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# Values and emotionality in the Greek political culture: a study of *ressentiment*

*Nicolas Demertzis1, George Papadoudis2 and Tereza Capelos3*

Abstract

In this paper, we provide a theoretical discussion of *ressentiment* within the emerging fields of the political sociology and political psychology of emotions and offer an empirical investigation of its political-cultural function. The complex emotion of *ressentiment* refers to a recurrent rumination on negative feelings and an affective compensation for life failures. Extant studies show *ressentiment* can be linked to populist, anti-immigrant and far right parties support, and can provide leverage for major socio- political upheavals. Using the World Values Survey 7th wave dataset for Greece we analyze the psychological components and political expressions of *ressentiment* testing three hypotheses on its relationship with efficacy and life satisfaction, value systems, and political violence. The analysis is possible due to an original six-item *ressentiment* scale that we offer as a novel measure of this emotional phenomenon. We find a limited distribution of *ressentiment* in Greece concentrated among economically and socially disadvantaged segments of society. We also find that *ressentiment* scores link monotonically with overall life dissatisfaction and diminished political interest, lack of efficacy, low interpersonal trust and aversion for socio-centric and emancipative values. Traces of dormant support for violence are evident in responses about violence against others where *ressentiment*-ful participants score higher compared to their less *ressentiment*-ful counterparts. We discuss the implications of our findings for the quality of democracy, authoritarian populism and nationalism.

*Keywords*: *ressentiment-*scale, WVS, complex emotions, political interest, populism

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**Introduction: The political relevance of *ressentiment***

This article employs *ressentiment* to understand the affective underpinnings of populism, anti-politics and public assessments of the quality of democracy. *Ressentiment* is a complex political emotion stirred by negative feelings elicited by social comparison and felt injuries, which remain unexpressed due to the subject’s incapacity to express them. Here we use contemporary Greek society as an illustrative case, and investigate the social basis and political expressions of *ressentiment* in relation to the value substratum of the Greek political culture.

The political sociology and the political psychology of emotions enrich the analysis of political behavior by operationalizing specific emotions such as fear, anger, trust, devotion, anxiety, compassion, solidarity, enthusiasm, shame, and avoiding abstract and amorphous emotional terms such as "national sentiment" or "passion"(Demertzis 2020). They have transformed the way we examine political phenomena, recognizing that within social interactions individuals behave both as rational actors and as "emotional citizens" (Thompson and Hoggett 2012). Important examples are the role of anger in explaining the rise of populism (Rico et at 2017), the impact of compassion in post-conflict societies (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008), the politics of pity (Houliaraki 2004; Whitebrook 2002), the effect of shame in understanding political violence (Turner 2007) and the way fear shapes political processes (Kinnvall 2013; Wodak 2015). Our paper contributes the analysis of the operational value of *ressentiment* as a complex emotional phenomenon that predicts political practices.

For nearly a hundred years, drawing from Nietzsche (1885/1961), Scheler (1961) and Dostoyevsky (1864/2000), philosophers and moralists have focused on and disputed the subtle and complex emotion of *ressentiment*. Since Scheler and Sombart (1998), the analytical value of *ressentiment* has been recognized as an individual and collective political emotion fueling revolutions, uprisings, religious wars, pogroms, political malaise, and post-colonial frustrations.

From a social psychology perspective, Yankelovich (1975) examined whether and to what extent the American public's dissatisfaction with politics immediately after the Vietnam War was a product of *ressentiment*. He described *ressentiment* as a dangerous political emotion, a reservoir of psychic energy accumulated by frustration and manifested through politics of anger, retribution and demagogy[[1]](#footnote-1). *Ressentiment* consists of suppressed negative emotions such as fear, envy, hatred, *Schadenfreude* or indignation experienced by the powerless, and involves a compensatory upgrading of weakness into virtue, what Scheler (1961) called “transvaluation”.

A historical sociologist, Greenfeld (1992) interpreted the ethnogenesis of France, Germany, Russia, and USA based on the *ressentiment* of the elites and the mass public. Greenfeld focused on the historical context of the competitive inter-constitution of particular nationalisms and the international distribution of status and dignity. She noted that while the English aristocracy secured and vindicated the country's prestige as a nation of free citizens, French and Russian nobility sought to protect it, the German intellectuals to conquer it and the Americans to defend it (Greenfeld 1992: 488). For the French, Germans, Russians and Americans their country’s prestige was also achieved via expressing *ressentiment* against each other. Demertzis (2020) identifies as similar process in the case of Greek nation-building, taking place under "crypto-colonial" terms (Herzfeld 1995).

Adding to the above, scholars understand political developments in late modernity as a politics of generalized *ressentiment*, cultivated by the uncertainties of late-capitalism and the ubiquitous sense of the public’s inadequacy and powerlessness. In this context, political expressions by publics are seen as hasty reactions, usually manifested as "identity politics" and ethnicity, instead of autonomous and self-grounded political acts (Brown 1995: 21–76; Connolly 1991: 22–23, 207). More recently,Mishra argued that *ressentiment* is the defining element of our world. According to Mishra (2017: 31) modernity’s’ promise of equality has been refuted by massive disparities of power, educational opportunities, status and concentration of ownership[[2]](#footnote-2).

Scholars also deem *ressentiment* an essential cultural-emotional characteristic of the silent majorities who, immersed in mediocrity, are anxious to maintain their identity (Pirc 2018: 112). Focusing on the role of *ressentiment* as driver of unconventional political behavior, Posłuszna and Posłuszny (2015) explain extremism and fundamentalism as active validations of *ressentiment.* The scholars add that despite its compensating value reversal *ressentiment* cannot offer lasting relief to the humiliation experienced by post-colonial populations and militant groups. Similarly, Žižek argues that terrorist violence stems from *ressentiment* to the extent that "the problem with fundamentalists is not that we consider them inferior to us, but rather that they themselves secretly consider themselves inferior" (Žižek 2008: 86). According to Žižek, terrorist fundamentalists are not true believers, but instead feel insecure with their cultural- religious identity against the sinful way of life of the West.. Compared to others, they are not convinced of their own moral superiority.

Studies that seek to understand the rising and the victory of Donald Trump in the USA and the populist mentality of his supporters, place special emphasis on *ressentiment* (Hackett 2016; Salmela and von Scheve 2018) [[3]](#footnote-3). White, blue-collar workers and less educated voters supported Trump but were unlikely to improve their class status. Scholars argue that Trump’s discourse released – unknown for how long - their bitterness and aroused the simmering fire of their anger for those "above" (Wimberly 2018: 189, 195). Of course, the *ressentiment* of the Trumpists was also fueled by complaints against existing inequalities and "status anxieties" (Hoggett 2018). As millions of people in the West blame the "indifferent" elites for the growing loss of economic and political power, Trumpism is a phenomenon that goes beyond Trump himself (Knauft 2018). Similarly, employing the twin concept of “resentment” but echoing that of *ressentiment*, Hochschild (2016: 135, 147, 212) offers a thick description (deep story) of the Tea Party supporters by qualitatively researching their anger, hopes, fears, pride, shame, and anxiety. *Ressentiment* has also been identified in the contempt towards political elites, experts, and the media, expressed by the silent majorities of populist politics suffering by a “castrating lack of efficiency” (Pirc 2018: 112).

In the next section, we present a brief socio-political analysis of the Greek context focusing on its political culture and we present our main research question on how *ressentiment* has an impact on citizens’ political engagement and electoral preferences. Next, we review the key elements of *ressentiment* and put forward theory-driven empirical hypotheses. In the empirical section of the article, we test three sets of theoretically driven hypotheses focusing on efficacy, life satisfaction, value systems, and propensity for violence, using the 2017 World Values Survey Greece dataset. This dataset contains a six-item abbreviated scale of *ressentiment* and a battery of items measuring emotional reactions to the financial crisis. While the political implications of *ressentiment* have been analyzed from historical, sociological and phenomenological perspectives drawing from qualitative and interpretive approaches, little has been done so far to quantitatively scrutinize the political relevance of *ressentiment*. This is the key empirical contribution of our article.

## Witnessing *ressentiment* in the Greek social and political cultural context

On its own path dependence to modernity and late modernity, as a country of the semi- periphery, Greece has always lagged behind in the hierarchy of the international division of labor and symbolic capital, experiencing the pressure of, as it were, a crypto- colonial dynamic (Herzfeld 2005: 56, 67–68, 214). The persistent and painful perceived sense of inferiority of Greece, when compared to its western counterparts, has brought about a perpetually unbearable sense of deficiency begging for a rectification, felt as ‘almost never arriving’. Victimhood, destiny and perceived inferiority are key signs of *ressentiment*. We argue that like the civilizational distance experienced by the Russian elite vis-á-vis the West, this perception operates as a conducive condition for not just nurturing, but also infinitely reproducing national *ressentiment* as a collective emotion and/or emotional climate that permeates Greek society.

This macro-affective landscape is evident in high levels of life dissatisfaction and deep-seated distrust towards the local elites and the country’s partners in the EU especially after the Great Recession (2007-2009) followed by the Eurozone crisis (2009-2013) . In Greece, objective indicators point to stressful realities on the ground. Since late 2009, the country lost more than a quarter of its GDP, saw unemployment reach a record 27%, and experienced soaring poverty levels (OECD 2016). The sovereign debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio went from 120% in 2010 to an estimated 210% by 2021, the highest among the EU27[[4]](#footnote-4). Currently, Greece ranks 35th among 41 EU and OECD countries in the social justice index[[5]](#footnote-5), and 53rd in the Steve Hanke's Misery Index in a total of 156 countries[[6]](#footnote-6). In 2020 about 29% of the population lived at-risk-of-poverty while 32% harbored material deprivation estimated by the EU-SILC standards[[7]](#footnote-7). This goes in tandem with malaise and life dissatisfaction which due to a number of interrelated macro (e.g., techno-cultural lag compared to advanced countries), meso (e.g., crony capitalism and administrative deficiencies, low GNI per capita) and micro-structural reasons (e.g., poor bridging and linking social capital), was high well before the financial crisis. Characteristically, from 1981 to 1999 life dissatisfaction in Greece was the highest among the EC countries (*Eurobarometer* #3-54). Between 2003 and 2010, measures of overall life dissatisfaction in EU15 remained constant (circa 22%), whereas in Greece, overall life dissatisfaction increased from 46% in 2003 to 51% in 2010 (*Eurobarometer*, #60.1, 74).

These indicators reveal a warped social profile, which coupled with the pathologies of the Greek political system and culture (weak civil society, low levels of institutional trust, clientelism and demagogy), and augmented by migration challenges, have led to the nurturing of populist and anti-politics reactions premised, among others, on *ressentiment.* The post-authoritarian public life in Greece (i.e., 1974 onwards, after the collapse of the military dictatorship of 1967) is replete with political populism. While the populist decade of Andreas Papandreou’s Socialist Party did not attract much international academic attention (Clogg 1993), the leftist populism of the 2012-2019 period has been studied extensively (Mudde 2015). Between 2015-2019 the anti-austerity coalition government formed by the radical left-wing party of SYRIZA and the ethno- nationalist Independent Greeks. This counter-intuitive coalition triggered much international attention, in the context of the heightened interest in populism after Trump’s electoral success and the Brexit referendum. A handful of studies have examined populism and reactionism in Greece drawing from the theoretical tenets of *ressentiment* (Demertzis 2006; Capelos and Demertzis 2018). Our article contributes to this debate by seeking to identify the expressions of *ressentiment* in relation to the value system of Greek society. Is *ressentiment* prevalent among particular segments of Greek society, and what are the value orientations that most strongly associate with it?

***Ressentiment* key characteristics and our working hypotheses**

Drawing from Scheler’s conceptualization, we approach *ressentiment* as an unpleasant complex moral sentiment, which functions as a chronic reliving of repressed and non-acted out vengefulness, hatred, animosity, envy, jealousy, fear, *Schadenfreude*, and resentment. When individuals are unable to express overtly these emotions, they disavow the value of what they unconsciously desire (Aeschbach 2017; Demertzis 2020). This repeated reliving of negative emotions *cum* impotence cultivates in the persons of *ressentiment* a sense of fated self-victimization. To cope with this self-degradation, these individuals develop a reaction formation defense mechanism to respond actively to real or perceived inflictions. To compensate for their perceived inefficacy, the *ressentiment-*ful persons devalue those perceived to hold superior positions, and reevaluate their own inferiority; in doing so they console themselves that, at least, they are morally righteous and innocent victims. The devaluation – reevaluation interplay makes for the transvaluation process, without which *ressentiment* would be felt as fear, envy or just resentment (i.e., moral anger)[[8]](#footnote-8).

While theorization on *ressentiment* is rich, empirical research is scant. Ball (1964: 95) defined *ressentiment* as a kind of "passive political rebellion". He identified *ressentiment* in 15% of a representative sample of middle-class young Americans who held repressed animosity and weakness towards the adult world. These young people consciously rejected politics and withdrew from public affairs. According to Ball, *ressentiment* could be operationalized as a version of "alienation" - a concept that captured the interest of many American political scientists at the time - but generalizing conclusions should be done with due care and caution.

León et al. (1988) constructed a *ressentiment* measurement scale to study the cognitive-affective dimensions of this complex emotion. They initially formed a psychometric scale of 51 questions that respondents answered with "yes" or "no". In order to increase the validity and reliability of the measuring tool, León and colleagues developed a 28-dimensional scale, which includes nine items from the L dimension of the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ). [[9]](#footnote-9)

Utilizing data collected to study radicalism and radicalization in Greece under the financial crisis[[10]](#footnote-10), Capelos and Demertzis (2018) operationalized the affective orientation of *ressentiment* as a proxy variable and used it to explain overt and covert political behavior of a conventional (legal) or non-conventional type (illegal and violent). They constructed their ‘*ressentiment* proxy’ variable by combining anger, anxiety, and low internal political efficacy.

These approaches reflect Scheler’s account of *ressentiment* (1961: 46-69) as emerging out of two necessary conditions: (a) an unfulfilled, repressed demand for revenge, and (b) chronic powerlessness. Scheler also notes three sufficient conditions: social comparison, the gap between perceived social equality and real power, and a sense of destiny regarding felt injustices. Drawing on Scheler’s conceptualization and extant empirical approximations of this complex concept, we identify six key indicators of *ressentiment*:a persons’ sense of victimhood, indignation, destiny, inefficacy, injustice and jealousy.

Sophisticated and dedicated *ressentiment* instruments allow us to test complex hypotheses regarding its relationship with other cognitive and affective determinants of political decision making. Take emotional reactions of anger and fear, for example. For Scheler (1961) and Nietzsche (1885/1961), *ressentiment* is conducive to passivity. While it can be expressed as sadness, fear and anger and recorded as such in public opinion survey discrete emotion items, *in ressentiment* these emotional expressions lack action tendency and are passive. To clarify, the rumination, inferiority and victimization experienced by *ressentiment*-ful individuals as destiny, block their anger against real or alleged wrongdoings, and lead to inaction. Among the advantages of engaging with *ressentiment* is that it theoretically challenges the hypothesized ‘fight versus flight’ effects of anger and fear (Marcus 2021). *Ressentiment* contains anger and fear in repressed and transmuted forms, but instead of any action, fight or flight, it is expected to generate inaction and be observed as passivity (Capelos et al. 2021).

In this article we explore the social basis and political expressions of *ressentiment* in relation to the value substratum of the Greek political culture. We ask whether *ressentiment* permeates the Greek national political culture as a whole - as might be indicated by a macro-theoretical and speculative historical sociological approach; or alternatively, is it situated in specific social categories, marking specific political subcultures?

Our first set of hypothesis involves the populations likely to experience *ressentiment*. Extant studies in Greece show that low-income citizens suffer and/or are threatened with social exclusion and multiple social discrimination (Papadoudis 2018). Following the economic crisis, the already weak welfare system has taken serious blows. We therefore expect groups with low quality of life and low-income to be most likely to experience the entire constellation of the affective content of *ressentiment.* According to historical and political sociologists, *ressentiment* has nurtured major societal transformations and political upheavals (Ferro 2010; Betz 2002; Sombart 1998; von Martin 2016). Studies in Europe suggest that *ressentiment* is associated with extreme right-wing political orientations favoring the electoral support of anti-immigrant populist right-wing parties (Salmela and Von Scheve 2018). We therefore expect *ressentiment* to be more prevalent among citizens with extreme right ideological leanings. We also expect that the inherent passivity of *ressentiment* will be reflected in individuals’ low interest in politics. Political interest, like curiosity about public affairs, predicts civic engagement and electoral participation (Van Deth and Elff 2004). Lack of political interest is an indication of political alienation, which we expect will characterize *ressentiment*-ful individuals.We also expect evidence of the compensatory processes of r*essentiment.* While these individuals barely trust anyone, in order to compensate for their own devaluation and self-estrangement, they will be likely to seek comfort in the imaginary community of the nation and feel proud of it.

Our second set of hypotheses involves the values linked to *ressentiment*. The self- marginalization and self-victimization of *ressentiment* restrict an individual’s hermeneutic horizons towards self-transcendence and self-actualization. This is perfectly represented in Dostoyevsky’s “mouse-man” – the character the bitterness of which drove Nietzsche to conceptualize *ressentiment*-, a lonely, isolated and misanthropic creature living secretly by inwardly gnawing and consuming himself (Dostoyevsky 1864/2000: 10). Because *ressentiment* is inefficacious in its core, we expect to see a negative relationship with values that favor independence, stimulation, innovation and desire for change. We also expect a negative relationship between *ressentiment* andpost-materialist, emancipative values, which are conducive to extraversion, assertive citizenship, and democratic participation. Since the early 1980s, post-materialism has been a prominent paradigm to explain civic action and electoral preferences in late modern societies (Inglehart, 1977, 1990, 1997). The paradigm was exemplified in a two-dimensional cultural map designed by Inglehart & Welzel (2005) in the context of the World Values Survey (WVS) and the European Values Study (EVS). The value sets of that map were “traditional” vs “secular-rational values” and “survival” vs “self-expression values” constructed by 12 variables. Operating WVS and EVS data, Welzel (2013) introduced later on his “New Cultural Map of the World” using 24 variables to tap “obedient vs emancipative values” and “sacred vs secular values”.

Our third set of hypotheses involve predispositions and orientations towards political violence. *Ressentiment* involves vengefulness and animosity towards real or imagined targets but these negative feelings are not acted out (Demertzis 2020: 138-140). Although in *ressentiment*, individuals feel wronged due to their inherent powerlessness, they are not able to imagine that they could reciprocate it. Through transvaluation, the value of their weakness reverses into a virtue, and the value of what was desired reverses to being undesirable, just like "sour grapes". Unlike morally angry citizens, *ressentiment-*ful citizens transvaluate and feel intense jealousy, victimhood, a sense of injustice, inefficacy, and a strong sense of destiny. For *ressentiment*-fuls, the avoidance of violence is not due to a deep-rooted peaceful disposition, but rather a reassuring bypass of a lacking self-confidence and sense of agency. Capelos and Demertzis (2018) found that *ressentiment*-ful individuals were more likely to be dormant supporters of political violence in comparison to resentful individuals who were more likely to actively engage with it. We therefore expect that *ressentiment-*ful individuals will not actively support political violence.

## Methodology

Our analysis involves data from the Greek component of the 7th round of the WVS (Haerpfer et al. 2020). The study was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1200 participants (36% response rate) between 8 September 2017 and 16 October 2017. The questionnaire involved approximately 320 items, and was delivered via telephone interviews, using Random Digit Dial. The data collection took place while Greece was under austerity measures.

This dataset has two unique features: it contains one set of items measuring discrete emotions elicited in the context of the financial crisis, and one set of items measuring *ressentiment [[11]](#footnote-11)*. The survey measured six felt emotions (fear, anxiety, shame, hope, sadness and anger) ranging from 1-10 (not at all - completely). For our empirical analysis, we focus particularly on sadness, fear, anger, and their relationship with *ressentiment,* staying close to Scheler’s conceptualization of the term.

*Ressentiment* was measured with six adapted items from León et al. (1988) ranging from 1- 10 (completely disagree – completely agree). These six items directly tap the dimensions of *ressentiment* drawn from Scheler’s analysis and they go as follows: *a) There are people who live a better-off life than myself despite having made less of an effort* (jealousy and resentment); *b) There are many ‘Mr Nobodies’ that look like great men* (transvaluation)[[12]](#footnote-12); *c) I often think that people abuse my kindness* (victimization); *d) I often think that people are disrespectful towards me* (inefficacy/powerlessness); *e) When things turn out badly, I often ask myself ‘why me’* (sense of injustice); *f) I believe that my hopes and dreams will never come true* (fate/destiny).

Measures of ideology (left-right), income, social class, education, gender, occupation, employment status, marital status, household size, citizenship and age are available in WVS as standard. The survey included measures of overall life satisfaction, satisfaction with the political system, post-materialist values, social trust, national pride and the propensity for violence and political violence. Instead of efficacy, the survey included a measure of agency and control in one’s life. The perceived degree of choice and control over one’s life ranged from 1-10 (no choice – a great deal of choice).

We used the 24 value items of the WVS to apply Welzel’s new cultural map research protocol which takes into account 24 value scores to locate each respondent to two scales/dimensions: obedience values versus emancipation values and sacred values versus secular values. For the construction of the two dimensions, the method brings together eight separate indexes related to issues such as disobedience, distrust, relativism, skepticism, autonomy, equality, expression and choice, each including 3 objects/variables. This application includes both external weights based on individual characteristics and internal weights based on the completeness or the missing values in the 24 questions utilized from WVS.

The alpha (α) reliability coefficient that taps the inter-item correlations or covariances of the six *ressentiment* items was 0.7589 (N 1200). Deleting any of the items did not improve the scale. This is an improvement from the original scale by León et al. with alpha .65 (1988, p.346, 349)[[13]](#footnote-13). We constructed the *ressentiment* index taking the average scale of the six items (see Figure 1). The scale is positive (no negative values) and continuous and provides a score for 1,199 participants. The mean scale score is 5.821, with median 5.833 and standard deviation 1.5833.

(Figure 1 about here)

## Analysis and key findings

Our analysis starts with a socio-demographic and affective anatomy of *ressentiment* in Greece using the *ressentiment* index. We describe the distribution of *ressentiment* on the political Left-Right axis, examine how it relates to efficacy and life satisfaction, and explore its link with post-materialistic value orientations, trust and national pride. We also test its association with violence and support for political violence. Although our data come only from Greece, these hypotheses can quantitatively buttress the theoretical conceptualizations of *ressentiment* and help shape precise analytical tools for future research.

### The anatomy of ressentiment in Greece: socio-demographic and affective bases

To explore the social basis of *ressentiment* in Greece we ran an OLS regression model that estimates the marginal effects of social, economic, and demographic characteristics on *ressentiment* as the dependent variable (see Table 1). Predictors include social class (self-perceived), income scale self-placement, employment status, educational level, occupation, financial status, residence, nationality, gender, age, marital status, children in the family and household size.[[14]](#footnote-14) Our analysis presents the marginal effects instead of the regression coefficients because they capture the direction and the range of these trends.[[15]](#footnote-15)

(Table 1 about here)

First, we examine how *ressentiment* scores vary (increase or decrease) based on social and individual factors. For example, social class has a significant positive effect on *ressentiment*, and moving from a higher to a lower social class increases the *ressentiment* score. A similar negative effect is also apparent for income self-placement, especially at the low points of the scale that correspond to the poorest part of the sample (see Figure 2). We note that those who answered that they were “*very*” concerned about their employment status (764 individuals) have an average *ressentiment* score well above the total sample average (6.50 vs. 5.82) and the average of their income category (5.98) [[16]](#footnote-16).

(Figure 2 about here)

Next, we examine employment status and living conditions (see Table 1). On employment status, we find a significant positive effect (increase in *ressentiment*) for people who are unemployed and those who declare the household is their only occupation. However, there is no (statistically) significant effect on part-time employees, self-employed, retirees or students. Educational level does not seem to have a significant effect on *ressentiment*. Occupation is only significant and positive for the semi-skilled and unskilled workers. An individual’s financial situation has a significant and positive (increasing *ressentiment*) effect, particularly for people who state that their family has spent its savings and were forced to borrow money. This is not the case for people who state they are simply making ends meet or that they have spent some savings.

The model shows that the size of the city a person lives in may affect *ressentiment*, but the findings do not provide clear conclusions: while living in a big city increases *ressentiment*, living in a medium or small city reduces it. Being of Greek nationality has a small positive effect on *ressentiment*, whereas gender, marital status and the presence of children in the family do not have a significant effect. Age has a negative effect on *ressentiment* (see Table 1), at least for the younger age groups compared to the older ones. Finally, the size of the household has a negative effect on *ressentiment*, with it decreasing as the number of household members increase.

Turning to the affective profile of *ressentiment*, we analyzed responses on sadness (sorrow), anger, and fear. Our data shows that as *ressentiment* increases, so do fear and sadness suggesting a “flight’ mode of conduct. The differences in *ressentiment* scores between the lower and the higher parts of the three distributions depicted in Figure 3 are statistically significant at p<.001.

(Figure 3 about here)

Next we examined whether *ressentiment* is a political emotion that is property of the political Left or the Right? Systematic empirical research across Europe is in its infancy. In our Greek dataset we find disproportionately higher scores of *ressentiment* in the 9 and 10 positions (Right) compared to the 1 and 2 (Left) and this difference is statistically significant at p<.01 (see Figure 4). This finding supports our hypothesis.

(Figure 4 about here)

Turning to political interest, with respect to the Greek public, the higher one scores in the *ressentiment* scale the less one is interested in politics. The difference in the *ressentiment* scores of those who are “very interested” in politics (mean value 5.601) and those who are “not at all interested” (mean value 6.059) is statistically significant at p<.05.

***Testing of the three research hypotheses: Analysis and discussion***

Next, we test the three sets of our working hypotheses, which reflect theoretical advances and empirical research on *ressentiment*.

### (H1) High score on ressentiment will be related to low efficacy and low life satisfaction.

In our dataset, efficacy was estimated as the perceived amount of choice and control over one’s live. Given that *ressentiment* is premised on perpetuated self-victimization, we expected that people with a high *ressentiment* score would feel that they cannot adequately control their lives and are less satisfied with them*.* The results in Figure 5 confirm our expectation in a monotonic fashion. Our explanation for this result is that *ressentiment* in Greece draws on the deep- seated societal malaise, which, in turn, is premised on a sense of intense relative deprivation resulting from several processes of social and cross-national comparisons. The resulting negative balance of symbolic capital is a key generative factor of *ressentiment*.

(Figure 5 about here)

### (Η2) High score on ressentiment will be negatively related to post-materialist values and social trust, and positively related to national pride.

To test this set of hypotheses, we examined the values of individuals high in *ressentiment*. According to our findings, the value propensity towards emancipatory and/or postmaterialist orientations is much weaker among respondents with high *ressentiment* scores. We examined the data based on the new cultural map of Welzel (2013), i.e., obedience values versus emancipative values and sacred values versus secular values. Overall, 52% of the 1,195 participants gather on the left and bottom part of the map. In other words, the majority of the sample is located closer to the obedience but also the sacred values or, alternatively, farther away from the emancipative and secular values. (Figure 6). Focusing on the upper 25% of the *ressentiment* scale (individuals with high scores), we see that concentration on the left and bottom part of the map is essentially even higher comparing the two subsamples: 59% vs. 52% (the difference is statistically significant at p<.05). Noteworthy is also the difference between the general population (N 1,195) and the special population (298 people with high *ressentiment* scores) regarding the concentrations in the 1st and 2nd quadrants: the concentration close to the emancipative and secular values characterizes only 35% of the *ressentiment*-full respondents compared to 43% that applies to the general population.

(Figure 6 about here)

It seems then that the *forma mentis* of the *ressentiment*-imbued persons repels postmodern emancipative values, which are likely to support liberal notions of democracy and pro- immigrant public attitudes. Beyond that, however, *ressentiment* seems to lead to social shyness and to low scores on generalized social trust (measured in the WVS survey by "*Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you need to be very careful in dealing with people*?”). The findings confirmed our hypothesis: individuals with high levels of interpersonal trust have lower *ressentiment* scores (mean 5.374) compared to those who express caution (mean 5.934).

Our findings did not confirm the hypothesis of national pride being a compensatory emotional reaction for inefficacy and distrustful social isolation. On one hand, the difference between *ressentiment*-ful respondents who are “*very proud*” to be Greeks (mean 5.803) and those who are “*not at all proud*” (mean 7.655) is statistically significant (at p<.01). On the other hand, the small sample size of 11 respondents who answered ‘*not at all proud*’ cannot support meaningful comparisons. We think that national pride does not partake in the transvaluation process to alleviate sour powerlessness and victimization. At any rate, national pride stems from identification with the nation as a cultural or political community of people who vindicate their commonness via rituals and ceremonies where they share experiences, memories and affective practices of togetherness (Sullivan 2014). It is possible that in Greece *ressentiment*-ful respondents are far too isolated to experience emotional ties with the nation, an abstract and imaginary category. Other scholars corroborate this expectation, suggesting that social sharing bonds are shallow among *ressentiment*-ful individuals and that *ressentiment* is not conducive to selflessness (Salmela and Capelos 2021). We believe this finding calls for more research on social sharing and *ressentiment* in particular domains such as the echo chambers where cultural homophily is endowed with emotionality.

### (Η3) High score on ressentiment will be associated with a low predisposition to violence against others and low support for political violence, due to the passive nature of ressentiment.

Our hypothesis that high *ressentiment* scores will be associated with a low predisposition to violence cannot be fully tested with our data because the number of people who answered positively in support of political violence in the sample overall is very small. We think this might be because the wording of the relevant question, common to all countries participating in the WVS, was such that it presumably elicited socially desirable answers: “*it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between?*”. The answers “*political violence is never justified* or “*violence against others is never justified*" exceed 80% and 90%, respectively. As a result, the levels of support for violence for those high in *ressentiment* are low, and remain indistinguishable from those with low or middle-range *ressentiment* scores. While this is good news for democracy, there are still a small number of people for whom violence (political or otherwise) is a justifiable act. The questionnaire did not elaborate on reasons or conditions for such responses, therefore, on an exploratory level, there is a clear impasse. Traces of the dormant support for violence in general can be seen in responses about violence against others. Here we find a statistically significant effect, albeit marginal, for high *ressentiment* (Table 2). This is a particularly interesting finding that prompts further investigation.

(Table 2 about here)

## Conclusion

The concept of *ressentiment* has been employed to understand the groundwork of major socio-historical transformations, such as nation-building and revolutions, and to decipher political grievances. More recently, a significant number of political sociologists and psychologists have used it to analyze “pathologies” of contemporary democracies especially after the escalation of Trumpism. Emanating from accounts of *ressentiment* offered by Scheler (1961) and Nietzsche (1885/1961), these analytical endeavors result in varied and sometimes incompatible approaches. To name some key contributions, *ressentiment* has been viewed as complex affective phenomenon (Aeschbach 2017), a complex ‘cluster’ emotion (Demertzis, 2006, 2020; TenHouten, 2018), an enduring complex sentiment elicited by disfavor and negatively directed to others (Rodax et al 2021), or as a lasting compensatory emotional mechanism (Salmela and von Scheve 2018; Salmela and Capelos, 2021).

Here we remained close to Scheler (1961) and approached *ressentiment* as a complex moral sentiment elicited by life failures and powerlessness, registered by the defense mechanism of transvaluation. We used a novel empirical operationalization of *ressentiment* available in the 7th round of the Greek WVS which utilized a 6-item scale. Our study mitigates the scarcity of empirical studies on *ressentiment,* which for almost two decades now, has been considered an elicitor for the demand for populist, nationalist, far right and generally anti-systemic parties and political programs. The macro-sociological and phenomenological approaches leave significant room for misinterpretation and over-generalization. Hence, the need for employing complementary quantitative and qualitative methodological approaches.

We examined the social basis and political expressions of *ressentiment* in relation to the value substratum of the Greek political culture and tested three sets of hypotheses related to (a) efficacy and life satisfaction, (b) post materialist value orientations, trust and national pride, and (c) predisposition to violence and support for political violence. Our research focused on the dynamics of this complex negative moral sentiment rather than the socio-political impact of distinct emotions such as anger, fear, or anxiety. As much as the analysis of separate primary emotions is necessary for political research, so is the study of complex emotions like *ressentiment* and cynicism, which allows us to apprehend multilayered political cultural trends and cross-determined political behavior. Furthermore, we examined the relationship between this complex sentiment and values instead of attitudes which is often the approach adopted in similar projects. Values are hierarchically organized, deep-seated normative assumptions on how things should be run, and motivate individuals to act in one way or another. Their theoretical and empirical association with emotions improves their analytical significance (Capelos and Demertzis, 2018).

Our analysis of the social basis and political expressions of *ressentiment* found a limited distribution in Greece at the time of the financial crisis. This diverts from historical and phenomenological interpretations that see the *ressentiment*-ful mentality marking the very national habitus of the country, and the structure of feeling of its citizens (Demertzis 2020: 184-197). Synchronic cross-sectional analyses like the one we provide here are not necessarily at odds with diachronic qualitative explanations. Provided that findings are confirmed across studies, they may qualify the *longe durée* of the constants of the national political culture. The positive news, according to our data, is that instead of permeating the entire social fabric, or being a cemented affective orientation towards political objects (the political system as a whole, the input and output structures, and the political self), *ressentiment* appears in high concentrations in specific sub-sections of the sample. It is evident among individuals who are unemployed, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, low income citizens, and those who are on the far right of the political spectrum. What we can say with confidence is that a) *ressentiment* does not appear to have a ubiquitous presence in Greek political culture during the time of austerity and b) in line with other studies in Europe it appears to be directly or indirectly linked to the rise of far right and populist politics (Betz 2002; Taguieff 2007; Demertzis 2020: 159). The first finding invites further over-time investigations that can explore *ressentiment-*ful expressions during different events and crises in Greek political history. Such studies would draw strong links with phenomenological accounts of Greek political culture more broadly. The second finding invites further examination focusing specifically on electoral behavior and vote preferences.

Our expectation that inefficacy and self-victimization entail social isolation and political estrangement was consistent with our findings that high *ressentiment* scores link monotonically with overall life dissatisfaction and diminished political interest. A clear indication of social isolation is the *ressentiment*-ful persons’ lack of interpersonal trust and their aversion for socio-centric and emancipative values. This finding aligns with the finding that *ressentiment* is an affective driver of reactionary orientations (Capelos and Demertzis 2018; Capelos, Katsanidou and Demertzis 2017). The analysis of values in relation to emotions and political orientations is a field of research that deserves further attention.

Our study uses data from Greece, but the abbreviated *ressentiment* scale we used here can be adopted as a methodological tool for synchronic and diachronic national and international comparisons in Europe and beyond. The growing international attention to *ressentiment* and its impact on contemporary grievance politics can benefit from parsimonious measures such as this one. Testing empirical hypotheses originating in sound theorizations can move forward by employing qualitative methodologies that explore the nature of *ressentiment*-ful grievances, and quantitative studies that generate time series data able to trace over-time changes.

The policy implications of our findings are relevant for addressing the grievances and political consequences of *ressentiment*. Policies that aim at temporarily alleviating economic losses do not address or heal the deeper and long–lasting vengeance of *ressentiment* that could remain and grow, even when the financial conditions improve. What is outwardly manifested as xenophobia, anti-stances (anti-immigration, anti-expert, anti-science, anti-elite, anti-EU) and populist preferences, capitalized upon by demagogues and nationalist parties, is not *just* the anger or fear of citizens resulting from a temporary reaction to financial hardship. We posit that these phenomena that challenge even affluent democratic societies are the manifestation of a complex and long-lasting emotional response to a perceived inability to acquire recognition and status. This frustrated inability turns bitter, hateful and distrustful, and can fuel anti-social and violent behaviors delivered by far-right extremists or Islamic fundamentalists alike. Our findings show social class frustrations and income inequalities can predict *ressentiment*; and core social values together with emotions can explain it. Psychologically, *ressentiment* might offer individuals a release valve for the internal pressure of one’s perceived inability and bitterness through the transformation of the value of the self, and the superficial social sharing with peer-others. But this solution can hardly constitute a resolution as it fails to address the pressing realities it seeks to side-step (Salmela and Capelos, 2021). The transvaluation of *ressentiment* does not foster inclusive values, and its vengeful gaze does not favor policies that support vulnerable groups in society (welfare policies, immigration and asylum, social inclusivity). Policy makers will find in the *ressentiment*-ful citizens stringent opposition to initiatives promoting openness, civic education, empathy, and inclusivity. Such initiatives will be ineffective if they do not address the complex emotionality of majority and minority groups and individuals that experience *ressentiment*.

We close with a reflection on the importance of *ressentiment* for the quality of democracy. Scholars of *ressentiment* note that through the “inversion of values” it functions as a “psychological dynamite” (Scheler 1961: 50, 69), it corrodes the virtues of the civil sphere (Alexander 2006), undermines political participation and enhances de-democratization (Tilly 2007). In today’s post-democracies, permeated by technocracy, elitism, erosion of political institutions and corruption of political personnel, social comparison and concomitant low self-esteem thrive. Disadvantaged individuals and groups are eager for recognition, the restitution of social torts, and the filling of the gap between nominal rights and real power to achieve them. This renders them susceptible to demagogy and makes them *ressentiment-*prone. Although *ressentiment* can be a response to extant social injustices (Ciulla 2020), from the point of view of constitutional democracy, it is an aberrant response because it does not translate individual grievances into collective solidarity, active social trust, and self-centered political praxis. The challenge for scholars is to clarify conceptually the conditions under which *ressentiment* is cultivated and develop empirical studies that can shed light onto its political repercussions. The challenge for policy makers and public intellectuals is to take advantage of this knowledge, and defend democracy in practice against authoritarian populism and nationalism.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Estimation of marginal effects (after OLS regression model) by socioeconomic and demographic characteristics for *ressentiment*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Dependent variable: *ressentiment* index** | **Marginal** | **Standard** |
| *Social class (subjective)* | 0.3023\*\*\* | 0.0706 |
| *Income scales (self-placement: 1-2)* | 0.4272\*\* | 0.1473 |
| *Employment status (base: full-time employment)* |  |  |
| *Part time employed* | 0.2889 | 0.2180 |
| *Self-employed* | 0.2165 | 0.1975 |
| *Retiree* | -0.1151 | 0.1642 |
| *Homemaker* | 0.6485\*\* | 0.2269 |
| *Student* | -0.1245 | 0.2987 |
| *Unemployed* | 0.4386\*\* | 0.1529 |
| *Educational level* | 0.0487 | 0.0455 |
| *Occupation (base: no occupation)* |  |  |
| *Professional and technicians* | 0.2115 | 0.2828 |
| *Administrators* | 0.6364 | 0.4332 |
| *Employees* | 0.3382 | 0.2496 |
| *Sales* | 0.3946 | 0.2357 |
| *Services* | 0.4064 | 0.2508 |
| *Skilled worked* | 0.3570 | 0.2612 |
| *Semi-skilled worked* | 0.7804\*\* | 0.2600 |
| *Unskilled worker* | 0.9682\*\*\* | 0.2434 |
| *Farming worker* | 0.3476 | 0.3923 |
| *Farmer* | 0.3328 | 0.2720 |
| *Previous year, the family (base: saved)* |  |  |
| *Was simply making ends meet* | 0.3512 | 0.2236 |
| *Spent some savings* | 0.2119 | 0.2475 |
| *Spent the savings and borrowed money* | 0.9442\*\*\* | 0.2825 |
| *City size (base: over 500.000)* |  |  |
| *100 - 500.000* | 0.6633\* | 0.2959 |
| *50 - 100.000* | -0.1859 | 0.1472 |
| *20 - 50.000* | -0.4702\*\* | 0.1501 |
| *10 - 20.000* | 0.1199 | 0.2591 |
| *5 - 10.000* | -0.7592\*\*\* | 0.2308 |
| *2 - 5.000* | -0.1347 | 0.2912 |
| *Under 2.000* | -0.4796\*\*\* | 0.1260 |
| *Citizen of this country (yes)* | 0.5770\* | 0.2508 |
| *Gender (woman)* | -0.0640 | 0.1014 |
| *Age groups (younger to older)* | -0.1161\*\* | 0.0452 |
| *Marital status* | -0.0174 | 0.0285 |
| *Children in the family* | 0.0736 | 0.0620 |
| *Household size* | -0.1947\*\*\* | 0.0482 |

Statistical significance according to p-values at \*p<.05, \*\* p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001. Adj. R2=0.19 & N=1,090.

Table 2. Support of violence and *Ressentiment*

## Political violence as violence against other people

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Participants** | **(%)** | ***Ressentiment*** | **Participants** | **(%)** | ***Ressentiment*** |
| *It is never justified* | 960 | 81.4 | 5.898 | 1,082 | 90.6 | 5.845 |
| *2* | 106 | 9.0 | 5.596 | 62 | 5.2 | 5.975 |
| *3* | 30 | 2.5 | 6.010 | 21 | 1.8 | 6.383 |
| *4* | 23 | 2.0 | 6.273 | 6 | 0.5 | 6.734 |
| *5* | 35 | 3.0 | 6.010 | 12 | 1.0 | 6.875 |
| *6* | 12 | 1.0 | 6.004 | 8 | 0.7 | 6.579 |
| *7* | 5 | 0.4 | 5.994 | 3 | 0.3 | 6.291 |
| *8* | 6 | 0.5 | 7.141 |  |  |  |
| *9* | 1 | 0.1 | 5.833 |  |  |  |
| *It is always justified* | 2 | 0.2 | 5.583 |  |  |  |
| *Total* | 1,180 | 100 | 5.892 | 1,194 | 100 | 5.882 |

Figure 1. *Ressentiment* – average scores (7th round WVS, Greece, 2017)

**There are many ‘Mr Nobodies’ that look like great**

**men**

**7.9**

**There are people who live a better-off life than**

**myself despite having made less of an effort**

**7.7**

**I often think that people abuse my kindness**

**5.5**

**When things turn out badly, I often ask myself ‘why**

**me’**

**5.4**

**I believe that my hopes and dreams will never**

**come true**

**4.6**

**I often think that people are disrespectful towards**

**me**

**4.1**

Weighted

mean values

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Figure 2. *Ressentiment*, income scale and social class (subjective)



**8.000**

**Lower class**

**7.000**

**Lower middle class**

**Working class**

**1**

**2**

**6.000**

**Upper middle class**

**6**

**8**

**7**

**5**

**3**

**4**

**5.000**

**9**

**4.000 Upper class**

**3.000**

**10**

**2.000**

**Social class**

**Income scale**

Figure 3. *Ressentiment* and associated emotions



**8.000**

**7.500**

**7.000**

**6.500**

**6.000**

**5.500**

**5.000**

**4.500**

**4.000**

**Fear Sorrow Anger **

Figure 4. *Ressentiment* and political self-placement



8.000

7.500

7.237

7.000

6.500

6.641

6.000

5.869

5.882

5.686

5.834

6.312

5.500

5.573

5.644

5.770

5.000

4.500

4.000

Left

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

Right

Ressentiment index by group

Ressentiment index by self positioning in political scale

Figure 5. *Ressentiment*, efficacy, and life satisfaction and politics

**8.000**

**7.500**

**7.000**

**6.500**

**6.000**

**5.500**

**5.000**

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

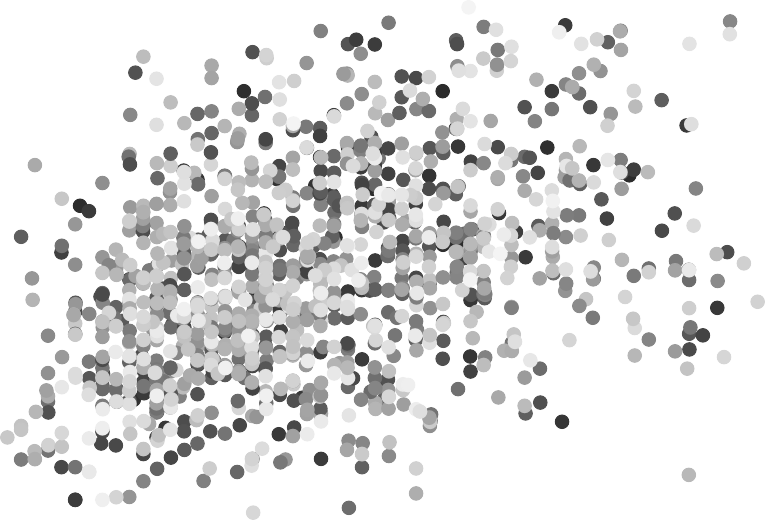
8

9

10

**Perceived freedom of choice and control Satisfaction from life**

Figure 6. *Ressentiment* distribution in the new cultural map (Welzel 2013)



1

0.9

1

35%->28%

8%-

>7%

2

0.8

0.7

0.6

0.5

0.4

0.3

0.2

0.1

3

52%->59%

0

0

0.1

0.2

0.3

0.4

0.5

0.6

0.7

5%-

>6%

0.8

4

0.9

1

**Sacred vs Secular values**

**Obedient vs Emancipative values**

1. Thirty-four years later Yankelovich called *ressentiment* "the second most powerful political emotion after instability," which "literally corrodes societies" (2009: 26). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bauman had much earlier postulated that the combination of rearrangements in class hierarchy and consumerism through social comparison result in a particularly high *ressentiment*-generating potential (Bauman 1982: 179–180). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A similar case can be made for the events of the storming of the US Capitol following Trump’s defeat in the 2020 elections. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. https://www.statista.com/statistics/270413/national-debt-of-greece-in-relation-to-gross- domestic-product-gdp/. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/SJI\_2019.pdf. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The Hanke Misery Index is the sum of the unemployment, inflation and bank lending rates, minus the percentage change in real GDP per capita. Higher readings on the first three elements are ‘more miserable’ (https://www.cato.org/commentary/hankes-2020-misery-index-whos-miserable-whos-happy#). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. https://www.statistics.gr/documents/20181/17180313/LivingConditionsInGreece\_0721.pdf/8267f241- 1d5d-032f-ca99-7df01e7e6706. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Resentment should be distinguished from *ressentiment*. Resentment is the emotion that arises when intentional wrongs, unjust and harmful offences are inflicted on a person. As a kind of anger motivated by an injustice, resentment is a retributive, punitive, or moral emotion, and is expressed as an active posture towards wrongdoers. On the contrary, *ressentiment* is premised on the inability of the person to actively pay back perceived transgressions against the self. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In Eysenck's revised psychometric questionnaire on personality structure, the L(ie) scale measures a person's tendency to conceal true feelings and to mislead others as to socially desirable views Eysenck, Eysenck & Barrett 1985). The other scales measure psychoticism, extraversion, and neuroticism. Each scale consists of twelve individual dimensions. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The data was collected by the project “Designing & Operating an Infrastructure for the Empirical Inquiry of Political & Social Radicalism in Greece” conducted by the University of Macedonia and funded by the EU Commission and the Greek Ministry of Education. A three-round survey (January, February, and November 2025) in Greece used a representative sample of 2,557 respondents (Konstantinidis et al. 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For a review of the incorporation of these items in the WVS questionnaire see Demertzis and Capelos (2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This statement refers to the devaluation of someone perceived as superior, and captures the first part of the transvaluation process. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A factor analysis tested whether the six *ressentiment* items carried the same weight in the creation of the *ressentiment* index. The factor scores indicate the weight that each of the six items carry on the index *ressentiment* score for each respondent. The load of the six items ranged from 0.5800 ("*my hopes and dreams will never come true*") to 0.7603 ("*I often feel that others do not respect me*"). The strongest factors of *ressentiment* are the psychological defense mechanism of transvaluation, jealousy and resentment as reflected in the statements " *There are many ‘Mr Nobodies’ that look like great men;* " and " *There are people who live a better-off life than myself despite having made less of an effort* ", respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Respondents were asked to describe themselves as belonging to the: 1. Upper class, 2. Upper middle class, 3. Lower middle class, 4. Working class, 5. Lower class. Our analysis follows the ordering/ranking of the questionnaire. Income is measured by a variable with 10 answer categories where 1 indicates the lowest income group and 10 the highest income group in the country. The respondents were asked to choose just one group for their household. The educational level accounts for the highest educational attainment of each respondent (self-completed), based on the ISCED-2011 coding – International Standard Classification for Education used by the UN and UNESCO: from Early childhood education (ISCED 0) or no education to Doctoral or equivalent (ISCED 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For our analysis we used linear prediction after regression to estimate average marginal effects (dy/dx method). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The WVS question item was: "*To what degree are you worried about the following situations*?". Participants had a choice between two answers with a special moral and social weight: a) "Losing my job or not finding a job", b) "Not being able to give my children a good education". [↑](#footnote-ref-16)