The Role of Religion in the the Rise and Decline of Authoritarian Governments in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine | Kathryn A. Murphy | Georgetown University (C’21)

Research Questions

- How have the leaders of Hungary, Poland, and Ukraine employed religion to increase their power?
- What are the similarities and differences in how they use religion?
- What effect has religion had upon either the increase or decrease of the authoritarian nature of these governments?
- What effect has religion had upon the liberalization or illiberalization of these governments?

Methodology

I looked at numerous speeches, writings, and official publications by the political and cultural leaders of the nations in question. I also explored popular reactions. I employed scholarly writings and peer-review academic sources for my analysis.

Results

Overall

- Both Hungary and Poland have become more authoritarian and illiberal, and religion has played a prominent role in their descent. Ukraine, however, has become more liberal.

Hungary

- Viktor Orbán, the de facto dictator of Hungary, further consolidated his power by exploiting the growing xenophobia and Islamophobia due to the recent influx of primarily Muslim refugees from the Middle East and Africa.
- Although most Hungarians do not actively practice Christianity, Orban has cast himself as the defender of Christian — or traditional Hungarian — culture, which he claims is under attack.

Poland

- Jarosław Kaczyński of the Law and Justice Party has framed his politics as representing true Polish society, which is conservative and Catholic.
- Kaczyński has allied himself with various religious figures to justify his xenophobic, Islamophobic, homophobic, and sexist policies.

Ukraine

- Under President Volodymyr Zelensky has been both pacifying and nationalistic.
- The most notable influence religion has had over the Ukrainian identity is through the founding of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). However, Ukraine has become more religiously tolerant, particularly of Judaism.
- Religious actors also played prominent roles in Euromaidan, a time of protest for greater associations with the European Union instead of Russia, from November 21, 2013 to February 23, 2014, and they are credited with promoting peaceful tactics.

Thesis

In Hungary and Poland, religion is employed as a guise for xenophobia, Islamophobia, homophobia, and misogyny. Likewise, influential government figures have aligned themselves with churches in their respective countries to consolidate their power. In Ukraine, a country in a civil war and striving for democracy, religion has become a symbol and cause of nationalism, much like Hungary and Poland. But, contrastingly, it has been a more peaceful and harmonious version.