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**articles**



## RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS AND THE SOCIAL CAPITAL OF THE YOUTH IN POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES

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### Abstract

In this research we ask whether churches and religious organizations in post-communist countries can contribute to social capital formation among young people. We investigate this relationship by an innovative research design that combines quantitative and qualitative methods and is firmly grounded in the comparative empirical research tradition. First, we analyze multinational survey data in order to explore the multifaceted relationship between religious participation and social capital. Second, we conduct four critical case studies that allow us to explore in-depth the mechanisms through which religious participation can be conducive to social capital. We consider religious participation to include both activities organized within churches and within religious nongovernmental organizations. The first pair of case studies forms a comparative investigation of the potential that churches and religious organizations has on social capital creation among the youth in Poland and Romania – the two most religious and religiously homogenous countries in East Central Europe, one Catholic and one Orthodox. The second pair of case studies follows the same logic, but focuses on how churches and religious organizations lead to social capital creation among the youth in the largest migrant communities of Romanians in Spain and Polish in the United Kingdom respectively. We argue that the experience of migration creates a unique context in which churches and religious organizations become fundamental identity carriers and help preserve and reconstruct the idea of community. We will touch upon the subject of the consequences of social capital developed within religious organization on civic skill formation.

### Description of the project and contextualization of the research topic

Social capital<sup>1</sup> is a key concept associated with a healthy and vibrant democracy. Commonly conceived of as encompassing social trust, norms

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and associative behavior, social capital is a resource that empowers citizens and creates a fertile context in which democracy is enacted. Post-communist countries display low levels of social capital (Rossteucher 2008), while scoring high on religiosity and religious participation (Norris and Inglehart 2011). During transition, characterized by political apathy and mistrust in institutions, churches and religious organizations benefit from high popular support in East Central Europe (Mishler and Rose 1997). We focus on youth because they are the future democratic citizens - the first generations socialized within a democratic system (Radu and Greab 2011).

The main research questions asked in the project are the following: (Q1) How is social capital constructed within and through participation in church organized activities and religious organizations in post-communist societies?; (Q2) What institutional characteristics of churches and religious organizations are more conducive to social capital formation?; (Q3) What are the features of social capital created within these institutions and what are its effects beyond the religious community they focus on?; (Q4) How does the relationship between religious participation and social capital formation carry across national contexts? How similar are Romania and Poland from the perspective of social capital formation within churches and religious organizations, given that they are the two most religious post-communist countries, while also presenting different social, political and religious contexts?; (Q5) How do churches and religious organizations contribute to social capital creation in the case of communities of migrants – a unique context in which social trust, norms and networks become critical resources for both everyday life and the creation of the migrant identity?

## **Review of the relevant literature**

In the following critical literature review we introduce and define the main concepts of this research and identify the main limitations of pre-existing approaches. We understand social capital to include trust, norms and participation in associations/networks (Putnam 1993). According to Esser (2008), social capital is unique because it combines individual and social features. It is only through social relations that social capital as an individual resource can be activated; participation in various networks increases one's chances of attaining different social, political or career goals (Lin 2008). Although social capital is a contested concept marred by theoretical and methodological issues, common ground can be found among its various definitions (Van Deth 2008), and interdisciplinary

research is encouraged (Castiglione 2008). Social capital is a resource – as all social relations can be – but it only becomes effective if it is used as such.

Social trust is commonly discussed in the context of social capital and a healthy democratic society. Research shows that consolidated democracies have the highest level of social trust and social capital (Putnam, 1993, 2000). Uslaner (2002, 2012) theorized extensively on the typology of social trust and its effects on various measures of societal development. His term of *moralistic trust* refers to a predisposition to trust other people, irrespective of previous experience or without clear expectations for immediate reciprocity. Moreover, norms – for example reciprocity – are considered public goods, although they can be enjoyed by many, without contributing to their preservation (Esser 2008). Putnam's *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American community* (2000) is an example attesting the importance of associations in the creation/reproduction of a healthy trustworthy society. Participation in nonpolitical organizations is important for social capital accumulation, although such participation may also inhibit further involvement, through lack of time or of political efficacy.

Early debates about the effects of social capital focused almost solely on its benefits: from facilitating economic transactions, to democratic health, personal or organizational development. As early as 1973, Granovetter introduced the concept of weak ties that were later proved to create both positive and negative effects on social capital (Lin 2001). In 2000, Putnam proposed a conceptual difference between bonding and bridging social capital, with the former representing the positive effects of social capital within one's immediate group, while the latter refers to positive effects outside the group within which capital itself was cultivated. Recently, authors also reflected upon the dark side of social capital. Warren (2008) distinguishes between positive in-group externalities and negative out-group externalities and identifies types of trust that are more conducive to positive externalities than others.

Within social capital theory, the underlining assumption is that in the social milieu and through social interaction people learn the benefits of trust and cooperative social behavior (Smidt 2003). Religious organizations and churches form a distinct type of social interaction arena – not in the least because of their focus on religious doctrine. Moreover, their organization and functioning is affected by historical contextual variables describing the relationship between state and church, the role of religion in society and in

the construction of national identity. As such, authors consider that religious organizations should be treated separately when assessing their influence on social capital creation (Inglehart and Norris 2011, Rossteuscher 2006).

According to King and Furrow (2004), religiously participatory young people possess higher stocks of social trust and social capital – originating in their religious value systems yet mediated and fashioned through social interaction. After 1989, post-communist countries approached the idea of associationalism with apprehension and considered it a foreign concept (Smidt, 2003), except for religious organizations that benefitted from a wave of religious revival. Consequently, religious organizations and churches enjoyed a privileged status among other civil society actors. There is growing literature investigating the potential of religious organizations to generate social capital. Social capital gained in religious organizations may be more durable because the motivation to stay is faith-based and hence stronger (Smidt, 2003). Church going may lead to more volunteerism, and, implicitly contribute to a vibrant civil life and higher social capital (Wilson and Janoski 1995). Noting that religious citizens in Eastern Europe are more inclined to be socially active than their Western European counterparts, Lasinska (2013) distinguishes between structural and cultural approaches to the study of the relationship between religion and social engagement. The former sees religious participation as a way to enter pre-existing structures for social engagement, while the latter is built around the idea that religious people are internally motivated to become socially involved. Horstmann (2014) refers to various bridging effects discussed in the literature as being generated by membership in religious organizations. Among these, bringing together people of different ages/generations and economic backgrounds and creating a bond of solidarity between them are most common (Bruhn 2011).

Some churches and religious organizations can lead to higher social capital, but the institutional characteristics of these organizations are very important. Social capital is not only about people coming together, but also about institutional features that are conducive to social capital formation (Wuthnow 2002, 2003). Referring specifically to churches, Verba, Schlozman and Brady (1995) explain that they have the benefit of eliminating resource driven inequalities apparent in the American system, and contribute to acquiring civic skills. Churches that are grounded in a vertical, hierarchical model of religious authority would be less beneficial

to social capital creation in comparison to those constructed along horizontal ties (Coleman 2003). The size of the congregation also matters and so does the organizations' willingness and desire to activate and capitalize on social capital. If churches remain focused with promoting exclusively their mission and do not engage in outreach, their impact on bridging social capital may be limited.

Religious identification and church participation are often considered two key factors ensuring migrants' smoother handling of the migration process. Migration involves uncertainty, harsh and fast adjustment requirements, identity loss/change and even trauma. Faith and religious participation can offer meaning and identity during this process (Hirschmann 2007). Moreover, churches and religious institutions can also offer support, from financial to networking, from job placement to social capital. While the relationship between religion and migration is often addressed in terms of Muslim migrants in Europe - challenging the very quasi-secular core of most European states, raising questions on the need to address issues of church and state relationships in different contexts (Kastoryano 2007) - or by instrumentalizing church as an arena for networking and gaining access to resources, we explore how social capital is constructed in this special context of a religious community of migrants.

As far as youth are concerned, their role in newly established democracies is particularly important, since young citizens are the ones responding to new conditions (Franklin 2004). Scholarly literature was marked, in the recent years, by a revitalization of interest in youth's political orientations, along with renewed attention to political socialization studies (Galston 2001; Hooghe 2004; Sapiro 2004; Torney-Purta 2004). Jennings, Stoker, and Bowers (2009) show that civic involvement by high school seniors is strongly associated with involvement levels later in life. Participation in church and in religious organizations is an example for the latter, one in which social capital could potentially flourish.

This brief yet critical literature review emphasizes the need to bring together arguments developed within several disciplines - political science, religious studies, sociology, and psychology - and inquire into the limitations of current research on religious determinants of social capital. Through this research we aim to contextualize concepts developed in relationship to Western and mostly North-American social and political systems - such as social capital, civil society or civic skills - and adapt them

to the unique case of post-communist societies. Thus, we identify a niche for theorizing within social capital theory, especially when it comes to transformations suffered by the concept when transposed to different religious and political contexts.

### **Project objectives**

The main goal of the project is to investigate how participation in churches and religious organizations influences social capital formation in the case of youth in post-communist countries. The goal is operationalized into the following objectives:

(1) To provide a synthesis of research documenting the potential of churches and religious organizations to construct social capital among the youth in post-communist countries. Democratic transition and consolidation, religious revival, intensive migration and the transmitted legacy of communism are consequential for the social capital of the youth; (2) to offer an account on how participation in religious organizations influences social capital among the youth, based on multi-national surveys. Several hypotheses regarding this relationship will be tested throughout quantitative data analysis. The effects of participation in church and religious organizations on social capital formation will serve as the basis for exploring further the effects of social capital on political culture, civic skills and political participation; (3) to investigate - through in-depth interviews and focus groups - how participation in religious organizations, including church attendance, contributes to social capital formation among the youth in Romania and Poland, as two critical case studies; (4) to create a database of churches and religious organizations active in Romania and in Poland and in the Romanian and Polish diasporas that run programs for youth; (5) to examine the ways in which social capital is constructed within religious organizations for youth in the cases of Polish migrants in the UK and Romanian migrants in Spain; the specific context circumscribed by migration phenomena takes both the youth and religious organizations out of their usual context, and gives new meanings to notions of community and identity; (6) to integrate the empirical findings into a body of knowledge that can serve as a basis for further theorizing about the potential of constructing social capital within religious organizations in the case of recent democracies.

This research is innovative through both topic and research design. The relationship between participation in religious organizations and social capital is not well developed, and most of the contributions are from the North-American context. Our research contributes to ongoing debates in the field by recalibrating theoretical insights on social capital and religious participation in the case of post-communist countries. Another innovative feature is the comparison between effects of religious participation on social capital creation in Romania and Poland and in Romanian and Polish communities of migrants abroad, a quasi-experimental setting allowing for the exploration of how different contexts mediate the effects of religious participation on social capital formation. Last but not least, this research is innovative by bringing together theoretical approaches from various social disciplines, and constructing a new theoretical framework sensitive to context and relevant for both research and through its policy implications.

This research contributes both to theoretical debates and empirical studies on social capital. We investigate the relationship between participation in religious organizations and creation of social capital in different contexts, thus filling-in the gap between social capital theories focusing on North-America and theories of democratic transition of post-communist countries. Through the mixed methods approach, we also contribute to the growing literature on the contextuality of social capital and its various understandings influenced by time, space and history.

## **Methodology**

The research design includes both secondary data analysis and collection of primary data and has a high degree of interdisciplinarity, by bringing together models developed across several disciplines: political science, sociology, religious studies and education sciences. The research includes several stages: (1) conducting a critical review of the literature on social capital, its effects on society and the contribution of religious organizations and church participation to the creation of social capital among the youth. Social capital is approached as an interdisciplinary concept that needs to be contextualized. We focus on both sources (especially religious organizations) and effects (civic skills) of social capital; (2) performing quantitative analyses on multi national survey data documenting the relationship between participation in religious organizations and measures of social capital. Data is available from several sources (European Values Survey, Pew, World Values Survey, ISSP, Eurobarometer) allowing to

explore this relationship across time and space, while controlling for contextual features specific to post-communist countries; (3) constructing a database of religious organizations active in Romania and in Poland, and in their diasporas, in Spain and the United Kingdom respectively (including churches) that run programs for youth; (4) conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups in religious organizations and churches running programs for the youth in Romania and Poland. Both the leadership of the organizations and the beneficiaries will be interviewed. In this phase we aim to uncover the mechanisms through which religious participation can create social capital among the youth, and also be able to evaluate the type and strength of this specific form of social capital; (5) conducting in-depth interviews and focus groups within religious organizations in Spain and Poland with members of the Romanian and Polish young migrant populations respectively. These case studies are illustrative for the effects of migration on social capital, in a context in which the community is redefined, identities are re-fashioned, and social trust becomes a critical resource.

## **Conclusion**

The research notes in this special issue of *Europolis* refer to different dimensions of research carried-out between 2015 and 2017 under the aegis of the above described project. Daniela Angi's article offers a comparative analysis of the relationship between tolerance, conservatism and religiosity in Romania and in Poland. The article by Andreea Vornicu discusses the construction of social capital and political values among young Romanian migrants in Spain. Anatolie Cosciug's contribution explores the different ways in which Polish identity is maintained and promoted among young religious Polish migrants in the UK. While all the contributions in this special issue are research notes, they do aim to respond to the project's main research questions, and offer a glimpse into a previously understudied topic, that would benefit from more interdisciplinary and methodologically diverse research efforts.

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