

Religion and the Increase of Socio-Political Polarisation in Croatian Society

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ABSTRACT

This article takes as its starting point an understanding of socio-political polarisation as a situation in which there are overlapping sources of division concerning specific social and political issues that are not randomly distributed, implying that such a polarisation can be related to higher levels of social conflicts and threats to democratic consensus. Based on data from the European Values Study, the study tests two research questions related to polarisation trends between 1999 and 2018, and the connections between religiosity, political orientation, and attitudes on some morally contentious issues (homosexuality and abortion) in Croatia. The results show an increase in socio-political polarisation, i.e. a significant increase in the connection between religiosity and the above-mentioned attitudes in the last wave of the European Values Study. The article proposes a three-fold explanation of these findings: (1) civil society mobilisation („cultural wars“) as a response to the secularisation trends, (2) elite polarisation within the Croatian political context, and (3) changes within the media environment. In conclusion, some lessons that can be learned from this case study for the sociological study of religion are put forward.

KEYWORDS

political polarisation, Croatia, religion, secularisation, homosexuality, abortion.

Introduction

The growth of political and social polarisation has recently become an issue that captures the attention of social scientists and the public. A systematic review of the literature by Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) noted a sharp increase in published articles starting in 2012, even though they also pointed to an overabundance of American research studies in this field. Although seemingly intuitively clear, this concept is not easy to define and measure, usually encompassing the notion that society is divided into hostile blocs based on mutually opposing values and attitudes. DiMaggio et al. (1994) defined polarisation in a multidimensional way, that is, using four principles. The dispersion principle says that the greater the polarisation, the more opinions are dispersed, and the principle of bimodality states that polarisation is associated with the movement of views toward separate poles. The next two principles are more important for this paper since they relate to the connection between different social characteristics and attitude distributions. Namely, the constraint principle says that polarisation increases the more closely associated attitudes become within and across various social domains. The consolidation principle refers to the extent to which attitudes become aligned with important individual characteristics or identities. DiMaggio et al. (1994) argue that the level of social conflict can be expected to increase if such an overlap between attitudes and identities occurs. In other words, such a situation is not socially desirable, given that it might lead to increased affective polarisation, i.e. to highly negative feelings towards people who do not share our political and ideological convictions (Iyengar et al. 2019). Ideological sorting may become socially corrosive if coupled with affective polarisation in which the opposing side is viewed as radically different, aversive, and iniquitous (Finkel et al. 2020), which impedes cooperation and diminishes social capital. Studies have shown that in recent decades affective polarisation increased in the U.S., but generally in other parts of the world as well (Gidron et al. 2019; McCoy et al. 2022). For instance, Perry (2022) noted that even though Americans are becoming more liberal and converge on many issues, there has been an increase in ideological and partisanship sorting, with religious identities playing an important part in these processes.

The main goal of this article is to explore trends of socio-political polarisation in Croatian society and to investigate the role of religion in explaining polarisation given its special place in the Croatian nation-building process. During the period of a Socialist Yugoslavia, the Catholic Church in Croatia, alongside the nationalistic wing of the Communist Party, was the main bearer of the Croatian national movement. Analogous to situations in several other countries such as Poland (Borowik 2017), the Communist Party's efforts to diminish religion strengthened the link between the Church and Croatian national identity in the long run. After the collapse of the party-led Croatian national movement of 1971, in the period of the so-called Croatian Silence, the Catholic Church in Croatia became the main driving force of the Croatian cultural and political national movement. It became very active in organising several mobilising actions with mass-scale participation, such as the re-affirmation of the cult of the Virgin Mary as the „Queen of Croats“ and the official proclamation of Marija Bistrica as the Virgin Mary's national shrine (1971), commemorations of Croatian medieval rulers and the related pilgrimages during the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the organisation of the great novena entitled “Thirteen centuries of Christianity among Croatian people“ that culminated in the final ceremony in 1984 attended by as many as 500,000 people (Perica 2002). The scope of such mobilising actions was such that a Croatian journalist, Darko Hudelist, succinctly commented that Socialist Yugoslavia did not collapse solely because of the internal political and economic crisis, but also owing to the „actions“ of the Virgin Mary (Hudelist 2023). The interconnection between religion and nationhood, strongly present in the Communist period, remained relevant in the post-communist period as well (Marinović Jerolimov and Zrinščak 2006). Therefore, it is not surprising that today more religious people in Croatia show a higher degree of perception of the system's legitimacy and the meritocratic nature of the contemporary Croatian state (Pavić and Šundalić 2020), and that there is an increasingly strong overlap between religiosity and the personal importance of national identity (Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019a).

The current Croatian religious situation shows a relatively stable situation and slow secularisation, with church-related religiosity slightly declining (Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019b). However, there is no indication of a more massive emergence of new religious movements or new challenges to the existing

religious authorities within the Catholic Church in Croatia (Pavić, Kurbanović and Levak 2017). Secularisation theory claims that social pluralism tends to reduce religious belief given that ideas are more readily accepted when they are universally shared, i.e. when there are no cognitive challenges that contain alternative worldviews (Bruce 2009). Bruce suggests that the resulting relativism and loss of faith can be countered by strengthening those forms of identity that are not essentially religious but are connected to religion, primarily ethnic and national ones, labelling this reaction a „cultural defence“ (Bruce 2011). Moreover, increasing secularisation can encourage mobilisation against secular tendencies and forces and consequently strengthen the ideological coherence of religion. Namely, the revitalisation of religion can be a result of the backlash against the modernity-secularisation nexus that threatens traditional culture and morality (Fox 2008, 21). This second type of reaction can be eminently religious and stems from the socio-psychological process of internal homogenisation in situations of perceived external threat, which might take two forms. Religious communities trying to fight modernity can opt either for creating separate social spaces for themselves or to actively change the modern social environment using available tools, such as modern communication tools or democratic political institutions (Fox 2008, 24). In the political arena, religious actors can also find allies in the populist political elites who are not necessarily religiously motivated. For example, the political proponents of „illiberal democracy“ in some countries in Central and Eastern Europe realised that religion can be a useful resource in strengthening their political legitimacy by stating their agendas as a joint fight against „liberal diseases“ (Hidalgo 2019). Similarly, Agadjanian (2006) noted that religion in the public sphere in Russia serves as a source of the anti-modern reaction, but also as a symbolic resource that can be deployed to fight against contemporary risks and to strengthen individual and collective identities in times of uncertainty. Even in Western Europe, non-practising Christians express positive views towards churches and perceive them as a unifying social force and a marker of cultural identity (Pew Research Center 2018), representing a part of the backlash aimed at reducing cultural anxieties in the wake of the „silent revolution“ (Norris and Inglehart 2019). To sum up, anti-secular reactions can be religious in essence, that is, sincerely religiously inspired people can try to „re-evangelise“ the social reality. On the other hand, religion can be used as a symbolic resource in cultural/ethnic/national tensions, and can also find an ally in political forces that aim to gain legitimacy by fulfilling needs for symbolic security in the insecure and rapidly changing social circumstances of late modernity.

It is not easy to say to what extent this increase in the internal mobilisation of religion and its use as a symbolic resource could overcome long-term secularisation trends. Nevertheless, in the short or medium term it can certainly affect the number of believers, and/or a greater dedication of the existing ones. Given the noted trends in socio-political polarisation and the current religious situation in Croatia, this article aims to explore whether there is a closer alignment of the ideologically contentious attitudes, i.e. whether the above-mentioned reactions to social pluralism and secularisation can be noted in Croatian society. As noted by Kubin and von Sikorski (2021), research on polarisation often suffers from the ill-defined and inconsistent use of the concept itself. Therefore, in this study, an effort has been made to use the concept in a relatively precise and consistent manner. Consequently, based on the constraint and consolidation principles of DiMaggio et al. (1994) the following research questions were put forward :

1. Is there an increase in social polarisation in Croatia, as measured by the stronger alignment of ideologically contentious attitudes?
2. Do attitudes become more aligned with important individual characteristics or identities, such as political orientation and religion?

Methods

As a data source, three waves of the European Values Study, conducted in Croatia in 1999, 2008, and 2018, were used in this study (EVS 2022).

As an indicator of religiosity, the importance of God in everyday life was used (from 1 – not at all important, to 10 – very important). Political orientation was also measured on a 1 to 10 point scale, with „1“ denoting left-wing, and „10“ right-wing self-positioning. The attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion were also measured on a 1 to 10 scale, with 1 representing „never justifiable“ and 10

representing „always justifiable“ options. Our choice of these ideologically contentious attitudes stems from the fact that traditional and modern worldviews differ in that the former adopts the pro-fertility norms and the latter adopts the individual-choice norms (Inglehart 2021) Therefore, it is no wonder that Croatian neo-conservative civic movements, like their European counterparts, are focused on the following thematic areas: the preservation of the traditional family, as well as on opposition to sex education and abortion rights (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo 2017).

Age (in years), gender (1 – male; 2 – female), settlement size (0 – less than 5,000 people; 1 – 5,000 people and more), monthly household income (in thousands of Euros, corrected for purchase power parity), and educational level were used as control variables. Given the observed inconsistency between different waves, educational level was dichotomised as a finished/unfinished lower or higher level tertiary education (1 – yes; 0 – no). Namely, in the 2008 wave, only 0.59% of the respondents were marked as those who finished higher level tertiary education, while the share of those with a lower level tertiary education amounted to 19.15%. Control variables were selected given their empirical connections with the substantive study variables. For example, in Croatia, gender, age, educational level, and settlement size correlate with religiosity (Nikodem and Zrinščak 2019b), while various sociodemographic variables correlate with political orientation (Bagić 2007).

As for the sample characteristics, in 1999, the total sample size was 1,003, and it consisted of 57.33% of females and 42.67% of males. The average age was 39.22 years., the average family income was 1,264 euros, and 21.93% of respondents had a lower or higher tertiary education. In 2008, the total size of the sample was 1,525, while it consisted of 60.17% of female respondents. The average age was 45.13 years., the average family income was 1,066 euros, while 19.35% of respondents had a lower or higher tertiary education. In 2018, the total sample size was 1,487, while it consisted of 58.17% females and 41.83% males. The average age was 48.89 years., the average family income was 1,779 euros, while 30.67% of respondents had a lower or higher tertiary education.

The analytical strategy used in this study consisted of two steps. Firstly, bivariate correlations between the variables were calculated in all three EVS waves. Secondly, a series of linear regressions with political orientations and attitudes toward homosexuality and abortion as criterion variables were conducted. The data were analysed using IBM SPSS 25.

Results

Table 1 presents all bivariate correlations between religiosity, as measured by the importance of God in everyday life, political orientation, and attitudes towards abortion and homosexuality, in all three waves of the European Values Study in Croatia. We can note a sharp increase in the correlation between the importance of God and political orientation in 2008 and a further slight increase in 2018. On the other hand, a strong increase in connection between the importance of God and attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion can be noted in the period between 2008 and 2018. In the same period, the correlation between political orientation and attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion also increased substantially. The correlation between attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion also increased in both periods.

Correlation/wave	1999	2008	2018
Importance of God – Political orientation	.18**	.35**	.41**
Importance of God – Abortion attitude	-.39**	-.32**	-.43**
Importance of God – Homosexuality attitude	-.21**	-.23**	-.36**
Political orientation – Homosexuality attitude	-.15**	-.21**	-.35**
Political orientation – Abortion attitude	-.25**	-.27**	-.39**
Abortion attitude – Homosexuality attitude	.47**	.50**	.57**
Age – Political orientation	-.02	-.02	-.13**
Age – Abortion attitude	-.15**	-.10**	.09**
Age – Homosexuality attitude	-.24**	-.19**	-.19**
Age – Importance of God	.10**	.07*	-.01
Tertiary Education – Political orientation	-.08*	-.02	-.10**
Tertiary Education – Abortion attitude	.10**	.14**	.16**
Tertiary Education – Homosexuality attitude	.13**	.17**	.25**
Tertiary Education – Importance of God	-.08**	-.06*	-.18**
Gender – Political orientation	-.03	-.01	.05
Gender – Abortion attitude	.04	.04	-.02
Gender – Homosexuality attitude	.08*	.11**	.04
Gender – Importance of God	.13**	.18**	.27**
Household income – Political orientation	.03	-.04	-.04
Household income – Abortion attitude	.04	.10**	.11**
Household income – Homosexuality attitude	.08*	.17**	.20*
Household income – Importance of God	-.11**	-.08**	-.14**
Settlement size – Political orientation	-.10**	-.09**	.02
Settlement size – Abortion attitude	.08**	.25**	.05
Settlement size – Homosexuality attitude	.08**	.24**	.12**
Settlement size – Importance of God	-.06**	-.19**	-.08**

Table 1. Bivariate correlations (Pearson r) of the selected indicators in the three EVS waves. Male = 0, Female = 1; Tertiary education: No = 0, Yes = 1; Settlement size: 5,000 or less = 0, More than 5,000 = 1. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Source: European Value Study.

To carry out a multivariate check of the above-noted connections, first a linear regression with political orientation as the criterion variable was conducted (Table 2). In the first model, control variables were entered into the regression as the only predictors, and the results showed that gender and household income were statistically significant predictors in none of the waves; age and educational level were statistically significant predictors only in the last wave (with older and university-educated people being more left-wing orientated), while settlement size was significant in the first two waves (with people from bigger settlements being more left-wing orientated). Overall, socio-demographic variables were not substantially significant predictors of political orientation in any of the waves.

Wave	1999		2008		2018	
Predictor	B	β	B	β	B	β
Gender	-0.04	-0.01	-0.06	-0.01	0.14	.03
Age (in years)	-0.00	-0.00	-0.01	-0.04	-0.02**	-0.14
Household income (thousand euros)	0.14	0.06	-0.06	-0.04	-0.12	-0.05
Tertiary education	-0.30	-0.07	-0.02	-0.01	-0.56**	-0.10
Settlement size	-0.27*	-0.07	-0.39*	-0.07	0.20	0.03
R ²	0.01		0.01		0.03	
Adjusted R ²	0.01		0.01		0.03	

Table 2. Linear regression with political orientation as the criterion variable – Model 1. Male = 0, Female = 1; Tertiary education: No = 0, Yes = 1; Settlement size: 5,000 or less = 0, More than 5,000 = 1. Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$

In the second model, the importance of God was added as an additional predictor. We can see that controlling for the importance of God, women (in 2008 and 2018), older people (in 2018) and persons from bigger settlements (2018) were more left-wing orientated, whereas the educational level was not a statistically significant predictor in any of the waves. The importance of God was a significant predictor in all three waves, with a larger increase in the association between 1999 and 2008 and a smaller increase (albeit statistically significant) between 2008 and 2018.

Wave	1999		2008		2018	
Predictor	B	β	B	β	B	β
Gender	-0.13	-0.04	-0.36**	-0.08	-0.41**	-0.08
Age (in years)	-0.00	-0.03	-0.01	-0.05	-0.02**	-0.11
Household income (thousand euros)	0.14	0.06	-0.05	-0.03	-0.05	-0.02
Tertiary education	-0.24	-0.06	0.02	0.00	-0.22	-0.04
Settlement size	-0.22	-0.06	-0.06	-0.01	-0.44**	-0.07
Importance of God	0.12**	0.20	0.29**	0.37	0.33**	0.41
R ²	0.05		0.13		0.18	
Adjusted R ²	0.05		0.13		0.17	

Table 3. Linear regression with political orientation as the criterion variable – Model 2. Male = 0, Female = 1; Tertiary education: No = 0, Yes = 1; Settlement size: 5,000 or less = 0, More than 5,000 = 1. Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$

From the linear regression with abortion attitudes as the criterion variable (Table 4), we can note that political orientation and the importance of God were significant predictors in all three waves, that is, people for whom God is more important in their everyday lives had a more negative attitude towards abortion, along with people with a right-wing political orientation. Additionally, it is important to underline that the coefficients statistically significantly decreased between 1999 and 2008, and then increased between 2008 and 2018. Controlling for all other predictors in the model, women were more likely to be more liberal towards abortion in all three waves; older people were more conservative in the first two waves and more liberal in the third wave; people from larger settlements were more liberal in the second wave, while university-educated people were more liberal in the first two waves.

Wave	1999		2008		2018	
Predictor	B	β	B	β	B	β
Gender	0.72**	0.12	0.45**	0.08	0.88**	0.13
Age (in years)	-0.02**	-0.11	-0.01**	-0.09	0.02**	0.11
Household income (thousand euros)	-0.09	-0.02	-0.01	0.00	0.16	0.05
Tertiary education	0.48*	0.07	0.46*	0.08	0.31	0.04
Settlement size	0.33	0.06	0.90**	0.16	0.00	0.00
Importance of God	-0.36**	-0.34	-0.28**	-0.28	-0.38**	-0.36
Political orientation	-0.29**	-0.17	-0.19**	-0.15	-0.29**	-0.23
R ²	0.21		0.20		0.27	
Adjusted R ²	0.20		0.20		0.27	

Table 4. Linear regression with attitude towards abortion as the criterion variable. Male = 0, Female = 1; Tertiary education: No = 0, Yes = 1; Settlement size: 5,000 or less = 0, More than 5,000 = 1. Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$

When it comes to the attitudes towards homosexuality as the criterion variable, we can see that the regression coefficient of the importance of religion statistically significantly but not substantially increased in 2008, and more strongly increased between 2008 and 2018. The importance of political orientation as a predictor did not change in 2008, but there was also a strong increase in the importance of this predictor between 2008 and 2018 since the unstandardised regression coefficient grew from -0.16 to -0.31 and standardised from -0.14 to -0.24. When the demographic (control) variables were considered, women and university-educated persons were more liberal in all three waves; older people were less liberal in all three waves, while people with higher household incomes and people living in larger settlements were more liberal towards homosexuality in the last two waves. Looking at bivariate correlations in Table 1, we can also conclude that the impact of gender is suppressed in bivariate correlation, probably because women are more religious, i.e. the importance of God acts as a suppressor variable.

Wave	1999		2008		2018	
Predictor	B	β	B	β	B	β
Gender	0.77**	0.14	0.63**	0.12	1.12**	0.16
Age (in years)	-0.04**	-0.21	-0.02**	-0.15	-0.04**	-0.18
Household income (thousand euros)	-0.09	-0.03	0.18**	0.08	0.23*	0.07
Tertiary education	0.74**	0.11	0.65**	0.13	0.93**	0.13
Settlement size	-0.02	-0.00	0.78**	0.15	0.55**	0.07
Importance of God	-0.16**	-0.16	-0.17**	-0.18	-0.30**	-0.28
Political orientation	-0.16**	-0.10	-0.16**	-0.14	-0.32**	-0.24
R ²	0.12		0.19		0.28	
Adjusted R ²	0.11		0.18		0.27	

Table 5. Linear regression with attitude towards homosexuality as the criterion variable. Male = 0, Female = 1; Tertiary education: No = 0, Yes = 1; Settlement size: 5,000 or less = 0, More than 5,000 = 1. Note: $p < .05^*$; $p < .01^{**}$

Discussion

Starting from a specific understanding of political polarisation, this article established that Croatia belongs to those societies in which political and social polarisation has increased in the last two or three decades. In other words, the trend of increasing ideological coherence can be detected in the indicators selected. Namely, the attitudes towards homosexuality and abortion have become more constrained,

i.e. more ideologically coherent. Additionally, those attitudes have become strongly consolidated, i.e. correlated with political identification and religiosity. In other words, a growing nexus between right-wing political orientation, religiosity, and contentious value issues (pro-fertility versus individual choice) is noticeable. The results of the current study complement the analyses conducted by Nikodem and Zrinščak (2019a), who detected an increasing connection between religion and the importance of national identity in Croatia, and Lavrič and Naterer (2023), who concluded that among young people in Croatia, religiosity, pro-fertility norms and right-wing political orientation form one latent concept from the empirical standpoint.

However, before proposing explanations for the aforementioned increase of polarization, it is necessary to ascertain that the polarisation has indeed happened in the sense that it is used in this study. Namely, an alternative explanation for the increased correlations shown in this paper could be found in the decline in the number of believers/decline of religiosity, that is, in the possibility that the remaining believers are more dedicated and that their views are more ideologically coherent. In other words, a growing secularisation led to a decline in the number of people who declared themselves as religious only by social conformism, and among these people, it could be expected that their religiosity would be weakly related to their ideological views. Sekulić (2014) labels this explanation the Diluted Context Hypothesis. However, a significant decline in religiosity, especially in the period analysed from 2008 to 2018, did not occur in Croatia, so this explanation is not plausible either, especially considering the strength of the increase in polarisation. Moreover, Sekulić (2014), using other data sources, showed that the connection between religiosity and selected personal values in Croatia also declined substantially in the period between 1996 and 2010, even though religiosity only slowly declined in that period. These two arguments lead us to the conclusion that something did indeed happen between 2008 and 2018, i.e. that the polarisation trend changed its direction.

I will try to propose three possible explanations for this trend, largely based on previous research studies, theoretical considerations, and anecdotal evidence from Croatia. Namely, the increased ideological alignment may be explained by three processes: (1) civil society mobilisation, (2) elite ideological polarisation, and (3) the new media environments. These processes are certainly interconnected but can be separated analytically.

As for the first explanation, Jose Casanova (1994) warned us not to equate secularisation with the privatisation of religion, that is, secularisation cannot mean the complete disappearance of religion from the public sphere. First of all, the boundaries of the secular and religious spheres, as well as the boundaries between public and private, are very porous and flexible (Casanova 2011). Formal religious organisations, as well as religiously inspired civic society organisations, can penetrate secular spheres through their activities and promote their religious values in such a way as to wrap them in a universalist discourse, for example that of human rights. Casanova distinguished between public religions that can be active at the state level, in political society, and in the public sphere of civil society, indicating that the most probable situation would be the third one since it is only compatible with modern universalism (Casanova 1994, 218-219). However, it seems that the crossover between the second and the third type of public religion seems to be more common than Casanova envisaged. The previously mentioned example of the referendum on marriage in Croatia, as well as the debate on abortion, illustrate this possibility (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo 2017). On the one hand, religious values are indeed realised indirectly, that is, in a secular society, such as the Croatian one, it is impossible to implement them directly. This says something about the accuracy of the theory of secularisation if it is understood as a structural differentiation of social spheres. On the other hand, the Croatian situation discussed in this article shows that religion can be very active in the public sphere, that is, a larger or smaller group of well-organised people can achieve religiously motivated goals, even if indirectly, using legal arrangements and state force to do so. The number of civic society associations that represent liberal values, such as the protection of human rights and the rights of minorities, is large in Croatia. Nevertheless, during the 2010s, for the first time, there was a more intense mobilisation on the conservative part of the ideological spectrum that was not directly related to the Catholic Church but was undoubtedly religiously inspired.

This mobilisation can be understood as a part of the wider process of cultural backlash against societal liberalisation in Croatian society connected to the Croatian accession to the European Union and legislative actions related to minority rights made by the left-wing government (Čepo 2017). In other words, the anti-secularisation mobilisation is a part of the more general process of the backlash against liberal values aimed at the affirmation of re-traditionalisation of society (Norris and Inglehart 2019).

A crucial moment of the conservative mobilisation happened in 2013 when a civic association called *In the Name of the Family* succeeded in the challenging task of collecting a sufficient number of signatures for a referendum that would introduce a provision in the Croatian constitution according to which marriage is exclusively defined as the union of a man and a woman. Faced with the government's hostile attitude at the time and the mostly negative media coverage by the mainstream media, the initiative had the logistical support of the Catholic Church (Šola and Đukić 2014). The referendum was successful, considering that about 66% of citizens, albeit with a low turnout of about 38%, voted for the inclusion of such a provision in the constitution. The success of the referendum can be attributed to the substantial activation of the existing network of the neo-conservative religiously motivated civic organizations that seized new opportunity structures, such as the changes in the referendum legislation in Croatia and the widespread dissatisfaction with the political system and political elites (Petričušić, Čehulić and Čepo 2017).

The second clash of worldviews occurred on the occasion of the ratification of the so-called Istanbul Convention adopted by the Council of Europe (full title: The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence). The convention aims to create a legal framework that will contribute to the fight against violence against women, and it entered into force in 2014. It was ratified in Croatia in 2018. The announcement of the ratification led to another mobilisation in the conservative part of civil society, and the civic initiative „Truth about the Istanbul Convention“ was founded, which consisted of twenty civic associations, about half of which primarily dealt with religious issues. The main objections to the ratification relate to the introduction of „gender ideology“ and the violation of traditional and family values, including the right of parents to raise their children in the way they see fit (<https://istinaoistanbulskoj.info/neprihvatljivo-u-istanbulskoj-konvenciji>). Unlike the previous case, this mobilisation was unsuccessful because not enough signatures were collected to call for a referendum in which the ratification of the Convention would be annulled. Nevertheless, the controversies surrounding the Istanbul Convention dominated public opinion in Croatia for several months and could certainly influence additional worldview polarisation.

The second proposed explanation is related to the general social processes of elite influence and its role in increasing polarisation. Several research studies found a connection between elite polarisation and the level of affective polarisation (Boxell, Gentzkow and Shapiro 2024). The contention of the importance of elite polarisation is based upon the premise that a partisan audience may form their opinions on political issues by picking up the cues coming from their political leaders, thus aligning their political and ideological views with their party preferences (Holcombe 2021; Santoro et al. 2021; Zaller 2012). Elite polarisation is usually measured using ideological voting records and demographical analysis of the members of political parties (Pew Research Center 2022). The extent of political elite polarisation in Croatia is mainly based on anecdotal evidence, given that no research can reliably show whether the main Croatian political parties have ideologically diverged or converged within the period covered in this study. For instance, non-partisan voting is an extremely rare occurrence in Croatian politics, and therefore can not be used as a measure of elite polarisation. However, among Croatian liberal journalists and political commentators, there is a widespread belief that political conservatives became ideologically more extreme during the period of the rule of the Centre-Left government (12th Government, from December 2011 until January 2016) and the Centre-Right government (13th Government, from January 2016 until October 2016), mainly owing to the extreme political discourse of conservative political elites (see for instance „Karamarko odlazi. Šteta ostaje“, Telegram, 21 June 2016). In other words, a right-wing political orientation became more tightly aligned with conservative ideological attitudes, religion, and national identity, possibly capitalising on the still-existing political

tensions between the countries of the former Yugoslavia. Additionally, as outlined in the introductory part of this paper, political forces can utilise the need for symbolic security and collective identity, a process also present in several other countries of Central and Eastern Europe (Agadjanian 2006; Hidalgo 2019). However, as already noted, this explanation is highly anecdotal and speculative, given that the ideological polarisation may have come from the other (left-wing; liberal) side of the ideological spectrum as well. Therefore, this explanation for the increase in socio-political polarisation should be checked in future research.

As for the role of the changing media environments, we can note that the so-called mainstreaming effect (Gerbner et al. 1986) of media consumption has probably decreased with the advent of the Internet, given that because of selective exposure (Pariser 2011; Kim 2015; Johnson et al. 2020), which can be partially attributed to the social media algorithms, people are today more likely to consume partisan, instead of the centrist and balanced news (Lelkes et al. 2017; Levy 2021). In the era of the dominance of television as a medium, journalists had to endorse moderate ideas to get closer to a mass audience with inherently different values and attitudes, as well as to obey the journalistic imperative of a balanced approach to the topic that requires equal access to opposing sides. Journalistic gatekeeping has not perished as such, but the contemporary selection of digital news cannot fit into the paradigm of the classical gatekeeping process (Wallace 2017). It is no wonder that research studies have shown that social media use is connected with more attitude polarisation in very diverse attitude domains, such as redistributive ethics (Jung and Lee 2024) and vaccination attitudes (Mønsted and Lehmann 2022).

As stated earlier, these three explanations are interrelated. Thus, the new media environment and technologies may lead to an initial polarization that, in an attempt to follow voter preferences, may imply a stronger elite polarisation. Similarly, the tools provided by the new media can significantly facilitate the mobilisation of groups within civil society, that is, they can lead to its revitalisation, including the mobilisation of religiously and ideologically inspired groups. In other words, the new media reality can significantly facilitate existing tendencies leading to ideological polarisation. For example, in the case of the referendum initiative for the definition of marriage in Croatia, although the initiative was mostly negatively marked by the mainstream media, at the same time it had a strong presence on the Internet and social media (Šola and Đukić 2014).

However, successful civil society mobilisation and the consequent socio-political polarisation should not lead us to the thesis that in the Croatian case the theory of secularisation is wrong and should be rejected as such. Rather, it should be noted that in Croatia, in parallel with the obvious increase in the public and political relevance of religion, the arithmetic mean of the EVS indicator of the importance of God in everyday life fell from 7.17 in 2008 to 7.13 in 2018 (weighted data). Attendance levels also fell, with the number of those who stated that they never or practically never attended church services rising from 16.30% in 2008 to 21.13% in 2018 (also weighted data). Similarly, between 2008 and 2018 tolerance towards abortion and homosexuality significantly increased. The average results on the homosexuality tolerance scale rose from 2.40 to 3.29, while the increase was from 3.51 to 4.15 on the abortion tolerance scale. This parallels the situation in the U.S., where there has been an increase in the ideological coherence of attitudes, while the overall attitudes have become more liberal and converging (Perry 2022).

Conclusion and Limitations

In this paper, starting from a specific understanding of socio-political polarisation, I have tried to show that such a polarisation has indeed occurred in Croatia in the last 10-15 years and to offer possible, albeit somewhat eclectic, explanations for such a trend. I believe that this analysis brings two important lessons for the sociological study of religion. First, when studying the social importance of religion, other general and specific social processes not necessarily directly related to religion should be taken into account, such as specific political circumstances and changes in the media environment. A general theory of secularisation is a commendable endeavour, even so, a discussion of specific social circumstances must supplement any general theory, concretise and contextualise it, and offer explanations for possible

deviations from the trends predicted by the general theory. Secondly, a reasonable understanding of secularisation must on no account move religion into the private sphere and ignore the possibility of revitalising the social influence of religion through religiously inspired mobilisation within civic society organisations. The case presented in this article leads to the conclusion that trends in the social influence of religion are significantly less unidirectional and predictable than a simplified understanding of secularisation would allow.

When it comes to the limitations of this research study, we should first and foremost point out the specificity of the research indicators. Considering the notorious complexity of the phenomenon of religiosity, it should be noted that because of limitations of space we limited ourselves to presenting an analysis with the importance of God in everyday life as an indicator of religiosity. However, it should also be pointed out that a repeated analysis of attendance at religious services as an indicator of religiosity yielded very similar results, thereby strengthening the robustness of our results and conclusions. On the other hand, our measure of polarisation is specific and conditioned by available indicators. Additional confirmation of the results would be provided by an analysis with some of the indicators of affective polarisation, which unfortunately were not present in the analysed dataset for Croatia. Finally, it should be added that, as in the case of any cross-sectional research, it is also not possible to rigorously prove causal relationships in this research.

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