

# How Soviet communism changed the family

*Communist ideology in the Soviet Union initially sought to weaken the family and strengthen the role of the state. But did it achieve this aim? Drawing on new research, **Joan Costa-Font** and **Anna Nicińska** find that in contrast to expectations, exposure to communism appears to have strengthened preferences for family support for both children and parents.*

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The family has served throughout history as a [source of informal insurance](#) which can be crowded out by the market. However, we know less about how this informal family insurance is affected by the extension of the state, especially when individuals cannot accumulate wealth, as in communist economies. One of the main aims of Soviet communism was to remove capitalist institutions by abolishing the traditional family. However, it is an open question whether it managed to achieve this aim.

## Competing hypotheses

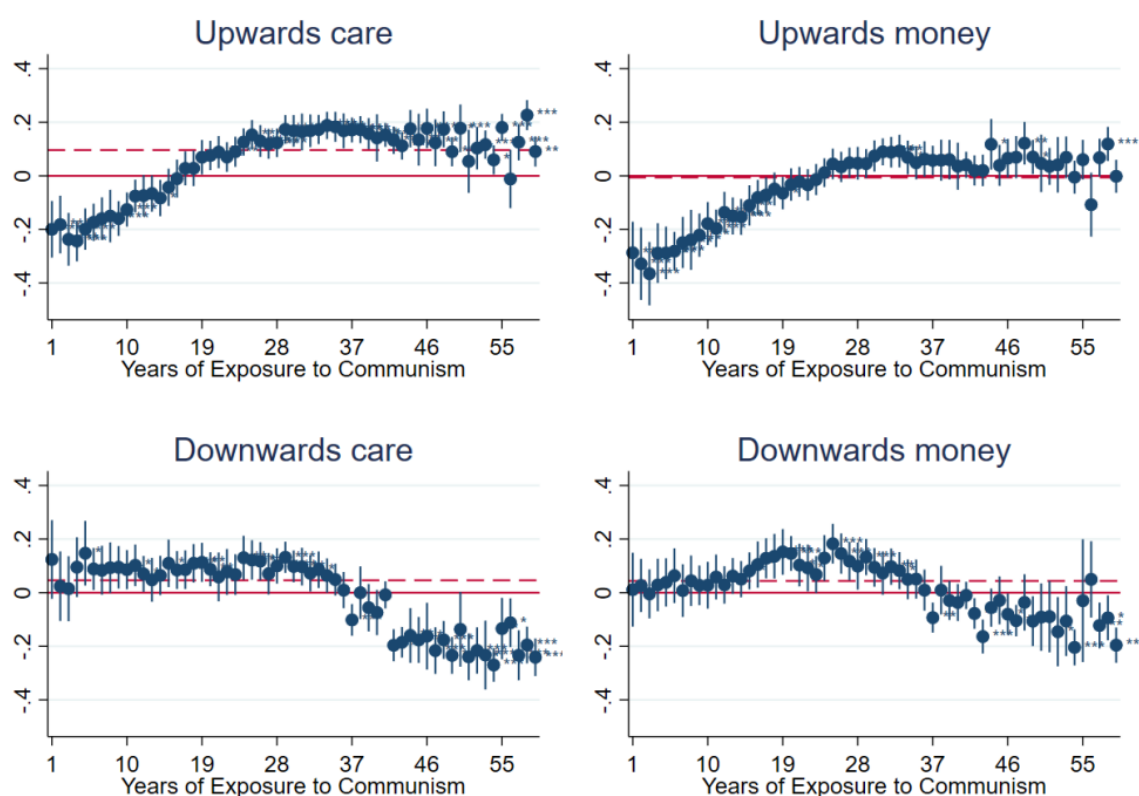
There are two competing hypotheses about the role of Soviet communism on the family. The first, which can be termed the *indoctrination hypothesis*, is that Soviet communist ideology indoctrinated the population to abolish the traditional family. The impact of these ‘indoctrination effects’ has been demonstrated in [previous studies](#) showing significantly stronger egalitarian preferences among people living in eastern European countries when compared with those in western Europe. However, these findings appear inconsistent with [other studies](#) that fail to find evidence of such effects. Furthermore, [most of the evidence is derived from Germany](#), which is problematic.

The second hypothesis can be termed the *informality hypothesis*. This states that by removing capitalist institutions, Soviet communism pushed markets underground, making market activities informal and strengthening family and social networks, which acted as a form of insurance and provided contacts to navigate the system. However, we know very

little about the effects of communism on preferences for the family as a source of informal financial and non-financial support.

In a [new study](#), we show that by abolishing wealth accumulation, communism created parallel informal incentives and family networks became a source of informal insurance. This is compatible with [previous research](#) showing that informal family networks were at the core of communist societies. Our study is based on evidence from four datasets, namely the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), World Values Survey (WVS) and European Social Survey (ESS), supplemented with the 2006 wave of the Life in Transition Survey (LITS).

**Figure 1: Effects of exposure to communism on the preference for family insurance by length of exposure**



*Note: Point estimates with 95% confidence intervals, controlling for ability to make ends meet or scale of incomes, age (quadratic), gender, education, country, as well as time and cohort fixed effects. Dashed line shows the average effect of exposure to*

*communism. Source: Authors' own estimations based on GGS wave 1 (release 4.2) and 2 (release 1.3).*

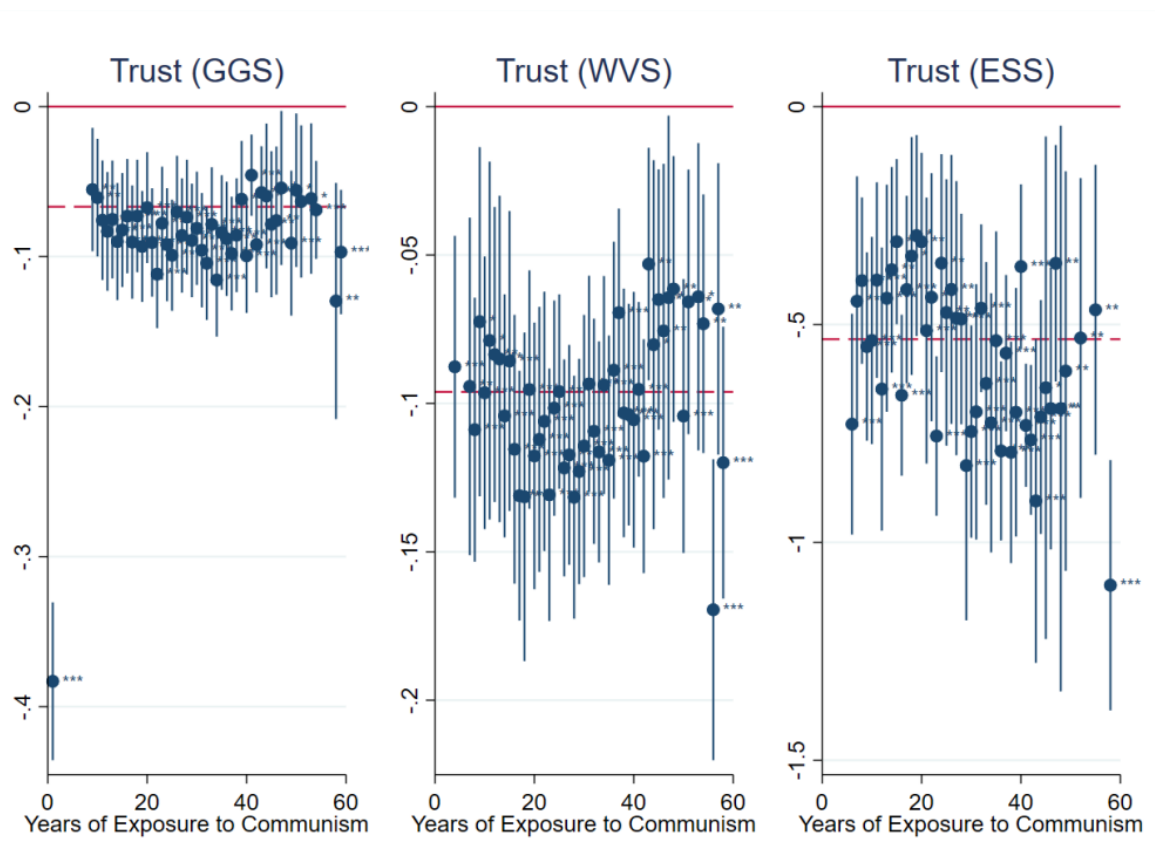
As Figure 1 shows, we find that individuals exposed to communism are more likely to report that members of their own family should support each other than individuals that have not been exposed to communism. This is especially true when personal care to older parents and support to children (both financial and non-financial) is needed.

In contrast to the indoctrination hypothesis, we therefore find evidence of a strengthening of preferences for family support that is consistent with the informality hypothesis. Figure 1 shows that the effects of exposure to communism are positive for intergenerational support both to older and younger generations. In the case of the preference for family financial transfers to older individuals, we find an insignificant yet negative effect from exposure to communism, which might be explained by the extensive and generous retirement schemes in former communist countries.

### **Potential mechanisms**

One possible explanation for our findings stems from the so called '[paradox of family values](#)' outlined by Francis Fukuyama. This refers to the tendency for societies with low levels of trust to have families with strong internal ties. It may be that our observation of increased preferences for family support is a consequence of an erosion of trust under communism. Indeed, we find that the probability of agreeing with the statement that 'people can be trusted' declined on average among those exposed to communism, as shown in Figure 2.

### **Figure 2. Effects of exposure to communism on generalised trust and confidence in public institutions**



*Note: Point estimates with 95% confidence intervals, controlling for ability to make ends meet or scale of incomes, age (quadratic), gender, education, country, as well as time and cohort fixed effects. Dashed line shows the average effect of exposure to communism. Trust – ‘generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people?’ Source: Authors’ own estimations based on GGS wave 1 (release 4.2) and 2 (release 1.3), WVS waves 2-6 (release 2015\_04\_18), ESS waves 1-8.*

Soviet communism depressed civic participation and support for democratic values. If public institutions are perceived as corrupt and people withdraw from expressing their voice in public due to their lack of trust in democratic institutions, it is reasonable to expect a higher preference for placing the responsibility for individuals in need of support on informal family networks rather than the state.

## Heterogeneity

The preferences for family support we find are driven primarily by women. There is also substantial heterogeneity across countries exposed to communism. The effects of communist exposure are most pronounced in the former Habsburg and Prussian territories rather than Russia, suggesting [religion and shared cultural values](#) play a role.

Overall, our findings have some important implications. By weakening trust and abolishing wealth accumulation, Soviet communism strengthened preferences for family support. The communist regime not only [shaped preferences about social insurance](#), but also the demand for family support, which constitutes a different kind of insurance. This suggests that family structures are very much endogenous to political regimes.

***For more information, see the authors' [accompanying paper](#)***

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*Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [Soviet Artefacts](#) on [Unsplash](#)*

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