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CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR COVENANTAL PLURALISM IN ROMANIA

By Lucian N. Leustean 

The fall of communism in Romania started with a religious protest. On December 15, 1989, a group of parishioners formed a human chain outside László Tőkés's church residence protesting his forced removal from the position of assistant pastor of the Reformed Church in Timișoara. Dissatisfaction with the regime spiraled to thousands of people marching in the street and chanting slogans against the political authorities. Gradually, demonstrations engulfed the country in what became known as the Romanian Revolution. Two weeks later, Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the presidential couple who had ruled the country for two decades, were arrested, faced trial and executed on Christmas Day.

From the start of this democratic path, religious symbols have been at the fore of political processes in Romania. During the following decades, mass media headlines have reported not only on the building of new churches across the country but also on instances

of how the religious card has regularly been displayed by political leaders (Conovici 2009–2010; Enache 2005; Leustean 2014a; Ramet 1998; Romocea 2011; Stan and Turcescu 2007). In 2018, the Pew Research Centre found that Romania was the most religious country in

Abstract: This article examines the concept of covenantal pluralism in Romania, the most religious country in Europe according to a 2018 survey run by the Pew Research Centre. After a short overview of religion-state relations and religious demography, it focuses on three dimensions of covenantal pluralism: freedom of religion and belief, religious literacy and the advancement of virtues. It examines the key challenges and opportunities faced by covenantal pluralism and argues that religious literacy, social inclusion, populism and the politicization of religion are key factors impacting social norms and electoral processes. These challenges are significant for understanding major trends in religion-state relations, the building of a multi-faith society in Romania, and the resurgence of far-right politics in Eastern Europe.

Keywords: covenantal pluralism, religious demography, freedom of religion and belief, religious literacy, social inclusion, far-right politics, Romania

Europe with 55 percent of the population declaring themselves religious, above Armenia, Georgia and Greece which have traditionally topped the ranking. By contrast, at the other end of the scale, only 7 percent of the Estonian population, and 8 percent of the Danish and Czech populations declared that religion played a significant role in their lives.¹

In which ways do religious communities influence societal and political actors in Romania? Does the concept of “covenantal pluralism” as proposed by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (2020) provide an insight into the ways in which religious and political leaders engage with each other in the country? What are the challenges and opportunities of covenantal pluralism in Romania? This article is divided into three parts according to the three key categories of covenantal pluralism, namely, the defense of the freedom of religion and belief, the advancement of religious literacy and social inclusion, and the interlink between virtues, populism and the politicization of religion. It argues that the application of covenantal pluralism provides a model for advancing social progress in Romania. In particular, among the key challenges and opportunities, religious literacy, social inclusion, populism, and the politicization of religion remain some of the most disputed areas of concern with wider societal and political implications impacting social norms and electoral processes.

A Short History of Religion-State Relations and Religious Demographics

Religion-state relations have been indissolubly tied to the Romanian nation-building process. The term “Romania” was used in official documents only after 1859 with the unification of the Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia. After the 1877 Russian-Turkish war, the Romanian kingdom received political independence from the Ottoman Porte and, in 1885, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople recognized the autocephaly (religious independence) of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The Romanian Orthodox Church was not only the predominant religious confession in the

country but also carried considerable political weight. After the First World War, in 1918, the Romanian-speaking territories of Banat, Bessarabia, Bukovina, Crişana, Dobrudja, Maramureş, Moldavia, Transylvania, and Wallachia united into Greater Romania. Article 22 of the 1923 Constitution indicated two key religious communities in the country with a prime role in advancing Romanianness in Moldavia, Wallachia and Transylvania stating that, “The Romanian Orthodox Church, as the religion of the vast majority of Romanians, is the dominant church in the Romanian State; and the Greek-Catholic [Church] has priority over the other religious confessions.” However, throughout the interwar period, confessional tensions continued and affected not only the two churches but also other religious communities. Between February 1938 and his death in March 1939, Patriarch Miron Cristea of the Romanian Orthodox Church, held the position of Prime Minister. During his tenure, around 200,000 Jews lost their citizenship while the far-right Iron Guard attracted support among the lower clergy and theologian scholars (Biliuță 2020; Brusanowski 2010; Clark 2021; Kaltenbrunner 2021; Leustean 2014b; Maner 2007; Popa 2017).

After the Second World War, under the military occupation of Soviet troops, Romania abolished the monarchy and became a people’s republic. Stalin’s death in 1953 led to the country embarking on national communism which gradually distanced the regime from Moscow’s authority. While in most East European countries behind the Iron Curtain, religious communities faced drastic persecution, in Romania, the Orthodox Church adapted to new political realities by collaborating with the regime. Orthodox resistance was limited and quickly disbanded, taking place at the end of the 1950s in line with religious persecution across the communist bloc under Nikita Khrushchev’s leadership. While the Romanian Orthodox Church, as an institution, was politically employed by the communist authorities, the other main religious communities suffered significant persecution. In 1948, the Greek Catholic Church was officially banned and integrated into the structures of the Romanian

Orthodox Church. The Greek Catholic and Roman Catholic leadership were arrested, most of whom died in prison. When in 1965, Nicolae Ceaușescu became General Secretary of the Communist Party, the regime's stance of national communism became evident in Romania refusing to take part in the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. At home, the security services (the *Securitate*) were notoriously known for controlling and oppressing dissent. In the 1980s, national communism took a megalomaniac form which had religious overtones with the Ceaușescu couple presented as mythical figures in charge of the destiny of the country, which embarked on a "golden era" of socialism (Bănică 2014; Capelle-Pogăcean 2008; Gillet 1997; Georgescu 2015; Leustean 2009; Oprea 2013; Schmitt 2024; Silveșan 2012; Șincan 2022; Turcescu and Stan 2021; Vasile 2005).

The 1989 Revolution represented not only a sudden transition from one regime to another but also revealed an imbalance in religious terms. The Romanian Orthodox Church was better prepared institutionally for political change than the other religious communities. It retained considerable social and political influence and in sociological surveys has regularly been assigned the highest figure among state institutions in terms of trust by the population, above the military, government, and parliament. The Greek Catholic Church emerged from the underground and was again recognised as one of the main religious communities, however, half of century of communist regime had a considerable impact in terms of membership. Tension around the restitution of religious properties and fear of proselytism have continued to be thorny issues between churches.

In 2017, a Pew Research Survey indicated that 21 percent of the population of Romania attended religious services on a weekly basis, the highest figure across Eastern Europe. In addition, the survey showed that 95 percent of the population believed in God, and 44 percent prayed daily. An unusual trend in comparing Eastern and Western Europe was the relatively high number of people declaring that a

nondemocratic government was preferable to a democracy, with 28 percent of Romanians agreeing with this statement, in a comparable manner with Ukraine (31 percent), Bulgaria (34 percent), Belarus (35 percent), Russia (41 percent) and Moldova (44 percent).²

The 2022 census revealed a total population of 19,053,815 people living in the country, with the majority of 14,025,064 people (73.60 percent) Eastern Orthodox Christian. Among other religious confessions with significant adherents were the Roman Catholic (741,504 people; 3.89 percent), Reformed (495,433; 2.6 percent), Pentecostal (404,475; 2.12 percent), Greek Catholic (115,457; 0.6 percent), Muslim (58,347; 0.3 percent) and Jewish (2,708; 0.01 percent).³ The 2022 census showed three key characteristics.

First, the figures denoted the decreasing number of the population, reminiscent of the 1966 census when the Socialist Republic of Romania counted 19,103,163 people. At the fall of communism, in the first national census which took place in 1992, the country counted 22,810,035. The significant decline in the number of people living in the country was evidenced by Romania joining the European Union in 2007 and a significant number of its population living abroad. Although the exact figures are unconfirmed, it is likely that between 4 and 7.5 million live abroad with large diasporic communities present in Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom, all of whom have set up their own religious structures (Guglielmi 2022).⁴

Second, from a religious perspective, the social influence of the Romanian Orthodox Church has started to be challenged by an increasing number of the population which does not regard itself as either belonging to a specific religion nor being agnostic or atheist. For the first time in a national census, a large segment of the population refused to indicate their religious affiliation. The census found out that for 2,658,165 people (13.95 percent) data on religious affiliation was "not available." It is important to note that only 71,430 people (0.37 percent) declared themselves as having "no religion," 57,229 (0.3 percent) as atheists, and

25,485 (0.13 percent) as agnostic. The unusually large number of people who refused to indicate their religion can be interpreted as an example of protest against traditional forms of religious and state hierarchies of power. It is also likely that the “not available” figure includes many Greek Catholic believers and other religious minorities.⁵

Third, changes in religious demography between the interwar and post-communist periods continue to be contested. For example, in the 1930 census, the Romanian Orthodox Church showed a similar number of believers to that in 2022 (72.59 percent in 1930 and 73.60 percent in 2022). However, between those years the Greek Catholics and the Jewish communities suffered dramatic changes. In 1930, 1,427,391 people (7.9 percent) declared themselves Greek Catholics and 756,930 people (4.19 percent) Jewish. It was thus no surprise that the 2022 census was contested by the Greek Catholic leadership who claimed that the figures would most likely be closer to 500,000 faithful.

The Freedom of Religion and Belief

Article 29 of the 1991 Constitution presented in detail six factors related to “Freedom of conscience.” While it clearly indicated that “(29.1) Freedom of thought, opinion, and religious beliefs shall not be restricted in any form whatsoever,” it also emphasized that “(29.5) Religious cults shall be autonomous from the State and shall enjoy support from it, including the facilitation of religious assistance in the army, in hospitals, prisons, homes and orphanages.” The Constitution does not mention a particular religious community as holding a privileged position in society but instead places emphasis on “a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect” (29.2) and that “Any forms, means, acts or actions of religious enmity shall be prohibited in the relationships among the cults” (29.4).⁶

If most articles related to the general recognition of freedom of religion and belief, the Constitution indicated that each religious confession operated under its own statute and in line with the legal requirements of the state (29.3). It was perhaps this area that remained most open to interpretation as it had an impact

on the ways in which religious communities were able to receive recognition as legal entities and enjoy financial privileges.

The recognition of the role played by the Romanian Orthodox Church was clearly indicated in “Law 489 from 28 December 2006 on religious freedom and general status of religious confessions” (republished with amendments in Official Monitor [*Monitorul Oficial*] no 201 on March 21, 2014).⁷ In the section on church-state relations, article 9.1 indicated that, “There is no state religion in Romania; the state is neutral towards any religious belief or atheistic ideology.” However, article 7.2 makes reference to only one religious institution by name, stating that, “The Romanian state recognizes the important role of the Romanian Orthodox Church and other recognized churches and religious confessions in the national history of Romania and in the life of Romanian society.” A religious confession is recognized by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs (*Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte*) by demonstrating that it was active on Romanian territory for at least 12 consecutive years and that it held a membership of at least 0.1 percent of the Romanian population (article 18). The law thus asserted the key privileges enjoyed by the predominant religious confession in education and financial support from local and national authorities for church buildings. As the prime institutional body in dialogue with religious organizations, the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs assured not only recognition of religious communities but also the distribution of financial support.

Between 2010 and 2018, the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs received between 0.3 and 0.47 percent of the annual state budget. In 2018, the allocated budget was over 823 million lei (around 165 million euros) which was distributed as follows: 73.12 percent covered salaries for religious personnel at home and abroad (16,656 people); 26.32 percent was allocated for church buildings and reconstruction; while the remaining 0.06 percent was used for other activities.⁸ In 2023, the budget increased to 1,546 million lei (around 310 million euros). In addition to

salaries for the clergy and church buildings in Romania, around 6.7 million euros was allocated for the salary payments of the clergy in the diaspora and one million euro for the financial support of the Romanian Orthodox Skete of Prodromos at the Great Lavra Monastery, Mount Athos, Greece.⁹

The application of the 2006 law posed three interlinked challenges with contemporary relevance and has favored the Romanian Orthodox Church due to its status as the predominant religious confession in the country.

First, it emphasized that religious communities were able to receive state funding only through data provided by the national census. Thus, new religious communities found it difficult not only to benefit from financial support but also to operate in the country. In 2018, taking into account the 2011 census, the state provided salaries for 13,885 clergy belonging to the Romanian Orthodox Church, compared to only 535 clergy from the Greek Catholic Church, 204 clergy from the Pentecostal Union of Romania, and 8 people from the Jewish community.¹⁰

Second, control of the leadership of the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs proved that funding could be channeled into projects benefiting a particular religious community. In June 2023, the appointment of Ciprian Olinici, director of Trinitas TV (the national television of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate) as State Secretary for Religious Affairs raised questions regarding impartiality and the favored status of the predominant religious confession.¹¹

Third, Romanian nationalism has been defended not only by the state authorities but also by Romanian Orthodox institutions abroad. In November 2023, the Romanian government increased its financial support for the Skete of Prodromos in Greece and the Bessarabian Metropolitanate in the Republic of Moldova, each receiving two million euros annually. In particular, the latter proved controversial. The Republic of Moldova has two Orthodox churches, a minority Bessarabian Metropolitanate under Bucharest and a larger Moldovan Orthodox Church under Moscow's jurisdiction. The Bessarabian Metropolitanate

used a significant financial incentive to encourage members of the Moldovan clergy to join its structure by offering salaries which surpassed those from the Moldovan Orthodox Church.¹²

Religious Literacy and Social Inclusion

At first sight, Romania is an example of religious harmony. In December 2020, in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sociological study which surveyed religion-state relations showed that the majority of the population regarded interfaith relations in a positive manner (63.2 percent declaring that relations were “good,” 14.7 percent “very good,” 15.7 percent “bad,” 4.6 percent “very bad,” and 1.8 percent “not declared”).¹³ However, the positive perception among the Romanian population should be coupled with two factors.

First, Romania is a primarily agrarian society. If two decades after the end of the Second World War, in 1966, 66 percent of the population was rural, between 1990 and 2023 the rate remained largely unchanged at around 45 percent.¹⁴ In a highly traditional society, local religious leaders play a significant role and interfaith dialogue mainly takes place in urban communities.

Second, the increase of a far-right discourse which uses religious symbols suggests that the politicization of religion takes place on a regular basis. The 2020 survey also found that 44.1 percent of the population thought that “the state aimed to subordinate religious confessions”, 29.3 percent considered that church-state relations were equal, while 20.6 percent viewed that “religious confessions tried to take on state attributes.” These three findings showed that religious confessions worked closely with state institutions.

As part of the implementation of Article 10 (7) of Law 489/2006,¹⁵ in the following year, the main religious institutions signed a “Protocol of Cooperation in the Area of Social Inclusion” (*Protocolul de Cooperare în Domeniul Incluziunii Sociale*) with the government. The protocol enabled the legal framework for the Romanian Orthodox Church not only to employ students studying Social Theology but also to set up a regular dialogue between state and church officials working on welfare programs (Conovici

2020). In 2007, the Church established the Philanthropy Federation (*Federația Filantropia*) which coordinated social programs across its bishoprics at local and international levels.¹⁶ The Protocol recognized the considerable outreach of the Romanian Orthodox Church as a social provider across the country benefiting the elderly and children whose family members were working abroad (Turcescu and Stan 2021). It enabled the Church to establish foundations and NGOs benefitting from tax exemptions and receiving property which was used for social programs (Conovici 2013, 62). In 2023, an annual report detailing its philanthropic activities stated that the Romanian Orthodox Church had 884 local organizations running 1,254 projects divided as follows: 62 with external funding, 34 with state funding, 1,014 with its own funding, and 144 with mixed funding. In 2023, the Church carried out social projects totaling 60 million euros which reached 215,394 people. As one of the main examples, the Church set up a program called “The Table of Joy” (*Masa bucuriei*) in partnership with two supermarkets across the country which donated food and hygiene products to the needy and poorly people, worth nearly one million euros. In relation to Ukrainian refugees present in the country and in the Republic of Moldova, the Church offered over one million euros in material aid.¹⁷ The Church employed 447 priests who provided social assistance in military units, prisons, hospitals, and other social establishments.

The social engagement of the Romanian Orthodox Church has been reflected in its wide outreach in education. Since 1995, religion has been a mandatory subject in primary schools and optional in secondary education. In 2023, the Romanian Orthodox Church employed 6,171 teachers across the country. Religious education was taught in 25 secondary school seminaries and 11 faculties of theology (Alba Iulia, Arad, București, Cluj, Constanța, Craiova, Iași, Oradea, Pitești, Sibiu, and Târgoviște) and 3 departments of theology (Baia Mare, Galați and Timișoara) at university level. At secondary

school level, it had 4,280 students, while at university level 4,344 students were taught by 372 academics (71 professors, 108 readers, 147 lecturers and 46 assistants). The universities were home to 500 PhD students, 95 of which were admitted that year. In 2023, the Patriarchal Palace organized 140 religious events with over 20,000 participants from 20 countries.¹⁸

Religious literacy in Romania takes into account the interplay between the extensive social and educational outreach of religious communities, with the Romanian Orthodox Church playing the prime role in church-state relations. Although recent official numbers remain unavailable, in 2014 the Romanian Orthodox

Church counted 14,513 priests and deacons servicing 15,218 places of worship and 637 monasteries and sketes with over 8,000 monks and nuns. The number was a nearly two-fold increase from around 8,000 clergy at the

end of the communist period.

The main challenge to increasing religious literacy in Romania has been the social power extended by the Romanian Orthodox Church. It is without doubt that the Church reaches a significant segment of populations in need, however, the extensive usage of Orthodoxy and social welfare without involving (or even acknowledging) the work carried out by state institutions and other religious communities is detrimental to social progress.¹⁹ For example, the program “The Table of Joy” which provides free meals to people in need is regularly presented as solely an Orthodox initiative, when in fact it draws on the 2006 Protocol set up with the government in advancing social inclusion and the generosity of local supermarkets. It thus creates the idea that the Church is the sole institutional body which is able to address social needs.

In addition, inter-faith dialogue remains limited and is primarily carried out in urban environments. The Romanian Orthodox Church is a member of the Ecumenical Association of Churches in Romania (*Asociația Ecumenică a Bisericilor din România*) (AIDRom). Mostly with external funding, the AIDRom has run 40

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programs since 2012 which have reached over 25,000 people.²⁰ In January 2024, the association stood out by organizing “The Ecumenical Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.” However, while these activities are encouraging, AIDRom has faced the predominant perception among Orthodox circles that ecumenism is a heresy and that, for fear of proselytism, contact with other religious confessions should be carried out only at the top level rather than at the grassroots. An example of the limited social engagement of the Romanian Orthodox Church is the humanitarian work of Philanthropy Federation. In 2024, it was the umbrella of 24 NGOs across Orthodox bishoprics at the national levels without members from other religious communities. Furthermore, in a contentious manner, in 2018, when conducting interviews with religious organizations working with refugees in Serbia, I was surprised to find out that the Philanthropy Federation in Bucharest had no contact with their counterparts in Belgrade, even if they shared the same word in its title, Philanthropy (*Covekoljublje*), the Charitable Foundation of the Serbian Orthodox Church.²¹

Paradoxically, religious literacy has been affected not by the large number of students studying theology and graduating from theological high school seminaries but by limited job opportunities. With the state budget covering a limited amount of money for clergy salaries and with a limited number of parishes available across the country many students have been unable to be ordained or to find employment in church structures. Over many years, the Church has been affected by corruption and reports in the mass media that parishes were available to those applicants who were able to offer thousands of euros. A video with hidden camera in which a priest wanted to be appointed in a local parish in November 2023 attracted over 1.4 million views in one year with people decrying the lack of transparency in church funding and the bribing system as the “unofficial norm” in receiving a clerical position.²²

Lastly, religious literacy in an Orthodox context has largely been carried out by women, although they remain an unrecognized voice. In

the Orthodox Church, women are not ordained and their work on welfare programs is carried out as part of church structures. Many of those who teach religion in schools and work together with local parishes, however, acknowledgment of their role and the wider social involvement of women are long overdue. Over the last decade, a number of bishoprics have set up local gatherings of Orthodox women on the model of the “Association of Orthodox Women in Romania” established in 1910. However, the impact of their activities at national level remains limited.

Virtues, Populism, and the Politicization of Religion

As Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (2020, 12) have argued, “the embodiment and expression of *virtues* [...] are fundamental in any society to achieving] a positive ethos of nonrelativistic pluralism.” Religious leaders are thus paramount to setting up a framework which advances “virtues such as humility, empathy, patience, and courage, combined with fairness, reciprocity, cooperativeness, self-critique, and self-correction.” From a doctrinal perspective, the Orthodox Church places a prime role on the balance between “passions” and “virtues” in elevating spiritual and material progress (McGuckin 2008). A large body of theological scholarship going back to the first centuries places a great emphasis on the ways in which passions, or human desires, could be controlled through the practice of virtues.²³

In post-communist Romania, the emphasis on achieving spiritual progress has not been limited to only one religion. The increase of renewal Orthodox movements (for example, “The Army of the Lord,” *Oastea Domnului*), the significant increase in religious demography among Pentecostals, and the return of the Greek Catholic Church from an underground body to a national community are examples which combine religious identity and the practice of virtues in enabling religious pluralism. However, operating in a predominantly Orthodox society, the politicization of religious virtues has had a long-term impact on societal fabric.

In all national elections, religion has been a factor either in endorsing a particular candidate

or advancing a religiously-inspired nationalist agenda (Andreescu 2015; Cinpoș 2020; Cîrlan 2018; Gherghina and Mișcoiu 2022; Norocel 2016). Religious references and symbols are not something new to contemporary politics and have been visible from the first days of the 1989 Romanian Revolution. The clergy have been members of parliament and even in the government, such as Hegumen Neculai-Simeon Tatu, abbot of Plumbuita Monastery who twice acted as a member of the Senate between 1990 and 1996; Ilie Sârbu, Minister of Agriculture between 2000 and 2004, a Senator between 2004 and 2015, and president of the Senate in 2008; and recently, Marcel Boloș, Minister of Finance between 2023 and 2025.²⁴ In March 2008, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church decreed that the clergy were able to stand for election in an independent position only for local and country councils.²⁵ Those who stood in national elections for Parliamentary positions were no longer able to serve as clergy, although exceptions could be made. For example, in Boloș's case, he did not renounce his clerical activity but was appointed a missionary priest, continuing to perform the liturgy a few times a year.

Despite restrictions to taking part in national elections, both lower and top clergy have regularly endorsed candidates. In 2014, during presidential elections between an Orthodox candidate, Victor Ponta, and a Lutheran candidate, Klaus Iohannis, the clergy were threatened by local politicians with financial repercussions if they did not support the Orthodox card. Iustin Sigheteanul, Vicar-Bishop of the Bishopric of Maramureș and Satmar, encouraged the faithful to vote for the "right" candidate as follows: he "should be Christian, be Orthodox [...] and know how to make the sign of the Holy Cross."²⁶ Similar messages were uttered by lower clergy including influential monks. A few weeks before the elections, in a ceremony held at Hurezi Monastery, Patriarch Daniel awarded Liviu Dragnea, Vice-Prime Minister and Ponta's chief electoral mastermind, "The Order of the Brâncoveni Saints and Martyrs," one of the highest ecclesiastical distinctions awarded for renovating church buildings and working closely with the Church.

However, Church support did not stop Iohannis, who was voted in largely by the extensive Romanian diaspora in Western Europe.

After two terms in power, Iohannis was regarded by the general electorate as being detached from the electorate, cultivating instead a positive image abroad. In November 2024, in the first round of the presidential elections, Călin Georgescu, a relatively unknown far-right candidate, won the largest number of votes. He stood as an independent candidate without affiliation to any of the mainstream parties in power, however, his TikTok online activity resonated with the electorate. In encouraging people to vote for him, he appealed to the religious vote by presenting images of a mythical past which extolled nationalist values. He declared sympathy for Corneliu Zelea Codreanu and Ion Antonescu, fascist leaders during the interwar period, and encouraged a rethinking of the country's relations with Russia.²⁷ Before the elections, he gave speeches across the country. Thus, in October 2022, he preached a sermon at the Betania Jebel Pentecostal Church near Timișoara in which he claimed that, "The time has come to prepare the country for the coming of Jesus Christ."²⁸ In the summer of 2024, he appeared extensively in online media promoted by far-right groups alongside Orthodox monks and clergy advocating a spiritual renewal of the Romanian nation.²⁹ His mixture of political messianism, populism, and religious appeals made him stand out from the other candidates. He claimed that there was no war in Ukraine and that the conflict benefited only American military companies.³⁰ In one of his most widely circulated videos, reminiscent of the Russian President Vladimir Putin's politically orchestrated electoral messages, he could be seen swimming in a frozen lake, stating that he had a special connection to the divine: "I am not afraid, I am not cold, because everything I do, I do through God and I communicate with him through my heart. I don't need Facebook, I don't need internet, I don't need email, I just need my heart to learn [God's] wisdom."³¹

In his first speech after the elections, his words sounded more like those of a priest during

a sermon rather than a politician. Using messianic words, he claimed that, “The Romanian people, who sat in darkness, saw the great light.”³² He suggested a direct link between the religious and political vote as follows:

I want to be very clear and precise. This Sunday, the 30th after Pentecost, the parable of the rich young man [is celebrated] in the Orthodox Church. At the liturgy, the essence is the following: no matter how rich you are, you are in vain if you do not have God. The Romanian people passed through the eye of a needle today, however, the oligarchic system did not. In other words, the rich of the [oligarchic] system, today, in Romania, have become poorer, and the people, the poor Romanian people, have become richer.³³

Georgescu’s unexpected rise drew on dissatisfaction with the political elite and the increase of the far-right discourse, in part supported by the clergy. In a message criticizing the political involvement of the Church, Vasile Bănescu, former spokesperson of the Romanian Patriarchate, wrote that the Orthodox Church leadership had a duty to come forward and reject the politicization of religion with monks and clergy to be held responsible for the latest political turmoil. In his view, if Georgescu won the presidential elections in the second round of votes, Romania was moving closer to Russia and towards autocracy and ultranationalism which had little to do with “Christian values.”³⁴

As reflected in the Romanian national elections, the main challenges in the “the embodiment and expression of *virtues*” (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 12) are the politicization of religion and, over the last decade, the increase of populism. Clergy have guided the faithful to vote for the “right” candidate not only due to the view that by doing so they were protecting the Romanian nation but also due to benefiting financially from close religion-state relations. The offering of religious awards in public ceremonies to state dignitaries was in recognition of state funding being

channeled towards religious projects. Extolling the idea that the Romanian nation could only be protected by close cooperation between the state and the Orthodox Church, a gigantic 135-metre-high People’s Salvation Cathedral was built in the center of Bucharest (Andreescu 2007; Tateo 2020). The building, envisaged to become one of the largest church structures in the world, began construction in 2010. In March 2024, after 230 million euros had already been spent on the project,³⁵ the Bucharest City Council allocated another 20 million euros. Significant funds are still required for the building which is aimed to be completed in 2025 when the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate celebrates its 100th year anniversary.³⁶

Conclusion

From the 1859 union of the Principality of Moldavia and Wallachia, and the 1918 establishment of Greater Romania, to the 1989 Romanian Revolution and contemporary times, religion has been a constant feature in the national identity, political discourse, and state-building processes of the country. The threefold dimensions of covenantal pluralism advanced by Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover (2020) provide a theoretical framework which advances social progress and cooperation between religious communities living side by side in a multi-faith rather than “interfaith” society. The three areas, freedom of religion and belief, religious literacy, and the advancement of virtues, bring with them their own challenges and opportunities.

In post-communist Romania, while the Constitution and the legal framework of religion-state relations do not favor a particular religion, in practice the Romanian Orthodox Church, the predominant confession, holds a significant societal and political influence. Understanding religious literacy poses one of the most challenging areas of concern due to limited inter-faith relations. Religious literacy is thus connected to social inclusion and has limited outreach at the grassroots level. The idea that the Romanian Orthodox Church is the sole embodiment of protecting the Romanian nation has not only encouraged fear of the other but, in

recent years, has fed the rise of far-right populism, anti-Westernism, and criticism of European institutions (Leustean 2018; 2023; Makrides 2009). An iconic image which reflects the politicization of religion and anti-Westernism took place two weeks before the 2024 Romanian presidential elections, when Diana Șoșoacă, a far-right MEP, brought two Orthodox priests to Brussels who blessed the corridors of the European Parliament with holy water claiming that they were purifying the institution from malefic forces.³⁷ The politicization of religion has been a constant feature of national elections with the monastic circles and top clergy exerting pressure on the faithful in choosing the “right” candidate.

At first, after Romania became a member of the European Union in 2007, the growing number of people living in the diaspora seemed to attenuate the electoral influence of the Church. However, as evident in the 2024 presidential elections, political messianism and religious networks still have a significant hold on large segments of the population. A better understanding of covenantal pluralism with its emphasis on multi-faith society is key to social progress, the future of the country’s democratic path, and more broadly, the changing nature of far-right politics in Eastern Europe. ❖

About the Author

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