The need to be just, to live in moral rectitude, and to address the political and social conflicts of a society justly or fairly, as well as the fundamental need for moral principles determining just conduct are social problems as old as human history. The struggle over economic, political, and social justice has been a fundamental social force for centuries almost everywhere. In contemporary history, from Asia to the Balkans, from South America to Russia, wars and revolutions have been fought in the name of democracy and political justice. The apparent conflict between the market and social justice has become one of the most demanding challenges for modern societies and economic systems. In modern European and American liberal thought – dating back to the French Revolution – the principle of justice is one of the crucial guiding values regulating and balancing the other virtues and principles in the political and legal realms. Nevertheless, the history of the modern liberal state and the continuous crises of market economies over the last two centuries have clearly proved that the idea of social justice is extremely controversial and conditional: its particular interpretations are confined to given temporal, geographical, and social arrangements. There is therefore no such a thing as a universal, unconditional, or perfect understanding of the concept.

Correspondingly, the various interpretations of economic, political, and social justice and the motives behind substantial changes in their conceptualization have long been the subject of scholarly analysis. Until recently, however, such analyses and discussions have not taken into account the views of ordinary people; research on this latter aspect of the perceptions of justice has been a rather recent development. While from Rawls to Hayek, or from Homan to Greenberg, philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, and social psychologists carried out extensive analyses and surveys on the formal, institutional, and systemic aspects of political and economic justice, by contrast, very little has been learned in a rigorous and comparative fashion about the structures and guiding principles of everyday beliefs and norms of justice.

As history teaches us, public sentiments defining or redefining the critical value contents of political and social justice are usually articulated and crystallized by radical political mass movements. Both of the major political developments in twentieth-century Europe that claimed to restore social justice and redefine how justice operates in political and social life emerged in the same...
geopolitical region. The first was the Russian Revolution in 1917 which later (in the wake of the Second World War) extended its ideological and political system to the other parts of East Central Europe. Paradoxically, the second attempt to restore political and social injustice happened in the same region with the collapse of the very same communism in the late 1980s. This time, communism as an ideology and a political, economic, and social vision, which once upon a time had been a revolutionary venture to create a just and fair social environment, was entirely and profoundly rejected by those who had had to live through it.

During the 'fiesta' of the 1989–1990 'revolutions' of East Central Europe, and their swift 'liberation' from both external and internal political oppression, both the actors in the transition and the experts analysing events agreed that the systemic changes in the region would take place peacefully, 'fairly', and rapidly. At the beginning, the common expectation was that political justice could be quickly restored, and new and just economic and political systems could be set up immediately. Nobody foresaw that the crisis in fundamental values which preceded the change of regimes in East Central Europe would continue. Hence, nobody expected that in all former socialist countries people's feelings would quickly become polarized, and in a virtually identical pattern throughout the region. Who is entitled to compensation for past injuries? Who is responsible for those injuries? Who should be considered as collaborators? Who should be rewarded for heroic resistance? How much state-owned property is to be distributed, and to whom? Finally, what policies should be pursued in the formation of a new moral and economic order?

In this article, we seek answers to these questions through the lenses of two cross-sectional studies of people's views of justice. Originally, twelve countries from various regions of the world were involved in data collection in 1991, and in 1996 the study was repeated for five East Central European countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, the former East Germany, Russia, and Bulgaria). Our aim in this article is to utilize the data from the two surveys which can provide a basis for a follow-up on both the stable and the changing elements in the social acceptance of the principles of justice.\(^1\) The current analysis is restricted to four of the countries listed above.\(^2\) It is not concerned, however, with comparing the individual countries, but instead with exploring tendencies in the region as a whole. This unifying approach is justified by the fact that, in the decades before the political transition, the citizens of these countries were subjected to

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2. Unfortunately, the Czech case had to be left out of the current analysis. The Czech participants repeated the original study in 1995, but as several questions – key to our current discussion – were left out of the second questionnaire, the Czech data could not be incorporated into the current comparative analysis.