

Connecting Personal Agency, Autonomy, and Subjective Well- Being

A Cross-National Analysis with a Focus on Hungary

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Table of contents

1. Introduction.....	2
1.1. Research Question and Hypothesis	2
2. Literature Review	2
2.1. Theoretical Framework: Autonomy and Subjective Well-Being	2
2.2. State Paternalism and Well-Being	3
2.3. Authoritarianism, Personal Agency, and Happiness	3
2.4. Evidence from the European Social Survey (ESS)	4
2.5. Hungary as a Case Study	4
2.6. Conclusion of Literature Review	6
3. Methodology.....	6
3.1. Research Design and Approach	6
3.2. Data Sources	6
3.3. Statistical Methods	7
3.4. Limitations of Methodology	8
4. Results of Data Analysis	9
4.1. Correlation analysis	9
4.2. Regression analysis.....	12
4.2.1. Life satisfaction.....	13
4.2.2. Happiness	18
4.3. Comparative data analysis on the country level	21
4.4. Hungary and the authoritarian mindset	24
5. Conclusions.....	26
6. References.....	27

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1. Introduction

Subjective well-being (SWB), defined as individuals' self-reported assessment of their own life satisfaction and happiness, has become a focal point in contemporary social sciences. Understanding the factors that contribute to well-being is critical not only for academic research but also for policymakers seeking to enhance quality of life at the societal level. A growing body of literature highlights the importance of personal agency and autonomy—key components of human freedom—in influencing subjective well-being. Personal agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices, while autonomy involves self-governance and freedom from external control.

This paper examines the relationship between personal agency, autonomy, and subjective well-being on both personal and national levels, with a specific focus on Hungary. Hungary provides a compelling case study due to its recent political shifts towards more authoritarian governance, increased state intervention, and rising concerns over declining personal freedoms. By exploring the dynamics between autonomy and well-being, this study seeks to contribute to the broader understanding of how individual liberties and state policies impact life satisfaction.

1.1. Research Question and Hypothesis

This study addresses the following research question: **To what extent do personal agency and autonomy influence subjective well-being, both at the individual and national levels, particularly in the context of Hungary?** We hypothesize that higher levels of personal agency and autonomy are associated with increased subjective well-being. Specifically, we posit that individuals in societies with less paternalistic and more liberal policies will report higher levels of life satisfaction compared to those in more controlled environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework: Autonomy and Subjective Well-Being

The relationship between autonomy and subjective well-being is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposed by Ryan and Deci (2000). SDT posits that autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that, when satisfied, enhance well-being and motivation. Autonomy, defined as the experience of self-endorsed action, is crucial for fostering intrinsic motivation and personal fulfillment. Numerous studies have confirmed that individuals who

perceive higher levels of control over their lives report significantly higher levels of happiness and life satisfaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Empirical evidence from cross-national studies also supports the positive impact of autonomy on well-being. For instance, Diener et al. (2010) found that autonomy support at the national level, including democratic governance and respect for civil liberties, correlates strongly with higher levels of subjective well-being across countries. These findings suggest that environments promoting personal freedom and reduced external control are essential for individual happiness.

2.2. State Paternalism and Well-Being

State paternalism, characterized by extensive government intervention in personal choices, has been scrutinized for its potential negative impact on well-being. Bjørnskov et al. (2010) argue that heavy regulation and paternalistic policies can undermine personal agency, leading to decreased life satisfaction. Their analysis of European countries indicates that nations with higher economic freedom, less state intervention, and stronger protection of personal liberties tend to have happier populations.

Further supporting this view, the Nanny State Index (2023) highlights how excessive regulation in areas such as alcohol, tobacco, and food control correlates with lower self-reported well-being. Countries like Hungary, which rank high on the Nanny State Index due to stringent regulations, provide a critical context for examining how paternalistic policies can constrain personal freedoms and impact overall happiness.

2.3. Authoritarianism, Personal Agency, and Happiness

Research on authoritarianism and subjective well-being reveals that citizens in more authoritarian regimes often report lower levels of happiness compared to those in democracies. According to Freedom House (2023), the erosion of political rights and civil liberties in countries like Hungary, now classified as “Partly Free,” has coincided with declining levels of subjective well-being. Inglehart et al. (2020) found that authoritarian governance tends to reduce perceived agency and control, which in turn negatively affects individual happiness.

The literature also highlights the specific mechanisms through which autonomy impacts well-being. Individuals in autonomous environments are more likely to experience a sense of purpose, engage in meaningful activities, and build stronger social connections—all factors that contribute to higher subjective well-being. In contrast, individuals who perceive themselves as lacking control over their lives often experience feelings of helplessness, alienation, and anxiety, which detract from their overall well-being.

This decline is evident in Hungary, where recent years have seen a shift towards more centralized governance, decreased media freedom, and increased state influence over personal choices. These changes have led to a marked decrease in perceived autonomy among citizens, aligning with lower scores on international happiness and freedom indexes.

2.4. Evidence from the European Social Survey (ESS)

The European Social Survey (ESS) provides robust data on personal autonomy, trust, and subjective well-being across European nations. Analysis of ESS data indicates a strong positive correlation between perceived control over life and life satisfaction. In countries with high levels of perceived personal agency, such as Denmark and Sweden, average life satisfaction scores exceed 7.8 out of 10. In contrast, Hungary, where fewer respondents report feeling in control of their lives, exhibits lower average life satisfaction scores around 6.1 (ESS, 2020). We will dive deeper into data analysis in a later section.

These findings are consistent with the Human Freedom Index (Fraser Institute, 2023), which ranks Hungary 49th in terms of personal freedom, reflecting a decline in perceived agency and autonomy. This data underscores the importance of individual freedoms in shaping well-being, supporting the hypothesis that more liberal, less restrictive environments contribute positively to life satisfaction.

2.5. Hungary as a Case Study

Hungary's trajectory over the past decade serves as a critical case for exploring the link between agency, autonomy, and well-being. Since 2010, Hungary has experienced a gradual erosion of democratic norms, increased state control, and diminished personal freedoms. As a result, Hungary's ranking in global freedom and well-being indexes has deteriorated. This study aims to quantify the impact of these changes on subjective well-being, using Hungary as an illustrative example of how state policies can shape individual perceptions of agency and happiness.

Since 2010, Hungary has been governed by the Fidesz under Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has increasingly consolidated power and diminished the checks and balances typical of liberal democracies. This political shift has decreased civil liberties, including reduced media freedom, curtailed judicial independence, and growing governmental influence over education and civil society. This drawback has also been highlighted by international indices, such as Freedom House, where Hungary has been on a downward trend since 2017, dropping from its previously prestigious "Free" status to the "Partly Free" category (Freedom House, 2023). Hungary has the lowest score among European Union (EU) Member States in the Freedom House ranking and is the only Member State categorized as „Partly Free“. The erosion of democratic norms in Hungary can be linked to declines in personal agency and perceived autonomy, with significant implications for subjective well-

being. Additionally, Hungary ranks relatively high on the Nanny State Index, which assesses European countries based on the extent of regulation over personal lifestyle choices, including alcohol, tobacco, food, and vaping. Hungary holds the 5th position, with all other Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries receiving lower (less restrictive) scores (The Index, 2023).

Literature also suggests that there is often a corresponding decline in subjective well-being in contexts where individuals feel their freedoms are being eroded. One critical dimension of Hungary's political transformation is the increased centralization of power and the rise of state paternalism. The state has exerted a growing influence over personal decision-making in family life, education, and the economy through legislation and government initiatives. The decline in freedom in these areas becomes evident through the lens of the Human Freedom Index (HFI), for instance (Fraser Institute, 2023). The HFI, which measures personal, civil, and economic freedoms, ranks Hungary, again, lower than all EU Member States, reflecting its downward trend. The government has justified these paternalistic measures as necessary for maintaining national identity and social order. However, from the perspective of personal agency and autonomy, these policies limit individual freedoms and the capacity to make independent life choices, thus potentially reducing life satisfaction.

Hungary's comparatively low ranking in the World Giving Index, which evaluates acts of kindness such as donations, volunteer work, and aiding strangers, indicates a diminished feeling of civic responsibility and communal cohesion (Charities Aid Foundation, 2023). While Hungary has improved its ranking considerably in the last decade, it still ranks 59th, taking a position around the middle of the 141-country list. Less room for non-governmental organizations and philanthropic endeavors results from government-imposed excessive control over social and economic life. This could stifle the community-driven support that thrives in more open societies. Furthermore, as reported by Eurostat, its comparatively poor social protection benefits and rising Old Age Dependency Ratio reveal underlying vulnerabilities within Hungary's social fabric (OECD iLibrary, n.d.; Eurostat, 2023). The aging population and insufficient social welfare policies place increased pressure on public services.

To what extent do personal agency and autonomy influence subjective well-being, both at the individual and national levels? How can political contexts affect the link between happiness and autonomy? The experience of Hungary offers an excellent ground for answering the research question. The nation's growing state paternalism and authoritarianism provide a microcosm for studying how external elements like governance frameworks and policy initiatives impact citizens' sense of agency and control. This study sheds light on the wider effects of authoritarian governance on subjective well-being by utilizing Hungary as a case study. It will be useful for scholars and policymakers interested in the relationship between happiness, autonomy, and human agency.

2.6. Conclusion of Literature Review

Literature consistently supports the hypothesis that personal agency and autonomy are significant determinants of subjective well-being. Countries that prioritize individual freedoms and minimize state intervention tend to foster higher life satisfaction among their citizens. Hungary's recent experience of declining freedoms provides a pertinent example of how changes in governance and policy can influence the well-being of a population. This study will further explore these dynamics through empirical analysis, attempting to highlight the importance of fostering individual agency to ensure citizen satisfaction and well-being.

3. Methodology

This section outlines the research design, data sources, variables, and statistical methods used to examine the relationship between personal agency, autonomy, and subjective well-being at both individual and national levels, with a particular focus on Hungary.

3.1. Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a quantitative approach to investigate the hypothesis that higher levels of personal agency and autonomy are associated with greater subjective well-being. A cross-national comparison is employed, using data from multiple countries to compare the effects of varying levels of autonomy and state paternalism on subjective well-being. Hungary is used as a key case study, given its political shifts towards more centralized governance and its implications for personal freedom.

3.2. Data Sources

To ensure robust and reliable findings, the study draws from several widely used and credible data sources:

European Social Survey (ESS): The ESS is a biennial cross-national survey that gathers data on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals across Europe. It includes questions on subjective well-being (life satisfaction, happiness) and personal autonomy (perceived control over one's life). It covers both Hungary and comparable European countries.

World Values Survey (WVS): The WVS collects data on political values, cultural changes, and personal beliefs, with a focus on democracy, freedom, and life satisfaction. This dataset will complement ESS data by providing additional insight into personal agency and values associated with autonomy across nations.

Human Freedom Index (Fraser Institute, 2023): This index measures personal, civil, and economic freedom across 165 countries. The index provides a useful measure of

national-level autonomy, which will be used to assess whether higher national freedom correlates with higher well-being scores.

Nanny State Index (2023): This index ranks European countries based on the extent of government intervention in lifestyle choices, such as alcohol, tobacco, and food regulations. Hungary's position in this index will be used to assess the impact of state paternalism on subjective well-being.

World Happiness Report (2023): This annual report ranks countries based on life satisfaction scores and provides a global context for comparing well-being across nations. Hungary's ranking will be compared to other European nations in relation to its levels of autonomy and agency.

World Giving Index (Charities Aid Foundation, 2023): This index ranks countries based on their generosity (measured through donating money, volunteering time, and helping strangers), to assess global generosity and encourage charitable activities by highlighting trends and country performance. Hungary's ranking will be compared to other European countries.

Freedom in the World (Freedom House, 2023) This index assesses the state of political rights and civil liberties in countries around the world, categorizing them as "Free," "Partly Free," or "Not Free." Hungary's position in this index will be used to assess the strength of democratic institutions, media freedom and judicial independence.

Freedom and Prosperity Index (Atlantic Council): This index explores the relationship between political freedom and economic prosperity. It evaluates countries based on governance quality, economic performance, and civil liberties. Hungary's position in this index will be used to demonstrate how freedom and good governance contribute to national prosperity and long-term stability.

Old-Age Dependency Ratio (OECD) This index measures the proportion of older adults (aged 65+) compared to the working-age population (15-64). It reflects the demographic pressures on a country's workforce to support its aging population. Hungary's position will be used to assess the demographic challenges of the country compared to other European nations.

Social Protection Statistics – Social Benefits (Eurostat, 2023): This dataset provides information on social protection expenditures, including pensions, healthcare, unemployment benefits, and family allowances across European countries. It will be used to compare Hungary's social protection system to other EU countries.

3.3. Statistical Methods

A range of statistical techniques will be applied to analyze the data and test the hypothesis. These methods will ensure a robust examination of the relationship between personal agency, autonomy, and subjective well-being.

Descriptive Statistics: Descriptive statistics will be presented to provide an overview of the data. This will include mean levels of subjective well-being, perceived autonomy, and personal agency across the countries in the dataset. Hungary will be highlighted in these descriptive statistics to establish its standing in comparison to other nations.

Multivariate Regression Analysis: The analysis will use multivariate linear regression models to examine the effect of personal autonomy and agency on subjective well-being, controlling for income, education, health, and demographic factors. Separate models will be run for Hungary and for the broader sample of European countries, allowing us to test whether Hungary's lower levels of autonomy and higher levels of paternalism are associated with lower life satisfaction.

Cross-National Comparisons: Additional analyses compare Hungary with high-autonomy countries based on the aforementioned indexes. By comparing the coefficients for autonomy and personal agency across these countries, the study assesses whether less paternalistic states consistently report higher subjective well-being.

Correlation Analysis: Correlations between national-level measures of freedom and national well-being scores will be calculated to test the hypothesis at the national level. A positive correlation would support the hypothesis that greater freedom enhances subjective well-being.

Robustness Checks: Additional robustness checks, such as alternative measures of well-being (happiness instead of life satisfaction) will be performed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.4. Limitations of Methodology

While the quantitative approach provides robust empirical evidence, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

Cross-Sectional Nature of Data: The analysis relies on cross-sectional data, meaning it captures a snapshot in time. This limits the ability to infer causal relationships. Longitudinal data would provide more insight into how changes in autonomy and state paternalism over time affect well-being.

Self-Reported Data: Both well-being and autonomy measures are self-reported, which may introduce bias due to individual differences in reporting styles or cultural variations in expressing satisfaction or autonomy.

Complex variables: Subjective well-being is convoluted; many factors contribute to one's perception of their well-being, and individual needs and preferences shape it,

it would be impossible to record the complete, let alone universal recipe for feeling good, nor is it the goal of this study. Therefore, this study alone isn't a handbook for well-being, it merely explores whether personal autonomy, freedom and control are part of the recipe, and if so, how badly we need it.

Despite these limitations, this methodological approach provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the relationship between personal agency, autonomy, and subjective well-being, particularly in the context of Hungary's political and social environment.

4. Results of Data Analysis

4.1. Correlation analysis

The first hypothesis of our study was that people with higher personal autonomy have higher subjective well-being. To begin assessing this, we'll first check correlations on three measurement levels, global, European and Hungarian. We explore the potential relationship between two variables, one regarding life satisfaction and another regarding perceived control over one's life. To make the correlation check more robust, we will carry out the same analysis using a happiness variable instead of a variable for life satisfaction. Our data source for global measurement will be the aforementioned World Values Survey, for the European measurement, we'll use the European Social Survey, and for the Hungarian measurement, we employ the country-specific database of both the European Social Survey and World Values Survey.

DESCRIPTION OF VARIABLES USED IN CORRELATION ANALYSIS				
	WVS		ESS	
	variable 1	variable 2	variable 1	variable 2
name	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?	Taking all things together, would you say you are...?	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?	Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?
0	-	-	Extremely dissatisfied	Extremely unhappy
1	Completely dissatisfied	Very happy		

2		Rather happy		
3		Not very happy		
4		Not at all happy		
5		-		
6		-		
7		-		
8		-		
9		-		
10	Completely satisfied	-	Extremely satisfied	Extremely happy

Figure 1.: Variables and response items employed in our correlation analysis.

WORLD VALUES SURVEY CORRELATION RESULTS		
	Satisfaction with life/How much freedom of choice and control	Feeling of happiness/How much freedom of choice and control
Pearson Correlation	,435**	-,252**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,000
N	154459	153671

Figure 2.: Correlation between life satisfaction, feeling of happiness and feeling of control over own life based on WVS data.

Examining correlation outputs from the WVS, we see that there is a significant correlation between life satisfaction/happiness and perceived control/freedom of choice. In both examples, higher control and freedom of choice comes with higher subjective well-being measurements. Both correlations are significant at the 0,000 level. The correlation coefficient of satisfaction and control is 0,435, signaling a **moderately strong connection**. The correlation coefficient of happiness and control is (-)0,252, which is a **weaker** but still **moderate connection**, especially considering such a complex variable as one's subjective happiness. As is evident from Figure 2, the pool of respondents is over 150 thousand people, a staggering number, thanks to the extensive global database of the World Values Survey.

EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY CORRELATION RESULTS		
	Satisfaction with life/How much control over life in general	How happy are you/How much control over life in general

Pearson Correlation	,416**	,424**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,000
N	21969	22041

Figure 3.: Correlation between life satisfaction, feeling of happiness and feeling of control over own life based on ESS data.

Looking at Europe, we utilize the European Social Survey database. It's important to note that the ESS results aren't currently representative of the European continent or the European Union, as only 13 countries are featured in the latest, Summer 2024 release, with a further 18 countries said to release in November 2024. Here we had to make a decision to use an older but complete European data set, or showcase up-to-date survey results, but in a limited pool of countries. We chose the latter, as all other data was up-to-date, and especially in the case of Hungary, we wanted to use the latest available data.

The correlations observed in the WVS are also present in the ESS results, maybe even more so. In the 13 observed ESS countries, which together give us a sample size of over 21 thousand respondents, there is a **moderately strong correlation** between subjective well-being and sense of control. The correlation coefficient of satisfaction and control are 0,416, and that of happiness and control is 0,424. Both are significant at the 0,000 level.

CORRELATIONS - HUNGARY				
	WVS		ESS	
	Satisfaction with life/How much freedom of choice and control	Feeling of happiness/How much freedom of choice and control	Satisfaction with life/How much freedom of choice and control	Feeling of happiness/How much freedom of choice and control
Pearson Correlation	,396**	-,244**	,396**	,508**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0,000	0,000	0,000	0,000
N	1497	1496	2098	2108

Figure 4.: Table summary of ESS and WVS correlation analysis results with sample sizes included

Last but certainly not least, we focused on Hungarian data from the latest ESS and WVS waves. This meant four correlation checks in total. The Hungarian sample from WVS consisted of almost 1500 respondents, a comfortably representative sample. The ESS sample was even greater, with over 2000 Hungarian respondents. Two

correlation checks, satisfaction-control and happiness-control were conducted for both WVS and ESS samples. In all four cases, correlations were significant at the 0,000 level. The greatest correlation coefficient, 0,508, was measured for the ESS data and the happiness variant. This is a **strong correlation** between how happy a respondent feels and how much control they feel they have over their life. The correlation is positive, so happier Hungarians are also more likely to feel in control of their life and vice versa. In the case of satisfaction, the ESS and WVS correlation coefficients matched exactly, at 0,396, a **moderately strong connection**. The WVS correlation between happiness and control was **weaker but still considerable**, with a correlation coefficient of (-)0,244. From all of this we can deduct that in Hungary, as in the rest of the world, control and freedom of choice are connected to subjective well-being. In Hungary, in the case of the ESS data, we observed an outstanding link between happiness and the sense of control.

4.2. Regression analysis

Such variables as general happiness and satisfaction are very convoluted; therefore, a brief correlation analysis isn't enough to state that being in control increases well-being, though it establishes that there is a real connection between the two variables. For an exploration of causality, we use regression analysis. Using regression analysis, we can learn what contributes to increased well-being and see if being in control of one's life really is an important aspect of a happy, fulfilled life, or it just comes with overall better quality of life and demographic aspects. The European Social Survey contains a wide range of variables that can be referenced to try and look at the greater picture, though something as complicated and nuanced as causes of general happiness and satisfaction would be nearly impossible to fully explore. Still, while we can't crack the code to complete and universal well-being, regression analysis will help us establish at least some important ingredients of happiness and satisfaction, as well as give us an idea of how many other ingredients are hidden from us.

For the analysis, we selected a handful of variables to be used as independent and control variables, and our dependent variables were general satisfaction in the first test, and happiness in the second. We standardized all variables using z-scores. The following variables were used:

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES USED IN REGRESSION ANALYSIS				
Demographics	Personal autonomy	Institutional trust	Social life	Identity and politics

Age	Control over life	In legal system	How often socialize	EU integration
Sex	Risk-taking	In police	How many close relationships	Climagte change
Education level	Like being leader	In parliament	How active in life	Religion
Employment	Important to make own decisions	In politicians		State authority
Income	Important to follow rules	In parties		
Health	Important to have strong government	In EU		
People in household	Important to obey	In UN		
	Loyalty to leaders	In own ability to participatre in politics		

Figure 5.: Introduction of variables and response items used in regression analysis

We aimed for the most robust analysis possible. While sometimes in regression analysis, using fewer independent variables can give us better explaining powers, we didn't want to miss anything in this analysis, so we included all variables that were thought potentially relevant, given that they didn't decrease the explaining power overall (adjusted r square value). Factor analysis would also be worth considering as a continuation of this research. For now, using the previously explored ESS database, we pinpointed certain elements that could potentially influence subjective well-being. Demographics are very important of course; no regression analysis is complete without such control variables. Social life was bound to influence subjective well-being on some level, as we assumed loneliness would decrease it, so we have included several variables concerning social life. Institutional trust may contribute to feeling safe and therefore feeling better, so we include such variables as well. Apart from perceived control over one's life we included all variables that express a sense of individualism and personal agency, to see if there are any others that could strengthen our hypothesis, or downright challenge it. Lastly, we included variables expressing identity and political opinions, to see if ideologies directly affect our well-being. We conducted two separate analyses for robustness' sake, one for satisfaction and one for happiness as dependent values, and we used the ESS data again, to have a solid sample size and a pool of respondents from different cultural-geographical-political contexts.

4.2.1. Life satisfaction

Model Summary			
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
,558 ^a	0,311	0,309	0,79399952

Figure 6.: Model summary and explaining power of our analysis model

We began with the analysis of satisfaction. The model used has an adjusted R square value of 0,309, which means that our model explains around 31% of the variance in the dependent variable. This is certainly acceptable, as we stated, it would be difficult to discover the universal recipe for happiness or satisfaction. To put it simply, from this model we are one third of the way to understanding satisfaction, and we'll see shortly what factors constitute this 31%.

ANOVA ^a					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3931,095	34	115,620	183,398	,000 ^b
Residual	8714,506	13823	0,630		
Total	12645,601	13857			

Figure 7.: Significance test of our regression analysis related to life satisfaction

From the ANOVA test, we see that the model as a whole is statistically significant, with an F-statistic of 183.398 and a p-value of 0.000, indicating that the independent variables significantly explain the variance in the dependent variable.

Coefficients					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	-0,004	0,007		-0,629	0,529
Government should reduce differences in income levels	0,035	0,007	0,037	5,101	0,000

Obedience and respect for authority most important virtues children should learn	-0,026	0,008	-0,027	-3,112	0,002
Country needs most loyalty towards its leaders	-0,008	0,008	-0,008	-0,990	0,322
How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues	0,072	0,008	0,073	9,018	0,000
How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters	0,078	0,008	0,080	10,105	0,000
Take part in social activities compared to others of same age	0,022	0,008	0,023	2,806	0,005
Subjective general health	-0,198	0,008	-0,201	-25,052	0,000
Age of respondent, calculated	0,133	0,010	0,128	12,879	0,000
Household's total net income, all sources	0,078	0,009	0,080	9,035	0,000
How much control over life in general nowadays	0,281	0,008	0,275	35,926	0,000
I like to take risks, to what extent	-0,004	0,008	-0,004	-0,515	0,607
I like to be a leader, to what extent	0,007	0,008	0,007	0,855	0,392
Number of people living regularly as member of household	0,048	0,008	0,048	5,805	0,000

Highest level of education, ES - ISCED	-0,008	0,007	-0,008	-1,019	0,308
Gender	0,012	0,007	0,013	1,717	0,086
Doing last 7 days: paid work	-0,018	0,009	-0,019	-2,059	0,040
Internet use, how often	0,034	0,009	0,032	3,756	0,000
European Union: European unification go further or gone too far	0,026	0,008	0,027	3,356	0,001
How religious are you	0,013	0,008	0,014	1,706	0,088
How worried about climate change	-0,026	0,007	-0,026	-3,498	0,000
Total hours normally worked per week in main job overtime included	-0,013	0,007	-0,014	-1,863	0,063
Important to do what is told and follow rules	0,031	0,008	0,033	4,077	0,000
Important to make own decisions and be free	-0,043	0,007	-0,043	-5,759	0,000
Important that government is strong and ensures safety	0,012	0,008	0,012	1,536	0,125
Important to behave properly	-0,007	0,008	-0,008	-0,943	0,346
Important to follow traditions and customs	-0,001	0,008	-0,001	-0,074	0,941
Confident in own ability to participate in politics	0,019	0,008	0,019	2,384	0,017
Trust in the legal system	0,067	0,011	0,068	5,840	0,000

Trust in the police	0,135	0,010	0,134	13,513	0,000
Trust in country's parliament	0,020	0,013	0,020	1,606	0,108
Trust in politicians	0,003	0,016	0,003	0,197	0,844
Trust in political parties	-0,001	0,015	-0,001	-0,043	0,966
Trust in the European Parliament	-0,017	0,012	-0,018	-1,445	0,148
Trust in the United Nations	-0,005	0,011	-0,005	-0,503	0,615

Figure 8.: Regression analysis coefficients of variables affecting life satisfaction

The meat of the analysis is the table of coefficients, showing the beta values (relative importance) and p-values (significance) of individual predictors. Any Sig. value below 0,05 level means that the given variable affects satisfaction of the respondent. This effect can be microscopic, but also gigantic, based on the Beta value. Overall, we've included 34 variables as predictors. Of the 34, 19 had a significant effect on satisfaction, but the effects of most predictors were rather small.

Of those 19 predictors, 4 contributed to happiness considerably, and a few others contributed noticeably, but to a lesser extent. The greatest contributor to overall life satisfaction was **control over one's life**, with a Beta coefficient of 0,275. The second greatest contributor was **subjective general health** with a beta coefficient of 0,201. **Respondent age and trust in the police** took third place with beta coefficients of 0,128 and 0,134 respectively. This important finding once again confirms that life satisfaction and perceived control over one's life are connected, that higher control over one's means higher life satisfaction and most importantly, this is evidence that control over one's life isn't just any contributor to satisfaction, it is the **single greatest contributor** out of the 34 examined predictors.

Interestingly, based on this data, we observe that in the pool of European countries, with age, comes slightly higher life satisfaction. Those who can trust the police more are also more likely to be satisfied with life. There are other, smaller contributing factors, such as household income (Beta 0,08), and a rich social life such as meeting friends, colleagues and relatives regularly (0,073) and having close relationships with whom one can discuss personal life (0,08). Comparatively, education level, gender or current employment didn't have significant influence on satisfaction, nor did having a strong ideological stance or religion.

We aim for robust analysis of this matter, therefore we ran a second regression with happiness instead of satisfaction as our dependent variable.

4.2.2. Happiness

Model Summary			
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
,554 ^a	0,307	0,305	0,78474587

Figure 9.: Model summary showcasing the explaining power of our model related to influences on happiness

The adjusted R square of this model was 0,305, almost identical to that of satisfaction's analysis. This is acceptable, as it explains around 31% of variance in the dependent variable, feeling of happiness, from the ESS survey.

ANOVA ^a					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	3779,273	34	111,155	180,498	,000 ^b
Residual	8529,807	13851	0,616		
Total	12309,080	13885			

Figure 10.: Significance test for our happiness analysis

The new model is statistically significant on the 0,000 level, with an F-statistic of 180,498.

Coefficients ^a					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	0,006	0,007		0,890	0,373
Government should reduce differences in income levels	0,014	0,007	0,015	2,002	0,045

Obedience and respect for authority most important virtues children should learn	-0,034	0,008	-0,036	-4,155	0,000
Country needs most loyalty towards its leaders	-0,007	0,008	-0,007	-0,850	0,395
How often socially meet with friends, relatives or colleagues	0,087	0,008	0,089	10,977	0,000
How many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters	0,081	0,008	0,084	10,658	0,000
Take part in social activities compared to others of same age	0,029	0,008	0,030	3,720	0,000
Subjective general health	-0,214	0,008	-0,220	-27,388	0,000
Age of respondent, calculated	0,127	0,010	0,124	12,472	0,000
Household's total net income, all sources	0,070	0,008	0,073	8,277	0,000
How much control over life in general nowadays	0,276	0,008	0,274	35,824	0,000
I like to take risks, to what extent	0,037	0,008	0,038	4,542	0,000
I like to be a leader, to what extent	0,009	0,008	0,009	1,045	0,296

Number of people living regularly as member of household	0,078	0,008	0,080	9,576	0,000
Highest level of education, ES - ISCED	-0,007	0,007	-0,007	-0,901	0,368
Gender	0,031	0,007	0,033	4,347	0,000
Doing last 7 days: paid work	-0,016	0,009	-0,016	-1,769	0,077
Internet use, how often	0,033	0,009	0,032	3,700	0,000
European Union: European unification go further or gone too far	0,046	0,008	0,048	6,040	0,000
How religious are you	0,019	0,008	0,020	2,501	0,012
How worried about climate change	-0,016	0,007	-0,016	-2,186	0,029
Total hours normally worked per week in main job overtime included	-0,018	0,007	-0,019	-2,574	0,010
Important to do what is told and follow rules	0,021	0,008	0,022	2,720	0,007
Important to make own decisions and be free	-0,015	0,007	-0,015	-1,992	0,046
Important that government is strong and ensures safety	-0,006	0,007	-0,006	-0,760	0,447
Important to behave properly	-0,021	0,008	-0,022	-2,665	0,008
Important to follow traditions and customs	-0,004	0,008	-0,004	-0,484	0,629

Confident in own ability to participate in politics	0,008	0,008	0,009	1,066	0,286
Trust in the legal system	0,035	0,011	0,036	3,054	0,002
Trust in the police	0,120	0,010	0,121	12,159	0,000
Trust in country's parliament	0,000	0,012	0,000	0,029	0,977
Trust in politicians	0,032	0,016	0,033	2,000	0,045
Trust in political parties	-0,016	0,015	-0,017	-1,087	0,277
Trust in the European Parliament	-0,023	0,012	-0,024	-1,944	0,052
Trust in the United Nations	-0,014	0,011	-0,014	-1,292	0,196

Figure 11.: Regression analysis coefficients showcasing the influence of certain variables on subjective happiness

The beta coefficients are very similar to those observed in the case of satisfaction as a dependent variable, which confirms that of the 34 variables examined, perceived control over one's life is the most notable predictor of happiness or satisfaction, therefore subjective well-being. The more in control one feels, the happier they are. The Beta coefficient for control over life as a predictor was 0,274. Subjective general health comes second again, with a coefficient of 0,220. Age of respondent and trust in police are in third place. As for weaker predictors, bustling social life also increases happiness, not just satisfaction. A change from before is that happiness is also positively influenced by more people living in one's household (Beta coefficient 0,08). Household income still plays a part in explaining increased happiness.

4.3. Comparative data analysis on the country level

We explored the connection between subjective well-being and agency on an individual level, and it is clear based on the data taken from several large-scale international surveys that having control over one's own life increases happiness and satisfaction globally, in Europe and in Hungary. The second hypothesis of this study is that individuals in societies with less paternalistic and more liberal policies, where there's more emphasis on individual decisions, will report higher levels of life satisfaction compared to those in more controlled environments.

To check this, we compared rankings of 13 countries in 8 separate indexes, the Human Freedom Index, Nanny State Index, Freedom in the World, World Giving Index, Freedom and Prosperity Index (Freedom and Prosperity are two separate indexes here), Old Age Dependency ratio, social benefits to GDP ratio. The 13 countries are the same European countries that were featured in the 11th wave of the European Social Survey's Summer 2024 release, which is the most up-to-date release at the time of writing this study. Compiling the rankings of these countries in all indexes, we attempted to create a single definitive ranking for individual freedom and agency. There were two different strategies employed, both mathematically pointing us to the same results. First, we created our new ranking by average country rankings in the 8 indexes. This method is favorable as some countries are not featured in all 8 indexes, so a simple additive method could be misleading. The second method, however, was additive, as in, it is based on a points system, where country ranks in each index were worth points based on how favorable the country's position is in said index. The points were totaled, giving us a singular ranking once more. Overall, there are only two missing data points, Old Age Dependency ratio wasn't properly measured for Croatia and Nanny State Index doesn't feature Switzerland, so it's still worth using the points ranking system as a means to check validity of the average rankings system, keeping in mind that the positions of these two countries are impacted by the missing data. Otherwise, the order of countries is unchanged.

Country	Rank in Best Average ranking	Rank in Points ranking
Hungary	13	13
Croatia	12	12
Lithuania	11	11
Slovenia	10	10
Slovakia	9	9
UK	8	8
Germany	7	7
Austria	6	5
Finland	5	4
Ireland	4	3
Switzerland	3	6
Netherlands	2	2
Norway	1	1

Figure 12.: Country rankings based on measurements of paternalism and authoritarianism.

Based on the results we can clearly state that Hungary is the country with the least amount of individual freedom and agency among those examined. On average, Hungary placed 11th/13 in the featured indexes. Unsurprisingly, Western and

Scandinavian countries put more emphasis on nurturing the freedom of the individual, educating citizens in individual agency. leading to an overall better ranking. Hungary's neighbors feature more towards the bottom of the ranking, signaling that there is a strong regional aspect. This is not surprising; Eastern Europe regularly performs underwhelmingly in freedom and well-being statistics compared to the West.

Now that we have a definitive order, it's time to see whether countries with lower individual freedom and personal autonomy also have lower subjective well-being.

Country	Compiled freedom indexes ranking	Life satisfaction (0-10 AVG)	Happiness (0-10 AVG)
Hungary	13	6,58	7,10
Croatia	12	7,20	7,55
Lithuania	11	7,05	7,41
Slovenia	10	7,54	7,78
Slovakia	9	6,32	6,57
UK	8	6,98	7,43
Germany	7	7,67	7,76
Austria	6	7,80	7,78
Finland	5	7,94	8,07
Ireland	4	7,38	7,69
Switzerland	3	8,12	8,15
Netherlands	2	7,89	7,93
Norway	1	7,78	7,95

Figure 13. Compiled freedom index rankings of countries and their average scores for individual happiness and life satisfaction

Comparing the country rankings in our compiled personal freedom index to country satisfaction and happiness scores examined in ESS wave 11 (see figure 13.) immediately reveals a pattern. Countries with more personal freedom and autonomy have more satisfied and happy citizens. A correlations check confirms this: Better country ranking in the indexes significantly correlates with higher well-being scores for citizens of that country. The Pearson correlation coefficient of country ranking, and life satisfaction is **-0,721552392**, which is a **strong correlation**, while this number is **-0,646237359** in the case of country ranking and happiness, **also a strong correlation**. Hungary is last in country rankings for freedom and autonomy and second last in both life satisfaction and happiness, underperformed only by Slovakia, whose citizens report slightly lower happiness and satisfaction.

4.4. Hungary and the authoritarian mindset

We've established so far that people who have control over their own life have higher subjective well-being, and that countries where individual freedom and control are diminishing report lower subjective well-being. Of the examined European countries, it is apparent that Hungary isn't doing well in terms of individual freedom and control or subjective well-being. One important aspect of this phenomenon is yet to be discussed. International indexes regarding individual freedom, control and agency generally review laws and regulations, which tell us about the ruling governmental mindset, but not of the mindset of citizens. Public opinion research can help us examine citizen mindset, in order to find out: Do citizens adopt the controlling, authoritarian mindset and sense of dependency of the authoritarian regime? To check this, there is no better test subject than Hungary.

After establishing that Hungary is the most authoritarian and least agency-oriented country of the examined few, we've compared responses for the ESS survey regarding the "authoritarian mindset". We compiled a number of variables where respondents express their opinions about a strong, controlling "nanny" state or, their views on the importance of individual freedom of choice. We then compared the answers of Hungarian respondents to the average response of the 13 examined countries. The results are shown in figure 14.

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	HUN AVG	ESS AVG	DIFFERENCE
How satisfied with life as a whole (0 - dissatisfied; 10 - satisfied)	0	10	6,58	7,41	-0,83
How happy are you (0 - unhappy; 10 - happy)	0	10	7,10	7,63	-0,52
How much control over life in general nowadays (0 - no control; 10 - complete control)	0	10	7,09	7,55	-0,46
Confident in own ability to participate in politics (1 - not at all; 5 - completely)	1	5	1,86	2,26	-0,39
Government should reduce	1	5	1,86	2,12	-0,25

differences in income levels (1 - agree; 5 - disagree)					
Obedience and respect for authority most important virtues children should learn (1 - agree; 5 - disagree)	1	5	2,35	2,33	0,02
I like to take risks, to what extent (0 - not at all; 6 - completely)	0	6	2,66	2,61	0,06
Important to do what is told and follow rules (1 - very much like me; 6 - not at all like me)	1	6	3,07	3,25	-0,17
Important to make own decisions and be free (1 - very much like me; 6 - not at all like me)	1	6	2,35	2,08	0,26
Important that government is strong and ensures safety (1 - very much like me; 6 - not at all like me)	1	6	2,18	2,30	-0,12
Important to behave properly (1 - very much like me; 6 - not at all like me)	1	6	2,33	2,58	-0,24

Figure 14. Table showcasing variables related to an authoritarian respondent mindset, comparing Hungary to the European Social Survey average.

Overall, we see that Hungarians are attracted to the idea of a strong, paternalist state. They are not confident in their own ability to participate in politics, are more likely to think that it's important to follow rules and do what is told, to behave properly, important that the government is strong and ensures safety, and not so important to make one's own decisions and be free.

It is clear that the Fidesz-KDNP government's idea of governance and control is part of the nature of Hungarians. The state is not seen as an extension of the will of the people, but a father figure who protects us and decides for us.

5. Conclusions

No matter how much confidence is placed in the state, we see that Hungarians aren't happier or more satisfied for it, for being free of the burden of individual decision-making. It's unnecessary to now start listing all economy and prosperity indicators to prove that Hungary is worse-off than the rest of Europe, and clearly, these circumstances also affect subjective well-being. However, our analysis shows that as in the world, so in Hungary, being in control of one's own life invokes increased happiness and satisfaction, in fact, it is one of the most important ingredients for well-being. This combination of research findings tells us that the authoritarian, paternalistic mindset of Hungarians and the like-minded ruling government¹ stand in the way of improving Hungarian well-being. It's hard to guess whether boosting prosperity of Hungarians or changing their and the government's mindset is the harder task, but it's useful to know that any education or campaigning aimed at bolstering individual choice and agency may positively impact the record-low subjective well-being of Hungarians. It is a twofold task – On one hand, it requires us to change how we view the government and its purpose, it should help us create an environment where we are inclined to make our own decisions and control our own life, not make the right decisions for us; On the other hand, we must change how we view ourselves, more capable, more independent, less reliant on the state to live our life and decide for us.

¹ Who might be a beneficiary of an existing pattern in a post-socialist country and/or a catalyst of the formulation of such mindset over the course of its now 14-year-old rule in Hungary. A potential future topic to extend current research.

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