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The Overlooked Actors in the EU Studies: Examining the Strategies and Objectives of
Religious Actors in the European Union

by

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Abstract

In the context of the European Union, religious actors hold a unique position. Despite being defined as civil society organizations by the EU, according to Article 17 on the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, religious actors and non-confessional organization enjoy an “open, transparent, and regular dialogue” with the EU. Aside from making them the only civil society actors singled-out in the TFEU, the ramifications of Article 17 also include annual high-level religious leaders’ meetings with EU institutions as well as high-profile EU officials such as the Vice Presidents of the European Commission and of the European Parliament, who are charged with dialogue with religious actors. Despite their special standing and active participation, religious actors have been overlooked in the EU studies. As a result, this paper focuses on the most transnationally active religious actors – the Catholic and the Orthodox Churches – and examines their objectives and strategies through the institutionalist theories in Political Science. In doing so, it finds that religious actors represent strategic political actors who are mainly driven by their self-interest.

Introduction

In the context of the European Union (EU), religious actors hold a unique position. Although identified as a civil society organization (CSOs) by the EU, religious actors and non-confessional are the only CSOs to have an Article in the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) dedicated to “an open, transparent, and regular dialogue” with them.¹ The ramifications of Article 17 include annual high-level meetings for religious actors with EU institutions and high-profile EU officials such as the Vice Presidents of the European Commission and of the European Parliament (EP) who are charged with dialogue with them. Nevertheless, the role and place of religious actors in the EU is understudied as they are regarded as an “unfashionable variable”² in Political Science.

As a result of Article 17 TFEU, 120 religious actors have had contact with the European Commission as of 2014, with 82 of them having offices in Brussels.³ Furthermore, the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church have both given public speeches in the European Parliament on at least two occasions. As both their special recognition in EU treaties and active presence in Brussels prove, religious actors have a special place and interest in the EU. Consequently, this paper will research the objectives and strategies of religious actors in the EU by answering the following research question, “*How and why do religious groups seek to influence the European Union?*” The former part of the question will allow for an understanding of what kind of civil society actors religious actors resemble by the

¹ Art. 17 TFEU

² Francis Geoffrey Castles, “On Religion and Public Policy”, *European Journal of Political Research*, 1994, cited in: Simon Fink, “Churches as Societal Veto Players: Religious Influence in Actor-Centered Theories of Policy-Making”, *West European Politics*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2009, pp.78.

³ Lucian N. Leustean, “The politics of Orthodox churches in the European Union”, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2018, pp. 146-147.

strategies they use to participate in the EU; the latter part of the question will allow for a clearer understanding of what the main interest and goals of religious groups in the EU are.

To answer the research question, this paper will examine two Political Science theories – rational-choice institutionalism (RCI) and normative institutionalism (NI). On the one hand, NI claims that an actor is bound to their institutional norms and values in their strategies and objectives.⁴ On the other hand, RCI claims that despite institutional constraints, an actor's behavior is primarily motivated by self-interest.⁵ To test which theory is most fitting for religious actors in the EU, this paper will use the discursive institutionalism (DI) as a methodology. DI serves as a valuable research method as it focuses not merely on what is said or done but also on “where, when, how, and why it was said/done”.⁶ Data will be collected from the speeches and publications of religious actors, secondary sources, and interviews with respective actors in the field.

Although many different religious denominations have representations in Brussels, this paper will focus on Catholic and Orthodox religious actors. In this context, religious actors refers to figures who “assume the role of representing religion and so claim a ‘special’ legitimacy anchored in tradition or affect”.⁷ In the case for Catholic and Orthodox actors, this refers to priests, patriarchs, the Pope, as well as representatives of Catholic and Orthodox religious organizations in Brussels. Catholic and Orthodox religious actors were chosen as case studies considering that both have transnational figures – the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch – who represent their institutions internationally and have been active in EU affairs since the drafting of the EU's

⁴ B. Guy Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science. The New Institutionalism*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012, 3rd ed., p.20.

⁵ Peters, *loc. cit.*

⁶ Vivien A. Schmidt, “Discursive Institutionalism: The Explanatory Power of Ideas and Discourse”, *The Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 11, 2008, pp. 305.

⁷ “Religious Actor and International Law,” *Oxford Scholarship Online*, 2014, retrieved 23 April 2020, <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198712824.001.0001/acprof-9780198712824>

constitution. Furthermore, both have shown particular interest in EU affairs, unlike Protestant religious actors that have been relatively indifferent.⁸

Most of the actor-centered studies carried out on religion and politics categorize religious actors of different denomination as actors with different interest and objectives. Consequently, religious actors belonging to the Catholic denomination are said to have different goals than religious actors of the Orthodox denomination. In contrast, this paper groups Orthodox and Catholic actors as one category of actors and studies them comprehensively using the normative and rationalist institutionalist theories. In doing so, it offers a framework to study religious actors in one category which can contribute to the better understanding the nature of religious actors as a whole. Additionally, this paper adds to the limited literature that exists on the role of religious actors in the European Union. Although religious actors are no longer active political players as they once used to be, their role should not be overlooked in Political Science. As Gill writes, “ignoring religion is overlooking a potentially important variable in explaining politics”.⁹

The paper is structured as follows: the first section will elaborate on the theoretical framework and how it will be operationalized; the remaining two sections will test the two research hypotheses by researching the role of religious actors in the EU from the drafting of the EU constitution up until 2019. The research will be conducted on a two-level analysis: the first will research the behavior of transnational religious actors that assume the role of representing the Catholic and Orthodox institutions internationally. The second level of analysis will research the behavior of permanent representatives of Catholic and Orthodox churches based in Brussels.

⁸ Sergei A. Mudrov, “Religion in the Treaty of Lisbon: Aspects and Evaluation”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2016, pp. 2.

⁹ Anthony Gill, “Religion and Comparative Politics”, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2001, vol. 4, pp. 117.

Theories & Research Methodology

This section will introduce the two theories and the methodology on which this paper will be built. Given that religious actors are always bound to institutions – either formal procedures or informal norms and conventions –¹⁰ institutional theories serve as the most valuable framework in studying religious actors. Although numerous institutionalist theories exist, three are prominent among political scientists: historical, rational-choice, and sociological/normative institutionalism.¹¹

The most commonly used institutionalist theory to studying religious actors has been historical institutionalism. Research carried out by Philpott and Shah¹² and Byrnes and Katzenstein¹³ has come to a conclusion that Catholicism is more in favor of European integration than Eastern Orthodoxy due to differences in its historical legacy and institutional structures. If one looks at religious actors in the EU today, however, one will find greater unity and consistency in the behavior of religious actors than historical institutionalism would expect. As an interviewee from the European Parliament notes, “We shouldn’t underestimate the unity of the Orthodox Church and overestimate the unity of the Catholic Church”.¹⁴ Consequently, historical institutionalism alone does not suffice in explaining the interest of religious actors in the EU, let alone the strategies they use to express their interests. Whereas historical institutionalism pits the institutions of Catholic and Orthodox churches against each other, normative and rational-choice institutionalism offer more comprehensive, yet diverging, perspectives as to why Catholic and Orthodox religious actors have had the same stance on European integration.

¹⁰ Peter A. Hall and Rosemary C. R. Taylor, “Political Science and the Three New Institutionalisms”, *Political Studies*, vol. 44, no. 5, 1996, pp. 937.

¹¹ Peters, *loc. cit.*

¹² Daniel Philpott and Timothy Same Shah, “Faith, freedom, and federation: the role of religious ideas and institutions in European political convergence”, in: Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 34-65.

¹³ Peter J. Katzenstein and Timothy A. Byrnes, “Transnational Religion in an Expanding Europe,” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 4, no. 4, 2006, pp. 679-694.

¹⁴ Interview with an official, European Parliament, Brussels, 3 March 2020.

According to normative institutionalism, actors' behavior is determined by the norms and values of the institution of which they are part, or the "logic of appropriateness."¹⁵ Actors are said to follow institutional norms and values since they find it to be "good, desirable, and appropriate".¹⁶ Given that they put the institutional norms ahead of their self-interest, they are said to have moral, rather than calculative, objectives and goals.¹⁷ This most closely reflects actors in NGOs who claim to be promoting the public, rather than state or economic, interest.¹⁸ To redirect this to our research question, NI expects religious actors, like NGOS, to be driven by ideological and altruistic motives and institutionally embedded strategies in their relations with the EU. (Hypothesis One).

The normative vision of religious actors was shared by the founding fathers and influential leaders of the EU.¹⁹ Robert Schuman, for example, wanted to root "Christian basics of Europe"²⁰ – freedom, equality, solidarity, and peace – in the EU governance. Schuman's vision was most actively pursued by Jacques Delors, who believed that religious actors could serve a balancing role against the dehumanization of citizens.²¹ Consequently, it was Delors who first launched the "A Soul for Europe" initiative which financed inter-religious meetings with religious communities to

¹⁵ Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

¹⁶ James G. March and Johan Olsen, *Rediscovering Institutions: The Organizational Basis of Politics*, New York, Free Press, 1989, cited in Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change," *International Organizations*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1998, pp. 889.

¹⁷ Amitai Etzioni, *A Comparative Analysis of Complex Organizations: On Power, Involvement, and their Correlates*, New York, Free Press, 1963, cited in cited in: B. Guy Peters, *Institutional Theory in Political Science. The New Institutionalism*, New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012, 3rd ed., p. 27.

¹⁸ Neera Chandhoke, "How Global is Global Civil Society?," *Journal of World-Systems Research*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2005, 356.

¹⁹ Adrian Hastings, *Religion and the Construction of Nationhood*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997, cited in: Daniel Philpott and Timothy Same Shah, "Faith, freedom, and federation: the role of religious ideas and institutions in European political convergence", in: Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 60-61.

²⁰ Jeff Fountain, "A Christian Europe(an): the forgotten vision of Robert Schuman", *The Schuman Centre for European Studies*, 2011, retrieved 8 May 2020, https://encountersmissionjournal.files.wordpress.com/2011/08/fountain_2011-03_schumann_and_europe.pdf

²¹ *Ibid.*

engage in discussions on European integration;²² this was later institutionalized as dialogue with religious actors and non- confessional organizations through Article 17 TFEU.

Rational-choice institutionalism stands on the other side of the spectrum of normative institutionalism when it comes to its view on how institutions shape strategies and interests of respective actors. Unlike the logic of appropriateness of NI, RCI claims that actors are guided by the “logic of consequentiality”²³ – a calculated behavior that most maximizes their interests. Unlike pure rational-choice theory, RCI recognizes that institutions have an important role in shaping and constraining interests and preferences.²⁴ Therefore, instead of assuming every actor – notwithstanding their institution – has the same interests and preferences, RCI induces preferences and interests to actors based on the institution of which they are a part.²⁵ Consequently, although interests and preferences are likely to vary from institution to institution, RCI expects these interests to be motivated by “interest in esteem, money, and power”.²⁶ Accordingly, whereas NI would expect religious actors to adhere to institutional values for the sake of promoting the common good, RCI would assume actors to act outside the logic of appropriateness and deviate from institutionally engrained norms and values to achieve their interests. In this case, RCI expects religious actors to act more like an interest group than an NGO – act strategically to defend and push-forward their interests rather than promote the common good. (Hypothesis Two).

²² Bérengère Massignon, “Orthodox representations to the European Union: between inter-Orthodox competition and dynamics of Europeanization”, *Balkanologie*, retrieved 5 May 2020, <https://journals.openedition.org/balkanologie/599#ftn7>

²³ Peters, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

²⁴ Ira Katznelson and Barry R. Weingast, “Intersections Between Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism”, in: Ira Katznelson and Barry R. Weingast (eds.), *Preferences and Situations: Points of Intersection Between Historical and Rational Choice Institutionalism*, New York, Russell Sage Foundation, 2005.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Most of the RCI research on religious actors has centered on how religious actors act strategically to maximize their profit.²⁷ Limited significance has been placed, however, on religious actors' quests for esteem and power. Throughout history, churches considered esteem and power as if "they were legitimate representatives of a societal system".²⁸ Today, however, given the decrease in churchgoing and religiosity in Europe,²⁹ this legitimacy of churches has also receded. Consequently, in contemporary Europe, Casanova argues that churches can gain more influence and legitimacy if they combine "the religious message with a defense of modern values and liberal democracy and if they operate as society-oriented, rather than state-oriented, institutions".³⁰ Therefore, in the context of religious actors in the EU, it would be rational-choice behavior of churches to adjust to the respective environment to gain power, esteem and profit.

In terms of methodology, this paper will use discursive institutionalism as a framework for both levels of analysis. Although a theory in itself, discursive institutionalism also serves as a valuable research method as it focuses not merely on what is said or done but also "where, when, how, and why it was said/done".³¹ Such a framework of analysis is especially fruitful when studying behavior of actors, since "what" is said needs to be analyzed together with "where, when, and how" to come to a clearer understanding on "why".³² Empirical data will be gathered from the public speeches of the religious actors, publications on their websites, and interviews conducted with representatives of religious organizations in Brussels. For a clearer understanding of the data,

²⁷ Refer to Carolyn M. Warner & Anthony Gill.

²⁸ Pieterjan de Vlieger, "The chaplains of Europe? Christian interest representation and EU rationality", in: François Foret and Xabier Itçaina (eds.), *Politics of Religion in Western Europe. Modernities in conflict?*, New York, Routledge, 2011, pp. 76.

²⁹ José Casanova, "Religion, European secular identities, and European integration", in: Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 67.

³⁰ Casanova, José, *Public religions in the modern world*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 30.

³¹ Schmidt, *loc. cit.*

³² *Ibid.*

secondary sources and an interview with a representative of the European Parliament will be incorporated.

Religious Transnational Actors in the European Union: The Pope and the Two Patriarchs

The first empirical section will begin with an introduction to the three internationally prominent Catholic and Orthodox religious actors and why they were chosen for the analysis. The findings of the analysis will follow, after which a detailed overview of the results will be presented.

Among Catholic and Orthodox religious actors, three stand out that have an internationally prominent role – the Pope, the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the Russian Orthodox Patriarch. On the Catholic side, the Pope serves as the head of the Catholic Church and sovereign of the Vatican City. Considering the hierarchical and centralized nature of the Catholic Church, he has the greatest authority in the Catholic Church.³³ Since the majority of the world’s Catholics are based outside the Vatican, reaching the church’s constituency requires the Pope to act as a transnational actor.³⁴ On the Orthodox side, although its decentralized institution has no such figure as the Pope, there are two Patriarchs who are rather prominent and active in the international sphere. Patriarch Bartholomew, Archbishop of Constantinople, enjoys the primacy of honor status in the Orthodox world and is regarded as the representative of Orthodox believers in the world. Despite his powers being more limited than those of the Pope, Patriarch Bartholomew is politically significant.³⁵ Furthermore, since he is located in Turkey, his reach to the Orthodox constituency also requires him to cross borders and act as a transnational

³³ Katzenstein and Byrnes, “Transnational Religion in an Expanding Europe”, *loc. cit.*

³⁴ Ivan Valuer, “The Roman Catholic Church: A Transnational Actor”, *International Organization*, vol. 25, no. 3, 1971, pp. 481.

³⁵ “Ukraine Orthodox Church granted independence from Russian Church”, *BBC*, 2019, retrieved 1 May 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46768270>

actor. Patriarch Kirill, on the other hand, is the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, the Orthodox Church with the most followers, which as the interviewee from the European Parliament notes, wants to present itself as first Orthodox Church.³⁶ The Russian Orthodox Church is said to be closely associated to the Russian state, and “spiritual security” is one of the priorities in Russian national security strategy.³⁷ Although unlike his counterparts, Patriarch Kirill’s constituency is more nation-based, the Russian Orthodox Church is present in the international realm.

Using the discursive institutionalist framework, each instance of the religious actors’ appearance in or actions towards the EU was analyzed. By placing “what” they said or did on an equal footing with “when, how, where, and why” they said or did it,³⁸ our analysis found that their objectives and strategies were most in line with the rational-choice institutionalist hypothesis. In other words, religious actors’ activity in the EU affairs was mostly oriented to protecting their legitimacy and status from the EU influence. To achieve this, they acted strategically and deviated from their institutional norms and values. Below a more detailed overview of the findings is presented.

Objectives of transnational religious actors in the EU

The main indicator of our finding that religious actors’ main objective in the EU is to retain their status and influence comes from the timing of when they most actively get involved in EU politics. This paper divides the EU integration into four periods: 1) the initial stages of EU integration, or the period up to the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam when the EU’s competences were mostly of an economic nature; 2) the transition from an economic to political union, or the period following the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam and the drafting of the EU constitution

³⁶ Interview with an official, European Parliament, Brussels, 3 March 2020.

³⁷ Leustean, *loc. cit.*

³⁸ Schmidt, *loc. cit.*

when EU increased its competences and the power of supranational institutions 3) period of growth and stability in EU integration following the signing of the Lisbon Treaty up to European debt crisis in 2009; 4) period of migrant and economic crisis from 2010- 2020, or a period the EU itself refers to as “challenging times”.³⁹

As an overview of the activity of religious actors in the EU makes apparent, two periods stand out when these actors showed the greatest interest in the EU: i) the EU’s transition from an economic to a political union with the signing of the Treaty of Amsterdam and drafting of the EU constitution and ii) the migrant and the economic crises of the EU. Although the two periods are of very different natures, a commonality among the two is that both constituted either a threat or an opportunity for the legitimacy and status of religious actors. When it comes to the former, religious actors needed to protect and defend their status from a newly emerging political union that could both directly and indirectly trespass on their legitimacy and status. In terms of the latter, the decrease in EU’s legitimacy – due to two crises that questioned the union’s values – served as a window of opportunity to reclaim the status and legitimacy of religious actors that had been on the decline in Europe.

In the first period of EU integration, when the EU was relatively powerless and did not threaten the legitimacy of transnational religious actors, both the Pope and the Patriarch gave speeches to the EP and stressed the significant role of Christianity in defining Europe, but neither pleaded for any special privileges or a formal recognition of Christianity. In the conclusion of his 1994 speech in the EP, Patriarch Bartholomew pleaded, “Please accept our presence here as a

³⁹ European Union, “The history of the European Union,” retrieved 1 May 2020, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#2010-2019

simple reminder: We remind you that we exist”.⁴⁰ As integration deepened and the EU expanded its competences, a mere reminder that “that we exist”⁴¹ turned into more concrete and tangible requests. During the negotiations of the Treaty of Amsterdam, or the beginning of the second period of EU integration, Pope John Paul II sent a declaration to EU ambassadors stating that Church-State relations should remain a competence of member states,⁴² which Germany, Italy, Austria, and Portugal pushed for during the negotiations. Consequently, Declaration 11 which states that the EU “respects and does not prejudice the status under national law of Churches”⁴³ was added to the Treaty of Amsterdam. Given that the Vatican’s access and influence in a member state depends on the Church-State relations in the country,⁴⁴ the Pope’s push for keeping these relations a national competence fits the expectations of him aiming to retain his transnational power.

Declaration 11, however, was not enough to halt the involvement of religious actors in the drafting of the EU constitution. The “legal, political, and ideological”⁴⁵ significance of the EU constitution led religious actors to persistently push for their interests. In a meeting with the President of Convention of Europe, Pope John Paul II was reported to have pushed for the inclusion of God and Christian faith in the EU constitution.⁴⁶ Similarly, in a speech to the European Study Congress, he sought the “specific identity”⁴⁷ of Churches to be recognized since they have a

⁴⁰ Ecumenical Patriarchate, Patriarchal Address, “Address to the Plenary of the European Union”, 1994, retrieved 1 May 2020, https://www.patriarchate.org/environmental-addresses/-/asset_publisher/47ISmr00STje/content/address-to-the-plenary-of-the-european-parliament

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Mudrov, *loc. cit.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Valuer, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁵ Mudrov, *loc. cit.*

⁴⁶ Nicola Smith, “Religious Identity Enters Convention Debate”, *EUObserver*, 2002, cited in: Sergei A. Mudrov, “Religion in the Treaty of Lisbon: Aspects and Evaluation”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2016, pp.16.

⁴⁷The Holy See, “Message of John Paul II to the European Study Congress on the theme – Towards a European Constitution?”, 2002, retrieved 5 May 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020622_costituzione-europea.html

“specific institutional density”.⁴⁸ Similarly, the Orthodox representatives, chaired by the Ecumenical Patriarch, also released suggestions for the draft constitution. Whereas the first one was the recognition of Europe’s Christian values, the other five points were less related to the promotion of Christian norms and was oriented to ensuring that the rights of European churches are not undermined and that there are specific regulations for dealing with sects and proselytism.⁴⁹ While the former would ensure that the churches’ original place in the member states would not be undermined, the latter would ensure that their place would not be challenged by competition from other groups.

Finally, even the least active actor in EU affairs among the three, the Russian Patriarch Kirill, sent a statement to President of the Convention of Europe when he began drafting the Constitution, emphasizing that in order to ensure that, “Western culture and lifestyle” are not imposed on the East as a result of EU expansion.⁵⁰ Once the draft of the Constitution was released, which did not mention Europe’s Christian roots, Patriarch Kirill issued another letter to the Present of the Convention where he stated that not linking the liberal values of the EU to Christianity could lead it to be “exploited to establish tyranny”.⁵¹ Similar to the Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch, he also demanded that “education, family life, and ethics” remain a competence of member states.⁵²

As the involvement of religious actors in the first stages of EU integration made clear, they were more oriented towards safeguarding and recognizing their status and legitimacy than on promoting the public interest. This legitimacy and status could be undermined in different ways

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Sabrina P. Ramet, “The way we were – and should be again? European Orthodox Church and the ‘idyllic past’”, in: Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 165.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Ramet, *op. cit.*, pp. 146.

⁵² *Ibid.*

for different actors. For the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Catholic Pope, it could serve as a threat for their roles as transnational actors who attain their power from access to different member states; it could also serve as an indirect threat in undermining their role as the provider of values. For the Russian Patriarch, a growing and powerful EU could undermine Russia's sphere of influence and power in the region.

Delors, who wanted a greater role for religious actors in dialogue with EU institutions, was disappointed in his meeting with Pope John Paul II that the Pope's main priority was on giving a Christian identity to the EU rather than participating in such dialogue.⁵³ According to Delors, religious actors could play a more significant role in the preservation of the human dimension of the economy through dialogue with EU institutions rather than by being "[an] identity marker" of the EU.⁵⁴ The focus of these actors on preserving their status and identity is further proven with the fact that religious actors were less actively involved in the negotiations of the Charter of Fundamental Rights,⁵⁵ which looks more closely at the normative dimension.

Whereas the involvement of religious actors in the EU affairs lessened during the third period of EU integration – the period following the Treaty of Lisbon when there was stability and growth in the Union – they reappeared on the scene during another turning point in the EU – the migrant and economic crisis. This time, what the EU itself referred to as “challenging times”⁵⁶ served as an opportunity to for these actors to reclaim their status, legitimacy, and influence. As Birkland writes, crises, or “focusing events”, are used by disadvantaged groups to regain their

⁵³Michal Matlak, “Jacques Delors, the Single Market and the Failed Attempt to Give a Soul to Europe”, *Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies*, 2018, retrieved 5 May 2020, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3157116

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Mudrov, *loc. cit.*

⁵⁶ European Union, “The history of the European Union”, retrieved 1 May 2020, https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history_en#2010-2019

voice and status that has been suppressed by dominant groups.⁵⁷ Considering that churchgoing had been declining in Europe,⁵⁸ the EU's migrant and economic crisis could have served as a strategic opportunity for religious actors to criticize EU's secular values and promote Christian values as a better alternative. Although one could argue that this re-emergence could be driven by normative goals, the fact that these actors showed up only when there was scope for opportunity tells us otherwise.

After a long disappearance from the EU sphere, Pope Francis gave a public speech to the European Parliament in 2014 in the midst of the Eurozone crisis. Unlike his predecessor, his outlook was more critical. As he stated, the founding ideas of Europe lost their meaning and have been replaced by "bureaucratic technicalities of its institutions".⁵⁹ In 2017, he hosted the EU Heads of State and Government in the Vatican for the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Rome, where he dedicated his speech to the EU's founding fathers and urged the current EU leaders to return to the initial pillars of the European economic community,⁶⁰ stressing principles of solidarity, openness to the world, the pursuit of peace and development. Similar to the Catholic Pope, Patriarch Bartholomew stressed that the current crises cannot be "addressed by the values of a bureaucratic, technocratic, and economically centered Europe"⁶¹ during his 2019 speech at the College of Europe. He identified the most serious threat to solidarity as "the reduction of human

⁵⁷ Thomas Birkland, "Focusing Events, Mobilization, and Agenda-Setting," *Journal of Public Policy*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1998, pp. 54.

⁵⁸ Casanova, "Religion, European secular identities, and European integration", *loc. cit.*

⁵⁹ The Holy See, Visit of His Holiness Pope Francis To the European Parliament and to the Council of Europe, "Address of Pope Francis to the European Parliament", 25 November 2014, retrieved 6 May 2020, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/november/documents/papa-francesco_20141125_strasburgo-parlamento-europeo.html

⁶⁰ The Holy See, "Address of Pope Francis to the European Parliament", *loc. cit.*

⁶¹ College of Europe, Address by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, "The Role of the Churches in Today's Europe", 11 November 2019, retrieved 1 May 2020, <https://www.coleurope.eu/fr/events/high-level-speech-his-all-holiness-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomew>

beings to homo-economicus”.⁶² Similar to Pope Francis, he identified Christianity as the solution to these crises – identifying Christian Churches as “natural allies of human rights”.⁶³

Finally, Patriarch Kirill released a statement after a meeting with the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the EU (CROCEU) which underlined “moral relativism” and “radical secularization of life of the Western society” as a cause of concern of non-EU churches.⁶⁴ In 2012, he wrote an appeal to Moldova to reject the anti-discrimination law – a prerequisite for Moldova’s visa-liberalization plan with the EU –⁶⁵ justifying it by the fact that religion is “simply disappearing” in the EU.⁶⁶ Patriarch Kirill’s comment is in line with the statement made by Russia’s deputy prime minister at the time, who warned that it would be a “grave mistake” for Moldova to get closer to the EU.⁶⁷

How can we explain the growing criticism towards the EU? When it comes to Patriarch Kirill, it is closely linked to the Russian government’s interest in retaining their sphere of influence in Europe. Consequently, the two crises and growing secularism in the EU provided the Russian Patriarch – who has close relations to the Russian state – with a window of opportunity to openly voice criticism against the EU. For the transnationally based Ecumenical Patriarch and the Catholic Pope, this criticism can more closely be associated to leveraging the window of opportunity to reclaim their transnational status and legitimacy. Consequently, this brings us back to the window of opportunity provided by “focusing events”⁶⁸ for disadvantaged groups, who exploited this

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ “CROCEU meeting in Moscow”, *CROCEU*, retrieved 20 April 2020, <https://www.romorth.eu/single-post/2017/10/10/CROCEU-meeting-in-Moscow>

⁶⁵ Lucia Diaconu and Mircea Ticudean, “Battle Over Moldovan Antidiscrimination Bill Reaches Fevered Pitch”, *Radio Free Europe*, 2012, retrieved 6 May 2020, https://www.rferl.org/a/moldova_gay_antidiscrimination_law_opposition/24541486.html

⁶⁶ David M. Herszenhorn, “Russia Putting a Strong Arm on Neighbors”, *The New York Times*, 2013, retrieved 7 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/23/world/europe/russia-putting-a-strong-arm-on-neighbors.html>

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Birkland, *loc. cit.*

opportunity to bring about a policy-change. In the case of religious actors, instead of a policy-change we can argue that they took advantage of these challenging times to reclaim their status and legitimacy by claiming monopoly over the values that Europe had at stake.

Strategies of transnational religious actors in the EU

The second part of our research question – the strategies of religious actors in the EU – also came most in line with the rational-choice institutionalist hypothesis. Religious actors adjusted their activities and method of communication based on what would gain them the most advantage. Whereas the Catholic Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch made public appearances and adjusted to the secular discourse of the EU, the Russian Patriarch – with a national-reach – was more direct and harsher with his discourse and appeared less in public. Nevertheless, the strategies of all three went in line with their self-interest to retain their respective status and influence.

In the first place, the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Catholic Pope both made public appearances in EU institutions in which they combined their message “with a defense of modern values and liberal democracy”.⁶⁹ Specifically, both emphasized their apolitically motivated goals and underlined the significance of Christianity in the foundation of Europe. For example, in his appearance at the EP, Patriarch Bartholomew emphasized that his mission is not to impose “political strength, economic power, or ideological claims”⁷⁰ to the EU.

Having justified their involvement, both the Pope and the Patriarch gave concrete examples of how Christianity has contributed and shaped EU values. In his first speech to the EP in 1979, for example, a few months after the European Regional Fund had been created, the Pope emphasized how the Christian faith had “to a great extent”⁷¹ contributed to solidarity in the

⁶⁹ Casanova, *Public Religions in the Moderns World*, *loc. cit.*

⁷⁰ Ecumenical Patriarchate, Patriarchal Address, “Address to the Plenary of the European Union”, *loc. cit.*

⁷¹ The Holy See, “Address of his Holiness John Paul II To Members of the Presidency Office of the European Parliament”, *loc. cit.*

continent. Similarly, Patriarch Bartholomew noted how the EU's principle of subsidiarity – what he called the “most advantageous method of defining powers”⁷² is the same model as the “deeply democratic organization”⁷³ of the Orthodox Church, which offers national churches administrative autonomy while keeping them united through faith. On the other hand, the written appeals of the Russian Patriarch came with a harsher discourse tone and show limited willingness to adapt to modernity and democracy. In one of his letters he sent during the drafting of the constitution, for example, he, “Equated gay marriage with pornography, prostitution, and drug abuse as all equally ‘unacceptable’ to Orthodox Christianity”.⁷⁴

Additionally, to appeal to the growingly secular public, both the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Pope have defined what Browne terms a “highly specific issue niche”⁷⁵ – or a specific issue that they repeatedly advocated for in their discourse. For Pope Francis, this issue-specific niche was the migrant crisis of the EU. Aside from mentioning it as recurring theme in his speeches, Pope Francis’ first papal journey was to the island of Lampedusa,⁷⁶ the first entry to Europe for many migrants. For Pope Bartholomew, the specific issue niche is ecology, which has been the recurring theme in his discourse and activities. As Browne states, definition of a highly specific issue niche gains the actors recognition, which was the case for both the Pope – who was named ‘Time Person of Year 2013’⁷⁷ and Patriarch Bartholomew – who was named the ‘Green’

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Ramet, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁷⁵ William Browne, “Organized Interests and Their Issue Niches: A Search for Pluralism in a Policy Domain”, *Journal of Politics*, vol. 52, no. 2, 1991, pp. 477, cited in: William A. Maloney, Grant Jordan and Andrew M. McLaughlin, “Interest Groups and Public Policy: The Insider/Outsider Model Revisited”, *Journal of Public Policy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1994, pp. 18.

⁷⁶ Paulina Guzik, “Communicating migration – Pope Francis’ strategy of reframing refugee issues”, *Church, Communication, and Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2018, pp. 115.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

Patriarch.⁷⁸ Given that the Russian Patriarch is less dependent on a transnational reach, he has not opted for such a specific issue niche.

In the case of all three actors, the strategies they use meet the expectations of rational-choice behavior. For the Ecumenical Patriarch and the Catholic Pope, adapting to the EU was a way of retaining their transnational grip and role. Given that the Russian Patriarch is nation-based and hence has no need to acquire legitimacy on the transnational level, this explains his limited engagement in public affairs and greater emphasis on speeches and statements. It also explains the harsher edge to his discourse.

Overall, our analysis shows that the actions and strategies of transnational religious actors in the EU are most in line with rational-choice institutionalism – religious actors are motivated by retaining their status and legitimacy more than promoting certain institutionally-engrained values. To achieve this, they behave strategically and deviate from their institutional rules and norms.

Religious Organizations in Brussels: COMECE and CROCEU

This section will focus on studying the strategies and motives of Catholic and Orthodox permanent representations based in Brussels. The focus will be on the Catholic representation to the EU– the Commission for the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Union (COMECE) – and the Orthodox representation to the EU – the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Institutions (CROCEU). This section will begin with a short overview of the two organizations before presenting the detailed findings on their objectives and strategies.

⁷⁸ Marlise Simons, “Orthodox Leader Deepens progressive Stance on Environment”, *The New York Times*, 2012, retrieved 1 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/04/science/bartholomew-i-of-constantinoples-bold-green-stance.html>

On the Catholic side, the Commission for the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union has had a permanent office in Brussels since 1980, and as the interviewee from the EP recalls, were one of the first CSOs to have a representation in Brussels.⁷⁹ Consequently, in parallel with Pope John Paul II, COMECE was actively involved in the process of the drafting of the EU Constitution and released one of its first declarations requesting a reference to Christianity in the constitution.⁸⁰ In the same declaration, COMECE asked for “structured dialogue” with EU institutions as well as maintaining the status of churches and religious communities a national competence.⁸¹

According to COMECE's official website, the mission of the organization is two-fold: i) to monitor the developments in the EU and communicate the bishop's concerns, and ii) to “inform and raise awareness” of the EU to the bishops.⁸² COMECE does not identify itself as an interest group since they claim to be involved in the EU to “make a contribution to the common good”.⁸³ As the Legal Advisor for the Ethics, Research and Health working group of COMECE, Friederike Ladenburger, explains in an interview, “If you are lobbyists, you are interested in fighting for the interest of your group, but we are promoting the interest of everyone – ethical questions, ecology, peace policy”.⁸⁴

When it comes to the Orthodox Church, a unified representation of Orthodox churches in the EU only opened in 2010 – possibly due to the decentralized institutional configuration of the Orthodox Church that does not have a unified doctrine on how to engage with political

⁷⁹ Interview with an official, European Parliament, Brussels, 3 March 2020.

⁸⁰ “Churches and Religious Communities in a Constitutional Treaty of the European Union”, *COMECE*, retrieved 20 April 2020, <http://www.comece.eu/site/en/ourwork/publications>

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² “Our Mission”, *COMECE*, retrieved 24 April 2020, <http://www.comece.eu/site/en/ourmission>

⁸³ “Secretariat of COMECE,” *Transparency Register*, retrieved 24 April 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/consultation/displaylobbyist.do?id=47350036909-69>

⁸⁴ Interview with Friederike Ladenburger, Legal Advisor for Ethics, Research and Health (COMECE), Skype call, 17 April 2020.

authorities.⁸⁵ Before 2010, most of the Orthodox Churches had separate representations in Brussels and pushed for their interests separately.⁸⁶ The Church of Greece pressured its government during the negotiations of the Treaty of Amsterdam to maintain its special status – which was successfully included in the annexed Declaration 59 of the Treaty of Amsterdam.⁸⁷ Similarly, the Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches were active in the debate of the Convention;⁸⁸ the Churches only united as one Orthodox Church after the release of the draft of the EU Constitution.⁸⁹ Its goal, of a more limited scope than COMECE’s, is “to foster and to promote the cooperation between the European Institutions and the Orthodox Churches”.⁹⁰ Although how COMECE and CROCEU both identify themselves is clear, the next two sections will analyze their strategies and objectives in line with our discursive institutionalism framework.

The analysis of these organizations with the discursive institutionalist framework points to the conclusion that rational choice institutionalism most clearly reflects their strategies and objectives in the EU. In the first place, how the groups organize and present themselves – their strategies – is most closely in line with interest group behavior that deviates from their institutional norms and values – religious organizations adapt to EU context to get access and influence in the organization. Second, the activities of the groups in the EU mostly constitutes an attempt to defend and preserve their status and legitimacy from EU influence. Nevertheless, some of their activities were found to be linked merely to promoting the common good. Below a more detailed description of the findings is presented.

⁸⁵ Leustean, *loc. cit.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Massignon, *loc. cit.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ “Our Mission,” CROCEU, retrieved 1 May 2020, <https://croceu.org/#mission>

Strategies of religious organizations in Brussels

To analyze whether the strategies of religious groups are more in line with their institutional norms or their self-interest, how these groups organize themselves, adapt to the EU discourse, and mobilize themselves was analyzed. The results indicated that their strategies more closely resemble interest group behavior than behavior that is strictly embedded in them by their institution, which points to the conclusion that they are mostly driven by their self-interest.

When it comes to how they organize themselves, COMECE claims “issue-specific expertise” in different policy areas, which is a strategy that increases a group’s access to decision-making.⁹¹ COMECE is divided into different working-groups that focus on different policy areas: migration and asylum, external action, religious freedom.⁹² For each working-group, a special expert is assigned by the national Bishops’ Conferences.⁹³ Consequently, it is not the bishops themselves but rather skilled lay persons,⁹⁴ mostly legal experts, who are in charge of these working groups and commissions. When a specific cause is invoked in statements, however, it is mainly communicated through their clergymen⁹⁵ – who, one can argue, have greater legitimacy in the normative dimension. In contrast, CROCEU has no specifically defined policy areas of interest on its website and its staff consists of clergy instead of lay people. Consequently, their discourse, is less adjusted to EU rationality and their requests often come off as “dogmas”.⁹⁶ Furthermore, given that these actors already have representations of national churches in Brussels, they work as

⁹¹ Browne, *loc. cit.*

⁹² “Our work”, COMECE, retrieved 2 May 2020, <http://www.comece.eu/site/en/ourtopics>

⁹³ “Commission and Working Groups,” COMECE, retrieved 3 May 2020, <http://www.comece.eu/site/en/howare/commissionsworkinggroups>

⁹⁴ De Vlieger, *loc. cit.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

“seconded”⁹⁷ staff for CROCEU. Consequently, unlike COMECE, they possess no issue-specific expertise that could benefit them in relations to the EU. Given their decentralized nature and reliance on nation-states for financial resources, the lack of experts or adjustment may be partly explained by these limitations.⁹⁸

In addition to how they organize themselves, another factor that can provide insight in examining the strategies of religious actors is to test how much they adjust to the EU requirements.⁹⁹ An important expectation of the Commission, according to its guidelines on the implementation of Article 17, is for all “interlocutors”¹⁰⁰ to enlist in the Transparency Register. Out of the six categories that exist in the register from lobbies to NGO’s, “Organizations representing churches and religious communities”¹⁰¹ have a separate category. Consequently, both COMECE and CROCEU are registered in the Transparency Register, where they provide their budget, sources of the budget, legal status, and expenses. As De Vlieger comments, the registration on the register makes these groups more closely resemble “transparent and representative NGOs”,¹⁰² especially given that COMECE has previously been criticized by the media, members of the EP, and competing interest groups for keeping their accounting practices secret.¹⁰³ A loophole in this register, however, is that the registration is meant for organizations representing churches and not churches themselves – allowing the bookkeeping of churches to remain secret. Given that most of CROCEU’s members consist of clergy who are seconded staff and have their

⁹⁷ “Committee of the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches in the European Union”, *Transparency Register*, 2020, retrieved 3 May 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/consultation/displaylobbyist.do?id=945330325636-88>

⁹⁸ Massignon, *loc. cit.*

⁹⁹ De Vlieger, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁰ European Commission, “Guidelines on the implementation of Article 17 TFEU by the European Commission”, retrieved 5 May 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/archives/bepa/pdf/dialogues/guidelines-implementation-art-17.pdf>

¹⁰¹ “Transparency and the EU”, *Transparency Register*, retrieved 1 May 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/homePage.do?redir=false&locale=en>

¹⁰² De Vlieger, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

primary position in national churches, this loophole may make many of their activities under national churches opaque. The same can be applied to COMECE's staff who have their guidelines set by bishops who are not required to register in the register.

Finally, the ability to mobilize and “convert shared attitudes into an organization able to articulate group demands”¹⁰⁴ is a significant factor in determining a group's access to decision making according to Rose.¹⁰⁵ In the case for both Catholic and Orthodox actors, the ability to unite has been evident – although with more intensity for Catholic than Orthodox actors. As the interviewee from the EP states, “If they (religious groups) want a meeting with Commissioner, they better all have the representatives together”.¹⁰⁶ In the case of Orthodox actors, uniting as one organization under CROCEU is a significant indication – especially given its decentralized nature – of them adjusting to the requirements and expectations of the Commission. Another recent example of such mobilization includes the meeting of COMECE, CEC, and CROCEU with the Romanian Presidency of the Council at the time. Furthermore, the EP interviewee recalls the unity of these organizations when the EU was re-negotiating a trade deal with Pakistan and religious organizations united to oppose it due to a Pakistani Christian woman being convicted of blasphemy.¹⁰⁷ Finally, in the case of COMECE, the partnership with CEC has been recurring over a long period of time.

In essence, as espousing a set of strategies, COMECE fully meets the expectations of our RCI hypothesis by possessing issue-specific resources, mobilization capabilities, and by adjusting to the EU requirements in their communication and organization.¹⁰⁸ These are all interest group

¹⁰⁴ Rose, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Interview with an official, European Parliament, Brussels, 3 March 2020.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ De Vlieger, *loc. cit.*

strategies that increase their chances of having an influence on and access to the EU decision-making. As for CROCEU, all the RCI expectations are also met except for the matter of issue-specific resources and expertise. Given CROCEU's adjustment to other EU's requirement such as registry on the Transparency Register and mobilization despite its decentralized nature, their lack of expertise seems to more of a matter of resources and capability rather than lack of willingness and interest. As a researcher working in the field notes, these churches often times lack the sophisticated political communication skills required for dialogue with EU institutions.¹⁰⁹

Objectives of religious organizations in the EU

Although the analysis of religious groups' strategies already provided us with some insight on their objectives, this section will present the findings centered specifically on the objectives of religious groups. When it comes to COMECE, the activities of the group according to their official website involve the organization of events, release of publications, press-releases and a newsletter titled "Europe Infos".¹¹⁰ As Massignon has noted, these newsletters are strikingly "neutral and non-religious".¹¹¹ When it comes to their publications, they are all related to the EU agenda but not necessarily centered on policies that are value-based. For example, Ladenburger¹¹² brings up the example of a publication entitled "Technology at the service of peace", which laid-out recommendations to the EU and its member states to prohibit "completely autonomous armed systems."¹¹³ COMECE also releases recommendations for the EU Council presidencies, which are mostly related to what they term as the common good – for example, ensuring that not all EU

¹⁰⁹ Informal discussion with a researcher in the field, Phone call, 23 March 2020.

¹¹⁰ "Our Work", COMECE, retrieved 1 May 2020, <http://www.comece.eu/site/en/ourwork>

¹¹¹ Bérengère Massignon, "The European Compromise: Between Immanence and Transcendence", *Social Compass*, vol. 54, no. 4, 2007, pp. 573.

¹¹² Interview with Friederike Ladenburger, Legal Advisor for Ethics, Research and Health (COMECE), Skype call, 17 April 2020

¹¹³ "COMECE reflections on 'uncrewed armed systems'", COMECE, 2019, retrieved 3 May 2020, <http://www.comece.eu/comece-reflections-on-uncrewed-armed-systems>

activities are, “market-oriented and economic”.¹¹⁴ A few of them, however, are recommendations that can be more closely related to the self-interest of these churches. For example, retaining the Transparency Register section for their organizations without including churches themselves, or restating the principles of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights by inviting churches “as long-standing actors in the field, to bring specific contribution”.¹¹⁵

A recurring activity by COMECE that most strongly leads us to believe that their primary objective is their self-interest is their push for an official, formalized, and structured dialogue with the EU since 1990s, which they justify with the claim that the existing system had no clear goals related to policy development.¹¹⁶ COMECE’s Legal Advisor for Ethics, Research and Health makes the same claim in an interview, stating that although the high visibility these events get are good on the one hand, more can be done in terms of content.¹¹⁷ She suggests the setting can be changed to the working-level of the committees, which is similar to the request made by the CEC and COMECE in a memorandum for a pre-legislative consultation procedure which would let these groups take part in decision-making processes.¹¹⁸ According to a leaked report released by Open Democracy, these suggestions were taken up by an Irish member and vice-president of the European Parliament – Mairead McGuinness – who presented a recommendation for “more direct meetings between religious associations and the parliament’s rapporteurs” to the European Parliament’s bureau.¹¹⁹ The leaked report caused disquiet among members of the EP and the

¹¹⁴ “Contribution of COMECE and CEC to Finland’s Presidency Programme ‘Sustainable Europe – Sustainable Future’”, COMECE, 2019, retrieved 1 May 2020, http://www.comece.eu/dl/nstmJKJKnlNJqx4KJK/COMECE-CEC_contribution_Finnish_Presidency_of_the_EU_Council.pdf

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ De Vlieger, *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁷ Interview with Friederike Ladenburger, Legal Advisor for Ethics, Research and Health (COMECE), Skype call, 17 April 2020

¹¹⁸ De Vlieger, *loc. cit.*

¹¹⁹ Sian Norris, “Revealed: controversial plan to boost religious lobby in Brussels, as far right pledges to fight for “Christian Europe,” *Open Democracy*, 2019, retrieved 6 May 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-controversial-plan-to-boost-religious-lobby-in-brussels-as-far-right-pledges-to-fight-for-christian-europe/>

media. Furthermore, it proved the influence religious groups can have on EU institutions and decision-making.

When it comes to CROCEU, its activities are of a more limited scope than COMECE's and include conferences, annual seminars, and statements that give updates on their activities. The annual seminars are held between member churches of CROCEU and, as Leustean writes, place greater emphasis on Orthodox solidarity than actual dialogue with EU institutions.¹²⁰ This goes in line with the goals they have registered on the Transparency Register, which is to "facilitate cooperation among the Orthodox Representatives to the European Institutions"¹²¹ In this case, their objective is more closely related to consolidating their power and unity than promoting the public interest. Their events also include meetings with presidencies of the Council as well as seminars with EU institutions. Unlike COMECE, however, the meetings with the presidencies are held less systematically and limited information is provided about them in their statements.

Unlike their strategies of these organizations, the goals of COMECE and CROCEU are more difficult to pinpoint. In terms of COMECE, it is evident that most of its public activities have normative goals. On the other hand, its attempt to gain greater access to decision making and participate in less transparent processes point to the possibility of these goals also are more oriented to its own self-interest. When it comes to CROCEU, although no such attempts as evidenced by COMECE have been made, many of CROCEU's activities are more oriented towards promoting an inter-Orthodox dialogue among the different branches than engaging with EU institutions. In their sporadic and infrequent engagements with the EU, however, their points of discussion are mostly related to normative end-goals.

¹²⁰ Leustean, *loc. cit.*

¹²¹ "Committee of the Representatives of the Orthodox Churches in European Union," *Transparency Register*, 2017, retrieved 6 May 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/transparencyregister/public/consultation/displaylobbyist.do?id=945330325636-88>

All in all, despite the fact that some of COMECE and CROCEU's activities are indeed dedicated to the common good, most of their strategies and objectives are most closely in line with rational-choice institutionalism. That being said, we can most closely associate religious organizations to interest groups; such categorization can make the understanding and future research and analysis of religious actors easier.

Conclusion

In conclusion, given the special place accorded to religious actors in the European Union and their active involvement in EU affairs, this paper found it puzzling that these organizations have been largely neglected in the field of EU studies, and more generally in the wider field of Political Science. Consequently, it aimed to contribute towards filling this gap by researching the objectives and strategies of religious actors who are effective players in EU affairs.

Given that religious actors are mostly bound to institutions, institutionalist theories were taken as a framework for the research. Although historical institutionalism has been the most frequent approach taken in the few studies that exist on religious actors, its emphasis on organizational structures and path-dependent policies prevent it from serving as an all-encompassing theory in studying religious actors from different denominations. Consequently, this paper relied on normative and rational-choice institutionalism as theoretical frameworks that could provide all-encompassing, yet diverging, perspectives to the research question. Catholic and Orthodox actors were taken as case studies given that they have most actively participated in a range of EU affairs, unlike their Protestant counterparts who have remained fairly uninterested non-participants in EU politics. Research was conducted using the discursive institutionalist

framework -which involved placing “what” these actors say and do on the same footing as “where, how, why, and when” they say and do it.

According to our theoretical frameworks, two competing hypotheses were drawn on why religious actors would participate in the EU’s affairs. On the one hand, the normative hypothesis claims for religious actors to be driven by ideological and altruistic motives to participate in EU affairs, so as to ensure that the EU is working for everyone. Their strategies, accordingly, are of an apolitical nature and derive from their institutional roles. This is the view advocated by religious actors themselves who justify their involvement for the promotion of the common good or the wider public interest. Additionally, this view was shared among the founding fathers and influential leaders of the EU and is the reason religious actors hold a unique status in the EU today. On the other hand, the rational-choice hypothesis expects religious actors – as with any other political actor – to be driven by the aim to maximize their power, esteem, and finances. To achieve these objectives, it is expected for religious actors to act strategically and adapt accordingly to their respective environments.

In the analysis of the internationally prominent religious actors within the remit of this study, our results have showed that despite their different institutional standings, their engagement in the EU was most closely in line with the rational-choice hypothesis that claims that the main motivation of actors is the desire to retain their power and status. The main indicator of this finding was that the timing when these actors became the most active in direct relations with the EU was during periods when their power and status was either under threat or when there existed a clear window of opportunity to consolidate and regain their status and power. In terms of strategies, they all acted instrumentally to meet their interests. For the transnational Catholic Pope and Ecumenical Patriarch, instrumental behavior involved appearing frequently in public, adjusting to the EU

discourse, and claiming an apolitical role in EU affairs. For the Russian Patriarch with a more national reach, strategic behavior involved being direct and harsh with his demands and making little effort to appear in public or adjust to the EU discourse.

In the second level of analysis, the representations of religious organizations were examined. The analysis found the strategies of these organizations to most closely resemble that of an interest group in that they sought to gain special privileges in keeping with their “special” status as well as being accorded a separate category in Article 17 TFEU. This is compounded by these religious organizations having a separate category on the Transparency Register while COMECE has been demanding access to pre-legislative procedures and asserting that their public and official activities are mostly based on promotion of the “common good”. Thus, an interim categorization of these religious actors comprising an ‘interest group non-governmental organization’ does not exclude their potential for study as interest groups *per se*.

Overall, when combining this study’s results, we can conclude that despite the special status that religious actors have in the EU treaties and notwithstanding their refusal to be referred to as interest groups, the strategies and objectives of religious actors in the EU indicate that they resemble and can be studied as any other mainstream political actor. This contradicts the expectations of normative institutionalism as well as the expectations of the influential leaders of the early stages of the EU, who envisioned religious actors contributing as balancing and apolitical actors whose role would consist of ensuring that the EU was working for everyone. Naturally, this also puts into question the special role accorded to religious actors in the EU. Nevertheless, that is not to say that religious actors have not participated in promoting the public interest. Rather, most of the activities of these actors were found to be strategically oriented to retaining their power and status.

In the wider context of Political Science, this paper has added to the limited literature that exist on role of religious actors in the European Union by studying their goals and objectives. In doing so, it found that religious actors are active political players that strategically act to defend their interest and legitimacy. Furthermore, this paper added value to the academia by studying religious actors under the same theoretical frameworks. Until now, different religious actors have rarely been studied as actors of one category given differences in their institutional configurations. With the rational-choice and normative institutionalist framework, this paper has offered a framework to study religious actors of different denomination under one category. This can facilitate future research and analysis on religious actors as well as on other non-state actors.

The limitations of this paper and grounds for future research are that values and interests are not easy to differentiate, especially in relation to the instance of religious actors that act under the normative umbrella. Consequently, context analysis can lead to conflicting interpretations. This offers fruitful avenues for future studies given the volatile nature of Church-State relations and widespread unease about the future of the European Union as a pan-European enterprise that was not envisaged as such by its original founding fathers.

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