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## Religion Within and Beyond Borders: The Case of Croatia

*The authors analyse religiosity in Croatia from the point of view of significant differences among its regions demonstrating an array of theoretical and methodological difficulties in interpreting religious changes in the post-Communist era, particularly the revitalization of religion in some countries and the contradictory social role of religion in most countries of Central and Eastern Europe. That the differences in religiosity between Croatian regions are connected to borders with countries of different religions, nations and/or languages and with the historical as well as recent social processes is very visible. Apart from the dominant paradigms of explanation (differences in historical processes and the trend of politicization of religion and “religionization” of politics in the transitional period), the authors suggest that the possible influence of politicization must be considered over a much longer historical period, that different patterns of socio-religious development have long-lasting consequences and that the role of religion as a cultural resource for individuals and for social groups must not be neglected.*

**Key words:** borders · Croatia · post-Communism · religiosity · social roles of religion

*Les auteurs analysent les variantes régionales significatives de la religiosité en Croatie et mettent en lumière l'ensemble des difficultés méthodologiques et théoriques d'une interprétation des changements religieux dans la période du post-communisme, en particulier la revitalisation de la religion dans certains pays et le rôle social contradictoire de la religion dans la plupart des pays d'Europe centrale et de l'Est. On observe différents types de religiosité dans les régions croates qui doivent être mis en relation avec le pays de religion, nation et/ou langue différente dont elles sont limitrophes. Au-delà des paradigmes explicatifs dominants (les différences de processus historiques ainsi que la politisation de la religion et la “religionisation” de la politique dans la période de transition), les auteurs suggèrent que l'éventuelle influence de la politique doit être observée dans une période historique bien plus longue, que les divers types de développements socio-religieux ont des conséquences à long terme et que le rôle de la religion comme ressource culturelle pour les individus et les groupes sociaux ne doit pas être négligé.*

**Mots-clés:** Croatie · frontières · post-communisme · religiosité · rôles sociaux de la religion

### **The Framework for an Analysis of Religion in Post-Communism**

In the transitional period, most post-Communist countries of Central and East Europe share common characteristics (despite various differences between them): the revitalization of religion, an increased number of new religious movements, the correlation of religion and nation, the correlation of religion and politics, and problems for the churches in adjusting to the new social circumstances. Analyses of numerous texts on religious changes in post-Communist countries show that research mostly concentrates on four key theses.

The first thesis deals with the revitalization of religion, or rather, with an increased and significant social influence of religion and the Church in the new social circumstances (Borowik and Tomka, 2001). Revitalization does not occur in all countries in the same way, nor does it explain all the aspects of socio-religious change. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it is a dominant trend in the post-Communist world, especially in the last decade of the 20th century.

The second thesis is based on enormous differences between countries. These differences have, however, been emphasized only in the past few years when the results of numerous comparative researches became available, for example, "Aufbruch" or EVS (Tomka and Zulehner, 1999; Müller, 2004; Pollack, 2004). Therefore, despite the revitalization of religion, the level of religiosity differs to such a substantial degree that the post-Communist countries include those countries with the highest as well as those with the lowest level of religiosity among all European countries. Such disparity significantly hinders or completely excludes the possibility of making one general statement about so many different (although all post-Communist) countries, with different histories, cultures, predominant religious traditions and, no doubt, different futures.

The third thesis is based on religion as an important identity framework for social processes and individual value orientations. The role of religion in the revival of society confronting an authoritarian political regime became obvious as early as the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s (Tomka, 1991), and has now gained new connotations in giving legitimacy to the new social order and in giving necessary support to the majority of the population for whom affiliation to the Church or religion is an important factor in their social identification. In this context, many discussions have emphasized the indispensable role of religion in the formation and preservation of separate national identities, for example, in Poland, Romania, Macedonia, and Croatia.

The fourth thesis concerns many controversies regarding the new social role of religion and the social and ideological confrontations over the role of religion in the new, pluralistic social milieu. While some authors discuss the problems of religious adaptation to the new social circumstances or the lack of understanding of all of that the new market economy, the consumerist society and the open society bring, other authors emphasize the strong influence of ideological judgements about an "appropriate" position for religion

in modern society, more specifically, the fact that religion is an indispensable part of ideological discussions.<sup>1</sup>

### **Croatia: Aspects and Dilemmas of the New Social Role of Religion**

A survey of sociological literature on the situation of religion in post-Communism reveals at least two reasons for methodological caution: (1) the need to combine a general picture of religion or society with various deeper or partial analyses of a country, problem or process; and (2) the need for a new theoretical understanding of rapid changes in religiosity at both the societal and individual levels. The Croatian case illustrates this methodological complexity.

The most basic data on religiosity place Croatia among the countries with a relatively high level of religiosity and as one of the countries with a highly visible trend towards the revitalization of religiosity after the fall of Communism, which coincided with Croatia becoming an independent state. For example, on the basis of data from the EVS 1999/2000, the religiosity index (based on answers to the questions: Are you a religious person?, Do you believe in a personal God?, What is the importance of God in everyday life?, Do you take comfort and strength from religion?, and Do you make time for prayer outside religious services?) places Croatia in third position among the post-Communist countries (behind Poland and Romania), and in seventh position among all European countries (behind Malta, Portugal, Italy and Ireland).

In the literature, Croatia is singled out as a country where religion has played or still plays an inevitable role in the formation and preservation of the separate national identity of the people. This aspect of the social role of religion was emphasized under Communism as well, since many surveys documented the strong ties of separate nations in the former Yugoslavia with various religious traditions (Croats and Slovenians with Catholicism and Serbs with Serbian Orthodoxy). Research on young people in the whole territory of the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1980s showed significant differences between the religiosities of each nation, so Croats, Slovenians and Albanians were predominantly religious, while Serbs and Montenegrins (who are also Serbian Orthodox) were predominantly not religious (Vrcan, 1986). However, in post-Communist times, this relation assumed new connotations due to the war that took place on the territory of the former Yugoslavia and in which the involvement of religion, at least at a symbolic level, cannot be denied, although those wars cannot be characterized as religious conflicts (Zrinščak, 2002).

Croatia is an example of a country where it is possible to identify various conflicts regarding the role of religion. On one hand, there are different ideological standpoints on the role of religion, as evidenced by a strong association with the new social order which is presumed to have retroactively played a part in the high level of religiosity as well. On the other, many puzzling dilemmas have arisen from the perceived discrepancy between a high level

of confessional and religious identification and a low level of conforming to certain religious norms, for example, in the field of morality—the same discrepancy that was widely discussed in many studies of secularization in numerous West European countries!

Finally, and more specifically, Croatia is, like other post-Communist countries, also responsible for the uncertainty about how to reinterpret the revitalization of religion in post-Communism from a sociological point of view. Although not always clearly observable, this dilemma is hampering many analyses offered by Croatian sociologists. Is it the issue of a simple return to the old times after years of Communist repression? In other words, if we introduce the period after World War II into this analysis, then the Croatian picture of religiosity might be roughly divided into three main periods: (1) traditional religiosity in the 1950s and 1960s; (2) secularization (from the middle of the 1960s); and eventually (3) revitalization after 1990. Or, as already noted by Eileen Barker, and based on the similar pattern observed in some other countries: “such a pattern [of secularization, desecularization and resecularization] suggests, it might be argued, that after the ‘unnatural’ pressure was removed, religion rushed in and slightly overshot its ‘natural level’ before finally finding it and settling down to ‘normal’” (Barker, 1998: 195). If we think about a socially driven return to the old times or relatively quick changes in a short period of time (e.g. the percentage of religious people—those who identify themselves as firm believers and religious in comparison to those who claim to be not sure or indifferent or not religious—has increased from 41 percent in 1989 to 78 percent in 2004), the crucial question is how to make sense of it. What if, even 15 years after the fall of Communism, the data suggest stability in the religious situation and make it difficult to predict a return to the “normal” situation?

Taking all these considerations into account, our analysis will now focus on religiosity among particular Croatian regions, where significant differences in religiosity can be observed. The biggest challenge is to find an interpretation of both the high rate of religiosity at the level of society in general and of marked differences between its regions.

### **Croatia and its Regions**

Like many other European countries, the borders of Croatia have been in place only since the end of World War II. The borders of each of the six republics of the former Yugoslavia were constitutionally and politically recognized. At that time, for example, Istria, the far West Croatian peninsula that had been a part of other states for its entire history, and before World War II had been part of Italy, became an integral part of Croatia for the first time. A similar destiny was shared by some other Croatian regions as well, especially those that were not liberated from Ottoman rule until the 19th century.

This very brief historical introduction should be borne in mind during the following analysis of the differences in religiosity between the Croatian regions. In fact, regional differences in religiosity could be seen from the

results of several investigations carried out in the whole of Croatia, according to which the highest levels of religiosity were detected in East Croatia and Dalmatia, and the lowest in Istria and Primorje (Bezinović et al., 2005; Boneta, 2000; Marinović Jerolimov, 2002; Vrčan, 2001). East Croatia and Dalmatia are in the far north-east and south of Croatia, so these are the regions that share much of their borders with other countries with a similar language (Serbia, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina) but also with different religions (Orthodoxy and Islam). These are also the territories (except part of Central Croatia) that experienced the worst devastations in the war (1991–1995). Istria and Primorje are on the West of Croatia, and these regions have common borders with countries having a different language (Italy and Slovenia) but with the same predominant religion (Catholicism). At this point we shall introduce into the analysis the rest of Croatia (known also as Central Croatia) with its capital city of Zagreb, and which has some common borders with a country having a different language (Hungary) but with the same predominant religion (Catholicism). The figures presented are from the research project, “Social and Religious Changes in Croatia” carried out by the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb in 2004, using a representative sample of the adult population of Croatia ( $n = 2220$ ) (Tables 1 and 2).

In terms of basic religious affiliation, there are statistically significant differences between certain parts of Croatia, but they are not that striking. However, religious self-identification points to big differences and shows that there are twice as many firm believers in Eastern Croatia as in Istria and Primorje. In Istria and Primorje, there are three times as many people who described themselves as “not religious” compared to East Croatia. Similar differences can be seen in the acceptance of basic religious truths (God exists; God created the world and man; God is the source of morality; there is heaven and hell; there is life after death) as well as in indicators of religious practice. Those who attend religious services most frequently (at least once a month or more often) are the citizens of Dalmatia (57 percent) and East Croatia (52 percent), followed by those in Central Croatia (42 percent), while the citizens of Istria and Primorje are the least regular (35 percent).

**TABLE 1**  
Religious affiliation and macro-regions in Croatia in 2004 (%)

Religious affiliation	Dalmatia	East Croatia	Central Croatia	Istria and Primorje
Catholic	92.6	88.4	90.7	84.7
Orthodox	3.8	7.5	4.8	5.8
Muslim	0.7	0.0	0.4	3.1
Other	0.2	1.1	0.8	0.3
None	2.6	2.9	3.4	6.1

Notes:  $\chi^2 = 45.32$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ;  $c = 0.14$ .

**TABLE 2**  
**Religious self-identification in macro-regions in Croatia in 2004 (%)**

Macro-region	1 Firm believers	2 Religious	1+2	Insecure and indifferent	Not religious and opposed to religion
East Croatia	51.9	29.0	<b>80.9</b>	12.7	6.3
Dalmatia	50.1	36.0	<b>86.1</b>	9.1	4.8
Central Croatia	37.0	40.1	<b>77.1</b>	14.4	8.5
Istria and Primorje	22.8	43.9	<b>66.7</b>	16.3	17.0

Notes:  $\chi^2 = 106.53$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ;  $c = 0.21$ .

For further analysis of the differences of religiosity between regions, we chose four counties as smaller administrative units, specifically those counties where it is possible to observe the biggest differences in the basic indicators of religiosity. The first two counties (Split and Dubrovnik) are part of Dalmatia; the third is part of East Croatia (County of Vukovar); and the fourth is part of Istria and Primorje (County of Istria) (Tables 3 and 4). The County of Vukovar and the County of Dubrovnik were most damaged in the war, while the County of Istria was the furthest away from the devastation of the war.

Again, the main difference is not as visible in basic religious affiliation as in religious self-identification. Although the largest number of firm believers come from the County of Vukovar, the highest number of religiously self-identified people are found in the County of Dubrovnik (96.6 percent). The lowest percentage of self-identified religious people is in the County of Istria, and, among them, firm believers amount to only 17 percent! Istria is populated mainly by Catholics. Istria also has the highest number of “insecure” and “indifferent” people (23.6 percent) as well as the “not religious” and those “opposed to religion” (15 percent). In addition, Istria, as the least religious region, is outstanding for the low level of belief in basic religious truths and of indicators of religious practice. The most striking contrast is between the County of Dubrovnik where 68 percent of the respondents attend

**TABLE 3**  
**Religious affiliation in four regions (%)**

Religious affiliation	County of Split	County of Dubrovnik	County of Vukovar	County of Istria
Catholic	96.9	93.2	84.8	89.6
Orthodox	0.4	0.0	14.1	1.9
Muslim	0.0	5.1	0.0	1.9
Other	0.4	0.0	1.0	0.0
None	2.2	1.7	0.0	6.6

Notes:  $\chi^2 = 66.54$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ;  $c = 0.34$ .

**TABLE 4**  
**Region and religious self-identification (%)**

Regions	1 Firm believers	2 Religious	1 + 2	Insecure and indifferent	Not religious and opposed to religion
County of Dubrovnik	67.8	28.8	<b>96.6</b>	3.4	0.0
County of Split	55.8	30.8	<b>86.6</b>	8.9	4.5
County of Vukovar	69.7	18.2	<b>87.9</b>	11.1	0.0
County of Istria	17.0	44.3	<b>61.3</b>	23.6	15.1

Notes:  $\chi^2 = 88.48$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ;  $c = 0.39$ .

religious services regularly (at least once a month) and the County of Istria where regular attenders number only 14 percent.

These regional differences in religiosity are influenced by various factors, some of which are more important in a particular region while others are more important in other regions. One of these factors is the correlation between religiosity and nationality. In effect, the analysis of data in smaller regional units showed that the level of religiosity is lower in areas where there are more Orthodox believers (mainly Serbs) than in other units. For example, in the County of Sisak, religious people comprise 40 percent of the Serbs, but 82.5 percent of the Croats. The same difference can be seen in other indicators of religiosity, i.e. the acceptance of basic religious beliefs and religious practice. In the same county, as many as 40 percent never attend religious services; and the Serbs, in particular, constitute more than half of these (54 percent), and 27 percent of our sample.

Although there are no systematic research findings, many indicators show that the Serbs have also come under the influence of revitalization in recent years. As already mentioned, they were the least religious in Croatia as well as in the whole of the former Yugoslavia. Research in the region of Zagreb in 1982 showed that believers were 51.4 percent of the Croatian population but only 7.9 percent among the Serbs. Alternatively, 12.3 percent of atheists were of Croatian nationality and 42.1 percent were of Serbian nationality (Dugandžija, 1986: 28). The reasons have not been systematically investigated but could be traced back to doctrinal and organizational differences between the Catholic Church and the Serbian Orthodox Church, with Serbs having a somewhat closer identification with the then-current social system. Of course, identification with the system, at least for the Serbs from Croatia, was jeopardized in post-Communism, so we can assume that their identification with the Church increased after 1990. The data on religiosity in Serbia from the end of the 1990s point to this assumption. EVS/WVS data for 1999/2001 show that 92 percent of people declared adherence to a religion and that 68 percent described themselves as religious, and these levels are much higher than during the Communist period (Zrinščak, 2004). However, it is obvious that, despite this revitalization of religion, there is still a somewhat lower level of religiosity among the Serbs. Nevertheless, as

among the Croats, identification with the Church is very high, which represents one of the most important bases for the separate national identification of Croats and Serbs.

### **Conclusion: Religion in the Context of Insecure Borders and All-Pervasive Social Processes**

The revitalization of religion and a high level of religiosity in Croatia are incontestable, but the fact is that there are also considerable regional differences in the level of religiosity within this particular society, i.e. one (predominant and majoritarian) national and confessional territory. How can we explain these differences?

Based on our research, as well as taking into consideration the results of similar research in two different regions—one in Croatia (Istria and Primorje) and one in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Western Herzegovina, as a territory predominantly populated by the Croats) (Vrcan, 2001)—the following general points can be outlined.

First, these two territories are geographically the furthest apart, located at the two opposite borders of Croatia; and they both have been, historically speaking, politically and culturally involved in different events and processes. In this respect, then, they have been exposed to different influences. In this context we should emphasize an indisputable historical fact underlined by Vrcan, namely that all three major world religions that have been present in these territories for centuries (Catholicism, Orthodoxy and Islam) have been historically shaped as true confessions *from* the border and *on* the border (Vrcan, 2001: 147). Similarly, Boneta's (2000) analysis of religiosity in Istria highlights the specificity of the Istrian region in which religious confession (the same among Croats, Italians and Slovenians) did not have the same role in shaping national identity as in other parts of Croatia where religion was the basic differentiating factor when confronting other groups. In Istria, two secular facts played a more important role in national identification: language and social space (Boneta, 2000: 135).

Second, differential levels of modernization (industrialization and urbanization) and its different social effects are also connected with the level of secularization and desecularization in these territories. This fact is emphasized by Vrcan (2001) and underlined by Boneta (2000) as well in their analyses of religiosity of Istria. Boneta discusses the influence of modernization (on the economic level through the rapid growth of tourism in the 1970s) on the greater effects of secularization in Istria than in other parts of the country.

Consequently, it is clear that Catholicism (as a predominant religious tradition in Croatia), through the diversity of its social role, produces different effects at the individual level too. In this regard, the diversity of the Church's social role in many ways limits, or at least shapes, the effects of modernization. The level of religiosity in Croatia as well as the co-existence of a high level of religiosity with the persistence of secular values (e.g. in the



field of moral attitudes) cannot be explained by modernization and secularization alone. As a result of recent events where borders have been the main issue (the war against the independence of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina was waged mostly under the pretext that the borders of the former republic borders could not become new state borders), and where different religions have efficiently demonstrated the power of their identity, the influence of religious traditions on the preservation of the national identity of Serbs, Croats or Muslims remains a dominant factor in generating a different (and relatively high) level of religiosity in Croatia as well as in most of the other countries that emerged after the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia. In this connection, as can be seen from the analysis of regional differences, we should strive to ensure that sociological analysis always takes territory into account as a factor determining the different social role of religion.

However, such analysis, although explaining the differences in religiosity between some Croatian regions, does not answer questions about other aspects of the sociological analysis of the level of religiosity in post-Communist times, especially the revitalization of religion in post-Communism. In other words, sociological analyses of religiosity in Croatia also tend to operate with the thesis that the transition in Croatia (or in the territories of the former Yugoslavia in general) is taking place within the framework of the "ethnicization" of politics and the politicization of ethnicity. The politicization of religion and the "religionization" of politics (Robertson, 1989; Vrcan, 2001) are evidence of this. In this sense, the differences within Catholicism in Croatia can easily be explained by differences in the extent to which, and the intensity with which, the politicization of Catholicism has proceeded (Vrcan, 2001: 149). Having said all that, it is easy to reach the conclusion that the period of transition can be characterized as a period of extraordinary, politicized, all-pervasive social processes that can also be reflected in an extraordinary level of religiosity.

However, without contesting the exceptional character of these social events, which connect powerful social processes to the level of religiosity, we need to emphasize another sociologically relevant fact. Namely, it is difficult to characterize the actual events as exceptional without applying the same idea to the whole history. However, we can analyse only the Communist period, which was marked by a consciously directed and encouraged process of atheization that introduced elements of violence into the social processes. A Croatian sociologist of religion, Esad Ćimić, has called such complex socio-religious processes "the atheization drama" (Ćimić, 1984). The politicization of society, in the sense of political supremacy over society, has intensified aspects of the politicization of social activities in the dominant Churches, with the result that religion, at the sociological level of interpretation, could not have been analysed separately from the influence of political processes. This explains the fact that the level of individual religiosity could have been so heavily determined by social factors, i.e. that changes in the level and structure of religiosity could have been the outcome of a totalitarian political supremacy over society, and not only the result of the processes of social change induced by modernization. Therefore, religion was and still is

a political fact, so the “exceptionality” of social events and “politicization of religion” should be considered over a much longer historical period. In this sense, it is theoretically more stimulating to draw on Martin’s (2005) analysis which explains the reasons for the strength of ethno-religion in most of Eastern Europe,<sup>2</sup> while at the same time noting that history produces different patterns of socio-religious change. These different historical paths remain highly influential in contemporary developments and explain why it is not realistic to expect the role of religion to be the same today or in the near future in Croatian regions or between Croatia and its neighbouring countries.

At the same time, this analytical approach introduces a new perspective which, while not denying the importance of social processes, also interprets the level of religiosity in the context of its cultural role and of its capacity to satisfy many other individual needs. As James Beckford notes, “It would be safer and more rewarding to investigate precisely what [people] count as religious resources and how they translate them into beliefs, dispositions and actions in *particular situations*” (2003: 25). This means, we believe, recognition of religion’s actual role of being the main source of social and individual orientation.

Finally, overstating the elements of the politicization of religion and the “religionization” of politics in post-Communist times diverts attention away from other aspects of actual and controversial social processes which affect the differences between levels of religiosity and the unpredictability of religious trends in many European countries. This also points to the fact that, despite many differences, the dilemmas facing sociological interpretations of religiosity in Western and Eastern countries are not so dissimilar because, in the West, as Yves Lambert emphasizes, “everything is up for grabs”, as the role of religion becomes more and more different and unpredictable (2002: 159).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>. According to Tomka:

Everyday experience and statistical evidence emphasise rather an ideological polarisation. There are important groups with a committed and very often traditionally-shaped religiosity, and there are opposing groups with a positivist cultural background and a materialist value-system. (1999: 50)

While Agadjanian states:

In Russia today, religion is considered as a form of ideology, or it is expected to carry out ideological functions. One certain conclusion that can be drawn from the above narrative is the natural tendency to treat religion as an ideological construct that is instrumentalized in historical and political speculations. (2001: 363)

2. Martin states:

The crucial point to notice however, is that a great deal hinges on whether Catholicism or Catholic political powers were hostile to the birth of a modern nation-state: in France and in Czech lands, Catholicism was perceived as hostile; in Poland, Lithuania, Croatia and Slovakia, the situation was quite the reverse. (2005: 81)

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