction and to contrast what citizens live through under restored democracy with their reminiscence of the previous regime. Although we cannot recreate the authentic past experience, we strive to present a systematic view of both perspectives and discuss the reasons for our rather unexpected findings.

## 2. Frustration of needs in the socio-political context

[Staub \(2003\)](#) in his essay on cultures and human needs stressed that the perspective of satisfied or frustrated needs is essential for assessing the quality of life of individuals and indispensable for judging the character of societies. Although frustration was originally conceived as a concept relevant primarily to individuals and small groups ([Berkowitz, 1989](#); [Dollard et al., 1939](#); [Feshbach, 1964](#)), the societal and political impacts of widespread individual frustrations soon became obvious and were explored by political scientists, sociologists, and criminologists. During the heyday of frustration research, in the 1950s–1970s in particular, social processes were to a great degree explained by such phenomena as systemic frustration, relative deprivation, and status frustration. The concept of frustration, although key for individual and social motivation,

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seems to have experienced ebb of interest in recent decades. This is paradoxical in the time of social turmoil, global recession, increasing income inequality and environmental concerns. Frustration itself does not seem to be in decline yet the use of the term is. The Ngram viewer graphing tool, which registers word frequency in English language books, positions the apex of usage of the word 'frustration' to early 1970s, (Googlebooks, 2013). The recent scholarly literature seems to substitute the generalized negative term of frustration by positive antonyms or by more focused concepts. Thus, rather than of general political 'frustration,' one can read of political 'distrust' or low levels of 'trust' in the political sphere (Lianjiang, 2011; Lock et al., 1999; Maxwell, 2010; Peterson and Wrighton, 1998). Still, frustration is a useful concept, whether from the perspective of the individual or from the view of various social groups. More than other concepts, frustration integrates the cognitive, emotional, and conative aspects of attitudes. Frustration also implicitly indicates the potential dynamics, whether they are aggression and violence (frustration-aggression theory) or, alternatively, tendencies to regression, rational coping, and others. These concepts appear as particularly useful also in the Communist and Post-communist contexts.

*Systemic frustration* is a concept which explicitly extends frustration from an individual level to social systems. The concept was thoroughly elaborated by Feierabend et al., who characterized it as "frustration that is experienced collectively within societies" (1972, 109). Close in its substance to Gurr's (1972) relative deprivation, systemic frustration is typically caused by a) discrepancy between current social aspirations and achievements; b) discrepancy between estimates of future satisfactions or frustrations; c) uncertainties of social expectations; d) conflicts between aspirations and expectations. Feierabend and Feierabend (1971) were also among the first who empirically, by a macro-quantitative analysis, found relationships between the systemic frustration, political aggression/coercion, and political instability.

*Relative deprivation* was perhaps most plainly defined by Stewart (2006, 781) as "individual frustration produced by a negative comparison with a reference group" and by Smith et al. (2012, 203) as "the judgment that one is worse off compared to some standard accompanied by feelings of anger and resentment." Stewart also pointed out that relative deprivation is not just individual; he credited Runciman (1966) with coining the term 'fraternal' relative deprivation for relative deprivation experienced on a group level.

The core idea of relative deprivation was noted much earlier, among others by K. Marx, W. James, and J. Davies. Merton pointed out that the fourth century Greeks were aware of it and he quoted Carlyle's insight that "'happiness' (gratification) can be represented by a fraction in which the numerator represents achievement and the denominator, aspiration" (1968, 206). Along this line, Gurr (1972, 185) defined relative deprivation as a "perceived discrepancy" between values which are expected (goods and life conditions to which people believe they are justifiably *entitled*) and value capabilities (goods and conditions people believe they *can realistically get* and keep). Gurr, following up on the frustration-aggression theory, warned that the resulting discontent and anger motivate aggression (Rummel, 2013). Recently, Smith et al. (2012, 203) explicitly urged the revitalization of relative deprivation "as a useful social psychological predictor of a wide range of important individual and social processes."

*Status frustration* is a concept coined by Albert Cohen (1956). He pointed out the "universal desire for status" (1956, 27). He observed that delinquency may be a way to achieving recognition and noted that a low social status may be at the root of male delinquency in low class subcultures. Status frustration is also the motive which under Communism drove people to compliance and collaboration; this same motive now drives the unemployed to desperation.

The study of frustration is unthinkable without a reference to the classic works by A. Maslow and his early insights (1943) into the hierarchy (prepotency) of needs from physiological and safety needs to self-actualization and transcendence. Maslow observed that people are not just motivated by avoidance of pain and reduction of tension but also by striving for growth and "developing to the full stature of which they are capable" (Maslow, 1973, 178).

Maslow's theory was frequently revisited, for example, by Alderfer (1972) who based on it his simplified *erg* theory, that is, existence, relations, growth schema. However, Maslow's theory is still considered the most insightful and influential, a fruitful blueprint, an operating manual (Peterson and Park, 2010) and a "generative foundation for future empirical research" (Kenrick et al., 2010, 292). Even complex studies, such as the World Value Survey by Inglehart and Welzel (2005), interpret the supranational value patterns in Maslowian terms: their resulting dichotomy of 'survival values' and 'self-expression values' resonates with what in the previous century Maslow labeled as 'deficit needs,' 'higher' and 'growth needs.' His framework is particularly useful for the assessment of dis/satisfaction under various political regimes.

### 3. Objectives

The main objectives of this study were:

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