

## Preface

This special issue of the social research journal “Culture and Society” contributes to theoretical discussions about the role of religion in public sphere of contemporary societies and provides some new empirical insights. It particularly focuses on the region of Eastern Europe that has seen recent and most significant social, political and economic transformations. The official atheist doctrine of the socialist period was overcome between the years 1989 and 1991 (Gerlach & Töpfer 2015). Such change interplayed with public life, while religion and belief found various and different roles in society, usually more apparent. This period enhanced the notion of ‘freedom of religion and belief’ (Gerlach & Töpfer 2015). Nonetheless, contemporary societies in Eastern Europe experience a heterogeneous religious landscape. The population’s religious and belief identities grow diverse as we move on in the 21st century. The current makeup of the society also depicts new challenges and controversies in different spheres of public life. The role of religion and belief has also changed while non-belief and the contested notions of secularity have gained much attention in discourse and personal belief, both.

In light of the changes mentioned above, legislation should be addressing these exigent issues and provide appropriate frameworks to accommodate the religious difference in the public sphere. Nonetheless, social policy need be informed by current and ever-changing demographics, as well as how the current religious landscape is playing out in different spheres of public life (also see, Dinham & Francis 2015).

The present special issue draws attention to the growing religious diversity in Eastern Europe and its implications in public life. The collection of the articles calls for enhancement of the discourse in the sociology of religion and study of religions in Eastern Europe. The aim of this special issue is dual; to further explore the changing religious landscape in Eastern Europe. Also, it seeks to unpack the role of religion and belief in public life, and how that plays out in politics, policy, and everyday practices. This special issue consist of six papers presenting diverse social scientific – legal, sociological, anthropological and political science perspectives toward religion in the public in different countries of Eastern Europe.

In his article “Legal personality, minority religions and religious accommodation in Eastern Europe”, Hugh McFaul discusses the problem of

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religious accommodation in the public sphere particularly focusing on minority religions and some case studies approached by European Court of Human Rights. McFaul pays particular attention to the extent to which approaches to the acquisition of legal personality for religious groups may restrict or undermine religious freedom and accommodation. He concludes that the accommodation of religion in the public sphere can depend upon law and policy makers choosing to recognise certain beliefs and practices as religious beliefs and practices and, in certain contexts, this recognition is contingent upon religious groups acquiring legal personality. Achieving this recognition has proved to be problematic for minority religious groups, especially in Eastern European jurisdictions.

Andrew P. Lynch, in his article “Catholicism in Central and Eastern Europe after Vatican II: Assessing the Legacy of John Paul II”, examines the legacy of John Paul II’s efforts to oust Soviet communism from not only his homeland of Poland, but from Europe altogether. The paper argues that Catholicism has managed to re-emerge as a powerful force in Central and Eastern Europe, but still has work to do if it is to maintain its position in this region and be what Karl Rahner called a “world Church”.

Simona Guerra, in her article “Without losing my religion: The dilemmas of EU integration in Poland”, discusses the role of Roman Catholic Church in the public debates around the integration of Poland to EU. According to her officially Catholic Church remained rather pragmatic towards EU integration, and finally supportive, although never enthusiastic. However, during the same period, radical right and right wing groupings became electorally successful, as with the League of Polish Families (Liga Polskich Rodzin: LPR), campaigning on Euroscepticism and the mobilization against abortion, euthanasia and the role of the Church in the Polish life. Young people’s disillusionment and citizens’ disappointment towards the incumbent shifted the votes towards PiS (Law and Justice, Prawo i Sprawiedliwość: PiS), Kukiz’15, and KORWiN. Their agenda, advocating social national conservative (PiS), sometimes populist (Kukiz’15), and radical right and hard Eurosceptic (KORWiN) programmes can still indicate that Polish values and Polish policy towards the EU are salient factors, while the radical Catholic Church can still play an important role in the social and political life of the process of Europeanization of Poland.

Alexandra Coțofană, in her article “White Man Law versus Black Magic Women. Racial and Gender Entanglements of Witchcraft Policies in Romania”, focuses on structural discrimination in Romania, based on gender and racial logics. The author analyzes social policies directed at a historically marginalized ethnic group, the Rroma. In investigating important changes in the role of religion in Romania, this paper follows the intersections of religion, belief and the secular in public life, legislation and everyday practices. The article analyzes contemporary cases of Romanian politicians

developing racist policies, aimed at a historically marginalized group in Europe. Witchcraft, according to Cotofana, is a productive category to think through global, political and economic insecurities. Panics around the occult symbolize larger cultural anxieties regarding socio-economic changes and indicate a move to challenge an existing order (Mantz 2007).

Tayfun Kasapoglu, in his article “Religion and Politics in Contemporary Turkey: Attitudes of Atheists”, explores the attitudes of atheists towards the intersection of religion and politics in contemporary Turkey. In this paper, the concept of hegemony by Antonio Gramsci is used in order to analyze the hegemonic position of Islam within the realm of politics in contemporary Turkish society. Rather than a Marxist view of a clear-cut dichotomy of classes as ruling and ruled, a Bourdieuan approach, where society is thought to be consisting of many “fields,” including religion and many groups that strive to gain more power within these fields, was adopted. The results indicated that atheists perceive religion and politics as closely intertwined, as politics are perceived as being strongly influenced by religion. The close connection between politics and religion is then seen as leading to an increase in religiosity in society, as well as to increasing pressure on atheists both by the state and the public.

In the context of scholarly discussions about the Easternisation of the West authors, Alp Arat and Marta Kołodziejaska, in the article “The Conspiracy of Silence”: Teaching Mindfulness in Poland”, offer a renewed examination of this subject by presenting the first qualitative study of mindfulness in Poland. Drawing on interviews with leading practitioners in the Polish public landscape, authors present evidence showing that mindfulness denotes a much more spiritual form of practice than typically assumed. These findings call them to offer a fresh look into the increasingly complex ways in which our existing categories of religion, spirituality, and now the secular are currently being played out in relatively overlooked parts of the European continent.

Instead of generalizations, we invite the reader to consider this special issue about the role of religion in public life in Eastern Europe as a contribution to the ongoing scholarly discussions about the social change after the fall of the Iron wall and its implications for the fields of religion and within various levels of societal life in general. This special issue is also an invitation to challenge the over simplified explanations of the role of religion in the societies of Eastern Europe like secularization or desecularization.

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