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**ORTHODOXY AND ECONOMIC BACKWARDNESS:  
COMBATING THE MYTH**

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The article ponders upon the potentially discriminative attitude towards Orthodox identity as a comparative impediment towards socioeconomic progress in 12 countries where such identity is believed to be shared by the majority, developed in political economists' academic discourse. The current data provide no confident or decisive evidence for judgments of this kind. One might look at other sources for modern Orthodox nations' relatively laggard development pattern.

**Keywords:** Orthodoxy, development, comparative patterns, OECD, EU, imperialism, state socialism.

**ПРАВОСЛАВИЕ И ЭКОНОМИЧЕСКОЕ ОТСТАВАНИЕ:  
БОРЬБА С МИФОМ**

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Статья посвящена изучению потенциально дискриминационного взгляда на Православие в политической экономии, рассматривающего православную конфессиональную идентичность как препятствие для социально-экономического развития 12 стран, в которых ее разделяет большинство населения. Имеющиеся статистические данные на этот счет не предоставляют надежного основания для подобных выводов. Существуют другие факторы, которые могут быть рассмотрены как более весомые с точки зрения ответственности за сравнительное отставание процессов модернизации в рассматриваемых странах.

**Ключевые слова:** Православие, развитие, шаблоны для сравнения, ОЭСР, ЕС, империализм, государственный социализм.

In social sciences there exists a widespread opinion [4] that nations with predominant Orthodox cultural identity historically lag behind in modernization, and

therefore, in well-being, compared to those with predominant Protestant and Catholic cultural identity. What stands behind this claim and how adequate is it? Should one blame the Eastern Christian cultural legacy for socioeconomic backwardness, if there is any, and if not, **what else** could be the reason for slower pace of development? These are the questions we will attempt to approach in this piece.

Primarily, let us take a closer look at the object. Just to clarify, Armenia is not part to our study from the start – with all possible similarities to Orthodoxy, its Armenian Apostolic Church has arisen significantly earlier than any divisions within Christianity became politically important. We also refrain from analyzing cases, where Orthodox believers do not constitute a majority or a minority, not amounting to a key cultural group. This is partially due to the circumstance, that in such examples minority religious identity **rather corresponds to ethnicity issues** and one has to endeavor into the particular ethnic group's social and economic standing in the resident society. We also exclude unrecognized or partially recognized statehoods as they hardly provide for any well-founded argument. Therefore, we are left with 12 nations [3].

Let's enumerate them in the order of official data on how expansive is Eastern Christianity in these countries. It's Greece (95%), Moldova (93,3%), Cyprus (89,1%), Serbia (84,59%), Georgia (82,1%), Romania (81,1%), Montenegro (72,1%), Macedonia (64,8%), Bulgaria (59,4%), Belarus (48,3%), Russia (46,6-77%) and Ukraine (26,8-76,6%). We will come back to peculiarities of Russian and Ukrainian indicators later, but as of now – what could be inferred from the very dissemination of the Orthodox confession?

First, all of the listed countries are situated belong to **geographical Europe** (Russia partially) and ten out of twelve (**83,3%**) have experienced totalitarian Communist rule in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for somewhat different length and intensity. One has also to observe, within this argument, that the very two nations without (at least nominally) Marxist totalitarian periods in their history **lead the group** in economic well-being with Cyprus top-35 in GDP per capita by purchase power parity (PPP) in 2016 and Greece top-45 [7] and also a member of the OECD since as early as 1961.

One might, once based on the ‘correspondence’ between distribution of Eastern Orthodoxy and economic affluence to stipulate *sarcastically*, that within the group specimen in focus, ‘the more Orthodox is the country, the more developed it got’. This, however, doesn’t only sound like academic nonsense, but also is such. For instance, Serbia and Georgia are apparently third and fourth in terms of proportion of Eastern Christians to the rest of the population, but both fall far below the world’s GDP PPP average (which is \$15, 536) in 2016. This subtlety, when it comes to Eastern Christian development patterns *is not unaccompanied*.

First of all, let us relate to our earlier article in which we’ve discussed the current results of post-Communist transit [6]. Its conclusions make it sufficiently easier for us to establish, how successful the Orthodox nations are in modern political setting, which is unalienable from economic success. Four out of twelve (Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria and Romania) have joined the EU between 1981 and 2007. Montenegro and Serbia are EU candidate nations, while Macedonia is following the same path. Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine (the latter still with a glimpse of understatement) are EU political associates with various degrees of access to the EU common market.

Seven out of twelve are established democracies with the three of the EU Eastern Partnership nations are pluralist emergent democracies, which have suffered through a serious of political jump-starts in 2000s-2010s (to compare, a non-Orthodox Slovakia and post-Balkan war Croatia did the same in 1990s). Only two countries with dominant Orthodox population are widely regarded as autocracies. And again – how could Eastern Christianity be held responsible for that? Now even if one combines the average GDP per capita income in the Orthodox ‘community’ – that being \$17,474 – it seems to be **noticeably over the world average**.

This aggregate, in fact, belongs within the range of nations **as diverse** as Mexico, Iran or Barbados, what makes the ‘Eastern Christian’ identity as hindrance to development argument even **shakier**. Yet, some innuendo still remains due to the comparison problem as European Catholic and Protestant (or/and Reformed) countries are unarguably more prosperous and more confident with regard to firmness

of their democratic institutions [1]. What could be then a different explanation to that, while taking into the account that, say, the very notion of democracy is ancient Greek legacy and direct democracy has been characteristic of Eastern Slavs in earliest age of their statehood?

On one hand, the above is a fundamentally complicated question due to the diversity of depth and contents of the historical narrative of countries under scrutiny. On the other, there exists (as we've already mentioned state socialism impact) a set of similar features, which might provide **the environment for answers**. In our opinion the similarity between the twelve dwells within lack of historic opportunities for independent development overshadowed by inclusion into imperial and neo-imperial political designs. At this point we are able to classify Eastern Christian nations into four groups depending **upon the degree** they have endured deficit of independent national self-realization.

The most populous is **Group A**, which includes Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. These four countries – if the short experience of late 1910s put aside – had only a quarter of a century experience to endeavor the availability of political freedom and integration into the global market. None of the four, symptomatically, had any sizeable living generation experience of independent statehood, and moreover – their pro-sovereignty narrative refers to Ancient (in Georgia's case) and, at best, Late Medieval Age for the rest. In three later cases the historical statehoods of Belarusians, Moldovans and Ukrainians were loose princedoms or warrior republics with quickly changing borders and population (and the latter is responsible for abovementioned Ukraine's confessional identification fuzziness). One might easily explain why Belarus is the one leading in Group A in terms of its statistical economic prosperity, as it remains insofar the only member of the group without episodes of armed conflict, unlike Moldova (1990-91), Georgia (1990, 2008) and Ukraine (2014). In 18<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which proved to be so important for human progress, all four were provinces (often internally disunited) of Russian and then Soviet Empire, and also Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, while in the interwar period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century parts of the countries in question belonged to Central Eastern European (also called

collectively ‘Mitteleuropa’) nation-states. Of course, Georgian ambitious westernization and modernization effort in 2000s makes it stand somewhat out, but not as one might suppose, fundamentally so far.

**Group B** includes Serbia, Montenegro and Macedonia, which, in their turn, have had just a snippet more of an opportunity to develop independently. With not going into unnecessary detail those Balkan nations have been long subdued and even devoured by European/Mediterranean empires for most of their history and lived through a frantic and short-lived independence at different stages of Yugoslavia statehood and later under local Communist rule. All three have also taken hard hits in 1990s and 2000s armed conflicts. Their low-middle and middle position within a group of Eastern Christian twelve is rather dictated by this legacy, and not religious identity.

**Group C** consists of Romania and Bulgaria, which have acquired sovereignty in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but still have been run over by harsh Communist regimes in the Cold War era.

Finally, **Group D** incorporates Cyprus, independent from Great Britain since the tripartite Zurich and London agreements between the UK, Greece and Turkey of 1960, and, namely, Greece itself, recognized as sovereign after a prolonged war for independence in 1830. Both nations never belonged to the Communist camp in the Cold War.

Such a classification, not ignoring the multitude of various implications, is much better suited to explicate the current ‘hierarchy’ within the group of twelve with regard to well-being and human progress, than an ‘Eastern Orthodox development late-comer’ hypothesis put forward by ‘clash of civilization’ tradition of political thought.

There remains one example of a country which might not fit into any group (or to be a scientifically, just as politically sovereign and separate **Group E**) to align towards the idea of the classification above. And that is Russia – which is being commonly blamed for hazards and misfortunes by at least a good half of other

Eastern Orthodox nations. But how fair such an *accusation* could be? To say the least, this indictment does not sound scholarly.

**Firstly**, modern-day Russia can hardly be held accountable for the Communist (or, for that matter, a state socialist) period, as it sprang out in its modern form from 1991 just as other post-Soviet states (what might be responsible for specific Russian religious identity indicators mentioned above). As for the Romanovs' Empire, the Orthodoxy did not impede Russia to become one of the major European powers in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and one of the world's most dynamically developed nations on the brink of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One might argue that Russia's peculiar kind of modernization (importing fashion and industry but not rights and freedoms from Western Europe) between the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century has also embraced the introduction of direct government control over the Russian Orthodox Church and sacking of its independence. But much of the same has happened in Europe's Scandinavian North, where the transfer from Roman Catholicism to Reformism was swift and led by the monarchs themselves, while in both cases the Church has played a distinctively retrograde role. Ironically, the pace of development in the Netherlands of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries has also been criticized on similar cultural grounds [2].

**Secondly**, there exists abundant evidence in favor of the opinion, that Russia's imperial diffusion never actually generated enough wealth to provide for the country's development per se. As noted by the Russian Empire's last secretary of state Sergey Kryzhanovsky, "Unfortunately, the heartland of Russia did not possess sufficient sources of cultural and moral strength which could have served as an instrument of ... assimilation, all the more so as many border regions - because of their special historical and geographical development - stood culturally on a much higher plane than the centre. Therefore endeavors directed at their russification ('obrusenie'), mostly amounting to intervention by force, proved futile and only angered local populations. At the same time these endeavours drained the Russian national centre because they made it necessary to squander its little developed forces

over the huge expanse of the empire and to lower the average level of the serving class that was called upon to fulfill the demands of the state" [5].

There are three **conclusions** which might be driven from the above treatise.

**First**, while there definitely occurs a set of cultural patterns between which development trends vary in tempo, the religious identity is at best a precarious ground to produce any relevant judgments.

**Second**, as it has been demonstrated without much complication, that when approached 'sine ira et studio', the adherence to Eastern Christianity can hardly be identified as any sole or overwhelming factor to influence the 12 established Orthodox countries comparative sluggishness with regard to modernization.

And **third**, the space for more width and depth of further research in this area still remains to be of gargantuan dimension.

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