
Political Christianity in Contemporary Romania

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Abstract

The electoral campaign for the Romanian presidential elections at the end of 2024 exposed vulnerabilities in the national security system that were successfully exploited by state and non-state actors. In the present paper, I will argue that, in addition to the technical and organizational gaps that favored the influence of a significant percentage of voters, the human factor played a special role, as propaganda in the physical and cyberspace attracted the majority of the vulnerable electorate by promoting common values that were shaped in accordance with the psychological needs of voters. The most important factor in this context was the promotion of Christianity, which, in reality, proved to be a political agenda disguised as a religious one. This approach on the part of politicians is not innovative in the context of international security, given the fact that, for example, in the modern era, the Islamist discourse resonated in the Islamic world, and the Zionist discourse is promoted among Jewish individuals.

Keywords:

Religion; Propaganda; Politics; Political Religion; Mass Psychology;
Exploitation of Vulnerabilities; Cyberspace; Security.

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Introduction

The involvement of religion in political matters, especially when used to influence the results of electoral campaigns, is a common practice in territories inhabited by Muslim and Jewish voters. However, the elements exploited in such societies to achieve electoral success have proven to be equally effective in a European society that is predominantly Christian-Orthodox. Therefore, in the present paper, we will consider relevant political and social aspects and concepts that have been documented in Romania's eastern proximity and which have directly or indirectly influenced the decision-making capacity of Romanian voters during the presidential election campaigns of 2024 and 2025. In the following pages, we will observe general analyses regarding the importance of including faith in a political position, religious and traditional values, and subsequently, we will observe this approach applied in a rhetoric formulated in accordance with the expectations and validation of the fears of the target audience.

Eastern examples: political Islam (Islamism) and political Judaism (Zionism)

Islam is the religion that has been most visibly manipulated to conform to and serve political aims. In this sense, the concept that we call "Islamism" in Romanian and English was developed, which claims to promote a political order inspired by the will of God, opposing popular sovereignty (Tibi 2012, 1). In publications written in Arabic, the name *al-'islām as-syāsīy* ("the political Islam") is used to highlight the religious pretexts imposed on political actions and speeches.

Regarding Judaism, the political implications that have been attributed to it since the end of the 19th century have contributed to defining the Zionist movement. It envisages the creation and expansion of a Jewish state, but without being based on the values promoted by the Jewish religion (Moskowitz 1917, 3) and which, paradoxically, are used to justify military and governmental actions on the occupation of the Palestinian territories (Saleem 2025).

However, Christianity has not been assigned a distinct term that would distinguish its political attribution from its religious connotation, which is why we will use the name political Christianity in the following analysis.

Russell Kirk (1953) proposes the idea that conservatism involves spiritual and moral regeneration together with the reconfiguration of the ethical system and religious sanctions. However, the author distinguishes this definition from political Christianity, arguing that such reform cannot be social or included in a government program (Kirk 1953, 539). David McLellan (1997) resumes this observation, adding that simplistic political solutions are avoided by 20th century's conservatism, which specifically aims to restore a just government defined by respect, discipline and

social order, redefines the phenomenon of the proletariat, opposes “armed doctrine” and ideologies by means of the restoration of traditionalist political philosophy and mentality and “territorial democracy” ([McLellan 1997](#), 168-70).

A contemporary view belongs to Jonathan Leeman ([2016](#)), according to which political success depends on demonstrating high levels of belief; it is expected that such rhetoric will be exposed to contradictions and even failure, but the main purpose of such an approach in political contexts is to convince the receiving audience of the resilience with which the “truth” is promoted and uttered ([Leeman 2016](#), 384).

Therefore, in the context of a socio-political landscape where voters are unfetteredly exposed to digital content with a political substratum or that may acquire a political, respectively electoral, character, political Christianity represents the shaping of political discourse and approach in accordance with the religious, spiritual, and ethical expectations of the electorate.

Russia in the modern Eastern geopolitical context

In a psychological analysis applied to the political discourses of Russian leaders, Andrei P. Tsygankov ([2014](#)) compares the relationship between Russia and the West to that between brothers, in which emotions such as fear, hope, and frustration are involved. These emotions are identified by the author in the speeches of state leaders, reflecting the ways in which Russia relates to the West and the support it expects in its offensive foreign policy approach. However, tensions between brothers can escalate to severe conflicts and even fratricidal ones, and the author considers the attack on Ukraine to be such an illustration of the tensions between Russia and the West ([Tsygankov 2014](#)).

From the Western perspective, Russia falls more into the Eastern space, which is in turn perceived as dominated by extremism, conservatism, and totalitarian regimes, all of which represent serious issues for the West, especially for the United States of America. After the violent events of the “Arab Spring”, Russia’s actions to arm radical regimes in the Middle East in order to combat the USA’s presence in this space subsequently led to the reduction of Russia’s influence in the Eastern space and contributed to Russia’s conviction that the USA, together with its allies, supports Islamist expansion in the Middle East ([Rafique, Farooq and Amin 2021](#), 171-4). Geographical proximity may, in turn, be a favorable aspect for Russia’s continued involvement in Middle Eastern political and military affairs ([Rumer 2019](#), 2-3), while the position it speculates is that of a supporter of Islam and an ally of the Middle East against the USA ([Blank 2015](#), 73).

Although the central subject of this paper is not Islam, I consider its progressive popularity among Russian citizens oriented towards Islamist concepts relevant, in

order to interpret the promotion of extremist ideologies that are meant to attract numerous followers.

One of the categories that sociologist Andrey Ignatyev identifies among Russian Christians converted to Islam is that of “white Muslims”, in which elements of Islam are combined with Russian nationalism, neo-paganism, racism, and/or radical leftist doctrines (Goble 2009). In addition to the opportunity to adopt new attitudes, individuals converted to Islam may also have financial motivations; in a state threatened by poverty and unemployment, Salafist Islam offers financial assistance, jobs, and protection, and conversions often take place even in prisons (Ibrahimov 2015).

These examples reveal the consequences of distrusting the rhetoric, vision, and usual values that citizens may find inadequate, becoming attracted to new perspectives that either seem to be more relevant to pre-existing beliefs or offer the opportunity for targeted individuals to contribute to achieving a supposed justice. Social background can be a decisive factor in shaping vulnerabilities that can then be exploited through an approach in which undeniable elements – such as those of a religious nature – are used to achieve major political goals.

Regarding the tense relationship with Romania, a declassified report by the Foreign Intelligence Service mentions Russia’s perception according to which Romania “provokes and threatens Russia’s security through its hosting of NATO and American military potential, wants to solve its economic problems at the expense of Russia and represents a direct competitor in the Republic of Moldova” (Serviciul de Informații Externe 2024).

Orthodox Christianity, nationalism, or political extremism?

In contrast to the offensive purposes of political religions described above, the ideology that I call political Christianity in this paper is more of a tool that amounts to psychological manipulation.

It is therefore relevant to emphasize the boundaries between religion and politics, taking into account, in the first phase, observations identified in international contexts. Firstly, we will consider Robert Wuthnow’s (1994) view that the sacred represents a fundamental concept that exceeds all human capabilities and is distinct from religion, which, in turn, represents a human product favorable to institutions, organizations, professional roles, and finances (Wuthnow 1994, 2). Thus, Marcela Cristi (2001) identifies “civil religion” as a determining factor in generating influential symbols of national solidarity that encourage American citizens to achieve national goals and aspirations (Cristi 2001, 2).

Secondly, the involvement of the sacred as an argument in support of issues related to the good organization of the state is notable. In this sense, Wuthnow (1994)

defines civil religion as “the use of the language of God in reference to the nation” (Wuthnow 1994, 130). Cristi (2001) complements this point of view by adding that, like other secular ideologies, civil religion may attempt to impose a collective identity and legitimize an already existing political order (Cristi 2001, 3). This concept, in which divinity plays a decisive role in formulating arguments and approaches, is present even in the rhetoric of contemporary Romanian politicians, and this factor is joined by other psychological and sociolinguistic elements to concretize the strategy of acquiring the attention and trust of the target audience.

However, this analogy is not new for the Romanian socio-political reality; thus, in 1930, Nae Ionescu considered that, in order to be able to call oneself Romanian, an individual must place himself in a relationship of “belonging and participation at the same time, towards a collective reality, the nation; which surpasses you, but which constitutes the very sufficient reason for your existence as a Romanian, Turk or Englishman. This collective reality is, by its nature, a spiritual unity; and by its organic structure, a community of love”. In addition, the author considers that the attitude towards divinity “is an integral part of the intimate structure of the nation” (Ionescu 1990, 199-200).

The analogies between religions and viruses that some researchers formulate, such as D. C. Dennett (2006), R. Dawkins (1976), and S. Blackmore (1999; 2010), are supported by Jonathan Haidt (2012), who concludes that religion gives rise to illusions that can significantly affect cognitive abilities, including the justification of certain actions or membership in various groups to which believers belong (Haidt 2012, 276-80).

In his study of American politicians’ discourse, Robert Harvey notes the observation that the quality of being a patriot is the opposite of the status of a terrorist (Harvey 2025, 32). Therefore, the fact that individuals who do not have the obvious quality of patriots are classified as terrorists represents, for the first category, a confirmation that the direction they have chosen is the right one.

This reference to patriotism also seems to be included in Nae Ionescu’s statement that “to be Romanian, not a good Romanian, but simply Romanian, means to be Orthodox as well” (Ionescu 1990, 201). Such a belief, whether or not it is explicitly communicated to the population, implies the reverse, according to which not promoting Orthodox values means not having the quality of being Romanian. Therefore, by repeatedly including in an electoral discourse the importance of the attributes of being Romanian and Orthodox, there is a risk of triggering the fear of non-conformity and even betrayal of secular and family values.

This approach reveals the involvement of the culture of fear, which, according to the explanation of David L. Altheide (2006), is concretized by political actors in order to achieve various objectives, among which are political power and symbolic

domination (Altheide 2006, 18). As a result, a political discourse built around national and religious values not only satisfies the need to guarantee the involvement of these familiar elements in an electoral scenario but also proposes the guarantee of an ethical, fair, and patriotic choice.

According to another conclusion presented in Haidt's study (2012), an important aspect that religion and politics have in common is the ability to arouse the broad concern of individuals with concepts that exceed their understanding and, consequently, to unite them in groups where they can cooperate to discover and approve often convenient conclusions (Haidt 2012, 299).

Addressing a disappointed and connected people

Fear of the unknown represents one of the specific elements of crowd psychology, according to Elias Canetti's conclusions (1960, 15). This human characteristic, seen as a vulnerability, can justify the target audience's tendency to resonate with a discourse in which familiar aspects and values are highlighted.

Therefore, the repetitive mention and emphasis of concepts, events, or periods in history can be introduced into a discursive context in order to concretize the conviction of the possibility of returning to a past often admired with nostalgia and admiration by the target audience. In combination with a calm and apparently empathetic approach, such a possibility of regaining the supposed glory of the past can end up being perceived as a mission by the target community and, in addition, gives the speaker in question a particularly powerful, righteous and – as it is called in the Romanian press reports from the end of 2024 – “messianic” allure (Guță 2024). Consequently, the invalidation of such a character by a collective majority can be perceived as a particular injustice by his followers.

The attractive image that a candidate can thus form during an electoral campaign not only creates a picture of the future that voters consider possible, but also manages to remedy, apparently, errors or other aspects of the political class that have aroused dissatisfaction and frustration over time among the target audience.

The impact of the calm tone and the emotions provoked by the discursive content has been analyzed since before our era by ancient philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Cicero. The passage reproduced below is taken from the treatise published by Marcus Tullius Cicero in 55 BCE and includes observations of some of the most important elements for the persuasive character of a speech, which are valid even in the current era:

“But the most important thing in advising on matters of state is a knowledge of the constitution of the state, while the essential thing in persuasive speech is a knowledge of the national character; and as this frequently changes, it is often necessary to modify the style of speech also; and although the fundamental

nature of eloquence practically does not vary, yet, considering the exalted dignity of the nation, the supreme importance of politics, and the violent passions of the multitude, it would seem that an oratorical style of a grandeur and brilliance above the average is necessary; and the greater part of a speech must sometimes be directed to stirring the emotions of the audience, by exhortation or by some form of reminder, either to hope, or fear, or desire, or ambition, and often also to bringing them back to folly, anger, or hope, and to injustice, envy, or cruelty” (Cicero 1947, 453-455).

In order to build a profile that attracts the admiration and trust of the public from the first contact, the persuasive attitude must follow aspects such as those listed by Cicero (1947) and, in the case of an electoral competition, it is necessary to know the patterns of the speeches and approaches of the opposing candidates, in order to identify the points that they have not emphasized and which, in the appropriate context, may constitute an advantage. For example, belonging to various political parties, presenting intentions to carry out important projects, and offering goods or food during electoral campaigns represent three of the aspects present in the approach of the most voted candidates in democratic Romania.

Applying the concept that Cicero (1947) calls “knowledge of the national character”, a candidate can have an innovative approach both through the form and content of the speech, and the environment in which it manifests itself. In this sense, it is relevant that changes in society and the ever-growing access to technology and social networks require an approach adapted to current reality, in such a way as not to insist on novel elements that could intimidate the audience, but at the same time to select only favorable aspects from the past.

In rhetorical approaches, the discursive element that is meant to arouse various emotions among the receiving audience is called *pathos*. The other two means by which the affective dimension of an audience can be influenced are called by Aristotle, *ethos* and *logos*.

According to Aristotle’s observation, the trust that a speaker inspires “must come from the discourse itself and not from any preconceived idea about the speaker’s character”, thus outlining the definition of the concept of *ethos*, while *pathos* has the role of “transposing the listener into a certain mental state”, and *logos* constitutes the discourse itself along with “what it demonstrates or seems to demonstrate” (Aristotel n.d., 1356a).

Displaying an empathetic temperament conveys the appearance of an intention to listen and understand the needs behind “challenging” behaviors, transforming the tension in communication into compassion. This approach helps people feel understood, encouraging cooperation and calm, and creating a more positive atmosphere. Over time, this builds trust and mutual respect for future interactions (Hourihan 2023). Empathy can play an important role in creating a charismatic

image that helps gain the trust of interlocutors due to their natural need to feel listened to (Sadik 2023, 24-69).

Therefore, gaining the trust of the target audience is one of the goals that a candidate needs to achieve in order to develop his or her number of supporters. Such a strategy can be especially effective in a society where empathetic communication is generally deficient. This is among the consequences of the communist regime in Romania on the collective mentality, given the lack of trust and constant skepticism felt by citizens, contributing to the formation of a legacy that favors tradition, religion, resistance to change, conformism, and emotional conservatism to the detriment of self-determination and civic involvement (Şimon, Fărcaşiu and Dragomir 2022).

In turn, the redefinition of identity is part of what Lucian Boia (2011) calls “communist psychology”. This involves the abandonment of individualism in favor of a collective identity whose major advantage is the assumption of a personality “stronger and richer than that of the old man” (Boia 2011, 135).

Wuthnow (1994) endorses such a perspective in his study of “public religion”, considering that the public represents an entity without a developed sense of self and which denotes openness and accessibility (Wuthnow 1994, 9). A relevant example analyzed in Haidt’s study (2012) concerns the demonstrations of American football fans, whose role is more to create and strengthen communities than to express their support for a team (Haidt 2012, 272). Furthermore, as Canetti (1960) concludes, the fear of not being reached can be diminished only by joining a crowd, especially if it shares similar values to those of the individual in question (Canetti 1960, 15). Last but not least, Emile Durkheim (2008) notes that collective representations reveal the result of extensive cooperation in space and time, in which numerous minds unite to join their ideas and feelings (Durkheim 2008, 16).

Therefore, for an electoral discourse that on the surface supports traditional and traditionalist values, the target audience will be made up of individuals who can be convinced that they are understood and that they will be united in a majority community governed by the only correct values and beliefs.

Human vulnerability in cyberspace: the case of Romanian users

Exploiting the sensitive points of Romanian users did not require bot farms that violated the operating policies of the platforms involved, but rather relied on human interventions, following an efficiently calculated strategy (Serviciul Român de Informații 2024). The constant expression of preferences for content with nationalist, patriotic, or Christian-Orthodox themes has favored the natural popularization of malicious accounts.

Social engineering tactics can also be effective in electoral campaigns, which Christopher Hadnagy (2010) summarizes as “the actions of manipulating a person to take an action that may or may not be in the interest of the target. This may include obtaining information, access, or determining the target to take a certain action” (Hadnagy 2011, 10).

Cyberspace and especially social networks offer unrestricted freedom of expression, which is why materials intended to promote false information can spread quickly and, especially if they have intriguing, conspiratorial, or convenient content from the users’ point of view, can attract them to a virtual community that is easily manipulated by those who organize it and who may have political interests. However, in addition to controlled disinformation, another danger is represented by the lack of information among users, together with the lack of skepticism or curiosity about the information that is offered to them.

Beyond the psychological aspects that underlie this type of behavior, the very fact of receiving information without effort represents a potential risk factor. In this regard, it is important to remember that social networks have the role of offering unlimited and effortless entertainment to users. In addition, content created with the help of deepfake technologies and artificial intelligence can contribute decisively to the propagation of disinformation, in the absence of effective filters both from the online environment and from the critical capacities of users. In the absence of other long-term intellectual activities or consistent discipline, social networks can go beyond their status as an entertainment tool, becoming a means – sometimes unique – of informing and even influencing decisions in everyday life, including during electoral campaigns.

A consequence of this reality is demonstrated by the support for anti-European discourse among a significant segment of Romanian citizens, which is influenced by their disagreement with helping Ukraine in the context of the conflict with Russia (GlobalFocus 2024). Nevertheless, the politicization of the issue of support for Ukraine may serve as an indicator of Russia’s involvement in disinformation campaigns within Romanian cyberspace, thereby illustrating the depth, sophistication, and strategic orientation of Russian hybrid operations (Neagu 2024). An important element exploited through such rhetoric is fear – “of invasion, of insufficient stocks, of inflation, of economic instability” –, the indicated solution, consequently, being the normalization of radical narratives and ultra-conservatism (GlobalFocus 2024), which constitutes an approach that is meant to trigger, acquire, and redirect collective anger.

In his study on social engineering, Hadnagy (2011) specifies several elements of target manipulation, which may be relevant in this paper and which will be summarized below:

- Controlling the environment by limiting and directing the information to which the target has access, including by monitoring and influencing

communications on social networks. The attacker thus manages to filter the reality perceived by the target and influence their decisions;

- Inducing doubt by subtly undermining the target's beliefs, rules, or values to weaken their ability to make clear decisions. Repeated questions and ambiguous suggestions can gradually affect their confidence in their own judgment.
- Feeling helpless as a result of creating a perception of lack of control by invoking "facts" from sources with a supposed authority. Over time, in this way, the target can be determined to passively accept the indications received, without having the ability or instinct to question them.
- Triggering strong emotions, especially invoking fear, guilt, or other intense emotions to change the target's behavior and beliefs. Well-directed emotions can block critical thinking and accelerate compliance ([Hadnagy 2011](#), 233-4).

Inducing and exploiting fear can also be elements of manipulation or social engineering, especially in the conduct of an electoral campaign. Firstly, if a community of voters is explicitly encouraged to believe that the election of another candidate or political direction will have catastrophic consequences for the country and their value system, the candidate whose rhetoric promotes such a perspective can gain remarkable popularity. Secondly, from a psychological point of view, fear diminishes the ability to discern the magnitude of threats ([Bader-Saye 2007](#), 54) and can even lead to the failure to verify their existence. Last but not least, the "politics of fear" provides that "others" or "they" are to blame for the disappointments, frustrations, and failures of citizens, thus condemning the current system and authorities ([Furedi 2019](#)).

Therefore, access to massive and uncontrolled content in the digital environment constitutes a risk factor among Romanian social media users. This vulnerability in the information sphere has been proven to be exploited by Russia during the 2024 presidential elections in Romania ([Administrația Prezidențială 2024](#)), thus affecting its foreign policy objectives and relations ([Rebegea 2017](#)).

This electoral campaign, together with the one in 2025, constitutes the most remarkable contemporary context that denotes the influence of political Christianity in Romania. For example, after analyzing political discourses published on social networks, Paula Rațiu and Sandu Frunză ([2025](#)) observed the strategic tendency of candidates to suggest the relationship with religion in "natural contexts", such as in videos during visits to crowds of voters where formulations such as "God bless us" or declarations of faith were included, so as to highlight the common aspect of candidates and voters in terms of religious beliefs ([Rațiu and Frunză 2025](#), 40). Additionally, the fact that for most Romanians, faith is placed at the level of identity rather than practice, as Cezar Manu's analysis of the Russian propaganda narrative in Romania's 2024 electoral campaign on the website veridica.ro shows – facilitates the favorable impact of messages that invoke the "millenarian faith of the Romanian

people” on a public called conservative and reluctant to change their approach to religion. As a result, according to the aforementioned publication, “Romania becomes a favorable terrain for false narratives that claim the existence of attacks against Christianity — themes exploited in Russian anti-Western propaganda, which describes the EU and NATO as morally decadent and opposed to the Christian-Orthodox values that Russia claims to defend” (Manu 2024).

Conclusions

Russia’s involvement in the electoral campaign in Romania at the end of 2024 represented a threat to national security not only from a technical point of view, but also from a humanistic point of view.

The interest of a significant percentage of voters in a controversial candidate should draw the attention of Romanian politicians and authorities to the grievances and needs of citizens who, according to electoral statistics, would have wanted a radical change in the political class, even if the way in which this objective could have been achieved was part of a complex campaign of disinformation and manipulation. The trust and admiration of voters were therefore won through a formally consistent discourse, revealing the prevalent impact of the manner of expression over the content of the discourse.

Voter opinions during the presidential elections at the end of 2024 revealed, therefore, that the modeling of a well-calculated political discourse adapted to the current social reality, which would provide the feeling of closeness to the people, and effective communication were lacking in previous electoral campaigns, where there were no candidates who dominated the election results before they had become known to all citizens entitled with the right to vote.

The approach of a discursive strategy that satisfies the needs of the target audience and that validates and calms collective fears in a tense geopolitical context represents, in the case presented in this paper, a crucial element in achieving political and electoral success, especially to the extent that the rhetoric involved consistently promotes the most important values for the target audience.

This episode in Romania’s contemporary history revealed vulnerabilities in society that, not being diminished in a timely manner, were exploited offensively by external state actors. In this sense, Romanian society needs to demarcate religious, traditional, and cultural values, which are deeply rooted in the collective psyche, from the contemporary, constantly evolving political sphere. In the absence of the development of such critical skills among voters, the opportunity to conveniently sensitize them during electoral campaigns will continue to represent a risk of manipulation, both by candidates to secure the support of the electorate and by external actors in the process of exploiting potential vulnerabilities that would grant them the opportunity to influence and unbalance the Romanian state.

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