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Perceptions of Social Climate in the Baltic Countries: Methodological and Comparative Issues

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Social climate is a relatively new concept measuring people's wellbeing (Duguleană and Duguleană 2015), operationalized by perceptions of people's conditions of living. It has been used in the Eurobarometer surveys since 2009 but still gained little attention in academic research. In this paper, issues in constructing an index of social climate are being discussed. As the rates of meaningful responses to questions on different aspects of the social climate vary greatly, the author proposes a revisited version of the social climate index as well as assesses its internal consistency and usability. The article presents the results of the regression analysis on the impact of factors related to the social climate across the three Baltic countries. The findings suggest that the political competence, the type of community, and the employment status account for most differences in social climate perceptions.

Keywords: social climate, Eurobarometer, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, linear regression

INTRODUCTION

In 2009–2014, six consecutive Eurobarometer surveys were conducted in the European Union focusing on social climate (European Commission, Special Eurobarometers: 349, 2010; 370, 2011; 391, 2012; 408, 2013; 418, 2014). Duguleană and Duguleană (2015) characterize social climate as a framework concept for assessing the wellbeing of Europeans, and trace back the theoretical foundations of its components to research on the quality of life in Europe (cf. Duguleană, Duguleană 2015: 208). Social climate is considered comparable to other operationalizations of wellbeing (e.g. Povey et al. 2013; OECD 2013; Kahneman, Deaton 2010; Costanza et al. 2008).

In this paper, three aims are brought to a focus. Firstly, issues in practical applications of the composite social climate index are explored. Secondly, a revisited and shortened version of the SCI is proposed and its internal consistency is assessed. Finally, the article proceeds with the analysis of factors that account for differences in the levels of social climate evaluations across the three Baltic countries.

SOCIAL CLIMATE IN THE EU AND BALTICS: AN OVERVIEW

Social climate is defined in an enumerative way listing 15 indicators combined in a three-dimensional Social Climate Index, or SCI for short. Despite lacking a grounded theoretical definition, it provides researchers and policymakers with a tool to assess what Europeans think about their living conditions. Data from the Social Climate Eurobarometer have been discussed in several recent publications, including Duguleană and Duguleană 2015; Grześkowiak 2015; Lonska 2014; Verkulevičiūtė-Kriukienė 2014; Pittini 2012.

Eurobarometer Social Climate reports provide an image of social climate dynamics both in the EU and its member states (see Fig. 1).

Overall in the EU, the SCI hovered between –0.6 in 2011 and –1 in 2014, showing a tendency to decline over time. SCI values in Estonia were above the EU average every single year, varying from –0.5 in 2013 to 0.1 in 2014. The other two Baltic countries are a sharp contrast to both EU-28 and their northern neighbour. The trajectories of SCI in Latvia and Lithuania demonstrate a downward trend from 2009 to 2010–2011 and then a rise till 2013 when it almost came to a halt (in Lithuania) or even went down again (in Latvia). Such differences beg several questions addressing the impact of certain factors contributing to SCI as well as differences in their impact across countries.

SOCIAL CLIMATE INDEX METHODOLOGY

The SCI is a summated rating scale (Spector 1992), comprising 15 indicators divided among three dimensions, labelled 'personal situation', 'national picture' and 'social protection and inclusion'. Questions on the personal situation ask respondents to evaluate their life in general, the area where respondents live, their personal job situation and the financial situation of the respondent's household. The 'national picture' dimension focuses on respondents' evaluations of the country's cost of living, affordability of energy, affordability of housing, way the public administration runs, country's economic situation, and situation with employment. The 'social protection and inclusion' dimension refers to the country's healthcare system, pension system, unemployment benefits, relations between people of different cultural backgrounds, and addressing inequalities and poverty. Contrary to four scores of 1 to 4 used by most 4-rank scales, the SCI assigns a value of 10 to answers 'very satisfied' and 'very good', a value of 3.33 to 'fairly satisfied'/'rather good' and

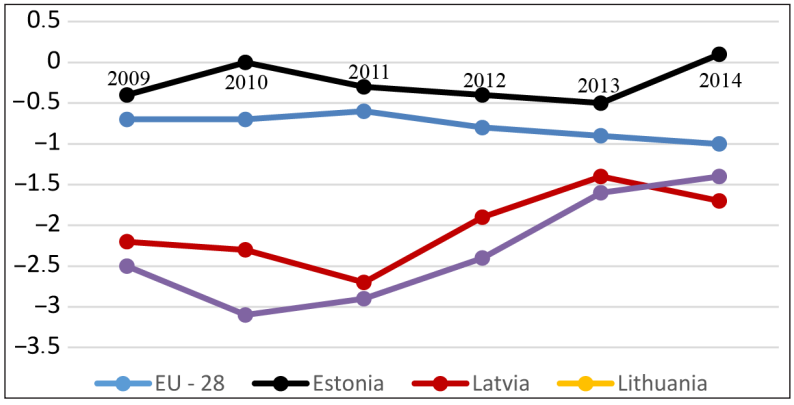

Fig. 1. Social Climate Index dynamics in the EU-28 and Baltic countries, 2009–2014

Source: Eurobarometer.

the negative equivalents of these values to answers 'not at all satisfied'/'very bad' and 'not very satisfied'/'not very satisfied', respectively (see Table 1). Respondents' answers to all 15 questions are then being summed and divided by the total number of questions.

Table 2 shows the proportions of valid and missing ('don't know') answers on each of 15 SCI questions in all three countries. Questions are grouped according to three dimensions of the SCI.

For the items on satisfaction with life in general, area where respondents live, household financial situation, cost of living, and affordability of energy, missing values do not exceed 5–6% of cases. They present a sharp contrast to items on the personal job situation, public administration, and unemployment benefits where missing values amount up to one-third of all cases. The rest

Table 1. **Original SCI-15 scale values**

Q1: Satisfaction with the life you lead		Q2–Q15: Judgment of the current situation in 14 areas	
Very satisfied	10	Very good	10
Fairly satisfied	3.33	Rather good	3.33
Not very satisfied	–3.33	Rather bad	–3.33
Not at all satisfied	–10	Very bad	–10
Don't know	Not scored	Don't know	Not scored

Table 2. **Valid and missing values of SCI indicators by country**

Country	Estonia		Latvia		Lithuania	
Answer percentage	Valid	Missing	Valid	Missing	Valid	Missing
Personal situation						
Life in general	99.1%	0.79%	99.7%	0.3%	99.51%	0.49%
Area where respondents live	98.91%	1.09%	99.51%	0.49%	99.7%	0.3%
Personal job situation	68.58%	31.42%	84.15%	15.85%	70.68%	29.32%
Household financial situation	98.12%	1.88%	97.54%	2.46%	98.32%	1.68%
National picture						
Cost of living	95.85%	4.15%	96.06%	3.94%	98.32%	1.68%
Affordability of energy	94.96%	5.04%	94%	6%	95.16%	4.84%
Affordability of housing	89.23%	10.77%	93.21%	6.79%	93.29%	6.71%
Public administration	77.17%	22.83%	88.88%	11.12%	76.9%	23.1%
Country's economic situation	91.21%	8.79%	95.67%	4.33%	97.04%	2.96%
Employment situation	87.75%	12.25%	95.67%	4.33%	95.26%	4.74%
Social protection and inclusion						
Healthcare system	96.25%	3.75%	95.67%	4.33%	97.63%	2.37%
Pension system	91.6%	8.4%	89.67%	10.33%	91.81%	8.19%
Unemployment benefits	66.7%	33.3%	76.67%	23.33%	76.80%	23.20%
Cross-cultural relations	85.97%	14.03%	96.06%	3.94%	91.91%	8.09%
Addressing inequalities and poverty	83%	17%	89.67%	10.33%	93.88%	6.12%

Source: Social Climate Eurobarometer 2014.

questions show unequal missing values rates across countries. For example, the question on addressing inequalities and poverty remained unanswered by 17% of Estonians, 10% of Latvians and 6% of Lithuanians. In most cases, the proportion of missing answers among Estonians is larger than that of Latvian or Lithuanian survey participants. Questions with the highest missing answers rates pose significant problems for data analysis. Their impact reinforces itself when constructing a composite index with missing answers on each question adding up in the index.

Table 3 shows the number of valid responses to all 15 questions of interest. In Estonia and Lithuania, their number does not come up to even a half of the sample size while in Latvia it barely exceeds 50%. Out of the total 3 041 respondents in the pooled dataset, just about one-third (1 301) provided meaningful answers to all SCI-15 questions. The simplest remedy would be to ignore the 'don't know' response and proceed with the analysis of meaningful data. However, low response rates severly constrain the generalizability of results, so the use of the original 15-item SCI becomes problematic. Solutions based on missing values substitution with other values, e.g. arithmetic mean, or applying a more advanced technique such as imputation offers little remedy due to extremely high nonresponse rates.

As the SCI is a composite measure for a multidimensional construct, one could attempt eliminating indicators with most missing values and design a tailored version of the index with less indicators but more substantial responses. Table 2 suggests that attitudes on the personal job situation, public administration, and unemployment benefits would be candidates for deletion. However, this solution should be justified by showing that the tailored version does not fall short in precision in comparison to the original. If so, the tailored SCI should demonstrate a strong positive correlation with the original 15-item index.

In order to check the equivalence of the original and the tailored versions of the SCI, the author created the tailored 12-item SCI excluding three indicators with the highest nonresponse rates. It resulted in an improvement of data validity, elevating the number of substantial responses from 1 301 to 1 987 (Table 4).

Table 3. **Valid responses on the SCI-15 composite variable by country**

Country	Eurobarometer 2014 Social Climate Survey sample size	Valid responses, Social Climate Index (15 indicators)
Estonia	1012	336
Latvia	1016	537
Lithuania	1013	428

Source: Social Climate Eurobarometer, 2014

Table 4. **Valid responses on the SCI-12 composite variable by country**

Country	Eurobarometer 2014 Social Climate Survey sample size	Valid responses, Social Climate Index (tailored version, 12 indicators)
Estonia	1012	563
Latvia	1016	700
Lithuania	1013	724
Total	3041	1987

Note: Valid responses refer to the number of respondents who answered all 12 questions forming a composite SCI-12 measure.

In the next step, the Pearson correlation between the original and the tailored SCI for both the pooled data and for each country separately was calculated. For the pooled data, $r = 0.9868$ with the statistical significance level $p < 0.001$, revealing a very strong and positive association. For Estonia, $r = 0.9874$ ($p < 0.001$); for Latvia, $r = 0.9875$ ($p < 0.001$); for Lithuania, $r = 0.9826$ ($p < 0.001$). The tailored SCI version reveals a high consistency across the countries. The Cronbach alpha (Cronbach 1951) value for the 12-item SCI equals 0.82 regardless of retaining or deleting cases with missing values on any indicator, thus providing the evidence of a good internal consistency of its items. The 12-item SCI composition is presented graphically in Fig. 2.

EVALUATIONS OF SOCIAL CLIMATE IN THE BALTIC COUNTRIES: A COMPARISON

Prior to exploring factors influencing the social climate using regression, a comparative overview of evaluations of each indicator would be informative. Table 5 presents cumulative percentages of each country's respondents that provided positive evaluations on the SCI-12 indicators. On the whole, the distribution of positive evaluations is far from uniform. Just three out of 12 indicators show similar positive evaluation rates across the countries, two belonging to the personal situation dimension (life in general and area where respondents live) and the third one (cost of living) being evaluated negatively by more than 80% in all the countries. Differences in the household financial situation and cross-cultural relations are more pronounced, reaching a 10% difference between Estonia and other two Baltic countries for the financial situation and between Estonia and Latvia for the cross-cultural relations. Values for the rest indicators show an even greater variation. Far more Lithuanians are critical about the affordability of energy and housing than are Latvian and especially Estonian respondents. More Latvians are pessimistic about their country's pension system and the way inequality and poverty is addressed. Moreover, Latvia scores lower on evaluations of country's economic situation, employment situation, and national healthcare system in comparison to those of its neighbours. Latvia surpasses Lithuania substantially in two areas (affordability of energy and housing) while Lithuania outperforms Latvia in positive evaluation rates for eight indicators.

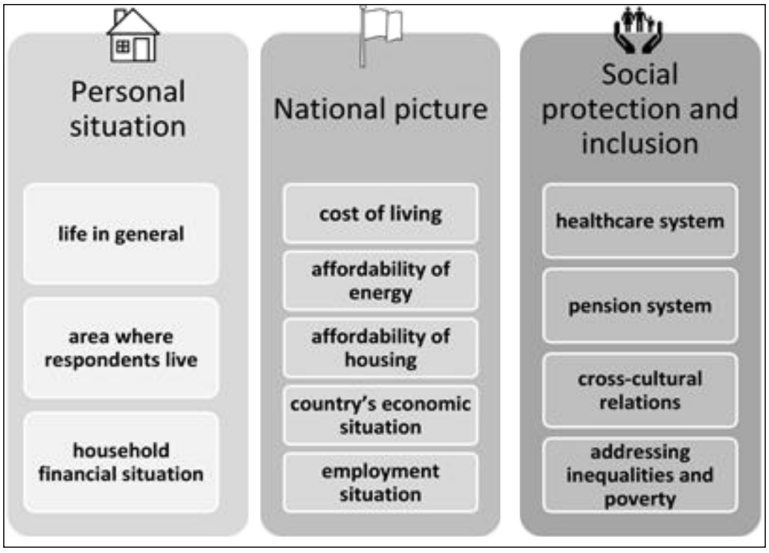

Fig. 2. The revisited Social Climate Index (SCI-12) and its components

Table 5. **Percentage of positive evaluations for each SCI-12 indicator across countries**

	Estonia	Latvia	Lithuania
Life in general	71.31%	66.04%	65.77%
Area where respondents live	90.61%	86.35%	94.36%
Household financial situation	66.26%	56.91%	56.53%
Cost of living	12.58%	12.30%	13.96%
Affordability of energy	86.26%	70.99%	19.19%
Affordability of housing	59.14%	51.43%	13.86%
Country's economic situation	47.45%	18.62%	29.40%
Employment situation	27.48%	16.05%	24.87%
Healthcare system	56.98%	27.67%	51.87%
Pension system	26.00%	9.88%	19.03%
Cross-cultural relations	77.70%	67.21%	73.58%
Addressing inequalities and poverty	18.81%	7.90%	13.25%

Source: Social Climate Eurobarometer, 2014

Next, problematic points can be examined for each country in detail. Estonian data reveal five indicators with positive rates below 50%, Latvia shows six and Lithuania seven indicators. Estonians are least satisfied with the cost of living, followed by addressing inequalities and poverty, their pension system, employment situation, and economic situation. In Latvia, the least number of respondents is satisfied with addressing inequalities and poverty, followed by the pension system, cost of living, employment situation, country's economic situation, and healthcare system. Most Lithuanians provide negative evaluations of addressing inequalities and poverty, affordability of housing, and cost of living, followed by the pension system, affordability of energy, employment, and economic situation.

Successful areas are comparable in a similar manner. In Estonia, evaluation rates are most positive for the area where respondents live, affordability of energy, cross-cultural relations, and life in general. The content and ranking of the most positively evaluated indicators is the same in Latvia although actual rates lag behind those of Estonia. Lithuania's top two are the area where respondents live and cross-cultural relations, followed by life in general and household financial situation.

FACTORS OF SOCIAL CLIMATE UNDER CONSIDERATION

Grześkowiak (2015) summarizes the current practice of analysing the social climate and its determinants. She concludes that respondents' age, the employment situation, and the age of leaving full-time education have the strongest impact. The social climate is also related to the subjective perception of the respondent's level in the society. In turn, the impact of respondent's gender is relatively weaker.

For comparison reasons, all five socio-structural determinants of the social climate mentioned by Grześkowiak are analysed here. The cross-country analysis requires inclusion of respondent's country in the list of factors. Due to socio-economic inequalities between regions, the type of community the respondent lives in (rural, a small/middle town, or a large town) should be considered as well. The level of general trust may also affect the social climate perceptions (the higher –

the better). Respondents' agreement with the statement 'My voice counts in our country' is included as a proxy variable for subjective political competence (Almond, Verba 1989), that is, the belief that the country's condition can be improved by democratic political participation. For more precision in the cross-country analysis, three interaction terms are included: the country/respondent's level in the society; the country/political competence; the type of community/respondent's level in the society. An overview of social climate determinants is summarized in Table 6.

RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Table 7 presents the results of the regression analysis for the impact of factors determining social climate perceptions. The model, based on 1 874 observations in total, accounts for about one-third of all variation found in the distribution of SCI-12 values ($R^2 = 0.33$).

The respondent's country reveals the strongest impact on the dependent variable, although its standalone explanatory power is weak. Still, it serves as an extra confirmation of the previously established cross-country differences: social climate rates are well above in Estonia than in Latvia and Lithuania. The next factor to consider is the political competence. Consistently with the previous expectations, its higher rates are associated with more positive perceptions of social climate. The analysis shows no significant differences in the impact of political competence between Estonia and Latvia, whereas in Lithuania its positive effect is more evident (Fig. 3). It is also insightful that respondents with higher scores on general trust in people, another pro-social attitude, tend to have more positive perceptions of the social climate.

As for the respondent's level in society, there are no significant differences between low-level and middle-level respondents, while the high-level group has predictably more positive perceptions of the social climate. The effect of a community type seems to be negative: those living in a small/middle town tend to score lower on SCI-12, and residents of large cities show even more negative values. Apparently, the benefits of living in larger communities with more employment options and better infrastructure do not result in positive evaluations of one's living conditions. An exploration of the community type interplay with the subjective social class shows that the actual relationship is more complex, with the class revealing a stronger effect in large towns than in rural areas where differences in social climate perception do not vary much (Fig. 4).

Table 6. **Determinants of SCI-12**

Social climate determinant	Variable type	Variable levels
Age	Categorical	15–24; 25–39; 40–54; 55+
Age of leaving full-time education	Categorical	15 or less; 16–19; 20 and more; still studying; no full-time education
Country	Categorical	Estonia; Latvia; Lithuania
Gender	Categorical	Male; female
General trust in people	Quantitative, interval-appearing	1 to 10 scale
Labour market status	Categorical	Self-employed; employed; not working
Level in the society	Categorical	Low; middle; high
Political competence	Quantitative, interval-appearing	1 to 4 scale (totally disagree; tend to disagree; tend to agree; totally agree)
Type of community a respondent resides in	Categorical	Rural area or village; small/middle town; large town

Table 7. **Social climate predictors: results of the regression analysis**

Social Climate Index factors	B	S. E.	beta
Age: 25–39 years	–0.70***	0.23	–0.10
Age: 40–54 years	–0.75***	0.24	–0.12
Age: 55 years and older	–0.39*	0.23	–0.07
Age of leaving full-time education: 16 – 19	–0.12	0.22	–0.02
Age of leaving full-time education: 20 or more	0.17	0.23	0.03
Age of leaving full-time education: still studying	0.33	0.35	0.03
Age of leaving full-time education: no education	–0.23	1.16	–0.00
Gender: female	–0.12	0.11	–0.02
General trust in people	0.20***	0.02	0.17
Labour status: employed	0.30**	0.13	0.05
Labour status: self-employed/business owner	0.73***	0.25	0.06
Level in society: middle	0.50	0.33	0.09
Level in society: high	0.82**	0.41	0.13
Type of community: small/middle town	–0.48*	0.27	–0.09
Type of community: large town	–1.21***	0.31	–0.21
Political competence ('my vote counts')	0.69***	0.12	0.22
Country: Latvia	–1.78***	0.39	–0.31
Country: Lithuania	–2.00***	0.40	–0.35
Latvia: middle level in society	0.27	0.34	0.04
Latvia: high level in society	0.54	0.40	0.06
Lithuania: middle level in society	–0.09	0.33	–0.01
Lithuania: high level in society	–0.25	0.41	–0.02
Latvia: political competence	0.10	0.16	0.04
Lithuania: political competence	0.49***	0.16	0.19
Small/middle town: middle level in society	0.51	0.32	0.08
Small/middle town: high level in society	0.24	0.42	0.02
Large town: middle level in society	1.32***	0.36	0.18
Large town: high level in society	1.71***	0.43	0.20
Constant	*–2.82****	*0.48*	
Observations	*1874*		
R-squared	*0.33*		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

The results also suggest that gender and the age of education completion do not have a significant impact on the social climate perception. At the same time, differences among the age groups are evident, younger people (age 15–24) tending to have more optimistic views. The elderly respondents (55+) reveal a more negative view, and the respondents from

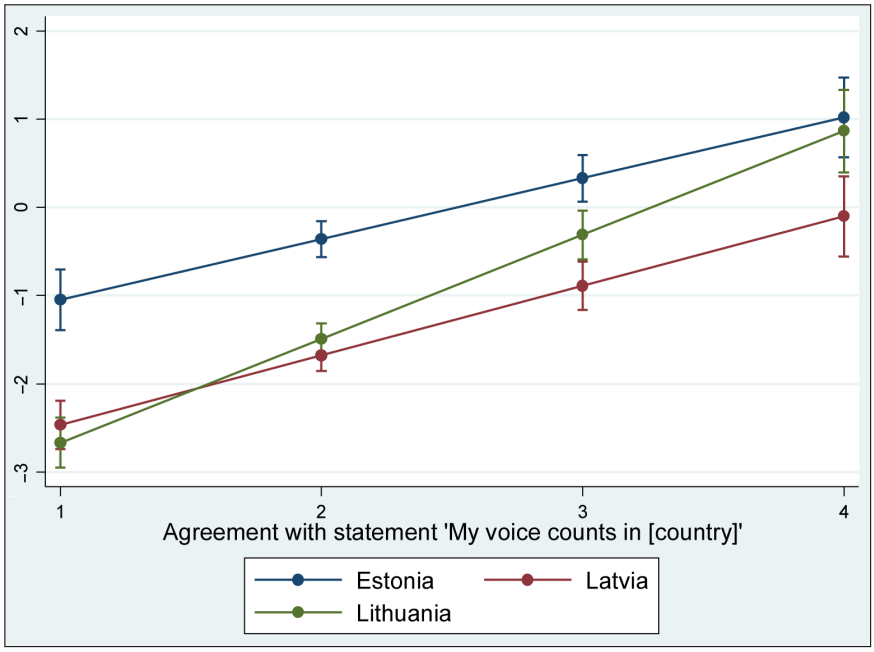

Fig. 3. Effects of political competence on SCI-12 by country

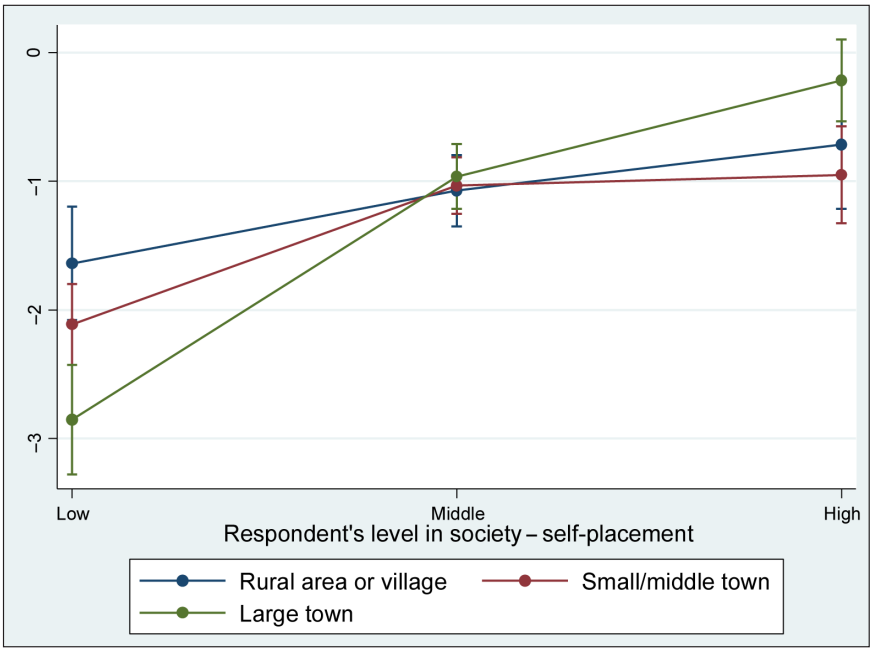

Fig. 4. Effects of the level in society on SCI-12 by type of community

middle-aged groups (25–39 and 40–54) are the most pessimistic. The evaluations of employed respondents are more positive than those of not working ones, and individuals who are self-employed or own a business score highest on the SCI-12.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper had three goals: exploration issues in practical applications of the composite index designed for measuring social climate, general assessment of the composite social climate measure quality and the analysis of factors that may account for differences in the levels of SCI across the three Baltic countries. Application of some indicators was found problematic due to many missing values. A decision was taken to construct a tailored version of the social climate index instead, referred to as SCI-12 (as contrasted to the original SCI with all 15 indicators present). The newly constructed index demonstrated a good consistency with the original SCI-15, thus justifying the choice of a more parsimonious and valid measure.

Evaluations of social climate components across the Baltic countries are far from uniform, although most problematic issues are congruent. Estonia is a champion of social climate perception with higher rates for most indicators. For seven out of 12 indicators, more than a half of Estonian respondents provide positive evaluations. Lithuanian respondents are especially pessimistic about energy and housing, while Latvians evaluate their health system lower than their Estonian and Lithuanian counterparts. Considering an average proportion of positive evaluations on all 12 indicators, Latvia is slightly ahead of Lithuania (41% against 40%); however, Lithuania outperforms Latvia in positive evaluation rates for eight indicators, thus making Latvia an underperformer among the three analyzed countries. To sum up, the social climate in Latvia and Lithuania is equally unfavourable on average, but Latvia lags behind in the majority of components.

The regression analysis assessed the impact of factors accounting for SCI-12 rates and cross-country differences. Political competence turns out to be an important predictor of the social climate. One possible explanation could be that people with higher political competence values feel more empowered to make life in their country better. General trust in people is an attitude involving, *inter alia*, the readiness to coexist and cooperate, thus being not only an individual but also a societal property, so its positive correlation with SCI-12 was also predictable. It was hypothesized that the two variables related to the individual's placement in the country's social structure – the type of community the respondent resides in and his/her subjective social class – may have an impact on the perceptions of social climate. Actually, the interaction of both factors takes place, with the effect of social class being stronger in large urban communities and weaker in rural areas. Social climate perceptions are least positive among not working respondents and highest among self-employed individuals and proprietors of own business. In contrast, gender and the age of full-time education completion do not seem to be significant predictors. Social climate perceptions do, however, vary across age groups, with younger and elderly people demonstrating higher rates and the age groups in the middle being somehow more pessimistic.

In general, in can be concluded that perceptions of social climate are an outcome of a complex interplay between many determinants with no single 'key' explaining most of the variance. SCI components are themselves indicators of salient issues societies have to deal with. Thus, it is advisable for the future research to focus not only on the SCI on the whole, but to set sights on certain issues such as health, energy, housing, cost of living, and inequality-related problems – that is, issues equally common for all three countries as well as problems the acuteness of which is evaluated differently.

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Baltijos šalių socialinio klimato suvokimas: metodologija ir palyginamumas