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Generations and Atheism: Patterns of Response to Communist Rule Among Different Generations and Countries

The communist systems in Central and Eastern European countries had some common features, with atheism as the cornerstone of the political order, but they varied in many different aspects. Both political pressure and social change brought about not only the rise of secularism but also the rise of religiosity, particularly in the 1980s. However, the course of change and the impact of atheism on generations were quite different in each country. This is shown in the empirical analysis, which is presented in two parts. First, four countries are examined (Croatia, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia) showing three distinctive responses to communist rule. Second, on the basis of the EVS 1999 data for 14 post-communist countries, three groups of countries are differentiated according to religious and non-religious legacies and the different generational impacts of the communist system.

Key words: *atheism · Central and Eastern Europe · communism · generations · social change*

S'ils présentaient nombre de traits communs (avec l'athéisme comme pierre angulaire de l'ordre politique), les systèmes communistes des pays de l'Europe de l'Est et de l'Europe centrale étaient aussi très différents. Et la pression politique et le changement social liés à la période communiste ont concouru à la promotion du sécularisme mais aussi de la religiosité, et ce, particulièrement dans les années 1980. Cependant, le cours du changement et l'impact de l'athéisme sur les générations variaient selon les pays. L'analyse empirique qui suit en témoigne: elle se divise en deux temps. Quatre pays (Croatie, Hongrie, Pologne, Slovaquie) sont tout d'abord privilégiés. En ressortent trois réponses distinctes à la règle communiste. L'enquête EVS 1999 conduit ensuite, à partir des données relatives à 14 pays, à distinguer trois groupes de pays en fonction des différents héritages religieux et non-religieux et en fonction de l'impact générationnel des systèmes communistes.

Mots-clés: *athéisme · changement social · communisme · Europe centrale · Europe de l'Est · génération*

Introduction

In order to describe the problems of adjustment to the new communist rule post-1945, an eminent Croatian sociologist presented a telling illustration (Županov, 1995). A university professor, whose discipline was in the field of

natural science, found an easy and crafty solution: we will put some red bunting outside, and everything will be fine. But his colleague, a university law professor, had far more difficulties. Before 1945 he did not know anything about Marxism but very quickly learned to interpret all legal institutions as the reflection of the social base – he developed the theory in preposterous detail. The tale, which seems ridiculous and silly even today, points to what was at that time a life and death game. Personally, I became aware of such stories only as a sociology student in the early 1980s. Born in a part of Croatia which belonged to Italy until 1945 and which suffered particularly from Italian fascism in the 1920s and 1930s which attempted to violently suppress non-Italian national feelings, I absorbed in my childhood the view that tended to forget all the negative features of communism just because it liberated some parts of Croatian territory. Again as a student, I learned that some of my colleagues had absorbed in their childhood views that were completely different from mine and that religiosity could be an important predictive indicator of social behaviour. Generally, people who were more religious tended not only to be more critical of the system but also belonged to families that had undergone negative experiences of communism.

The analysis that follows is based on many personal stories without actually mentioning them. It also has a quite specific task: to present not only the different stories of various social groups in many former communist countries, but to do it through the perspective of generations. While the focus on different generations can ignore some distinctive personal or group features of reactions to atheism, it helps reveal the different positions of various generations through time. Without a time perspective it is impossible to understand the social changes that have occurred in 45 years of communism and their impact on generations. Therefore, the analysis presents some common features of atheism and communism, at the same time, trying to understand the specific religious and generational developments in different Eastern European countries. We then go on to data analysis, which is divided into two parts. Available sources are used to reconstruct age differences in religiosity and non-religiosity under communism, focusing particularly on Croatia, Hungary, Poland, and Slovenia. These are countries in which reliable sociological studies were conducted in the communist period and were published more or less regularly both in national languages and international journals. Although only four countries are analysed, these examples show how the unique political systems acquired different social shapes, according to differences in history and culture. However, available data do not permit full reconstruction of changes through time. That is the reason for the second part of the data analysis: using European Values Survey (EVS) data from 1999, through which a partial reconstruction of respondents' religiosity, when they were young, can be drawn.

Atheism, Communism and Social Development

Atheism, in the sense of a total opposition to religion, was a key part of the official politics of all European communist countries. Based on the writings

of Marx, Engels and Lenin, religion was interpreted as an ideology that, together with other ideologies, masks the interests of the ruling class. Religion as an illusion was also seen as a reflection of the unjust social base, a consciousness which prevents any changes in social reality. “Religion is the opium of the people”, “Man creates religion, and not *vice versa*”, “Religion presents a distorted consciousness of the world” were statements uncritically extracted from Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Marx and Engels, 1978) and frequently cited. During the period, an interesting debate took place in some communist countries and part of the Western world as to whether the official communist teachings on religion were Marx’s real position. That debate was strengthened by the Latin American theology of liberation, where Marxism was not treated as the opposite of religion but rather as a tool for social analysis and social change. However, such a discourse was completely irrelevant to the social and political realities of Eastern bloc countries. The fact was that, despite many political and social changes, atheism remained the official position of all of them, an inseparable part of the communist ideology. Even in the former Yugoslavia which, together with Hungary, developed perhaps the most liberal (in fact pragmatic) version of communism, self-declared atheism was, up to 1990, a *conditio sine qua non* for membership of the Communist Party. This statement does not try to hide important differences in the way Marxism (and atheism) were applied. But, generally, atheism was not a position freely chosen, nor a mere consequence of social development, but an unavoidable part of totalitarian rule, which in most cases came and stayed by violent means. As a consequence of this, it is impossible to deal with the present subject matter—atheism and generations—without reference to the communist social system within which it was set.

To understand relations between generations, communism and religion, one needs to be familiar with three historical developments. The first is the political clash between communist rule and the old social order; the second the social development that occurred after the Second World War in communist countries; and the third, the relevant differences that existed between the countries.

Communism and the Old Social Order

As previously mentioned, atheism cannot be understood outside the context of the new totalitarian political system after 1945. Communists presented themselves as those who were against the old and unjust social order and who would radically change and liberate the world, bringing power to the previously oppressed. For communists, Churches were the main part of the old order, its most powerful institutions and prominent symbols, and survivors of the communist takeover. At this point the communist position on atheism and the clash between the old and new political orders converged. What happened is already well known: imprisonment of prominent Church leaders, persecution of priests, nuns and those lay people who were close to Churches, the closure of some Church buildings, nationalization of Church properties, banning of religious instruction from state schools, the

breaking off of diplomatic relations with the Holy See at the beginning of the 1950s, etc.

In all countries, and particularly those where conflicts were more enhanced, normalization came about in the 1960s. This followed social and political modifications in communist countries and the new Vatican Eastern policy, a result of the changes inaugurated by Vatican Council II (Casaroli, 2000). Normalization brought an easier life for the Churches, but changed neither the features of the basic political conflict nor the atheistic character of communist rule.

Social Change

Even so, those born in the 1960s and 1970s were born in somewhat different social conditions than the harsh environment of the immediate post-war period. In that former period communists had single-mindedly sought to put into effect the manifest ideology of workers' liberation, promoting the new social order through nationalization and the abolition or massive reduction of private property. At the same time, extensive industrialization had been accomplished, primarily by means of using a cheap labour force of rural migrants. Employment in the state sector had been made attractive by new social security rights for state employees. The process of extensive industrialization resulted in high rates of economic growth in the 1950s and 1960s. The per capita growth in Eastern Europe between 1950 and 1970 was 2.4 times higher than the European average (Turnock, 1997: 25). But when the opportunities for industrial growth based on cheap labour were exhausted, the system progressively went into structural and permanent crisis.

The processes of urbanization, expansion of mass education, and the mass employment of women thus accompanied industrialization. The percentage of the urban population between 1950 and 1991 grew from 20% to 35% in Albania, 27% to 68% in Bulgaria, 38% to 61% in Hungary and from an already high 52% to 77% in Czechoslovakia. Employment in the service sector was between 30% and 40% in almost all countries by 1985 (Turnock, 1997: 24, 48). Yet, some crucial factors prevented the type of social change known in the Western half of Europe as modernization and can be seen by using both GDP measures and social indicators. The cause of communist failure to equal or surpass the West was in part the result of seeking change solely by political will and control and by not embedding it within the culture and practice of the people as a whole. Authors usually speak of halfway, partial, deviant modernization or modernization without modern consequences.

Halfway or partial modernization complicates the interpretation of other changes. Some authors have looked to secularization theory to explain the increase in the 1960s and 1970s of partially religious or irreligious people in communist countries (Bahtijarević, 1975; Vrcan, 1980). Such a theory, very popular at that time in the West (Wilson, Berger, Dobbelaere, etc.), seemed appropriate for communist lands as well mainly because of allegedly similar patterns of social change resulting in rising secularism. The same

dilemma of how to interpret religious and social changes existed in the 1980s when the completely opposite trend of religious revitalization suddenly emerged in some Central European countries, prompting some authors to speak of anti-secularization processes (Vrcan, 1986). But, if modernization was partial or deviant, then it is quite improper to speak about secularization in communist regimes: Tomka (1991) suggested that the apparently secularist manifestations came rather from the quick and violent destruction of the old social system and the social anomie that resulted from it. In any case, secularism appeared in almost all countries both East and West with the appearance of new generations after the Second World War.

Differences between Countries

The third historical development was the divergent nature of the economies and cultures of the countries of which we speak. The division of Eastern Europe between Catholicism and Orthodoxy is a significant one in social terms (Martin, 1978). In some Catholic countries, a Catholic monopoly has existed (Poland, Slovakia, Croatia), while others are more denominationally mixed (the former East Germany, Czech Republic, Hungary). In the former group of countries (together with Romania), the connection between religion and nationality reinforced monopoly and resulted in the high social influence of dominant Churches. Among denominationally mixed countries, the case of East Germany is quite distinctive because of specific political developments and a lower level of religiosity even before the Second World War. Persecution of religion was the most severe in Albania, followed by the former Soviet Union, while in some countries and, particularly under late communism, religious expression was tolerated. Whereas a specific and more popular type of communism was developed in the former Yugoslavia, in many Central European countries the political pressure from the ex-Soviet Union was more and very violently marked, contributing to widespread opposition (in many cases religiously coloured) to communist rule. Some countries (particularly those in Central Europe) were more modernized even before communists took power. A combination of these specific factors contributed to differences in religious development and consequently differences in generational responses to atheism and communism.

Four Countries and Three Stories

Croatia

The first comprehensive sociological study of religion in Croatia was undertaken in the Zagreb region in 1972 (Vrcan, 1980). It showed that, even after 25 years of communism, confessional identification was still very high at 93.4%, and 96.7% were baptised. However, personal religiosity was of smaller proportions: 51.2% counted themselves believers, 20% undecided, 15.9% non-believers and 12.3% atheists. Some of the atheists had apparently been baptised in their childhood, with some also acknowledging that they

had a weak relationship to the Church. Religiosity was primarily ideologically mediated: peasants, workers, housewives and the less educated were significantly more religious, and state, party and army employees (particularly at higher levels) and the more educated were significantly more atheist. This basic framework of interpretation also permits us to distinguish age differences. Although confessional identification was less present in the youngest age group (78.3% in the 18–24 age group) in comparison to the oldest age group (97.3% in the over-fifties), age differences were not quite linear. First, and as noted above, they depended mainly on membership of different socio-professional groups. Second, those born during or just after the Second World War (between 1940 and 1947) and particularly those born between 1922 and 1931 were somewhat more atheist than those in neighbouring age groups.

Ten years later, according to new sociological research in the same region, the numbers of confessional non-identification had risen by 15%, and consequently the percentage of undecided had changed to 19.5%, non-believers to 18% and atheists to 17.8% (Bahtijarević, 1985). Age differences were somewhat more enhanced: the youngest age group was almost equally spread between these last three categories of religious self-identification. Again, age was not the most crucial predictor of religiosity as it came in fourth place, after profession, education and national identity.

While the surveys were not conducted systematically—which should add an element of caution to this interpretation—work done in the 1980s showed two important facts. First, research on the young generation in the whole of former Yugoslavia emphasized the importance of the connection between nationality and religiosity. Young Croats, Macedonians, Albanians and Slovenians were clearly more religious than young Serbs, Montenegrins and Yugoslavs (Vrcan, 1990). Second, the youngest were those who first showed signs of rising religiosity in the mid and late 1980s as indicated by research on secondary pupils in the city of Split in 1984 (Vušković, 1988). Research among the 18 to 27 age group in the city of Zagreb also showed that in 1988, 30% were religious and 50% non-religious, while only a year later this had changed to 45% religious and 32% non-religious (Marinović Jerolimov, 1993).

Hungary

In Hungary as well, generational differences in attitudes towards atheism can be interpreted only from within the framework of religious and social change of the communist period. According to Tomka's analyses, Hungarian social history at this time can be divided into three stages: (1) a society under totalitarian rule in the late 1940s and early 1950s; (2) an attempted communist consumer society in the 1960s and 1970s; and (3) a period of "liberalization" and the fall of communism in the 1980s (Tomka, 1997). The first period was characterized by a strong clash between the national-cultural heritage (symbolized by the Churches) and the new communist order. Religious participation rose after the war as a powerful indicator of resistance to communism. The second stage was characterized by attempts at survival: new dialogue

between the Churches and the State, but also communist “modernization”, both resulting in a drastic secularization of society. De-Christianization came to an end in 1978, and religious revival was a part of the general social reconstruction in the third stage.

The second stage is crucial for the interpretation of the first nationwide empirical data from the early 1970s, as results showed a strong religious–non-religious dichotomy (Tomka, 1979). The dichotomy was socially rooted. People who were more religious were mainly older, less educated, economically non-active and living in villages. Non-religious people were mostly younger, economically active, highly educated and living in towns. Age differences in religiosity existed in all socio-professional groups, but were less obvious among skilled workers and those less educated. Among intellectuals and those in leading posts, 87% were non-believers in the 20–29 age group and 67% in the 50–59 age group.

Beside the religious revitalization of the 1980s, research from that period showed that Hungarian youth was still predominantly non-religious: around one-third declared themselves religious, one half non-religious and 18% uncertain (Molnár and Tomka, 1989). Some 54.4% of young people did not go to church at all, 37.1% only on feast days or similar occasions, 3.1% once a month and only 5.4% every Sunday or more frequently. Yet Tomka noticed that in the last period those aged from 15 to 25 were in the process of searching for a new identity, while they denied both traditional religion and Marxist atheism and were more inclined than other generations to join small Christian groups which, at that time, were critical of the official Church (Tomka, 1988).

Poland

The Polish exception of high religious commitment in the whole communist period and very strong ties between the Catholic Church and Poles (stronger than in the Croatian case) provided another framework of response to atheism. All the different surveys, although not comparable, showed that secularization or de-Christianization did not happen in Poland, while still showing some slight changes. The number of those who declared themselves strong believers varied in different studies: 92% in 1958, 83.3% in 1968, 86.3% in 1977 and 93% in 1989 (Borowik, 1997). The percentage of those who practised religion (regularly and irregularly) was also very high: 81% in 1958, 68% in 1968, 79% in 1984 and 88% in 1989.

Within the overall trend, some age differences exist. All surveys show that between 60% and 80% of youth were believers for the whole communist period. Piwowski showed in 1969 that the youngest numbered themselves least among the strongest believers: 18.8% in the 15–18 age group, 13.8% in the 19–25 group, compared with 47.5% among those aged 46 or more. However, they still believed: 70.3% in the 15–18 age group and 70.6% in the 19–25 group (Borowik, 1997). Non-believers were a minority in the 19–25 age group (15.6%) and less numerous in the 26–35 group (12.4%). Similarly, students were not as religious as the whole population, but figures were still very high. Different studies in Warsaw showed the following percentages

for belief among students: 69.2% (1958), 65.1% (1961), 64.2% (1978), 70% (1983). Figures for Gdansk were as follows: 78.4% (1961/62), 73.2% (1972/73), 76% (1977), 77.3% (1978/79), 85.6% (1980), 72% (1981), 85% (1988).

Slovenia

Slovenian social and religious development has some characteristics in common with that of Hungary. As in Hungary, systematic sociological research conducted from 1968 identified two basic periods (Roter, 1982, 1988). The first lasted from 1968 to 1978, and the second from 1978 to the end of the communist period. The first period was marked by secularization, the second by revitalization. The rise of religiosity after 1978 was not a spectacular one, but was gradual and steady. That rise slightly changed the socio-professional structure of non-believers (and atheists) but, as in the other countries examined, religiosity in Slovenia was markedly present among peasants and non-skilled workers and non-religiosity among skilled workers and clerks. This was an evident reflection of a social system that promoted atheism as an official ideology. Consequently, the crisis of the system in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s was connected to the crisis of non-religious orientation among skilled workers and clerks. The percentage of non-believers among clerks fell from 75.9% in 1978 to 54.7% in 1978 (Roter, 1988). The rise in church attendance was also marked in the general population: regulars (once a week or more) went from 11.8% in 1978 to 13.9% in 1988 and non-regulars (less than once a week) from 33.8% in 1978 to 45.8% in 1998 (Toš, 1999).

In the secularization period significant age differences existed. According to data from 1978, 34.9% of the under-thirties were religious compared with 65.3% of the over-sixties (Kerševan, 1982). In the youngest group 50% were non-religious. Younger people also participated in the church less than other age cohorts, but the differences here were not so marked. Overall, 54.4% of the population in 1978 did not go to church, ranging from 63.1% for the 18–25 age group, through 58.4% for the 31–40, to 40.4% for the over-sixties. Ten years later the youngest age group was less non-religious than before (29.2%), while the 31–40 year olds were the largest non-religious group (39.5%) (Toš et al., 1986).

Data from the European Values Survey, 1999

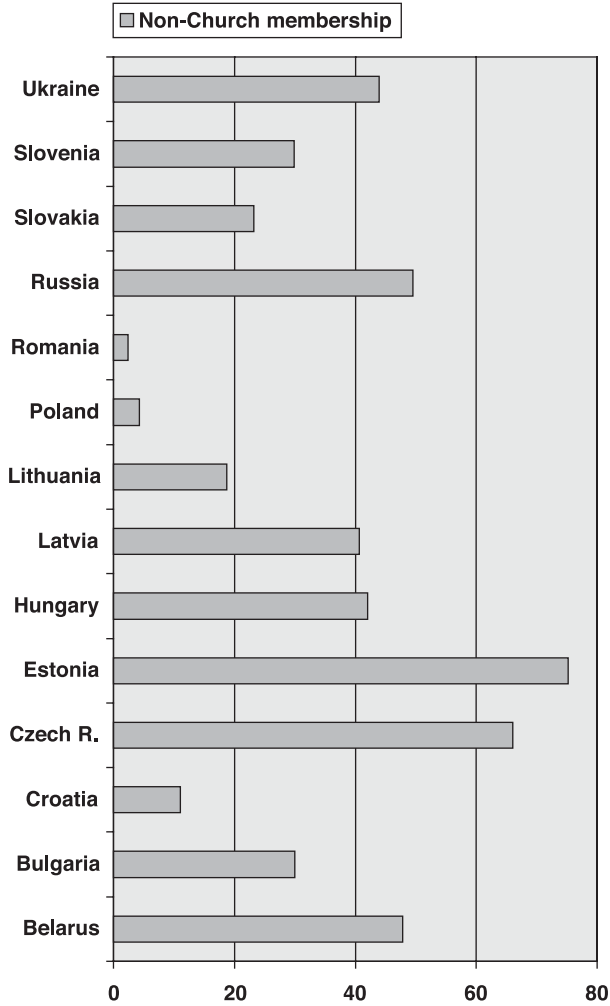
Only six post-communist countries participated in the second wave of the EVS in 1991, and this research showed that Eastern Europe was generally more secularized than Western Europe: non-membership of Churches averaged 32.8% in Eastern Europe and 24.1% in Western Europe (Ester et al., 1994). At the same time the research showed great diversity among post-communist countries. Non-Church membership ranged from only 3.7% in Poland through 28.1% and 41.7% in Slovakia and Hungary respectively, up to 60.1% in the Czech Republic and 64.1% and 64.7% in Bulgaria and Eastern Germany respectively. In the third wave of EVS in 1999, 14 post-

communist countries participated. Some comparison can be made for those who participated in both surveys and changes are noted (the greatest perhaps in Bulgaria), enabling us, therefore, to use the EVS 1999 data as a valuable, if partial, indicator of the communist legacy in the religious field.

Figure 1 clearly shows that the percentage of unchurched people remained high, with the notable exceptions of Romania and Poland and partly Croatia and Lithuania. Estonia and the Czech Republic are examples of extremely high non-confessional identification. When Church membership is compared with the percentage of those who declared themselves non-believers or convinced atheists, the picture is quite similar although some important differences appear. The most striking fact is that, in Estonia, Latvia, Russia and Ukraine, many of those who declared themselves as non-members of particular confessions did not want to include themselves among non-believers or convinced atheists. That can indicate non-existent ties with dominant Churches in their countries but uncertainty on spiritual issues, perhaps spiritual needs that—and perhaps because of radically broken ties—traditional Churches are not able to satisfy. The situation is quite different in Belarus, Bulgaria and to an extent in Romania, where confessional belonging is higher than religious self-identification.

It is impossible to attribute these “anomalies” only to country-specific factors, unless country specificity can be understood in the context of a common past. The comparison between Church attendance today and the year when respondents were only 12 years old supports that connection. As Figure 2 shows, non-attendance at Church is today more than 15% lower than when respondents were 12 years old in Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, Russia and Ukraine. A quite different and, in the European context, more expected pattern has occurred in many Central European countries, where people today generally attend services less frequently than in their childhood. The highest figures are those of Hungary (18.4%), the Czech Republic (14.6%), Slovenia (10.7%) and Slovakia (9.3%). The differences are quite small in Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Croatia.

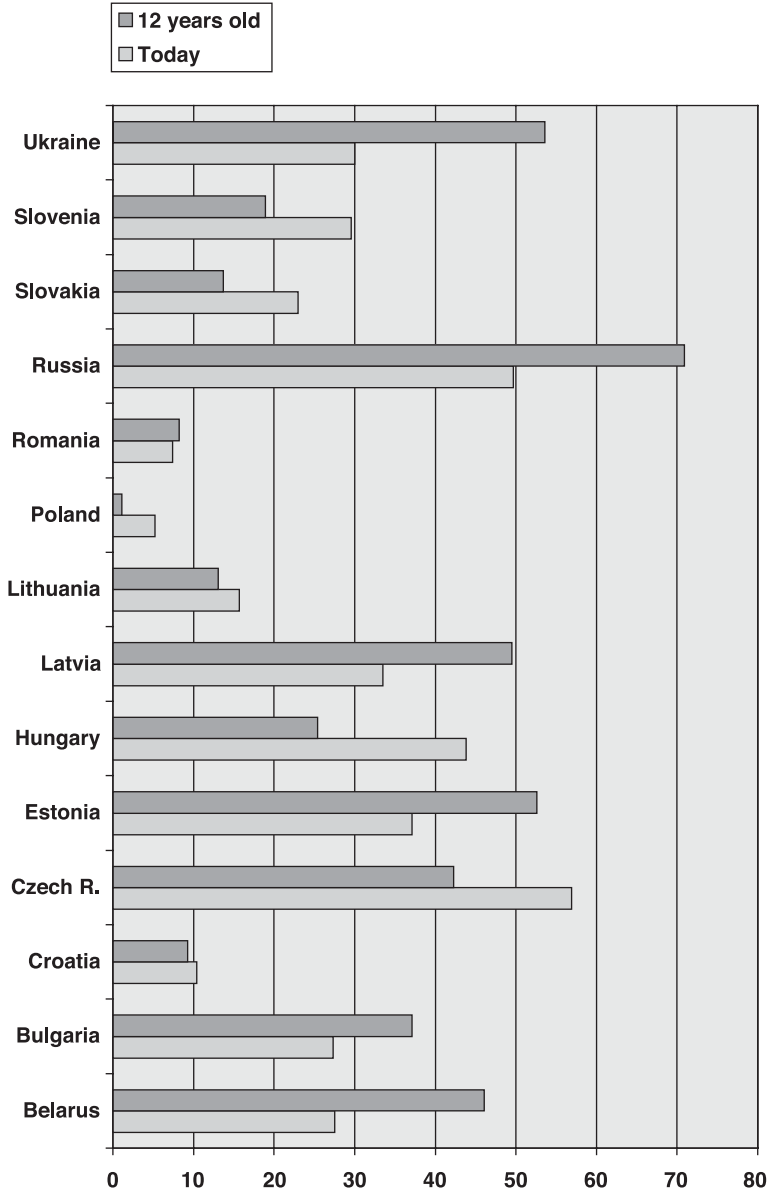
Taken together with the previous analysis, these figures suggest a possible and provisional division of all post-communist countries into three groups. The first group comprises countries in which atheism left the most severe consequences. There are two striking facts here: Church attendance is higher now than when respondents were young, and religious self-identification is stronger than confessional identification (Estonia, Latvia, Russia, and Ukraine). Although religious self-identification is lower than the confessional self-identification in Belarus, this country can also be added to the first group because of the high proportion of non-membership of Churches. That is partly true also for Bulgaria, in which the percentage of non-religiosity remains high and in which present Church attendance is 9.8% higher than in the past. It has to be noted that our data can be connected with many other studies that have shown the paradoxical position of religion and the Churches in some of these countries, i.e. the highly contested public role of religion together with its capacity to offer meaning and support versus a still low level of religious commitment despite its growth after 1990.



Source: EVS 1999.

FIGURE 1
Non-confessional identification (%) in 14 post-communist countries, 1999

The second group includes more westernized and secularized countries: Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovenia and, to some extent, Slovakia. In spite of the revitalization trend in the 1980s, the proportion of non-believers and those who never attend religious service is not so high (except in the Czech Republic) as in the previous group, but is still noticeable. In this group of countries the comparison of Church attendance today with the past indicates the probability of continuing secularization together with a rapid modernization after 1990.



Source: EVS 1999.

FIGURE 2
Respondents never attending Church (%) at age 12 and today in 14 post-communist countries, 1999

The third group is made up of countries in which there are no great differences between present and past Church attendance and where both religious and confessional identification remain high: Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Croatia. Yet, the proportion of non-believers and atheists is between 10% and 15% in Lithuania, Romania and Croatia, while only 5.5% in Poland. This last indicator suggests that Slovakia (with 17.4% of non-believers and atheists) lies somewhere between the second and third group. These are also countries in which the dominant Churches have played a crucial role in maintaining a separate national identity.

The possible impact of the past social system can also be seen from the percentage of non-religiosity in each age group. While in some countries the youngest are more non-religious than older people, in other countries they are not. The 30–49 age group is more non-religious than the 18–29 group in Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Belarus and Slovenia. In Russia, the highest non-religious percentage is the 50–59 (38.9%) and the 30–39 (38.8%) groups; but in the 18–29 and 40–49 groups non-religiosity is also quite high. In Poland, where differences in religiosity between age groups are not statistically significant and where the percentage of non-religious people is so low (which limits any conclusions), the most non-religious group is the 50–59. In many countries (Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Russia and Ukraine) today's 40–59-year-olds had the highest percentage of non-religious attendance when they were 12, which also indicates the possible impact of the previous political system.

Conclusion

The fact that atheism was an important brick in the totalitarian construction of the communist system conditions any meaningful analysis of how different generations have responded not only to atheism as an official ideology but to the communist system in general. In particular, the major social changes that occurred under communism significantly affected religion. Although it has been shown that communist modernization should be differentiated from Western modernization, there still remains the fact of rising non-religiosity under communism. It can only be said that atheism as an official ideology reinforced secular manifestations of social change, while it is impossible to say to what extent. In that respect, different countries vary significantly. Reasons for the high level of non-membership of Churches may be different in the Czech Republic and Russia—a further reminder that communism was not a standardized system. The different views of different individuals and their connection to their position inside the system must be added to the picture, alongside the more generic historical, political and cultural differences.

The analysis has shown that it is possible to talk about different generational responses to communism. Differences between them have been observed in many countries, particularly between the younger and older. Looking back over the period, it is also possible to see that some generations were more influenced than others by the system and its changes. Yet, besides the fact that we did not have systematic and reliable studies in the past, which

complicates any generalization, it is still possible to articulate a particular generational response, providing one analyses it from within the particular circumstances of each country. The importance of different circumstances in different countries is also stressed by the *Aufbruch* research team of 10 post-communist countries, while showing that the age differences in religiosity exist in all countries but within very different frameworks (Tomka and Zulehner, 1999, 2000).

Finally, and for all the reasons already stated, the analysis could not test models used in many Western countries to explore the impact of age on religiosity (Jagodzinski and Dobbelaere, 1995; Dobbelaere, 1999). However, for countries in which secularization is likely to continue and which now are participating in international research projects, it will be possible to do so soon. For others, research will still have to concentrate on the relationship between factors specific to each country in order to understand both past and future trends.

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