

Orthodox Conservatism and the Refugee Crisis in Bulgaria and Moldova

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Abstract

In 2015, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued an unusual statement declaring that the arrival of refugees represented a “true invasion” in the region. One year later, during debates on Moldova’s presidential elections, the Orthodox Church endorsed the fake news that 30,000 Syrians were about to arrive in the country. Drawing on interviews in Chişinău and Sofia, the article argues that the European refugee crisis has led to an internationally-linked Orthodox conservatism characterized by five components: defending a mythical past; fostering close relations with state authorities; anti-Westernism; building conservative networks at local, national, and geopolitical levels; and presenting Orthodox churches as alternative governance structures. These components shape religion–state relations in predominantly Orthodox countries in the region and have had a direct impact on the ways in which religious and state bodies have responded to populism and geopolitics.

Keywords

Moldova, Bulgaria, politics, religion, refugee crisis, Orthodox Christianity

Introduction

In an interview with the *Financial Times* in June 2019, Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, claimed that “liberalism has become obsolete” sparking a flurry of criticism among Western politicians (Barber, Foy & Barker, 2019). While the ideological structure of the international system remains debatable, Putin’s words denoted a different approach to the ways in which Eastern and Western societies are constructed and ruled. Emerging from atheist communism, Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states have developed close ties with political authorities. The process of secularization that has become the norm in Western Europe contrasts with the religious revival of Orthodoxy in Eastern Europe. In the last two decades, Orthodoxy has regularly been presented in the literature as being associated with an increase of authoritarianism and reducing political opposition (Anderson, 2015; Angold, 2006; Blitt, 2011; Krawchuk & Bremer, 2014; Knox, 2003; Lamoreaux & Flake, 2018; Leustean, 2014; Marsh, 2013; Ostbo, 2017; Papkova, 2011; Payne, 2010; Prodromou, 2004; Ramet, 1998, 2006, 2019; Richters, 2013).

The post-2011 Syrian crisis and the unprecedented population movement from the Middle East and North Africa to Western Europe have provided an opportunity to advance Orthodox conservatism. Recent events have been particularly poignant as throughout European history refugee crises have been at the core of Eastern and Western identity construction. From the arrival of the first refugees in Greece to regular crossings of the Balkan route through

Bulgaria and Serbia, forcibly displaced populations have faced the predominant culture and religion of transiting countries (Beckford, 2016; Christiansen, 1996; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2011; Hollenbach, 2014; Leustean, 2019, 2020; Mavelli & Wilson, 2017; Prodromou, 2018). In 2016, Archbishop Ieronymos II of Greece traveled together with Pope Francis to the island of Lesbos and encouraged the faithful to provide support to newly arrived refugees. In Serbia, the Holy Synod, the highest authority of the Orthodox Church, issued a statement encouraging openness to those transiting the country. However, these two examples remained singular. In 2015, at the peak of the European refugee crisis, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church issued an unusual statement condemning the government's policy on migration and declaring that the arrival of people represented a "true invasion." One year later, during presidential election debates in the Republic of Moldova, the issue of migration shifted the balance between candidates when the Orthodox Church, under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, endorsed the fake news that 30,000 Syrians were about to arrive in the country. No other Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe issued such strong statements against the arrival of refugees, which went against the Christian precept of "Love your neighbour as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31).

While, at first glance, the response of the Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and Moldova may seem unusual, they reflect a wider pattern of the strengthening of an internationally-linked religious conservatism in Eastern Europe. In Catholic Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, a number of top religious clergy issued statements endorsing right-wing politicians against liberal Western policies on migration. The Catholic response differed from the Orthodox position in its international dimension. Hungary and Poland have been repeatedly criticized by European institutions; however, the Catholic stance against liberalism and the refugee crisis reflected primarily a domestic agenda. In the Orthodox world, criticism of the liberal West advanced an internationally-linked position that benefits geopolitical interests of the main actors in the region. As a general rule, after the fall of communism, Orthodox traditionalism and conservatism has been presented by clergy and politicians as an alternative to liberalism, democratization processes, and human rights (Huntington, 1996; Köllner, 2019; Leustean, 2014; Roudometof et al., 2005; Shlapentokh, 2007; Stoeckl, 2014; Verkhovsky, 2002). Throughout the region Orthodox clergy presented themselves as "moral entrepreneurs" providing policy guidance on issues related to family and nation-building processes (Bluhm & Varga, 2018; Stoeckl, 2016; Stoeckl & Medvedeva, 2018).

This article addresses two main questions: How have the Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and Moldova responded to the European refugee crisis? To what extent have these two churches mobilized themselves and engaged with other religious communities and state authorities in response to the refugee crisis? How have transnational Orthodox networks developed in relation to the refugee crisis? The article argues that the refugee crisis has led to an internationally-linked Orthodox conservatism defined by five key elements: defending a mythical past of the country; fostering close relations with state authorities; increasing anti-Westernism; building conservative networks at local, national, and geopolitical levels; and presenting Orthodox churches as alternative governance structures.

What do Bulgaria and Moldova have in common? First, the legacy of atheist communism and religious persecutions has had an impact on social structures in both countries (Davie et al., 2018; Stan & Turcescu, 2011; Makrides, 2005, 2012; Leustean, 2014). Bulgaria has one of the highest percentages of atheists and agnostics among predominantly Orthodox countries in the region (22%); however, those declaring themselves Orthodox has increased considerably in the last decade (75%). Moldova has the highest percentage of Orthodox believers in Eastern Europe (90%) (Recensământul populației și a locuințelor [Population and Building Census], 2014). In both countries, there is a higher public trust in churches than in political structures (Pew Research Center, 2017). Second, both countries have been affected by

emigration with a significant number of their populations moving abroad, mostly to the European Union and Russia, due to economic reasons. Bulgaria has been described as “the world’s fastest shrinking nation” with two million out of a nine million population moving abroad (McLaughlin, 2018). Moldova, one of the poorest countries in Europe, has been presented as “the most migration-affected country in the world” with nearly one-quarter of its population living abroad (850,000 people out of 2.9 million total residents in 2016) (McLaughlin, 2016). Third, in both countries and throughout the region, Russia’s “soft power” has been exerted not only through cultural cooperation, energy, and military contracts but also through religious diplomacy directly involving Orthodoxy in foreign affairs (Cheskin, 2017; Conley et al., 2016; Curanović, 2012; Sakwa, 2017). Fourth, the comparison between Bulgaria and Moldova has broader significance to the construction of other societies in the region that have started to advance illiberalism and populism with an impact on regional and geopolitical consequences in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states (Hug, 2018). The comparison of Bulgaria and Moldova shows that despite both countries facing different waves of refugees, the public discourse of both churches has been similar advancing an internationally-linked Orthodox conservatism alongside populist rhetoric and geopolitical interests.

Methodology

This article draws on 22 interviews (11 interviews in each country) conducted with officials belonging to the three main categories: (1) religious communities (clergy and laypeople) working on humanitarian programs with refugees; (2) governmental and civil society organizations; and (3) academics from national universities and academies of sciences in Chişinău, Moldova, and Sofia, Bulgaria. The interviews took place in February 2019. Each interviewee received the same set of questions in advance, with the meeting following a semi-structured approach lasting between 30 minutes and one hour. The project underwent strict ethical procedures with all interviewees confirming their oral consent to be part of the project upon condition of full anonymity. The interviews took place in English, Bulgarian, and Romanian, and, in a number of cases, a translator was present helping to expand the themes of investigation. The list of interviewees presented in the References section reflects the affiliation of individuals, not the official position of any of these organizations. A wide range of participants responded positively to the project; however, the religious leadership of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Metropolitanate of Chişinău and all Moldova refused to meet and discuss the project. In Bulgaria, Catholic, Protestant, and Muslim organizations have also refused to meet. Despite not being able to discuss the project with the top leadership of Orthodox churches of these two bodies, the interviewees have been selected according to the dominant and minority religion in each country. The lack of official response has been addressed by conducting interviews with those directly involved in the refugee support, namely, volunteers working directly with refugees in Sofia and in camps throughout the country. As discussed in the analysis, the politicization of religious discourse explained the reluctance of top clergy to discuss their programs and the lack of widespread social mobilization on humanitarian issues. That this was the case, particularly in Bulgaria, was evident when Pope Francis traveled to Sofia in May 2019 with a message of encouraging authorities to address the refugee crisis. A photograph of Pope Francis praying alone in St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, with no Orthodox clergy joining him, made headlines around the world. In Moldova, although top clergy from the largest Orthodox Church refused to meet, the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia, which is a minority community under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church, agreed to be interviewed for the project and discussed their immigration/emigration mobilization. In a manner comparable to the lack of official response in Bulgaria, top religious leaders from the dominant religious confession in Moldova refused

to discuss their activities while those working directly with refugees have responded positively to the project. In both Bulgaria and Moldova, the refusal of predominant religious structures to discuss the project has enforced the main findings of this research, namely, the politicization of religious engagement with the refugee crisis and its wider societal impact. Qualitative data has been collated in both countries to ensure full anonymity of sources. In addition, quantitative data has been taken from published sources with material available online and printed publications. The findings of this article do not represent the official position of any interviewees, churches, or organizations listed in the References section.

Bulgaria: “The Orthodox Church is a State within a State”

Migration to Bulgaria is not a new phenomenon. The first wave of migration occurred during the Cold War period when Bulgaria, a member of the Warsaw Pact, strengthened its relations with the Soviet Union. The second wave took place immediately after 1990 when migrants from neighboring countries and the Middle East were encouraged to settle due to economic incentives. New communities started to develop, such as the Syrian community, which has been regarded as one of the most successful. The third wave of migration took place after the post-2011 Syrian crisis.

In 2015, at the peak of the European refugee crisis, the International Organization for Migration recorded 1,059,044 migrants arriving in Europe, most of whom were present in Greece (857,363 people), with 31,174 people in Bulgaria. Most refugees arriving in Greece headed north along the Balkan route aiming to reach Western Europe. After the borders were closed, a significant number of people became stranded in Southeastern Europe with mass media regularly reporting scenes of violence on the Croatian-Serbian and Serbian-Hungarian borders. Three years later, 60,083 people were stranded in Greece while Bulgaria counted only 690 migrants living in state-run refugee centers (International Organization for Migration, 2015–18). In February 2016, thousands of refugees were trapped on the Bulgaria-Serbia-Greece border in what Politico called “Europe’s most hostile port of entry.” Facilities in these camps were dire.

On 25 September 2015, in an unprecedented gesture, the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) issued “The Exclusive Synodal Address on the Refugee Crisis” (*Izvanredno obrashtenie na Sv. Sinod na BPTs-BP po povod krizata s bezhantsite*), becoming the first religious body to condemn its own government and the European Union’s policy on migration and asylum and to demand that the authorities reject any intake of refugees. The Church’s position was due to three main reasons:

First, since the fall of communism, the Church has presented itself as the sole protector of the Bulgarian nation at the expense of other religious communities (Kalkandjieva, 2014). Church leaders have regularly attended political gatherings, neatly symbolized by the close proximity of the headquarters of the Bulgarian Patriarchate and the Parliament, only a few meters apart. Decisions on the refugee crisis can be described as a combination of religious and political calculation. Most interviewees mentioned that in 2019 the number of refugees were much lower than during the 2015 crisis with those who wanted to reach the West already having left the country. During the last four years, refugees have regularly been presented negatively in mass media. Police escorted those who arrived at the border, and refugees were placed in detention centers and open centers. At first, the centers were derelict, and financial support from the European Union came only in 2016 when conditions started to improve. The refugees who reached other European countries described their stay in Bulgaria as akin to imprisonment, particularly the detention centers in the Busmantsi village near Sofia and in Lyubimets, a small town in the southern part of the country. Bulgaria did not witness refugees walking on foot across its territory as, for example, happened in the march from the Budapest train station to

the Austrian border, and there have been no large groups camped in cities, as, for example, in Belgrade's public parks. The population witnessed the refugee crisis mainly from the mass media, and only a handful of local communities, mostly located near the southern border, physically witnessed the new arrivals. In a number of cases, local authorities refused to register refugees. The Patriotic Front, a coalition of far-right parties that included Ataka, headed by Volen Siderov; the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria, headed by Valerii Simeonov; and the IMRO-Bulgarian National Movement, headed by Krasimir Karakachanov, minister of defense, have described the arrival of refugees as changing the predominant religion of Bulgaria. In February 2019, the far-right coalition even organized a march in Sofia honoring a Nazi general despite protests from the Jewish community. The far-right discourse on the refugee crisis took advantage of the Orthodox Church's position as the protector of the nation (Junes, 2017; Krasimirov, 2019). Second, the refugee crisis has proved an opportunity for the Church to advance a conservative agenda thereby reconfirming its authority in society. After the 2016 public statement of the Holy Synod, the Church refrained from opening any social programs in support of the refugees. The impact was twofold. The government declined to sign "The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence," with interviewees claiming that the decision was most likely due to pressure from the Orthodox Church. One interviewee stated that "the Orthodox Church is a state within a state" while another commented that "the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is very political and close to the government. The government says something today and the Church says the same thing the following day." Most importantly, the far-right presence in the government led to pressure on minority religious communities. The case of the Catholic priest Paolo Cortese from the village of Belene produced headlines when he was forced to leave the country after he received death threats due to helping a Syrian family that received legal residence and was accommodated in his parish (Sofia Globe Staff, 2017).

Third, the refugee crisis denoted close links between the Bulgarian and Russian Orthodox Churches. After the fall of communism, the BOC remained a closed community that has repeatedly refused participation in international religious dialogue with Western counterparts and has supported Russia's narrative of the conflict in the Donbas region. For example, on 15 December 2015, Patriarch Neophyte sent a letter to President Petro Poroshenko protesting against what it perceived as Ukraine's persecution of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate, an unprecedented gesture that defied diplomatic protocol, as religious bodies usually communicate via embassy channels rather than directly with the heads of other states. In 2016, the BOC was one of the three churches that followed Russia's refusal to attend the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church in Crete, a gathering of all recognized Orthodox churches in communion across the world. An interviewee stated that the links between the Bulgarian and Russian Orthodox Churches were evident not only due to the fact that most hierarchs studied in Moscow but also because there was no criticism of Russia's actions in either academia or the public sphere.

The Church's condemnation of the government's migration policy did not have full support among the population or among a small number of clergy. In September 2016, Metropolitan Naum of Ruse took a different position from the Holy Synod when he circulated a message on his diocese's website and Facebook that "we are obliged to lend a hand to those people who need empathy and attention" (Naum, 2016). A similar position was also taken by Father Stefan Stefanov from the same diocese, who argued in an interview that the Church should be open to the refugees stating that "I'm afraid many people now think that being xenophobic is Christian. Not only is it not so, it is anti-Christian to be a xenophobe" (Offnews, 2016). The difference between the official church discourse and the social mobilization of volunteers who supported humanitarian programs from Catholic and Muslim communities was an example of public dissatisfaction with the Orthodox stance. Statements from interviewees

reinforced the division between top hierarchy and ordinary believers: “I am Orthodox but the Church does not do anything for the refugees”; “refugees do not choose the country to live in”; “the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is like an unidentified flying object moving between scandal and scandal”; “I am embarrassed by the position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church.” One interviewee mentioned that in 2015, an Orthodox priest from a parish in Sofia preached during the Sunday liturgy that people should welcome refugees. His words were spontaneous and people attending the service were surprised as they contradicted the official voice of the Church. No actions were taken by the priest or his parish. Although the Bulgarian Patriarchate does not publicize social programs, one interviewee mentioned that two Orthodox parishes in Sofia were providing free meals to people in need, and perhaps refugees.

The humanitarian activism of a small number of volunteers contrasted with the public discourse of intellectuals associated with the Church. An interviewee mentioned that people were not viewing the refugees favorably due to the fact that the church discourse was summarized as follows: “The Church is about the salvation of the faithful; social services are the duty of the state.” The view that the Church was somewhat removed from society has been present in discussion with most interviewees.

Caritas, the Catholic nongovernmental organization, stood out among other religious communities by participating in international programs in supporting refugees. Its website stated that, in 2018, it provided support to 2,747 refugees through the St. Anna Integration Centre in Sofia and the Refugee Project, which brought together a network of volunteers. In 2017, Caritas published an online “Bulgarian Language Guide for Refugees” providing Level 1 translation from Arabic into Bulgarian (Caritas, 2017). Praising the activism was not shared by everyone. An interviewee stated that although Caritas was the most active faith-based organization in the country, there have been a number of cases in which it helped refugees only after pressure from other NGOs. Caritas was not working in any joint programs with the Orthodox Church. The lack of Church’s lead was reflected in the Bulgarian society with national surveys showing that most people declined to have refugees as their neighbors. One interviewee mentioned that the lack of resources allocated by the state to refugees had a hidden agenda, namely, to indirectly disincentivize people from settling in Bulgaria.

In addition to Caritas, the local Muslim community provided support to refugees. A Syrian businessman based in Sofia was employed by the state to provide halal food to refugees in state-run camps. An interviewee mentioned that refugees received support from the local mosque in Sofia, but nothing was reported or made public in the capital; helping refugees was discreet and on a case-by-case basis. The fact that the mosque worked with refugees was evident when changes were made to introduce Arabic in a number of prayers, a move that was not welcomed by local faithful. In Sofia, most Muslims attended prayers in Turkish or Bulgarian, and the introduction of Arabic led to unease. Linguistic changes have also been evident in other Bulgarian cities, for example, in Varna, where prayers were mostly in Turkish, rather than Bulgarian, and locals complained that they did not understand the language.

Volunteers who worked in refugee camps stated that they did not encounter any Orthodox clergy. Instead, a number of Protestant pastors had visited the camps, and there were a number of isolated cases of baptized refugees in a river near the open camps. Conditions in open camps were mixed, with each Syrian family living in one room, while other nationalities shared beds in a larger room (40 people). Men were grouped together while teenagers and children were separate. As a general rule, the Muslim Muftis were not allowed in the camps and people prayed alone on prayer carpets.

While religious mobilization in supporting refugees has remained low, civil society organizations run programs filling in the void of spiritual and material support, such as providing free juridical assistance and setting up bread workshops for refugees that brought together people from different confessions. An interviewee pointed out that, as a whole,

Bulgarian society has become more open to humanitarian engagement, with a significant number of businesses being open to providing help to those in need, but refusing at the same time to advertise their charitable work. As an example, an interviewee mentioned that after an interview on Bulgarian television in which people were encouraged to donate something to refugees living in dire conditions in the camps, an anonymous company unexpectedly sent a truck with 5,000 drinking glasses to the refugee camp near the border with Greece. The interviewee pointed out that the large number of items not only exceeded expectations but also showed that businesses refrained from publicity in order not to suffer any possible political backlash. Another interviewee expressed surprise that the European Union did not take a more active position against the political use of Orthodox Church by far-right actors.

Two items have been mentioned in most interviews, namely, a lack of transparency regarding church finances and the nationalistic discourse of the Church. Transparency, or lack of it, has become a major issue in public debates taking into account repeated claims that the state should fund restoration of St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia. The Cathedral was confiscated during the communist period and returned after 1990 on the assumption that the Church would take care of its maintenance. The Church was seen as having extensive assets including property and land in Bulgaria and abroad; as a whole, its resources have been unclear. Furthermore, the Church asked the state to pay salaries to clergy. The fact that the government has not launched a public discussion on the United Nations “Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration” agreement was also viewed as an example of pressure from the Orthodox Church.

The overall support of the state authorities toward refugees has been limited. In 2018, Bulgaria had two detention centers. Refugees received only food and accommodation until October 2018, when they started to receive 20 lev (around 10 euros) per month. Refugees had 14 days to leave the center, find a job, rent a flat, and arrange their own subsistence. After an individual left the detention center, the state did not provide any support, as only nongovernmental organizations helped those in need. The lack of public engagement with refugees raised concerns among international organisations, with one interviewee claiming that unofficially it was highly likely that around 18,000 migrants were still living in Bulgaria. The figure represented the difference between those who arrived and those who left the country and were not officially registered since the Syrian refugee crisis began in 2011. The lack of credible data has also been reflected in the attitude of officials working on the Bulgarian-Turkish border with an interviewee claiming that more than 70 cases of violence against refugees took place in 2018. An interviewee stated that when confronted by evidence, authorities denied that they were at fault.

Moldova: Orthodox Churches between Romanian Nationalism and Russian Geopolitics

As in Bulgaria, the Orthodox Church plays a prime role in religion–state relations with a direct influence on society and politics. Since the fall of communism, Moldova has developed two competing Orthodox churches: the Metropolitanate of Chişinău and all Moldova (MCM), under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church; and the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia (MB), under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church (Avram, 2014; Carnevale, 2019; Popescu, 2004; Turcescu & Stan, 2003). Both Orthodox structures have been linked to either Romanian nationalism or Russian geopolitics in the region. At times, political parties have presented the threat of unification with Romania as an inevitable consequence of Moldova’s pro–European Union stance. An interviewee stated that Moldova’s foreign policy was complicated not only by allegiance to Romania or Russia, but also by the fact that more than half of the members of Parliament held Romanian passports, raising questions on state sovereignty. Therefore, the discourse of Orthodox churches has been politicized with clergy

regularly issuing statements in support of political authorities alongside the pro-Russian or pro-Western camps (Țugui, 2011; Voicu et al., 2017).

As a general rule, both Orthodox churches have limited social engagement with refugees coming from other former Soviet states, in the aftermath of the Transnistria War in the 1990s or the European refugee crisis. The MCM, the largest community in the country, has been condemned by local intellectuals for its link with the security services during the communist period. The MB has instead been criticized for openly fostering unification and raising fears on the future of Moldova's suzerainty. Both churches have limited humanitarian structures. The MCM has links with Russian business people and benefits from government support while the MB engages with social programs run by the Social Department of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Diaconia. After visa liberalization in 2013 with the European Union, the government and international organizations launched programs on bridging the gap between citizens who moved abroad and local communities in Moldova. In 2018, the United Nations Development Programme engaged emigrants in deciding which communities should benefit from financial support by setting up Hometown Associations. The Associations devised 55 projects aimed at local development, such as street lighting, park development, and refuse collection (UNDP Moldova, 2019). In a number of cases, Orthodox clergy became Association members and worked directly with local institutions. The involvement of the clergy was welcomed by the diaspora due to their authority in local communities.

The mobilization of those living in the West has been important for the state not only for financial reasons, with significant resources being sent back to the country, but also for electoral purposes. The diaspora has been a source of votes with religious communities directly involved in supporting candidates. In February 2019, during national elections polling, booths were opened near Baptist churches in the United States encouraging believers to vote for Valeriu Ghilețchi, who previously headed the Baptist Church in Moldova (Agora, 2019). Similarly, Orthodox communities in Italy, which has one of the largest Moldovan diasporas, have largely been under the jurisdiction of the MCM and thus favored pro-Russian candidates. Orthodox churches exert influence not only abroad but also in the disputed territory of Transnistria. The MCM remains the predominant religious confession in Transnistria, while the MB has established a diocese in name (Bishopric of Dubăsari and all Transnistria), but with no appointed hierarchy. Similarly, to avoid tension, an interviewee stated that Catholic parishes in Transnistria are half administered by Moldovan or Romanian clergy and half by Polish clergy. As evident in other countries in the region, although a minority community, the Catholic Church is the most active on social issues. Moldova has not experienced an influx of refugees after the post-2011 Syrian crisis or the 2014 Russian-Ukrainian War. An interviewee mentioned that, in 2018, only one Syrian refugee was known (who opened a restaurant) and three families from Donbas arrived in Chișinău. Another interviewee claimed that it was highly likely that around 500 refugees from Donbas were in Chișinău and they were unreported as the Ukrainian Orthodox Church – Moscow Patriarchate had its own church in the capital. Being under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate, Ukrainians and Moldovans could attend services in both churches.

Interviewees pointed out that Moldova had been a migration destination during the Soviet Union when students from the Middle East studied in Chișinău. Many remained in the city and a significant Muslim population continues to exist near the University of Medicine. In the 1980s, a significant number of the Jewish population moved to Israel. After the 1990s, many Israelis frequently visited the country, providing active support and social programs for the Jewish community. Many interviewees mentioned that although the size of the Jewish community was small, the community was the most visible in the public domain in its charitable work and social programs. By contrast, Orthodox churches were regarded as wealthy and associated with political rule but were not engaged in social issues. An example was that

of Bishop Dorimedont (Cecan) of Edineț and Briceni, a member of the MCM, who reestablished the Noul (New) Neamț Monastery in Chițcani in the 1990s. As an interviewee pointed out, people noticed that his house and the monastery were refurbished and that “expensive cars and foreign delegations” traveled to the village while the community remained poor. The monastery was perceived as a symbol of post-communist Moldova, and the case made headlines when the bishop died in a car accident (Moldova Ortodoxă, 2018).

While the MCM has regularly been visible in mass media, the MB remained largely quiet. An interviewee suggested that the lack of its public presence was perhaps due to a meeting between the Romanian and Russian patriarchs in Bucharest in October 2017. By contrast, the MCM was perceived as in a permanent state of conflict between two key hierarchs, namely, Metropolitan Vladimir (Cantarean) of Chișinău and Bishop Markel (Mihăescu) of Bălți, seen as his likely successor. Another interviewee pointed out that, although in charge of the whole church on Moldovan territory, the metropolitan benefited from police protection and enjoyed state privileges; however, he required permission from the state authorities to travel to Transnistria.

Tension between Moldova and Transnistria was regularly promoted by Russian media. Despite the Parliament passing a law in 2018 restricting Russian channels of propaganda, the European refugee crisis in Europe was presented in the mass media as a sign of Muslims about to invade the country. When the government recognized the Islamic League in 2011, the MCM organized protests in four cities— Chișinău, Bălți, Ungheni, and Cahul—with Metropolitan Vladimir claiming that the legislation was “a humiliation” for the country while demonstrators chanted slogans such as “Moldova – Orthodox Country” and “The Church is the Mother of Our People” (Ticudean, 2011). When the Islamic League was allowed to build a mosque, the local authorities did everything to delay its realization. Arguments ranged from a lack of suitable land in Chișinău to frequent protests organized by nationalist Orthodox associations (Saint Virgin “Mother Matrona” and Pro-Orthodoxy) outside Muslim premises. When the Muslim community found a place of prayer, the building was not registered as a mosque but as “an entertainment building”; it was located on the outskirts of Chișinău with no religious symbols permitted visible from outside. In sermons the Orthodox Church encouraged the faithful to follow the example of Saint Stephen the Great in the Middle Ages, who ruled Moldova and built churches after each battle with the Ottoman Empire. The nationalist stance led to a state of fear among the Muslim community with women afraid to wear the hijab in public. An interviewee mentioned that physical violence was reported when a Muslim person was forcefully removed from public transport due to his skin color; in another case, a family with children who stopped to change a flat tire was threatened by a passerby with a gun who demanded that they leave the country.

Direct confrontation affected not only the Muslim community but other minorities as well. In 2009 and 2010, nationalist Orthodox associations supported by the clergy demonstrated in Chișinău against the display of a menorah in a public space during the festival of Hanukkah replacing it with a cross. Father Anatol Cibric, who led the demonstration, stated that “we are an Orthodox country. Stephan the Great defended our country from all kinds of kikes, and now they come and put their menorah here. This is anarchy” (Kirsh, 2009). The state authorities failed to take action until the Moldovan delegation visiting American counterparts in Washington, D.C., was denied meetings and issued a public condemnation of the action. Most interviewees claimed that the MCM was able to mobilize groups that could become violent. Similar to clergy protests against the LGBT community in Georgia, Moldovan clergy regularly protested against planned marches and public display of non-Orthodox values. In 2013, when the Parliament discussed the LGBT bill, the MCM protested. One interviewee stated that the church protest was not widespread across the country; instead, most likely, it

ended only after state authorities agreed to offer an expensive new car and a substantial amount of money to the MCM hierarchy.

Close relations between church hierarchs and political leaders have been a constant feature of Moldovan society. In 2019, a few days before national elections, Vlad Plahotniuc, leader of the Democratic Party of Moldova, who was in government, attended the Old Style Christmas services at Curchi monastery, under the MB's jurisdiction. Bishop Siluan of Orhei, who led the service, praised Plahotniuc as a model to follow (Necșuțu, 2019). An interviewee stated that in order to avoid confrontations, Igor Dodon, president of Moldova and leader of the Socialist Party, attended religious services with Metropolitan Cantarean. Political conflict between Plahotniuc and Dodon also had religious ramifications, as in autumn 2018, when Plahotniuc refused a visit from Patriarch Kirill to Chișinău fearing that it would increase his rival's electoral support. Bishop Siluan was also regarded as enjoying good relations with another controversial politician, businessman Ilan Șor, mayor of Orhei, who set up a small party (the Republican Socio-Political Movement Equality, or the Șor Party) that enabled voters to buy bread and daily necessities at reduced prices through his own shops. All interviewees deplored the use of the Church in electoral competition and described oligarch Vladimir Plahotniuc as the sole person ruling the country. Plahotniuc was viewed as being able to bribe deputies and authorities and building a network appeasing both pro-Russian and pro-Western factions. He claimed that Moldova was a special case in the former Soviet Union and that his rule was the only way to ensure that Russia did not occupy the country. When Andrei Năstase, founder of the Dignity and Truth Platform Party, was elected mayor of Chișinău in 2018, Plahotniuc's party ensured that elections were canceled claiming that Facebook calls from Romania rigged the vote (Goșu, 2018).

Interviewees stated that President Igor Dodon was not personally religious; however, he used the religious card for electoral purposes. Together with his inner circle of politicians and businessmen, mainly from the Socialist Party, Dodon traveled regularly to Mount Athos in Greece carrying the flag of Stephen the Great and presenting a national image as the defender of faith. He regularly traveled to meet Patriarch Kirill to the extent that the Moldovan mass media joked that he was ready to move to Moscow. His regular visits to the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin were regarded as examples that he was not welcomed by his counterparts in Western Europe. Furthermore, Putin was perceived by the general population as one of the most trusted politicians, and Dodon aimed to benefit from an "image transfer." An interviewee pointed out that Dodon's involvement with religion showed that the Orthodox Church and Putin were his two legitimating factors as president. These activities denoted the wider religion-state relations and the ways in which the refugee crisis was presented by religious and political authorities.

The most controversial association of religion and politics took place during the 2016 presidential elections with both Orthodox churches supporting either the pro-Moscow (Dodon) or the pro-Western candidate (Maia Sandu, leader of the Party of Action and Solidarity). After Sandu received international support for her candidacy during a brief meeting with the German chancellor, Angela Merkel, at the European People's Party summit on 20 October 2016 in Maastricht, the Netherlands, fake news appeared in mass media controlled by Dodon and Plahotniuc. The fake news claimed that in her meeting with Merkel, Sandu agreed to take 30,000 Syrians if she won the elections. Fake news was coupled with the mobilization of the MCM, particularly through xenophobic attacks launched by Bishop Markel of Bălți, who claimed that Sandu was not Christian because she did not have children. On the other hand, Dodon was regularly praised by the MCM and his electoral posters made references to Saint Stephen the Great. The fake news had an impact on the vote, with Dodon winning the elections with 52.11% of the total vote. An interviewee mentioned that Bishop Markel and the clergy in his diocese were directly involved in organizing buses and touring parishes encouraging

believers not to vote for Sandu. In December 2016, Sandu approached the Constitutional Court and contested the ways in which elections were held pointing out a number of irregularities, including the direct involvement of the Orthodox Church (Curtea Constituțională, 2016). The petition was rejected. In June 2019, tension within the political elite took a different turn when parties were unable to form a government, and Sandu and Dodon were able to remove Plahotniuc from power.

Orthodox Conservatism in Bulgaria and Moldova: Five Key Features

The lack of Orthodox humanitarian mobilization toward the refugee crisis in Bulgaria and Moldova has shown that Orthodox conservatism has acquired an international dimension in which populism and geopolitics play an important role. Orthodox conservatism has been characterized by five key elements:

First, all Orthodox churches have been regularly advancing the notion of defending the nation. In Bulgaria, the response of the clergy condemning the arrival of refugees was presented as an act of protecting the nation from “the Muslim invasion.” In Moldova, references to the mythical past and the rule of Saint Stephen the Great in the Middle Ages were examples of the church’s opposition to refugees and support for the “Orthodox candidate” in elections. This type of discourse reached the faithful due to historic tensions between Orthodox and Muslim communities and the ways in which history was taught and presented to the public during the communist period.

Second, Orthodox churches have been allies of political authorities. One interviewee started the discussion by stating that in Bulgaria “the Orthodox Church is a state within a state” and that everything happening at social and political levels has to take into account the Orthodox influence. In Moldova, political leaders have extensively used religious symbolism with pro-Moscow politicians meeting Patriarch Kirill and traveling to Mount Athos. These visits have been portrayed in the mass media with religious symbolism (white clothes, the flag, and crosses) aimed at depicting the political leadership in a favorable light.

Third, Orthodox churches in both countries not only have criticized the European Union’s response to the refugee crisis but also have refrained from engaging in relations with their Western counterparts. Russia’s criticism of the liberal West, seen as corrupt and decadent, has found support in Bulgaria and Moldova. However, as evident from interviewees who volunteered to work in humanitarian programs run by other minority religions, the official Orthodox Church discourse has not been embraced by all clergy and the population.

Fourth, Orthodox churches not only have advanced conservative networks in the territory under their own jurisdiction but also have developed relations with other churches that shared similar values. As one interviewee stated, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is no longer the mother of the Bulgarian people; it is instead a stepmother; it is a branch of the Moscow Patriarchate.” In Moldova, the Orthodox Church under the Moscow Patriarchate’s jurisdiction regularly advanced the idea of linking the Moldovan and Russian people. By contrast, the Orthodox Church under the Romanian Patriarchate’s jurisdiction has claimed that it is an extension of the Romanian nation. These networks are built taking into account the structure and organization of churches at local, national, and geopolitical levels.

Fifth, and most importantly, Orthodox churches have presented themselves as alternative governance structures. This has been done through the following means: church leaders have regularly taken a public stance on issues related to faith and moral values adding pressure on state authorities; church leaders have defined religious leadership together with political rule, as, for example, during the Second Bulgarian Empire at the start of the first millennium (1185–1396), or during Saint Stephen the Great’s rule in Moldova (1457–1504). While, at first sight, religious statements on mundane matters may not have an immediate

impact and may seem detached from the running of everyday politics, their influence of the interaction between church and state is long-lasting, as evident in the distribution of public funds. Since the fall of communism, significant state funding has been allocated to Orthodox churches for the construction of new buildings, some of which are the largest in Eastern Europe. The position of churches as alternative governance structures has been evident in its parallel diplomacy with counterparts from across the region, at times in contrast to official state policy (for example, the Bulgarian condemnation of the government's migration policy and presenting a similar line of argument with that of Russian clergy).

Conclusion

In post-Cold War Europe, Orthodox churches have become key players in relation to the ways in which social and political power is distributed and managed in society. Orthodox churches exert influence both by issuing statements in support of state policy and by taking a separate stance that favors their own agenda. Orthodox conservatism has developed across the region, which brings together “moral entrepreneurship,” nationalism, populism, and geopolitics.

The response of Orthodox churches in Bulgaria and Moldova toward the European refugee crisis has shown that Orthodox conservatism has been characterized by five key elements: defending a mythical past of the country; fostering close relations with state authorities; increasing anti-Westernism; building conservative networks at local, national, and geopolitical levels; and presenting Orthodox churches as alternative governance structures. Among these characteristics, the idea that Orthodox churches provide alternative forms of governance has widespread ramifications ranging from national legislation on religion-state relations to the allocation of public funds and voting processes. Orthodox churches perceive state governance as being composed of two elements, namely, providing the means of governance (during electoral processes with clergy actively involved in supporting candidates) and taking a public stance when communities are at risk (achieved via statements and social mobilization ensuring that the faithful survive, adapt, and incorporate religious values at times of crises). As evident in the European refugee crisis, Orthodox churches lack a coordinated response to humanitarian emergencies; however, they shape public opinion and influence political decisions with a direct impact on populations in need.

Interviews

Chişinău, Moldova (5 February 2019–8 February 2019)

1. The Orthodox Metropolitanate of Bessarabia (MB)
2. Caritas Moldova
3. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova
4. The Islamic League of the Republic of Moldova
5. Migration and Local Development Project, The United Nations Development Programme in Moldova
6. Institute for Policy and European Reforms
7. Member of Parliament
8. Foreign Affairs Board, Action and Solidarity Political Party
9. Journalist, National Television
10. State University of Moldova
11. State University of Moldova

Sofia, Bulgaria (25 February 2019–28 February 2019)

1. International Organization for Migration
2. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Representative in Bulgaria
3. Representation of the European Union in Bulgaria
4. Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria
5. Volunteer (Caritas) and Teacher, Secondary School
6. Volunteer (Caritas) and Academic, Bulgarian Academy of Science
7. Bulgarian Academy of Science
8. Bulgarian Academy of Science
9. Bulgarian Academy of Science
10. New Bulgarian University
11. New Bulgarian University

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