Chapter 10
Trust and Life Satisfaction in Eastern and Western Europe

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Abstract Comparative international surveys consistently show differences between Eastern and Western Europe with regard to the perceived trustworthiness of state agencies like courts, police, or civil services. This article explores the consequences of these differences for the life satisfaction of the common citizen. The analysis concentrates on the one hand on the hypothesis that a lack of trustworthiness of state agencies implies the risk of the abuse of power by these institutions, which has among others also direct negative consequences for the life satisfaction of the citizens. On the other hand, the article also pursues the hypothesis that trustworthy state institutions may buffer the citizens’ risk of being deceived by non-trustworthy fellows, which obviously has an indirect positive impact on life satisfaction.

Using secondary analysis of survey data from the European Values Study (EVS), the article shows that the mentioned effects of institutional trustworthiness on life satisfaction differ by institution. It seems that the trustworthiness of the police mainly matters for the direct effects of the abuse of state power, whereas the trustworthiness of the civil service is relatively important for the buffering of distrust in fellow citizens. Based on quantitative information about these empirical regularities, the article finally makes conditional forecasts about the effects of changing trustworthiness of state agencies on the future life satisfaction in Eastern and Western Europe.

Keywords Life satisfaction, trustworthiness of state agencies, buffering of distrust, abuse of state power, Eastern/Western Europe, European Values Study
10.1 An Introductory Overview of the Research Questions

In the social sciences there is currently a growing literature about various types of trust together with their preconditions, causes, and consequences. Part of this literature is based on international values surveys (Eurobarometer, 2006; World Values Survey, 2005; European Values Study, 1999/2000) and focuses on the international differences between countries with regard to generalized trust in fellow citizens and political or social institutions (Mishler & Rose, 1997; Catterberg & Moreno, 2005). Among other aspects, this literature points to the fact that most forms of trust are lower in the Eastern European countries than in the Western ones. Another part of the literature deals with the psychological, cultural, and social causes of trust (e.g. Brehm & Rahn, 1997; Delhey & Newton, 2003, 2005). This literature is especially useful with regard to the question of how to promote and build trustworthy political and social institutions (Kornai et al., 2004; Kornai & Rose-Ackerman, 2004). Finally there are large number of publications about all kinds of consequences of trust, for example with regard to political legitimacy or the functioning of democratic institutions (e.g. Braithwaite & Levi, 1998; Warren, 1999). Within this category of literature, however, there are only few papers dealing with the influence of interpersonal or institutional trust and distrust on life satisfaction (e.g. Bjornskov, 2003 or Hudson, 2006).

The present article attempts to fill this gap with an empirical investigation of the country-specific impact of generalized distrust in others on personal life satisfaction. The article hypothesizes that this impact is negative (see Fig. 10.1, relation 1). However, it is assumed that this negative impact can be buffered through law enforcement by appropriate state agencies, which control and prosecute the abuse of trust (see Fig. 10.1, relation 2). Finally, the paper also considers that a trustworthy commitment of the state to the rule of law prevents government from abusing its power and thus has a positive and direct effect on the life satisfaction of its citizens (see Fig. 10.1, relation 3).

The empirical analyses presented here will show, whether the relations hypothesized in Fig. 10.1 genuinely exist. The answer to this question will further be differentiated according to the particular law enforcing institution such as the civil service, the police, or the justice system. Since Eastern and Western Europe have

![Fig. 10.1 Overview of the main hypotheses](image-url)