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WEAPONIZATION OF RELIGION AS ONE OF THE MAIN HYBRID INSTRUMENTS DIRECTED AGAINST ROMANIANS IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA, UKRAINE AND ROMANIA

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Abstract: *Religion has long been one of the key hybrid instruments used in geopolitics across the globe, for both defensive and offensive purposes. Thus, failing to recognize the importance of religion in national defense strategies, as an important factor for the society, represents a serious mistake. Yet, unfortunately, decision makers in Romania have failed to acknowledge and properly address this issue for a long time. The scope of this paper is not to investigate the reasons behind this aspect, but to highlight the importance of religion for Romanians in Romania, in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova, and to highlight the fact that by not addressing properly and responsibly the expectations and concerns of Romanians by the Romanian decision makers regarding religious rights and identity paves the way for weaponization of religion mainly by the Russian Federation, but also by Ukraine.*

The weaponization of religion against the interests of the Romanian people has a long history, mainly coming from the USSR and the Russian Federation. This weaponization, together with recent internal political developments in Romania, should highlight the importance of properly and responsibly addressing and cultivating the religious rights and identity of Romanians in Romania, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. Failing to do so will mean that adverse narratives and policies will weaponize religion against the stability, the security and the interests of the Romanian state and people, just as it has happened throughout history.

Keywords: *weaponization of religion; hybrid threat; geopolitics; Romanians' identity; Ukraine; the Republic of Moldova.*

Introduction

In this paper we will investigate the importance of the religious dimension for the identity of the Romanian minorities in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, and also for the Romanians from within the country. To this end, we will use quantitative data provided by various surveys. We will also highlight how historically neighboring powers have been trying to gain geopolitical advantage by weaponizing the importance of the religious factor for the identity of the Romanians in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. To this end, we will review relevant scientific literature concerning the geopolitics of religion, and the history of the religious affiliation of Romanians in the today territories of Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova.

The main point is that failing to properly acknowledge and address Romanian societal concerns and interests regarding religious freedom, religious rights and affiliation in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova will result (and this is already happening) in the proliferation of adverse narratives and hybrid threats primarily originating from the Russian Federation, which manifest both at home, in Romania, and abroad, in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova.

The Romanian minorities in Ukraine and the Romanians/Moldovans in the Republic of Moldova were forcibly separated from a religious and political point of view from their fellow citizens

in Romania after the Austrian Empire, the Russian Empire and later on the USSR annexed their homeland separating it from Romania. Their religious affiliation is still subject to manipulation for geopolitical objectives by both the Russian Federation and Ukraine. Unfortunately, as further elaborated in the paper, despite the fact that surveys show the Romanian minority in Ukraine and Romanians in the Republic of Moldova desire a rapprochement with their fellow countrymen in Romania, a reintegration with the religious structures of the Romanian Orthodox Church, neither the political structures from Romania, nor those from Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova seem to take notice of these concerns and desires. The failure to acknowledge and address these deep societal concerns, both at home and abroad, may result in proliferation of hybrid threats benefiting Russia, as it is already seen, both at home, and abroad.

1. Key Historical Note

In this paper, the majority of the citizens of the Republic of Moldova that self-describe as "Moldovans" shall be referred to as "Romanians", on the basis of a few decisive particular reasons.

One of them is that historically, the people of Moldova considered themselves as ethnic Romanians, the name "Moldovans/Moldavians" designating only a geographical denomination (much like the name Mancunians is for people from Manchester), and they have been aware they were speaking the Romanian language and named it as such. The Constitution of the Republic of Moldova clearly states that the official language in the Republic of Moldova is the Romanian language (Constituția Republicii Moldova 2024, 7). Moreover, this is explicitly pointed out historically even by one of Europe's leading scholars of the time, Dimitrie Cantemir, a Moldavian nobleman and ruler of the Moldavian Principality in the early 18th century (Cantemir 1717, 98-308)[1]. Ironically enough, Dimitrie Cantemir wrote his paper while he was in Sankt Petersburg, Russia, in exile, ousted by the Ottoman Turks, and he himself notes on the first page of one of his main papers that he had written his work in the *Romanian language* (Cantemir 1717, 1). All that began to change after the 1812 annexation by the Russian Empire of the area of Bessarabia (Eastern part of Moldavia/Moldova), where the Russian occupation tried to conduct an assimilation and Russification of the Romanian population by various means. One of these forms of assimilation was religion. Later on, Romania was founded in 1859 by what remained of the Principality of Moldavia and the Principality of Wallachia. Bessarabia (Eastern Moldavia) reunited on its own initiative with Romania in 1918, but was later on annexed by the USSR in 1940 and in 1944.

A second stage of the invention of the so-called "Moldovan" language and identity as being different from Romanian started in 1924 in the Soviet Union, when Russian, Ukrainian, Jewish and Romanian communists decided to invent a so-called *Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic* within the *Soviet Socialist Republic of Ukraine*, on the left bank of the Dniester river, comprising areas inhabited by Romanian ethnics. While this area had never actually been part of Moldavia (the ancient Romanian principality), naming it as such (author's note: Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic) would mean, as the initiators themselves pointed out in their Memo to Stalin that "The Moldovan Republic could play the same role of a political-propagandistic factor that the Republic of Belarus plays in relation to Poland, and the Republic of Karelia in relation to Finland. It would focus the attention and sympathy of the Bessarabian population, and it would create obvious pretexts regarding [our] claims to annex Bessarabia to the Moldovan Republic" (Negru 2003, 143-144). Concomitantly, "it would serve as the USSR's strategic breach to the Balkans (via Dobrogea) and to Central Europe (via Bukovina and Galicia), which the USSR could use as a bridgehead for

[1] „Niamul moldovénilor, munténilor, ardelénilor (carii cu toţii cu un nume de obşte români să chiamă)", which translates as "the Moldavian people, the Wallachian people, the Transylvanian people (which all of them are called Romanian as a people)", and „noi singuri şi astădzi români ne dzicem", which translates as "we call ourselves Romanians even today". Dimitrie Cantemir, *Hronicul Vechimei a Romano-Moldo-Vlahilor*, Sankt Petersburg, 1717, p. 98, 308, available at https://cantemir.asm.md/files/u1/hronicul_vechimei a_romano_ moldo_vlahilor_vol_I.pdf

military and political purposes" (Negru 2003, 143-144). These are obvious statements pointing to the artificial invention of this entity for geopolitical gains by the Soviet Union.

Nowadays, the Republic of Moldova is the remnant of an annexation by the Soviet Union in 1940 and 1944 that separated it from Romania. Thus, it is the remnant of this geopolitical pursuit by the Soviet Union/Russia and Ukraine trying to portray the ethnic Moldovans as being different from Romanians.

In summary, these are the reasons why in this paper we refer to the people of the Republic of Moldavia as, broadly speaking, Romanians, regardless of their self-denomination which occurred after an intense Soviet Russian and Soviet Ukrainian policy of occupation and assimilation, deportation, mass murder, manipulation and brainwashing. The identity of the occupied nations is one of the key problems left behind by the Soviet Union, and these days, Ukraine is unfortunately experiencing this firsthand, just as the citizens of the Republic of Moldova are.

2. The Geopolitics of Religion

One of the most important concepts in this work, and one of the first things we need to highlight, is the connection between geopolitics and religion, specifically the weaponization of religion in order to achieve geopolitical goals, to be more precise. This is one of the key issues addressed in this work. Recent specialized literature offers us certain perspectives on this matter.

In a volume published in 2017, Manlio Graziano explicitly argues that "the geopolitics of religions deserves to be a specific and separate discipline, devoted entirely to analyzing the interplay of politics and religious trends, using a geopolitical approach" (Graziano 2017, 2-3). In what the interplay between geopolitics and religion is concerned, Graziano argues that some of the factors impacting geopolitics and the will of political actors are quantifiable: geography, economics, demography, military power, alliances, institutions, and leadership. However, he argues that "other unmeasurable or 'immaterial' factors can play a consistent, even decisive, role: history, tradition, habits, ideologies, prejudices, and, of course, religions. Any shift in the weight of each of these factors can affect the relative strength of the political actors themselves, at a national or an international level" (Graziano 2017, 3). And this is where the importance of religion for geopolitics lies.

In a recent volume on the issue of geopolitics and religion, the editors Simone Raudino and Patricia Sohn argue that "religion remains important either directly in relation to political institutions or in the various forms of interaction among specific communities (religious or secular, or both), local, and national political issues" (Raudino and Sohn 2022, 22) and that "ignoring these trends due to normative proclivities - or, perhaps, only to habits of mind - that suggest modernizing is inherently tied to secularization makes opaque an empirical world that it is important to know. The notion advocated in some religious contexts that modernism and religion are not inherently oppositional bears in serious consideration, and deserves more attention than only the dismissive turn of the hand. Indeed, the continuing salience of religion in politics – even in the West – appears to bear out some parts of this basic idea simply on the empirical merits. That is, the reality of the place of religion in politics today is significant for hard geopolitical reasons of "failures of imagination", as well as for loftier reasons of pure science seeking to know the real world as it exists rather than as we wish to imagine it" (Raudino and Sohn 2022, 22-23). So they are speaking about "hard geopolitical reasons" related to the use of religion by political actors.

Another paper, named 'Islam as statecraft: How governments use religion in foreign policy' (2018), focuses the rivalry between Saudi and Iranian regimes. The authors claim that what they term as *the geopolitics of religious soft power* means "state support for transnational religious propagation, the promotion of religious interpretations that ensure regime survival, or competing visions of global religious leadership" (Mandaville and Hamid 2018, 1). They also provide a very concise definition of how geopolitical objectives and religion interplay, and of what we would call the geopolitics of religion: "efforts by the state to harness the power of religious symbols and authority in the service

of geopolitical objectives" (Mandaville and Hamid 2018, 2). Even though the authors made this assertion in relation to "Islam as statecraft" and the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran, we argue that this very concise definition could be very well applied to all other international actors using religion for geopolitical gains. The authors also point out how states are using religion to engage and influence populations abroad, in other countries, and how "geopolitical actors are pushing ideological alternatives and forms of transnational cultural solidarity" (Mandaville and Hamid 2018, 7). Arguably, this is exactly what the Russian Federation is trying to do today in portraying itself as a "defender of Christianity" and of "Orthodoxy". For Russia, this is still not a new narrative. Starting from the 17th and 18th century, the Russian Empire tried to pose as a defender of Christians in the Ottoman Empire (and even managed to be formally recognized as such by the Ottoman officials), and often used and still uses this pretext to gain geopolitical objectives (Blitt 2022). In the same paper, it is also noticed this aspect of the Russian Federation narratives and policies and, besides the examples of Saudi Arabia-Iran rivalry or other examples in the Muslim world. There are also provided some additional examples of how religion is being used for geopolitical objectives: "There are numerous examples today of governments pursuing geopolitical agendas through the prism of religion. The Kremlin has leveraged the transnational reach of the Russian Orthodox Church to build support for Moscow's policies in Ukraine. India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) mobilizes Hindutva, a form of Hindu nationalist ideology, in its outreach to Indian diaspora communities around the world. And Israel has cultivated ties with conservative evangelical Christians in the United States, seeking to portray the Jewish state as the natural guardian of a common Judeo-Christian heritage. There is no shortage of other similar examples" (Mandaville and Hamid 2018, 7-8).

In short, we have provided a few perspectives and definitions of the so-called *geopolitics of religion*, and a few examples as well. Perhaps the most concise definition for this concept was the one expressed by Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid, namely: "efforts by the state to harness the power of religious symbols and authority in the service of geopolitical objectives" (Mandaville and Hamid 2018, 2). Next, through the lens of this definition, we will attempt to analyze how Russia and Ukraine seek to politically instrumentalize this concept in relation to the Romanian minority in Ukraine and the Romanians in the Republic of Moldova, based both on historical events and present actions. We will also highlight the importance of religion for Romanians in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova, in comparison with the general significance of religion in Ukraine and in the Russian Federation. *This is because religion, as a geopolitical instrument, can only be used by geopolitical actors if it is relevant for the target population – in this case, the Romanian minority in Ukraine and the Romanians in the Republic of Moldova*.

3. Historical Weaponization of Religion Against Romanians

3.1. Romanians in the Republic of Moldova (part of Bessarabia)

Russia attempted its first religious takeover of the Romanians in Moldova and Wallachia even before annexing Bessarabia (Eastern Moldavia) in 1812. In 1791, Empress Catherine the Great appointed Archbishop Serebrenikov of Ekaterinoslav and Poltava as Exarch over the Metropolis of Moldova. In 1792, the Russian Orthodox Church Synod, in an anti-canonical act (due to the fact that the Metropolis of Moldova did not belong to the Russian Church Synod - since Tsar Peter the Great had abolished the Russian Patriarchate in 1721 and established a "Governing Synod" to lead the Russian Church), appointed Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni as Metropolitan of Moldova. In 1808, Tsar Alexander I appointed the same Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni as Exarch of the Romanian churches in Moldova, Wallachia, and Bessarabia, which he considered subordinated to the Russian Orthodox Church in St. Petersburg. Through this move, he aimed to sever the ties of the Romanian churches with the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which was under the Ottoman Empire (Păcurariu 1993, 53). The geopolitical objectives are clearly evident here, as this period marked the fifth Russo-Turkish war for dominance in Eastern Europe. However, Metropolitan Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni was forced to

retreat from Iași to Russia in 1812, along with the Russian occupation troops. After annexing Bessarabia in 1812, Tsar Alexander I established the Diocese of Chișinău and Hotin in 1813 in the newly conquered territories, thus uncanonically separating these territories from the Metropolis of Moldova. Apart from the first Metropolitan of this diocese, who was the Romanian Gavriil Bănulescu-Bodoni, all of his successors were Ukrainians or Russians. They gradually marginalized services and church books in the Romanian language, promoted the Russian language, appointed Russian or Ukrainian clergy to leadership positions, and thus began the Russification and denationalization of the church and population in Bessarabia. The most famous of these was the Russian Bishop Pavel Lebedev, who, despite overseeing a majority of Romanian believers, officially banned the Romanian language in 1871 in the few schools where it had survived. He also ordered the collection and burning of all Romanian-language books in monasteries (Păcurariu 1993, 74).

For example, a student who distributed Romanian books was deported to Siberia along with his father (Păcurariu 1993, 80). Thus began the official geopolitical instrumentalization of the Romanian Church in Bessarabia (now part of the Republic of Moldova). In 1918, when Bessarabia united with Romania, the Orthodox Church in Bessarabia severed its ties with the Russian Patriarchate and returned to the Romanian Church. However, in 1940 and 1944, amid the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union, the church in Bessarabia was once again forcibly and uncanonically attached to the Russian Patriarchate, continuing its geopolitical manipulation by Moscow.

This instrumentalization continues even today. For example, before crucial elections for the future of the Republic of Moldova, priests belonging to the Russian Patriarchate in Moldova were sent in groups to various “conferences” in Russia (Păduraru 2024), where they were taught how to manipulate their parishioners to make them vote according to Russia’s geopolitical interests. The current Metropolitan of Moldova, who belongs to the Russian Patriarchate, is a well-known exponent of Russia’s geopolitical interests in the region.

Because the religious identity of the Romanians in these territories conquered by the USSR was strong, for a faster assimilation of the inhabitants, but also for ideological reasons, in the early years of the Soviet occupation in Bessarabia, about 500 Romanian churches out of the more than 1,000 that were functioning before the occupation were closed. After 1958-1959, over 300 more Orthodox churches were closed, leaving fewer than 200 open. Many priests and monks, among those who had not sought refuge in what remained of Romania, were deported, sometimes along with their parishioners, to Siberia or Kazakhstan (Păcurariu 1993, 125). For a faster Russification, all correspondence with the diocesan center in Chișinău was done only in Russian, the religious books were available only in Russian, the religious objects as well, and instead of Romanian priests, Ukrainian or Russian priests were brought in, who served in Church Slavonic and introduced in the church choirs and hymns specific to the Russian church, removing the Romanian ones (Păcurariu 1993, 126).

3.2. Romanians in Ukraine

Northern Bukovina, today part of Ukraine, was first annexed by the Soviet Union from Romania in 1940, as “reparation” for the 22 years (1918-1940) during which Bessarabia was part of Romania. In Northern Bukovina and southern Bessarabia, territories annexed by the USSR from Romania and given to Ukraine, the religious life of the Romanians there was also geopolitically instrumentalized, and immediately after the annexation to the USSR in 1944, all the Romanian church administration that existed until then was dissolved. Instead of the Bukovina Metropolitanate, which was under the Romanian Patriarchate, the Soviets established an Episcopate based in Chernivtsi, part of the Ukrainian Exarchate, dependent on Moscow. The Episcopate of Cetatea Albă - Ismail and Hotin (Bălți) - were dissolved by the Soviets. Thus, all Romanian believers were forcibly moved under the Ukrainian Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate. Russian or Ukrainian hierarchs were appointed to lead them (Păcurariu 1993, 124-25).

Romanian priests and believers were arrested and deported by the Soviet Russians and Ukrainians, dozens of Romanian churches were closed, including the cathedrals in Chernivtsi and Ismail, and the former palace of the Romanian Metropolitanate in Chernivtsi was given to the Ukrainian university. Romanian parishes in southern Bessarabia, ceded by the Soviets to Ukraine, were forcibly transferred to the Odessa Metropolitanate, which, of course, also belonged to the Moscow Patriarchate (Păcurariu 1993, 126-27).

Here, briefly, is how, everywhere they annexed Romanian territories, the Russians and Soviets broke these communities away from the Romanian Church and forcibly attached them directly to the Moscow Patriarchate or the Ukrainian Church, which also belonged to Moscow. These practices were always accompanied by the prohibition or burning of religious books in Romanian, the closure of Romanian churches, the deportation of Romanian priests, and the replacement of Romanian priests with Ukrainian or Russian ones, with the aim of assimilating the Romanian population. Furthermore, we witnessed the confiscation of goods from Romanian churches and their allocation to Ukrainians or Russians. The goals for the past 200 years have been, including geopolitical ones, the erasure of the Romanian population from these territories and the elimination of any Romanian religious or other traces, as well as the invention of a parallel "Moldovan" identity, which would be distinct from the Romanian identity. This "Moldovan" identity would serve the geopolitical interests of Moscow (and until recently, also Ukraine), as stated by the very initiators of this artificial project in 1924.

Furthermore, seeing how these practices have historically unfolded for over 200 years whenever Romanian territories were annexed, it is not hard to make a connection with what is happening today. Recently, the Ukrainian mayor of Chernivtsi confiscated from Romanian believers in Ukraine a Chapel of the Metropolitans of Bukovina in the Central Cemetery, which historically belonged to Romanian believers, had been renovated at their expense, and where a Romanian priest officiated services in the Romanian language. The Romanian community in Ukraine complained about this abuse and asked for help from the Romanian officials (Ionescu 2024). Unfortunately, the response from the authorities in Romania to this abuse by the Ukrainian authorities was disappointing, the representatives of the Romanian Government largely making only promises or reiterating the arguments of the Ukrainians justifying the confiscation of the place of worship (Benea 2024).

4. The Importance of the Religious Factor for the Identity of Romanians in Ukraine, in the Republic of Moldova and in Romania. Comparison with Ukraine and Russia

The religious dimension has historically been a particularly important factor for the identity of the Romanian society and continues to be so. For example, in a 2018 study by the Pew Research Center, Romania was considered the most religious country in Europe (Evans and Baronavski 2018). Romanians in the Republic of Moldova, despite being subjected to Russian assimilation and the anti-religious ideological propaganda of the Soviet Union, still ranked 5th in religiosity in Europe. Among the former Soviet republics, only Armenia and Georgia had slightly higher scores than the Republic of Moldova (47%) (Evans and Baronavski 2018).

In contrast, Ukraine ranked only 11th in religiosity, with a score just slightly above half that of Romania (31% for Ukraine compared to 55% for Romania), while Russia ranked 20th in religiosity in Europe (17%) (Evans and Baronavski 2018). Only 22% of Ukrainians stated that religion was very important in their lives, whereas the same was true for 50% of Romanians and 42% of Moldovan citizens (Evans and Baronavski 2018) - despite the latter having spent nearly 50 years under an occupation that either used religion as a tool of anti-Romanian assimilation or fought ideologically against it. This highlights a similarity in religious attitudes between Romanians in Romania and those in the Republic of Moldova, in contrast to the way Ukrainians and Russians perceive religion.

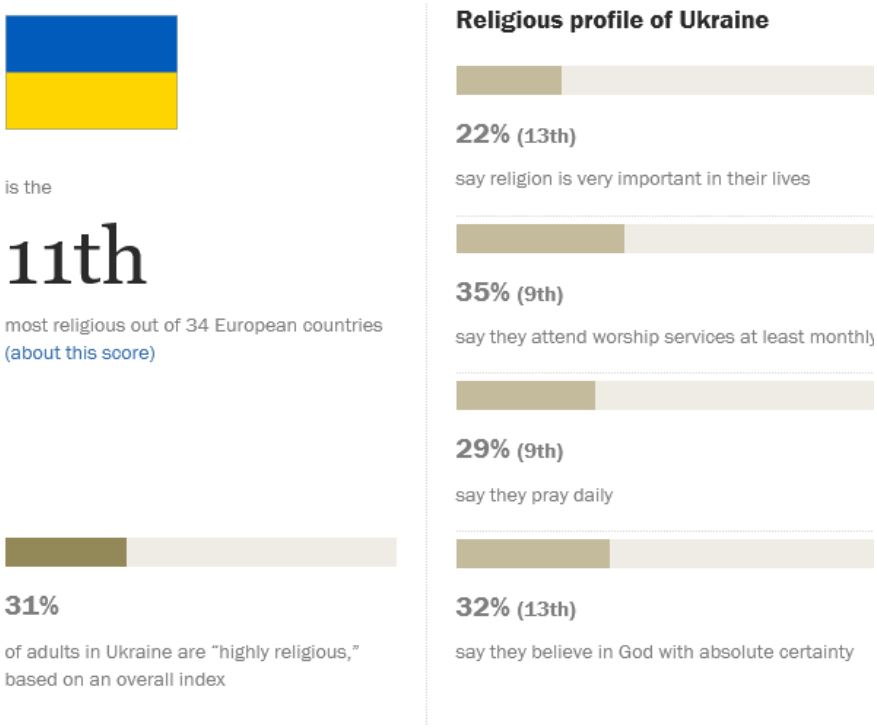

Figure no. 1: Religious profile of Ukraine (Evans and Baronavski 2018)

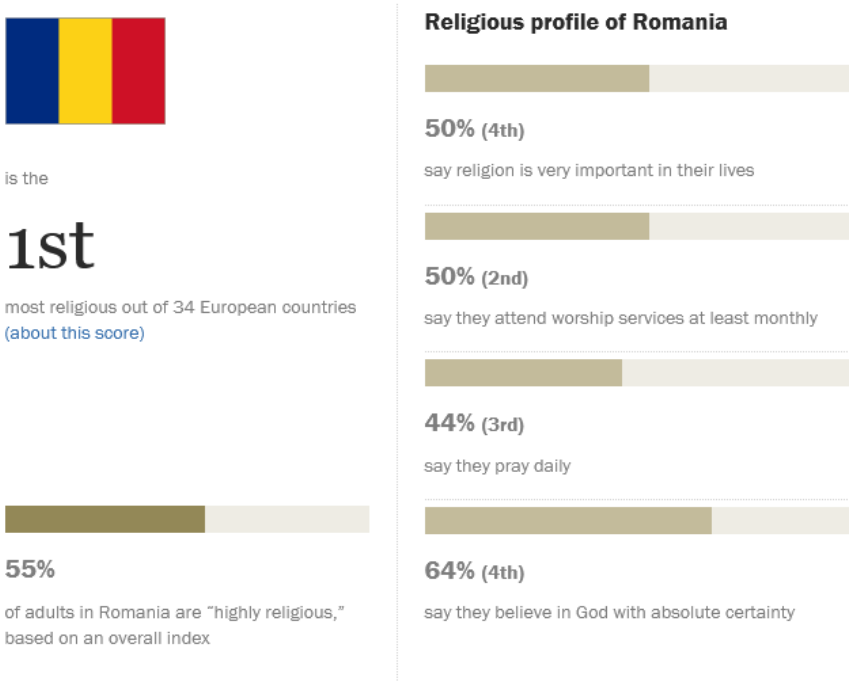

Figure no. 2: Religious profile of Romania (Evans and Baronavski 2018)

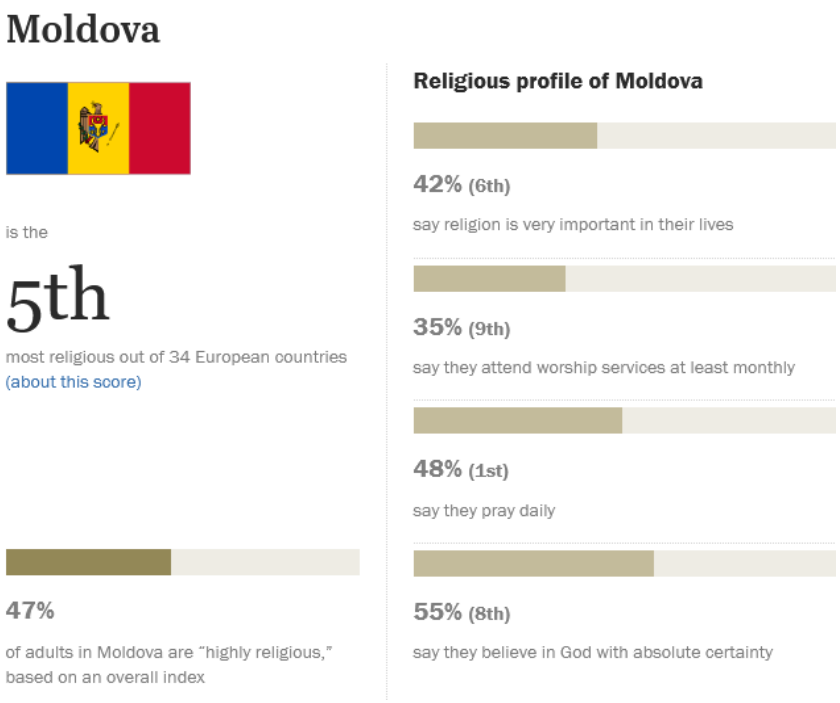

Figure no. 3: Religious profile of the Republic of Moldova (Evans and Baronavski 2018)

According to the 2022 Barometer of Religious Life in Romania, 83.1% of Romania's population considered themselves to be religious (ISPRI and CCSLARICS 2022, 6). Additionally, 66.3% of Romanian citizens had a high or very high level of trust in the church (ISPRI and CCSLARICS 2022, 3), making it the most trusted institution in the Romanian society. Regardless of denomination, 91.6% of Romanian citizens stated that they believe in God (ISPRI and CCSLARICS 2022, 8).

In the Republic of Moldova, very interestingly, two years before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, 74% of citizens trusted the church (Gațcan 2020). After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and considering both the implicit and explicit actions of the Metropolis of Chișinău in the Republic of Moldova - which is subordinate to the Russian Patriarchate and actively promotes Russia's interests in society - trust in the church dropped to 58% in 2023 (Institutul de Politici Publice and CBS Research 2023, 14). From a sociological perspective, assuming both surveys were accurately conducted, the only explanation that could account for such a significant decline in trust would be a dramatic internal or regional event. The most dramatic regional event was Russia's invasion of Ukraine, along with its frequent threats of invading the Republic of Moldova. Given that the largest church in the Republic of Moldova is affiliated with the Russian Patriarchate, it is easy to see how public distrust and fear of Russia's actions have also been directed toward its representatives on the ground - namely, the priests and churches under the Russian Patriarchate, which actively promote Russia's geopolitical interests in society.

All these surveys, on the one hand, highlight a significant difference between Russia and Ukraine compared to the two states, Romania and the Republic of Moldova, indicating a distinct approach to identity in relation to the religious dimension. On the other hand, data on religiosity among Romanians in Ukraine is harder to obtain. However, according to a survey conducted in 2022 by the Institute for Studies on Social Capital in Cernăuți, Ukraine, a relevant percentage of about 50% of Romanians in Ukraine participate in religious services, with an additional 29% declaring themselves Christians but not attending religious services (Gherman 2023, 10). This percentage of about 50% (or even more) among Romanians in Ukraine is significantly higher than the 35% of the

entire Ukrainian society that participates in church services, according to the Pew Research Center survey mentioned earlier.

Therefore, we have identified a significant difference in how Romanians in Ukraine relate to religion compared to the rest of the Ukrainian society. Furthermore, the percentage of Romanians in Ukraine who participate in religious services is identical to the 50% of Romanians in Romania who attend church services (Evans and Baronavski 2018).

According to a survey published in 2024, conducted by the same Institute for Studies on Social Capital in Cernăuți, Ukraine, 68.5% of the representatives of Romanians surveyed stated that they participate in religious services in churches led by the Metropolitan of Kyiv and All Ukraine (plus a few additional percentages for other denominations), while 23.3% declared that they are Christians but do not attend religious services (Gherman 2024, 13). Thus, we have a religiosity percentage even higher than that of 2023.

The impact of religiosity in Romanian society is not only reflected in the Romanian minority in Ukraine or the Romanians in the Republic of Moldova, but also affects the ethnic minorities within Romania. For example, the Hungarian minority in Romania is much more religious than Hungarians in Hungary, and in this regard, their perceptions are almost identical to those of the majority Romanians in Romania: "The study shows that 34 percent of Hungarians from Transylvania attend a religious service once a week, and 83 percent of them pray outside of mass at least once a week or even more often – compared to 81 percent of Romanians or 34 percent of Hungarians in Hungary" (Sarány 2020).

Thus, we have shown through several relevant surveys that Romanians in Romania, in Ukraine, and those in the Republic of Moldova have very similar religiosity scores and relate to the religious dimension in a similar, almost identical manner. Additionally, we observe a significant difference between how Romanians relate to religion, on the one hand, and how Ukrainians or Russians relate to religion, on the other hand.

5. Current Perspectives and Expectations of Romanians in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova Regarding the Romanian Orthodox Church

There is another aspect that is almost identical among Romanians in Ukraine and those in the Republic of Moldova: their desire to reconnect with the Romanian Orthodox Church, from which they were forcibly and uncanonically separated by the USSR in 1944. We have already given details regarding the uncanonical circumstances in which these Romanians were cut off from the Romanian Church, and here we will focus on their current aspirations. Today, they do not wish to belong to either the Moscow Patriarchate or the Ukrainian Church, as they were forced to do in the past.

5.1. Romanians in Ukraine

According to the 2023 survey mentioned earlier, 61% of Romanians in Ukraine would like the Romanian Orthodox Church to open churches in Ukraine for Romanian believers, while a huge percentage of 35% chose not to answer this question (Gherman 2023, 10). This 35% non-response rate is significant for a survey and can be explained either by religious attachment to their current hierarchs or by fear of answering the question. Only 4% of Romanians in Ukraine would not want the Romanian Orthodox Church to open churches there, which is an insignificant percentage (Gherman 2023, 10). It should be noted again that the majority of Romanian believers in Ukraine were forcibly and uncanonically separated from the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1944 by the Soviet Union, following the annexation of Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia by the Soviets.

According to the 2024 survey conducted by the same Institute for Studies on Social Capital, on religious indicators, we observe the same results as in the 2023 survey: a huge percentage of Romanians in Ukraine, 72.6% (more than 10% higher compared to 2023), support the Romanian Orthodox Church having access in Ukraine. Only 6% oppose it (compared to 4% in 2023), and 16% had not heard of the initiative (Gherman 2024, 13). Although they desire this, 71.2% of the Romanian

respondents fear that Ukrainian authorities might create certain obstacles to the establishment of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine (Gherman 2024, 14). They were right as, in late 2024, even though Romanian leaders in Ukraine met all regulations and requirements according to the Ukrainian law, they were denied the founding of a Romanian Church in Ukraine which would later be free to adhere to the Romanian Orthodox Church, thus denying them basic religious freedom. Even more, Eugen Pătraș, one of the leaders of the Romanian community in Ukraine and one of the founders of the initiative to re-open a Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine was consequently persecuted by the Ukrainian authorities and banned from entering Ukraine (Anton 2024).

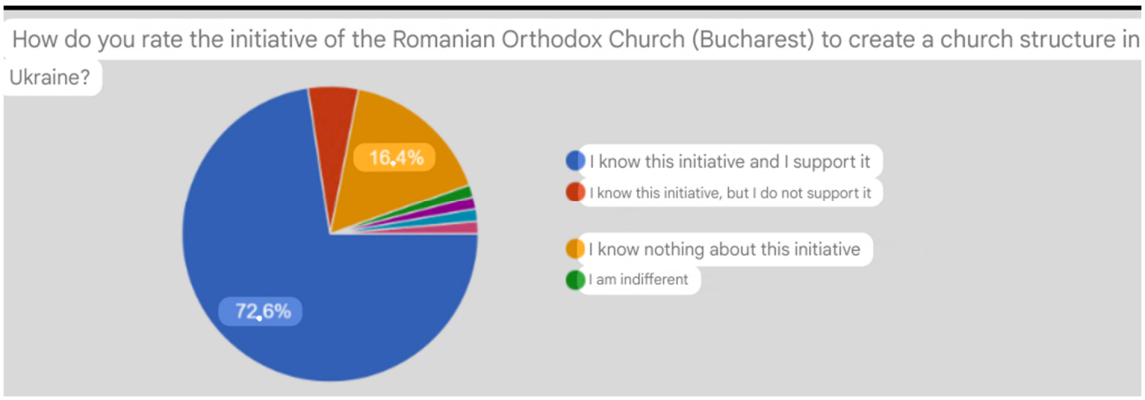

Figure no. 4: How Romanians in Ukraine feel about the initiative of the Romanian Orthodox Church to create a structure organization in Ukraine. (Gherman 2014, 13)

In 2024, when asked if the church in their city would decide to come under the authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, 80.8% of Romanian respondents in Ukraine stated that they would support this initiative, while 6.8% said they would oppose it (Gherman 2024, 14).

On April 30, 2024, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church announced its support for the establishment of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, subordinated to the Romanian Patriarchate, for believers who desire it. The Romanian Orthodox Church stated that it would "bless, encourage, and support the initiatives of Romanian Orthodox communities in Ukraine to restore communion with the Mother Church, the Romanian Patriarchate, by organizing themselves legally within the religious structure called the Romanian Orthodox Church in Ukraine" (Ursulean 2024). This was later denied by the Ukrainian institutions, without providing any valid explanation, and, as previously pointed out, one of the leaders of the Romanian minority in Ukraine was persecuted by the Ukrainian officials and banned from entering Ukraine.

5.2. Romanians in the Republic of Moldova

Romanians in the Republic of Moldova were also forcibly and uncanonically separated from the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1944, coinciding with the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviets, and were forcibly attached to the Russian Patriarchate. Today, in the Republic of Moldova, according to a survey from early 2024, 63.9% of citizens would like that Patriarch Daniel, the leader of the Romanian Orthodox Church, visit the Republic of Moldova (Jigău 2024, 35). Similar to the survey in Ukraine, quite a large percentage, 20.7%, did not answer the question (Jigău 2024, 35). Only 15.4% responded that they would not want Patriarch Daniel of the Romanian Orthodox Church to visit the Republic of Moldova (Jigău 2024, 35).

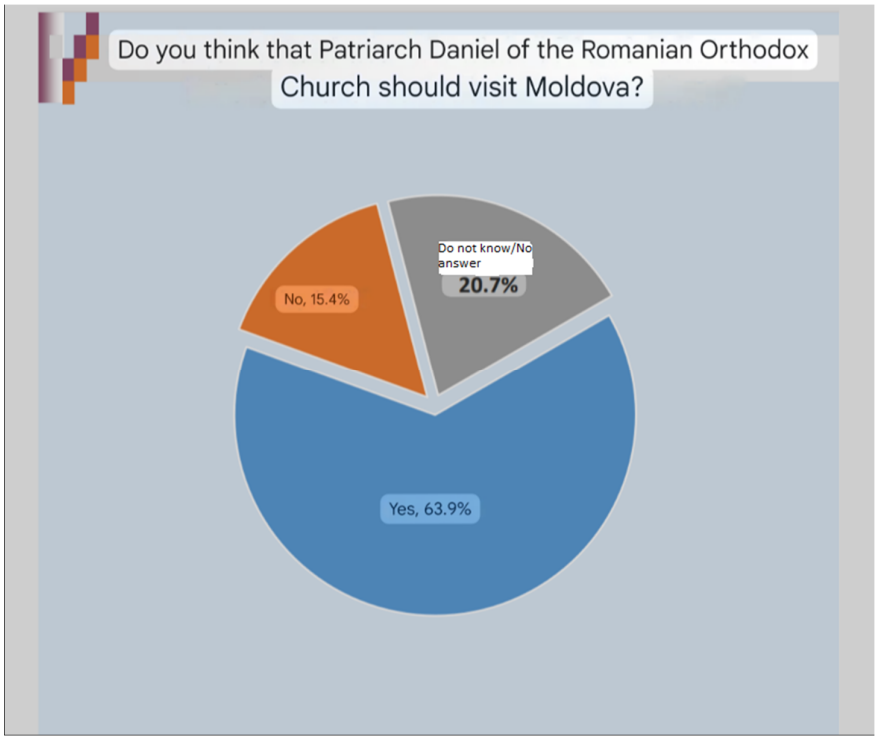

Figure no. 5: The opinion of the citizens of The Republic of Moldova regarding a potential visit of Daniel, Patriarch of The Romanian Orthodox Church (Jigău 2024, 35).

Interestingly, the 15.4% of those who do not wish for Romanian Patriarch Daniel to visit the Republic of Moldova is almost identical to the approximately 14.4% of national minorities in the Republic of Moldova, according to the 2024 census (Biroul Național de Statistică al Republicii Moldova 2025). These national minorities are largely the product of the deportation practices performed by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Empire, which deported Romanian population deep inside the Russian/Soviet Empire, and in exchange brought in population of different ethnic groups. These practices significantly altered the demographics of the Republic of Moldova.

We observe a real desire for rapprochement with the Romanian Orthodox Church from both Romanians in Ukraine and those in the Republic of Moldova, who were forcibly separated from the Romanian Church. While the Romanian Orthodox Church has acknowledged these realities and issued a statement expressing its willingness to accept Romanian communities in Ukraine, should they desire to join, as well as re-establishing the Metropolis of Bessarabia in the Republic of Moldova (which was abusively dissolved by the Soviets), the political representatives of the Romanian state have not shown signs of understanding this desire of the Romanians around the borders, the historical repair they seek, and the communion with the Romanian Church. Furthermore, the representatives of the Romanian state must understand the threats these Romanians face from the Ukrainian Church and the Moscow Patriarchate, which are playing geopolitically on this religious dimension and simultaneously instrumentalizing it for geopolitical purposes.

In short, Romanians in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova have been the subject of geopolitical instrumentalization on the religious dimension by the Tsarist Empire, the Soviet Empire, Russia, and Ukraine. Today, they are once again caught in the midst of such a geopolitical struggle over religion between Ukraine and the Russian Federation. The only way they can escape this instrumentalization is to return to the Romanian Orthodox Church, from which they were forcibly, abusively, and uncanonically separated by the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union through their annexations of Romanian territories. However, precisely against the backdrop of the geopolitical

instrumentalization of religion by Ukraine and the Russian Federation, this rapprochement with the Romanian Orthodox Church, which surveys show that the Romanians desire, *cannot happen without political support* from Romania. In other words, where geopolitical aggression and political pressure have been and continue to be exerted on Romanian believers and leaders of their community, the counteraction cannot happen without the political involvement on Romania's part. Ecclesiastical canonical arguments have never had any weight against Russian or Soviet aggression and will not have any weight today against Ukraine or Russia without Romania's political support. Romania should guarantee the reintegration of Romanians in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova into the Romanian Orthodox Church, if they wish so. And the surveys clearly show that they desire this.

6. Present Weaponization of Religion – Romanians in Ukraine and in The Republic of Moldova - between *Russification* and *Ukrainization*

Currently, the majority of Romanians in Ukraine belong to the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, which was under the Patriarchate of Moscow. The reason is very simple, highlighted even by Romanian analysts in Ukraine: Moscow allowed Romanians to participate in religious services held in the Romanian language (for Moscow's own geopolitical interests), while the Ukrainian Church did not allow that, being more "national" (Vălică 2022). Today, there are about 115 churches in Ukraine where services are held in the Romanian language.

In 2018, Ukraine made considerable efforts with the Patriarchate of Constantinople and obtained the right to have its own Patriarchy. This move created disturbances in the Orthodox world and deepened the crisis between the Patriarchate of Constantinople and the one in Moscow. It also caused divisions among the believers in Ukraine, split between three religious entities. Recently, the Parliament in Kiev has approved the outlawing of the Metropolis that belonged to the Patriarchate of Moscow. Perhaps the reason for doing so was because the Moscow Patriarchate has consistently supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine. All of these actions have clear geopolitical connotations.

The fact that currently, in Ukraine the Romanian minority is not allowed to freely associate religiously (being denied rights deriving from the Ukrainian law) is just another example of weaponization of religion against Romanian ethnics in Ukraine. Ukrainian politicians do not want Moscow to keep weaponizing religion in Ukraine − rightfully so −, yet they refuse the right of the Romanians to break free from the Russian Orthodox Church and adhere to the Romanian Orthodox Church. The Ukrainian political class wants to coerce Romanians in Ukraine to adhere to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which has "Ukrainization" and building a "Ukrainian World" as one of its key objectives (mirroring the Russian concept of the 'Russian World'): in 2024, "on February 10, the head of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, Epiphanius Dumenko, while in Chernivtsi, launched a secular-political concept - a geopolitical concept, we might say - called the 'Ukrainian World'. He stated that from that moment on, his church would build a 'Ukrainian World', presenting it as a response and mirror image to the Moscow – imperial concept of the 'Russian World'" (Cubreacov 2024). "Ukrainization" also means confiscating churches where services are being held in the Romanian language and replacing the Romanian language with Ukrainian. Priorly, there was provided the example of the confiscation of the Chapel of the Metropolitans of Bukovina (Ionescu 2024), but very recently, in 2025, four more churches are in the process of being confiscated by Ukrainian officials from Romanian believers. The ethnic Romanians in Storojineț have complained about the attempt by Ukrainian officials to confiscate two of the churches where services are being held in the Romanian language (one of them hosts the tomb of one of the most beloved historical figures of the Romanian community in Ukraine, Iancu Flondor) (Gherman 2025). In Adâncata (Hliboca), another area with a significant Romanian minority, the Romanian community is complaining about another attempt by the Ukrainian church and officials to confiscate two more churches where services are being held in the Romanian language (but also in Ukrainian) (BucPress 2025). Needless to say that these practices are a stark reminder of the practices of the Soviet Union

against Romanian believers and churches, which were mentioned earlier, and raise concerns and fear among the Romanian minority in Ukraine.

"Ukrainization" is a geopolitical concept and a set of policies proudly implemented and exhibited by top Ukrainian politicians and it is not directed exclusively against Russian influence, as one may think. It is directed, covertly or openly, against all other ethnic groups in Ukraine. Statements such as "A new stage of Ukrainization has begun in Ukraine. The mild approach has been replaced with an offensive one" (Vaskovska 2024) coming from top Ukrainian officials have rightfully been particularly worrying for all ethnic minorities in Ukraine, including Romanians.

Let us also illustrate other examples of statements regarding Ukrainization: "I have no doubt that Ukrainian is the language of our victory, the language of our offensive, and the language of an unconquered nation"; "Now, I see nothing but offensive Ukrainization, which has replaced the mild one", "Offensive Ukrainization involves strict control over compliance with the language law in all spheres of public life throughout the territory of Ukraine without exception" (Khoroshchak and Krechetova 2024), and so on.

Romanians in Ukraine have been complaining about explicit Ukrainization of education policies, meant to extinguish ethnic minorities' languages starting from school, with projects including obligation of pupils to speak only the Ukrainian language in schools, even during breaks (Popescu 2024). It is hard to believe that such policies can be conceived and accepted in the democratic Europe of the 21st century, yet here they are.

Again, the geopolitical implications of such Ukrainization policies are evident. Both ironically and tragically enough, in the 20th century, in USSR, when Russian and Ukrainian officials were trying to assimilate Romanian ethnics in the so-called Soviet Socialist Republic of Moldova, they had the same concern – *Ukrainization*. For example, on June 15, 1927, the Moldavian Regional Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party (PCU) submitted a memorandum to the Commission for Ukrainianization under the Political Bureau of the Ukrainian Communist Party, saying that it had "to complete the Ukrainization" (Țîcu 2021 (8)) performed by the Ukrainian Communist Party in the Soviet republic. The same memo went on to boast that "Ukrainization in the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic hardly lags behind the general pace of Ukrainization in Ukraine" (Țîcu 2021 (8)).

Similarly, as mentioned, the actions of the Moscow Patriarchate in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova have been manifesting geopolitical connotations as well. For example, in 2024, numerous priests from the Metropolis of Chișinău and All Moldova, belonging to the Russian Patriarchate, went in turn to various training sessions in Moscow to be prepared to influence their parishioners back home to boycott a pro-European referendum and vote for pro-Russian parties in the 2024 elections (Păduraru 2024). The Metropolis of Chișinău and All Moldova, belonging to the Russian Patriarchate, has historically continuously supported the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as well as all Russian narratives and geopolitical initiatives, especially those directed against Romania. All of these recent actions, as well as previous ones, starting with the very establishment of this Metropolis under Russia, have had obvious geopolitical connotations.

In essence, the geopolitics of religions refers to political factors that try to instrumentalize religious elements in order to achieve geopolitical goals, just as we see in the confrontation between Russia and Ukraine, but also in the actions of the Russian Federation in The Republic of Moldova, and in the actions of the Ukrainian officials directed against the Romanian minority in Ukraine.

Moreover, as it was shown, when the "Moldovan" identity and the so-called "Moldovan language" was created in the USSR in 1924, the initiators of this effort highlighted, even in their programmatic document, the geopolitical dimension of this cultural invention, which was supposed to create advantages and pave the way for the USSR's new conquests towards the center of Europe, the Balkans, and the dismantling of Romania by at least separating Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. One of the Soviet promoters even strongly argued that "the Moldavian nation is not a question of geography, it is not a question of academic science, it is a question of politics, and a question of class struggle" (Țîcu 2021 (7)).

After Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina were occupied by the USSR, the establishment of the Metropolitanate of Chișinău and All Moldova under the Russian Patriarchy followed, which was meant to solidify the geopolitical conquest of these Romanian regions. The Russian Federation still uses the Moscow Patriarchy and its supporters geopolitically today, attempting to maintain or strengthen its influence in both the Republic of Moldova, Ukraine, and other regions.

Bessarabia had been previously occupied territorially and religiously by Russia between 1812 and 1918, a period during which the Russian Church again played a geopolitical role, attempting the denationalization and assimilation, the Russification of the Romanians in Bessarabia, today's Republic of Moldova, as well as Budjak, which is now part of Ukraine. As already illustrated, an emblematic episode is the account according to which a Russian bishop, appointed by Moscow in Bessarabia, in order to accelerate the denationalization and Russification of the Romanians, gathered all the religious books in the Romanian language and burnt them to heat his episcopal palace.

We must understand that the elimination through assimilation, Russification, Ukrainization, and denationalization of an entire population from a territory, to the advantage of another dominant population, clearly has a geopolitical dimension. Similarly, maintaining and defending the identity of a population against such aggressions has a geopolitical dimension. In other words, today, preserving the linguistic, religious, and cultural identity of Romanians in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova must also have geopolitical and strategic importance for Romania, besides its obvious humanitarian dimension.

7. Present and Future Consequences and Impact upon Regional Security

The religious dimension is essential for the Romanians in Romania, Ukraine, and in the Republic of Moldova. No strategy of any state can ignore such an important identity component for its own society and for its co-nationals in neighboring states. Moreover, the geopolitical component of religion in this region is significant, with Moscow and Kiev engaged in a war on the ground but also in a religious confrontation against each other. And this religious confrontation has geopolitical stakes just like the war waged in the trenches, with both Ukraine and Russia trying to expand or maintain their influence over Romanian believers.

The 2024 initiative of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church (Ursulean 2024) responded to the requests and needs of the Romanian believers in Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova and promised to build a church in Ukraine, belonging to the Romanian Patriarchate, where Romanians that lived there could freely attend services in the Romanian language. The initiative is expected to be a complicated one, especially since representatives of the Romanian State do not seem at all capable or willing to exert pressure on the government in Kiev as they should. In September 2024, in response to petitions and requests from Romanians in Ukraine after a historic Romanian chapel in the Central Cemetery in Chernivtsi was confiscated by the local Ukrainian authorities, the representatives of the Romanian Government, aside from general promises, have merely reiterated the arguments of the Ukrainian side, not the Romanians' (Benea 2024). The Romanian Orthodox Church, although not an institution with such responsibilities, has played a more determined role on the external identity-geopolitical front than the representatives of the Romanian state.

That being said, for Romania to ignore the geopolitical importance of the Romanian believers in the neighboring countries and the significance of this dimension for their identity and the Romanian society alike would be an error that is impossible to justify. Regardless of the religious affiliation or the lack of any religious affiliation of any representative, analyst, or expert in Romania, realistically and pragmatically, no one can deny the significant importance of this religious dimension for the identity of Romanian society, for the Romanians in neighboring states, and for regional geopolitics.

This particular issue, if not resolved, will degrade relations between Romania and Ukraine, will create distrust between the two societies, but also between each of the two societies and their own respective state and institutions. And all of that may happen because Romanian and Ukrainian

officials did not want or were not able to responsibly and democratically resolve these sensitive issues. Russia, as a hostile actor, who is already implementing sustained narratives regarding these issues, stands to gain significant present and long-term influence if these issues are not properly addressed and if Romanian ethnics in Ukraine will not have religious freedom to adhere to the Romanian Orthodox Church, as the surveys have shown that they wish to do.

Conclusions

Throughout the paper, it was highlighted that, in order to counter Russian hybrid narratives and threats, decision makers in Romania need to properly and responsibly address the religious factor for Romanians in Ukraine, in the Republic of Moldova and in Romania. Basically, this would mean more institutional and political support for a dimension which is under hybrid attacks. These hybrid attacks benefit from political and institutional support from adverse entities, and ordinary citizens perceive that this religious dimension is not being defended - neither against Russian narratives and policies, neither against Ukrainian ones, nor against radical ideological narratives and policies at home, which disregard Romania's cultural and societal values.

It would also mean to politically support the religious initiatives of Romanians in Ukraine and in the Republic of Moldova who desire a rapprochement with the Romanian Orthodox Church that they were violently separated from by Russia and the USSR.

What is more, it would mean more political support for the Romanian Church in the Republic of Moldova (The Metropolis of Bessarabia) which has been facing and is continuously facing even violent persecutions and repercussions from institutions, politicians and the Russian Church which is still the main church over there.

On the home front, it would mean considering the interests and concerns of the Romanian society and decreasing the push for extreme ideological policies and narratives which have fractured our society and have allowed Russian narratives to spread.

Ultimately, both abroad and at home it would simply mean listening to what the real concerns of one's own society are, following adequate narratives and policies and denying Moscow the tools to further weaken and divide it.

Romania is a border nation, at the frontiers of NATO and Europe, and if we are to properly defend Europe and NATO, then we have to unite our own society, to consolidate it, we have to listen to its concerns and address the issues that our society holds to be most important. Whether some people like it or not, religion is one of these key-factors, as it was shown in this paper. Neglecting such a key-factor for our society has already weakened it and has allowed Russian hybrid threats to proliferate.

Failing to properly address these issues, concerns and interests of the Romanian society at home and abroad will further compromise local politicians and will alienate Romanian communities abroad, to the explicit benefit of Russia and other states. Not to mention the fact that failing to defend basic human rights, such as religious freedom, definitely compromises Romanian decision makers and institutions. This will have a double negative impact - *internally*, it will divide the society even more, and distrust in critical institutions will further increase, allowing hybrid threats to proliferate, while *externally* Romania's interests, prestige and security will dramatically suffer.

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