Rethinking Social Inequality and Why it Matters

Abstract: As distinct from income or wealth inequality, ‘social inequality’ is currently poorly understood and, at best, unevenly measured. We take a first step towards building a consistent framework to conceptualize and measure social inequality. We characterize social inequality as the relative position of individuals along a number of dimensions that measure achieved outcomes and perceived access to services as prerequisites to actively participate in the life of a community and achieve outcomes in the future. Using survey data from twelve Central and Eastern European countries we construct an index of social inequality that we compare with other measures of inequality, and we use to identify which countries are more or less socially advantaged. We find that cross-national patterns of social inequality differ significantly from patterns derived from measures of income inequality. This is important since countries with less social inequality have higher levels of economic performance and stronger political institutions.

Key Words: Inequality; Democracy; Measurement; Central and Eastern Europe.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the seminal contribution of Amartya Sen (1992) a substantial body of work has converged on the notion that measuring inequality in several dimensions better informs our understanding of larger societal profiles since inequalities in different dimensions tend to move together and influence each other. In the subsequently large literature that has emerged, a commonly used label for multidimensional inequality is ‘social inequality’, which has been used mostly as a catch-all concept rather than a distinct and coherent concept.\(^1\) While the term is sometimes used to refer to multiple disparities in material wealth in society, little attention is given to its character and specificities (Milanovic 2005; Bollen and Jackman 1985). Therefore, social inequality remains a vague concept compared with work on inequality in individual dimensions such as in income (Milanovic 1998; Atkinson 1999), wealth (Cagetti and De Nardi 2008), labour market segmentation, gender and ethnicity (Schrover \textit{et al.} 2007), welfare status (Layte and Whelan 2003), skills and training (Devroye and Freeman 2002), health (Marmot and Wilkinson 1999), and housing (Morris and Winn 1990), to name but a few.

Our aim here is to develop a framework to better conceptualize and measure social inequality. We face two primary constraints in achieving this, one theoretical and one methodological. The former constraint is the choice of dimensions to measure social inequality; the latter constraint is aggregating these necessary dimensions without introducing intractable complexity. We address the theoretical question of the choice of dimensions by conceptualizing social inequality with Sen’s capability approach in which individuals’

\(^1\) As a simple example, the entry for ‘social inequality’ in the \textit{Social Science Encyclopaedia} (Kuper and Kuper 2004) simply says, ‘see inequality’, or in the \textit{International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences} (Darity 2009) there is no further mention or separate category.
wellbeing depends on their effective freedom to achieve their life goals and full potential (1992, 1999). We argue that reaching this full potential depends both on having achieved fundamental outcomes such as income, education, and health, as well as on individuals’ access to services, which, we argue, is instrumental to actively participate in the life of a community and to effectively achieve outcomes in the future. In this way we can identify a set of minimally required dimensions that proxy fundamental outcomes and vehicles to achieve future outcomes. Methodologically, we propose a simple procedure to aggregate the dimensions into one index by using a weighted average of inequality measures across the chosen dimensions empirically weighted by their relative importance.

The findings provide several potential, if ambitious, contributions to the thinking about inequality by proposing an index that measures disparities both in terms of actual achievements and of how individuals perceive their capabilities to achieve outcomes in the future. The main results suggest that our theory-based social inequality index delivers a better conceptualization of how inequality matters to individuals. Further, given that our index outperforms the more commonly used measures of income inequality in predicting cross-national variation in economic and political conditions, social inequality defined in this way provides a better aggregate measure of how inequalities co-vary with national economic and political performance.

2. MEASURING INEQUALITY IN MANY DIMENSIONS

By viewing social inequality as intrinsically multi-dimensional, an important question is how to aggregate the data on different dimensions into one index. There is an extensive literature on the multi-dimensional measurement of inequality. At one end, there are authors who draw conclusions on the overall evolution of inequality by comparing changes in inequality in separate dimensions (e.g. Slottje, Scully, Hirschberg and Hayes 1991; Easterlin
A disadvantage of this approach is that it makes it difficult to formulate an overall conclusion of the extent of inequality if inequality in one dimension has evolved differently from inequality in another dimension. At the other end, there are approaches that first construct a composite multi-dimensional index and then measure the inequality in that index (e.g. Becker et al. 2005; Fischer 2003; McGillivray and Pilarisetti 2004; Noorbakhsh 2006). The disadvantage of this approach is that it reduces the multi-dimensional nature of the problem to one dimension.

A middle approach lies in between these two extremes by using recently developed measures of multi-dimensional inequality. This middle approach has the advantage of avoiding the reduction of a multi-dimensional problem to a one-dimensional one while yet producing an overall index of inequality. Two sophisticated versions of this approach are Decancq et al. (2009) and Decancq and Lugo (2009a) that construct a multi-dimensional inequality index which combines the information on inequality in different dimensions with the information on the correlation between these dimensions through weights and substitution parameters, the former building a multi-dimensional inequality Atkinson index and the latter building a multi-dimensional Gini index. Both indexes are derived within a theory-based framework that allows testing the robustness of the results to the theoretical assumptions that are used to build the indexes. However, at the same time, the theory-based framework has a level of sophistication that limits a wide application and use of the indexes. Two multi-dimensional indexes that make use of a simplified version of this middle approach are the Human Opportunity Index (HOI) that measures disparities in the distribution of access to basic services for children (Paes de Barros et al. 2009), and the inequality-adjusted HDI (IHDI) that measures wellbeing accounting for the distribution of human development across individuals (Foster et al. 2005). Both the HOI and the IHDI require simple computations and assume that each dimension included in the index weights equally.
In this paper we also propose a simplified version of this middle approach by computing a simple weighted average of inequality indexes. However, and importantly, differently from both the IHDI and the HOI, we relax the assumption of equal weights, which imposes an arbitrary choice on the relative importance of each dimension in the index. Rather, we let the data inform the choice of the weights by performing a factor analysis, which we will describe in Section 4.

2.1 CONSTRUCTING A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL INEQUALITY INDEX

Let us assume that there are \( M \) relevant dimensions along which to measure inequality and that these dimensions can be measured in an interpersonal comparable way. Let \( x_{ij}^m \) denote the value of individual \( i \) in country \( j \) for dimension \( m \) and let the vector \( x^j = (x_{ij}^1,\ldots,x_{ij}^M) \) summarize the values across all \( M \) dimensions for individual \( i \) in country \( j \). Let \( X^j \) define the matrix of all values across all \( M \) dimensions for all individuals in country \( j \). The overall index of inequality for a given country \( j \), \( I^j(X^j) \), which can be rewritten for simplicity as \( I^j(x) \), can be defined as a function of the \( M \) inequality indexes \( I_m^j(x_m^j), \ m=1,\ldots,M \), computed by aggregating the values of each of the \( M \) dimensions for all \( N \) individuals in a given country.

The problem to define a multi-dimensional inequality index can be described as the search for the index \( I(.) \) that aggregates inequality in each of the value vectors \( x_1^j,\ldots,x_M^j \) on the real line so that a natural ranking can be made:

\[
I^j(x) = \left[w_1^j I_1^j(x_1^j) + \cdots + w_M^j I_M^j(x_M^j)\right]^{1/\beta}
\]

(1)

where \( \beta \) is strictly different from zero and \( w_m^j > 0 \) for each \( m=1,\ldots,M \).
Therefore, the index $I(x)$ is defined as a simple weighted average of order $\beta$ of $I_m(x_m)$ with weights $w^j_m$, which are allowed to vary by country.\(^2\)

Given a chosen set of $M$ dimensions, three main components characterize the index $I(x)$: the parameter $\beta$, the $M$ inequality indexes $I^j_m(x^j_m)$, and the weights $w^j_m$. The parameter $\beta$ is related to the elasticity of substitution, $\sigma$, between pairs of dimensions. For a given pair of dimensions $h$ and $g$, $\sigma_{hg} = \frac{1}{1-\beta}$. The smaller the $\beta$, the bigger the substitutability between two given dimensions, that is the more we need to decrease one dimension in order to increase another dimension by one unit while keeping the level of the index $I(x)$ constant. By specifying the index $I(x)$ in equation (1) we implicitly assume the same degree of substitutability for all pairs of dimensions. Further, we assume that $\beta=1$, so that equation (1) reduces to the standard weighted arithmetic average.

In order to compute the inequality index $I^j_m(x^j_m)$ by country and dimension, we normalize and rescale the data by subtracting the minimum value and by dividing by the difference between the maximum and the minimum value, and we compute the Theil index of each $m$ dimension.\(^3\)

Finally, we aggregate the $M$ inequality indexes into the overall inequality index for country $j$. We do so by computing the weighted arithmetic average of the $I^j_m(x^j_m)$ inequality

\(^2\) As noted by Decancq and Lugo (2009b), Blackorby and Donaldson (1982) provide an axiomatic characterization of the mean and Maasoumi (1986) provides an information-theoretic justification of this class of indexes.

\(^3\) The Theil index satisfies the four basic properties desirable in an inequality measure (Shorrocks 1980). As such it has been extensively used in several inequality analyses (Galbraith 2012).
indexes for country $j$ with the $w^j_m$ weights specified in equation (1). Instead of arbitrarily imposing equal weights, we will use a factor analysis to let the data inform our choice of the weights (see Section 4). Therefore, overall, our approach simply consists of two main steps: first, use empirical data to compute the weights, and, second, use these weights to compute a weighted average.

2.2 CHOICE OF DIMENSIONS

Having identified a simple method to aggregate multiple dimensions in one index, we are faced with the theoretical question of the choice of which dimensions to include. The multi-dimensional measurement of inequality is motivated by Amartya Sen’s “capabilities/functionings” approach, which is based on the core concept that wellbeing depends on the individuals’ effective freedom to achieve their life goals and full potential or their own wellbeing (Sen 1992, 1999). Therefore, in theory, capability accounting should measure the real freedom that people enjoy in trying to achieve their desired – even if only potential – goals.

A number of important previous contributions (e.g. Anand et al. 2007; Alkire 2010) have established that a prerequisite for the fulfilment of individuals’ wellbeing is achieving outcomes in several dimensions. Simply, wellbeing is intrinsically multi-dimensional and therefore inequality should as well be consistently measured along a number of dimensions. Our innovation here is arguing that individuals’ wellbeing and effective freedom to achieve

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4 Factor analysis is one of several different alternatives to estimate the weights from empirical data (see Decancq and Lugo 2009b for a comprehensive review of the literature and Chiappero-Martinetti and Esposito 2008 for an example of computing weights by using direct empirical evidence on the relative importance attached to each dimension that will enter the aggregate index).
depend not only on what a person has actually achieved, measured by completed past outcomes such as one’s level of income, but also, and as importantly, on what a person expects to be able to achieve in the future. Actual and future achievements are related since future achievements depend on what has been already achieved as well as on how actual achievements will allow for an active participation in the life of the community where one lives. To our mind, a crucial prerequisite for this active participation is an effective access to health care and education, which we see as fundamental vehicles for social cohesion and equal opportunities. In other words, our argument is that a capabilities-based measure of social inequality includes disparities both in actual achievements and in individuals’ access to health care and education, which, we argue, is instrumental to actively participate in the life of a community and to effectively achieve outcomes in the future. The importance of access to services is paramount: inequality in any given measurable dimension is much more problematic in a society characterized by a skewed distribution of access to health care and education than in a society where access to services is more widely available (Binelli and Loveless 2010).

Therefore, we see social inequality as a multi-dimensional inequality measure of actual achievements and access to services, and we propose our index as the first attempt to measure disparities in both sets of dimensions. In order to accomplish this task we will use a dataset that allows measuring both sets of dimensions, described next.

3. DATA

Data collection for this paper was carried out as part of the EUREQUAL project ‘Social Inequality and Why It Matters for the Economic and Democratic Development of Europe and Its Citizens: Post-Communist Central and Eastern Europe in Comparative Perspective’, funded by the European Commission under contract No 028920 (CIT5), Framework 6.
Fieldwork was conducted by national surveys administered by polling institutes in each country via face-to-face interviews on the basis of stratified national random probability samples in the spring of 2007. The final dataset includes surveys conducted in 13 CEE countries (Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine) with each country’s data weighted to N=1000.

The EUREQUAL surveys provide a unique opportunity to bring to an empirical test our theory of social inequality. First, the countries of post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) including Russia provide a unique examination of the issue of inequality. This region’s re-orientation away from Soviet Communism towards market economies and political democracy has met with wide ranging levels of success. Instructively, these countries began a process of transformation at nearly the same time but achieved substantial dissimilarity in consolidation of economic and political institutions. Two-thirds of the countries in our sample, including Hungary, Poland, and the Czech Republic, are members of the European Union and thus represent near ideal transition cases toward these institutional arrangements while others, such as Russia and Ukraine, have demonstrated more troubled or partial transitions. We see this as an advantage over existing studies. Countries of recent and ongoing transition present crucial cases of inequality because it challenges the new ‘rules of the game’. That is, rather than merely troubling established democracies, inequality is more relevant to regime stability and legitimacy in non-established democracies as inequality in Germany, the UK, or even the US, does not threaten the edifice of democratic politics. A multi-dimensional inequality index – one that captures how individuals experience inequality - therefore contributes to our knowledge about the extent, stability, and quality of democratic outcomes given the wide variation in outcomes found in our sample.
Second, and as importantly, the dataset includes two variables that report individuals’ perceived access to health care and education, which respondents were asked to compare to “…the average access in the country as a whole.” These two variables allow us to measure self-reported access to services and thus to empirically substantiate the innovative component of our index. In order to measure achieved outcomes we include households’ income, individuals’ health status and education level. We have chosen these three variables as the minimum number of achieved outcomes, in congruence with other work that has established them as fundamental to capture wellbeing, as best described in the long debate that motivated the introduction of the HDI, which also measures countries’ level of achievement along these three dimensions (Fukuda-Parr 2003). Appendix A provides full details on the questions used to elicit information on each of these five variables. Since Poland does not have a response for perceived access to education, complicating its comparability, we drop it from our sample. We use a total of 12 countries: Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine.

Taken together, the five dimensions that we include in the index are fundamental to enhance the individual’s capability set by allowing individuals to lead a satisfactory and rewarding life. Taking away any one of someone’s income, health, education or preventing access to health care and education would restrict an individual’s capability set and thus reduce his/her level of wellbeing.

4. COMPUTING THE WEIGHTS USING FACTOR ANALYSIS

Having chosen the dimensions to include in the index, we compute the dimension and country-specific \( w_m \) weights specified in equation (1) by using exploratory factor analysis. Table 1 presents the results, which show clear cross-national variation across the individual factor loadings.
Table 1 shows that in each country the two access variables load strongly and more so than any of the three other variables suggesting that the access to services variables are a crucial determinant of our inequality index. This preliminary finding is in congruence with our argument that a capabilities-based measure of social inequality includes disparities in individuals’ access to services, which, we argue, is instrumental to actively participate in the life of a community and to effectively achieve outcomes in the future.

4.1 VALIDATION OF ACCESS VARIABLES

While we see the inclusion of the two access variables as a way to better capture capabilities, we recognize that these variables are subjective and as such can leave themselves open to a number of competing interpretations. We therefore assess the quality of these data through a validation exercise by correlating individuals’ self-reported levels of access to health and education with a number of existing and objective measures of health care and education provision.

We start with individuals’ perceived access to education. We validate the data by using both a measure of availability or provision of education proxied by enrolment rates, and a measure of quality of education given by the students-teacher ratio as a proxy for class crowding and learning effectiveness.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) provide cross-country data on enrolment rates and students-teacher ratios at different levels of education for each year between 1999 and 2008. First, while data on enrolment rates are available at each level of education from pre-primary to tertiary, data on students-teacher
ratios are only available up to secondary education. Second, while students-teacher ratios suffer from several missing values in 2007 and 2008, they are reported for most of the countries in our sample for each year between 2003 and 2006. This is not too limiting as we assert that dynamism in the educational environment is more likely to be registered by respondents than stasis. That is, given these data, we expect to find that individuals would positively rate their access to education if education quality has been improving and vice versa. Therefore, in order to assure consistency between our indicators and to reduce measurement error we focus on secondary education and we compute changes in enrolment rates and students-teacher ratios between 2003 and 2006. We proceed by computing the correlation between our multi-dimensional index and the changes in enrolment rates and students/teacher ratios.

<Table 2 about here>

The first and second column of Table 2 show that both changes in overall secondary enrolments and in public schools only are strongly, positively, and significantly correlated with the mean level of perceived access to education (by country). In addition, we find that access to education is also strongly, positively, and significantly correlated with students/teacher ratio, which suggests that while more students were able to enrol in school and thus experienced an increased access to education, they did so in crowded schools since the number of teachers did not increase proportionally.

5 The full dataset is publicly available at

http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx?IF_ActivePath=P,50&IF_Language=eng. As the EUREQUAL surveys were conducted in 2007, it is appropriate to use data that precedes individuals’ perceptions.
We now move to the second access variable, that is individuals’ perceived levels of access to health. The World Health Organization (WHO) provides several comparable cross-country measures of the quality of the health system and the effectiveness of health care provision. Overall, we would expect that in countries with higher expenditure on health and positive indicators of health, individuals would recognize this and indicate a higher access to health care. Therefore, we correlate four indicators with the mean of individuals’ perception of access to health care by country: life expectancy at birth; per capita government expenditure on health (in PPP, 2006); per capita total expenditure on health (at average exchange rate, 2006); and the amount of social security expenditure on health as a percentage of general government expenditure on health (in 2006).

Table 3 shows that the correlation between each of the indicators of health care provision from the WHO dataset and perceived access to health is positive and significant (for Social Security expenditure at the p≤0.10 level) lending support to the validity of our ‘access to health’ variable.

5. MULTI-DIMENSIONAL INEQUALITY INDEX: RESULTS

Having chosen the dimensions to include in our index, validated our use of the access questions, and obtained the weights using factor analysis, we can proceed to compute the multi-dimensional inequality index \( I(x) \) in equation (1) for each of the 12 countries in the sample. Figure 1 presents the index by country. Being a simple weighted average of Theil inequality indexes, the index is very easy to read: the higher the score, the higher the level of multi-dimensional inequality.

6 The full dataset is publicly available at http://www.who.int/whosis/en/
Slovakia has the lowest level of multi-dimensional inequality and Moldova the highest with a difference of nine percentage points between them. For these post-Soviet states, the variation in the quality and extent of both democratization and market liberalization match the generally expected contours of these related processes. While it may seem somewhat counter-intuitive to see countries such as Russia, Lithuania, and Hungary (and the Czech Republic and Belarus) having similar levels of social inequality, our multi-dimensional index of social inequality is a weighted average of achieved and potential outcomes (in the form of ‘access’). The balancing of actual and potential outcomes is one facet of the contribution of our index and in order to further assess the validity of this balance, we perform a series of competitive, robustness checks.

5.1 ROBUSTNESS

We perform two main validity checks of our index: first, we assess the importance and the role of the weights by recomputing the index when imposing equal weights; second, we assess the importance of the inclusion of the two access variables by recomputing the index without them. Table 4 reports the results of our baseline index together with the index without the access variables and the index with equal weights.

Comparison between the full index and the multidimensional index with equal weights (columns 1 and 2 in Table 4) suggests that the assumption of equal weights does not substantially affect the cross-country inequality pattern (r=0.93, p≤0.01, N=12). As well, Moldova remains the highest inequality and Slovakia the lowest. On the contrary, the pattern changes substantially when we compute the index without the access variables (compare columns 1 and 3 in Table 4; r=0.32, p≤0.31, N=12). In other words, while the weights may
slightly adjust the loading pattern of the final index (an important if peripheral aspect), the access variables change the nature of the index beyond mere computational transformations.

6. INEQUALITY AND CROSS-NATIONAL PERFORMANCE

In the literature income inequality has overwhelmingly been the most studied inequality concept and, as such, the common understanding of inequality is largely couched in narrowly economic terms. However, a number of studies have shown that changes in income inequality do not necessarily move predictably with changes in other dimensions of inequality; or, in other words, that being economically poor or having a low income is not necessarily a good indicator of being disadvantaged (e.g. Narayan et al. 2000, Alkire 2010).

Further, inequality in non-income dimensions has large impacts on development as countries with less human development tend to have greater inequality in more dimensions, or, in other words, that more human development is associated with less inequality (Alkire 2011). Likewise, the distribution of income is at best a mediocre predictor of the distribution of non-income dimensions of individuals’ wellbeing. Not surprisingly, therefore, aggregate income inequality, even when coupled with individual socio-economic locations, remains an unreliable predictor of broader social, economic, and political opportunities in individuals’ lives (Bartels 2008; Kaltenhaler et al. 2008; Bollen and Jackman 1985; Goodin and Dryzek 1980).\(^7\) Consistently, previous work has shown that changes in uni-dimensional inequality indexes such as changes in income inequality fail to account for substantial cross-national

\(^7\) While the cross-national covariance between national-level measures of income inequality and many social ills is well documented (Bartels 2008; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009), the link between individuals’ experiences of economic inequalities and social, economic, and political outcomes is much weaker.
variation in macro indicators that affect wellbeing (e.g. Binelli and Loveless 2010; Loveless 2009).

Given the findings of this previous literature, it may not be unreasonable to argue that the poor macro-performance of income inequality may be due to income - alone - being unable to capture information on the set of disparities that matter for individuals’ lives. We address this by computing the correlations between the most commonly used indicator for income inequality, namely the Gini index for income inequality, and a set of standard political and economic macro-indicators. In particular, we consider ‘Political Stability’, ‘Government Effectiveness’ measures (‘Governance Matters VIII’ project of the World Bank; Kaufmann et al. 2009), and Freedom House Score, all measured in 2007, as indicators of political performance; the 2007 GDP per capita and the 5 year growth of GDP per capita between 2002 and 2007 as economic indicators.

Table 5 presents the results. In congruence with recent findings in the literature, we find that income inequality fails to move in coordination with each economic and political indicator in any meaningful way. This finding is somewhat disconcerting as the Gini index for income inequality is a frequently used and often relied upon indicator of not only disparities in income but also as a proxy of other disparities that impact the lives of individuals. In contrast to this assumption, our index is constructed to capture much of the non-income inequality that affects individuals. By including not only achieved outcomes (among which income), but also perceived access to health and education, we expect the index to provide a better indicator of the inequality that matters to individuals and their societies, and thus to countries’ economic and political progress.

<Tables 5 & 6 about here>

Table 6 presents the correlation coefficients between our multi-dimensional inequality index (MDII) and the same macro variables considered in Table 5. In contrast to the poor
performance of the Gini index for income inequality, it does correlate strongly and in the expected direction with both government effectiveness scores as well as the Freedom House scores.\textsuperscript{8} The correlations suggest that richer countries with better political institutions (at \(\alpha\)-level 90\% or higher) tend to exhibit lower multi-dimensional inequality.\textsuperscript{9}

Further, to place both the Gini and our indices in direct comparison, Table 7 presents the results of a series of OLS regressions where each macro variable is regressed against our the MDII and of the Gini index for income inequality.

\textit{<Table 7 about here>}

The regression results in Table 7 strengthen the findings in Table 5 and 6. Controlling for the Gini index, not only does our social inequality index retain statistical significance for government effectiveness and the Freedom House scores, it does so as the Gini for income inequality fails to reach significance with all the macro variables. There is no issue of multicollinearity as our social inequality index is not correlated with the level of Gini index of income inequality \( (r=-0.06, p\leq 0.84, N=12); \) although it is moderately correlated with the change in the Gini index for income inequality from 2002 to 2007; \( r=-0.58, p\leq 0.06, N=12); \) Finally, and consistently with the high correlation between our index and the index with equal weights, while the MDII with equal weights reproduces this macro-performance by strongly correlating both with the political and with the economic aggregates (e.g. strongly correlating with GDP per capita at \( r=-0.61, p\leq 0.03, N=12); \) the index without the access

\textsuperscript{8} The Freedom House scores are intuitively reversed so that a high score is lower freedom.

We have retained that here.

\textsuperscript{9} We suggest to include GDP \textit{per capita} as the significance is just less than 90\% alpha such that, given the number of observations \( (N=12); \) it is misses statistical significance by a hundredth of one percent.
variables reproduces the poor performance of the Gini for income inequality by being uncorrelated with all macro variables.\textsuperscript{10}

All these results taken together provide evidence that inequalities in non-income dimensions, and in particular in access to services, have an important independent explanatory power that cannot be effectively proxied by variation in income, and that these non-income inequalities are the driving force of our index as a better indicator of the inequality that matters to individuals. In other words, the results show that the crucial source of variation that is allowing our index to better explain macro-economic and political changes is provided primarily by the two access variables, which provides supporting evidence for our capability-based concept of social inequality as reflecting disparities both in actual achievements and - crucially - in access to services, which we see as instrumental for a full achievement of the ‘freedom to achieve’. The question now is: why and how the access variables help better predicting political and economic performance? We discuss this next.

6.1 DISCUSSION

Our index, driven by the “access” variables, links with higher levels of political stability and governmental effectiveness in the same straightforward manner of the congruency between political culture and political regime type (Almond and Verba 1963). Countries characterized by a relatively high level of individuals who perceive the ability to act in their own interest correspond to our understanding of both healthy democratic citizenship and democratic processes (\textit{ibid.}; Dahl 1971; Bandura 2001). Yet, if the possibility of exercising this efficacy does not exist or does so inconsistently or poorly, or is perceived as such, realization of citizens’ full political or social potentials are likely limited. Thus while individuals’ income may indicate various levels of sufficiency or potential for action (as a

\textsuperscript{10} All results are available from the authors upon request.
distribution of ‘starting points’), the perceived availabilities to actually improve one’s prospects and actively participate in the life of the community where one lives as well depends on the provision and access to fundamental services such as health and education. Therefore, a multi-dimensional index comprising of actual achievements and of access to services that are a gateway to future achievements more closely aligns with the foundations of a democratic society.

The important role of disparities in access to services makes a twofold contribution to the existing literature. First, the inclusion of the access variables adds to the extant models of inequality that rely exclusively on achieved outcomes. This approach allows us to assess individuals’ own perceptions of their availabilities to achieve their potential thus producing a more complete understanding of what the nature of multi-dimensional ‘social inequality’ in a given society might look like. Rather than reductively assuming that disparities in income are sufficient to understand the distribution of advantages and disadvantages in society, the evidence here validates our re-conception of inequality and what it entails, which leads us to the second part of this contribution.

If we take the MDII to better represent inequality as it exists in several dimensions and as a function of how individual perceive their potentialities in their respective societies, we are led to a clearer understanding as to why countries with less social inequality have better economic performance and stronger democratic political institutions. The normative relationship between inequality (and inequalities) and democratic political institutions is fairly well understood (Lichbach 1989; Karl 2000) as the redistribution of the goods of society is a founding feature of successful democratization and long-term success (Boix 2003). When the market distorts the distribution of goods, democratic remedies are essential if and when citizens are dissatisfied with inadequate government responses (Dahl 1971). To the degree that these political institutions fail to offer solutions, they can be perceived to
broken and are thus de-legitimized. Again, as the evidence here shows, where and when this happens is not revealed by using uni-dimensional measures of income inequality.

How representatives are our findings? As above, while a less common region for study, countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) provide the means to rigorously test a new conceptualization and strategy to measure multi-dimensional inequality. Most of what we know about the relationship between inequality and political institutions come from established democracies; that is, countries in which the political institutions are established with little concern for backsliding or ‘alternative solutions’. Given the broad set of inequalities has been growing unevenly across CEE over this period (Milanovic 1998, 2005; Förster, et al, 2005), there have been strong calls for return to more egalitarian approaches as not only were employment opportunities insufficient to maintain a standard of living but also the goods of market economies were seen to be distributed in a distorted manner (Loveless and Whitefield 2011; Kelley and Zagorski 2004; Örkeny and Székelyi 2000). Like the West, but particularly pernicious in less established democracies, these perceptions and the presence of high levels of inequality in the region have led to declines in political engagement, such as voting (Karakoc forthcoming) and the perception of high levels of corruption (Loveless and Whitefield 2011b).

The role of inequalities is acutely relevant for CEE which is representative not only of post-Soviet states (including Central Asia) but also of other transitional states and regions, most notably Latin America. Both of these regions have and continue to struggle with consolidating democratic and market institutions as well as achieving relatively equitable distributions of public and social goods for their respective societies. Membership in the European Union of some of the countries examined here also has relevance to many of the countries of Southern Europe including Greece, Spain, and the Balkans, and smaller European countries such as Portugal and Ireland. Thus, despite a specific path to this point,
the current situations of the countries of CEE have generalizability to a number of other regions and countries.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper is to develop a framework to conceptualize and measure social inequality. We propose a capabilities-based measure of social inequality that includes disparities in achieved outcomes (income, education and health status) and in individuals’ access to health care and education, which, we argue, is instrumental to actively participate in the life of a community and to effectively achieve outcomes in the future. Our multi-dimensional index of inequality outperforms the more common uni-dimensional indicator of income inequality by better predicting important economic and political outcomes. This improvement is due to the inclusion of two access variables - access to health care and access to education – that incorporate the perceptions of disparities in two fundamental dimensions along which individuals directly experience inequality. The inclusion of the access variables innovates our understanding of how inequalities shape people’s lives and builds a strong case to elicit access-type questions in surveys that aim at measuring multi-dimensional inequality.

We aim to have contributed three key things. One, we have provided a novel conceptualization of social inequality as a capability-based inequality concept that measures disparities along both achieved outcomes and access to services as a fundamental means to actively participate in the life of the community when one lives and thus effectively achieve outcomes in the future. And we have done so with a simple aggregating procedure: a weighted average of inequality measures in the relevant dimensions. To be clear, we do not assert that our index as it is specified represents a final model. A number of alternative dimensional specifications are clearly available; however, we do assert that our index contains essential dimensions. Most importantly, it is the inclusion of both achieved
outcomes and variables that measure how these achieved outcomes can allow further achievements in the future that constitute our main contribution to the study of multi-dimensional inequality.

Two, we have found that cross-national patterns of social inequality differ significantly from patterns identified when using more common comparative inequality measures such as the Gini index for income inequality. In addition, and just as importantly, countries that have less social inequality exhibit better economic performance and stronger democratic political institutions. While income inequality matters for individual choices when it is measured at a disaggregated level at which it is directly experienced by individuals in their daily life such as among their neighbors or peers (e.g. Stark and Taylor 1991), when at the aggregate level it merely indicates an environment in which broader sets of disparities are activated. That is, rising levels of income inequality in a given country often only exacerbate - rather than capture - the more salient disparities as individuals experience them. Empirically, rising income inequality is necessary - but not sufficient - to understand how inequalities act in concert to constrain both societies and the individuals that constitute them.

Three, and given both above, the empirical results that we present validate our conceptualization of inequality as it matters to and is perceived by individuals. In countries in which actual achievements and perceived access to important social institutions are higher, we find better performing political institutions and higher national-level economic achievement. While not asserting a causal relationship, this is indicative of a relationship suggesting, for the most part, that countries with high levels of inequality are countries in which most people would prefer not to live. If this is the case, the innovation about the thinking and structure of inequality that we propose provides insights into what inequality means as an indicator of the actual quality of life in a given country. While an enormous amount of literature exists for the more common income inequality, future research should
aim at examining the connection of the index produced here to cross-national differences in which political, economic and social factors play an important role in generating future opportunities.
REFERENCES


Karakoc, Ekrem. (forthcoming) “Economic Inequality and its Asymmetric Effect on Civic Engagement: Evidence from Post-communist Countries” *European Political Science Review*


Morris, Jenny, and, Martin, Winn. 1990. *Housing and Social Inequality*. Hilary Shipman Ltd.


### Table 1: Exploratory Factor Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>0.77</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
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<td>Slovakia</td>
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<td>Ukraine</td>
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<td>0.83</td>
<td>1196</td>
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<td>1.59</td>
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Table 2: Correlation Between Perceptions of Access to Education and National-level Indicators of Availability and Quality of Education

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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r=0.91 (p≤0.001)</td>
<td>r=0.89 (p≤0.001)</td>
<td>r=0.90 (p≤0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=12</td>
<td>N=11*</td>
<td>N=11**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_P=Probability Two-Tailed; T-Test_

_Source_: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

_Notes_:  
* Bulgaria is dropped since there are no data on Secondary Enrolment Rate.  
**Estonia is dropped since there are no data on Secondary Students/Teacher ratio.
Table 3: Correlation Between Perceptions of Access to Health Care and National-level Indicators of Health Care Provision

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mean Perception of Health Care</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth in 2006</th>
<th>General government expenditure on health as % of total expenditure on health in 2006</th>
<th>Per capita total expenditure on health in 2006</th>
<th>Social security expenditure on health as % of general government expenditure on health in 2006</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>r=0.69 (p≤0.014) N=12</td>
<td>r=0.82 (p≤0.001) N=12</td>
<td>r=0.72 (p≤0.009) N=12</td>
<td>r=0.51 (p≤0.089) N=12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

P=Probability Two-Tailed; T-Test

Source: World Health Organization (WHO)
### Table 4: Multi-dimensional Inequality Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Baseline Full Index</th>
<th>Equal Weights</th>
<th>No Access Variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belarus</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>0.076</td>
<td>0.068</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>0.087</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.117</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>0.077</td>
<td>0.078</td>
<td>0.132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>0.073</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>0.093</td>
<td>0.098</td>
<td>0.129</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>0.080</td>
<td>0.084</td>
<td>0.154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldova</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.189</td>
<td>0.345</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>0.127</td>
<td>0.181</td>
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<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.064</td>
<td>0.158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukraine</td>
<td>0.089</td>
<td>0.088</td>
<td>0.347</td>
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<tr>
<td>Table 5: Correlation Between Gini Index for Income Inequality and Macro Indicators</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gini Index 2007</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Political Performance</td>
<td>Political Stability</td>
<td>r= -0.25 (p≤0.43, N=12)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Government Effectiveness</td>
<td>r= -0.06 (p≤0.85, N=12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Freedom House Score</td>
<td>r= 0.24 (p≤0.46, N=12)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic Performance</td>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>r= -0.18 (p≤0.58, N=12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5 year per capita</td>
<td>r= -0.01 (p≤0.99, N=12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>GDP growth</td>
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<td>Table 6: Correlation Between MDII and Macro Indicators</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Political Performance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Political Stability</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( r = -0.23 ) ( (p \leq 0.48, N = 12) )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Government Effectiveness</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>( r = -0.62 ) ( (p \leq 0.03, N = 12) )</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Freedom House Score</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>( r = 0.61 ) ( (p \leq 0.03, N = 12) )</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Economic Performance</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>GDP per capita</em></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>( r = -0.47 ) ( (p \leq 0.11, N = 12) )</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>5 year per capita GDP growth</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>( r = -0.17 ) ( (p \leq 0.59, N = 12) )</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Political Stability</td>
<td>Government Effectiveness</td>
<td>Freedom House Score</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MDII</td>
<td>-6.42 (8.14)</td>
<td>-23.23* (9.61)</td>
<td>55.15* (21.49)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gini Index 2007</td>
<td>-0.03 (0.04)</td>
<td>-0.02 (0.04)</td>
<td>0.11 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.87 (1.40)</td>
<td>2.74 (1.65)</td>
<td>-5.93 (3.69)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N=12; Beta (standard error): * p<0.05, ** p<0.01
Source: EUREQUAL Mass Publics Surveys 2007
Figure 1: Multi-dimensional Inequality Index
APPENDIX A: MEASUREMENT APPENDIX

Individual-level variables from EUREQUAL Survey:

Income: (L6a): “Can you tell me please what is your own monthly income before taxes from your work, pension and any other sources of income, such as child benefit, family allowances, etc. that you may have?” Open-ended response: Hungary, Moldova, and Romania. Income range categories: Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. We also produced a trifurcated version of income (based on the distribution by thirds) that produced a similar outcome.


Education: all countries were adjusted to the ISCED 1997. 0: Pre-primary; 1: Primary; 2: Lower secondary; 3: Upper secondary; 4: Post-secondary, non-tertiary; 5: First stage tertiary; 6: Second stage tertiary leading to an advanced research qualification.

Access to Health Care: L7f: Now, please compare your household’s access to health care with the average access in the country as a whole? Would you say that your household’s health care access is: 1: Well below average; 2: Below average; 3: Somewhat below average; 4: Average; 5: Somewhat above average; 6: Above average; 7: Well above average; Do not know (recoded to missing).

Access to Education: L7g: Now, please compare your household’s access to education with the average access in the country as a whole? Would you say that your household’s access to education is: 1: Well below average; 2: Below average; 3: Somewhat below average; 4: Average; 5: Somewhat above average; 6: Above average; 7: Well above average; Do not know (recoded to missing).

Macro-level variables: