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Religion and National Identity in Central and Eastern European Countries: Persisting and Evolving Links

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Abstract

The article aims to offer a contribution to a better understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the intertwining of national and religious identity at the individual level in (some) European former communist and socialist countries. It starts by retracing from a historical perspective the place religion occupied during the regimes, then paying attention to how, once politicized and ethnicized by the hand of a new class of ethno-political entrepreneurs, religion has become “the hallmark of nationhood.” This excursus allows us to better contextualize both the theoretical argument and findings. The intertwining of national and religious identity is investigated from two main theoretical sources. The first is the debate within sociology and political science on the different ideas of nationhood, while the second consists of socio-psychological models of intergroup relations. The empirical investigation is based on survey data from the European values study (EVS, 2017). A comparative approach is used which includes four countries having Catholic large majorities (Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary) and, as a benchmark, Romania having an Orthodox majority. To test the hypotheses, a structural equation model is specified. The causal model seeks to unravel to what extent different conceptions of nationhood (ethno-religious vs. civil), together with national attachment, influence the intergenerational transmission of religious values and distrust of people of another religion/nationality. The research results are in line with the current European trends pointing in the direction of a stronger overlap between the religious and the national in tailoring collective identities.

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Religion and National Identity in Central and Eastern European Countries: Persisting and Evolving Links

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Introduction

After the collapse of the communist and socialist regimes, many Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries seemed to experience some kind of religious revitalization.^{i ii iii}

Religion was a determining element in rebuilding national identities. Acquiring new meanings strictly tied to the communist “politics of memory/oblivion,” religion hence encompassed both the cultural and political spheres, and the individual and collective dimensions.^{iv} Nevertheless, it is difficult to draw a single picture of trends among the former communist and socialist countries, as levels of both religiosity and religious influence on the public and political sphere vary greatly from one country to another, requiring a close scrutiny of the area’s communist/socialist legacies.^v In this regard, the CEE region offers an interesting opportunity to investigate the interplay between secularizing and counter-secularizing trends and the forces depicted in Berger’s thesis of “desecularization.”^{vi}

In line with the Western European secularization process,^{vii} previous analysis^{viii ix x} investigating religious changes in the CEE region has shown a decline in religious identification, attendance, and beliefs, even in countries with large Catholic populations. In countries with an Orthodox majority – most notably Russia and most former Soviet republics – levels of religious affiliation instead seem to have risen. This religious change is described, for instance, in the report produced by the Pew Research Center as part of the Pew-Templeton Global Religious Future project which analyzes religious change and its impact on societies around the world.^{xi} Moving to religious beliefs, while on the one hand there is much evidence of growing interest in religion in a framework of “believing without belonging”,^{xii} on the other hand, again similarly to Western Europe, rates of religious attendance are either stable or in decline, and nevertheless rather low overall, with increases only being seen in Romania, Russia, and Bulgaria.^{xiii xiv}

All the same, religion seems to have acquired growing salience across the entire CEE region and, in particular, in the former communist and socialist countries, offering an interesting example of how individuals' value changes may follow institutional changes. Accordingly, any time that a set of circumstances causes cultural, political, and economic institutions to change their norms and functioning, the individuals making up the society at large tend to adapt to the modified context,^{xv} in turn tailoring their behaviors. Indeed, curiously, research on the topic shows that religion and levels of religiosity are particularly high among the generation born immediately before the establishment of the communist/socialist regime, and those born after 1970, who hence reached adulthood and completed their secondary socialization after the regimes had come to an end.^{xvi xvii xviii} While bearing this in mind, we should however not underestimate or neglect the impact and consequences produced by the political use of religion,^{xix} also and especially when trying to better frame and explain phenomena linked to religious “reawakening” or “revival”. In fact, according to some scholars, the growing salience of religion is not a matter of personal values or spirituality but above all a return to traditions, a way to reconstruct their country’s collective memory^{xx} (and, at times, national identity too) as well as a viable way to reconnect to what had been before the regime came into existence.^{xxi} Not surprisingly, the link between religion and national identity is present across the entire region, yet is somewhat weaker in the Catholic-majority countries, which retained relatively high levels of religiosity during the regimes.^{xxii} Nevertheless, the role of the post-communist and -socialist elites in mobilizing (and politicizing) religious values for power purposes is evident in the Catholic-majority countries too as shown, for instance, by the “dangerous liaisons” between the Catholic church and the state in Poland,^{xxiii} or by the more recent Catholic-driven, anti-gender mobilizations in Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary.^{xxiv}

Against this background, this article focuses on the individual conceptions of nationhood rather than on trends of religious attendance or beliefs over time, and specifically on the intertwining of religious and national symbolic boundaries. Following Lamont and Molnár,^{xxv} symbolic boundaries are “conceptual distinctions made by social actors ... [that] separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership.” Consistently with this, we adopt a cognitive perspective that considers ethnicity and nationhood as ways of perceiving, interpreting, and representing the social world, rather than as “things” in the world, in an explicit reference to the theoretical framework depicted by Brubaker.^{xxvi} According to the cognitive approach, however “imagined”^{xxvii} they may be, symbolic boundaries produce important social consequences, in terms of both attitudes and behavior. Social identity theory (SIT) gives a good illustration of the psychological mechanism underlying these phenomena.^{xxviii} To put it simply, the individual’s social identity refers to all those aspects of self-image deriving from the social categories to which the

subject feels he or she belongs. It develops as the outcome of the functionally connected processes of categorization, identification, and comparison between groups. Within this theoretical picture, some social psychologists have proposed an analytical distinction that is particularly useful for analyzing national identity as a particular case of social identity.^{xxix} This distinction is based on a division of social identity into three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and normative. The first concerns self-categorization as a member of a group and enables an answer to the question “Who am I?” The second expresses the intensity of the emotional attachment to the thus defined group. The third defines the criteria of inclusion in/exclusion from the group and enables an answer to the question “Who are we?” Since reference will be made to this dimension later in this work, it is a good idea to explain that we use the term “normative” – in the framework of SIT – to indicate only those norms, beliefs, and values perceived as prototypical of group identity. It has no prescriptive value. These contents establish the (symbolic) external boundaries of the nation, distinguishing between insiders and outsiders. They can vary in time and space, and are not infrequently the object of contestation and (re)construction in social and political practices. In this framework, religion is, therefore, considered one of the contents establishing the normative dimension of national identity.^{xxx} Previous studies showed that differences in the salience attributed to religion in the individual definition of national belonging could be explained by traits such as religiosity and perceived ethnic threat at the individual level. Furthermore, cultural narratives and institutional settings seemed to play a key role.^{xxxi} Against this general theoretical framework, the paper focuses on individual beliefs, attitudes, and values^{xxxii} rather than on political narratives about religion and national identity. Empirically, as better presented in the third paragraph, a statistical analysis was performed on survey data gathered in the last wave of the European Values Study (EVS) in 2017. The study looked at four countries having a large Catholic majority – namely Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary, and used Romania – having an Orthodox majority, as a benchmark. The rationale was to test whether a baseline model (hence before, and more than, individual and contextual variations) existed, linking religious practice, conceptions of national identity, and attitudes toward relevant religious issues, such as the intergenerational transmission of religious values and ethno-religious distance. To this end, structural equation modeling (SEM) was performed. In the past two decades, SEM, whose main advantage is that it integrates factor analysis and path analysis,^{xxxiii} has gained attention in psychology, sociology, economics, and political sciences. Using SEM, it is possible to both estimate unobserved variables (constructs such as “patriotism,” “prejudice,” or “political ideology,” etc.) from observed variables (e.g., response options for each question in a survey) and to investigate relationships between latent variables. SEM is particularly useful to empirically disentangle the

relationships between concepts that overlap with each other. In the case under investigation here, it is a powerful tool to identify different conceptions of nationhood and their relations with religiosity. In this specific case, SEM was used to look at the perceived relevance of religion as a national symbolic boundary in association with other contents of national belonging used by individuals to distinguish “co-nationals” from “outsiders” (such as ancestry, language, residence, respect for laws, shared customs, etc.). Furthermore, it was used to investigate the relationships between religious practice, the intertwining of religious and national symbolic boundaries, and attitudes and perspectives toward others in two domains of everyday life, namely religious education and intergroup relations. In this regard, it focused on the consequential dimension of religion as defined by Glock and Stark^{xxxiv}. The main expectation was that individual religiosity would be an important factor in explaining the effort to preserve the religious in-group (e.g., through the transmission of religious values to children), while it would hold little relevance in itself in explaining intergroup relations. In fact, ethno-religious distance was largely expected to depend on the type of conception of the nation adopted by people more on than their individual religiosity. Even though religious commitment may be associated with both civic and ethno-religious conceptions of the nation, only the latter was expected to foster ethno-religious diffidence.

To better contextualize the statistical findings, the paper necessarily starts by retracing the status historically occupied by religion and its institutions during and after the Soviet communist and Yugoslav socialist eras to then pay particular attention to how, once politicized and ethnicized by the hand of a new class of ethno-political entrepreneurs,^{xxxv xxxvi} religion became “the hallmark of nationhood.”^{xxxvii} Nevertheless, although acknowledging the relationship the different religions (and religious authorities) entertained with both the state authorities and the citizens, and the roles such ties played during and after communism and socialism, as well as all across the Soviet and Yugoslav federations (in turn differently helping to shape the independent republics’ nation-building and national identity-building processes), the study is unable to account for all the developments, political implications, and historical specificities of each confessional faith present in the CEE region or each country there located. In light of i) the very peculiar historical and political background of the CEE region and the countries composing it; and ii) the difficulties in investigating issues concerning national identity, ways of identification and feelings of attachment (from both the national and religious perspectives), the analysis provided by the paper is thus punctual though partial. Additionally, due both methodological and purpose-related reasons, it focuses only on some of those countries where the Roman Catholic church has come face to face with both an increasingly secularized society and its renewed socio-political centrality. Nevertheless, the historical introduction seeks to provide the reader with all the necessary references and tools in order to better contextualize

both the theoretical argument and the following statistical analysis, as well as to understand the complex and complicated relationship existing between religion and nation/national identities - particularly in the cases of the former Soviet and Yugoslav countries. Lastly, the paper closes with a brief discussion of the main results, acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the study, as well as envisaging a potential direction for future studies. While adding complexity to the academic debate, the article seeks to nurture reflection that goes beyond the case studies to touch on the widespread (and worrying) increase in electoral preferences for national(ist) and conservative political parties.

1. Context

1.1 Rebuilding the in-group: church and politics during and after communism and socialism

Issues concerning groups' collective identities, feelings of attachment and belonging, in- and out-group trust, as well as the perceived relevance of religion as a national symbolic boundary, are always crucial worries for multinational states which are, by their nature, composed of more than two groups, each with its own distinct national identity.^{xxxviii} Emblematic examples of such polities were the Soviet Union and the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (hereafter Yugoslavia), two multinational federations composed of various groups differing in their ethnic, linguistic, and/or religious backgrounds. Nonetheless, more than their internal heterogeneity *per se*, the key concern of the state authorities was the politicization of cultural differences, which would have threatened the internal equilibrium by reawakening national feelings, solidarities and antagonisms alike. In spite of the different strategies implemented by the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the collapse of the two federations saw these same issues violently come to the surface, not just metaphorically: in order to cope with the changing environment^{xxxix xl xli} and as a possible response to the ideological, economic, institutional, and social shocks to the existing systems,^{xlii} the cultural features of politically mobilized groups became dichotomizing elements^{xliii} serving the purpose of delimiting the groups' boundaries. All over the Central and Eastern European region, nation-building and boundary-making mechanisms – as a whole falling under the rubric of “centrifugal ideologization”^{xliv xlv} – were largely led by nationalist political actors and put at the center of new state-sponsored ideologies. Religion as a whole stood at the core of these processes, and religious actors and institutions also played a crucial and critical role in reinforcing the “us-and-them” dichotomy.

Although the path followed was the same, the phenomenon investigated played out differently across the Central and Eastern European region and in the single republics, with significant and interesting variations between i) the Soviet and the Yugoslav multinational federations; ii) the respective republics (e.g., roles and ties between religious and political actors were and are different in Poland

and Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia, etc.); iii) the region's two main churches – Catholic and Orthodox; as well as iv) within the same church (e.g., the role and status of the Orthodox church in Romania were very different from its role and status in North Macedonia, where it represented a key element in building the Macedonian national identity, and was fostered and favored even during the Yugoslav era).^{xlvi} In light of such complexity and heterogeneity, and for both methodological and purpose-related reasons, the following is not an exhaustive account of the peculiar liaison between religious and political actors/institutions. What it can account for, however, are two broader issues encompassing the whole region: firstly, the fact that its “re-evangelization”^{xlvii} since the end of the 1980s stood as an answer against “dangerous behaviors” such as abortion and divorce, which had become normal during communism; secondly, the fact that the “religious revival” also stemmed from the renewed importance and socio-political status acquired by the churches and their institutions, further favored and encouraged by new legislation and (ethno-national) political leaders. More specifically, and as far as the relationship established by the two grand federations with religion throughout the decades is concerned, the Soviet Union was rather centralized, and state atheism was the sole belief allowed. The regime was skeptical of religion, and Christianity was regarded “as a foreign body that governments must seek to subvert and in the end destroy.”^{xlviii} Yet religion was never completely eradicated and, generally, the church was given the choice either to dissent or cooperate with the communist authorities. In some republics such as Romania, for example, owing to the respect among the population for the dominant Orthodox church, it was not dismantled but used instrumentally by the state authorities to maintain control over the population, and pander to the party's goals by engaging in propagandistic activities. As explained by Leustean,^{xlix} “collaboration between church and state was officially centered on a new principle of the church, the so-called ‘social apostolate.’ According to this principle, as long as the church was engaged in the support of the social and political development of the country, it was allowed to perform its religious rituals.” By contrast, in other cases a “softer treatment” was granted in exchange for the church's secret collaboration with the communist police, as happened in Poland. Indeed, it should come as little surprise that while most present-day Poles continue to identify as Roman Catholic, the erosion of commitment to Catholic norms also stems from revelations about the collaboration of bishops and priests with the communist-era secret police.¹

The multiethnic and multireligious Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) instead established a different relationship with the religion and churches inhabiting its territory. The 1946 constitution granted “separation between state and church, freedom of worship, religious equality, [and] the seclusion of religion to the private sphere”,^{li} yet religion was prohibited and the churches persecuted right from the very start. It only was in the 1970s that a period of liberalization began,

providing that the churches' "activities remained in private settings such as reception of the sacraments, the religious upbringing of children (within parishes), dealing with families, and religious publications."^{lii} It is worth noting the role played by the Catholic church in Slovenia which, by trying to establish a dialogue with the state authorities, "followed the advice of the Vatican – that is, [...] to use 'the Yugoslav case' as a model of cooperation with the other socialist states".^{liii} Alongside other guarantees, the Yugoslav slogan of "Brotherhood and Unity" accompanied the ethno-national and religious groups throughout the decades, serving as a "civic religion"^{liv} able to foster a sense of supra-ethnic belonging while avoiding nationalist feelings. All the same, however, a set of circumstances, principally the nationalists' exacerbation of ethno-religious differences, caused the violent collapse of Yugoslavia, alongside the religion-based genocide in the city of Srebrenica, Bosnia Herzegovina, on 11 July 1995.

The events which marked the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s thus reopened "debates about religion in a modern and changing world and about secularization, revival, and 'new' religious fundamentalism."^{lv} Nonetheless, most of the countries in the CEE region successfully transited to liberal democracy and many have also entered the European Union. In the present day, however, the "marriage" between religious and political actors (meaning between religion and nationhood) is dramatically re-emerging, making scholars talk of a democratic backslide.^{lvi lvii lviii} Accordingly, the tendency to overemphasize the nations' religious backgrounds in order to safeguard the in-group from enemies and contamination^{lix} has become dominant in political discourses; and the appeal to Christianity as a "cultural and civilizational identity" [...] characterized by putatively shared values that have little or nothing to do with religious belief or practice"^{lx} is anything but an isolated incident. In post-communist Poland and Hungary, for example, the church has assumed and is increasingly supporting and advocating very conservative positions, at odds with the process of democratization. In Romania, although the legislation describes the state's attitude toward any religious belief as "neutral," it is common for priests to be directly involved in politics as party members or election candidates, as well as for politicians to include "God and Christianity" in their platforms and narratives. The use of metaphors referring to the "sacrality" of the nation or the idea of "choseness" are rather usual; and the tie between "God and the nation" has been, and still is, frequently employed.^{lxi} Among others, the case of Croatia is particularly explicative: in June 1981, in the middle of Yugoslavia's worst social, political, and economic crisis, the Virgin Mary appeared in the small village of Međugorje, in the south of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As Skrbis^{lxii} explained, this event helped to reawaken the Croat nation, conferring upon it an aura of sacredness, while allowing the "Croatian nationalists to imagine themselves and their nation as chosen for the task of community-building." Overall, particularly when considering the independence processes of the former communist and

socialist countries, the influence exerted by the church cannot be neglected. It ranged from clear interference, as in the case of Poland, where the Solidarność trade union and the Catholic church cooperated closely, aiding the fall of the regime; to the softer and more subtle influence of the “electoral advice” given by the Slovenian clergy. At present, however, across the CEE region, the church is increasingly present and vocal in the public and political sphere, and the nations’ religious roots increasingly stressed in order to mark the boundaries of (national) belonging.

2.Theoretical framework

Starting from this picture, the article aims to offer a contribution for a better understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the intertwining of national and religious identity at individual level in (some) former communist and socialist countries of Europe. The expectations that there would be a relationship between religious attendance, conception of nationhood, and the salience of religion in everyday life were based on two main theoretical sources, as presented in brief below. The first is the debate within sociology and political science on the different ideas of nationhood and on methods to measure the spread of these conceptions in public opinion. This piece of literature offer the basis for conceptualization and operationalization of the intertwining of national and religious criteria of belonging. The second regards the social consequences of religiosity in terms of attitudes and behaviors from a social identity approach.

2.1 Different ideas of nationhood: religion and other national symbolic boundaries

As anticipated in the introduction, in reference to SIT,^{lxiii} religion may be considered one of the contents – namely the norms, beliefs, and values perceived as prototypical of group identity – establishing the normative dimension of national identity. In the literature, this area of investigation is dominated by the widely criticized “ethnic/civic” dichotomy.^{lxiv lxv} In reality, this transposition from the macro to the micro presents various weaknesses.^{lxvi lxvii lxviii lxix lxx} First of all, it is based on a highly ideological and almost Manichean vision of nationalism. In the attempt to overcome this dichotomy, Eisenstadt and Giesen^{lxxi} proposed a tripartite framework based on three different symbolic codes – primordial, cultural, and civic (or civil) – upon which collective identity is built. Kymlicka^{lxxii} also distinguished between a dimension of national belonging based on sharing traditions and national ways of conduct and the strictly civic (meant here in terms of citizenship) and ethnic dimension. Lastly, Brubaker^{lxxiii lxxiv} and Smith^{lxxv} also distanced themselves from the initial rigid dichotomies and/or tripartitions in favor of readings allowing an interrelation between the different dimensions of belonging. Hence, instead of a rigid dichotomy, three core semantic centers – ethnic, cultural, and civic/political – instead emerged in the literature that are linked together and

can give rise to different identity configurations. Kaufmann directly addressed the issue, proposing to use the term “ethnic majoritarianism” to stress the fact that while most Americans are not ethno-nationalist, many are ethno-traditionalist.^{lxxvi lxxvii}

Despite these limits, extensive use has been made of this outline in sample surveys aimed at making a comparative study of the contents of national identity (see, for example, the recent EVS 2017 that will be used in this article, but also the Pew Research Center Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey and the module on national identity in the International Social Survey Program from 1995, 2003, and 2013). Typically, interviewees are presented with a list of attributes (for example, language, place of birth, religion, customs and traditions, citizenship...) and asked how important they consider them in order for a person to be a “true” co-national. Despite identifying two or three latent dimensions, the empirical studies have rarely found a full correspondence with the rigid ethnic/civic dichotomy deriving from the historical and sociological study of nationalism.^{lxxviii lxxix lxxx lxxxi} Hence, even though various scholars continue to use “civic” and “ethnic” to name the latent dimensions emerging from statistical analyses, they have to be understood as general labels which are often correlated to each other and dependent on the national context used by individuals to trace the national prototype. However, as has been noted, despite the rightful criticism levelled at the theoretical, methodological, and empirical contradictions in the civic/ethnic dichotomy,^{lxxxii} if not used in a prescriptive sense, this terminology has a heuristic utility all the same.^{lxxxiii} In particular, by using these instruments we can keep what the political elites say that the nation is or should be separate from how the citizens who are part of it see and regard it. In addition, it enables recurrent patterns in the population to be highlighted using statistical techniques. Moreover, in the specific topic dealt with here, there is empirical evidence that religion as a criterion for national membership tends to conflate with “ethnic” (or ascribed) conceptions of the nation.^{lxxxiv} However, as well pointed out by Trittler, “it is important to keep in mind that religious definitions of national belonging do not necessarily entail exclusive or ethnic connotations, but can instead refer to more cultural and value-oriented notions of belonging and integration.”^{lxxxv} Closer to the specific context investigated here, findings from survey-based research investigating the relationship between religion, national identity, institutional pride, and societal development in post-communist Europe have suggested that “there appears to be a stable, moderate for most, relationship between religiosity and the importance to claim a dominant religion as part of a national identity, which goes unmolested across two decades and during an apparent decline in conventional religious activity.”^{lxxxvi}

Following the foregoing discussion, in this article we will investigate the normative dimension of national identity by testing if the survey respondents in the countries under investigation here distinguish between the ethno-religious and civil conceptions of nationhood. Moreover, regarding the

affective dimension of national identity, following the literature on multiple identities^{lxxxvii} we consider the role of both national and European attachment.

2.2 Religiosity and social consequences

Based on a social identity perspective, religiosity offers a system of beliefs through which to enhance in-group identification and self-esteem as well as to interpret intergroup relations.^{lxxxviii} According to SIT, the more individuals feel attached to the group, the more sensitive they are to the potential collective threat coming from out-groups (e.g., fear of living in a society that does not respect the in-group values), and the more prone to support the in-group and to manifest negative attitudes toward out-groups.^{lxxxix} To check how far individuals' religious backgrounds play a key role in the importance attributed both to religion as a criterion for national belonging and in the consequential dimension of religion, we have taken into account the behavioral element of religion (i.e., attending religious services),^{xc} which, because of the time commitment involved, allows for the detection of strong forms of religiosity.

Sociological and psychological research has pointed out that religious identity can affect several aspects of person life, with both individual moral and social consequences. As regards social consequences, this article offers evidence of the impact of religiosity on two specific domains: religious education and trust in people of different nationalities and/or religions.

The first domain refers to a typical way to assure the continuity of religious group identity. Previous SIT-grounded investigations of religiosity provide a theoretical basis for positing that more frequent formal religious participation and more commitment to religious beliefs are associated with greater support for children's religious socialization. The key role of families in the intergenerational transmission of faith beliefs is well documented by sociological and psychological research.^{xc} The level of parents' worship attendance is one of the main predictors of children's religious identity^{xcii} and religious transmission seems to be stronger among children of conservative religious parents rather than moderate or liberal parents.^{xciii}

The second domain under investigation – the level of trust in people of different religions or nationalities – is more connected to the intertwining of religious and ethno-national identity.

In line with the social identity perspective and previous evidence, we have posited that religiosity is associated with a lack of trust in immigrants and especially their perception as dissimilar to religious or ethnic in-group members.^{xciv xcv xcvi xcvi} As regards the link between the meanings of national identity and out-group trust, there is evidence that civic/cultural contents provide a foundation for the extension of trust to newcomers and minorities.^{xcviii} By contrast, the intersection of national and religious identities seems to enhance distrust in foreigners. However, it should be considered that

religiosity could shape opinions toward immigrants in a different way, given that “the deeper commitment of the more devout should lead to greater exposure to the messages of religious elites” and, Knoll (2009) argues, “to increased tolerance for immigrants because of an internalization of religious teachings about compassion for the disadvantaged.”^{xcix}

2.3 Research question and hypotheses

Against this background, we came to formulate five hypotheses about the “causal” relationship between religious practice, religious and national symbolic boundaries, and the two aspects of the consequential dimension of religion considered here, that is, religious education and trust in people of different religions or nationalities.

Our hypotheses were as follows:

H1) religious attendance has a positive effect on the adoption of an “ethno-religious” conception of national identity;

H2) the “ethno-religious” conception of national identity has a positive impact on support for the intergenerational transmission of religious faith and a negative impact on trust in people having a different nationality/religion.

Concerning the differences between religious/non-religious people, on the other hand, we first of all expected that participation in religious practices would contribute to increasing the relevance of the “ethno-religious” conception of national identity. Secondly, as far as the social consequences of religion are concerned, we have argued that religious belonging has a direct effect on attitudes specifically related to the religious domain (such as the transmission of religious values). By contrast, we expected that religious belonging would only be associated with intergroup relations (e.g., tolerance of cultural and religious diversity) if national and religious symbolic boundaries are perceived as intertwined. Specifically, it is quite obvious to expect people who are more engaged in religious practices to be more likely to support the intergenerational transmission of religious faith as a way to enhance (religious) in-group favoritism. Therefore, the other hypotheses were that:

H3) the effect of religious attendance on trust in people having a different nationality/religion mainly stems from the “ethno-religious” conception of national identity, which acts as a mediating variable;^c

H4) religious attendance impacts attitudes toward intergenerational transmission both directly and indirectly, through the mediation of the religious “ethno-religious” conception of national identity.

Finally, the last hypothesis regarded comparison across countries:

H5) (at least) the configural structure of latent variables and structural paths is invariant across countries.

In other words, we have argued that, notwithstanding institutional, historical, and cultural national differences, there exists a baseline model linking religious practice, conceptions of national identity, and attitudes toward religious education and trust in people having a different nationality /religion.

3. Data and Method

The empirical investigation was based on survey data taken from the last wave of the EVS carried out in 2017. A comparative approach was used between four countries having Catholic large majorities (Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary) and, as a benchmark, one country (Romania) having an Orthodox majority.

Table 2 shows the distribution in each country and over time of belonging to a specific religious denomination.

[Table 2]

Besides the religious element, these countries were chosen for the analysis for two main reasons: firstly, all of them, until very recently, were ranked as “consolidated” (Slovenia) and “semi-consolidated democracies.”^{ci} Additionally, all of the countries successfully completed the procedure for accession to the European Union and have become member states. Secondly, in spite of these positive achievements, the quality of all these democracies has recently decreased (see Freedom House), compromised – mostly though not exclusively – by increasing ethno-nationalism and conservatism, as well as by the rise to power of far-right political parties and leaders. Such trends are well showcased by Hungary which has recently been downgraded to the status of “transitional or hybrid regime.”^{cii} Curiously, however, while the need to safeguard the “Christian roots” of their nations and Europe alike^{ciii civ} is among the key prerogatives of these political parties and trends, data from the Pew Research survey^{cv} showed the perception among respondents from Poland and Romania that their countries had become considerably less religious in recent decades. Respondents from Croatia, on the contrary, said the country had become more religious; while those from Hungary had not perceived any substantial change, saying that the level of religiosity had remained more or less the same as the previous decade.

Using EVS data,^{cvi} the number of people who described themselves as “a religious person” (other options were: a non-religious person, a convinced atheist) seems to have remained more or less stable over time in Croatia, Romania, Hungary, and Slovenia, but decreased in Poland (Fig. 1). However, as shown in Table 2, the number of people answering that they did not belong to any religious denomination increased in every country from 1999 to 2018.

[Figure 1]

3.1 Concepts, measures, and model

With this in mind, and in order to test our hypotheses, we put together a structural equation model.

The items used to measure the latent and observed variables in the model are briefly described below, while the related descriptive statistics are presented in Table A1 of the Appendix.

a) Religious attendance

It was measured using a binary variable that differentiated respondents who attended religious services more than once week/once a week from respondents who attended less often.

b) National identity

The normative dimension of national identity

As regards the normative dimension of national identity, the model distinguished the ethno-religious code of national belonging from civility. Both latent variables were measured by assessing how important respondents considered a list of attributes in order to be a “true” co-national. The ethno-religious code was measured by a list of symbolic boundaries: To have been in born [COUNTRY], To have [COUNTRY]’s ancestry, To be a Christian.^{cvi} The civility code implied more inclusive and achievable attributes: To be able to speak [THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE], to share [NATIONAL] culture, To respect [COUNTRY]’s political institutions and laws (original scale 1–4: very important, quite important, not important, not at all important).

The affective dimension of national identity

To take into account the distinction between exclusive identification vs. multiple territorial identities, the model included variables measuring the level of attachment to Europe and the degree of closeness to the country (original scale 1–4: very close, close, not very close , not close at all).

c) The consequential dimension of religion

Religious education

The importance attributed to the intergenerational transmission of religious values was measured using a binary variable that identified respondents who mentioned religious faith among the up to five most desirable qualities that children could be encouraged to learn at home.

Ethno-religious distance

To measure the relevance of intertwining national and religious boundaries in intergroup social relations, the model included a latent variable based on the level of trust in people of another religion and the level of trust in people of another nationality (original scale 1–4: completely, somewhat, not very much, not at all).

To test the hypotheses, we put together a structural equation model consisting of: 1) the measurement model, which included three latent variables (ethno-religiosity, civility, trust in people of another religion/nationality); 2) the structural/causal model which, based on the theoretical assumptions, linked the latent variables seen above and three observed variables (religious attendance, closeness to country, closeness to Europe, and support for the intergenerational transmission of religious values).^{cvi}

3.2 The measurement model

Specifically, the measurement model aimed to check the consistency of the conceptual refinement and the operationalization of the constructs with the survey data collected.

In other words, the measurement model (CFA, confirmatory factor analysis) allowed the researchers to test the hypothesis that there was a relationship between the observed variables and their underlying latent construct(s). In our case, as regards the normative dimension of national identity, we posited that the high level of importance attributed by the survey respondents to religion, ancestry, and place of birth (when they were asked to define the “true co-national” prototype) depended on a more general adherence to an ethno-religious conception of nationhood and that the level of importance attributed to mastery of the country’s language, respect of its institutions, and sharing its culture depended on a more general adherence to a civil conception of nationhood.

Before testing the causal model, a rigorous test of the cross-national measurement invariance of the three latent variables (ethno-religiosity, civility, and ethno-religious distance) had to be carried out. Said measurement invariance, to put it simply, “is a procedure that aims to demonstrate to what extent a self-report measure expresses the same meaning and whether the responses to the items are the result of the same factors, in all groups where it was applied.”^{cix}

The cross-national invariance of the latent variables was tested using multi-group confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA)^{cx} and by adopting a bottom-up strategy.^{cx} The measurement equivalence using

MGCFA was established by a sequence of tests ordered by level of strictness (configural, scalar, and metric).^{cxiii} The first step involved testing the model simultaneously on the countries under investigation, without imposing any equality constraints (configural invariance). This gave the basic level of invariance and provided evidence of the similarity of the factorial structure in the different countries. It provided the baseline model for testing metric and scalar invariance. In general, metric equivalence permits a comparison of the relations between latent variables (e.g., regression coefficients) and scalar equivalence permits a comparison of mean latent variables.

Goodness-of-fit measures of the MGCFA across countries are shown in Table 3. The goodness of fit was satisfactory for both configural (CFI=0.98; RMSEA=0.05; SRMR=0.03) and metric invariance (CFI=0.97; RMSEA=0.064; SRMR=0.060), while scalar invariance was not reached.^{cxiii}

Metric equivalence tests demonstrates that latent variable in the model can be considered as a reliable and cross-culturally valid concepts in Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary, and Romania. This paved the way to move to a causal model using the pooled dataset.

[Table 3]

3.3 The “causal” part of the model

The second, causal part of the model sought to unravel how far symbolic national boundaries (ethno-religiosity vs. civility), together with national attachment, promoted or inhibited the importance attributed to the two attitudinal domains under investigation: the intergenerational transmission of religious values and distrust of people of another religion/nationality.^{cxiv}

The associations between ethno-religiosity and civility were estimated as covariances/correlations. The remaining latent and observed variables were related to them in a meaningful way, based on the foregoing theoretical discussions. The structural paths were specified as follows: religious attendance directly and indirectly influenced the intergenerational transmission of religious values and distrust of people of another religion/nationality through the mediation of i) the normative dimension of national identity and ii) the affective dimension of national identity. The normative dimension of national identity was considered an antecedent of the affective dimension (level of closeness to country and Europe) in line with self-categorization theory,^{cxv} which emphasizes the cognitive determinants of social identity. In this approach, identification with a social group resulted from the salience of the social category, based on the clearness of the boundaries of that particular group. . Namely, people can only perceive each other as belonging to the same in-group if they recognize a prototype representing and differentiating it from the out-groups. Following this approach, group attachment follows from the perceived salience of the symbolic boundaries (in our model, criteria defining a “true” member of a nation).

Given our comparative approach, a question arose: is the full model consistent with the data collected in every country? According to H5, the findings confirmed that in at least four countries there was a baseline model linking religious practice, conceptions of national identity and attitudes toward religious education, and trust in people having a different nationality /religion.

Table 3 shows the model fit measures obtained from the SEM analyses in each country. Except for Hungary, the fit was satisfactory in all the countries considered. As a result, Hungary had to be eliminated from the sample for the subsequent analyses carried out on the pooled dataset.^{cxvi} However, the sample including Croatia, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia also passed the more restrictive test of partial scalar invariance (Table 4).

[Table 3]

[Table 4]

4. How religiosity and national identity relate with each other: empirical evidence

To test hypotheses 1 to 4, we needed to empirically investigate the way in which religious attendance, conceptions of nationhood, and attitudes toward religious education and ethno-religious distance related with each other at individual level. To do so, we ran the assumed structural equation model on the pooled dataset, which included survey data from Croatia, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia.

Figure 1 shows the estimated structural coefficients of the final tested SEM model (see Table A1 in the Appendix for correspondence between the labels in the model and the latent or observed variables).

[Figure 1]

The main finding to point out is that the sign and intensity of the structural coefficients confirmed the hypotheses: in line with H1 and H2, religious attendance was positively associated with ethno-religiosity (the standardized path coefficient was significant and equal to 0.150), which in turn promoted intergenerational transmission of religious faith ($\beta=0.145$) and diffidence toward people of another religion/nationality ($\beta=0.403$). However, as expected in H3, the effect of religious attendance on trust in people having a different nationality/religion (β was negative, but not significant) was mediated by the “ethno-religious” conception of national identity. In other words, the higher the religious attendance, the higher the importance attributed to ethno-religious components of national identity. In turn, this conception impacted on ethno-religious social distance. Instead, no direct effect from religious attendance emerged on ethno-religious social distance. By contrast, consistently with H4, religious attendance had a direct effect on support for the intergenerational transmission of religious faith ($\beta=0.403$).

It is worth noting that religious attendance was also positively correlated with civility. Similarly to the previous studies discussed above, the “civic” and “ethnic/ascribed” dimensions were complementary rather than alternative dimensions ($\beta=0.695$). However, these two dimensions behaved differently as regards the social consequences of religiosity. Civility had a negative impact on diffidence toward people having a different religion/nationality, while “ethno-religiosity” had a positive impact. As regards support for the intergenerational transmission of religious faith, the effect of civility was null while that of “ethno-religiosity” was positive.

In short, according to these findings, national identity and religiosity seem to constitute the frame in which intergroup religious differentiation becomes salient in all of the countries investigated here. Specifically: i) the ethno-religious conception of national identity contributes to distrust in people having a different nationality/religion because it gives salience to all those factors – symbolic and/or realistic threats – related to the religious social divide; ii) individual religious background reinforces this effect. However, the findings show that individual religiosity is not exclusively associated with this type of conception of national identity. It follows that the salience of religion as a marker of national identity has a little to do with religious faith, but primarily with its political mobilization in an ethno-nationalist perspective.

Conclusion

The investigation carried out by this paper has sought to better understand the mechanisms underpinning the intertwining of national and religious identity, looking at how they have and continue to play out in some former communist and socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The study adopted a comparative perspective and looked at four countries having a Catholic majority – namely Poland, Slovenia, Croatia, and Hungary – and used Romania, with an Orthodox majority population, as a benchmark. The study focused on two attitudinal religious domains: i) the perceived importance of the intergenerational transmission of religious identity; and ii) diffidence toward people of a different religion/nationality, considering both of them as a result of the categorization/identification/in-group favoritism depicted by social identity theory (SIT). Overall, what the analysis based on survey data from the 2017 wave of the European Values Study (EVS), showed is that:

i) In the countries under investigation at least, religiosity does play a role in giving salience to both “civil” and “ethno-religious” symbolic markers of the nation. By furnishing a quantitative picture of the complex tie between religion and nationality, the findings corroborate the historical accounts of “religious change” which has been taking place in the CEE region since the late 1980s,^{cxvii cxviii} while also enabling us to better understand the historical and political legacy of communism and

socialism^{cxix} throughout the area and across the countries analyzed more in detail. Nonetheless, while contributing to the literature on the topic, we acknowledge that the study offers a partial overview of the phenomenon studied, with further analysis required of the (individual and contextual) conditions under which this link could vary.

ii) The effect of religiosity on opinions about “national” issues (i.e., trust in people having a different religion/nationality) is almost entirely due to mediation of the meaning attributed to national belonging. By contrast, religiosity has a direct effect on the specific religious issue considered (i.e., as a value to transmit to the new generations). Moreover, the effect of religiosity is also reinforced by the adoption of “ethno-religious” symbolic markers of the nation. This means that the intertwining of religious and national boundaries seems to play a particularly important role in reinforcing the perceived relevance of the social transmission of religious values rather than ethno-religious intolerance and discrimination.^{cxx} In turn, this provides a statistical clue concerning the impact and consequences of the role played by so-called ethno-political entrepreneurs.

iii) The case of Hungary emerged as a sort of outlier when testing the full model. Nonetheless, when testing an alternative causal model which did not include “opinion about the intergenerational transmission of religious faith” as a dependent variable, the analysis obtained a satisfactory fit measure for this country too (see endnote 104). These findings suggest that a similar mechanism is at work in Hungary, at least as regards the impact of the intertwining of national and religious issues on ethno-religious discrimination.

iv) Last but not least, the research results are in line with the current European trends pointing in the direction of a stronger overlap between the religious and the national in tailoring collective identities, in which Christianity is often invoked as a pillar of both national identities – most notably in Hungary and Poland^{cxxi cxxii cxxiii} – and of European identity more in general.^{cxxiv cxxv}

To conclude, while acknowledging the account provided by this study is only partial, we are however confident that it adds complexity to the academic debate on the topic, and the research findings discussed above may well serve as a starting point for future explorations of the ties between religion and (national) politics on the one hand, and (declining) democracy and (growing) authoritarian tendencies on the other. In light of this study’s weaknesses and shortcomings, future investigations on the topic should also include and account for individuals’ political opinions and electoral behaviors which, as the paper has demonstrated, are closely linked to politics and mirrored in the electoral support for national(ist) and conservative political parties.

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Religious denomination (EVS Trend File 1981–2017)

	Do not belong	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Orthodox (Russian/Greek/etc.)	Muslim	Other
Croatia 1999-	11.2%	86.9%		0.1%		1.8%
Croatia 2008	17.3%	79.4%	0.1%	2.8%	0.2%	0.1%
Croatia 2017-	19.0%	79.6%	0.2%	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%
Hungary 1999-	43.3%	39.4%	14.9%	0.3%		2.1%
Hungary 2008-	45.5%	40.7%	12.6%	0.1%		1.1%
Hungary 2018	55.9%	32.7%	10.3%	0.3%		0.8%
Poland 1999	4.3%	94.1%	0.4%	0.3%		0.9%
Poland 2008-	6.3%	91.8%	0.3%	0.9%	0.1%	0.7%
Poland 2017	9.2%	88.8%	0.7%	0.6%		0.7%
Romania 1999-2001	2.5%	7.5%	2.0%	85.6%		2.5%
Romania 2008-2010	2.6%	5.0%	2.4%	86.4%	0.1%	3.6%
Romania 2017	4.4%	5.4%	4.8%	85.2%	0.1%	0.1%
Slovenia 1999-	30.0%	66.4%	0.3%	1.6%	1.1%	0.6%
Slovenia 2008	29.5%	65.7%	0.4%	1.8%	1.5%	1.0%
Slovenia 2017	35.9%	57.0%	0.3%	2.8%	3.3%	0.8%

Table 2. MGCFA fit measures (EVS 2017; Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia)

	χ^2	DF	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Configural equivalence	489.785	85	0.980	0.058	0.030
Metric equivalence	709.386	105	0.970	0.064	0.060
Scalar equivalence	20264.165	140	0.907	0.103	0.088
Partial scalar equivalence*	1160.435	122	0.948	0.078	0.071

Note: * the factor loading constraint on the “Christianity” item is released in Romania; the intercept constraint on the “Christianity” item is released in Romania and Poland; the intercept constraint on the “national culture” item is released in Slovenia

Table 3. Full SEM fit measures – single country (EVS 2017; Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia)

	χ^2	DF	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
Croatia	5984.699	66	0.956	0.067	0.042
Hungary	2306.668	66	0.870	0.070	0.051
Poland	4863.664	66	0.95	0.067	0.044
Romania	6433.753	66	0.976	0.049	0.026
Slovenia	2914.459	66	0.950	0.058	0.036

Table 4. Multi-group full SEM fit measures (EVS 2017; Croatia, Poland, Romania, Slovenia)

	χ^2	DF	CFI	RMSEA		SRMR
Pooled Dataset	20284.652	66	0.967	0.057		0.033
Multi-group SEM (scalar invariance)	20196.575	264	0.897	0.089		0.073
Multi-group SEM (partial scalar invariance)*	20196.575	264	0.942	0.068		0.059

Note: * the intercept constraint on the “being Christian” item is released in Romania, Croatia, and Poland; the intercept constraint on the “national culture” item is released in Slovenia

Figure 1. People describing themselves as “a religious person” (EVS Trend File 1981–2017)

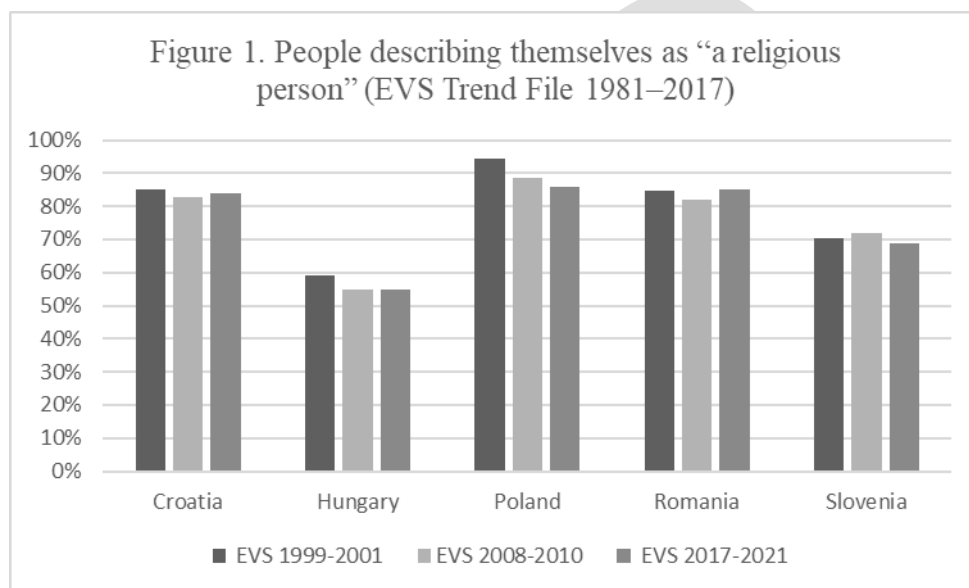
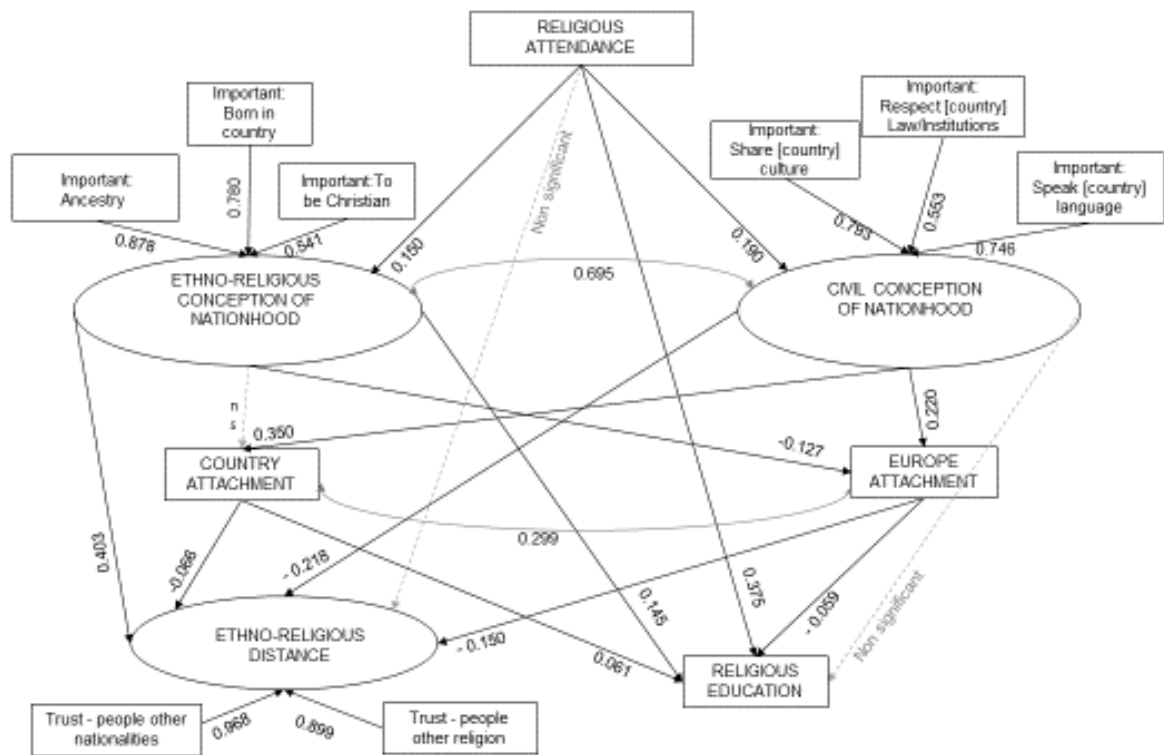


Figure 2. Pooled SEM (EVS 2017; pooled dataset: Croatia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovenia; only significant standardized path coefficients displayed)



Appendix

Table A1. Labels, variables, and question wording (SEM in Figure 1)

LABEL (SEM)	LATENT/OBSERVED VARIABLE	WORDING (EVS questionnaire)
	Normative dimension of national identity	<i>Some people say the following things are important for being truly [NATIONALITY]. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is? (reversed scale: 1 = not at all important, 4 = very important)</i>
NatAnc		To have [COUNTRY]'s ancestry
NatBorn		To have been born in [COUNTRY]
NatLang		To be able to speak [THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE]
NatLaw		To respect [COUNTRY]'s political institutions and laws
NatCult		To share [NATIONAL] culture
		<i>People differ in what they think it means to be European. In your view, how important is each of the following to be European? How important do you think each of the following is? (reversed scale: 1 = not at all important; 4 = very important)</i>
EUChris		To be a Christian
	Ethno-religious intergroup discrimination	<i>I would like to ask you how much you trust people from various groups. Could you tell me for each whether you trust people from this group completely, somewhat, not very much or not at all? (reversed scale: 1 = not at all, 4 = completely)</i>
diffiRel		People of another religion
diffiImm		People of another nationality
	Affective dimension of national identity	<i>People have different views about themselves and how they relate to the world. Using this card, would you tell me how close do you feel to...? (reversed scale: 1 = not at all, 4 = very)</i>
att_europe		Europe
att_country		[COUNTRY]
childRel	The relevance of religion as a social value	<i>Here is a list of qualities which children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which five would you say are the most desirable for a child to have? Religious faith</i>
relAtt2	Religious attendance	<i>Apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days? 1= more than once a week; 0 = other)</i>

Table A2.

Country		NatAnc	NatBorn	NatLang	NatLaw	NatCult	EUChris	diffRel	diffImm	att_europe	att_country	childRel	relAtf2
Croatia	Mean	2.8	2.8	3.3	3.3	3.3	2.4	2.3	2.3	2.6	3.2	0.3	0.3
	Min	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
	Max	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1
	SD	0.98	1.02	0.78	0.74	0.76	1.06	0.72	0.70	0.80	0.75	0.45	0.47
	N	1465	1466	1475	1465	1467	1439	1373	1378	1460	1478	1487	1487
Hungary	Mean	3.1	2.9	3.7	3.5	3.6	2.7	2.3	2.4	2.8	3.3	0.1	0.2
	Min	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
	Max	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1
	SD	0.88	0.97	0.50	0.73	0.54	1.03	0.77	0.80	0.81	0.70	0.35	0.38
	N	1500	1503	1508	1498	1507	1489	1426	1435	1496	1506	1514	1514
Poland	Mean	3.3	3.1	3.5	3.4	3.5	2.4	2.6	2.6	2.9	3.5	0.3	0.7
	Min	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0.00	0
	Max	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1.00	1
	SD	0.76	0.89	0.64	0.63	0.60	0.95	0.71	0.69	0.76	0.61	0.47	0.48
	N	1332	1337	1342	1324	1339	1290	1156	1153	1334	1351	1352	1352
Romania	Mean	3.3	3.3	3.6	3.5	3.5	3.1	2.9	2.9	2.9	3.4	0.5	0.5
	Min	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
	Max	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1
	SD	0.83	0.82	0.59	0.68	0.64	0.93	0.83	0.82	0.88	0.63	0.50	0.50
	N	1601	1600	1608	1605	1604	1577	1483	1493	1565	1582	1613	1613
Slovenia	Mean	2.6	2.7	3.7	3.6	3.3	2.1	2.7	2.6	2.8	3.4	0.1	0.2
	Min	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
	Max	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1
	SD	0.83	0.92	0.50	0.57	0.71	0.79	0.74	0.71	0.72	0.60	0.28	0.43
	N	1059	1057	1067	1066	1060	1052	1016	1031	1057	1062	1075	1075
Total	Mean	3.0	3.0	3.6	3.5	3.5	2.6	2.6	2.6	2.8	3.3	0.3	0.4
	Min	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0
	Max	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	1	1
	SD	0.90	0.95	0.63	0.69	0.67	1.02	0.79	0.79	0.81	0.67	0.45	0.49
	N	6957	6963	7000	6958	6977	6847	6454	6490	6912	6979	7041	7041

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^{ci} See <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>.

^{cii} **Ibid.**

^{ciii} Brubaker, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism.”

^{civ} Arianna Piacentini, “Save the People! Elite-People Relations and the Surge of Nationalism and Right-Wing Populism Across Europe,” *European Yearbook of Minority Issues Online* 17, no. 1 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1163/22116117_01701002.

^{cv} Pew Research Center, “National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.”

^{cvi} EVS, “EVS Trend File 1981-2017” (ZA7503 Data file Version 3.0.0, Cologne: GESIS, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.4232/1.14021>.

^{cvi} Actually, the item “To be a Christian” is presented in the list of attributes defining a “true” European. Unfortunately, as far as the national prototype is concerned, the level of importance attributed to being Christian was not tested. However, previous studies have shown that the two items – if measured at national and European level – are highly correlated in most European countries (Guglielmi and Vezzoni, “Meanings of National and European Identities.”).

^{cvi} In this article, SEM was performed using Mplus 8.1 software. To deal with missing data, full information maximum likelihood (FIML) was used. As an estimator, the weighted least square mean and variance adjusted (WLSMV) was used. The variables in the measurement and causal model are strictly ordinal (Likert scales), while the multi-group factor analysis (MGFA) uses continuous variables under the assumption of multivariate normality. Several studies, however, have shown that MGFA works well even when the data are ordinal rather

than continuous or normally distributed (Eldad Davidov, Peter Schmidt, and Jaak Billiet, eds., *Cross-cultural Analysis: Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2011)).

^{cix} T. Caycho-Rodríguez, L. W. Vilca, M. Cervigni, M. Gallegos, P. Martino, M. Calandra, C. A. Rey Anacona, C. López-Calle, R. Moreta-Herrera, E. R. Chacón-Andrade, M. E. Lobos-Rivera, P. del Carpio, Y. Quintero, E. Robles, M. Panza Lombardo, O. Gamarra Recalde, A. Buschiazzi Figares, M. White, and C. Burgos-Videla, “Cross-national Measurement Invariance of the Purpose in Life Test in Seven Latin American Countries,” *Frontiers in Psychology* (2022): 4, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.974133>.

^{cx} Eldad Davidov, Bart Meuleman, Jan Cieciuch, Peter Schmidt, and Jaak Billiet, “Measurement Equivalence in Cross-national Research,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 40 (2014): 55–75.

^{cxⁱ} There are two general approaches to testing for invariance: the top-down approach and the bottom-up approach. The top-down approach starts with the most constrained model; the bottom-up one starts with the least constrained model.

^{cxⁱⁱ} The distinction between these three levels of invariance is essential for correct interpretation of the differences among groups. Although configural equivalence indicates a common pattern for the conceptual structure across contexts, it does not ensure that different groups understand the items in the same way (as we shall better explain when interpreting the empirical results). The next levels of equivalence are necessary to allow some kind of comparison across groups: metric equivalence allows for the comparison of relations between latent variables (e.g., regression coefficients) while scalar equivalence makes it possible to compare mean latent variables.

^{cxⁱⁱⁱ} In absence of scalar invariance, one should avoid comparing mean latent variables across countries.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that it is sufficient to release the constraint of the “To be a Christian” item in Poland and Romania and of the “To share [NATIONAL] culture” item in Slovenia to improve the goodness of fit and to obtain at least a partial scalar equivalence.

^{cx^{iv}} To assess the ability of the full SEM to reproduce the data, we referred to the comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The cut-off values were: (a) CFI: if the value was equal to 0.95, the model could be accepted, values above 0.90

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^{cxv} John C. Turner, *Rediscovering the Social Group: A Self-Categorization Theory* (London: Blackwell, 1987).

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^{cxvii} Ramet, *Religion and Politics in Post-Socialist Central and Southeastern Europe*.

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^{cxx} Ewa Gołębiowska, “Ethnic and Religious Tolerance in Poland,” *East European Politics and Societies* 23, no. 3 (2009), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325409333191>.

^{cxxi} Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley, “Rethinking ‘Democratic Backsliding’ in Central and Eastern Europe – Looking Beyond Hungary and Poland.”

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^{cxxiii} Natalie Smolenski, “National-European Theology,” *East European Politics and Societies* 30, no. 3 (2016): 519–50, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325415605889>.

^{cxxiv} Brubaker, “Between Nationalism and Civilizationism.”

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