Title

‘The Left is Right’: Left and Right Political Orientation across Eastern and Western Europe

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ABSTRACT

Left-right political auto-identification has been used widely in socio-political research to interpret and organize political attitudes and opinions. In this paper we analyse whether the meaning of left-right orientation is the same in Eastern Europe and Western Europe. Using data from two big European survey programmes, European Social Survey and European Values Study, we show that while citizens' support for economic liberalism is positively related to their left-right political auto-identification, their support for cultural liberalism is negatively related. More importantly, we also present evidence for the regional diversity hypothesis, which shows that this pattern was more prominent among citizens of Western European countries than those of Eastern European countries. The results confirm the specificity of Eastern Europe when it comes to relationships between political auto-identification and other beliefs that are traditionally linked, implying that the concept of left-right political auto-identification cannot be transferred mechanically between Eastern Europe and Western Europe.

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The left is right

We're doomed

Desaparecidos (2015)

The left-right division is one of the most commonly used concepts across social and political sciences (Caprara & Vecchione, 2018; Jost, 2006; Malka et al., 2019). Its simplicity is appealing to substantive researchers, as it allows them to unidimensionally capture general political ideologies for use in substantive research. The left-right dimension has been widely used both in the realm of politics and in sociopolitical research. It has been demonstrated to be a versatile heuristic for interpreting and organizing political attitudes and opinions, but also for predicting both political and everyday behaviours. Currently, however, researchers debate whether this distinction is still meaningful for organizing political beliefs in the contemporary political landscape and whether the meaning of left-right political cleavage is invariant across different societies (Piurko et al., 2011; Malka et al., 2019; Tavits & Letki, 2009).

The primary objective of this article is to analyse the relationship between left-right political auto-identification and economic and cultural liberalism in Western and Eastern Europe. Considering the results and previous research (Piurko et al., 2011; Tavits & Letki, 2009; Thorisdottir et al., 2007; Wójcik & Cisiak, 2012) and differences in trajectories towards democracy, the understanding of the left-right dimension may be substantially different. Analysing these systematic differences is crucial for gaining a deeper insight into the dynamics of ideological cleavages in different societies as well as understanding the methodological inadequacies related to using a single item measure of political auto-identification.

Left-right metaphor

Historically, the left-right metaphor originated in 18th-century France and reflected the spatial position in the National Assembly of those who supported the *Ancien Régime* and hierarchical social order (on the right), and those associated with support for egalitarianism and deep social reforms (on the left) (Lipset, 1960; Bienfait & van Beek, 2001). Since then, the metaphor has been widely used to interpret, classify and evaluate political ideologies and programmes (Bobbio, 1996). The left-right distinction was found to be useful for encapsulating and understanding political programmes, offering the schema to interpret complex political discourses and therefore establishing a link between political parties and voters (Klingemann, 1998). Yet, Sartre called it an "empty vessel" (Bobbio, 1996), and many others accused it of either oversimplifying complex political phenomena or of being unable to capture newly rising social clashes, for example, recent reactions to issues surrounding climate change and environment conservation (Giddens, 1994). However, the concept is still widely used in social sciences due to its simplicity and versatility (Inglehart, 1990; Bienfait & van Beek, 2014).

In sociopolitical research, the left-right distinction has indeed been found to be a parsimonious way to capture individual ideological orientation (Feldman, 2003; Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990). Accumulating evidence from Western countries shows that citizens can at least make sense of left-right political labels and use them appropriately (Jost, 2006). Numerous social scientists have found differences between left- and right-identifiers (Adorno, 1963; Tomkins, 1963; Jost et al., 2003), demonstrating the validity of the distinction on the level of individual political orientation. From a theoretical point of view, the left-right position can be regarded as an indicator for a generalised political attitude, which influences the more concrete political beliefs (Fuchs & Klingemann, 1990).

The underpinnings of left- and right-wing political orientation

The problem of what underlies the left-right auto-identification has been probed ever since these labels were introduced into the political discourse. Early political theories traced the roots of the left-right distinction to attitudes regarding economic relations and equality. Marxist theories of class struggle (Giddens, 1994; Wright, 1997, 2015) linked ideological orientation to economic position with the ownership of the means of production at the core of the distinction. The New Left movement, however, emphasized the role of social or cultural values in the left-right ideological distinction (Kołakowski, 1978). From the sociopsychological point of view, Eysenck (1976) further developed this idea, bringing it down to the level of individual political orientation. According to Eysenck's model, left-right auto-identification is underlined by both economic and social values. Continuing this line of research Jost, Glaser, Kruglansky, and Sulloway (2003) summarised the conceptual work of the left-right distinction and its psychological meaning, and they also identified two dimensions underlying left-right auto-identification. Linking the classical political theories to more recent findings on psychological needs, they proposed two dimensions of political orientation: acceptance of inequality (corresponding to economic liberalism) and resistance to change (corresponding to cultural liberalism or traditionalism). They suggested that political orientation reflects deep-seated psychological needs, and those with a higher need for security would be more prone to identify themselves as conservative or right-wingers (see also Piurko et al. 2011). These two preference dimension – economic and cultural – are now widely recognized in contemporary literature as central to ideological differences between left and right (e.g. Carmines & D'Amico, 2015; Duckitt & Sibley, 2009; Malka et al., 2019).

The sociopsychological approach to political auto-identification as motivated social cognition has provided a theoretical framework that has opened new research avenues. Based on this theoretical idea, it was hypothesised that political orientation is shaped by personality predispositions which are heritable. Indeed, researchers found evidence that genetic factors

play a role in the formation of political ideology (Alford et al., 2005; Funk et al., 2013) and revived Adorno's idea of the close relationship of personality and political orientation by probing the role of personal characteristics that shape political auto-identification (Block & Block, 2006; Carney et al., 2008). Summing it up, the results of contemporary research suggest that the left-right orientation reflects deep-seated basic psychological needs (Jost et al., 2003), personality traits (Carney et al., 2008), values (Piurko et al. 2011) and cognitive abilities (Oskarsson et al., 2014), rather than merely serving as a communication vessel summarising otherwise complex political programmes or simply being a regurgitation of the social and/or familial discourse.

Importantly however, recent large-scale cross-national research using World Value Survey data found that cultural and economic political attitudes on average are weakly related, and that it is more common for them to be negatively rather than positively related (Malka et al., 2019). These findings suggest that the relationship between economic and cultural dimensions may be context-dependent and inevitably emphasize the longstanding problem of the universality of the left-right distinction (Bienfait & van Beek, 2014).

One may argue that if the relationship between economic and cultural preferences is not strong, positive and observed globally, then it puts to question the theoretical idea that psychological needs of security indeed underlie political beliefs. In what follows, we argue that the historical and political context may moderate this relationship as in different contexts support for certain political solutions reflects the search for stability to a different extent. For example, support for redistributive economic policies reflect openness to change in Western countries, while it may reflect conservation motivation in post-communist countries. Thus, in regions of relative political stability, political beliefs may be more coherent as indeed economic and cultural preferences reflect support for traditional arrangements (or openness to change) and may serve to satisfy the need for stability. In contrast, in regions of lower

political stability, support for certain economic and cultural arrangements does not coherently reflect the underlying need for stability and security. In such regions, the inner relationships between political preferences may be expected to be less coherent.

Universality of the left-right distinction and its underpinnings

First problem that needs to be highlighted is the stability of the meaning behind the left-right schema itself. Empirical evidence suggests that the meaning behind the left-right distinction may in fact undergo certain changes over time. For example, Knutsen (1995) investigated these dynamics by demonstrating how the post-materialist values were incorporated into the left-right distinction between the 1970s and early 1990s.

Second, most theorizing and empirical evidence on the nature and sociopsychological underpinnings of political orientation comes from research involving Westerners, citizens of largely liberal democracies (cf. Thorisdottir et al., 2007). This may result in dissociation of social theory from social reality as indeed, citizens of WEIRD countries constitute less than 15% of global population (Arnett, 2008; Henrich et al., 2010). The question of whether the left-right metaphor entails a similar meaning across different countries and cultures is currently one of the most important subjects of debate in the political and social sciences (Piurko et al., 2011; Jou, 2010; Thorisdottir et al., 2007; Malka et al., 2019). Early analysis aimed at comparing established (Western) and new (Eastern and Central European) democracies have suggested that the meaning of left- and right-wing political ideology may in fact differ across countries.

Huber and Inglehart (1995) summarized their analysis of the left-right schema among the political experts from Eastern and Western Europe by concluding that "the underlying meaning of left and right, however, varies from one society to another" (Huber & Inglehart, 1995, p. 91). In line with this idea, Tavits and Letki (2009) found that in Eastern and Central

Europe (contrary to Western Europe), financial policy pursued by left-wing governments was less redistributive than the policy pursued by right-wing parties, suggesting differences in the underpinnings of the left-right political orientation. Importantly, such differences have also been found on the level of citizens' political auto-identification.

Preliminary evidence that economic liberalism is significantly and positively related to the left-right auto-identification in Western Europe, but not in Eastern Europe was already provided by Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan & Shrout (2007). They, however, had access to data from a limited subset of Western and Eastern European countries. Similarly, Piurko, Schwartz and Davidov's (2011) research based on Schwartz's comprehensive model of personal values revealed that, in contrast to liberal countries, post-communist countries' values weakly predicted the left-right identification, less so than demographic variables. This indicates that underpinnings of left-right political orientation may differ across different countries or regions. Arguably, this differences may be prominent even within a fairly homogenous region such as Europe, due to cultural differences between regions such as Western, Eastern and Central Europe (see Kundera, 1984), as well as differences in historio-political background (i.e. Hobsbawm, 2012).

Thus, based on classic and recent literature on left-right political distinction, two caveats appear. First, whether there is systematic difference in how economic and cultural liberalism are related to left-right political orientation among citizens of Western and citizens of Eastern and Central regions of Europe. Second, whether this relationships has been recently undergoing changes over time. We will further develop this in the paragraphs below.

Regional diversity hypothesis

This article will analyse the potential differences in relations between cultural liberalism, economic liberalism and left-right political identification in Western and Eastern

Europe (please, see Table S1 in Supplementary Materials for regional classification of the countries¹). We have predicted that in well-established democracies, the support for economic liberal postulates is positively related to right-wing political orientation, while the support for cultural liberal postulates is negatively related to it. We did not, however, expect to observe the same pattern within newly-established Eastern European democracies that had undergone system transformation from the so-called socialist democracy to liberal democracy during the late 20th century. Thus, we predicted differences in the strength of the relationship between political orientation and support for economic and cultural postulates between citizens of Eastern and Western Europe.

Namely, we first predicted that among the citizens of Western European countries the right-wing political auto-identification will be positively related to economic liberalism and negatively related to cultural liberalism. Second we did not expect to observe this pattern among the citizens of Eastern and Central European countries which did not have long-term liberal democratic political traditions and have undergone systemic changes. In spite of early evidence revealing a significant relationship between cultural liberalism and left-right auto-identification among citizens of Eastern Europe, which was nonetheless based on a limited sample of four countries (Thorisdottir et al.), identifying a consistent pattern is unlikely among the Eastern and Central European countries. Despite their shared post-communist sociopolitical legacy (Hobsbawm, 1996), there is a cultural divide between those countries

¹ We classified countries according to United Nations geographical classification and history of political organization. Geographically Western, South-Western and Northern European countries were classified as Western European region with the exception of Baltic countries that emerged after the fall of Soviet Union. Geographically Eastern, Central, and South-Eastern countries were classified as Eastern European region. Part of Germany, that formerly belonged to German Democratic Republic was classified as Eastern European Region, while the part that used to belong to Federal Republic of Germany was classified as Western Europe. Turkey was not included as non-continental European country.

stemming from different historical background dating back to early Christianization, sustained by religious belongingness to Orthodox versus Catholic tradition (Kundera, 1984).

The reason for a different understanding of the left-right division may reflect how the meaning of socialism was defined within the State Socialism countries (Hobsbawm, 1996). While in Western Europe, leftist parties were related to democratic values and general acceptance to change (Kolakowski, 1978), in Eastern Europe, it was not so obvious (Hobsbawm, 1996). The communist parties across Eastern Europe perceived social-democratic values as a potential threat. Similarly, the potential democratic leftist leaders within the communist parties were restrained from power and persecuted (Szulecki, 2019). To complicate things even further. During the communism crises in the 80ties, the pro-market reforms were often initiated by the communists' leaders. At the same time, the otherwise conservative social movements rejected the pro-market approach and supported redistributive policies (Ost, 2006). Those historical reasons additionally blurred the classical distinction between Left and Right in Eastern Europe.

Nuancing those predictions

Summing it up, we predicted to find a consistent pattern in the Western European region, showing the coherent relationship between left-right political auto-identification and cultural liberalism (negative) as well as economic liberalism (positive) that reflects the similar ability of certain political attitudes to satisfy the need for stability. In contrast, we did not expect to find such a consistent pattern in Eastern European region, that would reflect the lower historical and political stability of that region and thereby lower ability of the same political beliefs to satisfy the need for security and conservation motivation. We further refer to these predictions as the **regional diversity hypothesis**.

Overview

In order to test the regional diversity hypothesis, we used two datasets from two major cross-national surveys conducted in Europe. We analysed the 2008 European Values Study (EVS) and the integrated dataset from the European Social Survey (ESS) covering eight waves of surveys gathered biennially. Within these datasets we identified items corresponding to economic liberalism, that is, disapproval for state interventionism, and cultural liberalism, that is, approval for non-traditional social arrangements. For both concepts, three items were identified in the EVS study and one item was identified in the ESS. We then tested whether the relationship of citizens' economic and cultural liberalism with their left-right political identification was moderated by their country's regional belongingness using a meta-analytical approach (ESS dataset, Study 1) and multi-level cross-classified models (EVS dataset, Study 2).

Study 1

For the purpose of the analysis we used data from the European Values Study of 2008 (EVS 2011). The EVS is a large-scale cross-national survey research programme that began in 1981. Since then, four waves of the study have been conducted. We used the most recent available data from the 2008 survey covering nationally representative samples from 44 countries. The questionnaire used in the study was developed in a way that enables meaningful cross-national comparisons (GESIS 2016).

Method

Participants and countries: The total analysed sample included $N = 59,296$ respondents from 43 European countries. The list of countries by regional classification accompanied by the sizes of the national samples is presented in Supplementary Materials Table S1. For the purpose of verifying the regional diversity hypothesis, the region was coded

as a dummy variable with 0 indicating the country's belongingness to the Eastern European region, and 1 indicating the belongingness to the Western European region.

Measures

Economic liberalism: The indicator for economic liberalism was calculated as a mean of three items measuring the general attitude towards state interventionism on differential scales from 1 to 10; for example, "1 - Individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves" to "10 - The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for". The scale was recoded so that higher values indicated lower support for state interventionism, thereby reflecting higher support for economic liberal postulates. The previous research showed that the scale can be used relevantly in cross-cultural settings (Radkiewicz, 2017; Wójcik & Cislak, 2012)².

Cultural liberalism: The indicator for cultural liberalism was calculated as a mean of three items measuring attitudes towards abortion, divorce and euthanasia, as these issues are major points in the cultural clash between the political right and left (Baldassarri, 2012; McCarty et al., 2006). Participants responded on 10-point scales from "1 - never be justified" to "10 - always be justified". Higher values reflect higher support for cultural liberal postulates. Similarly, as in the case of economic liberalism, past work shows that the scale of cultural liberalism can be used relevantly in cross-cultural settings (Radkiewicz 2017; Wójcik & Cislak 2012)³.

² To test this assumption further, we have tested the scale for metric invariance (Davidov et al. 2013) using Bayesian estimator (van de Schoot et al. 2013). The differences in loadings between groups were assumed to be normally distributed with a mean of 0 and a prior variance of .1 for all pairs of items. The number of iterations for the model was set to 50 000. The model fit the data well. The 95% confidence interval between the observed and the replicated χ^2 were -34.973 and 123.679 and the posterior predictive p-value equalled .132. Both of those parameters suggest that the approximate metric invariance was given (B. Muthén and Asparouhov 2012).

³ As previously, we have repeated the measurement invariance testing for the cultural liberalism scale. The differences of the loadings between groups were assumed to be normally distributed with a mean of 0 and prior variance of .1 for all pairs of items and the number of iterations for the model was set to 50 000. The model fit the data well. The 95% confidence interval between the observed and the replicated χ^2 were -55.247 and 101.939 and the posterior predictive p-value equalled .279. Both of those parameters suggest that approximate metric invariance was confirmed.

Left-right political auto-identification: The political auto-identification was measured with one item on a 10-point scale that asked participants, "How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking?" Responses showed "1 - left" to "10 - right".

The exact wording of items used for the purpose of this study accompanied by numbers referring to the original EVS 2008 questionnaire (GESIS 2010) are presented in Table 1. The percentages of missing values, as well as the descriptive statistics of the original EVS variables used for the analysis across all countries, are reported in Table S2 in Supplemental Online Materials.

----- Table 1 about here -----

Results

Relationship between left-right political auto-identification and economic liberalism: In the first step, we computed the zero-order correlations between economic liberalism and political auto-identification across all analysed countries. As displayed in Figure 1, we observed significant positive correlation coefficients in 25 out of 43 cases, and in one case significant negative correlation coefficient (for all other cases the correlation coefficients were not significant). This pattern shows that in most cases, economic liberalism was positively related to the left-right political auto-identification, meaning that the higher support for economic liberalism was associated with right-wing political auto-identification.

----- Figure 1 about here -----

We then applied a meta-analytical procedure using a random model with a Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimator to test the regional diversity hypothesis. In the first step, we tested the aggregated model and observed a positive pooled correlation coefficient, $B = .15$. In the next step, we included the region (Eastern vs. Western Europe) as a moderator variable and tested the distinctive model. As presented in Table 2, the moderator effect was significant,

speaking to regional diversity in the strength of the relationship between economic liberalism and left-right political auto-identification. This pattern of results shows that the pooled correlation coefficient was significant and positive in Western Europe ($B = .25$), but insignificant in Eastern Europe ($B = .06$).

----- Table 2 about here -----

Relationship between left-right political auto-identification and cultural liberalism:

We then repeated this procedure to test the relationship between cultural liberalism and left-right wing political auto-identification. As displayed in Figure 2, we observed significant negative correlation coefficients in 23 out of 43 cases, and in two cases significant positive correlation coefficients (for all other cases the correlation coefficients were not significant). This pattern shows that in most cases cultural liberalism was negatively related to the left-right political auto-identification, meaning that the higher support for cultural liberalism was associated with left-wing political auto-identification.

----- Figure 2 about here -----

We again applied a meta-analytical procedure using a random model with a Restricted Maximum Likelihood estimator to test the regional diversity hypothesis. In the first step, we tested the aggregated model and observed a negative pooled correlation coefficient, $B = -.10$. In the next step, we included the region (Eastern vs. Western Europe) as a moderator variable and tested the distinctive model. As presented in Table 3, the moderator effect was significant, speaking to regional diversity in the strength of the relationship between cultural liberalism and left-right political auto-identification. This pattern of results shows that the pooled correlation coefficient was significant and negative in Western Europe ($B = -.15$), but negative and marginally significant in Eastern Europe ($B = -.05$).

----- Table 3 about here -----

Economic liberalism explained 2.25% of total variance in political auto-identification, while cultural liberalism explained 1% of total variance within political auto-identification in Europe.

To test for the robustness of our analysis we decided to check if the results hold when controlling for the socio-demographic variables. We have estimated a full multi-level model with the age and gender as additional controls. The results are reported in Supplementary Materials (Table S4) and confirm the results of meta-analytical approach.

Discussion

The results of Study 1 show that across all analysed European countries, economic liberalism was positively related to left-right political auto-identification, while cultural liberalism was negatively related to it. Importantly however, in both cases we observed a significant moderating effect of a country's regional belongingness. While these patterns were significant among citizens of Western European countries, they were not significant among citizens of Eastern European countries, thus providing the first evidence supporting the regional diversity hypothesis.

Study 2

In Study 2, we aimed at replicating the results of Study 1 using another cross-national dataset that contained a measure of left-right political auto-identification. In this study, we analysed the European Social Survey dataset (ESS ERIC 2016). We used a combined 8-wave dataset which included the most recent from 2016, and analysed data that has been collected since 2002.

Method

Participants and countries: The total analysed sample included $N = 315,246$ individual responses from citizens of 30 European countries. The list of countries by regional

classification accompanied by the sizes of the national samples gathered in each of eight waves is presented in Table S3 in Supplementary Materials. For the purpose of verifying the regional diversity hypothesis, the region was coded as a dummy variable with 0 indicating the country's belongingness to the Eastern European region and 1 indicating the belongingness to the Western European region. The drop-out ratio across eight waves for each of the countries varied between 0 and 6.

Measures

Economic liberalism: The indicator for economic liberalism was measured with a single item on a 5-point Likert-type scale from "1 - agree strongly" to "5 - disagree strongly". The respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement: "Government should reduce differences in income levels". The indicator was rescaled to have a minimum at 0, and a maximum at 1. To keep it consistent with Study 1, the scale was recoded, so the higher scores imply stronger disagreement for the item and thus more liberal attitudes.

Cultural liberalism: The indicator for economic liberalism was measured with a single item on a 5-point Likert-type scale. The respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the following statement: "Gay men and lesbians should be free to live their own life as they wish". Past work (van der Toorn et al., 2017) shows that orientation towards homosexuality is one of the major points in the cultural clash between the political right and left. The indicator was rescaled to have a minimum at 0 and a maximum at 1. The scale was recoded to keep it consistent with Study 1, so the higher scores imply stronger approval for the item and thus more liberal attitudes.

Left-right political auto-identification: The left-right political auto-identification was measured with a single item: "In politics people sometimes talk of 'left' and 'right'. Using this

card, where would you place yourself on this scale, where 0 means the left and 10 means the right". The responses were given on an 11-point Likert-type scale. The scale was recoded so that a higher score corresponds to a stronger right-wing political auto-identification.

Results

Relationship between left-right political auto-identification and economic liberalism:

Due to a more complex data structure, we used a different analytical approach than in Study 1. We estimated a series of cross-classified models (Beretvas, 2011; Hox et al., 2017) in which individuals were nested within countries and within waves. That allowed us to account for country-specific and wave-specific variance. We estimated three models using Mplus 8.6 software and a Bayesian estimator (Muthén & Muthén, 2017). The first model allowed us to estimate and partition the variance of the left-right political auto-identification between individual-level, country-level and wave-level. The second model tested whether cultural and economic liberalism served as significant predictors of left-right political auto-identification across all countries included in the analysis. The third model tested the regional diversity hypothesis and whether the strength of the relationship between cultural and economic liberalism was significantly stronger in the Western European region than in the Eastern European region. Every model was run twice using 50,000 and 100,000 iterations to check the stability of results as recommended by Depaoli and van de Schoot (2017). In Table 4 we report the results for each of these three models run with 100,000 iterations⁴.

----- Table 4 about here -----

The results for the first (empty) model show that most of the variance in left-right political auto-identification is at individual-level. In the second (aggregated) model, both economic and cultural liberalisms were introduced as predictors of left-right political auto-

⁴ We observed a similar pattern of the results for 50,000 iterations.

identification. In the final model, we added gender and age as socio-demographic, but they did not significantly influence the results. To further test the robustness of the results, we decided to check whether the study's wave influenced the results. Therefore we estimated a model comparing the effects across ESS waves. The analysis showed equal effects across waves (please see Tables S6 & S7 in Supplementary Materials for details).

In line with Study 1, economic liberalism was positively related to left-right political auto-identification, while cultural liberalism was negatively related to it. This pattern of results means that the higher support for economic liberalism was associated with a higher level of right-wing political auto-identification, while the higher support for cultural liberalism was associated with a higher level of left-wing political auto-identification. Both effects were rather small in magnitude. The mean difference in left-right political auto-identification across all countries and all waves between respondents who declared minimal and maximal support for economic liberalism was 1.36 on an 11-point scale (controlling for cultural liberalism). The analogous difference for cultural liberalism was .8. The pattern of results for the third (distinctive) model supported the regional diversity hypothesis. Both cross-level interaction effects for economic and cultural liberalism moderated by region were significant. Replicating the results of Study 1, the relationship between economic liberalism and right-wing political auto-identification was positive and significant within Western European countries but not within Eastern European countries. In a similar vein, the relationship between cultural liberalism and right-wing political auto-identification was negative and significant within Western European countries but not within Eastern European countries.

Discussion

The results of Study 2 show that across all analysed European countries, economic liberalism was positively related to left-right political auto-identification, while cultural liberalism was negatively related to it. Again, in both cases, we observed a significant moderating effect of a country's regional belongingness. While these patterns of results were significant among citizens of Western European countries, they were not significant among citizens of Eastern European countries. Again, this pattern of results supports the regional diversity hypothesis.

General discussion and implications

The results of two studies involving samples of citizens of European countries converged by showing that while citizens' support for economic liberalism is positively related to their left-right political auto-identification, citizens' support for cultural liberalism is negatively related to it. Importantly, however, we also found evidence for the regional diversity hypothesis, which shows this pattern was more prominent among the citizens of Western European countries than among the citizens of Eastern European countries.

The research presented here sheds new light on an ongoing debate regarding whether the very general concept of left-right political orientation might be understood quite differently among people from different social groups within a country and between people of different countries (Bauer et al., 2014; Scholz & Zuell, 2012). This is important, as left-right political orientation has been one of the most frequently used constructs to explain political attitudes and voting in political science. The pattern observed in the two studies involving two different datasets reflects the variance and possibly the change of meaning of the left-right orientation after 1989, which marked the downfall of the Communist regime in Eastern European countries. Presented results are consistent with the analysis that shows the specificity of Eastern Europe when it comes to relations between political auto-identification

and other beliefs linked to it traditionally (Hornsey et al., 2018; McCright et al., 2016; Thorisdottir et al., 2007).

It is often presumed in analysis that the left-right political auto-identification is equal to cultural and economic liberalism. Our analysis shows that this connection is weak even in Western European countries, and the percentage of explained variance does not exceed 5%. This is consistent with the line of research and sociopolitical theory that emphasizes the diminishing role of traditional left-right cleavage in Europe (Giddens, 1994; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). This also aligns with accounts of political auto-identification that emphasize that they are not consistently related to more specific social beliefs (Converse, 1964, 2007).

This result also shows that it is highly unjustified to treat the left-right political auto-identification as an indicator of common political ideology. It also makes the cross-cultural research even more compelling as we cannot assume the unity of the concept. Even when similar results appear across societies, researchers should be cautious as they may refer to different processes underlying the political auto-identification.

Limitations and future directions

Of course, this research is not without its limitations. As we aimed at using large datasets that are publicly accessible, we had to rely on available indicators of our focal concepts: economic and cultural liberalism. Other research suggests that the connection between political auto-identification and different forms of liberalism may depend on the specific manner in which they are operationalized (Azevedo et al., 2019). Both studies consequently show the moderating effect of country belongingness on the relations between political auto-identification and two forms of liberalism. This study does not determine whether those effects are impermanently stable. One could argue that, with time, the differences between Eastern and Western countries in auto-political identification could

diminish as current approaches to political auto-identification would suggest that the left-right political distinction is becoming less significant in political partisanship (Freire, 2008; Giddens, 1994) and that its connection with substantive beliefs is becoming lower (Ehret et al., 2018). Although our study is based on data taken from eight-time points, and this limited number of comparisons does not allow for the analysis of trends over time in a systematic manner. It will, however, be possible to analyse in due course whether the basis of political auto-identification in Eastern and Western European countries will converge. This remains to be seen.

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Figure 1. The correlation coefficients with 95% confidence intervals for the relationship between political auto-identification and economic liberalism across all analysed countries by regional classification. The grey diamonds depict the pooled correlation coefficients for this relationship computed separately for Eastern and Western Europe.

Figure 2. The correlation coefficients with 95% confidence intervals for the relationship between political auto-identification and cultural liberalism across all analysed countries by regional classification. The grey diamonds depict the pooled correlation coefficients for this relationship computed separately for Eastern and Western Europe.

Table 1. Question wording for all items used in Study 1 with numbers referring to the original EVS 2008 questionnaire (GESIS 2010)

No.	Question wording	
<hr/>		
<i>Left-right orientation</i>		
v193	In political matters, people talk of 'the left' and the 'the right'. How would you place your views on this scale, generally speaking*?	
<i>Economic liberalism</i>		
	On this card you see a number of opposite views on various issues. How would you place your views on this scale**?	
v194	Individuals should take more responsibility for providing for themselves	The state should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for
v197	The state should give more freedom to firms	The state should control firms more effectively
v199	Private ownership of business and industry should be increased	Government ownership of business and industry should be increased
<i>Cultural liberalism</i>		
	Please tell me for each of the following whether you think it can always be justified, never be justified, or something in-between, using this card.	
v241	Abortion	
v242	Divorce	
v243	Euthanasia (terminating the life of the incurably sick)	

Table 2. The comparison of aggregated and distinctive models for the relationship of economic liberalism and left-right wing political auto-identification moderated by region

	Aggregated Model			Distinctive Model		
	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	SE	<i>z</i>
Pooled Estimate ^a	.15*** [.10, .20]	.03	5.81	.06 [-.01, .12]	.03	1.78
Moderation				.19*** [.10,	.04	4.32
by Region ^b				.27]		
<i>Q</i> (<i>df</i>)	33.75 (1)***			18.66 (1)***		
<i>I</i> ²	96.55%			95.06%		

Note: *** $p < .001$; ^a – the estimate denotes the pooled effect size across all European countries for the aggregated model and the pooled effect size for Eastern European countries for the distinctive model; ^b – the coefficient may be interpreted as a difference between effect sizes for Western and Eastern European regions.

Table 3. The comparison of aggregated and distinctive models for the relationship of cultural liberalism and left-right political auto-identification moderated by region

	Aggregated Model			Distinctive Model		
	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	SE	<i>z</i>	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	SE	<i>z</i>
Pooled Estimate	-.10*** [-.13, -.06]	.02	-5.55	-.05* [-.09, -.003]	.03	-2.10
Moderation by Region ^b				-.10** [-.16, -.03]	.03	-3.01
<i>Q</i> (<i>df</i>)	30.85 (1)***			9.06 (1)**		
<i>I</i> ²	92.17%			90.64%		

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; ^a – the estimate denotes the pooled effect size across all European countries for the aggregated model and the pooled effect size for Eastern European countries for the distinctive model; ^b – the coefficient may be interpreted as a difference between effect sizes for Western and Eastern European regions.

Table 4. The comparison of empty, aggregated, and distinctive models for the relationship of cultural and economic liberalism and left-right political auto-identification moderated by region

	Model 1 Empty		Model 2 Aggregated Model		Model 3 Distinctive Model		Model 4 Control	
	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	<i>SD</i>	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	<i>SD</i>	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	<i>SD</i>	<i>B</i> [<i>CI</i> _{lb} , <i>CI</i> _{ub}]	<i>SD</i>
Economic Liberalism ^a	-	-	1.366 [1.00, 1.708]***	0.178	0.955 [0.434, 1.464]***	0.261	0.897 [0.336, 1.546]**	.302
Cultural Liberalism ^a	-	-	-0.803 [-1.158, -0.422]***	0.188	-0.240 [-0.690, 0.255]	0.241	-0.379 [-0.814, 0.068]	0.223
Economic Liberalism x Region ^{ab}			-	-	0.660 [0.012, 1.311]*	0.329	0.752 [0.001, 1.440]*	0.363
Cultural Liberalism x Region ^{ab}			-	-	-0.869 [-1.480, -0.283]**	0.302	-0.603 [-1.155, -0.047]*	0.281
Gender ^a	-	-	-	-	-	-	-0.034 [-0.112, 0.043]	0.039
Age ^a	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.049 [-0.437, 0.575]	0.259
<i>Var</i> (<i>Irscale</i>) _{individual}	4.66		4.30		4.30		4.25	
<i>Var</i> (<i>Irscale</i>) _{country}	.09		0.37		0.34		0.28	
<i>Var</i> (<i>Irscale</i>) _{round}	.002		0.17		0.01		0.01	
<i>Var</i> slope (economical liberalism → <i>Irscale</i>) _{country}			0.804		0.77		0.773	
<i>Var</i> slope (cultural liberalism → <i>Irscale</i>) _{country}			0.741		0.63		0.549	
<i>Var</i> slope (economical liberalism → <i>Irscale</i>) _{round}			0.017		0.017		0.016	
<i>Var</i> slope (cultural liberalism → <i>Irscale</i>) _{round}			0.012		0.012		0.012	
<i>N1</i> / <i>N2</i> _{country} / <i>N2</i> _{wave}	303900 / 30 / 8		292466 / 30 / 8		292466 / 30 / 8		291319 / 30 / 8	

Note: * *p* < .05; ** *p* < .01; *** *p* < .001; ^a – all predictors were rescaled with a minimum kept at 0 and a maximum at 1. That allows comparing the effect size for specific predictors. The coefficient may be interpreted as a mean difference between person with the lowest and the highest level of a specific

liberalism form.^b – the variable was coded as a dummy variable where 0 was used for Eastern Europe and 1 was used for Western Europe. The coefficient may be interpreted as a difference between in effect sizes between Western and Eastern Europe.