

# Nexus of Religion, Ethnicity, and Geopolitics – A Case of Geopolitical Fault-Line Cities in Eastern Ukraine

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Oleksiy Gnatiuk

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Department of Economic and Social Geography, Volodymyrska St, 64/13, Kyiv, Ukraine, 01601;  
e-mail: alexgnat22@ukr.net; ORCID: 0000-0003-1818-2415

Kostyantyn Mezentsev

Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Department of Economic and Social Geography, Volodymyrska St, 64/13, Kyiv, Ukraine, 01601; e-mail: mezentsev@knu.ua; ORCID: 0000-0003-1974-7860

Grygorii Pidgrushnyi

National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, Institute of Geography, Volodymyrska St, 44, Kyiv, Ukraine, 01054;  
e-mail: pidgrush@gmail.com; ORCID: 0000-0003-2116-8366

## Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationships between religious attitudes, ethnic and linguistic identities, and geopolitical preferences in three geopolitical fault-line cities in Eastern Ukraine – Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Dnipro. The research is based on data taken from a survey and the associated descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The findings suggest that the religious divide in Eastern Ukraine does not generate additional division but instead strengthens the existing divide, which is known to be formulated in terms of geopolitical as opposed to language- or ethnicity-based categories, although language and ethnicity do have an influence on geopolitical preferences. Moreover, civic-national identity appears to be more relevant than ethnic-national identity to understanding the religious fault-line in Eastern Ukraine.

## Keywords

religious split, geopolitical fault-line cities, identity, ethnicity, geopolitics, Ukraine

## Introduction

Ukraine is a country with strong religious divides. This is especially true for the Orthodox churches, which dominate in the country. On the one hand, formally, the religious split in Ukrainian Orthodoxy (and, in broader terms, Christianity) has its roots in issues of canonicity and doctrinal debates. However, the religious divide is also deeply interrelated with existing ethnic and geopolitical divides. The Church is involved in domestic political rivalry and is used as a tool to shape and disseminate conflicting geopolitical narratives – nation-centric, pro-European, and pro-Russian (Sagan 2015; Surzhko Harned 2022). The mass transition of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate parishes to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine (Constantinople Patriarchate), starting from the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine, serves as yet another clear illustration of the intertwining between religion and geopolitics in the country.

Geopolitical fault-line cities in Eastern and Southern Ukraine are extremely important in this context. They are located in relative proximity to the Russian border, meaning they have intense cross-border ties, are exposed to information coming out of Russia, have relatively weak connections to Ukraine's national centre of power, and experience a blurred sense of identity (Gentile, 2017, 2019). These cities are also home to significant ethnic Russian minorities and host significant non-pro-Western, if not outright pro-Russian, contingents that hold views incompatible with Europe's vision for Ukraine (Gentile 2020a, 2020b). Notably, pro-European and pro-Russian contingents are exposed to different truths portrayed within the Russian and non-Russian informational spaces (Gentile 2017). Divided in terms of ethnicity, language, and geopolitical preferences, these cities are highly sensitive to manipulation by local media, political and business elites, and, very likely, the Church.

The aim of this paper is to estimate the interrelationships between the religious attitudes, ethnic and linguistic identities, and geopolitical preferences of people living in the geopolitical fault-line cities of Eastern Ukraine. More specifically, we attempted to answer the following question: does the religious split create new dividing lines in these cities or strengthen existing ones? Our initial assumption was that geopolitical views and identities would be stronger predictors of religious attitudes than ethnic or linguistic identities. Our case studies are three Ukrainian cities: Kharkiv (eastern part of the country, pop. ca. 1.4 million), Dnipro (central-eastern part of the country, pop. ca. 1 million) and Mariupol (south-eastern part of the country, pop. ca. 450,000). The first two cities belong to the largest Ukrainian metropolises and rank among the most significant industrial and cultural centres of the country. Mariupol, before being mostly destroyed by Russian military forces in 2022, was the second largest city in the Donetsk region.

## Religious split, ethnicity, and geopolitics in Ukraine

In absolute terms, Ukraine has the third largest population (after Russia and Ethiopia) of Orthodox Christians – some 35 million. Moreover, Ukraine is an overwhelmingly Orthodox Christian nation, with 78% of its population identifying as Orthodox (compared with 71% in Russia). This is up from the 39% who said they were Orthodox Christian in 1991 – the year the officially atheist Soviet Union collapsed and Ukraine gained its independence (Pew Research Center Survey 2015). However, from 1991 to 2019, most of Ukraine's Orthodox Christians were divided among three Orthodox denominations: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP), the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP), and the Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC) (Bremer 2017). Since 2019, the last two denominations have merged into the united Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU), but the split between the UOC-MP and the OCU persists. Besides the Orthodox Churches, another influential church – the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church – is of the Orthodox rite but recognises the authority of the Pope in Rome (Bremer 2017).

It is also important to consider the role that Ukraine's history has played in its current religious divisions. In 988, Prince Volodymyr the Great, the ruler of Kyivan Rus, adopted Christianity. The newly created Ruthenian Church (Kyiv Metropolis) then fell under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the centre of the Byzantine Empire. After that, in the 14<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries what is now Western and Central Ukraine came under the rule of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, which had a dominant Catholic presence. Consequently, in 1595, four bishops of the Ruthenian Church signed the Union of Brest, broke from the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and reunited with the Roman Catholic Church under the authority of the Holy See, thus establishing the Ruthenian Uniate Church. Then, in 1807, under Austrian rule, it became the Greek Catholic Church (GCC), before being officially recognised as the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church (UGCC) in 1963. Nowadays, the Catholic Church recognises the UGCC as the only canonical successor of the Kyivan Metropolis (Bociurkiw 1995; Bremer 2017).

In 1686, following the inclusion of territories of Ukraine into the Tsardom of Muscovy, Kyiv Metropolis was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (Sagan 2015). Thereafter, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine has comprised a part of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). In June 1990, the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church (UAOC), which was established and declared to be independent from the ROC in 1921 in the wake of the breakup of the Russian Empire but then eradicated by 1937, was revived (Denysenko 2018). On 28 October 1990, the Moscow Patriarchate granted the Ukrainian Exarchate the status of a self-governing church under the jurisdiction of the ROC – Ukrainian Orthodox Church. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and Ukraine's declaration of full political independence in August 1991, a significant section of the Ukrainian Orthodox communion, led by Metropolitan Filaret, demanded its secession from the Moscow Patriarchate. In April 1992, the synod of the ROC rejected the request and replaced Filaret. In response, in June 1992, a part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, led by Filaret, decided to separate from the ROC and unite with the UAOC to form the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP). However, the UAOC finally refused the union (Bociurkiw 1995; Sagan 2015; Denysenko 2018). A part of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church that remained subordinated to the Moscow Patriarchate became known as UOC-MP. Since then, from 1992–2019, three

Ukrainian Orthodox churches – the UOC-MP, the UOC-KP, and the UAOC – existed separately and competed over parishes, church property, and churchgoers in Ukraine. The UOC-MP was the only Ukrainian Orthodox denomination that had official contacts with other Orthodox churches internationally and with the Catholic Church. The other two Orthodox churches, meanwhile, were not recognised by the other Eastern Orthodox churches and were therefore considered ‘schismatic groups’ by the Moscow Patriarchate (Sagan 2015; Bremer 2017).

However, on 15 December 2018, the unification council voted to unite all the UOC-KP and the UAOC, as well as a part of the UOC-MP, into the united Orthodox Church of Ukraine (OCU). On 5 January 2019, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople – widely viewed as the spiritual leader (*primus inter pares*) of the Eastern Orthodox world – granted the OCU independence by signing a tomos formalising its split from the ROC. The Constantinople Patriarchate thus recognises the OCU as the sole canonical successor of the Kyivan Metropolis, but, crucially, the OCU is not recognised by the ROC, nor by the remaining part of the UOC-MP.

Not surprisingly, the main cause of this religious split and its consequent tensions is the issue of cultural, socio-political, and geopolitical identities in the country, as opposed to genuine doctrinal disputes (Kumkova 2015; Rap 2015; Mandaville 2022). Starting from the early 1990s, differences in religious interest and affiliation in Ukraine followed distinctive geographic, ethnic, and electoral patterns; thus, scientific predictions were made that religious interest and affiliation may play important roles in the developing political divisions within Ukraine (Gee 1995). Rivaling churches and religious movements in Ukrainian Orthodoxy developed political theologies in order to protect their ideological agendas and institutional interests under different socio-political circumstances (Shestopalets 2021).

A wide range of Russian attitudes, such as Russian nationalism, notions of Slavic solidarity, the divine mission of Russian Orthodox civilization, and Russian imperialism, are also intertwined with religion (Zhukova 2013; Engström 2014; Curanović 2014). Since Kyiv and Crimea have featured centrally in Russian national mythology as the cradle(s) of Russian Christianity, the nationalist conception of space persisted within the ROC; at the same time, many Ukrainian citizens have looked to Moscow on matters of faith (Kozelski 2014). Indeed, the strong connection between the ROC and the Russian state has been well documented (Blitt 2011; Suslov 2014). The under-appreciated weapon of religion was deployed against Ukraine by the Kremlin regime long before Russia engaged in direct and hybrid warfare, cyber-attacks, and economic pressure (Mandaville 2022). The ROC operates in international relations, pursuing, through ‘religious diplomacy’, its own interests but also those of the Russian state (Richters 2013; Curanović 2014). The traditions of Russophilism are also present in many activities of the UOC-MP, acting under the umbrella of the ROC (Sagan, 2015). In view of this, the UOC-MP can justifiably be seen as a tool of Russian ‘soft power’, or even ‘sharp power’ for cultural and ideational influence (Mulford 2016; Hudson 2018; Mandaville 2022), although structurally the UOC-MP has sufficient autonomy to defy the pro-Kremlin ROC (Hudson 2018). To further acknowledge their Russian ties, both the ROC and the UOC-MP use either Russian or Old Slavonic (which is incomprehensible to the majority of parishioners) during church services. By contrast, from the early 1990s, the AUOC and, especially, the UOC-KP actively supported the idea of autocephaly of the Orthodox Church and the political independence of Ukraine (Plokhly 2006). Together with the UGCC, the UOC-KP has occupied the niche role of being a Ukrainian national Church – one that aims to provide representation for ethnic Ukrainians (Sagan 2015), and, accordingly, these churches, as well as the OCU that substituted them in 2019, use native Ukrainian language during church services.

The geopolitical inclinations of the churches in Ukraine were especially evident during the Revolution of Dignity, as well as the subsequent annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the Russian-backed military conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Along with its geopolitical and military dimensions, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict also has a major religious component, which has vividly manifested itself in targeted acts of violence against priests, the rapid emergence of military groups with Orthodox-based ideologies, and the nationalist rhetoric employed by some members of the clergy (Kozelsky 2014). However, religion did not simply emerge as a proxy for the political struggle (Kumkova 2015); indeed, Kozelsky (2014) argues that Russian religious nationalism was also at the heart of what is referred to as the ‘Ukrainian crisis’ of 2014.

The UOC-KP emerged as a particularly strong pro-Ukraine factor during the Euromaidan protests: churches were opened as shelters for protesters, while clergy actively participated in prayer and other promotions of the protests (Sagan 2015). When Saint Michael's monastery in Kyiv, belonging to the UOC-KP, opened its doors to those being targeted or who had been wounded by the police, many in Ukrainian society were moved by the symbolism of this act as it restored the ancient function of a church as a shelter for persecuted individuals and groups (Marynovych 2015). Spiritual leaders of the UOC-KP and UGCC were especially eloquent in defending the civic rights of the protesters (Marynovych 2015), and the UGCC's involvement helped enhance the legitimacy of the Euromaidan by constructing its quasi-religious image (Shestopalets 2020b). After the annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in Donbas, Patriarch Filaret of the Kyiv Patriarchate supported Ukrainian soldiers participating in the Anti-Terrorist Operations (ATO) in Donbas and lobbied alongside international partners for military assistance to be given to Ukraine (Mulford 2016).

At the same time, the position of the ROC leader Patriarch Kirill has been hostile to both the Ukrainian state and nation. In line with the official Kremlin view, he considered the war in Ukraine to be an internal conflict and echoed Vladimir Putin's repeated assertions that the Russians and Ukrainians are a single people and that Moscow has historical claims on 'Novorossiya' (Bugriy 2015). In fact, the ROC used the concept of the 'Russian world' to justify Russian aggression in Ukraine (Surzhko Harned 2022). In view of this, the UOC-MP found itself in a difficult position. Due to its membership of the Moscow Patriarchate, it has supported the 'Russian world' ideology, setting itself against Ukrainian independence (Sagan 2015). Its alleged neutrality during the Euromaidan protests played into the hands of the ruling regime by lessening the impression of the unity of the opposition and by undermining the high-moral-ground claims of the protestors (Shestopalets 2020b). The UOC-MP priests prayed for peace at its liturgies but not for the Ukrainian government or military, as had been a common custom before the conflict (Bugriy 2015). Numerous priests of the UOC-MP supported separatist movements both in terms of activity (cooperation with the fighters) and ideology (propaganda of Novorossiya ideas and discrediting the attempts at conflict resolution by the Ukrainian authorities, including the calls for Ukrainian soldiers to surrender weapons) (Sagan 2015). However, it is not true that the authorities of the UOC-MP have simply been unwaveringly repeating Russian dogma – on the contrary, some of the public messages from the Ukrainian Orthodox Church have been pro-Ukrainian (Bugriy 2015).

Confronting the Ukrainian state regarding its position on the events in Crimea and Donbas helped to discredit the UOC-MP and negatively associate its views with the Kremlin's policy, thus damaging its attempts to stir up Ukrainian patriotism. This contributed to the loss of UOC-MP supporters, particularly in Western and Central Ukraine, in favour of the UOC-KP (Bugriy 2015; Sagan 2015; Surzhko Harned 2022), as well as the shrinking of the 'simply Orthodox' group (from 39% of respondents in 2000 to 23% in 2018 – a consequence of citizens identifying more with one specific Orthodox church) (Razumkov Centre 2021). Simultaneously, the UOC-MP has been considered by the Ukrainian authorities to be the main agent of Russian ideological influence. Consequently, they strove to establish and promote an ideological paradigm that closely binds religion and nationalism – an effort that finally led to the emergence of the OCU in 2019 (Shestopalets 2020a) and which aided in the construction of Ukraine's anti-colonial religious national narrative (Surzhko Harned 2022). Formally aimed at overcoming the split between the Orthodox denominations in Ukraine, the developments of 2018–2019 further contributed to the geopoliticisation of the Orthodox division in Ukraine (Shestopalets 2020c) and, according to some estimates, have only served to create new dividing lines in Ukraine (Mudrov 2019; Mitrokhin 2020). Arguably, though, the evidence points more to there being added confusion as opposed to further division (Surzhko Harned 2022).

On May 27, 2022, the UOC-MP declared its independence from the Moscow Patriarchate due to Patriarch Kirill's support of the invasion of Ukraine. Prior to this decision, more than 400 parishes had left the Moscow Patriarchate in response to the invasion (Reuters 2022).

Church, ethnicity, and geopolitics in Ukraine have such close ties that believers define their attitudes to certain denominations not only (and not to any meaningful extent) based on their canonicity, but rather on feelings of ethnic belonging inscribed in church names (e.g. Ukrainian/Kyiv vs. Russian/Moscow), the language in which church services are conducted, and, above all, the geopolitical vector supported by the denomination. Empirical evidence for this can be found in

national surveys results (e.g. KIIS 2016; Razumkov Center 2021). This is facilitated by the fluidity of religiosity – Orthodox Ukrainians are often not entirely sure about their own Church affinity (Wanner 2014; Razumkov Centre 2021) and do not think deeply about the issue of church canonicity, which means that religious preferences are easily influenced by already-shaped geopolitical views. The country even has the expression ‘atheist of the Kyiv Patriarchate’, referring both seriously (e.g. Union of Orthodox Journalists 2018) or ironically (e.g. Mitrokhin 2020) to people who are not true believers (including those who are atheists or agnostics and would like to have less religion in the country) but support the UOC-KP (the OCU) for geopolitical reasons – such as for its function as a pro-Ukrainian national Church.

## Data and methods

This research is based on a survey conducted in Dnipro, Kharkiv (2018), and Mariupol (2020) (n=1254, 1258, and 1251, respectively, aged 18+). The data were collected through personal interviews and anonymised by the Kyiv-based Center for Social Indicators (CSI). The sample relies on a household-based sampling frame, and only one person was selected within each household using a somewhat modified version of the so-called Kish table (Kish 1949). The response rates are 28% in Dnipro, 36% in Kharkiv, and 30% in Mariupol, taking into account all forms of non-response. The main themes covered by the survey relate to the political and geopolitical situation in Ukraine in general and in case-study cities in particular. The variables used are identical across all three databases, both in terms of the wording of the questions and the available answering options.

The principal variables (PV) are levels of trust in certain religious organisations, which are estimated according to responses to the following question: ‘How much do you trust / do not trust the following religious organizations on a 5-point rating scale (5: completely trust; 1: absolutely do not trust)?’ The list of denominations included the following: the Ukrainian Greek-Catholic Church (UGCC) (PV1); the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Kyiv Patriarchate (UOC-KP) (PV2); the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate (UOC-MP) (PV3); the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (PV4); and Jewish religious organisations (PV5). For Mariupol, where the survey took place in 2020, the UOC-KP was replaced by the OCU. The Jewish organisations were added, first, to provide a comparison with at least one non-Christian denomination, and, second, because the long-lasting anti-Semitism of Russian propaganda, supported and disseminated including by the ROC, is a well-known phenomenon (Spier 1994; Kenez 1996; EUvsDiSiNFO 2018; Kelaidis 2022). The answers for each denomination were dichotomised for further correlation analysis (0–3 = 0: low level of trust; 4–5 = 1: high level of trust).

To estimate the ethnic-national and civic-national identities of the respondents, as well as their geopolitical preferences, the following additional variables (AV) were employed:

- (1) Indicators of ethnic-national identity
  - AV1: Feels Ukrainian (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
  - AV2: Feels Russian (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
- (2) Indicators of geopolitical identity
  - AV3: Feels European (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
  - AV4: Feels Soviet (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
- (3) Indicators of linguistic identity
  - AV5: Speaks Ukrainian at home (predominantly Ukrainian = 1, otherwise = 0)
  - AV6: Speaks Russian at home (predominantly Russian = 1, otherwise = 0)
- (4) Indicators of support for Ukrainian nation-state geopolitical narrative
  - AV7: Crimea is an inherent part of Ukraine (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
  - AV8: Support for renaming streets during decommunisation (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
- (5) Indicators of support for pro-Western geopolitical narrative
  - AV9: Support for EU or NATO accession (yes = 1, otherwise = 0)
  - AV10: Ukraine should defend European values (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
- (6) Indicators of support for pro-Russian geopolitical narrative
  - AV11: Russian should be the second state language (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)
  - AV12: Russia and Ukraine are one nation (agree = 1, otherwise = 0)

Descriptive statistics (%) for the additional variables are presented in Tables 1–3.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics (%) for the additional variables 1–4, 7–8, 10–12

Additional variable	City	Answer options					
		DA	A	D	DD	HTS	RTA
AV 1. Feels Ukrainian	Dnipro	67.1	22.8	3.8	4.5	1.5	0.2
	Kharkiv	62.0	26.5	5.2	5.1	1.2	0.0
	Mariupol	37.8	46.1	8.3	5.2	2.5	1.0
AV 2. Feels Russian	Dnipro	7.8	11.1	28.2	47.5	5.0	0.4
	Kharkiv	11.7	15.9	25.0	44.8	2.4	0.1
	Mariupol	13.1	31.7	27.5	19.6	7.6	0.3
AV 3. Feels European	Dnipro	9.6	19.1	26.9	36.0	8.3	0.1
	Kharkiv	3.7	16.5	20.7	54.4	4.6	0.1
	Mariupol	4.3	13.5	43.3	33.3	5.7	0.0
AV 4. Feels Soviet	Dnipro	17.0	18.8	20.4	38.4	5.0	0.3
	Kharkiv	17.6	25.9	18.6	33.6	4.2	0.1
	Mariupol	35.4	18.0	18.6	19.8	8.1	0.2
AV 7. Crimea is an inherent part of Ukraine	Dnipro	40.0	21.9	12.4	9.0	16.0	0.7
	Kharkiv	15.2	27.3	11.7	28.9	15.3	1.7
	Mariupol	13.5	39.5	23.6	9.3	12.5	1.6
AV 8. Support for renaming streets during decommunisation	Dnipro	11.9	14.2	21.4	45.0	6.9	0.5
	Kharkiv	3.8	9.1	23.4	59.2	4.5	0.1
	Mariupol	4.0	7.1	44.8	34.5	9.1	0.1
AV 10. Ukraine should defend European values	Dnipro	20.5	25.5	22.4	17.0	14.3	0.4
	Kharkiv	11.8	14.5	24.2	33.2	15.7	0.6
	Mariupol	6.9	30.9	28.9	23.8	9.1	0.5
AV 11. Russian should be the second state language	Dnipro	30.4	26.7	14.8	18.8	9.4	0.0
	Kharkiv	28.1	36.4	14.9	8.4	11.5	0.6
	Mariupol	44.5	43.5	6.4	3.1	2.3	0.1
AV 12. Russia and Ukraina are one nation	Dnipro	39.3	26.1	12.3	13.5	8.3	0.4
	Kharkiv	40.2	33.3	10.2	4.9	10.4	1.0
	Mariupol	41.5	41.9	8.1	3.3	4.4	0.8

Abbreviations: DA = definitely agree; A = agree; D = disagree; DD = definitely disagree; HTS = hard to say; RTA = refusal to answer

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics (%) for the additional variables 5–6

Additional variable	City	Answer options						
		Ukr	Rus	Sur	Ukr+Rus	Other	HTS	RTA
AV 5–6. Language spoken at home	Dnipro	4.1	74.7	8.4	12.5	0.2	0.0	0.0
	Kharkiv	1.8	88.6	5.4	3.3	0.6	0.2	0.1
	Mariupol	0.9	81.9	7.3	9.6	0.2	0.1	0.0

Abbreviations: Ukr = predominantly Ukrainian; Rus = predominantly Russian; Sur = surzhyk (mix of Ukrainian and Russian); Other = other language(s); HTS = hard to say; RTA = refusal to answer

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics (%) for the additional variable 9

Additional variable	City	Answer options					
		NATO+EU	only NATO	only EU	No	HTS	RTA
AV 9. Support for EU or NATO accession	Dnipro	4.1	74.7	8.4	0.2	0.0	0.0
	Kharkiv	1.8	88.6	5.4	0.6	0.2	0.1
	Mariupol	0.9	81.9	9.6	0.2	0.1	0.0

The presentation of the results in the following section begins with descriptive statistics regarding the general levels of trust in selected denominations in Mariupol, Kharkiv, and Dnipro. To determine the relationship between the principal variables (PV1-PV5) and additional variables (AV1–AV10), i.e. between the level of trust in chosen denominations and identities/geopolitical preferences, we employed two methods: (1) we calculated the percentages of people with certain self-identification or giving support to a certain geopolitical narrative by the groups trusting to certain denomination; and (2) we calculated fourfold point correlation coefficient – an index of the relation between any two sets of scores that can both be represented according to ordered binary dimensions.

## Results and discussion

In all three cities, Orthodox denominations inspired a significantly higher level of trust among the respondents compared to the UGCC and Judaism, and this disparity is more pronounced in provincial Mariupol than in cosmopolitan Kharkiv and Dnipro. More specifically, the high trust level (4–5 points) for the Orthodox churches was reported by 20–25% of the respondents in Kharkiv and Dnipro and by 30–40% of the respondents in Mariupol, while for the UGCC the respective figures were 5–10% and 3%, and for Judaist organisations only 4–6% and 1%. As for the Orthodox denominations, the confidence in the ‘Russian’ church (ROC) was slightly lower than in the ‘Ukrainian’ churches (UOC-KP/OCU and UOC-MP). Regarding the latter, the UOC-KP surpassed the UOC-MP in the level of trust in Dnipro, but in Kharkiv and Mariupol the opposite was found to be the case (Figure 1). This difference may be explained by the differing historical and cultural backgrounds of the case-study cities: while Dnipro rediscovered its ‘Ukrainianness’ after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian hybrid warfare in 2014 and became known as an ‘outpost of Ukraine’ (Kupensky and Andriushchenko 2022) and viewed as ‘the heart of Ukraine’ (Portnov 2015b), Kharkiv, the first Soviet capital of Ukraine, remained an international and cosmopolitan city with no predominant national culture (Musiyezdov 2009; L’Heureux 2010; Filippova and Giuliano 2017) and Mariupol, until the Russian invasion in 2022, was a quasi company town much dependent on the Soviet industrial legacy (Matsuzato 2018).

In Mariupol and Kharkiv, the highest share of people who feel Ukrainian and the lowest share of people who feel Russian are found among those who trust the UOC-KP/OCU. In Dnipro, the share of people who feel Ukrainian is slightly larger among those who trust the UGCC over the UOC-KP, and vice versa for those who feel Russian (Figures 2a–2b). However, trust in the UOC-KP positively (and to a greater extent than in the other denominations) correlates with feeling Ukrainian and negatively correlates with feeling Russian in all three cities (Figure 3). This may suggest that the UOC-KP/OCU is viewed as a church for ethnic Ukrainians and as one that repels ethnic Russians. Meanwhile, in Mariupol and Kharkiv, quite surprisingly, the share of people who feel Ukrainian is slightly lower among those who trust the UOC-MP and the ROC compared to those who trust the UGCC. Moreover, in Kharkiv, trust in the UGCC negatively correlates with feeling Ukrainian and positively correlates with feeling Russian, while in Mariupol there is a positive correlation between trust in the UOC-MP and the ROC and feeling Ukrainian (both of which are larger than the correlation with trust in the UGCC). This means that the UGCC, despite commonly being seen as a church from Western Ukraine, a region known for its extremely high rates of Ukrainian nationalism, is not thought of as being a Ukrainian church in the ethnic sense; rather, this niche is occupied by the UOC-KP/OCU (cf. Plokyh 2006; Sagan 2015).

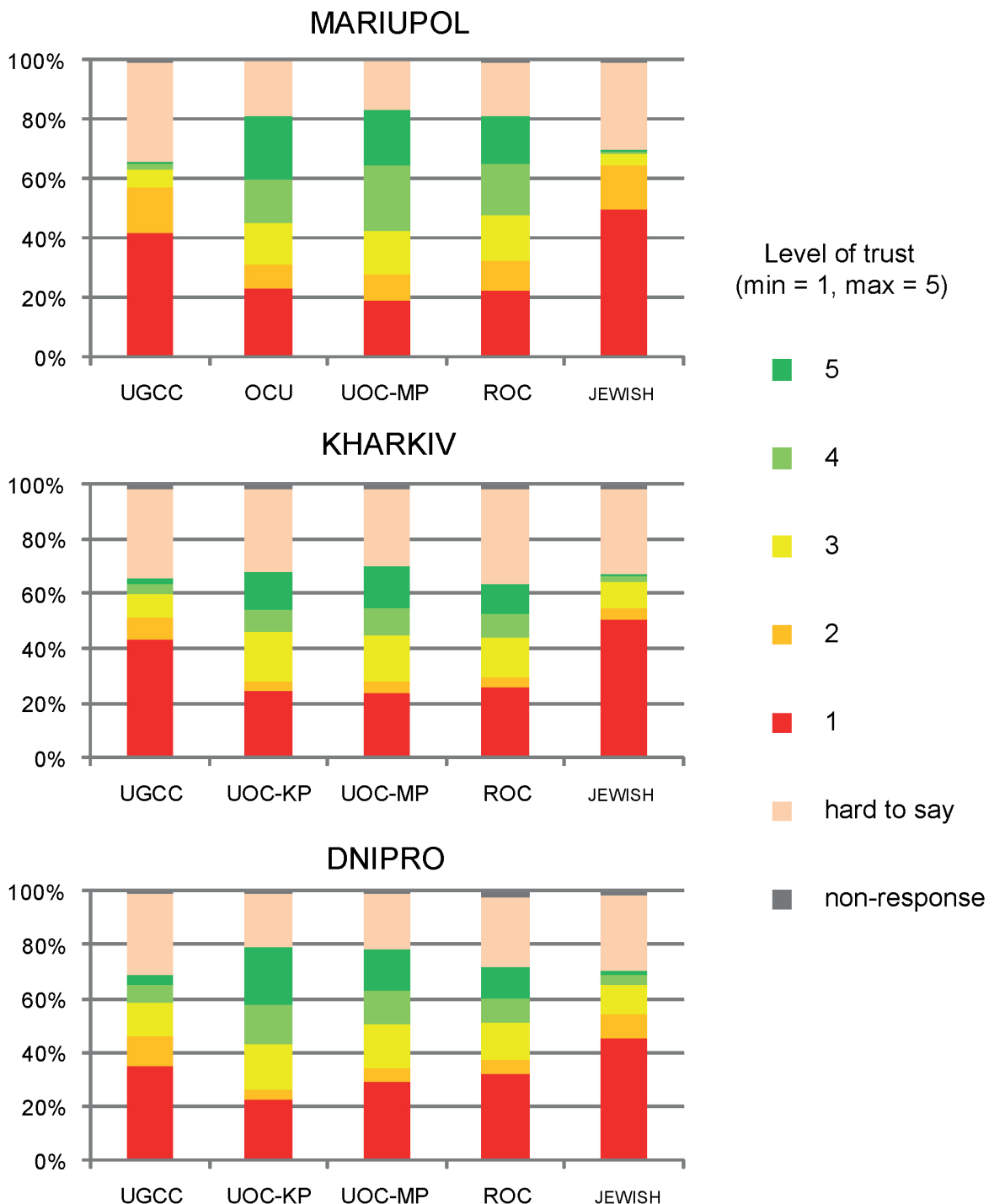


Figure 1. Level of trust in religious organisations

Source: Own research.

The question of linguistic identity, meanwhile, forces us to look at the problem from a different perspective. In all three cities, the share of those speaking Ukrainian is larger among those who trust the UGCC than among those who trust the UOC-KP/OCU. Furthermore, despite the fact that Ukrainophones hold relatively positive attitudes towards the UGCC and UOC-KP and relatively negative attitudes towards the UOC-MP and ROC, the difference between the UOC-KP/UOC and the UOC-MP/ROC in terms of Ukrainophones and Russophones is not as significant as one might have expected. Moreover, in Kharkiv, the share of Ukrainophones is higher among those



who trust the ROC than among those who trust the UOC-KP, and vice versa for Russophones; see also Figure 3 – where it can be seen that trust in the ROC negatively correlates with speaking Russian and positively correlates with speaking Ukrainian. These statistics suggest that the UOC-KP/UOC is trusted predominantly by Russian-speaking Ukrainians, who constitute a majority in case-study cities, while the UGCC is primarily trusted by a Ukrainian-speaking minority. It also suggests that Russophones have more confidence in Orthodox churches, whereas they view the UGCC – a Catholic church – as alien.

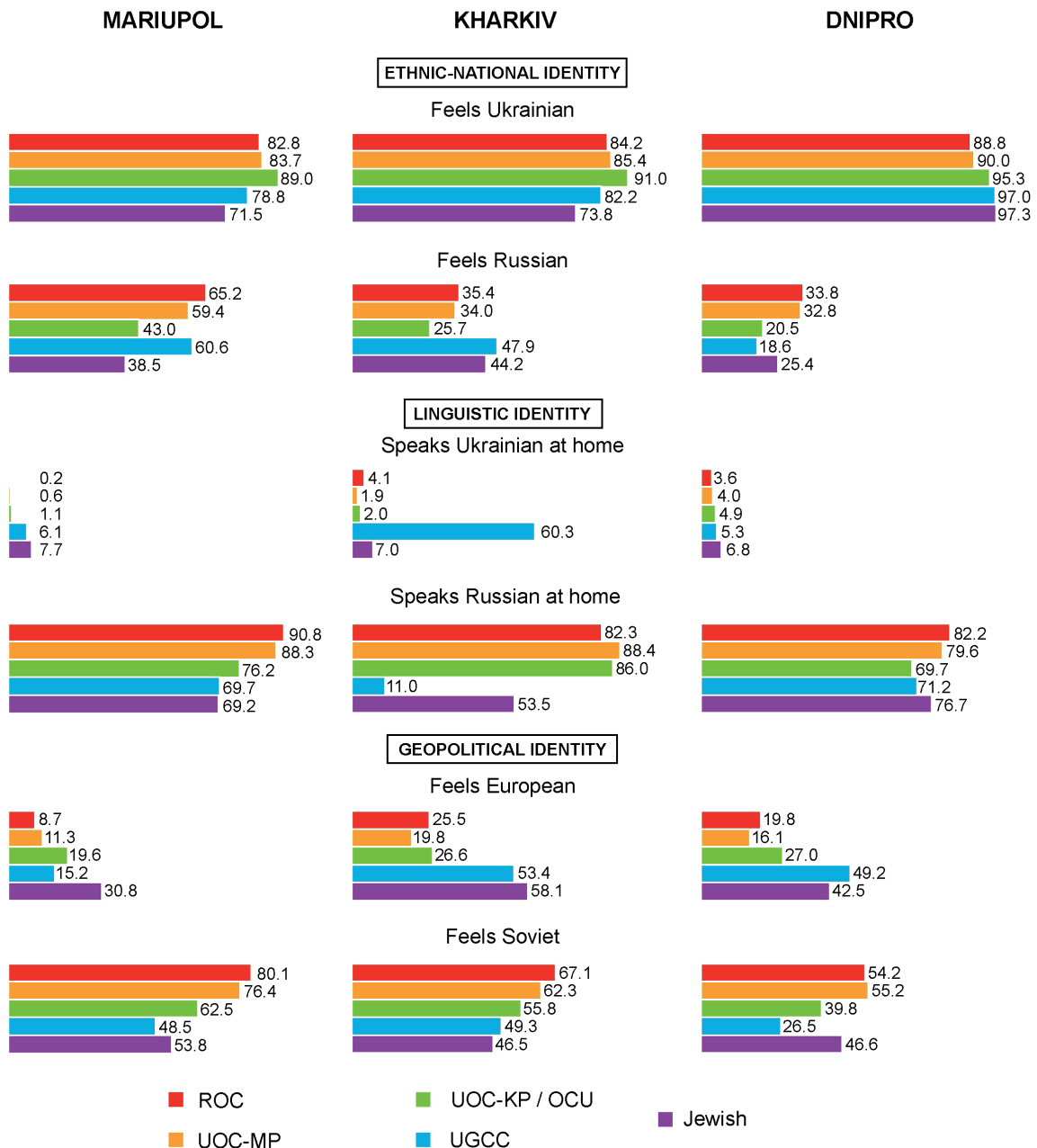


Figure 2a. Ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical identities of people who trust certain religious organisations (%)

Source: Own research.

Moving to the subject of geopolitical identities, we observe that in all three cities, feeling European has a relatively positive relationship with confidence in the UGCC and the UOC-KP and a relatively negative relationship with confidence in the UOC-MP and the ROC. Conversely, feeling Soviet has a strong positive correlation with trust in the UOC-MP and the ROC and a weaker positive

or negative correlation with trust in the other denominations. Feeling European and not feeling Soviet is extremely typical for those who trust the UGCC (except among those in Dnipro who feel European), making it a ‘church for Europeans’ and a ‘church for non-Soviets’.

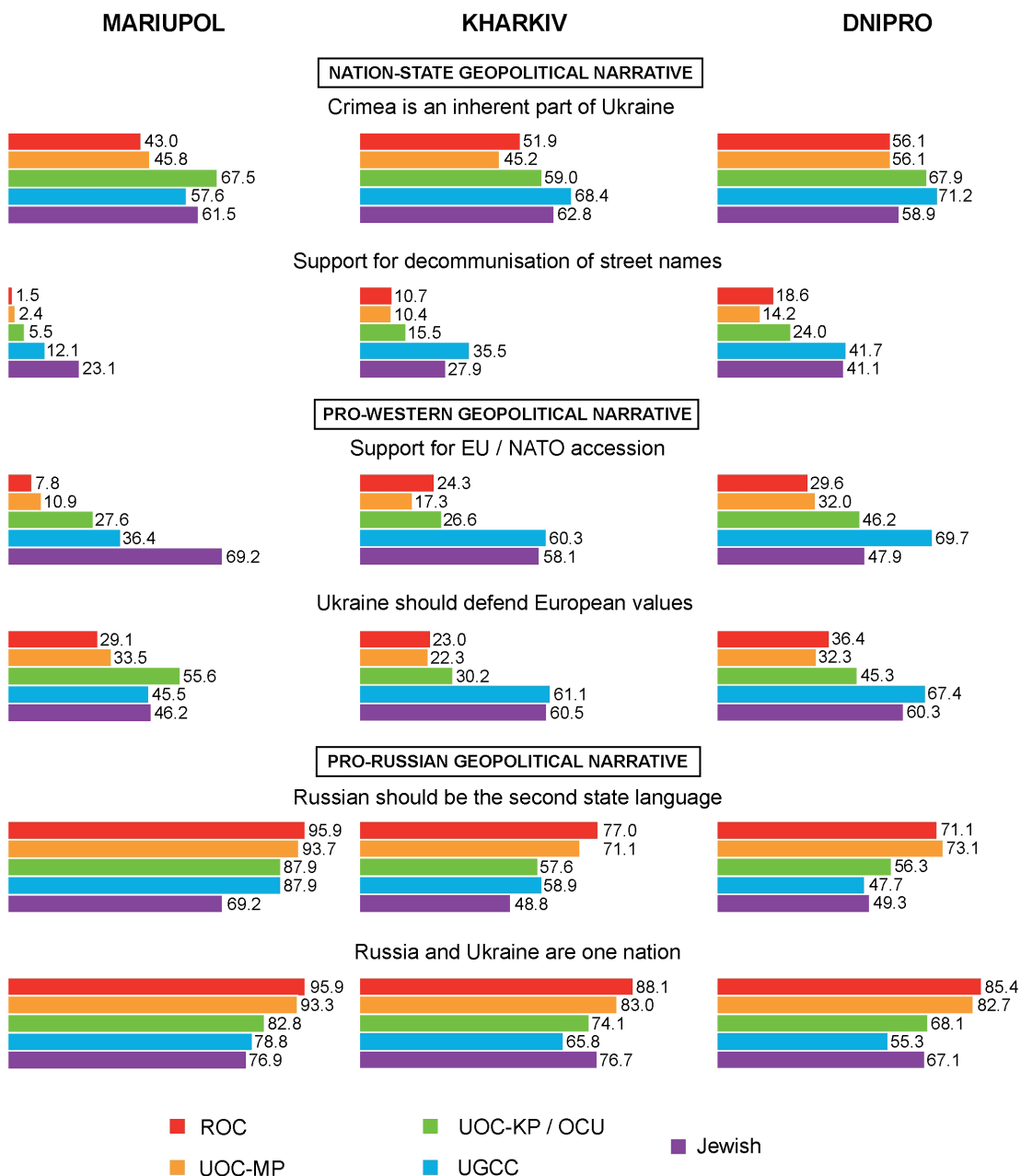


Figure 2b. Geopolitical attitudes of people who trust certain religious organisations (%)

Source: Own research.

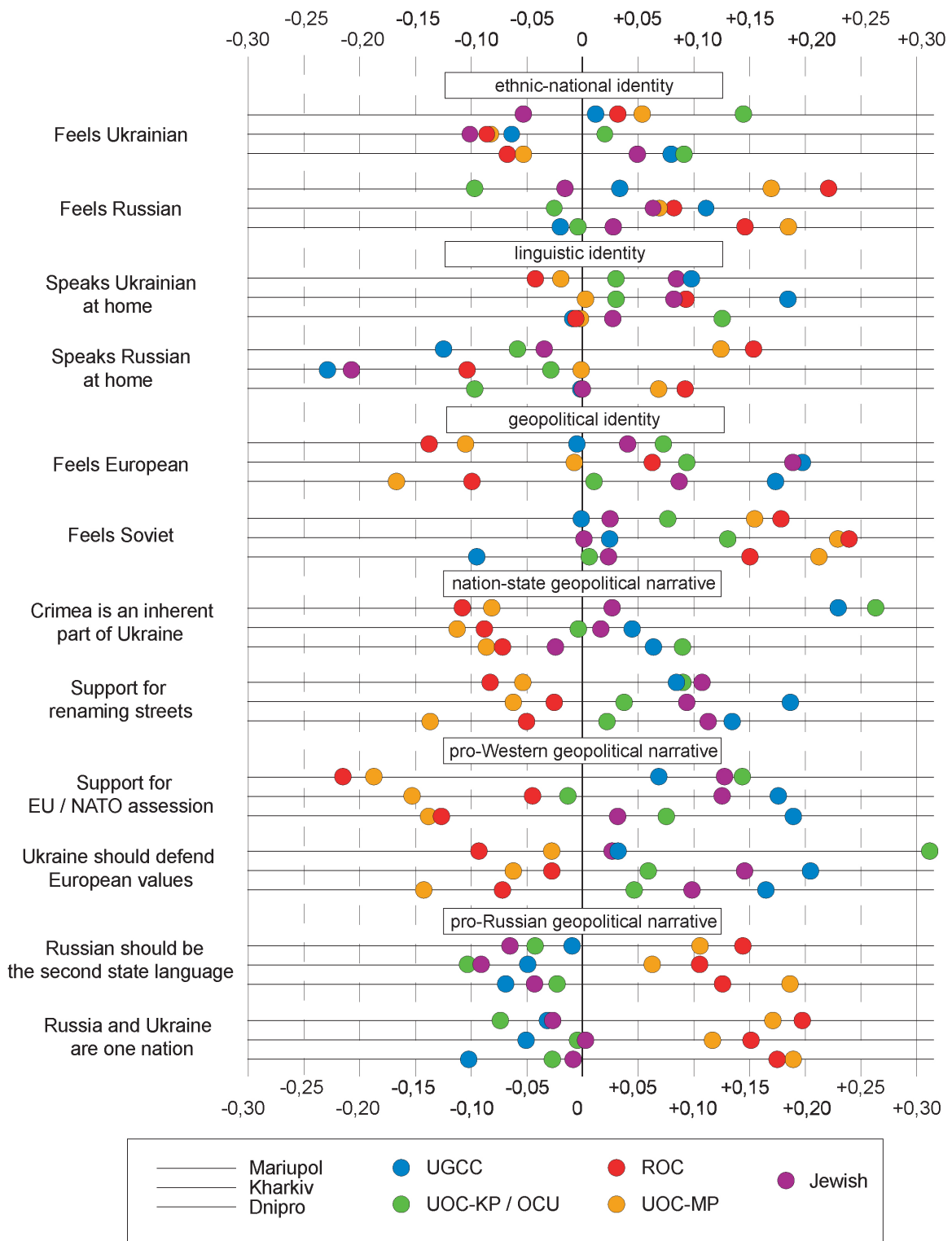


Figure 3. Correlations between the trust in certain religious organisations and ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical identities and attitudes

Source: Own research.

People who trust the UOC-KP/OCU and the UGCC consistently display a much higher level of support for the Ukrainian nation-state and pro-European narratives than those who trust the UOC-MP/ROC. Conversely, the former express much less support for pro-Russian narratives than the

latter do. This is evidenced by both the differences in percentages (Figures 2a–2b) and the correlation diagram (Figure 3), where the red/orange points for the UOC-MP/ROC and the green/blue points for the UOC-KP/OCU/UGCC are clearly clustered on the opposite sides relative to zero. This pattern contrasts especially with the mixed position of these points in the case of ethnic and linguistic identities. The shares of people who agree that Ukraine should join EU/NATO and defend European values are extremely high among those who trust in the UGCC (except for Mariupol) – which serves as more evidence that this church is perceived as being ‘European’ and is therefore trusted by people with a strong sense of European identity. Moreover, those who are confident in the UGCC are extremely strong supporters of the national decommunisation policy, while those who trust the UOC-KP/OCU, in most cases, take an intermediate position in support of these narratives, although there are exceptions (e.g. Mariupol has the highest level of agreement with the statement that Ukraine should support European values and Kharkiv has the lowest support for Russian as a second language).

As for people who place their trust in Jewish religious organisations, they are far more similar to the UOC-KP/OCU/UGCC than they are to the UOC-MP/ROC in terms of their identities and geopolitical preferences. They more often feel European and rarely feel Soviet and are more likely to be Ukrainophones than Russophones, although they lack a clear ethnic identity. They are inclined to support the notion of a Ukrainian nation-state as well as pro-European geopolitical narratives, while expressing relatively weak agreement with pro-Russian geopolitical narratives. In terms of their characteristics, they are very similar to those who trust in the UGCC – in fact, these two groups appear to comprise the same people.

To summarise, the factors that have the most pronounced impact on people’s level of trust in different religious organisations are attitudes towards the Ukrainian nation-state and attitudes towards pro-European and pro-Russian geopolitical narratives. By contrast, doctrinal disputes and the issue of canonicity are not especially important in shaping religious attitudes; instead, cultural and especially geopolitical identities and preferences have the biggest influence (Kumkova 2015; Rap 2015; Mandaville 2022). In regard to ethnic-national identity, the results vary depending on the particular city and in some cases they are contra-intuitive. Thus, ethnic and linguistic identities are important but not decisive influences on religious attitudes in the studied cities (cf. Aliyev 2019; Bureiko and Moga 2019, and Kulyk 2019 on the dubious importance of language and ethnicity in determining geopolitical preferences in Ukraine, especially with regard to the Russophone community). Consequently, ethnicity and language are less reliable predictors of religious attitudes compared to geopolitical preferences, although with some notable exceptions (e.g. the UOC-KP/OCU is viewed as an ethnic Ukrainian church by both Ukrainophones and Russophones, while the UGCC is perceived as a church for Ukrainophones of both ethnicities with strong European self-identification). All this means that in the geopolitical fault-line cities of Eastern Ukraine, the religious divide does not generate additional division but rather strengthens the existing one, which is known to be formulated in terms of geopolitical as opposed to language- or ethnicity-based categories, although the factors of language and ethnicity do have some influence on geopolitical preferences (cf. Barrington 2002; Portnov 2015a; Kuzio 2019). Religious attitudes, meanwhile, add another characteristic to the political stratigraphy of the pro-West and pro-Russian constituencies in Eastern Ukraine (Gentile 2015). Civic-national identity, including law abidance, shared beliefs, and adherence to state-promoted values and institutions (Shulman 2002; Leong 2020), is more relevant than ethnic-national identity to understanding the religious fault-line in Eastern Ukraine compared with ethnic-national identity (cf. Gentile 2015; Giuliano 2018; Aliyev 2019; Kulyk 2019). In view of the strong links between religion and geopolitics, the prospect of the reconciliation of the Church in Ukraine, even with the help of social and relational platforms (cf. Rap 2015), seems unlikely so long as conflicting pro-Western and pro-Russian narratives exist in the country. If it were to happen, it would depend on the extent to which the UOC-MP will be prepared to turn away/distance itself from its spiritual centre in Moscow (cf. Sagan 2015). However, the war between Russia and Ukraine, already having driven the UOC-MP to change its public position, may accelerate this process substantially (cf. Surzhko Harned 2022).

## Conclusions

Our analysis suggests that in the geopolitical fault-line cities of Eastern Ukraine, religious attitudes are strongly interrelated with ethnic, linguistic, and geopolitical identities. At the same time, civic-national identity, as reflected in attitudes towards conflicting geopolitical narratives, appears to be more relevant than ethnic-national identity to understanding the religious divide. Thus, the religious split in these cities reflects and further strengthens, first of all, the existing geopolitical divide between West-oriented and Russia-oriented citizens. On the one hand, this means that trust in certain religious denominations is largely shaped by the pre-existing factors of ethnicity, language, and, especially, geopolitics. On the other hand, the findings reveal the importance of one's Church in shaping one's geopolitical views, as churches play a critical role in sharing and disseminating certain geopolitical narratives. Since Ukrainian geopolitical fault-line cities are of pivotal importance not only for the modern Ukrainian national project but also for the entire European and global geopolitical order (Gentile, 2017), the role of religion should be considered to be of high importance to Ukraine's national security. The nexus between religion and geopolitics means that the reconciliation of the Church in Ukraine is hardly possible before the geopolitical conflict between Russia and the West has been solved. It is expected, however, that the current re-evaluation of the Russian factor in national politics in view of the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war in 2022 will naturally result in a shift in attitudes towards certain religious denominations and may contribute to the final reconciliation and unification of the Ukrainian Orthodoxy.

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