

Post-Soviet Union happiness lag between east and west Europe explained

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Research finds that mass unemployment after the fall of the Soviet Union may have had a far longer-term impact on the health and happiness of those living in Eastern Europe than was previously thought.

The upheaval caused by the collapse of the Soviet Union that left millions of workers unemployed for long periods of time could be the reason for the sizeable 'transition [happiness](#) gap' that existed for many years between east and [western nations](#) in Europe, according to new research.

Academics, including Dr. Olena Nizalova from the University of Kent, set out to examine why many Eastern European nations' populations reported lower happiness levels than Western nations, despite several years of economic growth and quality of life improvements prior to the Great Recession that started in 2008.

To assess possible causes for this the researchers analysed data from Ukraine from 2003—2012 that looked at the [life satisfaction](#) of both men and women in relation to their experience of [unemployment](#) during the 1990s, which were particularly turbulent for post-Soviet nations.

Overall, they found that those still being affected by unemployment were notably unhappier than those in work, as was expected. However, they also found that there was a small but significant impact of past unemployment to current happiness levels, known as 'scarring'.

Furthermore, given that under communism the idea of unemployment was supposed to be impossible, the collapse of the Soviet Union followed by job losses was likely to be particularly acute for workers in nations such as the Ukraine, and so the impact may have been harder than normal.

The researchers say that this makes it likely that it is a contributing factor to the 'transition happiness gap' that existed between Eastern European nations and those in the West, even with the gap declining since 2010. Moreover, experiences of unemployment during the Great Recession in Western Europe may have also played a role in closing this

gap.

Dr. Nizalova said: 'Despite the use of historic data on one country, our research is very policy relevant for many nations. Unhappy citizens provide a prolific ground for populist politicians, and if unemployment experience leaves such a profound scar in terms of happiness, it cannot be ignored even after people get re-employed.'

More information: Edward C. Norton et al, Does past unemployment experience explain the transition happiness gap?, *Journal of Comparative Economics* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jce.2018.07.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2018.07.005)

Provided by University of Kent

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