Social Consequences and Evaluations of Regime Change

11.1. Winners and Losers of Transition

System change has not only altered the overall economic situation and subjective economic conditions in East-Central Europe; it has also caused profound changes in social structure. On a macrosocietal level, these can be analyzed and described as the emergence of new interest configurations and the dissolution of traditional ones, as increasing societal differentiation or altered relative positions of social groups, and as the development of divergent lifestyles and new ways to earn a living. For individuals, this process manifests itself, on the one hand, as a change in their relative social position and the perspectives associated with it, and, on the other hand, as a division of society into "winners" and "losers".

Against the backdrop of an emerging market system and the internationalization of Eastern European economies, it is not surprising that the "winners" include entrepreneurs as well as individuals who have sufficient "cultural capital" to adapt to the new situation (e.g., knowledge of foreign languages). According to conventional wisdom, members of the old nomenclature are also capable of adapting; former managers of state companies are generally considered to have benefited from transformation. To a lesser extent, this also applies to Communist Party functionaries. Also among the winners are civil servants, who are seen as the primary beneficiaries of regime change (especially in the Czech and Slovak Republics) as well as army officers (except in Hungary). In sum, the pillars of the old regime are thought to have secured a place in the sun for themselves, even under the new order.

Conversely, large and important social groups are generally designated as losers of reform; this especially applies to workers, women and retired persons. In considering workers, a clear-cut
distinction is usually made between people on public and private payrolls. State workers are counted among the groups who have experienced socioeconomic decline, although only a quarter of them in the Czech and Slovak Republics feel they are now worse off than under the old regime. Private sector employees enjoy a reputation as transformation winners: this attitude is most frequent in the Czech Republic and Poland and least frequent in Hungary, even though a majority there assumes that living conditions have remained stable or improved for workers in the private sector.

As far as subjective self positioning ("people like me") is concerned, there are clearly discernible sociodemographic differences:

- Younger people, those with higher (high school or college) education, urbanites (especially those living in the capitals), white collar workers and civil servants see themselves on the positive side of the scale. The same is mostly true of the self-employed, except for independent farmers in Poland.

- The elderly, retired persons, people living in rural areas and, most of all, blue collar workers believe they are experiencing a significant decline in their social and economic position.

Compared to these stark contrasts, differences of gender are relatively insignificant despite a tendency to count women among transformation losers. Former Communist Party members do not feel that they suffer more social injustice than non-members. Only in the Czech Republic, where "lustration laws" seem to have been implemented more effectively than elsewhere, do former Party members consider their situation exceptionally difficult.

Hungary's group-specific balance of advantages and disadvantages is the most negative overall. In addition, there is a distinct general impression that societal development is uneven and slanted. Two thirds of Hungarian respondents identify a strong tendency toward social injustice, and 55 percent have experienced discrimination as individuals. For the Czech Republic, the figures are 33 and 25 percent, respectively, and Slovakia falls somewhere between the two (Fessel+GfK, 'Nationalismus in Ost-Mitteleuropa', 1995).