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Research Note

Geography, Nationality, and Religion in Ukraine: A Research Note

GRETCHEN KNUDSON GEE*

This paper uses data from a 1992 survey of young people in Ukraine to examine the linkages among geography, nationality, and religion in Ukraine. Differences in religious interest and affiliation follow distinctive geographic and ethnic patterns, and mirror the divisive voting behavior observed in the 1994 Ukrainian presidential election. Therefore, religious interest and affiliation may play important roles in the developing political divisions within Ukraine. Distinct differences exist in religious interest between western and eastern Ukraine. In addition, religious affiliation differs dramatically along regional and ethnic lines. Western Ukraine contains the highest percentage of religious believers, and these believers are most strongly associated with the Greek Catholic Church. Throughout the rest of Ukraine, interest in religion is lower, and the primary affiliation is with the Orthodox Church. This suggests that religious belief and affiliation may be related to geographic, nationalistic, and political divisions that are currently growing in importance within Ukraine.

In the three years since Ukrainian independence, ethnic and geographic divisions within the country have widened, and reconciliation between the opposing sides seems increasingly unlikely. The July 1994 presidential election pointed out the depth and intractability of these divisions. Defeated incumbent President Leonid Kravchuk, perceived to be the pro-Ukrainian nationalist candidate, focused his campaign around the need for Ukraine to increase ties with Europe and warned against the dangers of increased ties with Russia. His emphasis upon an independent and western-leaning Ukraine won him 94% of the vote in the pro-nationalistic western regions of Ukraine. Candidate Leonid Kuchma, the successful challenger, based his campaign upon a call for stronger ties with Russia and the need to associate Ukraine with the Russian-dominated states of Eurasia. Voters in the pro-Russian eastern regions of Ukraine responded, and Kuchma won 90% of the vote in Crimea and 82% of the vote in the regions of Donetsk and Luhansk (Arel and Wilson 1994). Kuchma emerged victorious from the election, having gained a bare majority of 52.1% of the vote. These election results show a country deeply split across many lines, and the divisions seem to be widening, rather than narrowing, over time.

The roots of these divisions run deep and include such factors as nationality, language, geography, and also religion. To understand the existing divisions, it is useful to place them in a context of the social and demographic patterns of Ukraine. This paper examines the linkages among geography, nationality, and religion in Ukraine and discovers that the cleavages demonstrated by the 1994 presidential elections extend to issues of religious belief and affiliation. The patterns revealed by the data suggest that geography, nationality, and religious interest and affiliation may help explain the schismatic voting behavior of the

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1994 election. In particular, the distinctive religious character of western Ukraine likely is important in shaping a strong nationalistic Ukrainian political identity.

The data for this survey were gathered in 1991-92 as part of an ongoing panel study of youth in Ukraine. Young people born in 1967-68 were surveyed from four regions within Ukraine: Kiev, Lviv, Khmel'nitsky, and Odessa. The survey was random and designed to be representative of people who were in their last year of secondary school in 1984-85 in each of the regions. The interviews were performed in person and were conducted by the Ukrainian Institute of Youth Problems Research as part of the Intergenerational Longitudinal Research Report.¹ The survey builds upon an ongoing study of the early life course issues of youth in these regions of Ukraine; the next wave is due to be carried out in 1996.

Although the sample is not representative of persons in that cohort in Ukraine as a whole, it provides a good basis for examining regional differences as well as the pattern of relationships between respondent background and religious interest and affiliation. The pattern of relationships is not likely to differ significantly between the respondents to this survey and persons in the same cohort in Ukraine as a whole. Some characteristics of the survey sample can be viewed in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the number of respondents according to several characteristics. Across all regions of Ukraine in the survey, there were 7,468 completed questionnaires. Fifty-five percent of the respondents were women; 45% were men. Eighty-one percent identified their nationality as Ukrainians and 14% as Russian; only five percent named another nationality. Survey data from Ukraine indicates that this survey population is representative of the country as a whole. According to the *Europa World Yearbook 1994*, the Kiev region contains nine percent of the country's population, Odessa contains five percent, Lviv has five percent, and Khmel'nitsky has three percent. Therefore, the proportional responses from the four regions in this survey are relatively balanced. The only exception is the Khmel'nitsky region, which is slightly overrepresented in this survey. The census figures indicate that Ukrainians make up 73% of the population, Russians 22%, and other nationalities five percent. Again, this survey population follows this general pattern, with Ukrainians being slightly overrepresented in the survey. The census also indicates that 54% of the population are women, while 46% are men. These percentages almost exactly match the sample characteristics.

TABLE 1
GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS*

	Percent	Number of Cases
Region		
Kiev	41.2	3074
Odessa	19.9	1487
Lviv	19.8	1482
Khmel'nitsky	19.1	1425
Nationality		
Ukrainian	80.8	5932
Russian	14.3	1048
Other	4.9	362
Sex		
Female	54.9	4070
Male	45.1	3342

*Survey response rate approx. 80%.

1. The surveys upon which this study is based were directed by Mikk Titma and administered by Olga Balakireva and Aleksandr Yaremenko of the Youth Institute in Kharkiv.

RELIGIOUS INTEREST

At the time the survey was administered, the Soviet Union had just ceased to exist and Ukraine had just declared her independence. Glasnost had been underway for several years, and religious freedoms were beginning to flourish. Religious interest was measured by asking the young people “Do you consider yourself religious?” Responses were either “yes” or “no.” Table 2 shows the percent who considered themselves religious across the categories of region, nationality and sex. Immediately, differences are revealed.

TABLE 2
SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PERCENT WHO CONSIDER THEMSELVES RELIGIOUS

	Percent Religious	Number	Chi-Square
Total Survey	44.4	3255*	
Region			425.8**
Kiev	34.7	1047	
Odessa	30.1	442	
Lviv	74.0	1077	
Khmelnitsky	49.4	689	
Nationality			67.7**
Ukrainian	47.6	2777	
Russian	31.0	320	
Other	31.8	114	
Sex			156.0**
Female	50.9	2040	
Male	36.3	1189	

*This is the number of respondents who answered “yes” to the question “Do you consider yourself religious?”

**p < .001

Young people from the central and southern regions of Kiev and Odessa were markedly less religious than their counterparts in the western regions of Khmelnitsky and Lviv. Seventy-nine percent of the young people from Lviv were religious, while only 35% of the young people in Kiev and 30% in Odessa considered themselves religious. The extremely high value of the chi-square statistic (425.8, $p < .001$) indicates that religiosity is contingent upon geographic region of residence.

Western Ukraine is unique due to its western ties and its nationalistic tendencies. Historically, western Ukraine has had a great deal of contact with western Europe. This contact, much of it through occupation, has shaped the region and differentiated it from the eastern part of Ukraine. Following World War I, western Ukraine was occupied by a variety of nations: Poland, Germany, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union. The experience of occupation shaped the west and distinguished it from the east. In particular, the struggles against the Poles, the Germans, and then the Soviets brought nationalism to a head in the western Ukraine. The resulting later Soviet annexation (1939-1945) of west Ukraine fostered this strong sense of Ukrainian nationalism in a manner that was unmatched in east Ukraine (Bilinsky 1964). This nationalism is demonstrated by the fact that, between 1959 and 1979, assimilation to the Russian language proceeded rapidly in east Ukraine, but was resisted in west Ukraine. Ukrainian, not Russian, was maintained as the predominant language in the west (Szporluk 1979), and this created greater Ukrainian identity and less Russification. These historical regional differences are still evident today and are highlighted by differences in religiosity. The dramatic differences in voting behavior for

the July 1994 presidential elections between the eastern and western regions of Ukraine suggest that the rift between regions is not diminishing.

Significant differences extend to considerations of nationality. Forty-eight percent of ethnic Ukrainians were religious, while only 31% of ethnic Russians and other nationalities were religious. The data indicate that among this cohort, Ukrainians are considerably more religious than Russians. Once again, the high chi-square value supports the hypothesis that nationality is highly related to religiosity. The suggestion that the practice of religion is a challenge to the authority to the state (Warhola 1992) indicates that those with a non-Russian nationality might have used religion to express their dissatisfaction with the control of the Soviet state. Research has demonstrated that historic displeasure toward the Soviet system had become tied to language and religion (Solchanyk 1991). Religiosity indicated displeasure toward the Soviet state. In today's context, religion could continue to be a hallmark of dissatisfaction, but that displeasure could be transferred to Russia (the heir of the Soviet legacy) and Russian-leaning politicians.

Language has been one of the strongest features differentiating western Ukrainians from eastern Ukrainians and other nationalities. The language loyalty of west Ukraine has always set it apart from the east. The continued use of Ukrainian in the west has fostered a distinct Ukrainian identity that has had historically strong links with religion (Szporluk 1979: 78).

TABLE 3
PERCENT RELIGIOUS BY NATIONALITY BY REGION OR SCHOOL LANGUAGE

	Region				School Language		Total Survey
	Kiev	Odessa	Lviv	Khmelnitsky	Ukrainian	Russian	
Nationality							
Ukrainian	35.5	28.7	76.8	52.5	54.9	37.7	47.6
Russian	33.2	31.3	33.3	20.5	29.8	31.2	31.0
Other	21.7	34.4	46.2	28.6	36.4	29.4	31.8
N	1029	440	1063	679	1782	1270	3211
Chi-Square	6.2*	3.1	80.2**	48.1**	24.9**	17.4**	

*p < .05
**p < .001

Table 3 reveals the positive regional association of Lviv with religiosity for all nationalities, but the effect is strongest upon Ukrainians. Ukrainians, in both Lviv and Khmelnytsky, are more religious than Ukrainians living in other regions and other nationalities living in the same region. Chi-square tests show a strong relationship between religiosity and nationality in the western regions. In Kiev and Odessa, the relationship between religiosity and nationality is much weaker. Going to a school that taught in the Ukrainian language is associated with greater religiosity, while attending a Russian-language school is related to decreased religiosity among Ukrainians. The high chi-square results indicate that, when school language is controlled for, there is a strong relationship between religiosity and nationality. Therefore, location, nationality, and even school language are jointly associated with religion. Western geographic location, when combined with Ukrainian ethnicity, has a strong association with religiosity. Region, ethnicity, and religion are all powerful forces that may combine to foster resistance toward Russification and to create a distinctive Ukrainian identity. Evidence for this distinctive identity can be found in the presidential election results. President Kravchuk, who campaigned on a Ukrainian nationalist and anti-Russian platform and who supported the promotion of the Ukrainian language in official circles,

gathered 94% of the vote in western Ukraine (Arel and Wilson 1994). This suggests that religion, together with geography and ethnicity, may be an integral part of the western Ukrainian political identity.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

Ukrainians also demonstrate interesting patterns of religious affiliation. Survey respondents who indicated a religious interest were asked to specify which religious group they acknowledged. It is important to note that the choices on the survey were limited and did not account for changes occurring in the religious environment. In particular, the survey did not distinguish between various branches of the Orthodox Church and did not list any Protestant churches. At the time the survey was designed, the Russian Orthodox Church was a united whole. At the time the survey was administered, however, several schisms had developed within the Orthodox Church, and the denominational picture was far more complex.

The vast majority of those who were religious chose either the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Uniate religion. The number of respondents who chose non-Christian groups was so small that those groups are not considered in this portion of the analysis.

TABLE 4
PERCENT RELIGIOUS WHO CHOSE EACH RELIGION

	Percent	Number
Choice of Religion		
Orthodox	33.2	2376
Catholic	1.2	86
Uniate	7.3	522
Other	1.6	115
Not Religious	56.7	4065*

*The fall-off is due to item nonresponse, so the cases were dropped on this question.

As Table 4 demonstrates, most of the people surveyed followed the Orthodox religion. Thirty-three percent of all respondents indicated that they were religious and chose the Orthodox faith; one percent were Roman Catholic; seven percent were Uniate. The Orthodox Church has historically been the most popular church in this area of the world, and was one of the few churches allowed a degree of freedom by the state during the Communist era. This freedom came at a price, however, since the Orthodox Church was to a large degree controlled and even coopted by the state (Simon 1970). It has been suggested that the Orthodox Church in Ukraine today is losing some of its attraction because of these past links with the Communist Party, its moral failings, and its present ties with the Russian Orthodox Church (Antic 1990). Because it cooperated with the CPSU and refrained from speaking out on a variety of societal issues, the Orthodox Church is seen by many as lacking an ability to take a moral stand and to speak to problems in society (Fletcher 1977).

When religious affiliation is compared across categories of region, nationality and sex, interesting patterns that might explain political behavior once again emerge.

TABLE 5
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS,
PERCENT RELIGIOUS, AND CHOICE OF RELIGION

	Percent Religious	Percent Religious for Each Religion*			Base N	Chi-Square
		Orthodox	Catholic	Uniate		
Region						1104**
Kiev	34.7	30.3	.9	.3	2927	
Odessa	30.1	26.9	.5	.4	1459	
Lviv	74.0	35.8	1.2	35.0	1432	
Khmelnitsky	49.4	43.5	2.5	.4	1346	
Nationality						110**
Ukrainian	47.6	34.9	1.3	9.0	5680	
Russian	31.0	27.2	.7	.2	1016	
Other	31.8	25.8	2.0	.3	353	
Sex						4.4
Female	50.9	38.1	1.3	8.5	3886	
Male	36.3	27.1	1.1	5.9	3230	

*This is a percentage of those who were religious and who chose a certain religion. For example, 30.3% of respondents from Kiev said they were religious and chose the Orthodox religion.

**p < .001

As can be seen from Table 5, Lviv has the highest percentage of religious people, and those people are almost equally split between the Orthodox (36%) and Uniate (35%) churches. These Uniates, or Eastern rite (Greek) Catholics, are strong only in this region, and in the other three regions of this survey make up only a fraction of the religious community. In fact, census data from Ukraine indicate that the Greek Catholic Church is strong only in the western regions of Ukraine surrounding Lviv. In these regions it is arguably the most powerful church, but in the rest of the country it is very small and relatively weak. Again, the western location of Lviv and its history of resistance toward the center may help explain this unique makeup.

In western Ukraine, after World War II, the institution that most bound Ukrainians to the West was the Greek Catholic Church. The Ukrainian nationalistic movement had strong links to this church (Bilinsky 1964: 110). Directly after the Soviet annexation, both movements resisted Soviet domination and continued their activities until the 1950s (Szporluk 1979). Although the church was forcibly “reunified” with the Russian Orthodox Church, it remained the “most important cultural and institutional presence of national identity in west Ukraine” (Bociurkiw 1992: 17). In recent years the Greek Catholic Church has become bolder and more visible. In 1989 it was involved in an independence demonstration in Lviv, and in 1991 it was recognized as an independent church. Given that Greek Catholics have been especially persecuted by the state, adherence to their faith may reflect interest in nationalism as well as in religion. This religious affiliation combined with nationalistic interests may explain part of the strong western Ukrainian vote for the nationalist President Kravchuk.

The region of Khmelnitsky has the largest proportion of Orthodox adherents. From this survey, it is not clear to which specific Orthodox Church the respondents are referring. Historically, however, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church has embraced the message of Ukrainian nationalism and has fought against the Russification and centralization of the Orthodox Church as a whole (Bociurkiw 1977). Forcibly united with the Russian Orthodox Church in 1929, it recently (1989) declared itself autonomous (Bociurkiw 1992).

Statistical tests indicate a very strong relationship between choice of religion and region, and between choice of religion and nationality. This supports the hypothesis that religious affiliation is strongly influenced by regional location and by nationality.

It is clear that there is a long history shared by proponents of Ukrainian nationalism and several Ukrainian churches. These ties, previously suppressed by the government, are now free to be strengthened. These preliminary results suggest that in both Lviv and Khmelnytsky, there is good reason to expect growing relationships between certain churches (the Greek Catholic and Ukrainian Autocephalous churches) and Ukrainian nationalistic interests, and to expect that these relationships will, in turn, influence voting behavior.

The potential linkages among religious affiliation, nationalism, and voting behavior are particularly intriguing in light of the age of these survey respondents. The young people in this survey were in their early work careers or finishing formal education and are poised to have a great deal of influence over the politics of Ukraine. In earlier phases of this study, the focus was upon the process of self-definition of a new generation. The data indicate that religious interest and affiliation are likely to be important components of this definition. Their regional location and their nationality are very likely to affect their religiosity and their choice of religion. Not coincidentally, region and nationality are becoming increasingly important in the political debates dividing Ukraine. Therefore, for the young people of Ukraine, religious issues may become increasingly linked to political debates, and religious divisions may contribute to existing political cleavages.

CONCLUSION

The data from the 1991-92 survey of youth in Ukraine indicate that religion is linked in an important way to the geographic and ethnic divisions within the country. In turn, the results from the 1994 presidential elections follow the patterns suggested by the data. These conclusions suggest that religious interest and religious affiliation play important roles in the demographic and political divisions within Ukraine. East and west Ukraine differ significantly. West Ukraine is much more religious, and a significant number of western Ukrainians follow the historically nationalistic Uniate Church. Loyalty to the Ukrainian language and Ukrainian ethnicity are both associated with religiosity. Therefore, religious belief and affiliation may be central components of the nationalist movement in western Ukraine. Eastern Ukraine is much less religious, and those who are religious are strongly associated with the Orthodox Church. It is not surprising that these divisions follow the same patterns revealed in the 1994 Ukrainian presidential election. The drastic differences in candidate support and voting behavior follow the same patterns predicted by the 1991-92 data. Religion, as well as geography and nationality, is an important factor affecting the deepening political divisions within Ukraine.

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