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Secularization versus religious revival in Eastern Europe: Church institutional resilience, state repression and divergent paths



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ABSTRACT

Despite continuing for over two decades, the debate about the nature of the trends in religiosity in post-Communist Eastern Europe remains unresolved: some arguing that these countries are undergoing the same process of secularization as the West, while others insist that the entire region is experiencing a religious revival. Using national sample surveys from the early 1990s to 2007 to examine the change in demographic predictors of religiosity, we show that Catholic and Orthodox countries are experiencing different trends, the first group displaying evidence of secularization and the second of revival, and that these two different trends are likely to derive from the legacies of state repression and the differing abilities of the churches to resist such repression. We argue that the current literature has thus taken a mistakenly general approach, and that the post-Communist region consists of at least two distinct groups of societies with different trends in religiosity.

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The collapse of communism, by ending the epoch of atheist state repression, has naturally sparked a vibrant and ongoing debate on the direction religiosity has taken in Eastern Europe. Although the debate has continued for almost two decades, the question about the general direction religiosity has taken in post-Communist Eastern Europe remains unanswered: some arguing that these countries are undergoing the same process of secularization as the West (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Pickel, 2009), while others insisting that the entire region is experiencing a religious revival (Greeley, 1994, 2002, 2003; Tomka, 2011).

The competing characterizations, secularization (Norris and Inglehart, 2004) and revival (Greeley, 1994, 2002, 2003; Tomka, 2011; Müller and Neundorf, 2012), have taken a general approach, dismissing large numbers of countries as special cases. The Russian case in particular has posed a challenge for the secularization approach. As time elapsed since the collapse of communism allowing for a longer term analysis, Russia has emerged as a clear case of religious revival with no evidence of having undergone secularization (Evans and Northmore-Ball, 2012). Several other countries including Romania (Voicu and Constantin, 2012) also do not fit into the secularization paradigm. In addition, the persistent religious vitality of Poland is difficult to fit into the secularization paradigm (Pickel and Sammet, 2012: 8). On the other hand, countries such as the Czech Republic and traditionally Protestant East Germany do not fit with the religious revival trend (Muller, 2011; Pickel and Sammet, 2012). Thus the two dominant approaches had limited success in providing a unified theoretical explanation for trends in religiosity in Eastern Europe.

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Our aim in this paper is to move the debate beyond this deadlock by showing that both trends are in fact present and to refocus attention on the role of history, particularly past state repression and its interaction with the institutional nature of the dominant churches, in shaping today's trends in religiosity. Furthermore we aim to move the discussion beyond the dominant secularization paradigm and the bottom up approaches to religiosity and to emphasize the importance of considering the macro-level institutional context in explaining the micro-level trends in religiosity in Eastern Europe.

In this paper we re-examine patterns in religious affiliation and church attendance across twelve Eastern European countries and over time, comparing them in the early 1990s and late 2000s. We argue that post-Communist Eastern Europe is best understood as consisting of two sets of cases, Orthodox countries and Catholic countries, each of which follow different dynamics in religiosity owing to the different institutional natures of the two churches, and their consequent ability to resist state repression under communism. Given its powerful international structure, the Catholic Church managed to retain adherents even under communism, and consequently levels of religiosity in predominantly Catholic countries were quite high immediately following the collapse of communism and have remained steady. In countries where Orthodoxy has traditionally been dominant, the Orthodox Church was suppressed, and the collapse of communism has opened the way for Orthodox Churches to rebuild themselves and regain adherents. We also show that the effects of denomination cannot be definitively disentangled from the effects of state repression itself; with most Catholic countries being outside the Former Soviet Union, we cannot be certain about how well the Catholic Church would have resisted the worst years of Stalinist repression. Although all the Eastern European countries share the experience of communism, they do not share the same patterns in the development of religiosity in the post-Communist period, thus the micro-level approaches need to be considered within the greater framework of the institutional context particularly religious denominations and the intensity of state repression. While the revivals in Orthodox countries may be temporary and primarily consist of 'lukewarm' or 'fuzzy' religiosity that represents a stage on the path towards dominance of a secular majority (Voas, 2009; Voas and Doebler, 2011), we emphasize that at least in the short-term Orthodox and Catholic countries represent different trends.

1. Explanations for trends in religiosity in post-communist Eastern Europe

We start by discussing the micro-level bottom up approaches to examining religious trends (the secularization and revival paradigms). We show how these two approaches help characterize the micro-level trends as being representative of either a religious decline or revival. However these approaches are limited to helping us identify the type of 'imprint' we would expect to see as a result of an overarching decline or revival but do not extend to identifying the cause of these trends. We propose to macro-level contextual factors, the legacies of communist state repression and the institutional resilience of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches, as possible causes of the micro-level trends in religiosity.

Secularization is the process by which religion loses relevance in all spheres of life as societies modernize. As societies become more industrial, urban, wealthy and educated, the increasing dominance of scientific rationality (Swatos and Christiano, 1999) and as well as greater existential security (Norris and Inglehart, 2004) discourage religiosity. In modern societies religiosity loses social relevance as religious institutions and rituals become increasingly "differentiated" from most spheres of social life (Tschannen, 1991: 403). For most of the 20th century scholars have agreed that all Western European societies are undergoing secularization. While recently the secularization approach has been challenged in a few respects - most notably for Euro-centrism, using a romanticized religious past as reference point, and ignoring the effects of religious competition - secularization remains the dominant paradigm for understanding dynamics in religiosity (Swatos and Christiano, 1999; Pickel, 2011; but see Bruce (2011) for a defence of the theory).

Several scholars argue that post-Communist Eastern Europe is no exception to the secularization paradigm (Norris and Inglehart, 2004; Need and Evans, 2001, 2004; Stolz, 2009; Pollack, 2008; Muller, 2009). In their analysis of three waves of the World Values Survey, Norris and Inglehart (2004) point to the linear decline in religiosity over birth cohorts as evidence that with each passing generation religiosity is waning in post-communist countries. As further evidence for secularization, the authors point to the negative association between overall levels of religiosity and human development (Norris and Inglehart, 2004). Need and Evans (2001) also argue that the positive effects of age on religiosity indicate that these countries are undergoing secularization.

While some studies are arguing that post-Communist societies are secularizing, another set of primarily empirical studies argue that these societies are actually undergoing a religious revival (Greeley, 2002, 2003; Tomka, 2011; Pickel, 2009). The main thrust of the revival arguments is based on empirical evidence of the persistence of religiosity despite the experience of communism in the Catholic countries of Central Europe, and signs of strengthening religiosity in eight post-socialist countries (Greeley, 2003; Tomka, 2011). Orthodox countries, particularly Russia, are noted as experiencing strong religious revivals (Greeley, 2002, 2003; Evans and Northmore-Ball, 2012). Critics of the revival argument, however, point to the 'little grounding in sociological theory' while acknowledging the theoretical value of links that revivalists make between national identity and religiosity (Pickel and Sammet, 2012).

The two stylized macro-level trends of revival and secularization can be identified and distinguished by the 'imprint' of the overarching processes (whatever their causes may be) on the micro-level patterns of religiosity (Evans and Northmore-Ball, 2012). An overarching process of secularization will be characterized by sustained or even strengthening effects of

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