

PERCEIVED SOCIAL JUSTICE AND LEGITIMACY OF STRATIFICATION ORDER IN POST-SOCIALIST ESTONIA

Marii Paškov

University of Groningen

M.Paskov@student.rug.nl

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Abstract. The transition of post-socialist countries into democratic and liberal societies has brought about both, privileges and burdens. Estonia together with a fast modernization process and excellent performance on an international level (membership of NATO and European Union in 2004) is often characterized as a country that has gone through a ‚successful transition‘. On the other hand, empirical studies have shown overwhelming dissatisfaction among the public with the outcomes of reforms concerning social justice, employment opportunities, and the general living standard. The latter poses threat to a stable development of democracy and causes a so-called ‚deficit of legitimacy‘. Current paper evaluated the perceived social justice and legitimacy of the stratification system in Estonian society. The data is from the International Social Justice Project of 1991 and 1996, and from the Estonian Social Justice Survey carried out in 2004. The results indicate that people have negative attitudes about the way distributive justice works in the society throughout the whole transition period. Thus people think there are no equal opportunity, no fair reward for input and peoples' basic needs are not satisfied. However, from 1991 to 2005 there is a positive trend – people perceive more social justice. It appears that the legitimacy of stratification order is to a large extent predicted by individual characteristics. Groups of people that support capitalistic principles and hold higher positions in the society are the ones more likely to have more positive perceptions about social justice. The opposite holds for people from lower social positions who oppose capitalistic viewpoints. Interestingly, the cleavage between different groups with regard to perceived social justice has changed over the years. This indicates that the variability of life-chances that is brought about by the transition period (due to the growth of income inequality for instance) has somewhat changed the disparity in the perceptions of social justice among different social groups.

Keywords: distributive justice, legitimacy, social transition.

INTRODUCTION

The transition of post-socialist countries into democratic and liberal societies can be seen as one of the quickest and most fundamental transformations in world history that has created an interesting ‘natural experiment’ for sociologists to study. Estonia, together with a fast modernization process and excellent performance on an international level (becoming a member of NATO and European Union in 2004), is often characterized as a country that has gone through a ‘successful transition’. The transition, however, has said to be full of inner contradictions. In the background of democratization, good economic developments and success on an international level, the poor social conditions in Estonian society have not gained much attention (Trumm, 2005). Empirical studies have shown overwhelming dissatisfaction among the public with the outcomes of reforms concerning social justice, employment opportunities, and the general standard of living (Lauristin, 2003). Perceived social injustice, however, poses a threat to a successful development of democracy and may cause a so-called ‘deficit of legitimacy’.

In general, *legitimacy of a stratification order* means that people believe material goods and positions in social hierarchy are distributed fairly according to the rules of social justice. Lack of legitimacy means that people are not satisfied with the way the distribution system is arranged. The question of legitimacy in general is crucial in post-communist countries where the newly introduced and still fragile democracy and capitalism need the public’s support in order to survive. This means that in order to implement the reforms and to advance capitalism it is important that the public would support the new policy in general, including the new stratification order. This paper will concentrate on the latter – that is the legitimacy of the stratification order in Estonian society during the transition period. Transition, most generally, refers to changes which occur on all levels of society and as a result create a new type of society (Lauristin, 1997).

The process of social transition is very often discussed from an objective point of view, looking at the economic indicators and political developments. The subjective perspective, including the question of what the members of the society think about the new societal organization, has received less attention. Subjective perceptions are interesting because they mirror how people have experienced the transition period and whether they consider the new stratification order legitimate. Concerning distributive justice, it will be studied whether people believe that everybody’s’ basic *needs* are satisfied in Estonian society, whether there are *equal* opportunities to get ahead in life and does the society work according to the principle of *equity*, thus whether people get rewarded for their ability and effort. Evaluations about legitimacy are

important to study in order to get insight about the level of satisfaction people feel with regard to the way the stratification order is organized. Perceptions add an important value to the objective measurements of social justice which fail to express how people experience the new system. Furthermore, perceptions about social justice can be viewed as an alternative way to evaluate the process of transition from a socialist into a market-oriented society – that is from the subjective perspective.

Initially, adoption of market ideology and application of neoliberal principles of distribution were seen, both by the policy makers and by the public, as a key to building up a democratic society and achieving economic success and prosperity. Despite noble intentions, the beginning of the transition period brought about shocking results for some of the social groups in the form of economic and social difficulties (e.g. unemployment, downward social mobility, poverty). Over time, certain social groups developed alienated and negative attitudes towards everything concerning Estonian society (Kalmus et al., 2004). For other social groups, however, the transition brought about great advantages and increased life-success. This has lead social scientists into a discussion about the ‘winners’ and the ‘losers’ of the transformation period (Lauristin, 2003). Besides looking at the general trends in the evaluations about existential social justice, in the current paper the effects of different individual characteristics will be studied. Moreover, the change in the effect of individual characteristics over time is looked at. Individual characteristics are analyzed in order to see whether the variability of life-chances that was brought about by the transition period (i.e., growth of income inequality) has created more disparity in the perceptions of social justice among different social groups. The latter could help finding out whether certain social groups emerged during the transition period who feel left-out, socially excluded and who show no trust towards the social order in the newly established Estonian society.

To summarize, two central aims of the paper are to study the: (1) evaluations of the distributive system during the transition period and (2) effect of different individual characteristics on social justice evaluations and to see whether these effects have changed over time. Answers to these questions are used to evaluate the success of the transition period and to see whether there exists a stratification order that is legitimized by the wider population.

Data for the paper is derived from two different projects. The data for 1991 and 1996 is from the International Social Justice Project (Kluegel & Mason, 1989-1996) and the data for 2005 is from the project “Social Justice in Estonian society: changing perceptions of new

generations”. First, the paper will begin by introducing the concepts of legitimacy and ‘market justice’. Next, individual and collective level determinants of perceptions about legitimacy are discussed and a theoretical model of the paper will be presented. Subsequently, the context in Estonian society is described in more detail. This section will give an overview of the events that occurred during the transition period in order to derive hypotheses about legitimacy evaluations. Further, the data, variables and methodology of the study are described. The empirical part of the paper will first bring out the general tendencies in the perceived inequality from 1991 to 2005. A logistic regression analysis will be used to determine which characteristics are most important in determining the perceptions about the existing social justice and how the effects of these characteristics have changed over the years. The paper will end with a conclusion and discussion.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Principles of distributive justice

Social justice is a broad and ambiguous notion which constitutes both a philosophical problem and a political issue. John Rawls (1971), one of the most famous philosophers of our time, has restricted the term by defining it as policy of distributing goods in a society. Goods, according to Rawls, are not only the material resources but also various rights, obligations and advantages. Thus, in the current paper, social justice is defined as a notion of distributing goods in a society. Various theories of social justice have emerged during the 20th century trying to answer the question of how a fair society would look like. There are three principles that are most commonly defined as the principles of social justice and that are often identified as central in the concept of distributive justice: equity, equality and need (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2003). The following section will discuss some of the contemporary literature to bring more insight into the three principles of social justice.

First, there is the principle of *equity*. Rawls (Rawls, 2002) argued that inequalities are justified because different positions have to offer different rewards in order to motivate the people with best talents, skills and knowledge to contribute to the maximum of the position they hold. This is the principle of contribution and proportionality – those who contribute more are entitled to receive higher rewards (Ritzman & Tomaskovic-Devey, 1992). However, it is important to keep in mind that inequalities in rewards are justified only when the competition for

positions is fair and open to everyone (Rawls, 2002). The latter can be referred to as the *equality of opportunity*. These principles combine the understanding that people should compete on an equal basis with no preference for special groups and the most desirable positions should be occupied by the most talented people, thus positions should be closely connected to one's ability (Weakliem et al., 1995).

The third principle is the principle of *need*. According to Rawls there is a pre-condition to social justice –satisfaction of basic human needs (Guttman, 1980). Thus, minimal level of primary-good distribution must be achieved before the principles of equal-liberty, opportunity and equity can be recognized as prior concerns. Thus every society should provide a social minimum and everyone should be able to afford necessities of life (Ritzman & Tomaskovic-Devey, 1992).

To summarize, there are three main principles of distributive justice. First, there is the principle of *equity* which can be interpreted as an achievement based on the combination of ability and effort. Second, there is the principle of *equality*. Equality does not necessarily mean that people need to be equal; in the current paper it is interpreted as a principle of equal opportunity. Third, there is the principle of *need satisfaction*, according to which every individual deserves to have an autonomous, decent and satisfactory life. In general, the need principle aims at securing the minimal resources that are sufficient for living according to socially accepted standards (Lewin-Epstein et al., 2003). These variables correspond to the basic criteria of the fairness of the distributive system – whether it rewards merit (effort and ability), whether it provides equality of opportunity, and whether it provides for the basic welfare (Spethenson, 2000).

These three principles are used in this paper as an index of distributive justice. This index is used to find out whether people believe that these principles of social justice hold in Estonian society.

Legitimacy of the distribution order

The authors of the International Social Justice Project (Kluegel et al., 1999) have written: “*For the development of post-communist economies, planners need to promote an economic order that the post-communist public believes provides opportunity and equity. Political legitimacy will need to be developed and secured by the new governments and such legitimacy must be based not just on democratic political institutions and capitalist economic growth but also on a popular*

sense that the political system and the economic order are fair". Legitimacy is an inter-related set of norms and beliefs that indicate peoples' support towards current state of affairs and the belief that the system is serving the needs of the population (Kluegel & Mason, 2000). According to Della Fave (1986) legitimacy refers to a normative approval of the stratification system.

In the current paper the index of distributive justice is used to give estimation about the legitimacy of the distribution system in Estonian society. In every democratic society there is an implicit 'social contract' which includes the general principles of justice (Stephenson, 2000). For the system to work successfully people need to believe that the principles stated in the 'social contract' are fulfilled. Legitimacy, most generally, exists when peoples' beliefs of how the society should work are in accordance to what actually exists on a societal level. Therefore, in order to say something about legitimacy of distribution order it is necessary to know what do people value. When analyzing peoples' justice beliefs during the transition period in Estonian society (Paškov, 2006), it was found that people are most inclined to support principles of social justice that are similar to the ideology of liberal equality. That is, people believe it is highly important to reward the members of the society according to their contribution, whereas at the same time the condition of equal opportunity needs to be fulfilled. On the other hand, people also value provision of support for the less advantaged by taking care of their basic needs and guaranteeing jobs. This indicates that people tend to value the same ideas that were presented before as the basic principles of distributive justice – equity, equality of opportunity and need satisfaction. Support for such ideas is not very surprising since the principles under attention are rather broad and partly constitute general human rights. These ideas are also a priority of most democratic societies. For instance, the principle of need satisfaction can be found in Constitution of Estonian Republic which states that Estonian citizens are entitled to state assistance in the case of old age, inability to work, loss of provider, and need (Estonian Constitution, 1992).

Furthermore, Kluegel and Mason (2004) have used the same principles of distributive justice in the International Social Justice Project when constructing a legitimacy index. The authors use the principles to indicate economic system justice, concerning equal opportunity to get ahead, the provision for need, reward for intelligence and skill, and reward for effort. The latter, however, is assumed to concern perceptions that the economic order is functioning fairly for people in general, and so may be termed as measure of overall legitimacy of the distribution system (Kluegel & Mason, 2004). The same authors continue by saying: *"For the new democracies of Eastern Europe to succeed, their governments must be perceived as being legitimate, and political legitimacy depends on popular attitudes and perceptions: that the*

political system is open and fair, that the economy will grow and provide opportunities to everyone, and that the government will regulate the transition and provide for those left behind.” Therefore, perceived social justice and legitimacy of the distribution system are crucial for the capitalist economies to be considered legitimate. On the other hand, for the society to be considered legitimate people need to believe that the basic principles of social justice are fulfilled.

Determinants of perceived distributive justice

A perception is a type of cognition that is considered to be more objective compared to ideals and attitudes since it refers to the individual's comprehension of an issue (Aalberg, 2003). Perceptions are expected to contain an element of information which makes them similar to factual knowledge. Perceptions describe how the public observes reality. Ideally, perception should not be different from the objective world since it is a response to what a person sees or feels with regard to the social reality. On the other hand, perceptions reflect what people subjectively think of an issue and thus a variation in perception is likely to occur because people can see and experience the exact same thing in many different ways. These differences, however, are likely to be systematic and caused by specific factors (Aalberg, 2003). Broadly viewed, collective and individual level determinants of perceptions can be differentiated (Kluegel et al., 1999).

Collective determinants

On a collective level perceptions can be determined by the history of the country, geographic position, political system, economic conditions and so forth (Hadler, 2005). Perceptions and legitimacy of the distribution system in post-communist countries is most likely to be determined by the overall economic conditions. Legitimacy of the stratification order and acceptance of income inequality are expected to be greater during periods of increasing economic prosperity and lower during the times of economic decline (Kluegel et al., 1999). Such macro-level influences are creating evaluations which are not dependent on individual's experience but on peoples' perceptions of how well the economy and the country as a whole is doing. These are known as the 'sociotropic' evaluations.

Individual determinants

At the same time, welfare state policies tend to bring benefits and costs to different groups defined by their socioeconomic and demographic statuses (Kluegel & Miyano, 1995). Thus, on the micro level peoples' perceptions are affected by individual characteristics and perceptions are relative to the location an observer occupies within a social hierarchy (Aalberg, 2003). The latter is most commonly explained by the *self-interest theory* according to which people evaluate positively those aspects from which they gain personally and disapprove those aspects that do not appear advantageous for them (Andreß & Heien, 2001). Moreover, it suggests that people in lower socio-economic positions generally hold more negative views about the society and are more critical towards the distribution system – they tend to hold egalitarian views and consider the inequalities in a society too large (Gijsberts, 2002). On the other hand, people with higher social status tend to legitimate higher inequalities. Contrary to the dominant ideology hypothesis which suggests little or no differences in the beliefs between people from different hierarchies, self-interest theory assumes there are relatively large differences among different groups.

First, there are the general *socio-demographic* factors such as age, education and gender that determine the structural (objective) location of a person in a social hierarchy. Matějů (1996) has argued that subjective factors of social stratification are even more important than objective factors in determining peoples' attitudes in post-communist countries. Such subjective factors are peoples' evaluations regarding their current living standards, feeling of income deprivation, expectations about the future and perceived status (Kluegel et al., 1999). According to Wegener (in Aalberg, 2003) the perceived status influences the perceived legitimacy of social inequality. The ones more optimistic about their own situation are more likely to perceive social justice and consider the system legitimate compared to the ones less optimistic. Thus, it can be expected that *“the higher the perceived rank in the status hierarchy, the greater the perceived legitimacy of the stratification order”* (Kluegel & Miyano, 1995).

Furthermore, perceptions can also be determined by the *justice beliefs* (values, ideals and attitudes) people hold (Kluegel & Mason, 2004). Not everybody in the society has a similar understanding of how the distributive system should be arranged. For instance, those who lean more towards egalitarianism tend to perceive more injustice than individuals with individualistic and market-oriented preferences. Justice beliefs have found much attention in the recent literature on attitudes, perceptions and support for capitalism and welfare states (Arts & Gijsberts, 1998; Lewin-Epstein et al., 2003; Kluegel & Mason, 2004; Saar, 2008). These different authors have

found that justice beliefs are crucial in determining peoples' political and economic satisfaction, support for the existing distribution system and so forth. Some authors have even claimed that "*perceptions of justice determine perceptions of fact rather than vice-versa*" (Headey, 1991). Thus, how the society is perceived is determined by what one believes. These arguments provide motivation to control for the ideological beliefs of people when studying the popular political attitudes and economic legitimacy (Kluegel & Mason, 2004).

The social context in Estonia

Estonia, together with other Eastern and Central European countries, has experienced a turbulent recent history. Important political and economic changes begun in the beginning of 1990's together with the collapse of the Soviet Union. After being a member of the Soviet Union for half of a century, Estonia started a rapid implementation of liberal socio-economic reforms (Trumm, 2005). Within a few years the official Marxist system of egalitarianism was abolished and neoliberal market justice was adopted as a general ideology. The political rhetoric emphasized that the system of equality will be substituted with the invisible hand of the market, which would reward the deserving (Stephenson, 2000). Capitalist efficiency was expected to produce enough wealth to ensure that everybody would live a better life than under socialism. Most public opinion research throughout post-communist Europe has found reasonably strong support for democratic principles, procedures, ideals and for the development of a market-based economy. According to Lauristin (in Kalmus et al., 2004) about 80% of people in Estonian society have a positive attitude towards the general changes that have occurred in the country as a whole. These are developments concerning democracy, economic progress, technological innovation, the position of Estonia on the international level.

The transition, however, has been full of inner contradictions. Together with the new opportunities new risks also emerged (Helemäe et al., 2000). Less enthusiasm has been reported for the way things have actually progressed social spheres. In the beginning of the transition there was a tremendous decrease of general well-being (Trumm, 2005). In sharp contrast with the positive evaluations on an international level, there was overwhelming dissatisfaction with the outcomes of reforms concerning social justice, employment opportunities, and living standard (Lauristin, 2003). Negative attitudes and criticism were widespread towards specific social issues such as social justice, lawfulness and chances of getting a good education and a good job (ibid.).

The aims, tasks and regulations of the new social reforms were often not clear (Trumm, 2005). Transformation did not work out as rapidly and as neatly as people had originally anticipated (Arts et al., 1998). It has been said that the shift from state-socialism into a market-oriented society brought about a fairly 'unfair' game that led to injustice, economic inequalities, and social tensions, creating more 'losers' than 'winners' (Kluegel et al., 1999). Ultimately the new rules of the game provided freedom at the cost of a more-bound and less stable life (Stephenson, 2000). As a result of these changes, large groups of people who had felt economically secure in Soviet society (such as agricultural and industrial workers, teachers and pensioners) suddenly lost incomes and found themselves in poverty (Lauristin, 2003). Poverty, a lack of resources to satisfy basic needs, was a characteristic of a major part of the population in the beginning of the transition period. Those who did not immediately fall into poverty were aware of the serious danger that it could happen to anyone. It was a time of uncertainty.

Furthermore, Estonia faced rapid changes in social stratification and increase of inequality (Helemäe, Saar, Vöörmann). The Gini coefficient¹ grew from 27.7 in 1989 into 39.6 in 1995. This increase is four times faster compared to developed countries like United States and Great Britain. By 2004 the Gini coefficient had decreased to 35.8 remaining still a lot larger compared to 1989 (Corina et al., 2003). Until now Estonia has one of the most unequal income distributions among the countries of European Union (Trumm, 2005). In addition, the feeling of unfairness was also fostered by a high level of perceived corruption and incredibility of the privatization process which created distrust of wealth, belief that distribution is unfair and that opportunities are not equal for everybody (Lauristin, 2003).

In total, the transition period has been truly controversial. People are satisfied with general changes but not with the situation in the social sphere. This can be labeled 'a paradox of unhappy transition' which means that even if people are materially dissatisfied and feel that they were better off before the economic reforms, they do not want to return to the Communist past and thus support the changes on the system-level (Lauristin & Vihalemm, 1998).

The period of radical reforms and uncertainty somewhat stabilized in the mid 1990's (Trumm, 2008). Despite all the difficulties Estonia has followed a relatively stable transformation process into a Western-type society (compared to unstable transformation countries such as Russia and Bulgaria for example) (Verewiebe & Wegener, 2000; Eamets, 1999). The general

¹ **The Gini coefficient** is a measure of inequality of income distribution or inequality of wealth distribution. It is defined as a ratio of values between 0 and 1 (in percentages the ratio is between 0 and 100). A low Gini coefficient indicates a more equal distribution of wealth, while a high Gini coefficient indicates more unequal distribution.

decline in poverty can be explained by the overall growth trend of the economy. This has led to the growth of incomes and achievements in the field of social protection (Trumm, 2005). The labor market stabilized in 1996-1998 when the decline of economic activity and unemployment slowed down (Vetik, 2002). According to an Estonian National Report on Sustainable Development (2002) in the second part of 1990's people developed a better understanding of the requirements of the new society and adopted new individual coping strategies. The latter is reflected, for instance, by the expansion of private businesses and increased demand for education and training. Lately, from 2000 to 2002 the living standard has improved remarkably (Lauristin, 2003). According to a survey data from December 2002 of the Department of Journalism and Communications at Tartu University, there is a clear decrease in the share of people who cannot afford to realize their needs, especially basic needs (such as clothes, medicine, and food) (Vetik, 2002).

In addition to the actual improvement of the economic situation it can also be expected that people adjusted more to the market-oriented ideology. According to Fave (1986) *'perceptions of what is are often transformed into notions of what ought to be'*. Thus, the more income inequality people perceive the more inequality they accept and think is legitimate (Gijsberts, 2002). This indicates that the increase in the actual level of inequality in Estonian society may have influenced people to tolerate more inequality. Moreover, as the transition proceeded people had time to internalize the neoliberal values of a capitalist democracy and adapt to the new norms of the society. Media has played an important part in creating such 'new norms' of the society (Kalmus et al., 2004). For instance, people who developed high consumption patterns and adapted well to the new capitalist society were presented as the „winners“. People with negative attitudes towards the changes, however, were often marginalized and presented as alien.

To sum up, this paper will analyze the attitudes towards the distribution system and legitimacy during the transition period in Estonian society. The period is divided into three time points which are interesting and important to study for several reasons. First of all, the beginning of the transition period (1991) is the time when the Soviet Union collapsed and Estonia regained its independence. In social terms this period turned out to be much more painful than people had initially anticipated. Next, year 1996 is studied because it can be considered a peak point in the process of social transition. Contrary to the high expectations about the general welfare people experienced economic hardships. Estonian economy recovered from economic recession in 1995, then for the first time the GDP² showed a positive trend (Eamets et al., 1999). The positive trend

² Gross Domestic Product – a measure of national economic income and output.

has continued since, the growth rate of GDP by 1997 was 11.4%. People's wages started to grow, inflation and unemployment stabilized. Over time capitalism has advanced in Estonian society bringing about a higher standard of living. Finally, year 2005 is studied to give an understanding of the current situation. *On sociotropic grounds it is expected that the distributive order will not be considered fair throughout the whole transition period. However, as the transition period proceeds it is expected that the legitimacy of the distributive will increase (Hypothesis 1).*

Distribution system is evaluated from three aspects based on the principles of distributive justice – equity, equality of opportunity and need satisfaction. However, it can be expected that not all principles get equal reactions from the public. The beginning of the transition period is known for extremely difficult financial situation. In 1993 on average 46 per cent of all individual expenditures were spent on food and one third of the population reported frequent problems with buying essential food products and medicines (Trumm, 2005). During the times when the basic needs are lacking people tend to set other aspirations to the background. *It is anticipated that the principle of need satisfaction is viewed more negatively in 1991 compared to the principles of equality of opportunity and equity, whereas in 1996 and 2005 no such differences occur (Hypothesis 2).*

A characteristic feature of 'transitional poverty' is its structural nature (Trumm, 2005). That means that poverty is increasingly a characteristic of certain social classes. Thus, in addition to the changes on the collective level individuals were likely to experience the transition period differently. In the times of social changes peoples' evaluations tend to depend on the subjective resources (Kalmus et al., 2004). It is important to look at the subjective resources in terms of the new social conditions. There were certain resources that contributed to coping with the new system and others had the opposite effect – they became restricting factors of achieving success. Certain social groups – the unemployed, pensioners, workers in big industries and agricultural areas, the 'old intelligentsia' – were confronted with high social risks (Laurisin & Vihalemm, 1998). Others at the same time, the educational elite for example, become the "winners" of the transition.

According to the self-interest perspective people who have the poorest experiences with the social transitions should also exhibit the least support for the changes that have occurred (Hadler, 2005). Negative personal experiences should also decrease the legitimacy of the distribution system and increase the perceptions with regard to the level of unfairness. Therefore, perceptions of social reality are expected to vary among different socio-economic groups.

To begin with, the socio-demographic factors are discussed. During the transformation the gap between men and women increased in favor of men. Women became the ones more likely to experience downward spiral (Matějů & Rehakova, 1996). In market-oriented societies women are in general facing higher risks. With regard to education the relative earning of workers with university education rose dramatically during the transition, while relative wages for the least educated groups fell (Eamets et al., 1999). Thus, in contrast to the Soviet era the one's highly educated became more likely to achieve success in the new social environment.

Age has also been an important factor in determining the life-success during transition period. In Western European countries young people are known to hold less secure occupational positions as compared to the older ones (Kreidl, 2000). In the post-communist countries, however, the opposite holds. Older people found it much more difficult to adapt to the new system, to find jobs, retrain, learn foreign languages etc. The latter reduced significantly their chances for the upward mobility. Instead, the younger people were the ones who experienced the upward mobility. Furthermore, a shift of relative demand towards younger workers occurred (Eamets et al., 1999). Promising future prospects and improved social status is expected to lead young people to see the society less unfair whereas the older people being in a disadvantaged situation are expected to perceive less social justice (Kreidl, 2000). In addition to the self-interest perspective it can also be expected that the older people who were socialized in a Soviet society might be more critical towards the new system and increasing inequality compared to the young people. *It is expected that the structural position (as measured by gender, education and age) will affect the perceptions about the distribution order. Thus, men, the higher educated and young people are expected to hold more positive perceptions about distributive justice (Hypothesis 3).*

Besides objective characteristics people's subjective positioning in a society is also taken into account. Previous studies have shown that the higher peoples' subjective evaluations on their standard of living the more satisfied people are with the overall changes in the society (Kalmus et al., 2004). Thus, it can be assumed that people, who subjectively put themselves in higher position in a society, also perceive the society to be less unfair. The opposite can be expected for people who see themselves in the bottom of the social hierarchy. Subjective satisfaction is assumed to be especially important for post-communist societies because personal experiences with the system and satisfaction are likely to form the overall support for capitalism. It can be expected that people who remained on less advantageous positions during the transition were likely to blame the new system, that is capitalism, for their misfortune. On the other hand, people

who happened to achieve a better position during the times of transition are more likely to consider the system legitimate. *It is anticipated that the subjective position (as measured by perceived status position, satisfaction with one's living standard and level of income deprivation) will affect the perceptions about the distributive system. Thus, the higher the perceived rank in the social hierarchy, the more satisfied with one's living standard and the less deprived one feels the more positive are the attitudes towards the stratification order (Hypothesis 4).*

Furthermore, it is assumed that people in Estonian society developed different attitudes towards the political system during the times of the changes. If people are satisfied with the political system, with the reforms and if the ideological principles are in accordance with what is practiced on a political level, then people are expected to perceive more fairness. *It is expected that the political attitudes (as measured by political orientation and justice beliefs) influence the perceived fairness of the distribution system. Thus, right-wing people are more likely to perceive the distributive order as legitimate compared to left-wing people. Furthermore, the greater the support for capitalist principles and the greater the opposition to government intervention and egalitarian principles, the stronger the perceived legitimacy (Hypothesis 5).*

Finally, it has to be said that the initial costs of the economic and political reforms were very high and the negative effects of transition reached almost everyone (Trumm, 2005). That means that poverty was collectively shared and almost everyone experienced confusion and a high level of uncertainty about the future. People did not know what to expect from the reforms and it was not yet clear what the new system would bring about and who the 'winners' and 'losers' are going to be (Gijsberts, 1999). However, as the time went on people were facing different experiences. Consequently 'winners' and the 'losers' of the transition developed (Trumm, 2005). Due to increased disparity among different social groups it is assumed that people with different life-experiences developed different perceptions about the existence of social justice. *It is anticipated that the group differences with regard to the distributive justice evaluations increased during the transition period (Hypothesis 6).*

DATA, VARIABLES AND METHODS

Data

The data is derived from the International Social Justice Project (ISJP) conducted in 1991 and 1996 and from Estonian Social Justice Survey conducted in 2004 and carried out by Institute of

International and Social Studies. Although two projects are called differently they contain to a large extent the same questions. All the questions used in the current paper were identical at all time periods which means that there is no bias due to differently posed questions. In total the dataset includes 3000 respondents and they representative for the entire working-age population of Estonia.

Variables

Dependent variable

In order to measure attitudes towards distributive justice an index is constructed containing several variables. People were asked in the survey to what extent they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- 1) People in Estonian society have an equal opportunity to get ahead in life;
- 2) People's knowledge and skill gets fairly rewarded in Estonian society;
- 3) Peoples effort gets fairly rewarded in Estonian society;
- 4) People's basic needs are satisfied in Estonian society.

These questions are in accordance with the theoretical background of the study, each of these questions represents a certain principle of social justice introduced in the theoretical part of the current paper. The first question is used as a measurement of equal opportunity. Second and third questions are measuring the principle of equity (whether people's input receives fair rewards). The last question is used to measure whether the principle of need is satisfied in Estonian society, thus whether the least advantaged people are taken care of.

All questions were measured on a Likert scale with possible answers 1 "Strongly disagree", 2 "Disagree", 3 "Neither agree nor disagree", 4 "Agree", 5 "Strongly agree" and 98 "Don't know". It appears that the answers to the questions are consistent – the reliability coefficient, Cronbach's alpha, for the four variables is 0.76 which indicates that the scale is reliable.

Independent variables

Year. Attitudes towards the principles of distributive justice are measured for three time points, 1991, 1996 and 2005.

Socio-demographic factors. *Gender* is defined as male and female. *Education* is categorized as 'primary', 'vocational', 'secondary' and 'higher'. *Age group* is categorized into four groups according to an age of the respondent at the moment of the study: until 25, 26-39, 40-59, over 60.

Egocentric evaluations. First, the measure of *subjective position in social hierarchy* is used. In the original interview people were asked to imagine a scale of social hierarchy in Estonian society ranging from 1 to 10, where the highest scores are for people with high social position and the lowest scores reflect low social position. People were asked to indicate where (on what position) would they place themselves on this scale. Ten-point scale is recoded into three social strata: „Low” (combining scores 1, 2 and 3), „Middle” (combining scores 4, 5 and 6) and „High” (combining scores 7, 8, 9 and 10). Response „Don't know” was transformed into missing value. Second, the *satisfaction with the standard of living* is measured. People were asked “How satisfied are you with your standard of living?” and the answers were recoded into three categories: “Not satisfied”, “Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied”, “Satisfied”. Next, *income deprivation* index is used which measures the relative feeling of deprivation with regard to income. People were asked: “Would you say your total (household) income is much less than you need, somewhat less than you need, about what you need, somewhat more than you need, or much more than you need?” The variable is recoded into: “Much less than needed”, “Somewhat less than needed”, “About what is needed, more than needed”.

Justice beliefs. With regard to the *political orientation* people were asked to determine their political attitudes on a scale from 1 to 10 where the lowest scores indicate left-wing attitudes and highest scores indicate right-wing attitudes. The scale was reduced into three subcategories: „Left” (combining scores 1, 2, 3, and 4), „Middle” (central scores 5 and 6) and „Right” (scores 7, 8, 9, and 10). Response „Don't know” was transformed into missing value. *Capitalistic values* are measured with an index of support for neoliberal capitalism. It includes the value of profit-making for the long-run benefit of all (“It is all right if business people make good profits because everyone benefits in the end”) and the need to have inequality to motivate people to take responsibility (“There is an incentive for individual effort only if differences in income are large enough”). A high score indicates support for capitalistic values. For *egalitarian values* there is an index representing commitment to general equality. The measure averages support for absolute equality (measured by “The fairest way of distributing wealth and income would be to give

everyone equal shares”) and support for need (measured by “The most important thing is that people get what they need, even if this means allocating money from those who have earned more than they need”). A high score indicates support for egalitarian values. *Government intervention* measure is constructed from three questions: “The government should guarantee everyone a minimum standard of living”, “The government should place an upper limit on the amount of money any one person can make” and “The government should provide a job for everyone that wants one”. A high score indicates supporting government’s intervention into economy and distribution of resources.

Methods

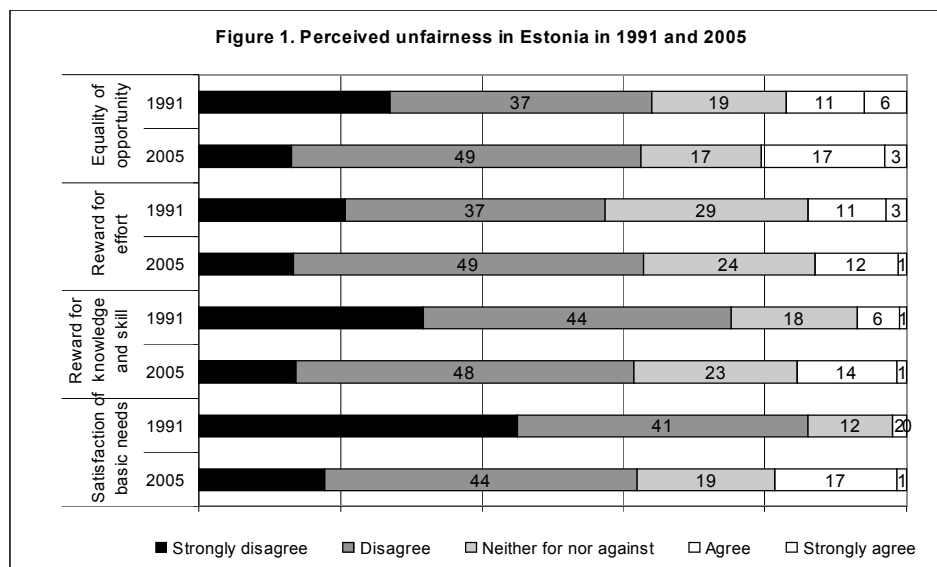
The aim of the current paper is to find out whether and to what extent have people’s perceptions with regard to existential social justice changed from 1991 to 2005. Furthermore, the attitudes of different groups are of interest in order to see whether different social groups have a different perception about the existence of distributive justice in the society. Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) is used to see whether there are mean differences among the years. Furthermore, in order to find how different characteristics influence peoples’ evaluations of distributive justice a linear regression analysis is conducted.

RESULTS

The changes in perceived distributive justice during the period of 1991- 2005

First, descriptive statistics for different principles of distributive justice are examined for the two most distant time points, 1991 and 2005 (Figure 1). It is noteworthy that in 1991 about one third of the population ‘*strongly disagrees*’ when asked whether the basic principles of social justice exist in Estonian society. Putting together the proportions of people who ‘strongly disagree’ and simply ‘disagree’ it appears that in 1991 a vast majority, 83% of all people, claim they tend to believe that basic needs of people are not satisfied in Estonian society. Similarly, 72% of people do not believe that knowledge and skill is being fairly rewarded. By 2005 the proportion of people ‘strongly disagreeing’ with these statements is about two times smaller for all principles of

distributive justice. On the other hand, it has to be noted that the percentage of people simply ‘disagreeing’ (not ‘strongly disagreeing’) in 2005 has increased indicating that radically negative attitudes have become somewhat less negative. It is also noteworthy that in both of the time periods, there are hardly any people in Estonian society ‘strongly agreeing’ with the statements of distributive justice. The proportion of people simply agreeing is ranging from 2% to 11% in 1991 and from 12% to 17% in 2005.



Mean differences for the index of distributive justice (including different justice principles) are presented in Table 1. It can be seen that the mean is gradually increasing from 1991 to 2005. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) confirms that the differences in means are significant³. Confidence intervals are not very wide which gives reason to believe that the sample mean differences do not vary very much from the true mean differences of the population. It is important to note the value of the means which ranges from 2.09 to 2.42. Taking into account the five-point scale it can be said that people generally tend to consider the distribution order not legitimate. Peoples’ evaluations are clearly clustered to the lower end of the scale which mirrors negative attitudes towards existential social justice.

When discussing the change in the mean it is important to consider that statistical significance does not automatically imply that important and meaningful changes have occurred in the practical sense. During the period of 1991 to 2005 the mean has increased 0.33 units.

³ $F(2,2826)=45, p<0.01$

Considering the five-point scale the change does not seem very large. In addition, the evaluations of people still remain very low indicating that instead of being very critical towards the existence of social justice people are somewhat less critical in 2005.

On the other hand, it is necessary to consider that the actual range of distribution is less wide than the scale itself. The scores are clustered in a smaller range meaning that the majority of people tend to give similar answers to the questions. Taking this into account the mean change of 0.33 units gains more practical significance. Furthermore, it is important to realize that the specific types of questions under study are very likely to receive negative reactions. It is rather natural for people to be critical towards the distribution system and thus it can be presumed that such questions always receive rather negative responses. More meaningful would be to compare the means to the Western countries in order to see the relative difference. Kluegel et al. (1999) present the means for the exact same distributive justice index for three Western societies in 1991. The mean of perceived legitimacy in Great Britain was 2.93, in West Germany it was 3.54 and in United States of America it was 3.38. It can be seen that the means in Western states are also not so high, but the means found in Estonian society are clearly much lower. Unfortunately there is no information available for the mean legitimacy for later periods in the Western societies and thus it is not possible to compare the means of later time periods. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that although the legitimacy of the distributive system has increased in Estonian society from the mean of 2.21 in 1996 to 2.42 in 2005, it has still not reached the level found in the Western countries in 1991. The latter gives reason to conclude that despite the increase in legitimacy there is still a low level of perceived social justice in Estonian society throughout the whole transition period. This provides confirmation for Hypothesis 1.

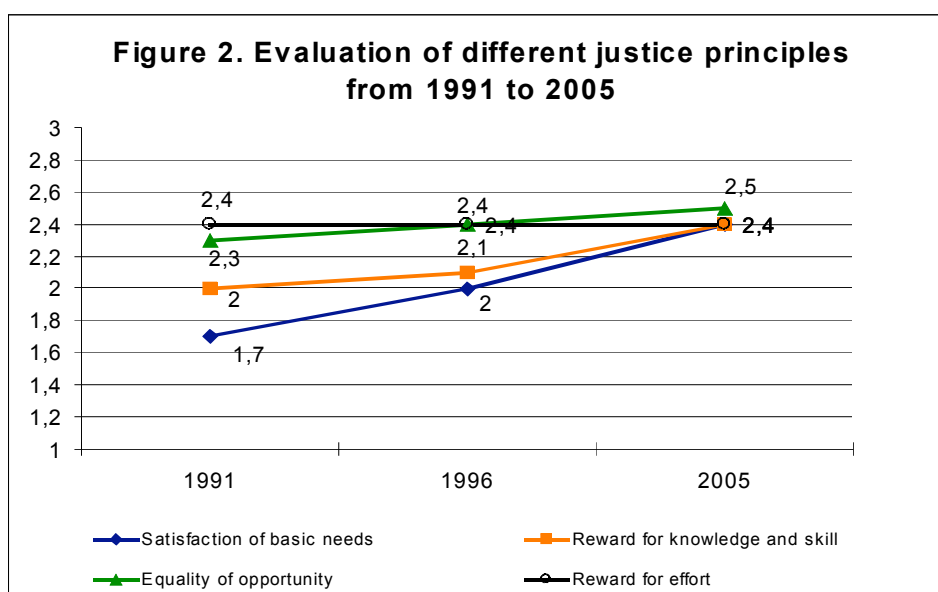
Table 1. Mean values for the legitimacy index at different time points

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower	Upper
1991	897	2.09	0.72	2.04	2.14
1996	978	2.21	0.77	2.16	2.26
2005	954	2.42	0.72	2.37	2.46

Figure 2 illustrates the changes in means for different justice principles that are included in the distributive justice/legitimacy index. The general legitimacy index showed a positive trend in the evaluations. When looking at principles separately it appears that evaluations do not change

equally much. The largest change has occurred with regard to the principle of need⁴. Apparently in 1991 people were most dissatisfied with the satisfaction of basic human needs.

The means for the provision of rewards for peoples' knowledge and skill together with equality of opportunity also show significant increase⁵. The mean for the question whether peoples' effort is fairly rewarded remains the same throughout the whole period under attention⁶. Thus, the change in the level of perceived inequality can be attributed to the fact that as the time went on people got more faith in the satisfaction of basic needs and more faith that the knowledge and skill is being fairly rewarded together with the existence of more equal opportunity. Thus, the first part of the second hypothesis is confirmed – the principle of need was viewed most negatively in 1991. It seems that people had the least faith that basic needs are satisfied in Estonian society. In 1996 the attitudes towards the principles are still somewhat different. The last part of the hypothesis is also true – in 2005 the mean score for all justice principles are at the same level.



Perceived distributive justice among social groups

Table 2 presents the results from a linear regression analysis to explain individual differences in perceived distributive justice and legitimacy. In total four models were estimated. First, the results confirm that the effect of a time period is significant. It appears that as compared to 1991

⁴ $F(2,2968)=146.95, p<0.01$

⁵ $F(2,2916)=53.78, p<0.01$ and $F(2,2953)=6.53, p<0.01$, respectively

⁶ $F(2,2906)=0.03, p>0.05$

people have much more positive opinion with regard to distributive justice in 1996 and ever more so in 2005. Model 2 presents estimations for structural characteristics. The results suggest that men compared to women believe more in the fairness of the distribution system. People with basic, vocational and secondary education differ from people with higher education, the latter are more positive towards the distribution system as compared to the rest. The effect of age is also significant. The younger people are more positive than the older ones. After including the subjective characteristics of socioeconomic position in Model 3 the effect of education disappears completely and the effect of age becomes much smaller, the youngest people only differ from the middle-aged people (the ones aged 40-59). This indicates that the educational differences and also the age differences are explained by subjective characteristics. The subjective characteristics, however, are all highly important. The ones with higher subjective social position are more satisfied with their standard of living and the ones feeling less deprived are also more positive about the distributive justice.

In the last fourth model the political attitudes of people are included. It appears that more distributive justice is perceived by the right-wing people as compared to the left-wing people. Furthermore, capitalist values influence perceptions. People with higher capitalist values have more positive perceptions about distributive justice in Estonian society. Interestingly, egalitarian values and support for government's intervention does not determine peoples evaluations. When political attitudes are added the effect of gender disappears completely and the effect of age group becomes smaller again. The explained variance of the whole model is 23%. This indicates that there are other important variables that may influence whether the society is perceived legitimate or not.

In all the expectation that the higher the rank in the status hierarchy, the greater the perceived legitimacy of the stratification order, was confirmed. Hypothesis 3 and hypothesis 4 are confirmed with some exceptions. that there is no effect of education and no effect of perceived status position.

Table 2. Influence of different characteristics on the evaluation about distributive justice, Linear Regression Analysis

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Year (ref.=1991)				
1996	.08***	.08***	.08***	.09***
2005	.20***	.19***	.14***	.17***
Gender (ref.=Women)				
Male		.04*	.04*	.03
Education (ref.=Higher)				
Basic		-.05*	.03	.02
Vocational		-.10***	-.03	-.03
Secondary		-.09***	-.03	-.03
Age group (ref.= until 25)				
26-39		-.10***	-.04	-.04
40-59		-.15***	-.07**	-.06*
Over 60		-.11***	-.05	-.03
Subjective social position (ref.=Low)				
Middle			.08***	.07***
High			.05*	.03
Satisfaction with standard of living (ref.= Not satisfied)				
Middle			.11***	.098***
Satisfied			.19***	.177***
Income deprivation (ref.= Much less than needed)				
Less than needed			.11***	.10***
About what we need, more			.16***	.15***
Political orientation (ref.=Left)				
Middle				.01
Right				.08**
Capitalist values				.18***
Egalitarian values				.01
Support for governments' intervention				-.02
Adjusted R²	.03	.05	.15	.19

Significance level: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Next, a linear regression analysis was conducted for the three time periods separately in order to find out whether and how the effects of various characteristics differ. First of all, the explained variance at three time points is different. In 1991 the model explained 14 per cent of the variance whereas in 1996 the explained variance was 22 per cent and in 2005 it was 20 per cent.

Furthermore, it appears that the evaluations about distributive justice were gender-dependent only in 1991 and in 1996 and 2005 the effect was not present. Thus in 1991 men perceived more distributive justice as compared to women but later on no differences occurred. Education has not had impact on the perceptions throughout the whole transition period. Age differences, however, emerged by 2005. By that time people over 40 were much more negative than the young people. By 2005 also the effect of subjective social position emerged.

Subjective characteristics seem to be influential throughout the whole transition period. The ones more satisfied with their standard of living and feel less income deprivation appear to be much more likely to evaluate the society as legitimate. Subjective social position is somewhat less important.

Interestingly, political orientation is of importance only in 1996 when left-wing people are much more negative as compared to right-wing and centrist people. In 1996 and 2005 no differences occur. Finally, justice beliefs were expected to play a crucial part in determining how the society is perceived. It appears that the capitalistic values are very important throughout the whole transition period. The more one supports capitalistic values the more positive are the attitudes about distributive social justice. Interestingly, in 1991 the people with more egalitarian values and higher support for the governments' intervention are more positive about the principles of social justice. Later, in 1996 and 2005 egalitarian values do not influence people to think more or less positively about social justice. With regard to the support of government's intervention a large change has occurred. In 1996 it has no influence and by 2005 the ones supporting more government's interventions are also the ones holding more negative attitudes about social justice.

Table 3. Influence of different Characteristics on the evaluations about distributive justice at three time points, Linear Regression Analysis

	1991	1996	2005
Gender (ref.=Women)			
Male	.08*	-.04	.05
Education (ref.=Higher)			
Basic	-.06	.02	.06
Vocational	-.02	-.08	.01
Secondary	-.02	-.07	.01
Age group (ref.=until 25)			
26-39	.04	-.06	-.08
40-59	.04	-.07	-.13**
Over 60	.07	-.04	-.10*
Subjective social position (ref.=Low)			
Middle	.08*	.04	.07
High	-.01	-.01	.11**
Satisfaction with standard of living (ref.= not satisfied)			
Middle	.10**	.12***	.07
Satisfied	.21***	.17***	.14***
Income deprivation (ref.= Much less than needed)			
Less than needed	.08*	.11***	.08*
About what we need, more	.13***	.14***	.16***
Political orientation (ref.=Left)			
Middle	-.01	.03	.00
Right	-.01	.16***	.07
Capitalist values	.18***	.20***	.16***
Egalitarian	.08*	-.02	-.02
Government intervention	.08*	-.04	-.08*
Adjusted R Square	.14	.22	.20

Significance level: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The goal of the current paper was to study the evaluations about principles of distributive justice and legitimacy in Estonia during the transition period. The transition process means that Estonia was making a radical shift from a socialist into a market-oriented society which among other things brought about a new stratification order. The latter means that instead of the Socialist egalitarian ideology the neoliberal principles of distribution were introduced. People had to adjust to the new rules of market justice which includes competition and heightened income inequalities. Legitimacy of a distribution order and perceived social justice are seen as important conditions for a stable and successful development of democracy in all post-communist societies.

In accordance with expectations it appears that legitimacy of the distributive order has increased during the transition period. This indicates that the transition process has been

successful at least to some extent – people believe that there is more equity, equality of opportunity and need satisfaction than in the beginning of the reforms. However, compared to advanced Western democracies the attitudes are more negative and there still appears to be a relatively low level of perceived social justice throughout the whole transition period. The results provide full confirmation for the first hypothesis.

There appears to be an interesting course of actions in Estonian society, while the overall inequality (measured by Gini coefficient) and income inequality have increased the perceived social injustice has decreased. Thus, although the inequalities are larger now compared to the beginning of 1990's people think there is more social justice in the society. There are several ways to interpret such results. First of all, there is a reason to believe that the general negative attitudes towards the Soviet regime transferred into a low level of legitimacy in the beginning of 1990's. Secondly, the overall economic growth has increased people's satisfaction and standard of living. Furthermore, with the increase of inequality people also tolerate more inequality. During the modernization period people have probably incorporated the Western values of 'market justice' and are more likely to accept income inequalities in the society. Finally, it is assumed that perceptions reflect reality and thus somewhat higher legitimacy is an indication that Estonian society has indeed become more fair providing people with a higher level of social justice.

The second hypothesis also found support. It was expected that in 1991 the attitudes towards the satisfaction of basic needs were more negative than the attitudes towards other principles of justice – equal opportunity and equity. This turned out to be true – in 1991 people were most critical towards the principle of need satisfaction. Almost half of the population completely disagreed that people's basic needs are satisfied. In 2005 no such differences between the separate justice principles occurred. These results mirror the very poor economic situation and large poverty in Estonian society in the beginning of the transition. People were clearly most concerned about the basic needs and this is in accordance with figures that show a high proportion of people living in absolute poorness during that time.

The results also show that people have different perceptions about distributive justice depending on their personal characteristics. In general, the expectation that the higher the rank in the status hierarchy, the greater the perceived legitimacy of the stratification order, was confirmed. It can be seen that people who have more advantageous characteristics believe more strongly that the principles of distributive justice holds in Estonian society. The ones more

positive are men, younger people, the ones highly educated and the ones more satisfied with their social position and economic situation. The same applies to people with right-wing and capitalistic values.

Finally it was expected that the dissimilarity in the evaluations of different social groups has increased during the transition period. This was confirmed only for some factors. By 2005 the differences emerged for age-groups and somewhat increased for people with different subjective social position. The effect of standard of living, on the other hand, decreased during the time period.

These results provide support to the previous studies that have shown a low level of satisfaction with the aspects of social justice. This indicates that the current stratification system is not legitimized. However, it is known that people are satisfied with the general developments of the country (Kalmus, et al., 2004). This provides confirmation to the 'paradox of unhappy transformation' according to which people are willing to suffer material difficulties when overall positive changes occur on the societal level. However, people cannot keep this state of mind forever and soon the attitudes towards social justice may start influencing the overall legitimacy of the system.

Future studies are necessary to see whether the positive trend is perceived distributive justice continues.

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