
ONE WAY TICKET TO EUROPE? RELIGION IN ROMANIA

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Abstract

Christian denominations are historically well connected with the formation of national identities (Romanian but also Hungarian, German, etc.) in Romania, in some cases religious and ethnic identities overlapping. The discussion about bringing new values from Orthodox - majority new Member States into the EU peaked before 2007 and afterwards left momentum, in order to give place to another discussion underway, about how secularization is affecting Romanian diaspora living in a more secular environment than at home, as well as the people living in Romania having strong religious values. The 2018 referendum on the definition of ‘traditional family’ failed to capture the interest of the electorate and the recent debates from the national Parliament shows that religion is not any more connected with political cleavages. The same path is observed as to the European Parliament, where religion is used by the Romanian MEPs (except from one that is part of the ECR group) more as an issue connected with the respect of human rights inside or outside the EU.

Keywords: European Parliament, identity, national, religion, Romania

1. Introduction

The richness of religious life in Romania, where 18 religions are recognized by the State but one Church, the Romanian Orthodox Church is followed by more than 85% of the total number of believers has its roots in the richness of the past and in a remarkable tolerance in terms of religious life across history. Romania did not witness religious conflicts. The Reformation inserted peacefully in Transylvania, different from other parts of Europe, while in Moldavia and Wallachia the Orthodox Christianity has been tolerated by the Ottoman Empire. Nevertheless, the links between ethnicity and religion were stronger in Romania, as compared to other European countries. How was possible to keep a high level of tolerance while developing the national feelings across religious belonging it is something that is not entirely explained nowadays. Romania became part of the European Union with this heritage: rich, paradoxical and relatively unknown. Our purpose is to explain the current place

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of religion in Romania, while taking into account how Romanians use religion as an argument or as an identity issue in the European Parliament. In order to have a complete and right understanding of this issue, it is necessary to undertake a long road. It is necessary to present the relationship between religion and ethnicity in current days Romania, but also the model of Church - State relationship that has been considered the best choice for Romania. It is also necessary to map the Churches involvement in social life, not by presenting every issue in detail, but by underlying the most important aspects. The public perception on religion and national identity is another part of the paper, because one can rely on a sociological investigation related specifically to this issue that offers relevant insights. How the Churches from Romania started to act as European actors, trespassing the national borders, due to the Romania integration into the European Union is also important to frame the whole research. Another issue that is analysed relates to the way religion is used in the national Parliament debates from 2020-2022 and in the European Parliament debates from 2019-2022. This may give an answer to what is different and what is similar when national and European levels of discussion and decision - making are discussed. Only after accurately describing all these parts of the puzzle around religion, politics, national and European identity in the case of Romania some conclusions may be formulated.

2. Religion and ethnicity in Romania - historical perspectives and the current context

Here also, before dealing with factual data, a conceptual framework would be handy. For example, to define the understanding of ethnicity; its relation to religion; and the meaning of ‘nationality’ in what follows.

Religion, history, and a certain sense of belonging shape people’s attitudes in Romania more than in Western Europe [1]. People’s identity started to be defined and it is still defined by ethnicity and religion [2, 3]. Germans (called themselves Saxons) in Transylvania established themselves more than 800 years ago and since then they are proud of their national identity that they strongly connect with the religious affiliation. Hungarians have the same feeling of belonging to a nation and to a Church simultaneously, either Romano-Catholic or Reformat. Romanians from all historical regions defined themselves also in ethnic and religious terms, either Orthodox or Greek-Catholic Church (the members of this Church represent right now only 0.7% of the total population). In 1437 Saxons, Hungarians and Szeklers from Transylvania signed an agreement called *Unio Trium Nationum*. Religious and political leaders at that time have agreed to establish an alliance across ethnic and religious identities and for this purpose they used the term *nationum*, that is ‘nations’, even if historians are arguing that only Hungarians perceived themselves in ethnical terms, while the Saxons and of the Szeklers were defined by a certain ethnic component, but for a considerable period of time it remained secondary to the political one Ioan-Aurel Pop argues that “starting with the 16th century, in

official circles and in the eyes of the public, *natio Nobilium* became synonymous to *natio Hungarica*” [4]. The emergence of the national identity in Transylvania (and lately in Moldova and Wallachia) was strongly connected with the religious belonging feelings. The Hungarians self-conscience as a nation different from others, the arrival of Germans in Transylvania or the revival of the national feeling (in the case of the Greek-Catholic Church established by Romanians in the 18th century) is strongly connected with the founding of churches and therefore a mix of religious and ethnic affiliation is stronger in Romania than in other European countries. This connection is falsely attributed only to the case of Orthodox Church believers, neglecting that for centuries all these religions were united to confront the Ottoman expansion [5, 6]. It survived the hard times of Communism - the official atheist education did not had results in Romania - and came back to the surface once again after 1989. Romanians, Hungarians, Germans remained attached to their Churches, even if the Communist regime practiced a very hard policy of freedom of religion repression.

According to the last 2022 census, 85.3% of the total 16.39 million people that declared religious affiliation belong to the Romanian Orthodox Church, other people declared their affiliation to other religions/Churches and only 0.9% of the total population declared themselves atheist, agnostics or without religion, a very slight increase from the previous 2011 census. The partial results of the 2022 census were released by the National Institute of Statistics in December 2022 [<http://www.insse.ro>]. These numbers shows that secularization induced by an atheist Communist regime that lasted 42 years was not at work in Romania, as different from other former Communist countries, like the Czech Republic or the eastern part of Germany that corresponds to the former DDR. The explanation is more profound than the simple intervention of state authorities, since the Protestant churches everywhere in the world followed the same path, not only in the former Warsaw pact. Most of the Romania’s population has remained religious.

The belonging of most people living in Romania to the Orthodox Church may be explained by historical factors (Christianity was brought in Romania, more exactly in the southern part of the country bordering the Black Sea in the first century) but also by the power of adaptation of this Church to the prevailing circumstances at work in different historical moments. In many documents until 19th century the Romanian Orthodox Church is named ‘The Church of our forefathers’ (*‘biserica strămoșească’*) which is a clear sign the link between the nation and the prevailing religion in the country. According to Daniel Barbu, the Orthodoxy has been for the Romanians “a political community and not a religious one”; for Romanians, the Christianity has been from the very beginning equivalent with the rules imposed by the Roman emperors; therefore, the Orthodoxy is „the conformity of the attitudes with a norm that is generally accepted” [7].

3. The current situation of religions in Romania - from the end of the Communism up to the ongoing integration into the European Union

A vast literature has been written about the situation of religion in Romania after 1989 [8-12]. In 1989 the revolution overthrew the Communist regime and offered new perspectives for the freedom of religion. The ROC changed its relations with the state [13-15]. The current situation is described as ‘an incomplete separation of the Church from the state’. ROC is considered, as all other Churches, part of the civil society [16] with a special status of ‘legal entities with public utility’. The leaders of ROC met with President Ion Iliescu in June 1990, asking for full autonomy and that the Church perspective will be considered when drafting the new Constitution and the new laws. As a first gesture of goodwill, the state re-established religious education in public schools, as it was before 1947, a gesture that was seen as “the achievement of the revolution” [17]. Some dioceses brutally eliminated by the Communist regime were re-established and new bishops that studied in the West were appointed. The number of theological faculties rose (they were only two before 1989), monasteries closed by communists were reopened, new churches were built. ROC started to return to social activities, first in the state system, then running his own institutions. ROC recoupled to the international ecumenical movement and hosted the Third Ecumenical Assembly of European Churches in Sibiu (2007).

The Greek-Catholic Church which follows the Eastern rite but also the authority of the Pope has been the product of the Habsburgs will to attract Romanians living in Transylvania after the defeat of the Ottomans (1683). In 1923, ROC and the Greek Catholic Church were both recognized as ‘Romanian Churches’. In 1948, following the direct interference of the Soviet Union, the Greek-Catholics from Romania were absorbed into ROC. The end of Communism meant for Greek-Catholics the right to re-establish as a Church on its own, but their number nowadays is much lower than it was in 1947.

The Romanian Constitution dates back from 1991 and it was amended in 2003. Article 29 guarantees freedom of conscience, including freedom of religion. Article 32 guarantees the right to education, including the freedom of religious education. According to Article 29, par. 3. “All religions shall be free and organized in accordance with their own statutes, under the terms laid down by law” [18].

After 16 years of discussion and after two other bills that were debated in the Parliament, on 13 December 2006 the Law on Religious Freedom and the General Status of Faith Communities has been adopted with an overwhelming majority and became Law no. 489/2006 [19]. The draft law has been previously sent to the Venice Commission that formulated its approval with some suggestions. The law established a model that follows the European model of regulating relations between State and religious communities [20, 21]. N. Dorsen, M. Rosenfeld, A. Sajó and S. Baer consider that there is a single

Western model on the state - religion relationship with five meanings of neutrality of the state towards religions [22].

The Romanian system of Church - State relationship is very similar to the idea of religious neutrality and to the cooperation model, as they are embodied in the German, Austrian and Italian systems [23].

Religious education is guaranteed by the Constitution and by the Law on Education of 2011. Religious education is given in primary, secondary and grammar schools. The pupils have the possibility of opting out of this subject and pupils who do not want to attend religious education have to get their parents' or guardians' consent. There is no substitute subject for those who opt out of religious education (Art. 18, par. 1) and religious education can only be taught by trained teachers in accordance with the agreements between the Ministry of Education and the recognized Churches [24].

4. Churches involvement in social life

Abortion has been legalized in Romania after 1989. The Churches started the fight for a culture of life years later. Ecumenical associations like *Pro Vita* are deeply involved in counselling centres for women that must take a decision when they find they are pregnant. Marriages between people of same sex are not possible, because of a Civil Code provision. A campaign to introduce in the Constitution the same prohibition failed because a referendum failed to be pass the 30% participation threshold in order to be validated in 2018.

After 1989, all religions started an impressive work in the area of social assistance. According to the Law no. 489/2006, there is a social partnership between state and Churches/cults [25]. Since 2007 there is a Protocol of cooperation between the Romanian Government and the ROC in the area of social inclusion. The money invested by the ROC in social activities increases each year. According to the latest report of the ROC, 44 million euros has been spent for social activities in 2021 and there are 719 institutions that performed social activities with the financial help of ROC. In the previous year the total amount spent by the ROC to social activities was 38 million euros, that was an increase with 18% referred to 2019. If in 2020 approximately 138.000 people were beneficiaries of the Church programmes, in 2021 more than 144.000 people get access to these programmes. Following the example of ROC, the Catholic Church has also signed in 2007, few months later, an agreement with the Romanian Government related to social activities.

The pandemics has been a huge challenge in Romania for all the Churches, since there were not allowed to continue their regular services and activities with the believers. Because of the restrictions, medical and social commitment of the Churches suffered as well. Many vulnerable people were isolated and the Churches used volunteers in order to distribute food and medication. In March 2020 it was decided that the Churches are not allowed to receive believers. In April 2020 the Ministry of Interior Affairs signed a Protocol with ROC allowing some exceptions for Easter ceremonies, followed by different acts with the same purpose signed with other Churches. The restrictions

were partially lifted in May 2020, but imposed once again in the Autumn of 2020 after the beginning of the second wave of the pandemics. Considering that traditionally in the period October-November 2020 many Orthodox pilgrimages are organized the restrictions were challenged by some believers and even by some ROC clerics. That period coincided with the electoral campaign for the December 2020 Parliament elections and therefore the discussion about restriction of religious freedom began to be politicized - a new political party AUR, belonging to the far-right populist family, started by acting against all pandemics restrictions and succeeded to gain enough votes to enter the Parliament. The whole discussion about restrictions to religious freedom was in place until the state of alert was finally lifted in March 2022. The Churches did not officially oppose the restrictions, although some clerics expressed their own resistance [16, p. 43-47, 139-143]. According to OSCE, Romania is, from the list of 57 Member States, in the group with the most severe restrictions related to religious freedom applied during the pandemics, together with Cyprus, Denmark, Germany and Turkey [26].

All the Churches of Romania are involved in helping the Ukrainian refugees after the war started on 24 of February 2022. Approximately 3.38 million Ukrainians passed the borders of Romania since the Russian invasion. ROC had spent so far 7 million euros for the Ukrainian refugees, providing shelter in monasteries and social centres and helping refugees with food and medication provided by volunteers from Church-related NGOs. There are no numbers available for the involvement of other Churches and religious organisations in the Ukrainian refugees' issue so far, but the level of public support shown by religious leaders in Romania for helping Ukrainian refugees is high. EU funds were allocated for this issue and the Romanian government built an online platform ('*Sprijin de urgență*' - 'Emergency help') where state authorities and NGOs may find information on how to access EU funds and public budget money that may be used for helping Ukrainian refugees. So far, no Church received funds using this instrument; Churches are relying on their own resources in order to help refugees.

5. The public perception about religion, pandemics, national identity and the European Union

The Institute of Political Science and International Relations of the Romanian Academy Ion I.C. Brătianu and Centre for Sociological Research LARICS, under the aegis of the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, conducted a survey-research on religious life in Romania, which was presented in December 2021, under the name *The barometer of the religious life in Romania* [https://larics.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Barometrul-Vietii-Religioase_decembrie-2021.pdf]. This is the most recent and the most comprehensive view on the current state of religion in Romania. 62.2% of the respondents considers that the relations between the different religions in Romania are good. On the question if they consider themselves a religious person, 56.7% answer in

a positive way. 89.8% of the respondents affirm that they believe in God. The participation to religious services is lower than expected, the majority (31.1%) are saying that they go only occasionally to the Church, but 42.9% believe religion is important in their life. An overwhelming majority of respondents (89.2%) believe that religion is not in contradiction with the belonging of Romania to the European Union, while most respondents (59.9%) believe religion is important for the national identity of Romanians. As regards the pandemic restrictions and how they affected religious freedom, the opinion of the respondents is divided. Many respondents (41.1%) are in favour of restrictions to religious freedom because of the pandemics, while a significant part (35.4%) believe that the pandemic restrictions were not in line with religious freedom. As a conclusion, secularization started already to affect the religious life in Romania but still the level of believing and practicing the belief is high, above prior expectations.

6. The attitude of the Churches related to the European integration of Romania

This issue has been much discussed before Romania joined the European Union in 2007 and it is still discussed nowadays but rather occasionally. By analysing the discourse of the ROC clerics but also of the public figures connected with Orthodoxy around the moment of the accession to the European Union [27], the conclusion is that the discourse opposed to European values is in the minority. The situation did not change since then.

ROC is a very active member of the Conference of European Churches (CEC), a pan-European organization bringing together 114 Orthodox, Protestant and Anglican Churches, together with the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Reformed Church, and the Transylvanian Reformed Church. The Catholic Church of Romania is a very active member of COMECE - The Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Union. Bishop Virgil Bercea of Oradea is the delegate of the Romanian Bishops' Conference to COMECE. ROC has its own representation in Brussels, apart from the belonging to CEC. Since 2005, there is a Permanent Office of the Romanian Orthodox Church to the European institutions. The decision to establish this Office has been preceded by the decision of the ROC Holy Synod in 1997 to create a European Orthodox Commission where representatives of all Orthodox Churches would be represented. This decision has not been applied because of the ROC belonging to CEC but starting from 1999 several voices manifested in the public sphere the support for the creation of such a ROC office in Brussels, apart from the CEC belonging. Therefore, in 2005, the Holy Synod of the ROC has decided to establish this Office. Lately in the same year, the Romanian Government decided by the Government Decision no. 1489/2005 to buy a place of worship in Brussels for the purpose of helping ROC to open this Office. The 2007 ROC Statute enumerate the offices of the ROC abroad and among them is this Office in Brussels that became operational in 2007. Bishop Nifon is the current president of the Office. It is a concrete form

of the interest manifested by the European Union in the dialogue with churches, especially after the coming into force of the Treaty of Lisbon, which institutionalize the dialogue with European Churches.

Since 2010, the Permanent Office of the ROC is a member of the Committee of the Representatives of Orthodox Churches to the European Union (CROCEU) [28].

We may ask ourselves if the emergence of this Office was useful for promoting ROC interests at the European level. Because the place consists of a church and several offices in the same area, it works as a place of worship and as a centre of alternative religious education. From this perspective, this Office has proved to be very useful for the Romanian diaspora in Brussels that is made up of approximately 400.000 people (9.3% of the total number of foreigners living in the town). As an instrument to boost the Romanian Orthodoxy dialogue with EU representatives, there are no data to make a final assessment, but however one cannot see any tangible achievement.

We shift here from Orthodox lobbying in Brussels to national parliamentary politics. Some guidelines would be welcome to relate the different points and place all parts of the puzzle in their right place.

7. Religion matters discussed in the Romanian Parliament (2020-2022)

Following the discussions related to religious matters in the Romanian Parliament, the period taken into account is December 2020 - June 2022, because in December 2020 the first national Parliament elected after the 2019 European Parliament elections started to work.

The debates in this Parliament focus on many issues but are very poor about religion matters. This is different from the previous Parliaments that were elected since May 1990 where many issues related to religion were discussed.

The only issue connected to religion that was discussed in this period is about the involvement of the Romanian state in helping the Prodromu hermitage that is in the Mount Athos and affiliated to the ROC. In July 2020 the government decided by Emergency Ordinance no. 113/2020 to contribute to the restoration of this hermitage with 960.000 euros, the money being allocated for this purpose to the State Secretariat for Cults. This normative act has been subsequently discussed by the Parliament and it was approved by the Law no. 39 of 16 March 2021. The members of the USR PLUS party, a new party that belongs to the Renew Europe parliamentary group in the European Parliament voted against the approval of the Ordinance, even if their allies in the government at that time, PNL (part of the EPP group in the European Parliament), voted for.

8. Religion matters discussed in the European Parliament by the Romanian MEPs

Currently Romania is represented by 33 MEPs. 14 belong to the EPP group, 10 to S & D group, 8 to Renew Europe and one to ECR (Table 1).

Table 1. Romanian MEPs and their political affiliation.

Name	Political group
Traian Băsescu, Vasile Blaga, Rareș Bogdan, Daniel Buda, Cristian Bușoi, Gheorghe Falcă, Mircea Hava, Marian-Jean Marinescu, Dan Motreanu, Siegfried Mureșan, Vlad Nistor, Eugen Tomac, Loránt Vincze, Iuliu Winkler	European Peoples Party - EPP
Carmen Avram, Dragoș Benea, Tudor Ciuhodaru, Corina Crețu, Maria Grapini, Claudiu Manda, Victor Negrescu, Dan Nica, Rovana Plumb, Mihai Tudose	Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)
Vlad Botoș, Dacian Cioloș, Vlad Gheorghe, Alan Mituța, Dragoș Pîslaru, Ramona Strugariu, Nicolae Ștefănuță, Dragoș Tudorache	Renew Europe
Cristian Terheș	European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR)

Among all these 33 members, the most active about religion in the European Parliament is Cristian Terheș, member of the ECR group. He was a cleric of the Greek - Catholic Church but he renounced to practice. A common presence in the media, he was elected in 2019 in the European Parliament on the Social Democrat Party lists in the fourth place. In May 2020 he declared that he left the party in order to join PNȚCD - the National Peasant and Christian Democrat Party - a small party pretending to represent Christian democracy that is irrelevant now in Romania (no representation in the national Parliament). Terheș changed subsequently the political affiliation from S& D to ECR group. In May 2022 Aurelian Pavelescu, the current president of PNȚCD, pretended that Terheș is no longer member of this party, although Terheș still pretend to represent PNȚCD in the European Parliament. Terheș has been very active in promoting the failed 2018 referendum that has as object to insert in the Constitution the definition of the marriage as union between a man and a woman.

The analysis of the activity of the Romanian 33 MEPs from 2019 to June 2022 reveals that there are 20 reports, motions for resolution or debates related to religion where they were active. There is no hierarchy of these non-legislative actions of the European Parliament. To draft a report is not easy in terms of spending time for documentation, nor to be a shadow rapporteur. The 2019 Rules of Procedure of the European Parliament describe in detail the mechanism for motions for resolution (Rule 143) and for debates related to the breaches of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law (Rule 144). None of these reports, motions for resolutions or debates is connected anyhow to the issue of religion in Romania. All of them are connected to human rights, both inside or outside the

European Union. Only 12 MEP, meaning 36.8% of the total number, contributed to the debate about the role of religion.

There are three categories of these events (Tables 2-4).

Table 2. Human rights and religion inside the European Union.

Title	Category	Date	Name of the Romanian MEPs involved
On the criminalisation of sexual education in Poland	Motion for a resolution	6 November 2019	Tudor Ciuhodaru, Rovana Plumb, Ramona Strugariu
The <i>de facto</i> abortion ban in Poland	Debate	9 February 2021	Ramona Strugariu, Cristian Terheş
Sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health	Debate	23 June 2021	Cristian Terheş
The impact of intimate partner violence and custody rights on women and children	Debate	4 October 2021	Cristian Terheş
On the first anniversary of the <i>de facto</i> abortion ban in Poland	Motion for a resolution	3 November 2021	Cristian Terheş

Table 3. Human rights and religion outside the European Union.

Title	Category	Date	Name of the Romanian MEPs involved
On forced labour and the situation of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	Joint motion for a resolution	16 December 2020	Ramona Strugariu
On the 2019 - 2020 Commission Reports on Turkey	Report	5 May 2021	Vlad Nistor (shadow rapporteur)
On the human rights situation in Myanmar, including the situation of religious and ethnic groups	Joint motion for a resolution	6 October 2021	Ramona Strugariu, Nicolae Ștefănuță, Loránt Vincze
The state law relating to abortion in Texas, USA	Debate	7 October 2021	Nicolae Ștefănuță, Cristian Terheş
On Myanmar, one year after the coup	Motion for a resolution	7 March 2022	Dacian Cioloș, Vlad Gheorghe, Dragoș Pîslaru, Ramona Strugariu, Loránt Vincze

On the human rights situation in North Korea, including the persecution of religious minorities	Joint motion for a resolution	6 April 2022	Dragoș Pîslaru, Vlad Gheorghe, Nicolae Ștefănuță, Ramona Strugariu, Dragoș Tudorache, Loránt Vincze
Persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion	Debate	2 May 2022	Eugem Tomac
On the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova	Report	12 May 2022	Dragoș Tudorache
On the 2021 Commission Report on Turkey	Report	18 May 2022	Vlad Nistor (shadow rapporteur)
Global threats to abortion rights: the possible overturn of abortion rights in the US by the Supreme Court	Motion for a resolution	3 June 2022	Cristian Terheș, Nicolae Ștefănuță

Table 4. Human rights and religion in the context of the pandemics.

Title	Category	Date	Name of the Romanian MEPs involved
Digital Green Certificate - Union citizens - Digital Green Certificate - third country nationals - The accessibility and affordability of Covid-testing	Debate	28 April 2021	Cristian Terheș
EU Digital COVID Certificate - Union citizens – EU Digital COVID Certificate - third-country nationals	Debate	8 June 2021	Cristian Terheș
EU transparency in the development, purchase and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines	Debate	16 September 2021	Cristian Terheș
The EU's role in combating the COVID-19 pandemic: how to vaccinate the world	Debate	24 November 2021	Cristian Terheș

As for the interventions of the Romanian MEPs during the debates around these issues, the most active was Cristian Terheș from the ECR group. He intervened in the 9th of February 2021 debate around *de facto* abortion ban in Poland. In October 2020, the Polish Constitutional Tribunal established that abortion is against the constitutional provision that guarantees the right to life. Terheș affirmed in his intervention that the opponents of this decision manifest a double standard about rule of law in the EU Member States, since the EU have

no competence at all regarding abortion. Terheş intervened also in the 21st of June 2021 debate about the Report on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health (The Matic Report) [European Parliament, Report - A9-0169/2021, *REPORT on the situation of sexual and reproductive health and rights in the EU, in the frame of women's health*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>]. He affirmed that to claim in this report “that abortion is a fundamental human right is undermining the foundation of the European Union, which was created to safeguard the life and human dignity of every European citizen”. In the 4th of October 2021 debate around the Resolution of the European Parliament on the impact of intimate partner violence and custody rights on women and children [European Parliament, Report - A9-0254/2021, *REPORT on the impact of intimate partner violence and custody rights on women and children*, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu>] that was adopted two days afterwards, Terheş affirmed that the report is “another brick in the social engineering construct intended in the European Union that places Marxist ideology over Biology and Physiology” and also that “the proposals from this report are violating the EU Treaties, which say that, according to the subsidiarity principle, the European Union has no competence for the development of policies related to family, criminal law, education and healthcare. All of these are prerogatives of the sovereign Member states and any intrusion of the institutions into these prerogatives is undermining the foundation of the European Union”. On 7th of October 2021 Terheş intervened in the debate related to the state law relating to abortion in Texas, USA (the so-called ‘Texas Heartbeat Act’, saying that the right to life is protected from the very first beat of a human being heart). According to Terheş, abortion is not a fundamental right, therefore “it is simply absurd that the European Parliament criticize now the Texas legislator for this act that protects the life of the unborn with the heartbeat”. In the motion for a Resolution that Terheş initiated with other 17 members of the ECR group and that was registered on 3rd of June 2022 and rejected on 8th of June, the same issue of abortion in the US is considered, the authors of this motion writing that “access to abortion is not recognized as a human right under international law, the UDHR, relevant treaties of the case law of the ECHR and the CJEU” and also that “the ‘*nasciturus*’ (unborn child) acquires specific legal protection in all situations that may be favourable to it by assimilating its status to that of a new-born child”. As for his interventions regarding different aspects of the pandemics, including vaccination, they are too many to be presented but all of them follow the same line of reasoning, against all covid-19 restrictions and blaming the vaccines for everything.

In the same debates where Terheş has been involved, two other Romanian MEPs intervened in a contrary sense: Ramona Strugariu and Nicolae Ștefănuță, both from Renew Europe. In the debate about the *de facto* abortion ban in Poland, Ramona Strugariu opposed the decision of the Polish Constitutional Tribunal by saying that “every woman has a right to a life, to such choices, to decide upon her future”, adding that she comes from a country “where thousands of women lost their lives during communist years because they had no choice”

(allusion to the abortion ban policy adopted in Romania in the 1970s that lasted until 1989). In the debate about the state law relating to abortion in Texas, Nicolae Ștefănuță used the same line of reasoning relating the debate to the Communist period of abortion ban in Romania. He considers that this law “might turn Texas into a snitch state” and “it is about exposing women to a deadly risk” for concluding that “we must stand firm with the women of Texas because they might be the women of Europe as well”. In the debate around the motion for a Resolution Global threats to abortion rights: the possible overturn of abortion rights by the US Supreme Court Nicolae Ștefănuță reiterated the line of reasoning on the Communist period of abortion ban in Romania for affirming that “striking down *Roe versus Wade* would lead to more than 20 US states banning abortion and perhaps to 36 million women having direct consequences from this on their right for their body, for their life” and concluding “let us stop a war on women, men and women together. We have very clear values here in Europe. Let us talk about them. Let us speak to our American friends about them, and let’s fight so that banning abortion remains just a sad legacy of the past and not a miserable gift for the future.”

Vlad Nistor from the EPP group has been shadow rapporteur for the 2019-2020 and 2021 Commission Reports on Turkey, discussed in the European Parliament in May 2021 and May 2022. There are issues related to religion in both reports. In the 2019-2020 Report, Turkey has been asked to promote reforms in the area of freedom of religion: by enabling religious communities to obtain legal personality and by applying Venice Commission recommendations, ECHR rulings and CoE resolutions, especially on Greek Orthodox living in the islands of Imbros and Tenedos. The same request is reiterated in the 2021 Report, but this document includes more references to religion, such as the need to recognize Alevi religious group, or to allow the reopening of the Halki Seminary that has been closed since 1971. This Report notes that in Turkey there is “hate speech and hate crimes against religious minorities”, especially Alevis, Christians and Jews and that the investigations in this area remained ineffective. Another Romanian member of the EPP group that has been active in the debates related to religion in the European Parliament is Eugen Tomac who affirmed at the debate on the persecution of minorities on the grounds of belief or religion organized on 2nd of May 2022 that the Soviet Union times of religion repression are similar to today behavior of Patriarch Kirill that is behaving against the Christians in Ukraine (Eugen Tomac was born in fact in 1981 in the Soviet Union, on the current territory of Ukraine, as a member of the Romanian minority).

Dragoș Tudorache from the Renew Europe group has been rapporteur for the Report on the implementation of the EU Association Agreement with the Republic of Moldova that has been adopted on 12th of May 2022. There is no mention of religion issues in this Report. However, in the area of human rights, the Report “calls on Moldova to abolish the constitutional ban on same-sex marriage put in place in 1994”. Considering that the Republic of Moldova received the status of associate country at the European Council meeting of 23-24 June 2022, this recommendation will be probably mentioned in further

European Commission evaluations on the status of the Republic of Moldova application and will raise disputes among religious lines.

Although this study is focused on the current period of the European Parliament that has been elected in 2019, the analysis of the issue of religion from the perspective of the MEPs cannot ignore the figure of László Tökés that has been MEP representing political parties from Romania and Hungary between 2007-2019. László Tökés is a very well-known dissident during the time of Communism in Romania, while he was a pastor of the Reformed Church. The attempt to evacuate him from Timișoara in December 1989 was the start of the anti-Communist uprising that culminated with the overthrow of the Ceaușescu regime and the emergence of democracy in Romania. After 1989, he was elected bishop of the Reformed Diocese of Királyhágómellék (Piatra Craiului) and was re-elected in 2004 for another 6 years term. He continued after 1989 to be very much socially involved, this time in the support of the Hungarian minority of Romania, by emphasizing the importance of Hungarian-language education, getting back the proprieties of the Church that has been confiscated by the Communist regime and by constantly underlining the social responsibility and the missionary work of the Church. László Tökés contributed to the opening of the first Hungarian-language private university in Romania in 1999, the Christian University of Partium in Oradea.

He ran for the first time at the European Parliament elections of 2007 as independent, but having the backing of Fidesz from Hungary. He succeeded to get enough votes for a seat but he was accused by UDMR - The Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania that he will split the Hungarian minority vote - in the end it was not the case, as UDMR succeeded to enter into the European Parliament as well. In 2009 he headed the party list of UDMR and was re-elected. In May 2010 Laszlo Tokes became one of the vice-presidents of the European Parliament. In 2014 he was the third on the list of Fidesz for the European Parliament elections in Hungary. Before the end of his term in 2019 he announced that he does not want to run for re-election, as in his view EPP “abandoned Christian Europe” - a frequent accusation of Fidesz that led to the split of Fidesz from EPP in 2021.

9. Religion perceived by the Romanian MEPs

At the survey about religion in the European Parliament, four Romanian MEPs accepted to participate, meaning 3.4% of the total number of answers received and 4.7% of the total number of MEPs. If we consider the total number of Romanian MEPs, 12.1% answered to survey. These figures are in line with those of other national groups in the European Parliament. Two Romanian MEPs from EPP group, one from Renew Europe and one from ECR participated in the survey.

A common denominator for all the answers is the affirmative answer to Q1 (‘According to you, does religion influence the functioning of the European Parliament?’). Three MEPs answered in the affirmative also on Q2, saying that

at the European Parliament religion has no effect on the identity of each political group, while one MEP refused to answer Q2. The same is for Q3 ('Does religion have a different importance depending on the nationality of the MEPs?') - three MEPs answered yes, while one MEP refused to answer. The answer on Q4 ('Does religion create differences between MEPs who are Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox or belonging to another religion?') shows a division: two MEPs answered in the affirmative, one MEP refused to answer, while the MEP from the ECR group answered with no. There is a division also on Q5 ('As a MEP, do you ever take religion into account?'), as two MEP answered 'permanently', one MEP answered 'often' and one MEP refused to answer. As for other questions included in the survey, it seems that the MEPs were not so much interested to answer. However, one MEP affirms that while believes religion play a role in the EU enlargements (Q14), he does not think religion play a role in the EU external relations (Q15) and he declares that is attending religious services once a month (Q19).

10. Conclusions

There are not so many studies about religion in Romania, neither from a historical perspective, nor about the current situation available in foreign languages, compared with the situation of religion in other European countries. There are a number of important sources on both aspects written in Romanian. The explanation is that not so many scholars outside Romania devoted attention to this issue [29; O.J. Schmitt, *Kirche und Wissenschaft bedrohen mit ihrer national-orthodoxen Ideologie Rumäniens Westbindung*, in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 26.10.2021] and, apart from Lucian N. Leuştean [30], the subject is carried in a rather superficial way. On the other side, Romanian authors preferred to publish their works in Romanian, for different reasons, therefore the number of accurate scientific sources is limited. Religion is still considered in Romania to be more connected with theology than to social sciences, a reminiscence of the Communist past but also an indication of the lack of trust in the instruments of social sciences or simply lack of interest by the Church decision-makers or/and scientists. This is the reason why reflecting about the connection between national and European identity in the case of Romania by considering religious aspects is a rather difficult task. Nevertheless, we can state some conclusions from mapping all these issues.

Christian denominations are historically very well connected with the formation of the national identities in Romania and in some cases religious and ethnic identities overlaps. In its historical evolution, religion has been affected in Romania by different factors, like the early Christianization of some provinces, the Ottoman or the Habsburg domination, the emergence of 'Great Romania' in 1918, the Communist period, the transition to democracy after 1989 and finally the European integration. Each of these events had an influence on religious behavior. The discussion about bringing new values from Orthodox - majority new Member States into the European Union peaked right before the accession of Romania (2007) and afterwards the discussion left momentum. The supposed

anti-European feelings of the Church believers were too much over-emphasized before 2007 but the reality shows that there is no values collision so far. This is because of growing secularization that affects all the EU Member States. There is an ongoing discussion about Romanian diaspora and if it will accelerate secularization overall, because of living in a secular environment, but there are no conclusions so far, since the discussion is only at the beginning. ROC learned to behave in a supranational environment before the end of the Communist period, by being an active member of the ecumenical movement. Consequently, when the long way of European integration started, ROC was better prepared for the transition and it is now playing at the European level in a more coherent way than expected. ROC and other Churches were not so much affected by the pandemics, as believers accepted state-imposed restrictions and the clerics were not so opposed either, with some exceptions. Nevertheless, the pandemics was a very interesting exercise in order to see how state and religions interact in an exceptional situation. Religion is not any more an issue of political cleavages in Romania, as the recent debates of the national Parliament proves. The 2018 referendum on the definition of family as a union between a man and a woman failed to capture the interest of the electorate and the Churches were reluctant to involve themselves in the public debate. This was the last moment so far when religion has been widely discussed in Romania. Romanian MEPs do not discuss at all the religious situation in Romania in the European Parliament, because there is no opportunity to do it and because there is not too much to be discussed, since there are no debates about religion at home. Romania is following the same path as other EU countries. Romanian MEPs are discussing issues related with religion from a broad, European and international perspective, having e.g. different attitudes on religious-connected issues in the US, depending on the affiliation on a political group in the European Parliament. Religion is an important issue that influence public positions in the case of the single Romanian representative of the ECR group. The same developments can be observed around many EU countries. Religion is part of the identity - related aspects that are used by radical right populist parties (or politicians - so far in the Romanian case, even if Cristian Terheş can be seen often at public events in the company of AUR leaders) in their discourse in order to distance themselves from the mainstream parties. Most probably, the next 2024 European elections will bring AUR representatives in the European Parliament and will reinforce this identity/religion trend inside the group of Romanian MEPs.

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