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RELIGIOUS CHANGE AMONG COHORTS IN EASTERN EUROPE: A Longitudinal Analysis of Religious Practice and Belief in Formerly Communist Countries

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ABSTRACT: The situation of the formerly communist countries represents an anomaly within the sociological debate about the various secularisation processes currently underway in Europe. The main issues relate to whether or not Eastern Europe has experienced a religious revival following the fall of communism and, if so, which dimensions of religiosity are most involved in that revival. Sociologists have yet to reach a clear consensus on country trends or on the impact of Christian doctrines on these processes. We will address these issues throughout this article. The results from different piecewise regression analyses of European Values Study (EVS) data show that regular religious practice in general is declining from cohort to cohort, whereas religious belief has shown a revival followed by a decrease from the oldest to the youngest cohorts. The impact of a country's main religious traditions is a relevant factor; predominantly Orthodox countries, for example, break with the overall results by showing a slight increase of religious practice as well as stable (and very high) belief among the youngest cohort. This situation is primarily driven by data from the Russian Federation and Bulgaria.

KEYWORDS: religiosity, Eastern Europe, multidimensional, cohort

EASTERN EUROPEAN RELIGIOSITY DURING AND AFTER THE FALL OF COMMUNISM

The sociological discourse about European religiosity is undoubtedly focussed on secularisation processes (Bruce 2002; Gorski and Altınordu 2008; Voas and Doebler 2011). The main tenets of such discussions are that processes of modernisation have a negative effect on the stability and vitality of religious communities, practices, and convictions (Pollack 2008). Given this unambiguous agreement about the strong secularisation Europe is experiencing, the situation in the former communist countries deserves further investigation (Pickel and Sammet 2012). Whether we speak about religious stability or whether we hypothesise a religious reawakening, Eastern Europe represents an anomaly within the main discourse about European religious change. Many scholars have no doubts about this point. According to Greeley, for example, "One can say with considerable confidence that religion is reviving in the former socialist countries" (2002, 76), while Evans and Northmore-Ball (2012, 795) state

that “the resurgence of Orthodoxy in Russia provides a robust exception to secularization trends in Western Europe”. Tomka (2010, 14) argues that “the religious revival observed in this region and time period can hardly be harmonized with the hypotheses of secularization theory”.

When speaking about Eastern European religion and religiosity, the period of the communist regime represented a divide between what was before and what came after. Before World War II, religion had been one of the cornerstones of the societal order and of the state itself, but “under the Communist era it was persecuted and pushed to the private sphere” (Tomka 2010, 1). The regime imposed a “politically forced” secularisation (Meulemann 2004, 49; Müller and Neundord 2012, 567) as a means of undermining religious traditions and the transmission of belief in the name of scientific materialism. This religion suppression treated believers as second-class citizens by excluding them from organisations, the media, industrial management, the officer corps, membership in the Communist Party, and upper-level government positions (Ramet 1987).

Under these conditions of severe repression, the religious landscape became polarised into two competing branches: a severely repressed church and the officially promoted atheistic alternative promoted under the name “scientific atheism” (Froese 2004b). Churches were no longer able to play a role in public education, religious organisations were monitored or prohibited entirely (Froese 2004b), and traditional family structures were eroded by state policies that supplied childcare and increased female labour participation (Myers 1996), all of which resulted in a weakening of the primary religious-socialisation agencies. In addition, rebellious religious leaders were imprisoned (Ramet 1987; Gautiert 1997), church properties were confiscated, and some places of worship were transformed into warehouses and restaurants (Ramet 1987; Müller and Neundord 2012; Michel 1992; Stan 2009). Contrary to the differentiation that the rest of Europe was experiencing, the communist system was intended to centralise people’s social lives under the power of the Communist Party. In this situation of dramatic and imposed change, the churches were the only institution to still represent the traditions of and continuity with the previous system, thus becoming the only source of opposition (Tomka 2010). While most sociologists have no quarrel with defining Eastern European religiosity as an exception to European patterns of secularisation, the field has yet to reach consensus about what occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Religious Practice and Belief in the Former Communist Countries

Concerning religious practice, Gautiert (1997) and Reistma et al. (2012) have reported higher rates of church attendance among the youngest cohort (i.e. those socialised after the fall of communism) in each of the Eastern European countries. Pollack (2003) and Greeley (1994), in contrast, argue that church attendance has either remained low or has declined in the former communist countries; Brenner (2016) supports this finding. For country-specific trends, Pollack (2003) identifies Russia and Albania as exceptions to the declining trend, Reistma et al. (2012) and Greeley (2003) find declining attendance in Poland, and Borowik (2002) argues that religiosity levels in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus are as low as in the most secularised of Western countries. Kaariainen (1999) asserts that Russians go to church less frequently than other Europeans, while Burkimsher (2014) reports *increasing* rates of attendance in Russia and to a lesser extent in Romania and Bulgaria. While it is difficult to draw a unique picture of Eastern European church attendance trends, most appear to resemble Western European trends, which are either low and stable or are in decline. Other countries, such as Poland, have rates similar to the high-attendance European countries while showing the same negative trends.

Only in three countries – Romania, Russia, and Bulgaria –we can observe some evidence of increasing attendance (Brenner 2016).

For religious beliefs, Gautiert (1997) reports strong belief among the youngest cohort, as does Kaariainen (1999), while he does report important changes at the beginning of 1990, when the number of believers increased significantly. Fox and Tabory (2008) similarly claim that religious monopolies have reduced participation (but not belief), while Greeley (1994) finds that between one-half and three-quarters of Russians believe in God – a finding that Pollack (2003) affirms. Tomka (2010), speaking more generally, notes changing opinions and growing interest in religion.

All cues appear to indicate that two different mechanisms have been at work following the fall of communism: (1) a reawakening of religious belief that (2) seems to counterbalance a stability or even a decrease in religious practice. This is, of course, a general picture, and we can pinpoint the main possible exceptions: Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria (Brenner 2016; Burkimsher 2014). The literature hints at this idea of diverging trends, especially in Tomka's (2010) discussion of an interpretation of religion that deviates from tradition by becoming more diverse and individualistic. Kaariainen (1999) also reports that, since 1991, numbers of churches and clergy members have notably increased, but neither of these factors seems to have had any influence on attendance at church services. This new religiosity, Borowik (2002) says, could be characterised by the avoidance of any duties towards religious institutions.

These hypothesised differing trends for regular practice and individual belief require different explanations. For practice and formal religiosity, it is impossible to forget the severe impact that the communist regime had on institutional churches. In pre-communist times, denominational institutions' personnel consisted primarily of priests, deacons, and other religious figures. The party completely banned these positions; during the post-communist era, the numbers of remaining clergy members were not even enough to sustain normal church activities. As the years went on, ecclesiastic institutions' personnel increasingly consisted of well-trained laic Christians (Tomka 2010). Indeed, the eventual reawakening of church attendance visible in some Eastern countries precisely shows the ability of institutional churches to re-organise themselves following the communist *tabula rasa*.

If institutional religiosity was something the communist regimes undermined, the eradication of personal belief was more difficult to influence, as it appears that "systems of belief require more than simply the power of promotion and coercion to become accepted" (Froese 2004b, 35). Yet the statement that communist regimes undermined religious practice while belief itself remained safe might be overly simplistic. We can summarise at least three different explanations for this eventual revival of religious belief. First, this revival could be a real revival of Christian belief, similar to what Voas and Crockett (2005, 12) define when speaking about the strong version of "believing without belonging". Greeley (2002, 77) agrees with this idea, stating that "those born after 1970 found themselves more likely than their immediate predecessors to believe in a God who is concerned about them personally [...]. Far from being a phenomenon of 'New Age' religion, it would appear to be a rebirth of age-old religion". Pollack (2003) has also reported the new forms of religiousness outside the church that are emerging in Eastern and Central Europe.

The second possible explanation concerns exactly what Greeley mentioned as "New Age" religion. This interpretation is similar to the weak version of "believing without belonging" (Voas and Crockett 2005, 12), which also considers God in a non-Christian manner: not as a personal God but as some kind of spirit or life force (Kaariainen 1999). In this way, post-communist countries' beliefs can "accumulate", such that people who declare their belief in

God also believe in other phenomena such as reincarnation, astrology, magic, occultism, and elements of Eastern religions (Borowik 2002; Kaariainen 1999; Tomka 2010).

The third possible explanation involves what might be termed a “burning of the bridges” factor (Borowik 2002). It is widely known that, until 1981, it was necessary to belong to the Communist Party to make advances in one’s career or to be accepted in society; thus, at the present time, being a Christian is essentially associated with being an honourable person. Religion, having been the only force of opposition, has become practically synonymous with anti-communism in the new democratic view of political life (Borowik 2002). Politicians are aware of this and have increasingly used religion as a way to legitimise political power (Meulemann 2004). It thus appears that this supposed revival is above all a return to tradition, a way to reconstruct a country’s collective memory, and a way to reconnect to what existed before the regime (Borowik 2002).

A generational matter?

At the time when communist regimes were installed, religion was strongly rooted in Eastern European society, so it is not surprising that young people would have been the most receptive to the imposed atheism (Borowik 2002) and that these same people would be expected to be less religious later in life as well because of the socialisation process during socialism. In contrast, the older generation had already developed their system of belief before the beginning of the regime and were less prone to change (Müller and Neundord 2012). If the idea of religious reawakening is correct, then we should see signs of this revival among the generation who came to maturity after communism ended (Evans and Northmore-Ball 2012). This historical reconstruction supports the idea of a U-shaped curve of religiosity, the highest levels of which represent the older generation born before the regime and the youngest generations who have come of age following the fall of the regime. Indeed, some researchers have corroborated this hypothesised trend. Greeley (2002), for example, reports the highest belief-scale scores for the younger cohorts (those born in the seventies and eighties), as well as for the older cohorts; Zrinscak (2004) finds different generational responses to communism; and Pollack (2003) also looks at birth cohorts to report evidence for declining attendance with the expectation that younger cohorts will be less likely to attend. Although the results about church attendance present a somewhat unclear picture, it appears that children do in fact share religiosity levels with their grandparents’ generation; a religiosity that their parents’ generation seem to have rejected (Greeley 2002, 1994).

The Catholic/Orthodox divide

Our presentation so far has considered the formerly communist European countries as being religiously homogeneous; however, it has overlooked possible differences between their religious traditions. Eastern countries’ Christianity comprises two different doctrines: Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Need and Evans (2001) clearly underline the importance of considering these religious denominations in order to better understand cross-country differences in patterns of religiosity. Halman and Petterson (2003) go further by stating that European religiosity is primarily related to religious tradition (rather than to the East/West dichotomy), with Protestants and Orthodox being more secular and Catholics being more religious. This Catholic/Orthodox divide is clearly visible in many empirical works. Bruce (2000) and Need and Evans (2001), for example, report that predominantly Catholic Eastern countries have higher rates of attendance than traditionally Orthodox and pluralistic ones. In addition, Pollack (2003) finds that predominantly Catholic Eastern European countries show high attendance rates that are comparable to their Catholic Western European peers. Titarenko (2008) also finds these high rates of mass attendance in Catholic countries compared to predominantly Orthodox countries; she interprets this situation as the ability and the

willingness of Catholic churches to educate their adherents' systems of belief. Overall, the Catholic Church seems to have more strongly resisted the political and ideological pressure of the regime (Pollack 2003).

In view of these contributions, religious denomination could plausibly have an impact on both the level and the trend of religiosity. While Catholic countries have retained relatively high levels of religiosity but have not shown any significant increases following the fall of the communist regimes, Orthodox countries suffered severe religious decline during the regime but have shown an observable and important revival in the aftermath of communism (Müller and Neundord 2012).

As these studies have shown, many issues must be addressed when speaking about a possible reawakening of religiosity in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. First, we must distinguish a possible increase of regular churchgoing from a possible increase of more individualised and intimate beliefs. Second, the prevailing religious denomination likely represents an important feature for distinguishing the possible religious trajectories among these countries. Third, whether a possible religious reawakening is observable across every Eastern European country, or whether a few peculiarities exist, is not clear. A discussion of these three issues is vital if we wish to draw a comprehensive picture of Eastern European religiosity after the fall of communism. The remainder of this paper will discuss these issues.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As we have seen from the discussion above, in order to better describe trends for Eastern European religiosity, it is necessary to disentangle and focus on the two main components of this religiosity: religious practice and belief. They may be viewed as different dimensions that underline the broad and complex concept of religiosity. They are part of Glock's (1962) well-known typology distinguishing a ritualistic dimension (practice) and an ideological dimension (belief); many authors have also depicted these dimensions as being central (Voas 2007). *Religious practice* is the dimension that sociologists have most often investigated because of its social and collective nature as well as its widespread availability through surveys. Because religious practice measures the ritualistic dimension of religiosity, this factor is suitable for detecting strong forms of religiosity because it also requires a time commitment (McAndrew and Voas 2011). The dimension of *religious belief* instead regards the supernatural aspects of religion; this dimension is concerned with the mixture of dogma that must be accepted and recognised in order to comply with a transcendent value (Pace 2007).

In the theoretical section of this paper, we observed how the changes in these dimensions are likely to be interpreted as generational change, starting from a generation socialised before the imposition of the communist regime, moving on to a generation socialised by communist-imposed atheism, and then finishing with a generation who reached maturity after communism had ended. This situation reinforces the idea of using cohorts to account for time when studying religious trends. This way of proceeding has clear theoretical foundations; cohort replacement should be thought of as the main mechanism behind religious change (Voas 2009; Voas and Chaves 2016; Voas and Doebler 2011) because of the socialisation effect from the religious environment of people's upbringing.

We can thus combine the multidimensional approach and the need to use cohort replacement to account for time and pose our first research question:

RQ1: Are the trends for practice and belief increasing or decreasing cohort after cohort in Eastern Europe?

With this first research question, we aim to determine general trends for the two dimensions discussed above. But these trends can subtend certain peculiarities linked to the predominant religious tradition. Many authors have discussed the resilience of Catholic countries to forced atheism as well as a decrease of religiosity during communist times; they have also discussed a resulting reawakening after the end of communism in Orthodox countries. Religious tradition is thus something to take into account when drawing a clear picture of Eastern European religiosity, which leads us to our second research question:

RQ2: Are the trends for practice and belief different or the same according to the prevailing Christian denomination?

In addition to denominational effects, the literature suggests a variety of country-specific factors related to the twentieth century's religiosity trends. For example, many studies have reported on a revival of religious practice only in Russia, Romania, and Bulgaria, whereas others have pinpointed Poland as a country where religiosity was strengthened by the regime's attempt to impose atheism. These factors lead us to our third research question:

RQ3: Can any country-specific factors be found in the trends for practice and belief?

DATA, VARIABLES, AND METHODS

This research is based on European Values Study (EVS) data, a large-scale, cross-national, longitudinal, and survey-based research programme that examines basic human values (EVS 2011). From this dataset, we chose a subsample of twelve formerly communist Eastern European countries – Belarus, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic, and Ukraine – that participated in at least two waves of the survey.¹ Starting from this sample, we retained all individuals born after 1930 because of the small sample size of this older group. The resulting sample comprises 39,257 individuals (see Table 1).

	EVS survey wave			Total (n)
	1990–1993 (n)	1999–2001 (n)	2008–2010 (n)	
Belarus	0	902	1,465	2,367
Bulgaria	846	832	1,428	3,106
Czech Republic	1,689	1,631	1,731	5,051
Estonia	884	882	1,423	3,189
Hungary	749	863	1,454	3,066
Latvia	822	874	1,438	3,134
Lithuania	800	932	1,456	3,188
Poland	795	946	1,469	3,210
Romania	909	1,007	1,428	3,344
Russian Federation	0	2,150	1,439	3,589
Slovak Republic	938	1,192	1,386	3,516
Ukraine	0	1,063	1,434	2,497
Total	8,432	13,274	17,551	39,257

TABLE 1: Individuals surveyed by country and survey waves

¹ Despite a few minor differences among countries, the general criterion used for sampling was a multistage stratified sample with random selection in each stage.

Dependent variables

As previously discussed, in this analysis we focus on two different dimensions of religiosity: religious practice and belief. The method for measuring *religious practice* is almost standardised and essentially refers to church attendance (Ruiter and van Tubergen 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2004; Voas and Doebler 2011; Biolcati-Rinaldi and Vezzoni 2013; van Ingen and Moor 2015; te Grotenhuis et al. 2015). We decided to measure religious practice as the average probability of attending church weekly. To build this variable, we started from the survey item “Apart from weddings, funerals, and christenings, about how often do you attend religious services these days?” For example, we assigned a value of 0.99 to those who declare that they attend church weekly, a value of 0.23 to those who attend church monthly (12 weeks over 54 weeks in a year), and a value of 0.02 to those who attend church once yearly: 1 week over 54 weeks in a year (Hout and Greeley 1998; Pisati 2000).

The measure of *religious belief* is less standardised and also more complex, because it is necessary to disentangle the real core of Christian belief from a more general and syncretic spirituality along the lines of “I know that something’s out there”. To measure this, we relied on a set of survey items that asked, “Which, if any, of the following do you believe in?” We coded people who answered yes to all items concerning God, heaven, and hell (i.e. the essential convictions of the Christian theological system) as 1, and 0 otherwise.²

Independent variables

Cohorts and religious tradition represent the independent variables of this analysis. The operationalisation of cohorts was straightforward, since we relied on the year of birth and treated the variable as being continuous.

	Obs.	Missing	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Practice	36,700	2,557	0.19	0.35	0	0.99
Belief	27,469	11,788	0.37	0.48	0	1
Year of birth	39,159	98	1958.41	15.36	1931	1990

TABLE 2: Summary of individual variables

To answer RQ2, we needed to distinguish the trends for practice and belief according to the prevailing Christian doctrine. The variable we used to distinguish among these doctrines was defined for each country; the variable was built by summarising the individual information gathered from the question, “Which religious denomination do you belong to?” Countries with an unclear situation (i.e. those that had high percentages for two different denominations) were coded as “mixed” (see Table 3).³

² Beyond the theoretical reasons, we also had methodological reasons for choosing these three items. Relying on the work of van Schuur (2003), it is possible to see these items as ordered and suitable for measuring a latent trait (such as religious belief), because “belief in God” and “belief in hell” represent the higher and lower bounds of a scale, while “belief in heaven” is located in the middle ranking. Using these items allowed us to focus on Christian belief in the strictest sense and to avoid generic spirituality.

³ The categories we found correspond with those of Norris and Inglehart (2004), except for the “mixed” countries, which they coded as Protestant.

	Individual religious denominations					Total
	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Orthodox	Other (non-Christian)	No denomination	
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	
<i>Roman Catholics</i>						
Czech Republic	26.25	2.57	0.14	1.35	69.69	100.00
Hungary	38.01	12.71	0.07	1.83	47.39	100.00
Lithuania	71.22	0.57	3.22	1.29	23.71	100.00
Poland	93.00	0.22	0.22	1.25	5.31	100.00
Slovak Republic	64.22	8.42	1.26	0.94	25.16	100.00
<i>Orthodox</i>						
Bulgaria	0.23	0.39	48.41	10.82	40.14	100.00
Belarus	7.91	0.55	54.13	0.55	36.86	100.00
Romania	5.05	1.92	86.29	2.95	3.79	100.00
Russian Fed.	0.28	0.31	49.76	4.13	45.52	100.00
Ukraine	5.76	2.29	46.04	12.54	33.37	100.00
<i>Mixed</i>						
Estonia	0.82	9.63	10.95	1.54	77.06	100.00
Latvia	18.15	16.45	17.06	2.79	45.56	100.00
Total	28.36	4.65	24.54	3.26	39.20	100.00

TABLE 3: Individual religious denominations and countries' Christian traditions

Modelling strategy

We adopted a two-step strategy to answer all three research questions. In the first step, we simply computed the means (and the lowess smoothing) of the dependent variables associated with each year of birth. Starting from the theoretical bases and from the results of this exploration, we identified several inflection points that we then used to compute piecewise regressions.⁴ With Model 1, we ran regressions using the entire sample, Model 2 divides the data among Christian denominations, and Model 3 distinguishes among countries. The final results start from the coefficients of these piecewise regressions. We ran f-tests to compare the piecewise models with both the linear and quadratic models in order to evaluate the applicability of the piecewise regression. The results showed that the piecewise models always worked better than the linear models and often worked better (and never worse) than the quadratic models.⁵

RESULTS

We have followed a two-step procedure to present the results. We first present graphs of the computed means for both religious practice and belief; we then present the piecewise regressions by reporting the models' coefficients. We present a summary of the findings related to RQ3 in the main text of this paper and have placed the full table in the appendix.

Figure 1 shows the means of practice and belief associated with the different years of birth for the entire sample of twelve formerly communist countries; the different shapes of the

⁴ Despite the dichotomous dependent variable for belief, we opted to use a linear model to present results that would be easier to read and interpret. See Hellevik (2009) for a complete analysis of why linear models with dichotomous dependent variables are acceptable or preferable.

⁵ These analyses are available upon request from the author.

trends for the two dimensions are clearly visible in the figure. Religious practice shows a clear linear decrease that flattens for the youngest cohorts, whereas religious belief shows a slight decrease for those born between 1930 and 1955, a slight increase for those born between 1955 and 1985 (an increase that is more pronounced after 1970), and a steep decrease for those born after 1985.

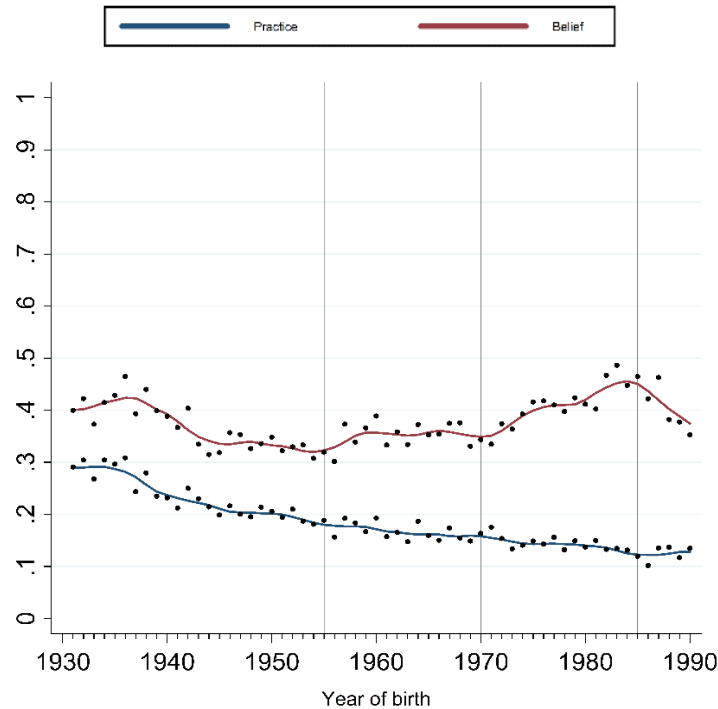


FIGURE 1: Means and lowess smoothing for practice and belief by year of birth

These inflection points are consistent with both the beginning and the end of the communist regime and with findings that have identified the 1970s as the period when the regime started to loosen its grip (Froese 2004a; Greeley 2002). Starting from this finding, we can confidently say that those born between 1930 and 1955 are people who were socialised under the most severe influence of the communist regime. Those born between 1955 and 1985 were instead socialised during a period when the communist-imposed atheism was loosening its grip, particularly for those born after 1970. People born after 1985 are those who were socialised following the complete end of the regime.

Starting from these inflection points, we then move to the piecewise regressions; Table 4 shows the estimations.

	Practice	Belief
1930–1955	-0.005***	-0.004***
1956–1970	-0.001***	0.003***
1971–1985	-0.002***	0.006***
1986–1990	0.000	-0.021***
Constant	0.297***	0.424***
Observations	36,610	27,402

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

TABLE 4: Model 1 estimation for religious practice and belief

The results from the piecewise regression confirm what we have seen from Figure 1. The trend for practice shows a statistically significant linear decrease for those born between 1930

and 1985; the trend flattens for those born after 1985. The trend for belief instead shows a statistically significant decrease for those born between 1930 and 1955, a statistically significant increase in the following cohorts, and a statistically significant (and very pronounced) decrease after 1985. The general scenario is therefore a clear linear decrease for religious practice and a reawakening of religious belief that also seems to have reached a peak and reversed course.

To better investigate these findings, the next step is to distinguish the trends among the different Christian denominations (Figure 2).

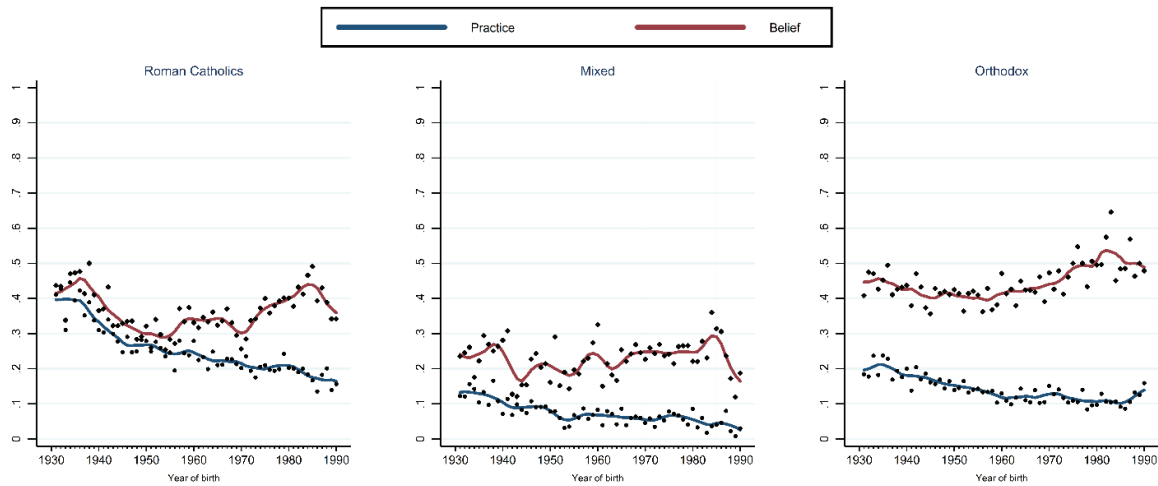


FIGURE 2: Means and lowest smoothing for practice and belief by year of birth, divided by prevalent Christian denomination

The graph shows that religious practice follows an almost linear decrease, regardless of the prevalent Christian denomination, with small signs of a revival among the youngest cohorts for Orthodox-majority countries. The trends for religious belief are consistent with our findings from the general picture: we indeed see a decrease among the older cohorts, an increase for those born between 1955 and 1985, and a decrease for those born after 1985. This last decrease appears to be less pronounced for those who live in Orthodox-majority countries.

In modelling these trends, we adopted the same piecewise strategy as before. The results from the model estimations shown in Table 5 confirm what we have stated above: religious practice shows a statistically significant decrease among the older cohorts, and the trends continue to decrease (or flatten) for those born after 1955. The statistically significant coefficient for the 1986–1990 cohort for Orthodox-majority countries confirms a small revival of religious practice among the youngest cohort.

	Practice (Catholics)	Practice (Mixed)	Practice (Orthodox)	Belief (Catholics)	Belief (Mixed)	Belief (Orthodox)
1930–1955	-0.007***	-0.003***	-0.003***	-0.006***	-0.002	-0.002***
1956–1970	-0.001	-0.000	-0.001	0.002**	0.003*	0.003***
1971–1985	-0.002*	-0.001	-0.002*	0.008***	0.002	0.006***
1986–1990	-0.007	-0.006	0.009**	-0.022***	-0.024**	-0.012
Constant	0.409***	0.137***	0.218***	0.452***	0.247***	0.451***
Observations	16,978	4,939	14,693	13,090	3,556	10,756

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

TABLE 5: Model 2 estimation for religious practice and belief

For religious belief, the coefficients also confirm the picture we have drawn. Belief has decreased among the youngest cohorts, increased or flattened among the intermediate

cohorts, and again decreased among the youngest cohorts. Only for the Orthodox countries is the 1986–1990 coefficient not statistically significant; a conservative approach suggests that we should interpret the trend for this cohort as being flat. Other than the different starting levels, the trends for those born between 1930 and 1985 are coherent among the three denominations: a basic linear decrease for practice and a decrease followed by an increase for belief. For the youngest cohort, the trend for religious belief is reversed in Catholic and mixed countries, whereas it flattens for Orthodox countries. Religious practice, in contrast, continues to decline in Catholic and mixed countries, whereas it slightly increases in Orthodox countries.

To help dig deeper into these results, the next step assesses the trends for individual countries. Figure 3 shows markedly different patterns for the various formerly communist countries.

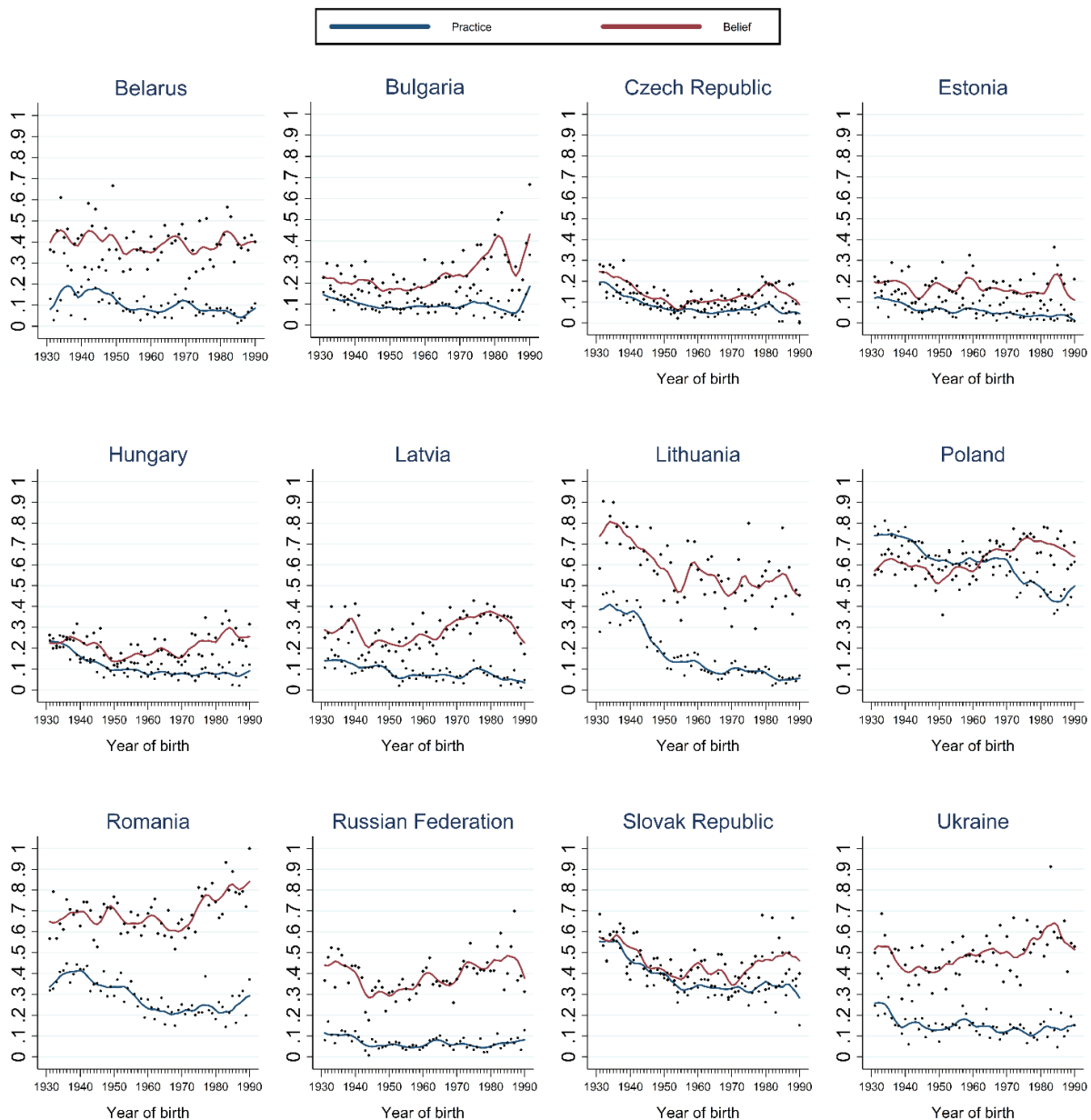


FIGURE 3: Means and lowest smoothing for practice and belief by year of birth divided by country

As before, the best way to summarise this information is to look at the piecewise model coefficients. We have included the complete table in the appendix; we will present a summary

of the model here (Table 6). It is vital to stress with these results that the sample size is now smaller than what the first two models used – ranging between 1,272 for Lithuania and 3,830 for the Czech Republic – which clearly introduces a certain level of fuzziness in the results. Adopting an approach based on statistical significance is thus a very conservative but necessary choice.

	Denomination	Practice				Belief					
		Average level ^a	1930-1955	1956-1970	1971-1985	1986-1990	Average level ^a	1930-1955	1956-1970	1971-1985	1986-1990
Czech Rep.	Catholic	0.184	↘	—	—	↘	0.253	↘	↗	↗	↘
Hungary	Catholic	0.234	↘	—	—	—	0.257	↘	—	↗	—
Lithuania	Catholic	0.474	↘	—	—	—	0.829	↘	—	—	—
Poland	Catholic	0.778	↘	—	↘	↗	0.619	↘	↗	—	—
Slovak Rep.	Catholic	0.589	↘	—	—	—	0.598	↘	—	—	—
Bulgaria	Orthodox	0.131	↘	—	—	↗	0.229	↘	↗	↗	—
Belarus	Orthodox	0.198	↘	—	↘	—	0.449	—	—	—	—
Romania	Orthodox	0.415	↘	↘	—	—	0.671	—	↘	↗	—
Russian Fed.	Orthodox	0.117	↘	↗	—	↗	0.452	↘	↗	—	—
Ukraine	Orthodox	0.198	↘	—	—	—	0.453	—	—	↗	—
Estonia	Mixed	0.118	↘	—	—	—	0.191	—	—	—	—
Latvia	Mixed	0.154	↘	—	—	—	0.304	↘	↗	—	↘

^a: Constant coefficients from Model 3

↗: Statistically significant (p<0.1) increase

↘: Statistically significant (p<0.1) decrease

—: No statistically significant effect

TABLE 6: Summary of Model 3 coefficients

The picture is easy to draw when we look at religious practice: practice has decreased for every country in the older cohorts; the trends have then flattened or continued to decrease for those born between 1955 and 1985 (except for the Russian Federation, but with a very small coefficient of 0.001). Among the youngest cohort, in contrast, we find a statistically significant revival of religious practice for the Russian Federation and Bulgaria (starting from a very low level) and Poland.

Religious belief confirms the interesting pattern we found in the previous models. We see a decrease among the older cohorts in almost every country, a statistically significant increase in many countries among the intermediate cohorts (1956–1985), and a decrease or flattening among the youngest cohorts (born after 1985). The data points to a revival of belief for those who grew up during the less oppressive phase of communist rule; it also shows that this effect has worn off among the youngest cohorts.

The common idea behind this data suggests that the supposed Eastern European religious reawakening is essentially related to the belief dimension; this phenomenon also appears to either be finished or to have stabilised. In contrast, it seems that some countries, such as the Russian Federation, Bulgaria, and Poland (and to some degree Romania, Ukraine, Belarus, and Hungary), have broken with the descending trend of religious practice and now show a kind of minor revival among the youngest cohorts.

DISCUSSION

The analytical framework of this work was designed according to a general-to-particular reasoning. We started by describing and modelling the trends for religious practice and belief

for the entire sample, the aim of which was to draw a general picture of Eastern European religiosity. We then modelled the trends by discriminating between different Christian denominations with the aim of determining any peculiarities linked to the prevalent religious tradition. By necessity, the last step was to model and delineate the trends for each country in the sample. The results justify this framework choice, since different specificities emerged while moving from the general to the particular.

The general picture shows markedly different trends between religious practice and belief. Religious practice has been in decline for cohort after cohort, and only in the youngest cohort has the trend flattened. The trend for religious belief is quite peculiar: while religious belief has declined among the oldest cohort, that trend has become completely reversed among the intermediate cohorts. The trend is again reversed for the youngest cohort, eventually becoming strongly negative. In the theoretical section of this paper, we have seen how communist regimes undermined institutional religiosity by confiscating church properties, closing places of worship, and imprisoning rebellious religious leaders. It is thus not surprising that the trend of religious practice did not strongly reverse itself once communist regimes started to loosen their grip. While institutional religiosity may have been easier to eradicate, the eradication of personal belief was harder to do, because a system of belief requires more than the power of coercion to become accepted or refused (Froese 2004b).

We have summarised three different possible explanations for an eventual revival of religious belief. A revival of this kind can be (1) a real revival of strong Christian belief; (2) a switch to a more syncretic religiosity, in which beliefs accumulate (i.e. people who declare a belief in God also believe in other phenomena such as reincarnation, astrology, magic, occultism, and elements of Eastern religions); or (3) a way to reconstruct a national identity and to “burn bridges” with the communist past. When we put together all the information we have gathered, the most plausible interpretation seems to be a mix of the three. In a scenario created by the church’s inability to support regular churchgoing, people started to declare their religious beliefs once the communist regimes began to loosen their grip. This situation resulted in a new form of religiosity; it may be interpreted as a distance from the regime while being little institutionalized and based on individual belief. The reversing trend we have observed among the youngest cohorts (those who were socialised following the fall of communism) may be interpreted as the diminished need for people to reaffirm their non-involvement with the regime.

Having this general picture in place allows us a first impression and confirms the need to look at religious practice and belief separately. Many of the differences we found were also present when grouping the countries according to their prevalent Christian denominations. We saw how the trends for Catholic and “mixed” countries confirmed the general picture we have presented. Religious practice has declined cohort after cohort until reaching a plateau: higher for Catholics, and lower (close to 0.05) for mixed countries. More interesting patterns emerge when we examine Orthodox countries. After a declining or flat trend among the older cohorts, the trend for religious practice became positive among the youngest cohort; in addition, the trend for belief partially differs vis-à-vis the other denominations. After having declined among the older cohort and increased among the intermediate cohorts, religious belief became noticeably flattened for the youngest cohort. We have thus characterised the youngest cohort by a slightly increasing level of religious practice and a stable – and very high – level of religious belief.

In order to delve more deeply into these considerations, it is essential to shift the focus to individual countries. The results show that all Orthodox countries are experiencing a kind of minor religious revival, characterised by stable religious belief (after major growth) and increasing practice among the youngest cohort (one that is more evident for the Russian

Federation and Bulgaria and less evident for Romania, Belarus, and Ukraine). Many Catholic countries, meanwhile, are experiencing an overall decrease of religiosity (as in Lithuania), a partial revival (as in Poland and to a lesser extent Hungary), or a flat stability (as in the Czech Republic, at a very low level, and in the Slovak Republic). The trends for mixed countries (such as Estonia and Latvia) fall into this third category, with stable and very low trends.

To summarise, we can confidently say that the supposed religious revival is mainly found among the Orthodox countries (with the clearest indications found in Bulgaria and the Russian Federation) and in only two Catholic countries: Poland and Hungary. As reported in the theoretical section of this paper, many studies have noted a revival of church attendance, especially for Romania, Bulgaria, and the Russian Federation (Pollack 2003; Burkimsher 2014; Brenner 2016). Many other studies (e.g. Greeley 1994; Borowik 2002; Bruce 2003; Müller and Neundord 2012) have depicted Poland as an exceptional case, given that Polish Catholicism played a leading role during the communist regime and in the regime's overthrow. We are very close to confirming these findings.

We can see the importance of Poland being a Catholic country during the communist regime from the high levels of practice and belief there, albeit in decline among the older cohort (Zrinscak 2004). Many observers have viewed the Russian Federation as the leading example of the Eastern European reawakening of religiosity. From our results, we are inclined to agree with Borowik's assessment (2002); Borowik argues that Russian religiosity is quite eclectic and that its connection with the Orthodox Church is somewhat theoretical in nature. Although we do not have data to support or deny it, this argument seems visible in the increase of beliefs that can also be syncretic. In addition, this increase in levels of personal belief is supported by the minor growth we found in traditional and institutional religiosity, which people use as a way of burning bridges with their communist past (Mitrokhin 1994), and is consistent with religion becoming an integrating factor in Russian society (Titarenko 2008). This growth is visible within the increasing trend for church attendance among the youngest cohort.

The case of Bulgaria is less easy to explain, but the results appear to be consistent with two different mechanisms at work. The first mechanism, which is common to all the Orthodox-majority Eastern European countries, essentially focusses on the overlap between religiousness and national identity; as Borowik (2006) says, being Orthodox and Bulgarian is almost the same thing. The second mechanism instead has to do with the less intense communist religious persecution that took place in Bulgaria (Borowik 2006), which would be consistent with an easier restoration process for institutional religion after the fall of communism.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, our findings show that the communist regime was successful in eradicating institutional religiosity in the form of regular churchgoing but less so in eradicating personal beliefs. This situation is evident in the increasing trend of religious belief after the most severe stages of the various regimes' religious persecution had ended. Something changed in the youngest cohort, which consists of people who were socialised after the regime had ended. People's need to burn bridges with their communist past seems to have ended in Catholic-majority countries, where beliefs have started to drop, and all indications point towards Catholic Eastern European countries resembling Western European trends in the near future. The only possible exceptions to these trends are found in Poland and, to a lesser extent, Hungary. The Orthodox countries, in contrast, seem to be experiencing a kind of religious revival, as shown in their slightly increasing religious practice (especially in the Russian Federation and Bulgaria) and high and stable religious belief among the youngest cohort. Many authors have argued that this supposed revival is only related to a minor and temporary period effect (Pollack

2003; Froese 2001); at the moment, we are unable to either confirm or deny that claim with a sufficient degree of certainty.

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APPENDIX

	Belarus	Bulgaria	Czech Rep.	Estonia	Hungary	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland	Romania	Russian Fed.	Slovak Rep.	Ukraine
1930–1955	-0.004***	-0.002***	-0.005***	-0.003***	-0.006***	-0.003***	-0.014***	-0.007***	-0.004***	-0.003***	-0.010***	-0.002*
1956–1970	0.001	0.002	0.001	-0.000	0.000	0.000	-0.002	0.002	-0.007***	0.001*	-0.000	-0.001
1971–1985	-0.004***	-0.002	0.002	-0.001	-0.001	-0.000	-0.002	-0.016***	0.004	-0.001	0.000	-0.000
1986–1990	0.009	0.020**	-0.013*	-0.003	0.006	-0.009	-0.003	0.027*	0.005	0.011*	-0.006	0.008
Constant	0.198***	0.131***	0.184***	0.118***	0.234***	0.154***	0.474***	0.778***	0.415***	0.117***	0.589***	0.198***
Observations	2,347	3,068	4,943	2,279	3,057	2,660	2,357	3,139	3,296	3,512	3,482	2,470

	Belarus	Bulgaria	Czech Rep.	Estonia	Hungary	Latvia	Lithuania	Poland	Romania	Russian Fed.	Slovak Rep.	Ukraine
1930–1955	-0.003	-0.003*	-0.007***	-0.001	-0.004***	-0.004*	-0.011***	-0.003*	-0.000	-0.006***	-0.008***	-0.000
1956–1970	0.002	0.006**	0.003**	-0.002	0.002	0.008***	-0.004	0.010***	-0.004*	0.006**	0.000	0.004
1971–1985	0.000	0.007**	0.005**	0.001	0.007***	0.003	0.005	0.001	0.016***	0.006	0.004	0.008*
1986–1990	0.000	0.007	-0.030***	-0.014	-0.004	-0.039**	-0.026	-0.016	-0.020	-0.020	0.009	-0.028
Constant	0.449***	0.229***	0.253***	0.191***	0.257***	0.304***	0.829***	0.619***	0.671***	0.452***	0.598***	0.453***
Observations	1,725	2,307	3,830	1,754	2,669	1,802	1,272	2,685	2,669	2,368	2,634	1,687