

## Postcommunist societies in times of transition: perceptions of change among adolescents in central and eastern Europe.

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**This article examines adolescents' perceptions of the economic changes and the justice of the new "social contract" in Eastern/Central Europe. Focusing on three countries, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Czech Republic, it explores the social, political, and economic environments in which adolescents came of age in 1990. Surveys conducted among high school students in each country during 1995 tapped their perceptions of the economy, the local community, and their personal beliefs about the efficacy of individual initiative and hard work. Responses differed significantly based on age, gender, social class, value orientation, and country. Older adolescents and girls were more likely to observe that economic disparities were growing in their country and to be cynical about the value of hard work. Those with socialist values also discounted the value of recent changes. Adolescents in the Czech Republic were the least cynical about economic changes, whereas those in Bulgaria were the most cynical, with Hungarian youth the least optimistic about the future.**

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### Introduction

Adolescents who came of age in the 1990s in the nations of Central and Eastern Europe are a unique historical generation. Their adolescence was marked by radical political and economic changes. They were children during an era of a state-controlled economy but were teenagers when market mechanisms were introduced. The decisions that they and their families made about career paths and education were made under the rules of a communist system. That system provided security in such basics as jobs, housing, and family subsidies, albeit at a low standard of living. At the same time, autonomy was constrained and alternatives including travel, education, and access to information were foreclosed. The old social contract has been replaced by a new one that, while offering more autonomy, provides less security. Whereas the old, more paternalistic system did not reward entrepreneurship, it also guaranteed that no one would be homeless. And unemployment, far from being a necessary evil of an economic system, was considered a crime. The socialist system was built on the principle that everyone should work, and the state assured the conditions that supported full employment, including family benefits and child care.

This article examines adolescents' perceptions of the economic changes and the justice of the new "social contract." We test several hypotheses, which we briefly outline and then discuss in greater detail. First, compared to boys, we expected that girls would be more likely to perceive the change to a market economy as negative. Second, we expected that, compared to their older peers, early adolescents would have a more optimistic outlook, feeling more positive both about their communities and about the changes in the market. Third, we expected that youth from higher status families (a relative term but one that can be indexed by the level of parents' education) would feel more positive about the transition to a market economy than would their peers from less educated families. Finally, we expected that youths' basic values would be related to their perceptions and beliefs about the transition to a market economy. Specifically, we expected that youth who held strong socialist values would see the negative consequences of the market system, whereas those who endorsed liberal values would perceive the market system more positively.

### Historical Background

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Bulgarian, Czech, and Hungarian adolescents have experienced a world very different from that of their counterparts in other generations. During childhood, a life stage typically determined by adult authority figures, they experienced life in a paternalistic, totalitarian system. Then, during adolescence, when the dominant developmental task is self-definition and identity formation (Erikson, 1968), they experienced radical political and economic changes. They were trying to form their own identity during a time when society as a whole was searching for a new identity, a time when the dominant theme was the negation and rejection of the existing social system.

At the turn of the decade, economic and political "shock therapy" was introduced into each of these countries. First, during

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elections in the early 1990s, "Western"-style political parties were voted in. This was usually followed by market reforms and many of these societies adopted the economic shock therapy recommended by Western financial institutions. However, this therapy did not occur with the same pace or consequences in each country. For example, for 15 years prior to the changes introduced in 1989, Hungary had been experimenting with modified market principles, and many small entrepreneurs were already holding second jobs in addition to those under the socialist system. Market reforms were less drastic there than in some of the other socialist countries. In contrast, the Czech Republic was highly advanced industrially and had the necessary infrastructure for successful market transformation. However, the Czech government refrained from implementing most of the difficult changes in financial controls and social services that comprise the "shock" of shock therapy. As a result, after a period of initial success, the Czech Republic experienced an economic crisis in 1997-98. When we collected these data in 1995, economic optimism in the Czech Republic was high compared to that in the other nations of Eastern and Central Europe.

To understand the factors that may play a role in adolescents' assessments of the changes in their country, one has to first have a grounding in the social and historical context within which they experienced their childhood. Since the beginning of the century, each of the three Eastern/Central European countries that are the focus of this research has had a very different history of economic and social development.

From a long-range historical perspective, Bulgaria can be characterized as a paternalistic society with strong emphasis on a traditional family hierarchy and Muslim and Eastern Orthodox religion and culture (Botcheva, 1996). Prior to the Communist revolution in 1944, it was an agrarian country with a predominantly village population and an economy based on small private enterprise. During the Communist period, the government sought to develop Bulgaria as an industrialized country with a predominantly urban population (Mirchev, 1994). This effort failed and resulted in a deteriorating economy. Bulgaria has never firmly identified with Western Europe. Its location on the eastern edge of the continent and the effects of recent social changes have made such identification even more difficult. In 1993, Bulgarians felt themselves to be even less European than they had 2 years earlier (Topalova, 1997).

Both the Czech Republic and Hungary are Central European countries with a more traditionally Western culture. Both were parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire until World War I. The Czech countries (Bohemia and Moravia) have experienced a number of periods of discontinuity during their historical development, due in part to their location on the edge of different cultural spheres: German, Hungarian and Slavonic. The modern independent state Czechoslovakia was constituted only after World War I. Until World War II it was a highly industrial country, with the beginnings of democratic institutions. During the war it was subjugated by Nazi Germany. The most recent totalitarian regime, dating from 1948 to 1989, had a strong influence on the development of today's adolescents. Under this regime one ideology, Marxism-Leninism, represented the only correct worldview. An attempt to reintroduce democracy into the framework of the communist system was crushed by the military intervention of the Warsaw pact countries in 1968. Because of this, most of Czech social life was frozen for decades. Public discourse was limited, with few expressions of independent opinion allowed. Free speech was carefully hidden within the family or within small communities and expressed in carefully couched language (puns and plays on words). This created the phenomenon of "dual life" - the difference between public and private behavior and morality (see Macek & Rabusic, 1994).

One important additional factor should be noted about the Czech Republic. After the fall of communism in 1989, the regions that constituted Czechoslovakia experienced increasing political and economic friction. In 1993, in a peaceful dissolution, the Czech and Slovak populations agreed to separate, with the Czech lands (Moravia and Bohemia) becoming the Czech Republic and the remainder of the country forming Slovakia. This dissolution was especially traumatic for the Roma population (gypsies) who were denied citizenship in either of the new countries. After dissolution, the Czech Republic continued with political and economic liberalization, while Slovakia followed a more conservative direction.

Hungary also became a totally independent nation-state only as a result of World War I. However, the boundaries of the present nation were imposed on the country, and more than one million Hungarians currently live outside its borders. Hungary went through a brief optimistic period of rebuilding after the end of World War II (see Csapo, 1994). By 1949, however, a Soviet-style Communist system had been imposed on the population. In 1956 a revolt against the totalitarian system, initiated by the Hungarian Communist Party, ignited open, armed resistance against Soviet troops. Afterward, the country suffered the consequences of the revolt's suppression. During the 1960s, younger people distanced themselves

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from the official ideology, but, in contrast to 1956, more through passive nonconformity. An alternative subculture continued to develop through the 1980s. In some cases it focused on disillusionment and alienation; in other cases it constituted an actual underground culture, including liberal thinkers at illegal "home universities." By 1989 the frozen political and ideological structures had begun to collapse and the beginnings of new institutions were beginning to be established.

### Role of Education in the Old and New Social Order

Under the Communist system, young people did not have the luxury nor perhaps the need for a period of moratorium in which to explore directions for their future (Marcia, 1980). In return for stability and security, the system purposefully kept the range of alternatives available to young people relatively narrow. "From each according to ability to each according to need," the principle of resource distribution, also shaped educational attainment by untying it from social mobility. Because rough income equality was a social goal, income disparities between occupations were minimal. Education did not have a payoff in extrinsic rewards such as better paying jobs. The pay of a manual laborer could be as good as or better than that of a university professor. In short, the motivation to pursue higher education was not for economic gain.

Beyond economic rewards, there were also few intrinsic rewards to education under the socialist system. Many of these countries had been primarily agrarian, with a rural prejudice against advanced education and intellectualism. In addition, the forced industrialization of the Communist system placed a premium on working-class status as a requirement for advancement. This resulted in a deprecation of the intrinsic value of a broad education as a requirement for leadership. At the same time, the socialist societies eliminated both gender and class disparities that had existed in these educational systems prior to World War II. Although the level of education was relatively good in these societies, the social resources devoted to higher education were limited during the Communist period.

Since the revolutions of 1989, the value of education, especially for employability, has increased in these societies. Those with higher levels of education now have a better chance of getting ahead. Given the increased importance of education under the new social system, we would expect that respondents with higher family educational attainment would have a more positive view of the social transformations occurring in these societies. We would expect them to be more optimistic about the future and more sanguine about current problems.

### Gender Issues

Family policy during the Communist era assumed that all adults would work. As a result, dependent children's needs were a state responsibility. In many of these societies birth rates were quite low. Pronatalist and family support policies including paid maternity leave, income subsidies, preferential housing for young families, and day care for children encouraged family formation and women's participation in the labor force. Extra subsidies for single-parent families under the old system served to minimize the suffering of children from divorce. Although structural barriers to women's employment were addressed under the Soviet system, there was not a parallel change in interpersonal relations nor in the gendered division of domestic responsibilities. Someone still had to shop and cook when the workday was done, and it was women who stood in lines for food. Bollobas (1993) noted that under communism, women were assumed to have equality but in reality bore the burden of having to maintain the home while working full time. Toth (1993) noted that under communism women continued to be socialized into conservative gender roles while supposedly enjoying gender equality.

Since 1989 the decline in social welfare services in these nations has placed an even greater burden on women, who are expected to continue to find a way to balance work and family obligations. Compared to the socialist state, where structural supports at least equalized opportunities for women to work, the new social contract poses additional problems for women. They are still more likely than men to have to balance the responsibilities of families with paid employment. But now they face increased competition for employment in societies that no longer provide support for the responsibilities of parenthood.

How these changes will affect girls' attitudes toward the transformation of their societies is not difficult to hypothesize. Girls generally are more sensitive in their evaluations of social issues than boys (Macek & Kostron, 1996; Jonsson et al., 1996). In addition, the change to a market economy and the decrease in social welfare benefits exacts a disproportionate burden on women. Thus we would expect that female respondents will be more sensitive than males to increasing social

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disparities and the negative aspects of social change.

### Age Differences

The developmental literature suggests that as they age, children become more cynical in their evaluations of the social order. In these formerly socialist societies, age could be expected to have an even greater impact on young people's assessment of social changes. Under the Communist system, all members of society received social support, regardless of their level of contribution to the society. Hard work and dedication had less to do with advancement than did political connections. Rewards were based not on objective measures of achievement, but rather on the subjective assessment of one's peers.

Part of the transformation into a market economy was aimed at eliminating this disjunction between individual effort and economic reward. In the old system, everyone received the same reward regardless of their effort. In the new system, one would expect that reward and effort would be linked. At the same time, general economic decline since transformation has reduced available rewards. Thus, although the new system should increase reward for individual effort, the actual results might be different. With the early exception of the Czech Republic, all of these former socialist societies experienced serious economic decline following the transition to market economies. Bulgaria experienced the greatest decline and has had the greatest difficulty recovering, with economic disparities becoming the most dramatic. Until recently, Hungary was also experiencing major economic problems. Unemployment continues to be high, and rural areas suffer from the lack of agricultural exports. Although the Czech Republic also experienced economic changes, economic decline there has only occurred recently.

Age was positively related to cynicism in the Soviet era largely because youth came to mistrust the official ideology. There is every reason to assume older youth would be cynical today as well. Compared to younger adolescents, they are more cognizant of the economic and political upheaval as their countries adjust to this new era. Moreover, older youth are directly impacted in terms of insecurities in employment and housing. Under the old system it was common, for example, for an industrial plant to "adopt" a secondary school in its area with the assumption that all of the vocational students would be guaranteed jobs in that plant upon graduation. Of course, such practices are no longer in effect, and it is particularly difficult for young people with no experience or connections to find work. Finally, many of the older cohort in these samples would have made decisions about secondary education (whether vocational, technical, or college-preparatory tracks) under the old regime. Yet they are living out the consequences of these choices under a new set of rules. These factors can only add to the cynicism that might be expected with age.

### Method

#### Sample

The three countries participating in this study (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, and Hungary) are part of larger international project, "Adolescents' Interpretation of the Social Contract" (see Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, this issue). Data were gathered in schools in a large urban area of each country between March and May 1995. An effort was made to recruit youth from higher and lower status backgrounds based on parental education and the school type (vocational, gymnasium, special high schools). Also, two age cohorts were selected: an early adolescent group younger than age 15 (12 to 14) and an older group of senior high school students 15 and older (to age 18). The study was introduced to youth as an international study of teenagers' opinions about issues in society, and it was made clear in oral and written form that there were no right or wrong answers.

#### Measures

Dependent measures. Adolescents were presented with a list of Likert-type items that tapped their perceptions of the economy, the local community, and their personal beliefs concerning the efficacy of individual initiative and hard work. These items were submitted to factor analysis and in all three national samples, three factors were identified. Moreover, these factors have the same meaning across three countries (Macek, 1997). The first scale, adolescents' perceptions that economic disparities were increasing in the country, was measured by two items ("Economic changes in our society have made the life of the average person worse, not better" and "A few people are getting richer, but many people are

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becoming poorer"). Cronbach's alphas ranged from .57 to .66 for the three countries. The second scale, perceptions of the local community as a caring place, was based on four items tapping the degree to which people in the local community cared about and helped one another (e.g., "Most people in our town try to make this a good community to live in"). Cronbach's alphas for this scale were between .62 and .67 across the three countries. The third scale, belief in the value of individual initiative, included three items. They express a belief in the logic of opportunity and hard work (e.g., "If a person is willing to work hard, they can make a good living"). Cronbach's alphas ranged between .52 and .53.

Independent measures. In addition to age and gender, family background was measured by the number of years parents spent at school and a dichotomous variable tapping whether either parent had lost his or her job in the past two years. The last set of variables assessed two dimensions of adolescent value orientations. The first were a set of what we have termed socialist values (items expressing strong endorsement of social welfare to equalize outcomes among people, with Cronbach's alphas .61-.66), the second a single item tapping liberal values ("It is only natural to have rich and poor people in a society").

### Results

#### Assessment of Social Changes and Personal Perspectives

A 3 country x 2 gender x 2 age groups analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run on each of the dependent variables. Country comparisons on the three dependent variables as well as means and standard deviations for girls and boys and for younger and older adolescents are presented in Table 1.

For adolescents' perceptions of growing economic disparities, there were main effects of age group  $F(1, 2022) = 7.53$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01; gender,  $F(1, 2022) = 17.78$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01; and country,  $F(2, 2022) = 118.82$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01. There were no two- or three-way interactions. As expected, compared to their younger peers (under age 15) ( $M = 3.72$ ), older adolescents (ages 15-19) ( $M = 3.82$ ) were more likely to observe that economic disparities were growing in their country and, compared to boys ( $M = 3.70$ ), girls ( $M = 3.85$ ) were more likely to observe growing disparities in income. The results also indicate that adolescents in the Czech Republic were less likely than either Bulgarian or Hungarian youth to observe increasing income disparities. As noted in the introduction, the Czech Republic has not been as quick as these other nations in Eastern/Central Europe to enforce market principles. In 1995, when these data were collected, it did not have the high levels of unemployment, for example, that the other two nations in this study had. (Even today, unemployment levels are only 4% in the Czech Republic.)

Table 1. Results of ANOVAs for Adolescents' Perceptions by Gender, Age Group, and Country of Origin

#### Perception that economic disparities are increasing

	Bulgaria		Czech Republic		Hungary	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Girls	4.07	0.74	3.43	0.80	4.03	0.73
(bbb)						
Boys	3.92	0.81	3.36	0.81	3.86	0.83
Younger	3.96	0.79	3.38	0.75	3.88	0.76
Older	4.03	0.76	3.41	0.81	4.01	0.81
Country	4.00(a)	0.77	3.40(a,b)	0.78	3.95(b)	0.79

#### Belief in the value of individual initiative

	Bulgaria		Czech Republic		Hungary	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Girls	3.30	0.77	3.56	0.69	2.76	0.70
Boys	3.51	0.79	3.66	0.70	2.95	0.78
Younger	3.44	0.80	3.72	0.66	2.92	0.78
Older	3.35	0.77	3.50	0.70	2.79	0.72
Total	3.39(a,c)	0.78	3.61(a,b)	0.70	2.85(b,c)	0.74

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Perception that ours is a caring community

	Bulgaria		Czech Republic		Hungary	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Girls	2.40	0.71	2.65	0.57	2.70	0.61
Boys	2.61	0.75	2.64	0.57	2.80	0.66
Younger	2.62	0.74	2.74	0.60	2.80	0.64
Older	2.39	0.71	2.55	0.61	2.71	0.62
Total	2.50(a,b)	0.73	2.64(a,c)	0.61	2.75(b,c)	0.64

Note: Within rows, means sharing a common single letter differ significantly by at least  $p$  [less than] .05 (Tukey-HSD procedure).

For adolescents' beliefs in the efficacy of individual initiative, there were main effects of age group  $F(1, 2015) = 21.61$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01; gender,  $F(1, 2015) = 27.47$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01; and country,  $F(2, 2015) = 187.08$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01. Again, there were no two- or three-way interactions. Consistent with the results for awareness of income disparities, younger adolescents ( $M = 3.37$ ) were more likely than older adolescents ( $M = 3.22$ ) to believe that anyone who worked hard could make a good living in their country and boys ( $M = 3.38$ ) were more likely than girls ( $M = 3.21$ ) to endorse this belief. Again, adolescents in the Czech Republic were far more likely than their peers in either of the other countries to hold such optimistic outlooks. In addition, Hungarian youth were more pessimistic than the Bulgarians.

For adolescents' reports that their local community was a caring and cohesive setting, there were main effects of age group,  $F(1, 2004) = 30.35$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01; gender,  $F(1, 2004) = 11.31$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01; and country,  $F(2, 2004) = 20.58$ ,  $p$  [less than] .01, and a marginal interaction of gender and country,  $F(2, 2004) = 4.11$ ,  $p$  [less than] .05. Younger adolescents ( $M = 2.72$ ) were more likely than older adolescents ( $M = 2.55$ ) to feel that people in their community cared about one another and tried to make it a good place to live, and boys ( $M = 2.68$ ) were more likely than girls ( $M = 2.58$ ) to endorse this belief. Bulgarians had the lowest mean, followed by Czech and Hungarian youth in that order. It should be noted that, on a 1-5 scale, the means were all below the midpoint.

### Prediction of Adolescents' Perceptions and Evaluations of Social Changes: Regression Results

Regression analyses were performed on the three dependent variables: (1) the perception that economic disparities are increasing, (2) the belief in the value of individual initiative, and (3) the belief that the respondent's community is a caring one. As the results in Table 2 show, when comparing regression results across countries, socialist values were significantly related in all three countries to adolescents' perceptions that economic disparities were increasing.

In addition, liberal values were negatively related to this outcome in Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, although not significantly in the latter. Surprisingly, liberal values were positively related to Hungarian youths' perceptions of increasing economic disparities. Although girls across countries were sensitive to economic disparities, this relationship was significant only in Hungary. The coefficients for age were in the expected direction but were not significant. As expected, higher levels of parent education were related to lower endorsements of growing disparities, but this relationship only reached significance in the Czech Republic.

For adolescents' belief in the value of individual initiative, older youth in all countries were significantly less convinced when compared to their younger peers. In addition, girls tended to believe this less than boys, although the difference was significant only in Bulgaria. Only in Bulgaria were parents' education and job loss significantly related to this belief. Youth from better educated backgrounds were less likely to endorse this belief, and those whose parents had lost a job were less likely as well. Liberal values were consistently and significantly related to this belief across all three countries. However, socialist values were negatively related to [TABULAR DATA FOR TABLE 2 OMITTED] this belief in the Czech Republic and Hungary but significantly only in the latter. There was a positive beta coefficient, although nonsignificant, in Bulgaria.

As expected, age was inversely related to adolescents' perceptions of the local community as a caring place. This was

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true across all three countries. Girls in Bulgaria and Hungary were less likely than their male peers to perceive their communities as caring places. Across all three countries, adolescents from better educated families were more cynical about their communities, and in the Czech Republic only was a bout of unemployment in the family associated with negative perceptions of the community. In Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, liberal values were negatively related to perceptions of the community as a caring place, but socialist values were unrelated to perceptions about the community in any country. Unfortunately, despite the significant beta coefficients, this set of independent variables predicted little of the variance in the dependent measures.

Overall, young people were not inclined to see their community as a caring and cohesive place. To develop an investment in their communities, young people need to feel an attachment and a sense of meaning in those communities. The mean scores on this variable were quite low in each country. If a sense of social cohesion is the integument of a civil society, this result paints a rather pessimistic picture from the youths' point of view.

### Discussion

The social and economic transformations occurring in Eastern/Central Europe are a source of pride and hope for many of the citizens of these societies. However, they are not the unfailingly positive experience that many Western commentators might suggest. Market transformation exacts a price. Many respondents did not assess the social changes occurring in their counties positively. Czech youth were the most positive in their assessment of costs of change, and Bulgarian youth were the most negative (perhaps reflecting economic reality). This research points to identifiable factors related to youths' perceptions of these costs.

For example, across countries, girls were more sensitive than boys to increased economic disparity, perhaps because of the gendered implications of the market reforms or a more general orientation of females to human needs. But values were even more important than gender in predicting adolescents' perceptions of increasing economic disparities. In all three countries, youth who endorsed a strong social welfare role for the state were more likely to feel that disparities were increasing. This is one of the few cases where the same predictor had a significant effect in each of the countries. Liberal views were related to young people's beliefs in the efficacy of individual initiative and hard work. Youth who considered poverty part of the natural order were more likely to believe in the logic of a market system, that is, that hard work and initiative would pay off with rewards and that both the losers and winners in an economic system received their just desserts. Generally, socialist and liberal values were related to economic rather than social cohesion perceptions. Perhaps because of the apparent success of market reforms in the Czech Republic at the time, youth in that country perceived the lowest levels of economic disparity.

One of the major goals of market reform is to hold individuals responsible for the results of their economic decisions, reward them if the decision is correct, and punish them if the decision is wrong. Increasing economic disparity is a natural result of such a process. However, if disparities grow too quickly or get too large, then resentment and backlash may result. For this reason, adolescents' perceptions of their communities as cohesive and caring places is particularly important in assessing the health of these fledgling democracies. The results of this study do not sound an optimistic note. First of all, the means for this outcome were quite low across countries (below the median). And although neither socialist nor liberal values were related to youths' perceptions of the cohesiveness of their communities, the background variables showed consistent relationships to this criterion variable across countries. In all three countries youth from better educated families felt that their communities were less caring and cohesive places. In two of the three countries, older youth and women felt the same way.

Young people in both Bulgaria and the Czech Republic appear to have adopted one of the basic premises of a capitalist society; They feel that individual initiative will be rewarded. Young people in Hungary do not. Perhaps the longer experience with a market economy has made Hungarian youth more cynical about the real value of initiative under capitalism. This cynicism is also reflected among older youth. Across all countries as youth got older they were less likely to believe in the value of initiative. Liberal values are the only other predictor that had a significant impact in each of the three countries. As expected, young people with liberal values feel that initiative will be rewarded.

As we have mentioned, the assessment of individual perspective within the context of social change is of key importance in adolescence, since this assessment creates room for the possible adult self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) to explore and

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make commitments (Marcia, 1980). In this respect there are marked differences among the countries: Hungarians are pessimistic in their assessment of their own future possibilities, Bulgarians are optimistic despite economic hardship, and Czechs are the most optimistic of all.

Overall, this analysis paints an unclear picture of adolescents' attitudes toward market changes. Generally, the young people who can expect to bear the burden of these changes, women especially, appear to be less optimistic in their outlook. However, none of the models predict young people's perceptions very well, so all of the results need to be viewed with caution. One issue that should be of concern is the perception by young people that their communities are not caring places. Although this might be the natural response of adolescents to a time of change and turmoil, if it represents a significant change in these societies, then it bodes ill for future social stability and the future of civil society in these three countries.

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