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Networks, friends and sociability: is the post-communist gap still in place?

Based on two waves of the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) the paper examines the relevance of the post-communist factor for explaining differences in the social structure (social networks, patterns of sociability and interpersonal relationships) between established democracies (mainly of the Western Europe) and post-communist countries. The 1986 wave of the ISSP includes seven countries, namely Australia, the FRG, Austria, the US, Great Britain, Hungary and Italy. The 2001 study features more countries, out of which my analysis keeps seven post-communist countries (a separate sample collected from East Germany is also counted here), ten West European ones, the US and Japan.

In the first step the paper compares patterns of interpersonal relationships and sociability (operationalized as number of friends from three different categories, namely friends from workplace, neighborhood, and other close friends) in the Western democracies and post-communist countries. The results indicate that there are quite substantive differences in terms of network sizes between countries belonging to the two groups, although this is mainly the case for the choice-based category of close friends (the other two categories –friends from workplace and neighborhood- can be seen more as a by-product of other activities). In the next step, the analysis checks for the relevance of the post-communist factor on the three types of social networks. Results show that after controlling for individual level variables (age, gender, education, residence, marital status and employment status) and country effects, the post-communist factor still retains significance when the dependent variable is the choice-based category of friends. People from post-communist countries appear to be more likely to have smaller networks, an effect that is significant and consistent across countries from this group.