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Can increasing religiosity foster democratization in Ukraine?

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Stable democracies are characterized by the predominance of certain values and political orientations. Ukraine, as a newly independent post-Soviet state, chose a democratic path toward its development and over the last two decades it experienced massive changes including transformations in the religious sphere. Statistical and survey data suggest that religiosity has significantly increased in Ukraine after independence. It is however not clear, whether religious people differ from the rest of the population with respect to socio-demographic characteristics, what kind of religiosity has increased and whether this growth can foster the democratic development of the society? This report presents the results of an explorative study of the link between the degree of religiosity and political orientations of the Ukrainian population.

In church we trust

Many scholars consider the communist ideology of the Soviet Union as a form of civil religion (Ryklin 2008, Maier 2003), which had its own symbols, heroes and proclaimed that the final goal of the Soviet state's development was to achieve a "communist paradise". This ideology had been suppressing traditional religions in the Soviet republics for many decades. The Soviet state considered traditional religions to be the "opiate of the masses", although to some extent tolerated the Russian Orthodox Church, which was used as an instrument of control over religious people. In the 1980s, when the failure of the Marxist-Leninist ideology began to be obvious, people started to turn away from the communist idols and traditional religions experienced a revival. Sociological surveys of 1989–1991 have captured the first wave of religiosity growth and have shown that Uzbeks, Lithuanians and Ukrainians were the three most religious nationalities on the eve of USSR's dissolution (Lewada 1993).

The second wave of religiosity growth among the population was reflected in sociological surveys in the late 1990s (figure 1). According to the data of the European Values Survey and World Values Survey, the share of people in Ukraine who declared themselves religious increased from 58% in 1996 to 81.3% in 2008. On the other hand, the proportion of those who described themselves as "not a religious person" decreased from 28.6% in 1996 to 11.6% in 2008.

Together with growing religiosity, there was an increase in the number of religious institutions in Ukraine. Official statistical data show that the number of religious institutions constantly grew between 2001 and 2013 (table 1).

Figure 1: Subjective religiosity
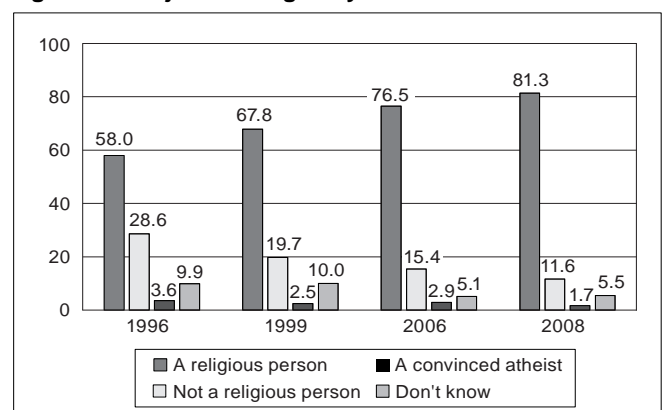
Source: EVS 2011, WVS 2009; author's computations.

Table 1: Religious institutions

	2001	2006	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Total (institutions)	24311	30507	32639	33351	33977	34586	35116
Centers, administrations (bishoprics, diocese etc.)	241	299	340	350	362	375	382
Communities	23400	29262	31257	31940	32521	33099	33581
Monasteries	277	386	432	439	459	471	500
Missions	214	309	340	347	357	360	370
Frateries	53	76	74	76	78	80	81
Religious educational institutions	126	175	196	199	200	201	202

Source: Ukraine in numbers (2013).

There are at least three theoretical approaches explaining the rise in religiosity after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first approach refers to the post-communist institutional transformation. In the background of the crisis of trust in political institutions such as national parliament, government, political parties etc. the level of trust in church as a non-political social institution was rather high and significantly grew over 2000–2010 (figure 2).

Figure 2: Trust in institutions
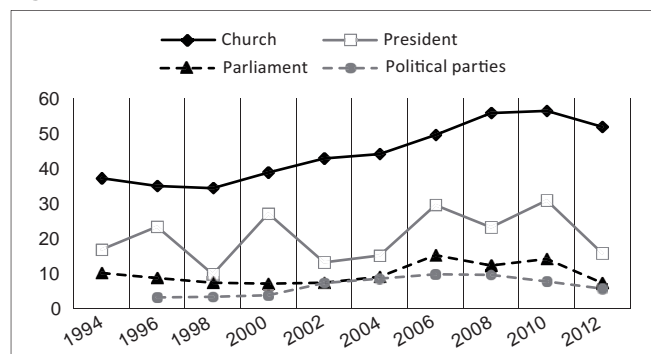
Source: Monitoring IS NASU; author's computations.

Even non-religious people in Ukraine often trust the church more than political institutions. It means that the church plays an important role in Ukrainian society and is perceived as a more reliable institution compared with many state institutions.

The second approach explains the rise in religiosity as a consequence of the ideological vacuum, which occurred as soon as the crisis of the communist ideology became obvious. According to this approach, people turned to traditional religions because they proposed a system of values that appeared to be a suitable substitute for the Soviet ideology. As a result, the church as a social institution has considerably strengthened its position by providing a compensatory system of values, which was readily perceived by the people since there was a large demand for the ultimate source of the moral standards in the population.

The third theoretical approach describes the mechanism of religiosity growth using the threshold models of collective behavior. According to these models people choose their orientations and behavior patterns based on how widespread these orientations and patterns are in their social networks. The larger the number of people who share religious values or perform religion-related activities in a person's environment, the more likely this person is to conform and to adopt the same behavior patterns.

The focus of this present report is on the following questions: What kind of religiosity increased in Ukraine? Do religious people differ from the rest of the population with respect to the socio-demographic characteristics? And is there a relationship between the degree of religiosity and political orientations of people? The answers to these questions will shed light on the nature of religiosity growth in Ukraine and clarify if the religiosity of people is reflected in their behavior and political orientations.

Nominal belonging or true believer?

Today, Ukraine clearly stands out among other post-Soviet states as a country offering more religious freedoms and is as a result characterized by a higher level of religious pluralism.

Figure 3: Religious denominations, 2010
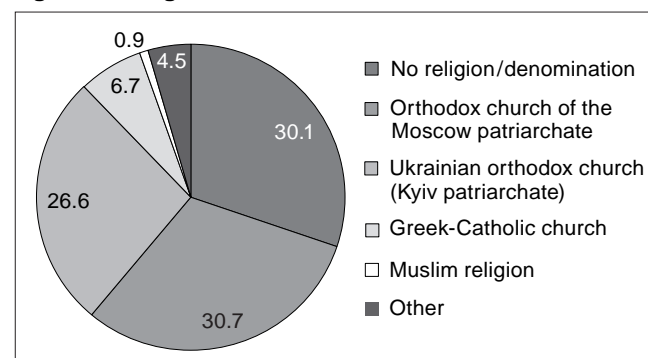
Source: ESS 2010; author's computations.

According to the European Social Survey (ESS 2010) approximately 70% of the Ukrainian population reported belonging to one of the religious denominations, while the remaining 30% of the population stated that they do not belong to any particular religion or denomination (figure 3). The largest religious group is represented by the Orthodox church of the Moscow patriarchate (31%). Almost as significant is the Ukrainian Orthodox church of the Kyiv patriarchate (27%). Other important religious groups include the Greek-Catholic church (7%), mostly

active in the western oblasts of Ukraine, and Muslims (1%), concentrated in the South of the country.

Although the information on subjective religiosity and religious denominations gained from quantitative surveys provides a general overview of the religious situation, this information does not allow distinguishing between true believers and people expressing nominal religious belonging. The former are likely to differ from the latter in their values and, hence, behavior patterns. In order to assess the degree of religiosity of the Ukrainian population, a cluster analysis was conducted using the data of the International Social Survey Programme collected in 2008 (ISSP 2012).

A statistically stable solution, which provided a plausible interpretation of the results, implied four clusters (i.e.,religious groups) (table 2). These groups include similar individuals with respect to the information contained in the following variables:

1. "Believer" – the variable that indicates if a person believes in God (code 3), hesitates (code 2), or does not believe in God (code 1).

2. "Subjective religiosity" – self-assessments of people on a 7-point scale from 1 – "Extremely religious" to 7 – "Extremely non-religious".

3. "Church attendance" – the variable which represents answers to the question "How often do you attend church?" using a 9-point scale from 1 – "Never" to 9 – "Several times a week".

4. "Prayer" – information on frequency of prayer provided by respondents using a scale from 1 – "Never", to 11 – "Several times a day".

The clusters are ranked in accordance with the degree of religiosity they represent. The first cluster (A) can be labeled *religious churchgoers* and it includes the most religious people, while cluster D contains the least religious people (*non-religious*).

Religious churchgoers in Ukraine on average go to church nearly every week and pray once a day. This cluster is the smallest group, while the largest one is the group of *moderate believers* – people, who generally describe themselves as somewhat religious, attend church several times a year and pray several times a week. The third cluster includes *passive believers*, who attend church several times a year and pray about once a month. Finally, the fourth cluster represents *non-religious* people, who never pray and attend church less than once a year. The proportion of people who do not believe in God is the largest in this group.
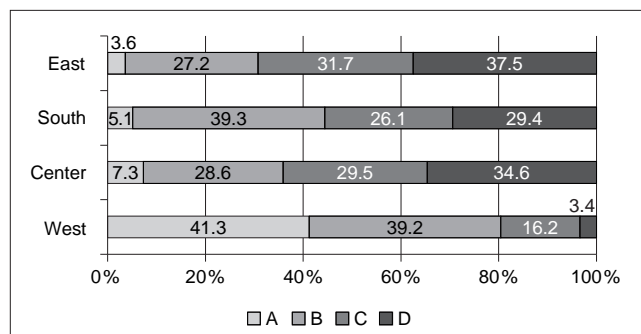
The East-West gap in religiosity

The distribution of religious groups is not even among Ukrainian regions (figure 4). The largest proportion of *religious churchgoers* is found in the Western region[1] of Ukraine (41.3%). In this region the share of *non-religious* people is very small – roughly 3%.

Figure 4: Religious groups in Ukrainian regions

Source: ISSP 2008, author's computations.

On the other hand, in Central, Southern and Eastern regions the shares of non-religious people are considerably larger; so much that the representatives of the least religious group outnumber religious churchgoers. In all regions the proportion of moderate believers is quite large and ranges from 27% in the East to 39% in the West. The share of passive believers goes up to 32% in the Eastern region and is almost twice as small in the West.
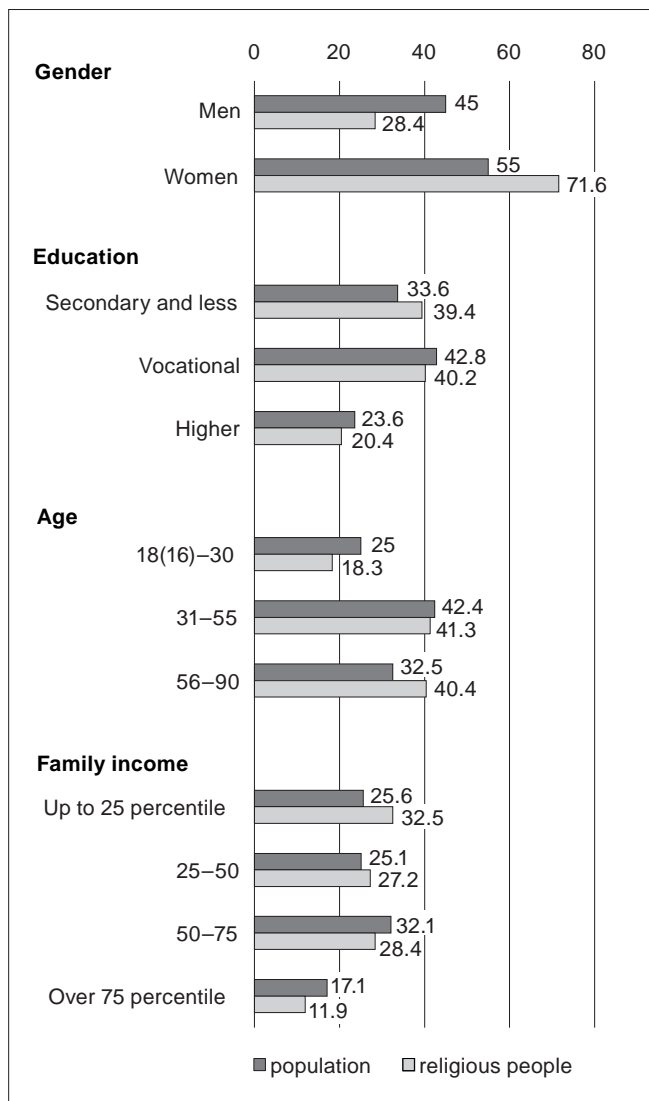
The results of sociological surveys suggest that the sharp rise in religiosity of people in Ukraine happened predominantly in the Eastern, Southern and Central regions, since in the West of Ukraine the level of religiosity was already very high.

According to the World Values Survey (WVS 2009) and European Values Survey (EVS 2011), between 1996 and 2008 the increase in subjective religiosity went up to 32% in the East, 22.5% in the South, and 23.3% in the Centre, while in the Western region it went up to 8.9%.

Who are the true believers?

Figure 5 presents a distribution of socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, education, age and family income of the whole population of Ukraine and of religious people, defined here as individuals who belong to the clusters A and B, that is, *religious churchgoers* and *moderate believers*.

Table 2: Religious groups

	Cluster A Religious churchgoers	Cluster B Moderate believers	Cluster C Passive believers	Cluster D Non-religious
Believer	Yes (2.97)	Yes (2.84)	Yes (2.63)	Yes & no (1.95)
Subjective religiosity	Somewhat religious (2.7)	Somewhat religious (3)	Somewhat religious (3.4)	Somewhat non-religious (4.7)
Church attendance	Nearly every week	Several times a year	Several times a year	Less than once a year
Prayer	Once a day	Several times a week	About once a month	Never
N	238	586	492	519

Figure 5. Socio-demographic profiles

Source: ISSP 2008, author's computations.

Gender distribution in religious groups reflects a world-wide trend; – women tend to be more religious than men. Women constitute nearly 72% of the most religious groups (cluster A and B) in Ukraine.

As far as the level of education is concerned, religious people tend to be less educated: the proportion of people with higher and vocational education is lower among religious individuals, while the share of those with secondary general education and less is, respectively, higher. There are less young people among the most religious citizens. Approximately 40% of the religious population is made up of people over 55 years old. Religious people also tend to have lower earnings and family incomes compared to non-religious people (the average number of members in households of religious and non-religious respondents is not significantly different). This set of differences in socio-demographic characteristics between religious and non-religious people corresponds to the common picture typically found in Western democracies.

Who can be the engine of political transformation?

Social scientists argue that religious values essentially affect people's political orientation (e.g. Hayes 1995). Religious affiliation is regarded as an important determinant of a person's attitude, perception and values. Since religion provides a frame of reference for people's behavior and forms a particular worldview among religious people, it affects, among other things, their political understanding, aspirations and actions. Therefore, a hypothesis may be formulated that the rise in religiosity among Ukrainian citizens in the last decade is associated with a values shift, which can lead to a transformation of political orientations. The question is whether religious groups in Ukraine share rather authoritarian political attitudes and values or if they adhere to democratic ideas, and thus can foster the democratization of the society.

Democratic political orientations are understood as orientations typical for liberal democracies characterized by the protection of human rights, universal political freedoms and ensuring the rule of law. The ISSP dataset provides several indicators that may be considered for the operationalization of political orientations. In the following, three major dimensions are considered: *trust*, *activism* and *equality*. The first indicator is generalized social trust, which points to the general level of social capital in a society derived from answers to the question: "Generally speaking, would you say that people can be trusted or that you cannot be too careful in dealing with people?". The more inclined people are to trust others, the more prone they are for cooperation with other people and the more open is the society they live in.

Political participation and attitudes toward one's role in the political process can be operationalized through voting behavior (whether a person voted in the last election or not) and the degree of agreement to the statement "There is little that people can do to change the course of their lives". The less people believe they can change their lives, the less motivation they have to alter the existing order.

Absence of profound and reflective interest in politics measured by social surveys can be measured by the absence of party preference. Approximately half of the population in Ukraine who answered the ISSP-2008 question "There are more than 100 political parties in Ukraine. Which party do you feel affiliated with?" was not able to indicate a political party, which they felt closer to. Voting behaviour, inclination to fatalism and political party preferences are indicators of personal *activism*.

Equality, non-discrimination and pluralism are important democratic values. These values are shaping the answers of respondents when they express agreement or disagreement to the statements: "All religious groups in Ukraine should have equal rights" and "We must respect all religions." Orientations toward traditional or modern gender roles were assessed by analyzing the degree of agreement or disagreement to the statement

"A husband's job is to earn money; a wife's job is to look after the home and family". Non-discriminatory attitudes represent people's orientations towards *equality*.

Using an explorative method of visualization of the relationships between multiple categorical variables in a two-dimensional space – a correspondence analysis – implied a diagram presented in figure 6. The following diagram visualizes the relationship of religious clusters A–D and political orientations: *trust*, *activism*, and *equality*.

Figure 6: Correspondence analysis
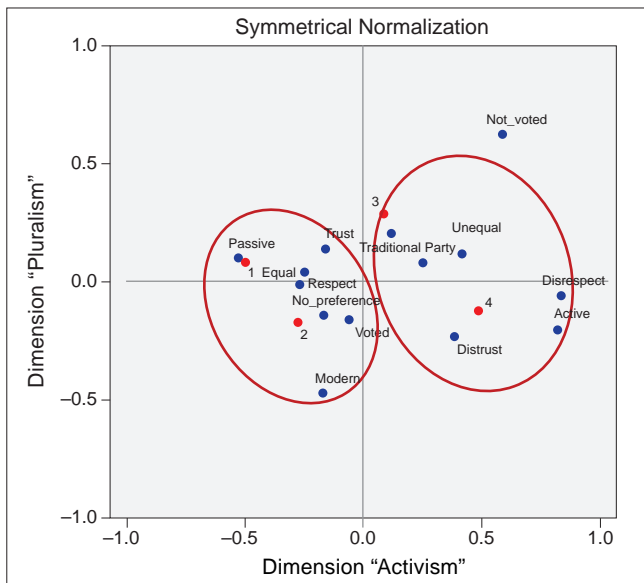
Source: ISSP 2008, author's computations.

Red points on the diagram numbered from 1 to 4 correspond to the clusters from A to D as described in Table 2. Blue points refer to the political orientation variables. The closer the points are to the zero value, the less they differ from the average population profile. The first two clusters – *religious churchgoers* and *moderate believers* – are found on the left-side of the graph, closer to the points labeled "equal", "respect", "voted", and "trust". These results suggest that religious people are inclined to share more distinctly the values of participatory pluralistic democracy. They tend to support equal rights for all religious groups and respect all religions. Furthermore, they trust people more strongly and participate in elections. However, the proximity of the "no preference" point to these clusters suggests that religious people often have no political preferences. In other words, they cannot indicate a party that represents their interests.

It is remarkable that a higher degree of religiosity is directly associated with the belief that people can do little to change their lives. In contrast, *non-religious* people appear more confident in their abilities – they rather tend to disagree with the fatalistic statement that people can do little to change their lives. The cluster of *passive believers* (cluster C) and to a higher extent the

one of *non-religious* people (cluster D) are located closer to the indicators of non-democratic political orientations: unequal rights of religious groups and absence of respect for all religions. Moreover, less religious people are more suspicious toward others and trust people in general less than religious people do. Nevertheless, it seems that they feel better represented by the existing political parties.

Interestingly, *moderate believers* tend to support slightly more the modern (as opposed to traditional) gender roles, while in the other religious groups the association is less pronounced.

Conclusion

The data of social surveys have captured a rapid growth of the subjective religiosity in Ukraine at the end of 1990s. A more detailed look at these data suggests that the largest contribution to the religiousness increase comes from the Eastern, Southern and Central regions of Ukraine; while in the Western part of the country, the level of religiosity was already very high. Despite their expression of subjective affiliation with a church, many people remain rather declarative believers. For approximately a quarter of the Ukrainian population, being a religious person does not imply regular church attendance or prayer.

The highest proportion of *religious churchgoers* is found in the Western Ukraine (41.3%), where the share of *non-religious* people is very small (3.4%). The picture in the other regions is quite the opposite: the share of *non-religious* people goes up to one third of the population and *religious churchgoers* constitute about 4 to 7 percent.

Religious people are more represented by women as well as older, less educated and poorer people. At the same time, they share to a larger extent the values of a pluralistic participatory democracy and tend to trust other people. The answer patterns suggest that a deeper religiosity is associated with stronger support for the idea that people can do little to change their lives. Although religious people normally vote, they often feel not represented by the existing political parties. Furthermore, empirical data suggest that *non-religious* people are less associated with the values of a pluralistic society, but they hold a more active position toward managing their own lives and have higher rates of political party affiliation.

These results suggest that under the current circumstances neither highly religious people, nor non-religious groups can build a solid platform for the development of liberal democracy in Ukraine. Democratic changes can be expected either if religious people who share democratic values take a more active position and give birth to a new political party, which will represent their interests; or if a value shift towards more democratic orientations takes place among non-religious people (including passive believers).

Notes

[1] Regions: *West*: Volyns'ka, Zakarpats'ka, Ivano-Frankivs'ka, Lvivs'ka, Rivnens'ka, Ternopils'ka, Černivec'ka; *Centre*: Kyjiv, Kyjivs'ka, Vinnyc'ka, Žytomyrs'ka, Kirovograds'ka, Poltavs'ka, Sums'ka, Chmelnic'ka, Čerkas'ka, Černihivs'ka; *South*: Krym, Mykolajivs'ka, Odes'ka, Chersons'ka; *East*: Dnipropetrovs'ka, Donec'ka, Zaporiz'ka, Luhans'ka, Harkivs'ka

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