

Religion and political identification in Communist Romania

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Abstract. *The Orthodox Church has played, from the beginning of the twentieth century, a vital role in building the political architecture of the Romanian state. The establishment of a communist regime in Romania after World War I created a new modus vivendi between Church and State, and placed the Romanian Church's activities under strict government supervision. This article will look at the role of the religion in the ethnic identity of Romanians, during the communist times. A historical outlook is necessary in understanding the foundation of religion in the Romanian state, thus the article provides a brief background on the role of the Church in the modern Romanian history. Then, the article will examine the unique norms of cooperation between religion and national communism built in Romania, during that period. Subsequently, this will help us observe the interplay between religion and ethnicity evidenced in communist Romania. The cases of the Serbian and the Lipovan Russian communities feature the complexity of this interaction. The goal of this paper is to offer an understanding of the relationship between religious and ethnic identities in Romania, during this particular period.*

Keywords: *communism, Romanian Orthodox Church, national identity, religion, ethnicity*

Introduction

In post-1989 Romania, as in most of Europe, religion has played a growing and increasingly conflictive role in the society. The deliberately orchestrated absence of any religious elements during the communist times sparked a powerful return of the Church after the fall of Ceausescu's regime. However, the Romanian Orthodox Church is to be found in playing an important political role in the history of the Romanian State, the culture but also

the ethnic identity of the Romanian society. However, the Church-State balance was going to massively change in the 1940s. Yet, the influence of religion in the Romanian society was not utterly erased; a cultural heritage imposed by the Church's active role in the previous years has left a mark on Romanian people's lives.

The Church-State relations during the communist times featured an unusual coexistence of administrations. Despite the prevailing trend of communist regimes to eli-

minate any power of the church, the Romanian church remained an “independent” body within the newly formed communist State. The church acquired a role that would bring the communist regime closer to the masses due to its popular position in the society. Later on, it proved to be an excellent tool for the promotion of national policies. At this end, many scholars have observed an interesting interplay between religion and ethnicity. The role of the church has preserved and influenced ethnic identities and this is particularly evident in the case of the Serbs in Romania. An additional case study, the Lipovan Russians of Romania, highlights the importance of religion to the preservation of the national identity. All in all, the influence of religion upon people during this time remains mystifying; typically isolated from the political reality but maintaining a role of “social apostolate” (Leustean, 2007a) to enhance its social mission.

The purpose of this article is to examine these forms of religious identity during the communist years in Romania. We will begin with a chapter summarizing the political role that the Orthodox Church played historically in the construction of the Romanian State in the nineteenth century. Subsequently, we will examine the change in the Church-State relations from the establishment of the first communist government until the overthrowing of Ceausescu’s regime. The main part of the article will explore theories of interaction between

religion and ethnicity. The example of the Serbian community in Romania will help us to establish these ideas. From a retrospective point of view, the last chapter will look at the legacy of religion throughout more than forty years of communism. The ideas and perceptions of religion – and the role of the church – in the first years of political restoration will help us evaluate the social impact of religion.

Finally, our conclusions aim to summarise our findings, to provide an observation of the Church’s role in the Romanian society and assess its overall impact on the population. Due to the limited scholarly work on religious context during the times examined, the development of this research, as well as the findings alone, are of great interest.

The Orthodox Romanian Church before the communist period

The Orthodox Church has demonstrated an active role in politics from the 19th century in Romania. The political identity of the Romanian State bears many elements of the political control over the Church. “In building the political architecture of the Romanian State, the Orthodox Church played a vital role, as one of the major elements of political attention: politicians felt that controlling the Church hierarchy would lead to control of the masses and to the development of Romanian national identity” (Leustean, 2007b, p. 61). Before

1859, during the period of Ottoman rule, the Orthodox Church preserved the identity of Romanians although this was religious in nature rather than national (Kitrolimides, 1989, p. 178). The State has built on a double-sided relation with the Church. On the one hand, religion was consistently used as a part of national policy to benefit the State, while on the other hand Orthodoxy specifically served as a tool for historical legitimacy for the State. In this way, the Orthodox Church also expanded its social mission by working in partnership with the State, aspiring to identify Orthodoxy with the Romanian nation (Leustean, 2007b). At the same time, the Romanian Orthodox Church has used and interpreted history to identify itself with the origins of the Romanian nation (Romocea, 2011).

In 1862, the Romanian Church expressed its desire to end the long period of Phanariot authority by the replacement of Greek liturgical usage with the Romanian language, which had been used in the country regions in Transylvania to encourage this way the local parishioners to know and value their faith. The whole Romanian church worshipped this language ever since, and a characteristic form of liturgical music has also developed, alongside the classical Byzantine musical styles (McGuckin, 2011, p. 67). The two autocephalous Romanian-speaking churches established in the nineteenth century included one in Transylvania, in the Austro-

Hungarian monarchy and the other, in the newly independent State of Romania. After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the wake of the First World War the greater Romanian territories' were once more re-organised, bringing together three separate Orthodox Church groups: Transylvania, Bukovina, and Bessarabia.

The negotiation of union¹ took six years, from 1918 to 1924, and culminated in the declaration of the Romanian Church as a patriarchate in 1925, which was immediately recognised by the patriarchate of Constantinople and the other Orthodox Churches (McGuckin, 2011, p. 68). As a result, the present Romanian patriarchate, which took a form of religious independence and national unity, was a combination of various groups, when the title of "Patriarch of the Romanian Church" was adapted for the position known as the "Archbishop of Bucharest" by then (Meyendorff, 1981). After the creation of the modern Romanian state, church-state relations were again redefined, but "the 1923 constitution, which Romanians still summon as one of the most modern in Europe at the time, did not provide for a democratic system that allowed all religious groups to worship freely and the state to treat them equally. Article 22 of the constitution states that „the Orthodox and the Greek Catholic Churches are Romanian Churches” (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 20).

Subsequently, the political control of the Church developed alongside State institutional structures; the Church legitimized political systems and the State used religion for its policy interests. For example, “in the interwar period the first Romanian Patriarch would become actively engaged in political life, as Prime Minister of three governments and a member of the royal regency. Further political leaders followed a similar approach towards the Church taking into account the religious configuration of the country and the influence of the Orthodox Church on Romanian society” (Leustean, 2007b, p. 77). A relationship of mutual agreement between Church and the State is clearly evident already from those times in the public discourse of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Church-State Relations 1947-1989

After the end of the Second World War, Romania fell under heavy Soviet control (McGuckin, 2011). The political uncertainty the end of the Second World War has caused, under which the countries of Eastern Europe came under the control of atheist communist regimes, represented a clash with previous forms of government. The installation of Romanian communism under the military force of the Soviet Union created fears that the new government would follow the same attitude towards religion, as

happened in Russia after the October 1917 Revolution (Leustean, 2007a). However, Romania followed a different course from the Soviet Union and the dominant religion, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, did not suffer mass persecution, but somehow seemed to benefit from its association with the regime. “The Romanian communists abolished other churches, but preserved a special attitude towards the Orthodox Church throughout the period of communist rule. As long as the church hierarchy supported the regime and the church remained engaged in propaganda the communists did not oppose it” (Leustean, 2007a, p. 304).

The Orthodox Church of Romania constitutes today the largest among the autocephalous Orthodox churches after that of Russia, with approximately 12,000,000 faithful. After nearly a century of close ties with the old monarchy, it has had to face the shock of a change in regime. However, the attitude communist governments adopted towards the Romanian Church differ noticeably from that popular communist method. Paradoxically, “the new communist State has never published a degree separating church and State, but in August 1948 a law recognized the ‘general regime of religion’ in the popular Republic of Romania. The law abolished the role that the Church once played in the State and in education, but preserves the control which the State has

always exercised over the Church” (Meyendorff, 1981, p. 149). Therefore, the paradoxical situation which exists in all the communist-dominated States is included in the constitution in Romania. Although regarded as a “lay republic”, Romania has a constitution that makes a specific reference to the Orthodox Church and defines it as a “unified church with its own head”. Supported by the Orthodox clergy, in October 1948 the communist authorities decided on the “reunification” of the smaller Transylvania-based Greek-Catholic Church with the Romanian Orthodox Church (Bottoni, 2010).

At the early stages of the communist period, the Church has gathered privileges in exchange with its governmental control. “The Church had 8,326 parishes, 10,152 priests, 182 monasteries and 11,506,217 faithful and was able to retain a part of its property. Two theological institutes were functioning, with thirty professors, one at Bucharest (290 students) and the other at Sibiu (338 students); the Church published about a dozen religious periodicals, one of which the review *Studi Teologice*, is by far the best Orthodox theological publication appearing behind the Iron Curtain” (Meyendorff, 1981, p. 150). The Romanian Orthodox Church was financially supported by the State and the main reason why was that with controlling the church, the regime managed to suppress opposition. “If in the 1950s, the

main concern of the regime was finding the means of having direct power over the hierarchy, at the beginning of the 1960s the church had been assigned an international mission. By taking advantage of the church's international religious contacts, the regime aimed to foster better relations with the West and promote Romania's political and economic interests” (Leustean, 2007d, p. 492). Thus, despite the ideological clash with the communist authorities – and the Marxist rule – the Romanian hierarchy maintained a considerable administrative power.

At the same wavelength, the church hierarchy publicly showed their support for the regime, throughout the 1950s, by criticizing the West and praising the Soviet Union. The collaboration between the Church and the Communists took a wholly different dimension after the 22nd Congress of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in October 1961. “In his attempt to transform the party, Nikita Khrushchev denounced the crimes committed during Stalin's leadership and the Congress decided to remove Stalin's remains from the specially-built mausoleum. The Congress had a significant impact on Romanian politics as the Romanian leadership under Gheorghiu-Dej was associated with Stalinist measures. Attempting to alleviate the situation, at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the RWP from 30 November to 5 December 1961,

Gheorghiu-Dej reiterated the idea that the process of de-Stalinization had already taken place in Romania and that the party did not have to rehabilitate anyone” (Leustean, 2007d, p. 500). The impact of the Plenum was that the Church has to strengthen further its nationalist discourse in order to remain in line with the country’s political course. Until 1965, the state continued its efforts to weaken the church’s role in society and control its hierarchy by legally weakening its national church status and the right to pursue educational and charitable activities (Stan & Turcescu, 2007).

The church-state relations softened between 1965 and 1977. The state abandoned the tactic of closing monasteries, re-established good relations with the clergy with the rehabilitation of formerly imprisoned clergy and financially supported the restoration of historical churches. “In a series of shrewd calculations, Ceausescu used the Orthodox Church to gain independence from Moscow in order to ingratiate himself with the West, whose financial support he badly needed for his megalomaniac industrialization projects. By 1979, religious persecution in Romania was on the rise again, and the Ceausescu regime continued its anti-religious policies unabated until December 1989” (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 24). In contrast to the pre-1965 cleanout on religious activities, now many stood up against Ceausescu’s uncovered violation on religious freedom.

Romanian Orthodoxy and National Communism

With the emergence of Balkan nation-states, Romania represents one of the most interesting examples of how Orthodoxy has been affianced in political design. The Romanian Orthodox Church encouraged the idea of an enduring relation to nationality, while the Romanian nation itself was given territorial expression through the Church before the establishment of the Romanian state (Leustean, 2007b). An undeniably remarkable blend of nationalism and Orthodoxy, rooted in Romania’s historical past, is also evident during its communist times. Nae Ionescu (1888-1940), a professor of Philosophy in the University of Bucharest, traced the intimate relationship between Orthodoxy and cultural identities in early Romania, and he arbitrated the influence of Eastern Christianity to have been a vital part of the Romanians' being; or, as he put it, “we are Orthodox because we are Romanian, and we are Romanian because we are Orthodox” (Hitchins, 1992, p. 1074).

This powerful relation found became a target of the political objectives of the communist party, when looking for means to promote the Romanian road to communism, with an increase of religious references (especially during informal visits of Western politicians). An example was provided by the visit to Romania of Sir Wavell Wakefield, a

British Member of Parliament in May 1956, following a tour of the Romanian rugby team of England and Wales in September 1955. Grigore Preoteasa, Foreign Minister of Romania, demonstrated his knowledge of theology and the similarity of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Church of England, in order to advance bilateral relations with the United Kingdom (Leustean, 2008). Many similar indications followed, which showed that the regime was aware of the impact of religion and was keen in using the church's foreign contacts, to benefit the position of Romanian communism.

The Romanian Orthodox Church had its own contribution to the promotion of the Romanian ethno-genesis and historical continuity. In a nationalist interpretation of history, the Orthodox Church portrayed itself as a constant supporter of the Romanians' autonomy and self-determination, which has led to the national church status. Commenting on the mutual support the Orthodox Church and the State, Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu of Oltenia has endorsed Ceausescu's exaggerated nationalism. Taken from his writings: "Since the beginning, the unity of the national state, its independence and national sovereignty have been constant preoccupations. The ethnic and geographic area has always enjoyed unity of language, faith, and tradition. It is for that reason that the Romanian people fought for the

unity of all three Romanian provinces of Trajan's Dacia. The Orthodox Church fought alongside the people, and all the fundamental events in Romanian history leading up to the 1918 unification have formed an integral part in the life of the Orthodox Church. The church defended the people's unity of faith and contributed to the defense of the people's essence and to the accomplishment of national unity. The two holy entities, church and fatherland, cannot be separated" (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 48-49).

The Orthodox Church contributed its part in the national building of communism through official history textbooks and claims. However, in spite of the Church's concentrated support towards national communism, Ceausescu's rule against religion was considered – at least – unclear. For instance, in 1972, he allowed his father funeral to be conducted in Orthodox ritual and his mother remained a committed Orthodox believer throughout her life. He has personally tolerated the use of Orthodox services (baptism, marriage and burial) by communist officials, who privately remained Orthodox Christians (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, pp. 48-49).

Religion and Ethnicity: A Complex Interplay

The relationship between religion and ethnicity is one of historical

interest in contemporary Europe. The specificity of Eastern Europe encourages the analysis of the ethnic issues on the background of the religious ideologies, in order to better understand the relationship between religion, ethnicity and political power. Religion, despite all criticism, remains closely related to the human identity. In Romania, for example, regardless of the increased communist propaganda, the opinion polls showed high level of religiosity, after the fall of communism in Europe (Rogobete, 2009). Ethnicity, especially as expressed in its ethnocentric nationalist form, was also expected to decrease during the intense communist times in the country. Our focus in this chapter is how both ethnicity and religion seemed to have a strong presence in the Romanian society, especially in the communist setting. In addition, in what way do these two notions interact and what it their mark on peoples' national identities? To answer these questions, we will first present an overview of the interplay between the two terms, within the context of identity. We will then attempt to identify certain historical patterns in which the two connect, in order to assist one to understand this complex interplay.

As many scholars have noticed, since religion existed before nations and nationalism, its cultural influence allowed it to subordinate nationalism to its goals. National churches frequently sustained and protected national identity (Stan &

Turcescu, 2007). From a theoretical point of view, an "ethnic group" gathers several features as prerequisites such as language, religion, territory, common culture and institutions. According to some researchers, however, the preservation of language is not a major condition for the identity of the ethnic community. Religion and culture can be the foundation of social and ethnic unity. "Religion is expressed through symbolic structures, which occur in relation to space; it is only this condition that ensures its maintenance (La religion s'exprime ainsi sous des formes symboliques qui se déroulent et se rapprochent dans l'espace: c'est à cette condition seulement qu'on est assuré qu'elle subsiste)" (Halbwachs cited in Lazar & Paus, 2013, p. 86).

Even if after the Second World War, the communists came to dictate political life, the Orthodox Church sustained its powerful influence on Romanian society through an adaptation of its nationalist discourse. "The employment of the Church and its survival during atheist communism retained its roots in the inter-war period when the Church was a political instrument of the regime. The subsequent regimes would take into account the position of the Church and would attempt to conquer the Church from within by imposing upon it its own people, thereby continuing a tradition that went as far back as the first years of the Romanian state" (Leustean, 2007c,

p. 735). Following the principle of symphonia, the Church would cooperate with the political realm in searching to preserve the “sacred unity” and “destiny” of Romanians (Alexandru, 2006).

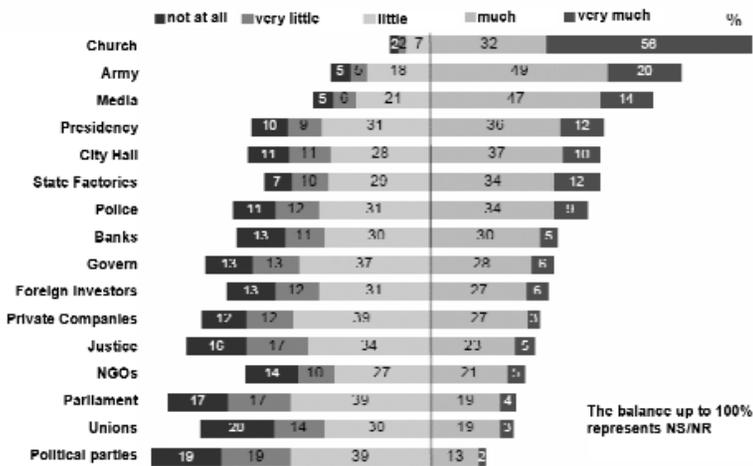
Religiosity and Implications

At a national level, the Romanian society provides an unexpected and particularly high level of religiosity, given the fact that it has been under one of the most repressive regimes during fifty years under the communist-atheistic ideology. Asked for which institutions of the state they have the highest regard in 1992, Romanians selected the Church (80-90 per cent) and the army (70-80 per cent). This is a noteworthy representation of preferences towards authority and national structure. In fact, “the Orthodox Church is considered to be an ‘institution of

the state’; a somewhat vaguely defined religious ideology has taken the place vacated by Communist ideology” (Boia, 2001, p. 176).

More recent religiosity levels, according to the 2002 National Census, showed a shocking figure of 99.96 % of the population claiming to belong to an officially recognized religious denomination, while only 0.03 % declared themselves as atheists and a 0.01 % claimed no religious association. In terms of distribution, the Romanian Orthodox Church has 86.8% of the Romanian population. In terms of the trust placed on religion and religious institutions, the church ranks at the top of the Romanians’ list, with 86% compared to other institutions, followed by the army with 69%. At the bottom of the list are political parties, the judiciary, the parliament, and the markers of the free market (Rogobete, 2006).

How much trust do you have in?



Source: Rogobete, 2006, p. 37

The implications of such high religiosity indications are connected to the symbolic identity of religion. Within the communist context, where the individual rested upon the higher institutions to provide identity and visions, religion became one of the highest marks of collective and individual identity (Rogobete, 2006). One more characteristic example of the powerful association of the Orthodox religion with the Romanian national identity is described by Silviu Rogobete, in his work “The Unfinished Odyssey of a New ‘Law for the General Regime of Religion’ in a South East European Country: the Romanian Case” (Rogobete, 2003). A well-disputed law of religion (Decree 177/1948), issued and put into action in 1948 by the communist regime, discriminates the dominant religion against other religious counterparts and represents –what the writer calls – “significant violations of religious freedom” (Rogobete, 2003).

The Romanian Orthodox Church is a unique source of an independent Romanian identity itself, having survived several unknown regimes as the depository of national culture (Martin, 1978). When the Romanian Communist Party came it power, in 1946, it established an unhelpful, if not harsh, line on church-religion relations. This was true not only for the predominant religion, but also for the Baptists who were the only non-Orthodox Church in Romania to have made major progress in

winning the loyalty of ethnic Romanians. In fact, the Baptists in Romania have been through tough times, during the 20th century. “Authorities closely controlled church personnel, property and activity via the Department of Cults. The Baptist Union was expected to comply with the instructions of the Department of Cults... If Baptists failed to comply, harassment, withdrawal of privileges and arrests ensued” (King, 1981, p. 114). Their growth between 1955 and 1973, when they counted around 120,000 was seen as a threat to the domination of the State. Today more than 1 million Romanians declare to belong to the Baptist Church (National Institute of Statistics, 2011).

A substantialist view over the question of identity reveals the historical connection of the holy tradition of the Church with the national identity, preserved with the continuity of language, territory and the traditions of the Church. Most of the time for the Orthodox, the religious, in the same way with the ethnic dimensions, are seen as a given “substantial” reality underlying the phenomena related to human identity (Rogobete, 2004).

In a contemporary Romanian Orthodox theologian’s words: “In Orthodoxy one does not enter, one is born”. Thus, being Romanian, *Romanianness* is one and the same with being “Romanian Orthodox”, as much as being a Greek is one and the same with being a “Greek Orthodox”. In other words, “if you

are born Romanian you are born Orthodox. It is an interpretation whereby the Church with its 'Holy Tradition' is seen as an 'essence', a 'substance' which constitutes the main ingredient required for ethnic/national identity, for being a Romanian, for 'Romanianness'; and vice-versa. There is, therefore, a presumed ontological, a priori link between the two" (Rogobete, 2009, p. 573).

In the same wavelength, Dumitru Stăniloae (1903-1993), the most prominent Romanian Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century, wrote on the relationship between Orthodoxy and Romanianism in 1992. In his words, "nationalism is the consciousness of belonging to a certain ethnic group, the love for that group, and the enacting of that love for the well-being of the group" (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 45). To this understanding of "nation" one should add the meaning of "neam". Reserved exclusively for the Romanian people, "neam" represented an ethnic group with stability and long-established historical roots. In an early writing, Stăniloae brought together *neam* and religion: *The Romanian "neam" (En. nation) is a biological-spiritual synthesis of Dacian, Latin and Christian Orthodox elements...The synthesis is new; it has its own individuality and a unity that goes beyond its components. The highest law of our "neam", the one that most appropriately expresses what the*

nation is, is experienced by the whole, not the parts. The parts are stamped with Romanianness, a new, both unifying and individualizing stamp. The highest law of our "neam" is Romanianness... What is the Romanian way of communion with the transcendental spiritual order? History tells us it is Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is the eye through which Romanians gaze at the heavens. Then, enlightened by the heavenly light, they turn to the world while continuing to attune their behavior to it... Certainly, in theory it is hard to understand how it is possible for Orthodoxy to interpenetrate with Romanianism without either of them suffering. Yet, the bimillennial life of our „neam” shows that in practice this is fully possible... Orthodoxy is an essential and vital function of Romanianism. Our permanent national ideal can only be conceived in relation to Orthodoxy. (Stan & Turcescu, 2007, p. 45)

This a priori connection was enhanced by the joint cooperation between State and Church to the support of ethnic minorities. For example, "Romanian politicians may not perceive the amendment of the debated 'nation state' clause in the Romanian Constitution, or the reform of an education law so as to provide ethnic minorities with access to higher education and local administration in their mother language, to be part of a moral effort on the road to reconciliation, but the churches may well do so and

may well wish to stress this aspect” (Romocea, 2004, p. 169). The Churches have also supported the discussions on ethnic minorities in the Romanian parliament with their prayers, as we will see later on in the Serbian’s community case.

Ethnic Minority Issues

The Serbs of Romania

The history of the Serbs in Romania may be divided into several individual periods: medieval, Ottoman, Habsburg, Austro-Hungarian, world wars, communist and post-communist. The community has been numerically declining due to assimilation processes and demographic trends (34,037 in 1977; 29,408 in 1992; 22,518 in 2002; 18,076 in 2011) (Djurić-Milonanović, 2012, p. 117). While in the interwar period, the Serbs of Romania maintained the right to their own school, church and cultural organizations, the end of the Second World War has an effect on the Serbian community. The minority went through several levels of assimilation during the communist period. “In 1948 the entire education system in Romania was nationalized and placed under state control, and all Serbian confessional schools were shut down. The early communist period was marked by strong assimilation pressures, including the deportation of the Banat Serbs to the Baragan Plain near the Danube delta in 1951” (Djurić-

Milonanović, 2012, p. 119). The introduction of several new legislations concerning minority issues, as well as the Constitution of 1991, ensured the protection of minority rights (ethnic, religious, linguistic). Additionally, it allowed the Serbian and other ethnic communities to have representatives in the parliament¹. Therefore, the Serbian community has been undergoing a number of changes, experiencing a revival of tradition and religion, the establishing of community organizations and the re-establishing of former institutions (Djurić-Milonanović, 2012).

The studying of identity dynamic may be central to understanding the processes taking place in diaspora communities, with an emphasis on preservation of cultural uniqueness in a multicultural environment, such as the Serbian and Romanian parts. Historically, the Serbian Orthodox Church has played an important role in the formation of national identity, since the Serbs in Romania had to base their ethnic identity on religion and language. Thus, the Serbs who did not speak Serbian and were not members of the Serbian Orthodox Church were perceived as not being “true Serbs”. The Serbian Orthodox Church was undoubtedly the keeper of the tradition, language and customs of the Serbs in Romania for years. Even if the role of the church in modern societies has been following the changing of socio-historical circumstances, her historical role is perceived as vital for

national identities. Under communism, the Serbian community, and Orthodox Christianity in general, were primarily characterized by secularisation, manifest in a decline of people going to the church or attending public religious festivals and gatherings. According to the ethnologist Mirjana Pavlović, when researching on the Serbs in Timișoara, “religion was not forbidden by law, but it came to be seen as undesirable and retrograde, while the practice of religion was normatively strictly privatized and confined to the family circle and places of worship” (Pavlović, 2008 cited in Djurić-Milonanović, 2012, p. 122). The presence, of course, of Protestant communities within the Serbian ethnic group shows that different religious traditions have gradually led to changes, which are predictable in many diaspora communities (Merdjanova, 2001). However, Serbs in Romania have kept an “esprit de corps” to the Serbian community, but they have also developed a sense of belonging to Romanian society. During that time the Orthodox Church and the Orthodox faith has been instrumental in the preservation of tradition and language.

The Lipovan Russians of Romania

The minority of Russian ethnic origin settled in the delta of Danube River in the Dobrogea region of eastern Romania, starting from the last decade of the 17th century.

Lipovans officially counts around 38,000 people, in a country of 22 million, but the true number is around 100,000 according to historians and church registers (Wesselingh, 2010). The first Lipovans appeared in the Romanian municipalities, in Moldavia, Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Muntenia and Dobruja. The Lipovan community claims “descent from groups who fled religious persecution ensuing from reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church that began in the middle of the seventeenth century and set off the great church schism known as *raskol*” (Bell, 2001, p. 13). The ethnic minority stands out in the Romanian society by their absolute devotion to the Christian Orthodox Church, which maintained their traditions from their ancestors to their descendants; most of their customs and rituals are closely associated with the Orthodox Christian wisdom and ethics (Varona & Moldovan, 2006). Religion has played a central role in the development of the communal identity both on an historical and on strategic basis. The power of religion is represented in the social process that keeps the ritual traditions alive or reactivates the symbolic resources of the community (Lazar & Paus, 2013).

During the communist years, the Lipovan community was put under the rule of a political regime that challenged the foundation of religion, the “core of Lipovan identity” (Wesselingh, 2010). Despite the

official recognition of the Russian Orthodox Old-Rite Church (Romanian based jurisdiction of the Eastern Orthodox Church) in 1946, the expression of religiosity was minimized greatly, while the religious services were closely monitored by the regime. The atheist propaganda as well as the bereft Church lacking her former means had a negative influence on the unity of the Lipovan community. "From an ethnic point of view, the policy of assimilation of the minorities triggered the dramatic drop of the use of the mother tongue (Russian), although in state schools Russian was a compulsory subject of study" (Varona & Moldovan, 2006). The fall of communism in 1989 brought new challenges and opportunities for the community, such as the preservation of their cultural identity in a European oriented state. A Lipovan woman, when asked, said that keeping the religion alive, and preventing it from falling into oblivion, is a moral duty to community ancestors (Wesselingh, 2010).

A Controversial Legacy

Romanian Orthodoxy has traditionally had a vigorous intellectual life. Its theologians were actively involved in the process of rebuilding the libraries and the schools, and were thus expected to offer a considerable contribution to the character of world Orthodoxy in the years that followed the restoration

of democracy. "The national census taken after the fall of communism showed 20 million people declaring themselves to be Orthodox Christians, worshipping in about 8,300 active parishes, which makes Romanian Orthodoxy the second largest of all the Eastern churches" (McGuckin, 2011, p. 69). The collapse of communism has given the Romanian Orthodox Church the opportunity to become more active in public affairs and to be perceived as a source of ethics, both of which are reflected in the faith the Church receives from Romanian public institutions. The post-communist social-ethical problems in Romania, which are the legacy of the communist autocracy, face the Romanian Church as a pressing future agenda which has begun to address after the fall of the regime, and should focus on more directly when it has re-established the base infrastructure of its churches, monasteries and schools. The rebuilding of the ecclesiastical life and structures has begun to proceed with extraordinary rapidity, which is a testament to the trust which the church has generally held by the ordinary people (McGuckin, 2011).

Many Romanian intellectuals expressed the opinion that as the country's major religious denomination, the Orthodox Church should lead the way toward moral rebirth and an honest reassessment of the past. Decades after the collapse of the communist regime, the Romanian public is yet to have access

to key documents revealing the activity of the Securitate, and its relationship with the Orthodox Church. Many were dissatisfied to see that Church leaders chose to defend their collaboration with communist authorities and justify it as a mere human weakness (Stan & Turcescu, 2005). However, the Orthodox Church is still a trusted institution in the Romanian society, despite the retrospective assessments of its role during the Cold War and the continuing corruption evidence among the clergy (Davie, 2013).

The collapse of Communism changed many areas of social life. On the most general geopolitical level, it changed the structural map of the world organized around the division of two blocs: the “Western” and the “Eastern”. However, the fall of the Soviet Union represented also the cease of the communist culture and thus posed the question of Eastern European identity in a very sharp way. Religion, especially in Eastern Europe, had to face much more serious problems than in Central or Western Europe; political identification with the communist regime was stronger in the first “satellite” countries of communism (notably, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia) than in the late comers (Poland, Hungary, Slovakia) (Borowik, 2006). Irena Borowik has offered three theoretical tools as of religion’s contribution to post-communist societies.

Orthodoxy as a Tool for Building Identity in a Changing World

There is more than one possibility for building a new orientation in the post-Communist world and correspondingly different roles for religion in this process. One potential orientation is towards the West, as evidenced by countries that search for a new political identity through a membership in the European Union. “The Romanian model of church- state interaction sits uncomfortably with Western liberal models in a number of ways: these include the distinction between denominations and religious associations and the system of privileges it engendered; the communist-era and earlier tradition of state activism in religious affairs and financial assistance for the denominations; the numerical domination of an Orthodox Church commanding the nominal allegiance of some 87% of Romanians; and the Caesaropapist elements in Romanian Orthodox doctrine and history” (Andreescu, 2007, p. 453).

Orthodoxy as a Basis for Political Identity

The problems in using religion to build a new political identity can be seen in the Ukrainian polarized presidential state of affairs. The pro-Russian candidate, Janukowitch, represented “himself as a defender of the traditional, eternal, unchangeable, spiritual, economic, and

political unity of Ukraine with Russia”, while he presented Yushenko as an American agent (Yourash cited in Borowik, 2006). The Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate stood behind Janukowitch, while all the other Christian and non-Christian churches of Ukraine supported his opponent. In this case, supporters of one or the other candidate were at the same time political rallies. Equally ambivalent, “the Orthodox Church in Romania is often perceived as an institution that retains and perpetuates an irrelevant and outmoded way of social thinking, exhibiting antidemocratic and, oftentimes, intolerant attitudes while at the same time formally supporting the commitment of the society to democracy and European integration” (Romocea, 2011, p. 13).

Orthodox as a Cultural and National Identity

Following the collapse of Communism, national identity has been one of the most problematic issues. Attempts to overlay national Orthodox Churches onto national states have resulted in conflicts within the Orthodox world. At the moment, it seems outdated to take this topic into consideration for the case of Romania, since the representatives of the Orthodox Church agreed to drop their ambitions for recognition by the Romanian State as a “National Church” in the recent draft-law. However, this change of

attitude was, more likely, due to the international pressure meant to protect the interests of other religious organizations active on Romanian territory. In this context, it is still important to look at the proposal as a social reflection within the Orthodox Church (Guran, 2006).

The Orthodox Church’s position in the new Romanian political balance remains controversial and not only due to its political past. “Many Orthodox leaders view democratisation as a threat to their Byzantine view of church-state relations and the state is unwilling to relinquish its traditional centralist coordination of every single aspect of Romanian life, including the religious one. But by sheer numbers alone the Orthodox Church has managed to maintain a strong political voice that cannot be ignored by the country’s political elite” (Stan & Turcescu, 2000, p. 1486). Whether the future will bring a secularisation of the State will be a challenge for the young member of the EU.

Conclusions

The Orthodox Church has demonstrated an important and excessively active role in the construction of the Romanian State from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Our examination also shows that the use of religious nationalism took various different forms of expression throughout the country’s history. Communism

brought dramatic changes in Romania in all aspects of the society, and both public and private life. Religion continued to be a vital element of the Romanian life, which suffered during communism. However, “the advantages of the Romanian Orthodox Church came at the cost of collaborating with the regime and suffering major transformations in its structure and organisation” (Leustean, 2007a, p. 327). The communist regime imposed their propaganda on the hierarchy of the Church, who promoted the ideology to the masses through the canals of the Church. Ultimately, religion did not lose its dominance but, as other communist countries, promoted a false perception of religious liberty.

Religious transformations were presented as people's decisions and the state imposed its authority in rewriting the history of the country in order to protect the “interests” of its people. Confessional differences offered the communists the motivation for accommodating the church within the regime since divisions between Eastern and Western Europe were drawn on religious lines and religion could thus offer the communists support in its political dominance. The Church enjoyed a privileged position in the Romanian society, despite its controversial activity during the regime, which is evidenced by the high religiosity levels of the people, a decade after the fall of communism. The crucial interaction of

Orthodox religion and Romanian nationality, we examined in an earlier chapter, might very well explain this ambivalence. In the case of Romania, the ethnicity was manifested to a great extent through the maintenance of Orthodox traditions.

Nevertheless, the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the communist regime was ambiguous and contradictory. The church sensed the danger of conflict and the benefits of collaboration, and chose the latter. Indeed, if the Orthodox Church seemed to profit from its collaboration with the communists in early stages, in the long term it suffered from large-scale anti-religious campaigns – especially during the Ceausescu era – which aimed at harming the reputation and influence of religion in society (Leustean, 2007a). Moreover, the collapse of communism came along with a new era for the Church, which allowed them to function in a free environment. The skillful use of nationalism by the Church “to restore its prestige and strike a chord with Romanians” cannot be ignored in this context (Stan & Turcescu, 2000, p. 1472). A critical assessment of the past and its future role is what many intellectual elites have pointed out as necessary for the transitional Orthodox Church in Romania. As we have seen, the nature of relationship between religion and society reflects the position of the Orthodox Church in key social issues, such as democra-

tisation, EU membership, citizenship etc. The European Union brings an additional dimension to

this relationship and the future challenges for the State-Church relations will be numerous.

Note

¹ The decision about the union was made at the Alba Iulia assembly in 1918 and came into action with the treaties of Trianon for Transylvania, for Saint-Germain for Bukovina and Paris for Bessarabia. The negotiations held between the former administrative divisions of the regions and the formed Kingdom of Romania.

² The Democratic Union of Serbs in Romania was founded in 1989 and since 1990 has a reserved seat in the Romanian Chamber of Deputies. Since 1990, three representatives have been elected: Milenko Lukin, Slavomir Gvozdenovic and Dusan Popov, who represents the Union in the current parliament.

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