

The Religiousness of Ukrainian Refugees in Slovakia as an Indicator of Their Adaptive Potential to Cultural Integration

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Abstract

Both the Ukrainian and Slovak peoples have strong religious traditions. While both nations are predominantly Christian, most Ukrainians identify as Orthodox, and most Slovaks as Roman Catholic. However, this shared Christian foundation presents distinct challenges and opportunities for cultural adaptation, as religious practices and beliefs can play a significant role in the integration process. Despite its importance, the intersection of religiosity and the adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia has not been sufficiently explored by European and Ukrainian scholars. The aim of this article is to examine how forced migration to Slovakia has influenced the religious practices, beliefs, and broader cultural adaptation of Ukrainian refugees, with a focus on their potential for adaptation in a new socio-cultural environment. The present research draws on a combination of semi-structured interviews with Ukrainian refugees, two online surveys (including one with open-ended questions), and participant observation to provide a comprehensive analysis. The findings reveal that Ukrainian refugees demonstrate considerable flexibility in adapting their religious practices, characterised by a pragmatic approach that blends traditional beliefs with the realities of their host society. This adaptive potential, observed through a process of “metamodern oscillation”, enables Ukrainian refugees to effectively navigate the cultural dynamics of Slovakia while maintaining connections to their religious identity.

Key words

Religion – cultural adaptation – refugees – Ukraine – Slovakia

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Introduction

Around 6 million Ukrainians were forced to cross the EU borders for safety after the start of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine.¹ More than 100,000 Ukrainians have received temporary protection status in Slovakia.² As the war has continued, the importance of their cultural adaptation and social integration into the host society has increased. One of the key factors in understanding this process is religion, which has historically played a pivotal role in shaping identity and social cohesion.

Among the factors that have contributed to the choice of Slovakia as a place of residence by Ukrainian refugees are geographical location, as well as the closeness of language, culture, and mentality. However, a deeper look reveals that this “closeness” is actually quite conditional. Both Ukrainians and Slovaks are religious, and both nations identify as Christian. However, most Ukrainians consider themselves to be Orthodox and most Slovaks Roman Catholic. According to the 2021 census of Slovakia, 56% of the population identify as Roman Catholic, while only 0.9% profess the Orthodox faith.³ In contrast, a significant portion of Ukrainian refugees, who hail from a country where 61% of the population identify as Orthodox,⁴ find themselves in a predominantly Catholic environment. There are 154 Orthodox churches⁵ in Slovakia, including two in the capital, Bratislava, underlining the smaller presence of Orthodoxy compared to the 4,125 Catholic churches nationwide.⁶ The level of religiosity and the attitudes of refugees towards matters of faith therefore become a significant factor in the cultural adaptation process.

Historically, during various military conflicts, Ukrainians have repeatedly faced the challenge of choosing an ally, not only in political matters but also in religious terms. The postulate of “proximity of faith” has often played a role in key decisions, and changes in the political landscape have influenced transformations in religious attitude, frequently leading to societal divisions. Today, in the context of the war, many Ukrainians forced to seek refuge in Catholic

1 Ukraine Refugee Situation. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/ukraine> (accessed 8 October 2024).

2 People under temporary protection stable at 4.2 million. *Eurostat*. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240508-2> (accessed 8 October 2024).

3 Sčítanie obyvateľov, domov a bytov 2021. Available at: <https://www.scitanie.sk/> (accessed 8 October 2024).

4 YAKYMENKO, Yuriy – BYCHENKO, Andriy – MISHCHENKO, Mykhailo: *Ukrainian society, state and church in war. Church and religious situation in Ukraine 2023. (Information materials)*. Kyiv: Razumkov Centre, 2023, pp. 34.

5 Kostoly Slovenska. Máme 154 pravoslávnych chrámov, ďalších sedem je vo výstavbe. *Denník Postoj*. Available at: <https://svetkrestanstva.postoj.sk/126117/mame-154-pravoslavnnych-chramov-dalsich-sedem-je-vo-vystavbe> (accessed 8 October 2024).

6 Pravoslávna cirkev zažíva boom stavania kostolov. Vďaka migrantom. *SME*. Available at: <https://domov.sme.sk/c/22825141/ako-sa-stavaju-kostoly-na-slovensku.html> (accessed 8 October 2024).

countries in Europe have begun to perceive Orthodoxy differently, adopting a more critical perspective of its tenets and comparing their experiences. This process, in turn, has led to the formation of worldview pluralism and increased conformism.

While much of the existing research on migrant religiosity has focused on the American⁷ and European contexts,⁸ particularly on how religion facilitates adaptation for different migrant groups, this study provides a nuanced perspective within the European context, focusing specifically on Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. Previous studies have examined the integration of Muslim migrants in predominantly Christian European societies,⁹ the religious reorganisation of Turkish Muslim and Polish Catholic immigrants in Germany,¹⁰ and the role of spirituality in the resettlement of Kosovo Albanians.¹¹ The relationship between migrants' religiosity and their cultural adaptation has also been a central theme.¹² Conversely, research has explored the impact of immigration on the religious beliefs of migrants.¹³ There are also studies that offer retrospective descriptions of the religious life of Ukrainians in Croatia but the current situation has not been thoroughly examined.¹⁴ Moreover, there are reviews of the religious life in Ukraine before the war¹⁵ and the results of surveys on religious issues in Ukraine have been published.¹⁶ However, the religious adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in a predominantly Christian but confessionally different environment such as like Slovakia remains under-researched. This gap underlines the relevance of the present research, as it seeks to address this oversight and contribute to the broader understanding of religion as a factor in cultural adaptation.

7 EBY, Jessica – IVERSON, Erika – SMYERS, Jenifer – KEKIC, Erol: The Faith Community's Role in Refugee Resettlement in the United States. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, 2011, n. 3, pp. 586–605.

8 FONER, Nancy – ALBA, Richard: Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion? *International Migration Review* 42, 2008, pp. 360–392.

9 MAUSSEN, Marcel: Islamic Presence and Mosque Establishment in France: Colonialism, Arrangements for Guest Workers and Citizenship. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 33, 2007, n. 6, pp. 981–1002.

10 DIEHL, Claudia – KOENIG, Matthias: God Can Wait – New migrants in Germany between early adaptation and religious reorganisation. *International Migration* 51, 2013, n. 3, pp. 8–22 <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12075>

11 GOZDZIAK, Elżbieta: Spiritual emergency room: The role of spirituality and religion in the resettlement of Kosovo Albanians. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, 2002, n. 2, pp. 136–152.

12 MASSEY, Douglas S. – HIGGINS, Monica Espinosa: The Effect of Immigration on Religious Belief and Practice: A Theologizing or Alienating Experience? *Social Science Research* 40, 2011, n. 5, pp. 1371–1389.

13 TRINKA, Eric M.: Migration and internal religious pluralism: A review of present findings. *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 28, 2019, pp. 3–23.

14 SAGAN, Galyna: Історія становлення та сучасні тенденції релігійного життя українців Хорватії [The history of formation and modern trends of the religious life of Ukrainians in Croatia]. *Київські історичні студії* 14, 2022, pp. 56–62. <https://doi.org/10.28925/2524-0757.2022.17>

15 Релігія в Україні. Available at: <https://vue.gov.ua/Релігія в Україні> (accessed 11 July 2023).

16 Як змінювалась релігійність українців з 2000 року. Короткий переказ великого дослідження Центру Разумкова. *Lb.ua*. Available at: https://lb.ua/society/2022/02/02/504398_yak_zmynuyalas_religiynist.html (accessed 11 July 2023).

The aim of the present research is to analyse how the forced migration of Ukrainian refugees to Slovakia influences their religious practices and serves as an indicator of their cultural adaptation. This research also seeks to understand how the concept of metamodern oscillation can provide insights into the adaptability of Ukrainian refugee' religiosity. By focusing on specific examples, such as the adaptation of Christmas celebrations, this study demonstrates how religious practices serve as a lens through which broader cultural adaptation processes can be understood. The choice of Christmas as an example is deliberate, as this holiday encapsulates the intersection of religious tradition and cultural adaptation, offering insights into how refugees balance their Orthodox heritage with the customs of their host society. This analysis not only deepens our understanding of how Ukrainian refugees navigate their new cultural environment but also highlights the ways in which religious practices can act as both an anchor for their identity and a bridge to the integration in the host country.

Theoretical Background: Refugees with Temporary Protection and Adaptation

For the purposes of this research, it is important to define some basic terms that are often used in studies of migration such as "forced migration", "migrant", and "refugee". Forced migration is a broad term that refers to the displacement of people as a result of conflict, natural disasters, or other crises, where individuals are forced to leave their place of residence without the possibility of voluntary relocation. This concept is distinct from voluntary or economic migration, which involves an element of choice. The term "forced migrant" encompasses all individuals displaced for various reasons.¹⁷ What distinguishes forced migration is the lack of initial willingness or desire to leave one's home country or place of residence.

The term "refugee" has a specific legal definition, which emerged prominently in the mid-twentieth century with the adoption of the 1951 Refugee Convention. According to this convention, a refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or unwilling to seek protection of that country.¹⁸ Refugees, unlike other migrants, are forced to leave their country in search of safety because of existential threats such as war or persecution.

17 EMN Asylum and Migration Glossary. Available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/networks/european-migration-network-emn/emn-asylum-and-migration-glossary_en (accessed 8 October 2024).

18 Ibid.

The situation in Ukraine has led to the introduction of the term “odídenec” in Slovakia, which refers to refugees under temporary protection.¹⁹ This status, created in response to the influx of Ukrainian refugees following the 2022 Russian invasion, provides temporary asylum and allows individuals to live and work in Slovakia while receiving social, medical, and educational benefits.²⁰ Under the EU Temporary Protection Directive, enacted on 4 March 2022, Ukrainian citizens were granted the right to visa-free travel within the EU and could apply for temporary protection in any member state. The initial duration of this protection is one year, but it can be extended.²¹

Temporary protection differs from refugee status or asylum-seeker status in its legal implications. While asylum seekers are awaiting a decision on their application for international protection, persons under temporary protection can work immediately and have access to various social benefits. As a legal term, “odídenec” applies specifically to Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia.²² However, for a sake of clarity and broader academic discourse, this article will use the more widely recognised term “Ukrainian refugees”. This study will focus primarily on those who have been granted temporary protection in Slovakia, as their experiences provide critical insights into the dynamics of cultural adaptation, particularly through the lens of religiousness as a factor in their adaptive potential.

In the context of Ukrainian refugees’ adaptation in Slovakia, the concept of metamodern oscillation²³ provides a valuable lens for understanding their experiences. Metamodern oscillation refers to the pendulum-like movement between opposites, such as hope and despair, tradition and modernity, or, in this case, home culture and host culture. Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia experience a form of “cultural oscillation” where they navigate between their attachment to Ukraine and their need to adapt to Slovak society. This oscillation is not a sign of failure to integrate but rather an indicator of flexible adaptation – a hallmark of the metamodern individual who can balance multiple identities and cultural influences.

This oscillation is evident in the way the refugees engage with religious practices. While maintaining their Ukrainian religious traditions, they also adapt to the religious landscape in Slovakia, which may involve attending Slovak churches, participating in interfaith dialogues, or adopting local religious customs.

19 Upozornenie: štatút dočasného útočiska majú odídenci z Ukrajiny aj po 31. decembri, overiť sa to dá online. Available at: <https://www.minv.sk/?tlacove-spravy&sprava=upozornenie-statut-docasneho-utociska-maju-odidenci-z-ukrajiny-aj-po-31-decembri-overit-sa-to-da-online> (accessed 8 October 2024).

20 TRAUNER, Florian – VALODSKAITE, Gabriele: The EU’s temporary protection regime for Ukrainians: Understanding the legal and political background and its implications. *CESifo forum* 23, 2022 n. 4, pp. 17–20.

21 EMN Asylum and Migration Glossary, *ibid*.

22 TRAUNER, Florian – VALODSKAITE, Gabriele: The EU’s temporary protection regime for Ukrainians: Understanding the legal and political background and its implications, *ibid*, p. 17.

23 VERMEULEN, Timotheus – VAN DEN AKKER, Robin: Notes on metamodernism. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, 2010, n. 1, pp. 1–14.

This dynamic interplay between maintaining one's religious identity and adjusting to a new cultural setting reflects the broader process of adaptation that the metamodern encapsulates.

Research Methods and Data

This research employs a mixed-method approach, incorporating qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including in-depth interviews, open-ended and closed-ended online surveys, and participant observation. The primary aim of this methodological approach is to study the religiousness of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia and to assess how religious practices influence their adaptive potential for cultural integration.

Between January and March 2023, I conducted eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with Ukrainian refugees living in Slovakia. Their participants were recruited through the Ukrainian Community Centre in Bratislava and Facebook groups tailored for Ukrainians in Slovakia. All interviews were conducted in Ukrainian, and each lasted more than an hour, allowing respondents to discuss their experiences in detail.

The interview guide consisted of over 100 questions, divided into several thematic blocks, covering areas such as: migration background (reasons for displacement, arrival in Slovakia); living conditions (housing, employment, and financial situation); social life (language use, communication, and social networks); education and healthcare; religion, culture, and traditions (this block contained of 30 questions, focusing on religious practices, their significance, and adaptation to new circumstances).

The interview participants were seven women and one man, aged between 18 and 50, all of whom had fled the war in Ukraine and received temporary protection in Slovakia. Their educational backgrounds ranged from secondary education to higher education, and they came from Orthodox Christian families. Among the participants were practising Orthodox Christians, atheists, and people with minimal religious engagement. The diverse religious and non-religious backgrounds of the respondents were crucial for exploring how refugees of different faiths adapt to life in Slovakia. The semi-structured interviews allowed to capture both the flexibility and challenges in the religious adaptation of the refugees, providing a comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences.

From December 2022 to April 2023, I conducted an open-ended online survey to gather additional qualitative data. This survey included questions related to the respondents' demographic profile, their religious beliefs or worldviews, and how they practiced or celebrated religious traditions in Slovakia. Participants were encouraged to answer freely, allowing for a range of expressions of their religious experiences and reflections on their adaptation to Slovakia.

The survey reached a total of 12 participants, of whom 10 were women and two were men, aged between 18 and 50. The respondents were predominantly Orthodox Christians (5), with others identifying as Christians (3), an atheist (1), a Buddhist (1), and an agnostic (1). Participants could respond in Ukrainian or Russian, depending on their language preference. Several respondents (2) had residence permit in Slovakia, while the majority were under temporary protection.

In March and April 2023, I carried out a closed-ended online survey to gather quantitative data on religious beliefs and adaptation processes. The survey, developed in Ukrainian, consisted of 23 questions addressing demographic information, religious affiliation, family traditions, and changes in religious or secular worldviews following Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Additional questions focused on church attendance, trust in religious institutions, and attitudes towards the shifting of Christmas celebrations.

A total of 71 participants completed the survey, 57 of whom were women, and 14 were men, ranging in age from 18 to 60. In terms of education, 51 participants had higher education degrees, while the rest had secondary or vocational education. Religious affiliation included 42 Orthodox Christians, 15 Christians of other denominations, 6 atheists, 2 agnostics, and 6 participants with other beliefs or worldviews.

The gender imbalance in all of my samples is consistent with broader demographic trends observed in studies on Ukrainian refugees, including those with much larger sample sizes. This skew reflects Ukraine's martial law, which requires men between the ages of 18 and 60 to remain in the country for military service. For example, the German study by Giesing, Panchenko, and Poutvaara,²⁴ which surveyed 936 refugees and conducted 17 in-depth interviews, found that the majority of respondents were women, with only four male participants. This demographic profile closely mirrors my own, supporting the validity of my smaller sample size and confirming that the findings are consistent with larger-scale research.

Maintaining ethical standards was a priority throughout the research process. The majority of my participants are refugees currently residing in Slovakia under temporary protection status. The primary reason for seeking asylum was to escape the war, lose their homes, and ensure the safety of their own lives and those of their children. In order to safeguard their security and confidentiality, all data were anonymised and fully de-identified to ensure the protection of their personal information. During interviews and the open-ended survey, only first names were collected, and participants had the option to use any name

24 GIESING, Yvonne – PANCHENKO, Tetyana – POUTVAARA, Panu: *Adaptation and Integration Strategies of Refugee from Ukraine in Germany*. München: ifo Institut, 2022, p. 9.

they preferred, which many did. No names were collected in the closed-ended survey. Additionally, participants were fully informed of the aims and procedures of the study before giving their informed consent. They were made aware that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. These measures are in line with ethical standards in anthropological research.²⁵

In addition to interviews and surveys, I employed participant observation as a qualitative research method. Over the course of several months, I actively participated in community events organized by the Ukrainian refugee community in Bratislava. This method allowed for direct observation of religious practices, social interactions, and adaptation strategies within the community.²⁶ By observing religious services, holiday celebrations, and community gatherings, I gained insight into how Ukrainian refugees maintain religious traditions and adapt them to the Slovak cultural environment.

By combining qualitative and quantitative methods, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of how religiousness serves as an indicator of adaptive potential among Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. The use of in-depth interviews, open-ended and closed-ended surveys, and participant observation allowed for a nuanced understanding of how religious practices are maintained, adapted, or transformed in the context of forced migration. These methods allowed for an in-depth understanding of the role of religiosity in the adaptation processes of Ukrainian refugees.

Religiousness as a Dimension of Cultural Adaptation: a Metamodern Perspective

While analysing the religious attitudes of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, we see a nuanced interplay between faith, cultural traditions, and adaptive potential. This dynamic can be framed within the theory of metamodern oscillation, where cultural adaptation is characterised by a fluid movement between traditional and modern values. The religious identity of these refugees reveals how deeply their cultural integration is shaped by both continuity and change, embodying this oscillation between preserving faith and adapting to new contexts.

According to the data obtained from the survey, in response to the question about their attitude to faith, 73.2% of respondents considered themselves religious, 15.5% identified as non-religious, and 11.3% chose not to define their

25 DE LAINE, Marlene: *Fieldwork, Participation and practice: ethics and dilemmas in qualitative research*. London: Sage Publications, 2000.

26 ROBEY, Daniel – TAYLOR, Wallace T. F.: Engaged Participant Observation: An Integrative Approach to Qualitative Field Research for Practitioner-Scholars. *Engaged management review* 2, 2018, n. 1, Art.1. pp. 1-13 <https://doi.org/10.28953/2375-8643.1028>

religious status. However, different answers were received regarding changes in respondents' attitude towards faith. Specifically, 43.7% reported that they had been believers since childhood, 38% became believers as adults, 5.6% had not believed since childhood, and 12.7% stopped believing as adults. This allows us to identify previously undefined respondents. In general, 81.7% of respondents are believers, and 18.3% are non-believers. These numbers are higher than the data obtained from nationwide Ukrainian polls in November 2021, when 66–68% of respondents considered themselves religious.²⁷ This increase may be explained by the fact that women and older people are more religious. On the other hand, the increase in religiosity may be related to the beginning of the active warfare in Ukraine, similar to 2014, when 76% of respondents considered themselves religious.²⁸ However, the respondents of the current survey indicated that 73.2% of them did not change their attitude after the 24 February 2022 remaining believers, 11.3% remained non-believers, 11.3% stopped believing, and only 4.2% became believers after 24 February 2022. The discrepancy between these figures and the data on self-identification likely relates to those who did not identify themselves.

While many continue to identify with traditional religious practices, others experience a shift towards a more individualised or secular worldview. The fact that some started or stopped believing after the war began reflects a deeper oscillation between reliance on faith for stability and a disillusionment with traditional structures.

Christianity dominates as the most prevalent religion among Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, with 81.7% of respondents identifying as Christian. Other groups include non-believers (8.5%), Muslims (2.8%), Buddhists (1.4%), and Judaists (1.4%), with 4.2% identifying with other religions. Among Christians, 62% are Orthodox, 7% are Ukrainian Greek Catholic, 7% are Protestant, and 5.6% are Roman Catholic. A notable 19.7% identify themselves as Christians without denominational affiliation. This figure is significantly higher than the 8-9% who identified as "just Christians" in national polls in Ukraine.²⁹

One interviewee expressed this confessional fluidity, stating: *"Now I am more atheistic, but I believe in God, not as in a Christian God but as in a being superior to me."*³⁰ This reflects a growing trend towards non-denominational religiosity, where faith is maintained, but traditional religious affiliation becomes less relevant. This metamodern oscillation suggests that while faith continues to be

27 Релігія в Україні, *ibid.*

28 Як змінювалась релігійність українців з 2000 року. Короткий переказ великого дослідження Центру Разумкова, *ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*

30 Ілья (18 years old); 22.03.2023.

a central part of identity, the way in which that faith is expressed can evolve, influenced by both personal and broader social factors. Thus, in general, the attitudes of Ukrainian refugees to the matters of faith and religion do not differ significantly from those in Ukraine. The majority of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia believe in God, they are Christians and belong to the Orthodox confession.

In both Ukraine and Slovakia, many respondents maintained religious traditions, particularly during major holidays such as Easter. The emphasis on religious ceremonies, such as the consecration of Easter cakes and eggs, remains a shared cultural practice among both believers and non-believers. As Inna from Bratislava noted: *"I only perform religious ceremonies, which we have, when it is necessary due to the circumstances or when I join senior people..."*³¹ This reflects a metamodern oscillation between the social performance of religion and personal belief, where individuals engage in rituals because of cultural expectations rather than deep personal conviction. This behaviour might also represent a form of "religious conformism", where people participate in religious celebrations not necessarily out of deep conviction but because everyone around them is celebrating

Lilia, for example, continues to plan for traditional celebrations: *"We are planning to consecrate Easter cakes. We are going to our Orthodox [church]."*³² Meanwhile, Olga reminisced, *"Last Easter we made Easter cakes and painted eggs"*³³, indicating that such practices provide continuity in a disrupted environment. Yet not all religious engagement is tied to belief. Inna stated, *"...I do not go to the church often, only to learn history or to look at architecture or interesting icons."*³⁴ Here, church attendance serves a cultural or intellectual purpose rather than a religious one, further reflecting the metamodern shift towards individualised expressions of faith.

The religious attitudes and practices of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia offer deep insights into their potential for cultural adaptation. While many maintain their religious identity, we see evidence of a metamodern oscillation in how that identity is expressed – shifting between tradition and adaptation to new cultural norms. This flexibility in faith, whether through participation in Slovak Catholic traditions or a shift towards non-denominational spirituality, reflects their potential for adaptation. Religion serves these refugees both as a source of continuity and as a domain of cultural negotiation, revealing their broader capacity to integrate into Slovak society while preserving essential elements of their Ukrainian identity.

31 Inna (48 years old); 13.01.2022.

32 Lilia (32 years old); 18.03.2023.

33 Olga (42 years old); 29.01.2023.

34 Inna (48 years old); 13.01.2022.

Challenges in Religious Practice of Ukrainian Refugees in Slovakia

The limited presence of Orthodox churches is a significant barrier for Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia as the majority of Slovaks affiliate with Roman Catholicism. Iryna from Levice commented: *"It is difficult to find an Orthodox church. From my observations, they [Slovaks] are religious, and every feast they have become a day off. They celebrate and do not work..."*³⁵ Olga from Opoj similarly noted the scarcity of Orthodox churches: *"I have visited an Orthodox church but there is no choice because it is only one."*³⁶

This lack of access to familiar religious spaces poses challenges for refugees trying to maintain their religious practices. The closure of churches outside service hours, which contrasts with the more open access typical in Ukraine, adds another layer of difficulty. As Olga from Bratislava described: *"I am an Orthodox Christian... I am used to thinking that in Ukraine a temple is open all the time. I decided to go to a church. I found an Orthodox [church] here, but it was closed when I arrived. It was strange. I was surprised at first. The church works according to schedule. What?!"*³⁷ This speaks to the meta-modern tension between institutional structures and individual spiritual needs, where the rigidity of religious institutions clashes with the fluidity of personal religious expression.

The survey data among Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia³⁸ reveal a complex landscape of religious engagement that underlines both continuity and change in their religious practices. The findings illustrate diverse patterns of church attendance, with 16.9% of respondents identifying as regular weekly parishioners and another 16.9% attending only on significant religious holidays. A notable 25.4% are not formal parishioners but attend church services regularly, reflecting a commitment to maintaining religious practices despite their displacement. In contrast, 23.9% of respondents visit religious sites infrequently, and 14.1% express no interest in religious practices.

This diversity in religious engagement among Ukrainian refugees contrasts with the situation in Ukraine before the war, where a majority (53%) reported consistent church attendance, a trend that has remained relatively stable over the years, even in the context of war. Although 11% of Ukrainians reported attending church more frequently after the onset of the war, and 8% less frequently, a large portion (53%) maintained their previous habits. This continuity

35 Iryna (25 years old); 18.01.2023.

36 These data were obtained through the survey conducted in December 2022 – April 2023.

37 Olga (42 years old); 29.01.2023.

38 These data were obtained through the survey conducted in March and April 2023. The question was about attending church in Slovakia.

suggests that religious practices serve many of them as a source of stability and resilience amidst the turmoil of war.³⁹

However, the shift to a new environment in Slovakia introduces challenges that complicate this continuity. The scarcity of Orthodox churches in Slovakia and the differences in accessibility and practices compared to those in Ukraine create a situation where refugees must adapt their religious practices to new conditions. This adaptation is visible in the experiences of individuals like Iryna, who, despite being unable to access Orthodox services in her town, finds comfort in attending Roman Catholic services that resemble her familiar traditions: *"I am a religious person. I am a Christian. I was not able to visit an Orthodox church in my town because there isn't one in such a small town. I visited their [Slovak] churches which are Roman Catholic. Yes, they are similar. We visited at Christmas. Their churches are decorated like ours."*⁴⁰ Such adaptive behaviours highlight the importance of religious practices as a means of maintaining cultural continuity, even when the exact form of those practices must change.

However, the data also point to a significant proportion of the refugee population experiencing a disengagement from religion, as reflected in the 14.1% who express no interest in religious life. This disengagement may be related to the trauma and psychological burden of displacement, which disrupts not only daily routines but also the deeper spiritual practices that provide a sense of identity and community. The stress of displacement also affects religious adherence. Respondents like Anna and Alevtina reported an inability to maintain their usual religious traditions, particularly due to the psychological burden of the war. Anna, for example, lamented the loss of her traditional preparation of 12 meals for Christmas,⁴¹ while Alevtina expressed a lack of festive spirit, stating: *"I am not in a mood to celebrate."*⁴² These statements are crucial because they show how the trauma of displacement affects the maintenance not only of religious practices but also of a sense of cultural continuity. This also fits into the framework of the metamodern, where individuals oscillate between the desire for continuity and the overwhelming demands of their new reality.

These findings reveal the diversity in religious engagement among Ukrainian refugees. While some maintain regular participation in religious activities, many others show more sporadic involvement, or even disengagement from religious life altogether. The different patterns of participation underline the flexible, personal nature of religious practice among refugees. This is consistent with the

39 YAKYMENKO, Yuriy – BYCHENKO, Andriy – MISHCHENKO, Mykhailo: *Ukrainian society, state and church in war. Church and religious situation in Ukraine 2023*, *ibid*, pp. 7–8.

40 Iryna (25 years old); 18.01.2023.

41 Anna (41 years old); 11.01.2023.

42 These data were obtained through a survey conducted in December 2022 – April 2023.

broader theme of metamodern oscillation, in which individuals oscillate between tradition and adaptation, often engaging with religion in ways that suit their current circumstances rather than adhering strictly to institutionalised norms.

Christmas Celebration as an Adaptive Practice

The celebration of Christmas holds significant cultural and religious importance in both Ukrainian and Slovak societies. However, these celebrations differ in timing, religious traditions, and cultural emphasis. In Slovakia, where the majority of the population follows the Roman Catholic tradition, Christmas is celebrated on 25 December according to the Gregorian calendar. It is a central holiday characterised by a family-oriented atmosphere and festive meals, such as carp and potato salad. For Roman Catholics, the birth of Christ is the most important religious holiday in the calendar.

In contrast, in Ukraine, religious affiliation and calendar observance differ, with a substantial portion of the population traditionally celebrating Christmas on 7 January according to the Julian calendar. This date is in line with the practices of the Orthodox Church. Emphasis is often placed on the spiritual aspect of the holiday, including attending church services, preparing traditional dishes such as *kutia*, and participating in extensive carolling. For the Orthodox, Easter holds more significance than Christmas.

However, in response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been a shift among many Ukrainian believers in the Orthodox Church of Ukraine to adopt 25 December as the date for Christmas celebrations. This shift is part of a broader movement toward the adoption of the new Julian calendar, and the state holiday has also been officially moved to 25 December.⁴³ However, this change remains controversial among many Ukrainian refugees, as some continue to adhere to the traditional date of 7 January. It is also important to note that Orthodox churches in Slovakia continue to celebrate Christmas on 7 January, providing a space for those Ukrainians who prefer to maintain this aspect of their religious traditions.

The decision of many Ukrainian refugees to celebrate Christmas on December 25, alongside or instead of the traditional date 7 January,⁴⁴ is emblematic of this oscillation. According to a survey, 45.1% of Ukrainians in Slovakia now celebrate Christmas on 25 December, while 19.7% celebrate it twice, and 11.3% adhere strictly to the 7 January date.⁴⁵ This shift in religious practice is not merely

43 Україна вперше відзначає Різдво 25 грудня: як ПЦУ та УГКЦ прийшли до цього кроку. *New voice*. Available at: <https://nv.ua/ukr/ukraine/events/rizdvo-25-grudnya-v-ukrajini-yak-pcu-ta-ugkc-pereyshli-noviy-kalendar-i-do-chogo-tut-rosiya-50377310.html> (accessed 16 October 2024).

44 Покрова і Миколая. *BBC*. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/news-65691768> (accessed 11 July 2023).

45 These data were obtained through a survey conducted in December 2022 – April 2023.

a matter of personal preference but can be interpreted as a broader cultural adjustment to life in a predominantly Roman Catholic society where 25 December is the central holiday.

Anna, who relocated from Sumy, captures the personal struggle of navigating this transition: *"We have a question now when to celebrate Christmas. I think on 25 December... If I stay here, I will unambiguously do this on the 25th [of December]. I did not feel any feast on 7 January."*⁴⁶ This individual decision to embrace 25 December aligns with the social rhythms of the host country, a reflection of how refugees adjust their practices to fit into the cultural landscape. However, such adjustments do not necessarily equate to abandonment of their traditions, as some refugees continue to celebrate on both dates. Denis from Pezinok shared: *"[We will celebrate Christmas] according to both Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. The only one thing has changed that one more holiday was added. The more feasts are the more pleasant life is."*⁴⁷

This practice of dual celebration illustrates the concept of metamodern oscillation, where refugees are not forced to choose between cultural fidelity and integration but rather navigate between the two. Yanina, who lives in Bratislava, echoes this flexibility: *"[I will celebrate Christmas] twice per year – on 24/25 December and on 6/7 January."*⁴⁸ For some refugees, however, tradition remains paramount. Olena noted: *"I am an Orthodox Christian, I cannot celebrate Christmas on 25 December."*⁴⁹ Lilia, for instance, holds steadfastly to 7 January, saying: *"The 25th of December is a normal day for me."*⁵⁰ Similarly, for others like Anatolii, an agnostic, the change in calendar is less significant: *"We maintain existed traditions... Nothing has changed in our life. We celebrated Christmas in December and will do this next year."*⁵¹ These examples reveal a range of responses that underline the non-linear nature of adaptation – some individuals are more flexible, while others remain firmly attached to their original customs.

The data collected from Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia highlight an important dynamic in their religious adaptation, which reflects a broader cultural oscillation. Many Ukrainian refugees, like Diana, report that their religious practices have shifted since moving to Slovakia, a predominantly Catholic country. Diana's family's transition from celebrating Christmas on 7 January, in accordance with Orthodox tradition, to 25 December as the primary day of celebration, illustrates how calendar conformity plays a role in religious life. She notes: *"We celebrate because we have a holiday, days off work and more opportunities*

46 Anna (41 years old); 11.01.2023.

47 These data were obtained through a survey conducted in December 2022 – April 2023.

48 Ibid.

49 Olena (34 years old); 24.01.2023.

50 Lilia (32 years old); 18.03.2023.

51 These data were obtained through a survey conducted in December 2022.

to meet relatives."⁵² This highlights a form of religious flexibility that can be tied to the necessity of adapting to new socio-cultural environments. Diana's experience also underlines the role of pragmatism in religious practice, where traditions are aligned with social schedules rather than spiritual obligation. This shift is further emphasised by her reflection on 7 January which has now become a regular day, albeit still observed with a dinner and family time.

The refugee experience also includes cultural contrasts in the way holidays are celebrated. Several respondents noted differences in the intensity of celebrations, the types of festive meals, and the family-oriented nature of Slovak celebrations. While Alevtina preferred Ukrainian dishes⁵³, Olena from Dnepr appreciated the Slovak culinary traditions, particularly the carp and potato salad served at Christmas⁵⁴. Diana from Malacky remarked on the simplicity of Slovak festive meals compared to Ukrainian traditions of cooking elaborate dinners, highlighting another area where cultural adaptation occurs.⁵⁵

The duration of holiday celebrations also differs, with Slovaks returning quickly to daily life after Christmas, in contrast to the extended holiday season in Ukraine. Daryna from Hlohovec observed: "*It is a little bit unusual that everything ended after Christmas...*"⁵⁶, while Yanina noted that Slovaks "*quickly return from holidays to their usual routines.*"⁵⁷

Ukrainian refugees find common ground with Slovaks in family-oriented religious celebrations. Many respondents observed that Slovaks celebrate important feasts primarily with close family, with social life almost coming to a halt. As Anastasia pointed out: "*In my boyfriend's village, we go to church every Sunday, and then the whole family gathers for dinner.*"⁵⁸ This sense of familial closeness mirrors the traditional Ukrainian way of celebrating holidays, suggesting that while certain practices may differ, the underlying values of family and togetherness remain a shared cultural trait.

Olga's experience, on the other hand, highlights how Slovak traditions, such as the closure of most businesses during the holidays, can be disorientating for refugees used to different rhythms of life in Ukraine. She found it surprising that amusement parks and shops were closed during Christmas, yet recognised how it aligned with the Slovak emphasis on family time.⁵⁹

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Olga (42 years old); 29.01.2023.

Interestingly, the Ukrainian refugees' interaction with Slovak religious traditions has not been entirely one-sided. Some refugees, like Diana, have embraced opportunities for cultural exchange, sharing Ukrainian holiday foods such as "kutia" with their Slovak hosts, while partaking in Slovak traditions such as the preparation of "kapustnica".⁶⁰ This cross-cultural exchange represents a crucial aspect of the metamodern oscillation, where refugees not only adapt to their new environment but also enrich it with their own cultural practices, fostering a reciprocal relationship.

However, it is important to acknowledge that some Ukrainian refugees, like Melania, remain steadfast in maintaining their Ukrainian traditions, underlining the diversity of adaptive responses within the refugee community. She reported: "*We have more religious people, we maintain traditions more carefully. We go to church for the consecration of the Easter cake. Nobody among my friends does that.*"⁶¹ This statement points to the ongoing oscillation between adaptation and identity preservation that defines the refugee experience.

The findings from the interviews and survey data underline the complexity of religious adaptation among Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. Their experiences illustrate not only a pragmatic shift in religious practices, driven by the need to adapt to local customs, but also deeper reflections on how displacement affects their sense of identity and belonging. This cultural and religious oscillation is a testament to the resilience and adaptive potential of the Ukrainian refugees, as they navigate between preserving their heritage and integrating into Slovak society. These oscillations in religious observance – sometimes preserving, sometimes adapting – are key indicators of the broader adaptive strategies at play among Ukrainian refugees as they respond to the cultural challenges of displacement.

Discussion

The findings of the present research provide meaningful insights into how Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia are navigating their religious practices as part of their broader cultural adaptation. The results suggest that the religiosity of Ukrainian refugees serves as a key indicator of their adaptive potential within Slovak society. As Ye. Hozdziak emphasises, religion and spirituality support many refugees in the process of rooting, forced migration and integration into the host society.⁶² While previous studies on migrant religiosity, especially in the North American context, indicate that religion can act as a facilitator

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ These data were obtained through a survey conducted in December 2022 – April 2023.

⁶² GOZDZIAK, Elżbieta: Spiritual emergency room: The role of spirituality and religion in the resettlement of Kosovar Albanians, *ibid.*, p. 136.

of adaptation,⁶³ this research contributes to a nuanced understanding of the European setting, specifically within Slovakia. The close alignment between the religious backgrounds of Ukrainians, who predominantly identify as Orthodox Christians, and the Christian heritage of Slovakia has indeed facilitated aspects of social integration. This supports the hypothesis that a shared religious framework, even across different denominations, plays a significant role in facilitating adaptation, consistent with prior research on European migrant groups.⁶⁴

However, unlike Muslim migrants in Western Europe, whose religious practices can create distinct boundaries in predominantly Christian countries,⁶⁵ Ukrainian refugees are adapting more seamlessly due to the broad Christian cultural environment. This aligns with the theory of metamodern oscillation, which helps explain how individuals navigate between continuity and change. Ukrainian refugees oscillate between maintaining their Orthodox traditions and adapting to the religious practices of the host society, as seen in their flexible approach to Christmas celebrations. The shift from observing 7 January (Orthodox Christmas) to 25 December, largely driven by the socio-cultural context of Slovakia, exemplifies this oscillation between old and new practices.

Importantly, this research also demonstrates that forced migration does not automatically lead to an increase in religiosity, as some theories might suggest.⁶⁶ On the contrary, Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia exhibit what can be termed "religious conformism" – pragmatic adaptation of their practices rather than deepening their spiritual engagement. This reflects their prioritisation of practical concerns, such as securing employment and housing, over religious involvement. The lack of access to Orthodox churches in Slovakia further limits their religious participation, reinforcing this trend. Such infrastructural challenges, including limited information about church locations and restricted opening hours, highlight a structural barrier to religious involvement, which was a significant finding of this research.

A notable implication of these findings is the dual role of religion as both a facilitator of integration and a reflection of trauma. While the Christian context of Slovakia aids Ukrainian refugees in adapting, their reduced religiosity and pragmatic adjustments reflect the psychological and social impact of displacement. The trauma of forced migration manifests itself in a reluctance to fully invest

63 EBY, Jessica – IVERSON, Erika – SMYERS, Jenifer – KEKIC, Erol: The Faith Community's Role in Refugee Resettlement in the United States, *ibid.*, pp. 586–605.

64 FONER, Nancy – ALBA, Richard: Immigrant Religion in the U.S. and Western Europe: Bridge or Barrier to Inclusion?, *ibid.*, p. 361.

65 MAUSSEN, Marcel: Islamic Presence and Mosque Establishment in France: Colonialism, Arrangements for Guest Workers and Citizenship, *ibid.*, pp. 981–1002.

66 DIEHL, Claudia – KOENIG, Matthias: God Can Wait – New migrants in Germany between early adaptation and religious reorganization, *ibid.*, pp. 12–13.

in the religious practices of the host country, as many refugees perceive their stay in Slovakia as temporary. This vision of temporality is a critical aspect of the adaptation process, as it indicates a lingering connection to their homeland and a hesitance to fully integrate. This sentiment was observed in many participants who expressed a desire to keep Ukrainian religious traditions while temporarily conforming to the practices in Slovakia.

Moreover, while the current research sheds light on the religious adaptation of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, it also identifies gaps in the existing literature, particularly regarding the early stages of adaptation for Eastern European refugees in predominantly Christian contexts. The study's focus on the first year of migration offers a snapshot of this critical period but leaves room for further exploration of long-term religious adaptation and integration outcomes. Future research could investigate whether the initial religious conformism observed here evolves over time into deeper religious engagement or secularisation. Additionally, examining how different demographic factors, such as age, education, and region of origin within Ukraine, affect religious adaptation would add further depth to the analysis.

Finally, while the theory of metamodern oscillation provides a valuable lens through which to understand the adaptive flexibility of Ukrainian refugees, further studies are needed to explore how this oscillation between cultural continuity and change impacts other aspects of their integration beyond religious practices. For instance, analysing the interplay between religious adaptation and language acquisition, social networks, and professional development could provide a more holistic understanding of how Ukrainian refugees are navigating their new cultural environment in Slovakia.

The present research confirms that religious practices among Ukrainian refugees are both an indicator of their potential for adaptation and a reflection of the broader cultural and psychological challenges they face. The religious conformism observed highlights their pragmatic approach to adaptation, while their continued connection to their homeland suggests that their religious and cultural integration remains a complex and evolving process. The implications of this research not only contribute to the literature on migration and religion but also underscore the importance of considering both individual and structural factors in shaping refugee adaptation pathways in host societies.

Conclusion

The research conducted on the religiosity of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia has provided significant insights into how forced migration affects religious beliefs, practices, and the broader cultural adaptation process. The findings demonstrate that religion, and in particular the religious practices of Ukrainian

refugees, serves as an essential marker of their potential for adaptation in the new cultural environment. This research not only addresses the initial aim of the article – to explore how migration affects religious beliefs and practices – but also contributes to a broader understanding of how religiosity serves as an indicator of the ability to adapt to a new socio-cultural context. By applying the concept of metamodern oscillation, this study has shown how Ukrainian refugees' ability to balance continuity and change in their religious lives is crucial for their adaptation to the socio-religious context of Slovakia.

Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia, who are predominantly Orthodox Christians, have shown considerable flexibility in adapting to the Roman Catholic-dominated religious environment of their host country. However, their religious adaptation is not limited to denominational differences but rather reflects a broader oscillation between keeping traditional practices and adapting to new cultural contexts. This process of oscillation aligns with the metamodern perspective, where individuals are seen as constantly navigating between continuity and change, and stability and adaptation. In this case, the religious adaptation of Ukrainian refugees can be viewed as an ongoing negotiation between their personal faith and the socio-religious realities of Slovakia.

Despite the significant challenges posed by forced migration, Ukrainian refugees have maintained a strong connection to their religious identities. A majority of them continue to identify as Christians, with many adhering to the Orthodox confession. This continuity is crucial as it suggests that religion remains an anchor for these individuals amidst the upheaval of displacement. However, this religious adherence is often personal and informal, characterised by practices such as lighting candles for health, attending services on major religious holidays, and baptising children. These rituals, rather than deep theological engagement or regular church attendance, form the core of the refugees' religious lives.

This personalised religiosity, characterised by a flexible approach to religious practices, allows refugees to adapt more easily to their new environment. In a setting where Roman Catholicism is the dominant tradition and Orthodox churches are scarce, the ability to prioritise personal faith over strict doctrinal observance becomes a pragmatic strategy for cultural adaptation. This flexibility in religious practice serves as an adaptive mechanism, allowing refugees to maintain their religious identity while coping with the practical challenges of life in Slovakia.

One of the most striking findings of this study is the adaptability of Ukrainian refugees in terms of religious practices. Despite their Orthodox background, many refugees have begun attending Roman Catholic churches or have reduced their participation in religious activities altogether. This shift is largely

a response to the structural limitations in Slovakia, where Orthodox churches are few and far between, especially outside major cities such as Bratislava. The ability to attend Roman Catholic services without perceiving significant doctrinal differences highlights the refugees' pragmatic approach to religion, which facilitates their broader social integration.

The flexibility observed in religious practices also extends to the celebration of holidays, particularly Christmas. The shift from celebrating Christmas on 7 January to 25 December is less a reflection of ideological alignment with European Union standards and more a practical adaptation to the Slovak cultural environment. Ukrainian refugees, who are accustomed to long holiday seasons stretching from New Year's Eve to Orthodox Christmas, have adjusted to the Slovak custom of celebrating Christmas and New Year in a more condensed timeframe. While many refugees still value the significance of Orthodox Christmas, they have shown a willingness to adapt their celebratory practices to fit the cultural norms of their host society. This willingness to oscillate between traditional and new practices demonstrates the strength of their adaptive potential.

The ongoing war in Ukraine and the resulting forced migration have inflicted deep psychological trauma among Ukrainian refugees. This trauma plays a crucial role in shaping their religious adaptation. Many refugees view their stay in Slovakia as temporary, a sentiment that deeply influences their approach to religion. For some, the trauma of displacement has led to a diminished focus on religious observance, as practical concerns such as securing employment, housing, and social connections take precedence. This aligns with findings from other migration studies, where early stages of adaptation are often characterized by a decline in religious participation due to pressing everyday concerns.⁶⁷

Moreover, the trauma of separation from family members in Ukraine has led to complex emotions surrounding religious holidays. Some refugees have chosen to return to Ukraine to celebrate Orthodox Christmas with their loved ones, despite the risks posed by ongoing military aggression. Others have celebrated remotely, while some have opted not to celebrate at all, reflecting the emotional toll of not being able to reunite with family. This variability in religious observance highlights the profound impact of trauma on the religious lives of refugees, underlining the fluidity and temporality of their adaptation process.

The theory of metamodern oscillation provides a valuable framework for understanding the religious adaptation of Ukrainian refugees. In this context, the metamodern refers to the oscillation between traditional religious practices and the need to adapt to new cultural conditions. Ukrainian refugees embody this oscillation as they navigate the tension between keeping their religious

67 DIEHL, Claudia – KOENIG, Matthias: *God Can Wait – New migrants in Germany between early adaptation and religious reorganization*, *ibid*, pp. 8–22.

identity and adapting to the predominantly Roman Catholic environment of Slovakia. This constant negotiation reflects the broader human experience of migration, where individuals must balance continuity with change in response to new challenges.

The religious flexibility shown by Ukrainian refugees is a manifestation of this oscillatory process. On the one hand, they retain their Orthodox identity, continuing to observe key rituals and traditions. On the other hand, they adapt their practices to align with the cultural norms of their host society, such as attending Roman Catholic services or adjusting the dates of religious holidays. This oscillation between maintaining a connection to their past and embracing the new cultural context is emblematic of the adaptive strategies that migrants often employ.

The findings of this study have important implications for both future research and integration policy. First, the religious adaptation of Ukrainian refugees provides a valuable case study for exploring the broader dynamic of migrant religiosity in Europe. While much of the existing literature focuses on the challenges faced by Muslim migrants in integrating into predominantly Christian societies, this study highlights how Christian migrants navigate similar challenges, albeit within a more familiar religious context. Future research could further explore the long-term religious adaptation of Ukrainian refugees, particularly as their stay in Slovakia extends beyond the initial phases of migration.

In terms of integration policies, the religious needs of Ukrainian refugees should not be overlooked. While their religious flexibility has facilitated their adaptation, structural barriers, such as the limited availability of Orthodox churches, remain significant. Greater infrastructural support for religious practices, such as increased access to Orthodox churches or the provision of interfaith services, could enhance the integration experience of Ukrainian refugees. Additionally, policies that recognise the trauma experienced by refugees and its impact on religious practices would be beneficial in designing support systems that cater to both the spiritual and psychological needs of refugees.

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