Authoritarian Institutional Infiltration: Causes and Consequences

Abstract Covert forms of authoritarian repression remain an understudied strategy of authoritarian survival. This article uses the infiltration of the Catholic Church with secret collaborators in communist Poland to study the drivers and consequences of such covert repression. We theorize that sub-national variations in communist infiltration are driven by differences in institutional vulnerability following WWII. In turn, we argue that the uneven degree of infiltration with pro-regime agents affected the subsequent effectiveness of the Church to foster anti-communist attitudes. We test these predictions against competing explanations (including imperial legacies and modernization) by analyzing seven Polish surveys from the late communist period (1985-89). Our results confirm the importance of institutional vulnerability in driving the success of communist infiltration efforts, and suggest that covert repression in the form of infiltration with secret agents was effective in undermining the Church's ability to shape the political attitudes of church-goers.

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1. Introduction

Overt forms of authoritarian repression have received considerable attention from scholars studying authoritarian survival (Svolik 2013, Geddes et.al 2014). Although direct violence meted out by uniformed authoritarian forces silences opposition, it does not eradicate it. Opposition to the regime, though stifled, may easily resurface once the repressive constraints weaken (Bautista et. al. 2019, Peisakhin 2014, Lupu and Peisakhin 2015, Rozenas et. al. 2015, Mattingly 2020). More subtle ways of facilitating authoritarian survival include cooptation of members of the opposition into authoritarian institutions (Gandhi 2008, Magaloni 2006) or the distribution of selective benefits to buy off elites who could pose a threat to the authoritarian regime (Blaydes & Gillum 2013, Gandhi and Reuter 2013, Howard and Roessler 2006, Levitsky and Way 2010).

Yet aside from engaging in open violence against the opposition or enticing its members to participate in authoritarian institutions, autocrats can also *infiltrate* opposition organizations. In this article we define infiltration as the penetration of non-state organizations (such as religious groups, trade unions or opposition movements) by pro-regime agents. Since the infiltrators' true loyalties are kept secret from the organizations' members, the infiltrators can influence members' hearts and minds while the latter do not even know they are being manipulated.[1]

Infiltration has two, possibly complementary, goals. First, the regime can use infiltrators to collect information about opposition activity. Infiltrating a trade union can be useful because pro-

[1] In this article we focus on the dynamics of infiltration assuming that the identity of infiltrators at the time of penetration is unknown. We briefly discuss the implications of organizational penetration by regime agents whose identity and intentions are known but these dynamics are beyond the scope of this article.

regime union members can alert the authoritarian regime about upcoming strike activity that could evolve into a more general anti-regime protest. Infiltration of church organizations can give the agents of the authoritarian regime access to private details of citizens' lives, which can then be used against those citizens. The second goal of infiltration is to affect the functioning of the organization itself. After infiltrating an organization, agents of the regime can sabotage the strength and unity of the organization, and thereby undermine its ability to promote resistance against the regime.

Until recently, such covert forms of authoritarian repression have received little attention from scholars. Two important exceptions include Mattingly (2020), who writes about the cooptation of civil society elites to control citizens on behalf of the Chinese state and Greitens (2016), who discusses the tradeoffs of engaging in covert rather than overt forms of repression. Investing in a secret police apparatus that infiltrates civil society, provides the regime with more robust sources of information and requires less violence than ruling with the help of uniformed enforcement agencies. It is associated, however, with a risk: a centralized agency concentrating information may eventually present a challenge to the autocrat himself.[2]

Though effective at predicting which autocrats will develop a secret police apparatus, Greitens (2016) says less about the organization of infiltration on the ground: which geographic

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[2] Related to the distinction between overt and covert forms of repression is a categorization of repression based on the employment of formal versus informal institutions (Chen Weiss 2017). Other classifications of repression include breaking it down according to timing (Fu 2018), and the degree of selectivity (Nugent 2020, Blaydes 2018, Balcells 2017).

areas and which organizations will be targeted and how will they go about recruiting secret agents and/or informers? Nor does she address questions about these strategies' effectiveness.

We leverage subnational variation in communist Poland to test a theory about both the drivers and the consequences of authoritarian infiltration. We argue that to understand where and when authoritarian regimes are successful in infiltrating civil society organizations, we need to focus on variations in the institutional vulnerability of these organizations. Such vulnerability, which may be driven by both external factors (such as social upheaval in the aftermath of traumatic events) and internal organizational dynamics (such as leadership choices and turnover), creates openings that authoritarian governments can exploit in order to infiltrate its agents into the target organization. In terms of consequences, we argue that covert repression in the form of infiltration may offer the regime significant advantages in manipulating public opinion because infiltrators may be more effective in their political objectives when ordinary members are unaware of their identity as regime agents. We test these theoretical predictions against competing explanations (including imperial legacies and modernization) on a unique set of empirical data, which combines fine-grained subnational data on authoritarian infiltration of the Catholic Church in communist Poland with individual-level data from seven Polish surveys from the late communist period (1985-89). Our results confirm the importance of institutional vulnerability in driving the success of communist infiltration efforts, and suggest that this form of covert repression was effective in undermining the Church's ability to shape the political attitudes of church-goers.

The next section develops theory and hypotheses. Section three justifies our empirical context: Poland's Communist Party's infiltration the Catholic Church in the 1950s. The fourth section is devoted to data analysis. We combine an original dataset detailing the number of "red"

priests working in Catholic parishes across Poland in the 1950s with seven surveys conducted in the final years of the Communist regime to relate church attendance under red priests to attitudes towards the regime across Poland. The final section discusses our results and draws implications from our findings for authoritarian survival.

2. Theoretical Framework

We first focus on the drivers of infiltration and next on the consequences of this strategy.

2.1. Drivers of Infiltration

The autocrat's decision to infiltrate an organization depends on its mix of penetrability and moral authority. If organizations lack moral authority, they may not be worth infiltrating: instead, the state can either eradicate them without risking backlash or ignore them without significant consequences for regime stability. Other organizations, such as underground conspiracies, may be attractive infiltration targets but they are often too hard to penetrate because they are difficult to reach or lack a centralized leadership (Schetyna 2019).

The most likely infiltration targets are organizations that maintain moral authority with the public, and can therefore challenge the regime's legitimacy and political dominance, but are easier to penetrate because they operate openly and have a broad membership. The moral authority of such organizations raises the costs of eradication efforts but also ensures that once captured from within, these institutions can be used to influence the hearts and minds of citizens of the authoritarian state. Churches are among the most prominent examples of such organizations: they tend to carry significant moral authority (Grzymala-Busse 2015) and, if they can be effectively controlled by the regime, they can become valuable instruments of authoritarian control.

The key question, then, is under what circumstances are authoritarian regimes able to infiltrate these coveted institutional targets. While in the broadest sense, the outcome depends on the balance between the coercive capacity of the regime and the resistance capacity of the target, for the purpose of our current argument we focus on the latter component. We argue that controlling for regime strength, the success of its infiltration efforts will depend on the institutional vulnerability of the target organization. In other words, the same regime may be successful in infiltrating some organizations but not others,[3] or, even within a given organization, it may be more successful in infiltrating some parts of it than others.

We argue that these within-regime and within-organization variations in the success of infiltration strategies are a function of institutional strength/vulnerability at the time when the regime launches its infiltration campaign. These variations in institutional vulnerability are a combination of long-term and short-term factors. Non-state institutions can differ in their long-term trajectory and their relationship to both the state and society, in ways that can affect their ability to resist infiltration efforts. For example, according to Janos (2000) the Catholic Church was more resilient to communist control than the Eastern Orthodox Church at least in part because of a longer history of subordination of Orthodox churches to the state. Beyond such long-term factors, short-term shocks can also weaken organizations. Such shocks can occur at the elite and/or the grassroots level and may be driven by either exogenous crises (such as social and political turmoil) or "self-inflicted wounds" (such as leadership successions or scandals).

[3] Braun (2016) finds that minority churches in the Netherlands were more likely to help Jews during the Holocaust at least in part because they were harder to penetrate by the Nazi authorities.

Regardless of their origin, such short-term shocks to institutional strength leave organizations vulnerable to infiltration by regime agents. Therefore, the first hypothesis we will test is:

H1 Institutional vulnerability increases the likelihood of successful authoritarian institutional infiltration.

Beyond institution-specific factors that weaken institutions and therefore make them vulnerable to regime infiltration efforts, we also consider how the broader societal context shapes the balance of power between authoritarian regimes and non-state institutions. In particular, we need to consider the role of socio-economic modernization. While the link between modernization and regime type has been the subject of extensive – and inconclusive – debates (Przeworski et al 2001, Boix and Stokes 2006), our focus here is how modernization affects authoritarian infiltration efforts. We expect the impact of modernization to vary as a function of the different facets of development. On the one hand, greater economic development should translate into greater access to economic resources, which should make it easier for organizations to resist economic and political pressures by the regime. Similarly, organizations with more educated members should be more capable of resisting regime infiltration efforts.[4] On the other hand, however, rural communities, because of their tight-knit character could be better at resisting infiltration, simply because their members are more familiar with one another, allowing infiltrators to be denounced more easily then in industrialized urban areas. Hence, modernization

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[4] Thus, Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006) show that pre-communist education undermined the ideological effectiveness of communist regimes, while Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017) document that resistance to communist socialization was greater for citizens from countries with greater pre-communist development.

bycontributing to the anonymization of social ties, could make non-state organizations susceptible to authoritarian infiltration by making it easier for the regime to recruit secret collaborators from within these organizations. In sum, we consider as an alternative explanation that socio-economic development affects the likelihood of successful authoritarian institutional infiltration, with the caveat that the direction of the effect depends on the specific aspect of development.

2.1 Consequences

What are the implications of a successful infiltration campaign? While infiltration is likely to affect a broad range of outcomes, including institutional and inter-personal trust, here we focus on an issue that is key for authoritarian incumbents: the extent to which infiltration affects the battle between the regime and the opposition for the hearts and minds of ordinary citizens. In particular, to what extent and how can infiltration undermine the way civil society organizations shape anti-regime attitudes?

Where infiltration has been successful, ordinary members do not know the identity of the regime agents (and will often be even unaware of the existence of infiltrators). In this scenario, which is our main theoretical and empirical focus, the effects of organizational infiltration on trust and participation should be limited, as the behavior of ordinary members is not affected by the knowledge of having infiltrators in their midst. At the same time, covert regime agents within the organization have ample opportunities to affect the attitudes of other members. Since these agents act incognito, citizens will not discount their messages as government propaganda. This influence should be particularly pronounced when regime agents occupy locally prominent positions, such as teachers, union leaders or priests. Such positions provide agents with copious

occasions – and often significant role-based legitimacy – to influence the views of those around them. This leads to two hypotheses:

H2: Institutional infiltration does not affect institutional trust and participation.

H3: Institutional infiltration reduces the ability of the affected institution to foster anti-authoritarian resistance.

In the next section we discuss how these hypotheses can be translated to the specific context of communist Poland.

3. The Empirical Setting: The Catholic Church in Communist Poland

Among the actors who compete with autocrats for citizens' hearts and minds, religious organizations represent "the most diverse and robust form of associational life outside of the state" (Koesel 2014, p. 3). In authoritarian regimes, religious organizations, alongside opposition parties and labor unions can undermine authoritarian efforts to dominate public discourse. Middle Eastern secular autocracies are illustrative of these effects (Wickham 2005, Masoud 2014), as are other regions, such as Latin America (Trejo 2012) or the Philippines (Youngblood 1990, Grzymała-Busse and Slater 2018). The influence of religion on political participation has also been documented in the sub-Saharan context recently McClendon and Riedl (2019).

Since in communist regimes conflict between the authoritarian state and religious communities was prevalent and other non-state organizations were virtually absent, we would expect churches to be even more powerful in this context, (Ramet 1987, Burgess 1997, Weigel 2003, Wittenberg 2006). There are, however, dramatic differences in the extent to which communist incumbents maintain their control over public opinion against challenges from organized religion. Pop-Eleches and Tucker (2017) show that communist exposure affects

political attitudes of Catholics considerably less than their Eastern Orthodox counterparts. Wittenberg (2006) discovers weaker communist legacies in the voting behavior among Catholics than Protestants in Hungary. Grzymala-Busse (2015) highlights the importance of the fusion between Catholicism and Polish national identity in explaining the Catholic Church's powerful influence on Polish politics.

The case of the Catholic Church in Poland offers additional advantages for studying strategies of infiltration, as the organization's role in communist Poland was a clear example of high moral authority with a significant potential to threaten the communist state in the competition for the hearts and minds of its citizens (Grzymała-Busse 2015). Yet the universal fusion between Polish nationalism and Catholic religion (Grzymala-Busse 2015) raised the costs of overt repression. The regime's only realistic option to counter the influence of this organization was to attempt a far-reaching infiltration campaign of the Catholic Church.[5]

The regime's long-term plan to take control of the Catholic Church organization was to recruit within the clergy about 1,000 communist sympathizers, roughly 10% of all priests residing in Poland (Zurek 2003). The most sustained of these efforts took place in 1946-1956 as the communist government used a two-pronged approach: First, at the parish-level it focused on recruiting freshly minted clerics graduating from theological seminaries. Second, it targeted the elite level of the Catholic hierarchy.[6] On September 1, 1949, the communists created a special

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[5] This fact facilitates our sub-national analysis by eliminating the large pre-communist differences in ethnic and religious compositions of inter-war Poland.

[6] For space and theoretical reasons, we focus on the first strategy and relegate analysis of the effects of the second to Appendix A (but we find similar patterns for both types of infiltration).

"Section for Priests within the Society of Fighters for Freedom and Democracy" (*Sekcja Księży przy ZBOWiD*). Informally, the section was referred to as the "Patriot" or "Progressive" Priests (*Księża Patrioci*). Its leaders were tasked with the mission of building the network of regional *Priest Councils*, associated with regional ZBoWiD cells. Once all regional ZBoWiD cells had their own Regional Councils of Priests, which happened shortly after 1950, the executive framework of the Patriot Priest organization began to take shape.

The *Patriot Priests*' Mission Statement asserted that "in terms of beliefs, they are in complete agreement with the Episcopate, but in terms of political and social outlooks, they represent the Polish people." This was an effort to stoke conflict between the left-leaning part of the clergy and the conservative Episcopate. The declaration also highlighted the necessity of reconciliation between the Church and the Polish communist state. The *Patriot Priests* used the organization's bi-weekly periodicals– "The Priest Smithy" (*Kuznica Kaplanska*), "The Citizen Priest" (*Ksiadz Obywatel*), and "The Priest's Voice" (*Glos Kaplana*) to disseminate their message.[7] Contents ranged from advising clergy on how to deal with the "tyrant" power of the Vatican and the Episcopate to advice on reconciling religion with communist ideology:

> Today's churches attract members of the working class in large numbers. (…) Illustrative examples should be sampled from contemporary life in a way that is clear and transparent for factory and steel mill workers. Alongside citations from the bible, they must include references to current events: the 6-year plan, the battle for peace and for collectivization,

[7] In terms of circulation, we know that for instance, eight thousand copies of "The Priest's Voice" were distributed nationwide (Żurek, 2009, Żaryn 1997).

physical labor, respect for collective property and respect for the Party and the fight with the "Colorado bug." (Kuźnica Kapłańska 1953).[8]

Patriots received "assignments" from three sources: The State Agency for Religious Beliefs and the Central Committee of the PZPR and the Ministry of Public Security (MBP), which was both the inspiration and the organizer of the *Councils of Priests* (Żurek 2009). The MBP coordinated parish visits to vet priests that were desirable recruitment targets, seeking out those known to be in conflict with their bishops, or former concentration camp prisoners and priests who had survived Gestapo arrests. The regime's secret police believed that such extreme experiences with the Nazi occupation would predispose them to view the communist "liberators" with sympathy and gratitude (Żaryn, 1997).[9]

In 1959, the Episcopate took advantage of the lifting of restrictions on staffing decisions and tried to dismantle the *Patriot Priest* organization. According to Dudek and Gryz, "since the Patriots lacked protection from the communist authorities, they often succumbed to their bishops' authority" (Dudek and Gryz 2006, 180). Although one way of dealing with Patriots' who had been placed in centrally located parishes was to reassign them to nearby, smaller

[8] The "Colorado bug" was a parasite ravaging wheat production in Poland. Communist propaganda disseminated a story according to which the parasites had been air-dropped by Western Capitalists.

[9] Using their historical accounts, we were able to create a map of the density of *Patriot Priest Share* in each of the 49 wojewodztwa (administrative units in Poland). This map, presented in section 4 indicates that the parishes in the areas receiving more migrants in the aftermath of WW II were more heavily infiltrated than the rest of Poland.

parishes, Dudek and Gryz point out that a "subset of the Patriots refused to follow their reassignment even after Archbishop Wyszynski threatened them with excommunication" (180). Hence, even two years into the thaw, in 1961, the Department for Religious Beliefs estimated that priests sympathetic to the communist cause made up about 8% of the clergy in Poland (AAN 1956), which is close to the 10% share of *Patriot Priests* at the height of the infiltration campaign.[10]

While the communist authorities ultimately failed to control the Catholic Church at the national level (Grzymała-Busse 2017), they achieved greater success in some areas than in others both at the elite level of the church leadership and at the level of rank-and-file priests. According to our theoretical discussion (summarized in Hypothesis 1), we expect infiltration to have been more effective where the Church was institutionally weaker.

Poland's tumultuous history offers three sources of sub-national variation in institutional vulnerability along the lines of our theoretical discussion. The first source, which produced a short-term increase in institutional vulnerability in part of the country, is associated with Poland's territorial westward shift after WWII. After ceding former Eastern territories to the Soviet Union, Poland was compensated with formerly Prussian territories in the west, which were euphemistically termed the "Recovered Territories."

Following the annexation of the Recovered Territories in 1945, the communist regime carried out a vast resettlement project. Three and a half million Germans, who made up over 90% of the population in the newly acquired territories, were given 48 hours to leave (Curp

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[10] However, we lack evidence of how these figures changed from 1961 to 1980 and do not know to what extent the infiltration persisted into the 1980s, when our surveys were conducted.

2006). Their homes were then handed over to mostly Polish and – to a lesser extent Ukrainian/Lemka – migrants, many of them from the Eastern territories lost to the Soviet Union.

Krystyna Kersten's analysis of the communist takeover of Poland captures the far-reaching consequences of this resettlement project: "Traditional structures and patterns of life were destroyed or badly eroded, social ties within the family, among neighbors, and in localities were weakened." (1991, 165). Unsurprisingly, the extent of migration was uneven across different parts of post-WWII Poland, ranging from less than 10% in most of the East to over 90% in many areas of the Recovered Territories in Western and Northern Poland (see Map A1 in Appendix B).

As a result of these large variations in migration patterns, Catholic parishes varied greatly in how well-rooted their communities were.[11] In communities disrupted by the inflow of migrants, parishioners would have been less familiar with each other, which undermined their ability to police their community against communist infiltrators (including *Patriot Priests*.) Moreover, many parishes in high-migration areas had to be assigned new priests, which created more opportunities for pro-regime infiltrators than in areas with higher personnel continuity from the pre-WWII period.

A second short-term factor affecting institutional vulnerability is associated with the leadership vacuum created by the communist regime's expulsion of the previous German bishops in the Recovered Territories and the refusal of the Vatican to appoint Polish replacements. These vacancies at the top of the church hierarchy left a power vacuum that could be filled by patriot priests while simultaneously undermining the legitimacy of the Catholic Church.

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[11] Anthropologists call this phenomenon of rootedness as "social disarticulation." (Cernea 1997)

The third source of organizational vulnerability to infiltration is associated with long-term "deep" pre-authoritarian institutional legacies. In 1795, Poland was "partitioned" (*Pod zaborami*) by the Prussian, Habsburg, and Russian empires for a period extending over 123 years.[12] The borders of the three empires shifted over time and in some instances, gave rise to briefly independent "republics." Poland regained its independence in 1918 but, as mentioned in our earlier discussion, the Recovered Territories belonged to Germany until 1946. As a result, different parts of Poland varied significantly in the length of time that they were incorporated into an independent Polish state. These subnational variations in independent statehood should translate into variations in institutional vulnerability. We would expect the Church to be more resilient in areas where it was part of the Polish nation-state for longer.

Of course, in the Polish case, the role of historical legacies is likely to extend to a broader set of channels beyond the length of independence. A sizeable literature produced in post-communist Poland (Rykiel 2011, Bartkowski 2003, Zarycki 2007, 2000, 2008, Janicki and Władyka 2005, Sleszyński 2007, Davies 2005, Wolff 2010, Jasiewicz 2009) has documented the continued political relevance of imperial legacies. For the purpose of our analysis, an important difference between the three empires was their different approach for dealing language and religious rights: while Catholic Habsburgs permitted extensive religious freedoms and tolerated greater cultural autonomy, the Russians promoted Russification and restricted the use of Polish language (particularly in religious practice), while persecuted the use of Polish language but were less assertive in terms of religion.

[12] Map A3 in Appendix B illustrates the borders of the imperial partitions overlaid on a contemporary map of Poland.

While these differential imperial policies could have long-term implications for the institutional resilience of the Catholic church, it is important to remember that imperial legacies are multi-faceted and also include many aspects that are not directly relevant to institutional resilience. One such factor, which could represent an alternative explanation for infiltration in the Polish context, builds on the work of Grosfeld and Zhuravskaya (2015) who have pointed out that industrialization differences may account for the different political dynamics often attributed to imperial legacies. Relatedly, differences in imperial policies could drive sub-national variations in education and urbanization, which can in turn affect the prospects for infiltration in opposite ways, as discussed in section 2. In light of these considerations, imperial legacies are an important control variable to include in our regressions.

Finally, turning to the consequences of infiltration, applying Hypothesis 3 to the Polish context suggests that the church should be less effective as a site of anti-regime resistance in more heavily infiltrated areas. Specifically, we should observe weaker anti-communist attitudinal effects of church attendance in areas with higher shares of *Patriot Priests*. At the same time, however, according to Hypothesis 2, given the covert nature of infiltration, we should not see a strong link between Patriot Priest shares and church attendance and trust.

4. Data and methods

One of the key obstacles to studying the effects of authoritarian infiltration – and political attitudes in authoritarian regimes more broadly – is the scarcity of credible public opinion surveys in most autocracies. The Polish case offers significant advantages in this respect: thanks to seven surveys carried out in 1985-1989 by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS) we are able to analyze citizen attitudes towards the authoritarian regime and the opposition before the collapse of the communist regime in mid-1989.

CBOS was created following the rise and fall of the dissident trade union Solidarity after the authorities realized that relying on reports from the secret police alone left them unprepared for outbreaks of popular dissidence. This motivation for the surveys, combined with Poland's greater tolerance for dissenting views and its long tradition of sociological surveys, makes these data less vulnerable to the biases and distortions that can plague surveys conducted in authoritarian settings.[13] Moreover, since our analysis focuses on sub-national variation in the effects of church attendance, our findings would only be biased if preference falsification affected churchgoers and non-churchgoers differentially in different regions. [14]

Figure 1: Map of *Patriot Priests* in post-WWII Poland by wojewodztwa according to materials collected by Zurek (2003). Note, the map uses administrative divisions from 1975.

[13] See Appendix F for a discussion of how we deal with potential bias in these surveys.

[14] As we show in Table F1 in the appendix, that is not the case.

To test our theoretical predictions, we combine the individual-level survey data with aggregate-level historical data from Poland's subnational administrative districts (województwo). For our key variables of interest – the extent of communist infiltration of the Catholic Church – we used a combination of historical sources. To measure institutional infiltration at the rank-and-file level, we used a collection of Special Reports produced by Radio Free Europe between 1949 and 1956, which allowed historians to document, at the aggregate level, the activities of the *Patriot Priests* (Żurek 2003, 2009). Based on these historical accounts, we calculated the *Patriot Priest Share* in each of the 49 Polish województwa. When mapping these infiltration patterns in Figure 1 above, we find significant subnational variation that suggests that the parishes in the Recovered Territories were indeed more heavily infiltrated than those in the rest of Poland.

Turning to our main independent variables, the most difficult challenge was measuring institutional vulnerability. In line with our earlier discussion, we created three different proxies for institutional strength/weakness. The first proxy captures institutional weakness at the elite level; it is a dichotomous indicator of whether or not a województwo belonged to a diocese that lacked a titular bishop as a result of the communist regime's expulsion of the previous German bishops and the refusal of the Vatican to appoint new Polish replacements. The second proxy, also based on the upheaval following the postwar border changes, focuses on the effects of large-scale migration. Specifically, we argue that migrant shares (also measured at the województwo-level and illustrated in Map A1 in the appendix) capture the extent to which the Catholic Church was weakened at the parish level creating opportunities for *Patriot Priests* to be appointed to openings in new parishes without churchgoers noticing. The third proxy captures the idea that the societal embeddedness and, hence, the institutional strength of the Catholic Church would be

greater in areas that had been part of an independent Polish state for a longer time period. Therefore, we calculated for each województwo the number of years that it had been incorporated into an independent Polish state between 1795 (the year of the third and final Partition) and 1939.

While these three proxies capture slightly different aspects of institutional strength, and it would have been interesting to study the relative importance of different dimensions of vulnerability, in practice the three indicators were very highly correlated. This means that our *Institutional vulnerability index* based on the three measures,[15] is superior to drawing questionable conclusions from models that use only one of the variable to stand for the institutional vulnerability of the organization.[16]

To measure subnational developmental differences, we collected województwo-level data from the 1950 census on three proxies of socioeconomic development: the value of industrial production per capita, the proportion of people living in urban settlements over 10000 inhabitants, and the number of school classrooms per capita (as a proxy of education).

Finally, to capture any residual effects of imperial legacies beyond the length of independence and the modernization outcomes discussed above, we assigned the administrative

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[15] The index, which is a standardized average of the three indicators, had a Cronbach's alpha statistic of .95.

[16] In Appendix E we show that our results are robust to using any of the three proxies separately. When combining multiple institutional vulnerability proxies in the same model specification, we find stronger effects for migrant shares but these models suffer from high multicollinearity.

units to three regions defined by the historical boundaries of the Russian, Prussian and Habsburg empires illustrated in Map A3.[17]

As an additional robustness check, discussed in Appendix G, we consider the possibility that the communist authorities directed infiltration efforts at specific wojewodztwa, such as border wojewodztwa or regions on Poland's new borders.

For our analysis of the consequences of infiltration, we use the aforementioned nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted between June 1985 (less than two years after Martial Law was lifted) and January 1989 (immediately prior to the Roundtable talks that paved the way for free elections and marked the beginning of the end of communism in the region). Therefore, even though conducted over the period of less than four years, the surveys span a period ranging from staunch authoritarian repression to relative liberalization. Appendix F provides more details about these surveys and the weights we created to ensure that the surveys were nationally representative. We also discuss how we ensured that our results are not affected by preference falsification.

In line with our theoretical discussion, we focus on three possible effects of infiltration. To test Hypothesis 2 we measure participation through *religious attendance* (using a three-category survey question, where 0=never, 1=irregular, 2=regular). To capture institutional trust, we used a question (measured on a five-point scale) that asked respondents to what extent they thought the Catholic Church served the interests of society. Finally, to gauge the ability of the

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[17] Note that the territories coded as Russian in Map A1 had initially belonged to the Prussian and Habsburg empires after 1792 but were incorporated into the Russian empire after 1815 and 1848. The original Russian partition is not part of post-WWII Poland.

Church to transmit anti-regime attitudes we used a question about attitudes to the anti-communist opposition and a question asking about support for the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR), the ruling party in communist Poland. From these two questions (both of which were asked on a five-point scale) we created the dependent variable for our analysis, *Net Communist Support,* which we calculated as the difference between the expressed support for the PZPR and the support for the opposition and then normalized so that it ranges from 0 (complete opposition support) to 1 (complete regime support). This variable has an almost exactly neutral mean (.53) and a standard deviation of .24 for the surveys analyzed in this article.

Since we are interested in how infiltration affects the anti-regime effectiveness of the Catholic Church, our main focus in the second part of the analysis is on the effects of church attendance (and how they are moderated by infiltration.) We measure *religious attendance* based on a three-category survey question (0=never, 1=irregular, 2=regular).

The surveys also included questions for a host of demographic variables, such as gender, age, education (primary/vocational, secondary and higher education), a detailed set of occupational categories and locality size, which were all included as controls in the regressions.

Critically, the surveys identify respondents up to the level of województwo. Based on this geographic identifier we were able to complement the individual-level survey data with the województwo-level variables described above. However, given the timing of the surveys, rather than using the developmental indicators from the 1950 census (as in the infiltration drivers' tests discussed above) we used data from the 1985-1989 Polish Statistical Yearbooks to calculate the share of production in different economic sectors (heavy industry, light industry and agriculture). In addition, we used contemporary województwo-level macro-economic indicators of capital investments and fixed assets as control variables to capture the effects of economic conditions.

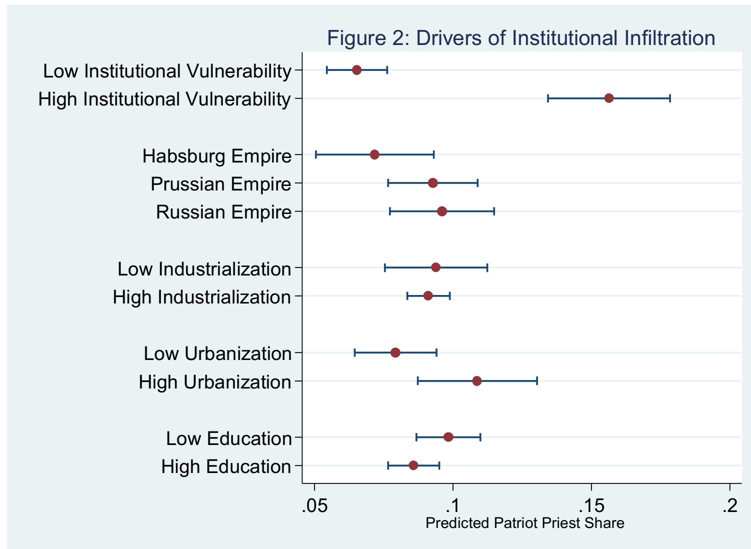
Given the multi-level structure of our data (individual, województwo-survey, and województwo), we use hierarchical linear models with random intercepts for our analysis of the attitudinal consequences of infiltration.

5. Results

Figure 2, which is based on the regressions in Table A2 in Appendix E, presents the main findings about the drivers of communist infiltration of the Catholic Church. To ensure comparability across different types of indicators, we present the predicted values of Patriot Priest infiltration (at the district-level) along with 95% confidence intervals for low (10th percentile) and high (90th percentile) values of the key variables of interest while holding other variables constant (at the sample mean.)

The results in Figure 2 provide strong support for the institutional vulnerability hypothesis (Hypothesis 1): the communist regime was significantly more likely to infiltrate the Catholic Church in parts of Poland where the church was institutionally weaker in the late 1940s, just prior to the launch of the *Patriot Priests* campaign. These results were not only statistically significant but substantively quite large: the predicted difference in Patriot Priest shares between low and high vulnerability districts was equivalent to roughly two standard deviations in the dependent variable.[18]

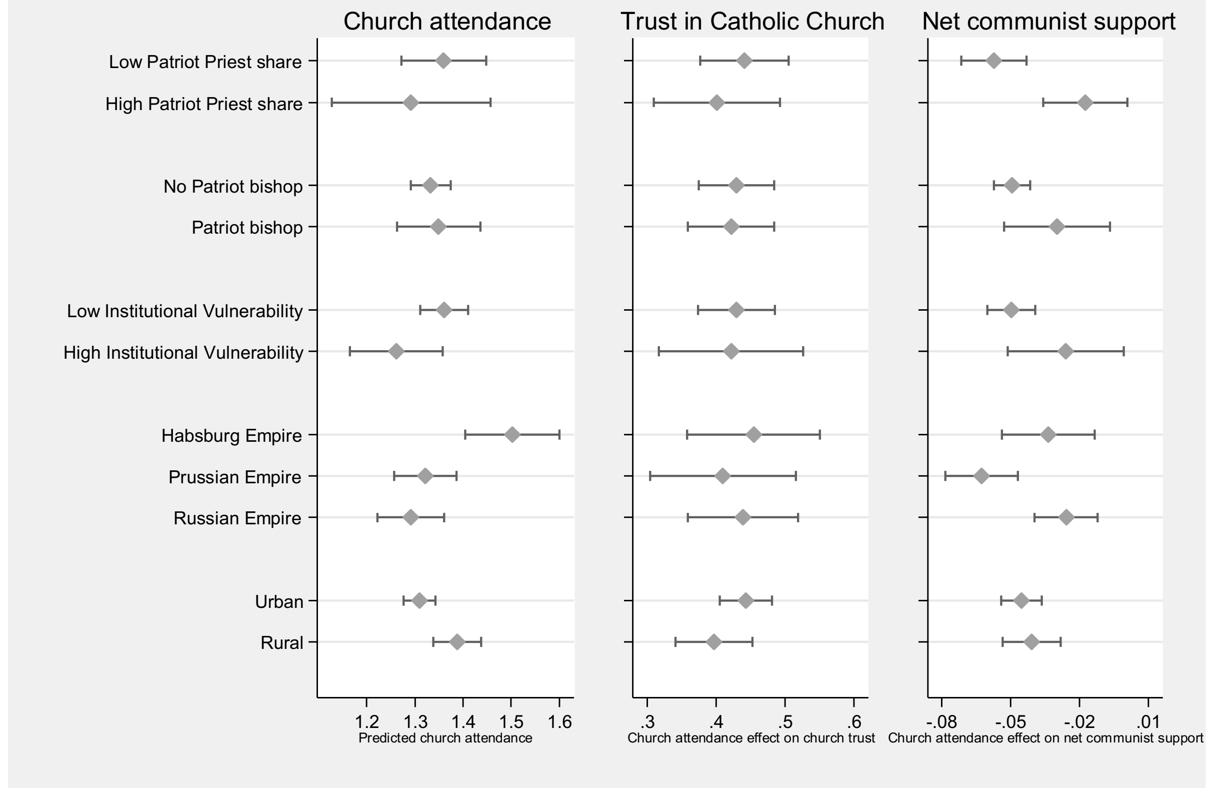
[18] In Appendix A we show similar (but substantively smaller) patterns for elite-level infiltration.



By comparison, support for alternative explanations of institutional infiltration – imperial legacies and socio-economic development – was noticeably weaker. While Figure 2 reveals some tentative evidence that infiltration was weaker in the areas of the former Habsburg Empire, these differences were substantively small and at best marginally significant.

The three sets of estimates in the lower part of Figure 2 reveal mixed support for the effects of socioeconomic development. Thus, there is no evidence that industrial development is associated with different degrees of infiltration. As expected, infiltration was lower in less urbanized settings, but the effects were only marginally significant (at .1) and not particularly large. Finally, areas with weaker educational infrastructure were somewhat more likely to experience infiltration but the effects were only marginally significant (at .1) and substantively fairly modest. In sum, the effect of modernization as a general phenomenon, is ambiguous.

Having established that institutional vulnerability is a key driver of institutional infiltration, we now turn to testing the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of institutional infiltration.



Overall, the patterns in the right panel of Figure 3, which show the effects of church attendance on *Net Communist Support*, reveal clear evidence that infiltration undermined the ability of the Catholic Church to promote anti-regime attitudes among its followers. Thus, we find that in low infiltration areas (with low shares of Patriot Priests), church attendance was associated with significantly more anti-regime political attitudes. Meanwhile, in areas that the communist regime had successfully infiltrated in the early 1950s, the anti-regime effects of church attendance were over 50% smaller and fell short of achieving statistical significance.

At the same time however, in line with Hypothesis 2, Figure 3 shows no systematic relationship between infiltration and either participation (measured by church attendance) or trust towards the Catholic Church. These patterns are consistent with our claims in Section 3 that communist regime's infiltration was largely covert, i.e., most churchgoers were unaware of the

identity of regime infiltrators in their midst. As a result, it appears that the *institution* of the Catholic Church was not weakened by infiltration (we do not observe a reduction in membership or trust) but its political effectiveness in challenging the communist regime suffered significantly.

It is important to note that the attitudinal imprint of communist infiltration we document in these surveys from 1985-89 remained visible more than three decades after the heyday of the Patriot Priest campaign. While such long-term persistence is in line with the patterns observed in previous studies of communist attitudinal legacies (Lupu and Peisakhin 2015, Pop-Eleches and Tucker 2017), it nevertheless raises important questions of how to interpret these results. We see two possible interpretations of the patterns in Figure 3. On the one hand, they could be due to the long-term persistence of a powerful but temporary "treatment" in the form of the Patriot Priests' campaign of the mid-1950s. On the other hand, the patterns could be reflecting the continued, if somewhat attenuated, presence of covert regime sympathizers within the Catholic Church.

These two alternative explanations have divergent observable implications. To adjudicate between them we compare age cohorts that started participating in church activities *during* the infiltration campaign with those that participated in church activities *after* the end of the main infiltration period. If our short term "treatment" interpretation is true and the former Patriot Priests' influence was largely neutralized after the late 1950s, either because most of them decided to get in line with the church hierarchy or because they were effectively sidelined by the church leadership and shunned by parishioners, we would to see different church attendance effects in response to Patriot Priest infiltration among the two groups of cohorts. For younger cohorts, the effects would be weaker than for older cohorts. However, if the Patriot Priests continued to disseminate communist propaganda (in line with the interpretation of a continuing

influence) anti-communist church attendance effects in the areas with high Patriot Priest shares would be similar for these two cohorts.

To adjudicate between these two possible interpretations, in Figure 4, we present the predicted effects of church attendance in low versus high infiltration areas for two different age cohorts: respondents who were old enough to have received their First Communion (initiation to the Catholic community as a full-fledged member) by 1956 (i.e. were born prior to 1950) and those who were not.[19]

Both the magnitude and the statistical significance of the moderating role of Patriot Priest infiltration on the attitudinal effects of church attendance are noticeably stronger for the older cohorts, who were likely to have attended church during the most intense infiltration period. By comparison, for the younger cohorts, the effects still pointed in the expected direction but they were substantively small and statistically inconclusive. This suggests that while *Patriot Priests* had a strong and lasting impact on political attitudes during the time when they were most active, their influence seems to have declined substantially in subsequent years. However, Figure 4 also shows that the attitudinal effects of infiltration on the age cohorts old enough to have personally experienced they heyday of the Patriot Priest period were substantively large and remarkably resilient even three decades later.

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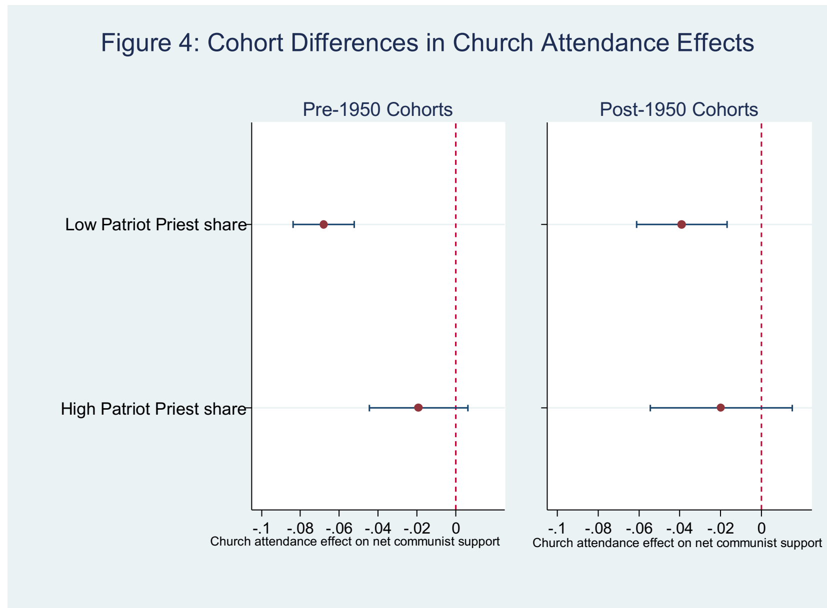
[19] The results are based on triple interactions between infiltration, church attendance and the dichotomous age cohort indicator. See Table A3 in Appendix E for full regression results.



6. Conclusion

The results presented in Figures 3 and 4 lead us to conclude that communist efforts to infiltrate the Catholic Church in Poland in the early post-WWII period were at least partially successful in blunting the church's anti-communist message. However, despite its short-term effectiveness in shaping political attitudes, and the long-term persistence of these attitudinal effects among directly affected individuals, the regime's decision to abort/scale back the Patriot Priest organization contributed to the failure of the communists' efforts to control the Catholic Church. While this decision may have bought it a temporary truce in the context of the political turmoil of the late 1950s, it ultimately paved the way for the fall of communism three decades later.

Our study offers a unique opportunity to examine the circumstances under which authoritarian regimes launch covert forms of repression, as well as the long-term effectiveness of such efforts. First, we show that in addition to the autocrats' willingness to expend the significant

efforts required for large-scale infiltration strategies (Greitens 2016), the success of such covert repression efforts depends on the vulnerability of the institutional target. In the Polish case, this vulnerability, was driven by a combination of a large-scale population displacement, weak leadership, and shorter track records of institutional autonomy, all captured in our index of institutional vulnerability. We show that such vulnerability matters more than socioeconomic differences and other historical legacies when it comes to successful infiltration efforts.

We also document that covert repression can have far-reaching political effects. Even though the covert nature of infiltration does not allow it to affect the trust and participation in the affected organization, its influence is, in a sense, more insidious. As in the case of propaganda (Rozenas and Stukal 2019), those who have succumbed to its influence, are unaware that they have been affected.

Finally, we turn to the scope conditions of our findings. While efforts to infiltrate non-state organizations are an important element in the authoritarian toolkit, the specific features of our case beg the question of the generalizability of our findings. In terms of the drivers of infiltration success, we expect our primary finding – that it is easier to infiltrate institutionally vulnerable organizations – to hold across a much broader set of cases than Poland in the aftermath of WW II. Although the particular factors driving institutional vulnerability will of course vary from case to case, we expect two of the drivers identified in this article – societal disarticulation associated with massive population movements and a leadership vacuum – to be key ingredients in many instances of institutional vulnerability. This suggests that successful authoritarian infiltration efforts should follow highly disruptive events, such as wars, revolutions and pandemics. The post-WWII upheavals in Poland were on the high end of the spectrum of societal disruption. At the same time, the last century provides numerous cases of large-scale social dislocation

following authoritarian takeovers, wars of independence, revolutions or civil wars all over the world.

With respect to the attitudinal impact of successful authoritarian infiltration efforts, we would expect our findings – that infiltration undermines the anti-authoritarian impact of participation in the organization but does not decrease trust or participation in the organization – to apply in cases where infiltration went uncovered, i.e., the identity of regime agents remained largely unknown to regular members of the organization. Where former infiltrators can be identified by regular members, we would expect weaker effects on anti-regime attitudes (since members would discount the political messages of known regime agents) but we would expect to observe decreased trust and participation.

This informs analyses of authoritarian infiltration efforts, as researchers must account for the degree to which regular members knew the identity and frequency of pro-regime infiltrators. Infiltration levels and transparency of infiltration efforts will obviously vary as a function of the nature of the regime (communist regimes arguably invested more in secret police apparatuses than other regimes), and the nature of the targeted institution (some organizations may be better able to identify and neutralize regime agents.) In light of these considerations, we would expect our findings to apply most clearly to communist and other "high-capacity" authoritarian regimes, which could engage in effective infiltration.

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