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Faith in a New Party: The Involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the 2020 Election Campaign

Sergiu Gherghina^a and Sergiu Mişcoiu^b



^aDepartment of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK; ^bDepartment of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania

ABSTRACT

The intensity and nature of ties between the Church and political parties was covered by a rich literature. However, we know relatively little about why the Church would support a newly emerged political party formed in a competitive space, in which other parties had in the past enjoyed the Church's support. This article aims to explain why many members of the Romanian Orthodox Church campaigned for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in the 2020 legislative elections. Our analysis relies on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with Orthodox priests from different parts of the country. The findings illustrate that the traditionalist priests supported the party. These priests felt cornered by the existing anti-clerical attitudes in Romanian society, declared themselves disappointed by the mainstream parties for abandoning the Church, and perceived the EU as a threat to the traditional Romanian values and way of life.

Introduction

The relationships between religious and political institutions in the democratic world are complex and dynamic.¹ In particular, the ties between the Church and political parties have been subjected to extensive enquiry. Earlier studies show how the Church remains active in politics through the establishment of religious political parties or through its support of autonomous parties with a strong ideological convergence.² In turn, political parties pursue an intersection with religious values because the Church can mobilize important segments of the electorate, particularly in countries with high levels of religiosity.³ Previous research reflects on the duration of these ties

CONTACT Sergiu Gherghina  sergiu.gherghina@glasgow.ac.uk  Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow

¹Thomas Banchoff, ed., *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Carolyn M. Warner, *Confessions of an Interest Group: The Catholic Church and Political Parties in Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Luca Ozzano, 'The Many Faces of the Political God: A Typology of Religiously Oriented Parties', *Democratization* 22:5 (2013), pp. 807–830.

³Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Irena Borowik, 'Religion, Politics, and Social Attitudes in Transforming Poland: A Conclusion' in *Religion, Politics, and Values in Poland. Continuity*

and their changing nature over time, as a reaction to various developments in politics and society.⁴

In spite of all this literature, we know relatively little about why the Church would support a newly emerged party joining a competitive space, in which other parties enjoyed the Church's support in the past. To address this gap, our article aims to explain why many members of the Romanian Orthodox Church campaigned for the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) in the 2020 legislative elections. Romania is an appropriate case to study this relationship because the Orthodox Church is an important institution in society, it is in the spotlight due to several scandals, and it has changed its strategy regarding political support (for details, see the research design section). AUR was formed in the fall of 2019 and won the fourth place in the 2020 legislative elections partially due to the involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the election campaign. The party has a radical-right ideology that emphasizes the importance of the country (heavy nationalism), and traditional values and faith. The Church supported several mainstream parties in previous elections⁵, but this did not happen in a systematic manner. Instead, it took place via particular procedures meant to elect priests, monks or laymen church supporters as local and county councilors or MPs. As we will illustrate in this article, in the 2020 legislative elections the support was systematic and oriented towards AUR, with significant involvement of many members of the Church.

Our qualitative analysis relies on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with Orthodox priests from different parts of the country, aiming to understand what caused them to openly support AUR in the 2020 elections. We derived three major themes from the literature, around which the interviews were conducted, to ensure that we covered the main reasons: the Church as principal seeking to promote its ideas in the political sphere; the Church as source of political values in which it sets the agenda; and the Church as an interest group that expects rewards once the party has gained office. The results show a nuanced picture with an important role played by the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second section reviews the literature about the connections between the Church and political parties. It uses examples from several countries to illustrate the existing trends and derives the themes used in the interviews. The third section briefly presents the research design with a focus on case selection, respondents' profiles and method of data analysis. Next, we provide an overview of the relations between the Church and political parties in post-communist Romania. The analysis includes the interpretation of answers from interviews, while the conclusion summarizes the key findings and discusses their implications for the broader field of study.

and Change Since 1989, edited by Sabrina P. Ramet and Irena Borowik (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 313–324; Frances Millard, *Polish Politics and Society* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴Stathis N. Kalyvas and Kees van Kersbergen, 'Christian Democracy', *Annual Review of Political Science* 13 (2010), pp. 183–209; Jeffrey Haynes, ed., *The Routledge Handbook to Religion and Political Parties* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

⁵Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The church and support for political parties

The sociological perspective on the relationship between the Church and political parties considers the latter as extensions of the former in politics. This is the case with those religious parties that ‘hold an ideology or a worldview based on religion (having, thus, a cross-class appeal), and mobilize support on the basis of the citizens’ religious identity’.⁶ Such parties can be denominational (democratic and mass-based) or fundamentalist, which are absolutist and organized along authoritarian lines.⁷ They often carry religious terminology in their name, use religious symbols or express religious values and goals in their programs.⁸

There is great variation among the religious parties and some of them have expanded their appeal beyond religious issues.⁹ They also campaign on secular issues such as economic policies, education reform and broad social issues.¹⁰ For example, the claims of many Islamic parties bring together religious issues and social grievances.¹¹ The political agenda beyond religious claims can be partially attributed to a decline in electoral support for religious parties¹² or to the fact that, in some instances, the Church is hostile to or has stopped supporting some religious parties.¹³

Another perspective considers the Church and political parties as two separate types of organization that can support each other under specific circumstances. Political parties seek the support of the Church when there are limited alternative sources of electoral success. In this case, parties do not constitute the political extension of the Church but are autonomous implementers of the Church’s values and ideas in the political realm. In its turn, the Church mobilizes political parties when it perceives the existence of direct threats.¹⁴ Nevertheless, this relationship is quite nuanced. Christian democratic parties, although maintaining strong religious values, seek independence from the Church. Several confessional parties emerged in opposition to the Church rather as a result of its will.¹⁵ Christian democracy, as reflected in politics, is different from the Church and from the Catholic religion broadly speaking.¹⁶ These parties do not accept the interference of the Church in their programs or political activities.¹⁷ They have broader claims because they try to avoid being single-issue parties and the appeal of the Church has decreased over time in many

⁶Manfred Brocker and Mirjam Künkler, ‘Religious Parties: Revisiting the Inclusion-Moderation Hypothesis – Introduction’, *Party Politics* 19:2 (2013), p. 175.

⁷Richard Gunther and Larry Diamond, ‘Species of Political Parties: A New Typology’, *Party Politics* 9:2 (2003), pp. 167–199; Richard T. Antoun, *Understanding Fundamentalism: Christian, Islamic, and Jewish Movements*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008); Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, Daphna Canetti, and Ami Pedahzur, ‘Two of a Kind? Voting Motivations for Populist Radical Right and Religious Fundamentalist Parties’, *Electoral Studies* 29:4 (2010), pp. 678–690.

⁸Stathis N. Kalyvas, ‘Commitment Problems in Emerging Democracies: The Case of Religious Parties’, *Comparative Politics* 32:4 (2000), pp. 379–398.

⁹Ozzano, op. cit.

¹⁰Payam Mohseni and Clyde Wilcox, ‘Religion and Political Parties’ in *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Politics*, edited by Jeffrey Haynes (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 211–230.

¹¹Jocelyne Cesari, ‘Religion, State and Nation: Islamic Parties between Ideology and Religion’ in Jeffrey Haynes (ed) *The Routledge Handbook to Religion and Political Parties* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 20–30.

¹²Luis Felipe Mantilla, ‘Church-State Relations and the Decline of Catholic Parties in Latin America’, *Journal of Religious and Political Practice* 2:2 (2016), pp. 231–248.

¹³Warner, op. cit.

¹⁴Kalyvas, *The Rise of Christian Democracy in Europe*.

¹⁵Ibid.; Kalyvas and van Kersbergen, op. cit.

¹⁶Kees van Kersbergen, *Social Capitalism: A Study of Christian Democracy and the Welfare State* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁷David Hanley, *Christian Democracy in Europe: A Comparative Perspective* (London: Pinter, 1994).

societies.¹⁸ Overall, the costs and benefits for the engagement of both sides – Church and political parties – in their relationship can be expanded beyond these particular examples and other analyses indicate that they may be context-specific.¹⁹

Zooming in on parties that are autonomous from the Church, the latter provides support to them throughout and outside of electoral campaigns. This happens in several forms that can be analyzed from the perspectives of both the political parties and of the Church. On the one hand, on the side of the parties, some of these align their rhetoric and ideological stances with the values and preferences of the Church, hoping to mobilize those voters who are close to the Church. The parties seeking intersections with religion adopt the language of spirituality and faith. For example, the programs of many political parties in Russia included extensive references to Orthodoxy and to the cultural dimension of spirituality. In most cases, the main reason behind this approach of the Russian parties was the misperception that the Church had a major influence in the elections of the mid-1990s.²⁰ This was visible in the case of the liberal party Yabloko that evolved from making no reference to religion in its 1995 program to supporting traditional religions and their active participation in social life in 1999 and 2001.²¹

For other parties, such as the radical-right Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, the references to Orthodoxy were meant to enhance the party's nationalist stance.²² In Italy, the Northern League viewed the defense of Catholic values as equivalent to the protection of national identity and culture. They oppose immigration and have ethnicized religion to achieve greater electoral support. This party makes instrumental use of religious orientation to build nationalist sentiment among the electorate and to exclude the groups of migrants that threaten both the national identity and the religious homogeneity of the country.²³ In essence, these parties can use the electoral backing of the Church to ensure their survival in the political arena. In many new democracies, electoral volatility is high, which means that the voters are open to many alternatives and parties must identify a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors. The support of the Church can supply such a way and, once elected to public office, the parties can channel resources to reward the Church.²⁴

On the other hand, the Church may wish to play an active role in politics and has a few options to achieve that goal. The most common are the establishment of political parties promoting religious values – which may become independent at a later stage – or the support of political parties promoting an ideology that includes the religious values. The Polish Catholic Church was directly involved in politics in the early 1990s and in the first post-communist elections and established political formations such as the Catholic Electoral Action or the Catholic Electoral Committee 'Homeland'. They

¹⁸Kalyvas and van Kersbergen, op.cit.

¹⁹Warner, op. cit.; Krzysztof Zuba, 'The Political Strategies of the Catholic Church in Poland', *Religion, State and Society* 38:2 (2010), pp. 115–134.

²⁰Irina Papkova, 'The Russian Orthodox Church and Political Party Platforms', *Journal of Church and State* 49: 1 (2007), pp. 117–134.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³Ozzano, op. cit.; Andrea Molle, 'Religion and Right-Wing Populism in Italy: Using 'Judeo-Christian Roots' to Kill the European Union', *Religion, State and Society* 47:1 (2019), pp. 151–168.

²⁴Warner, op. cit.

obtained poor results in elections²⁵ and the Church sought a different strategy in which it could support autonomous Christian democratic parties.²⁶ In the early 2000s, the electoral success of the League of Polish Families, a conservative Catholic party with strong radical-right elements at its formation²⁷, reflects the divisions inside the Catholic Church. The more conservative circles in the Church contested the resignation from direct engagement in politics and created a radio station that promoted a religious-political movement.²⁸ The League of Polish Families has its roots in this radio station, which was later accepted by the Church as an informal political arm.²⁹ In Italy, the Christian Democratic Party channeled religious issues into politics for a great deal of its existence, having a monopoly on the presence of religion in Italian politics until the early 1990s.³⁰

The propensity of the Polish Catholic Church to support political parties with a congruent ideology led to a situation in which newly-emerged political actors adopted specific positions to bring them closer to the Church. For example, the disintegration in 2001 of a party with a Christian democratic orientation allowed the newly-formed Law and Justice party to step in.³¹ The repeated references to religion over time from this party indicate that, although its roots are not in the Church, Law and Justice seeks to maintain strong ideological ties with the Church.³² In France, fundamentalist members of the Catholic Church actively supported the National Front because the latter makes explicit references to religion and considers it a crucial component of the French national identity.³³

This all points in the direction of three main reasons for which the Church supports independent political parties.³⁴ First, the Church can be a political principal that uses parties as agents to promote its ideas in the political sphere. Through such actions, it seeks to gain influence and visibility. The agents are expected to provide religious values with a political content that can reach citizens in a broader form. Second, the Church may be a source of political values in which it sets the agenda based on religious issues. Third, the Church acts as an interest group that expects rewards after the political parties achieve their goal of being elected to Parliament or government. These rewards can be in the form of subsidies, special legislation or policy favors. We investigate which of these reasons apply to the Romanian case with the help of a qualitative analysis.

Research design

There are three arguments that make Romania an appropriate case to study the reasons for which the Church supported a political party. First, the Romanian Orthodox Church

²⁵Millard, *op. cit.*

²⁶Zuba, *op. cit.*

²⁷Cas Mudde, *Racist Extremism in Central and Eastern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

²⁸Stanislaw Burdziej, 'Religion and Politics: Religious Values in the Polish Public Square since 1989', *Religion, State and Society* 33:2 (2005), pp. 165–174.

²⁹Zuba, *op. cit.*

³⁰Alberta Giorgi, 'Religion and Political Parties: The Case of Italy' in *The Routledge Handbook to Religion and Political Parties*, edited by Jeffrey Haynes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 238–248.

³¹Tim Bale and Aleks Szczerbiak, 'Why Is There No Christian Democracy in Poland – and Why Should We Care?', *Party Politics* 14:4 (2008), pp. 479–500.

³²Borowik, *op. cit.*

³³Michael Minkenberg, 'The Policy Impact of Church–State Relations: Family Policy and Abortion in Britain, France, and Germany', *West European Politics* 26:1 (2003), pp. 195–217.

³⁴These are fairly similar to those identified by Zuba, *op. cit.* to explain the activity of the Polish Church in politics.

is an important institution in society since, in terms of religiosity, the country has ranked at the top of European countries on a constant basis over the last two decades.³⁵ Second, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been in the spotlight for more than a decade for several scandals involving corruption, sex or collaboration of priests with the former state police under communism (Securitate). Its existence is perceived differently by citizens. Third, the legislative elections in December 2020 marked the first time that many members of the Church had openly supported the same political party throughout an electoral campaign. Many priests endorsed the party candidates, showing up together at party rallies, and two of the party elites had long-lasting connections with the Romanian Orthodox Church.³⁶ Thus far, priests had provided occasional or individual support to several parties. In 2020, this support was coordinated and the party was voted for in areas where priests were highly active. This was particularly visible in the diaspora, where one quarter of the votes cast were for AUR, but where attendance was very low.

Our study uses 18 semi-structured interviews conducted by the authors of this article with Orthodox priests. The respondents were selected to increase variation in terms of age, geographical distribution (balance between the counties of the eight Romanian historical regions) and size of their community (rural, small or average urban, large urban). None of the respondents come from the same locality, although some of them share the same county (in this latter case, the selected respondents come from communities with different sociological profiles – urban vs. rural, rich vs. poor etc.). We did not contact priests from the diaspora due to the low number of votes cast in this election by the Romanians abroad. The profile of the interviewees is presented in Table 1. For confidentiality and anonymity purposes, the initials of their names are fictional, while the data was classically recorded via written notes (this being also an explicit demand of the respondents who did not give consent for recording).

The interviews were conducted face-to-face (12) and online (6) between 15 December 2020 and 8 February 2021. Our interview guide includes questions about the parish, the respondents' values and principles, their perceptions about their social role within their community, the effects of the EU accession and of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on the spiritual life of Romanians, and their active involvement in campaigning through counselling the parish members about their vote in the 2020 parliamentary elections (see Appendix 1).

We use inductive thematic analysis to identify the reasons for which the Romanian priests supported AUR. This method is useful to investigate the perspectives of our interviewees and allows for a flexible clustering of similar points into common themes that are not pre-determined.³⁷ In our case, the themes correspond to the reasons for which they

³⁵Irina Marica, 'Pew Research: Romania Is the Most Religious Country in Europe', *Romania-Insider.Com*, December 2018, <https://www.romania-insider.com/pew-research-romania-religious-country-europe>; Inna Naletova, 'Other-Worldly Europe? Religion and the Church in the Orthodox Area of Eastern Europe', *Religion, State and Society* 37:4 (2009), pp. 375–402.

³⁶Lia Reman, 'Biserica Ortodoxă, Una Dintre Forțele Motrice Care Au Propulsat AUR În Campania Pentru Parlamentare (The Orthodox Church, One of the Main Drivers behind AUR in the Campaign for Parliamentary Elections)', *G4Media.Ro* 9 December (2020), <https://www.g4media.ro/biserica-ortodoxa-una-dintre-fortele-motrice-care-au-propulsat-aur-in-campania-pentru-parlamentare-serviciile-prestate-de-claudiu-tarziu-si-de-avocata-diana-osoaca-pentru-biserica-ortodoxa-in-tim.html>.

³⁷Victoria Clarke and Virginia Braun, 'Thematic Analysis', *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 12:13 (2017): pp. 297–298; Lorelli S. Nowell et al., 'Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16:1 (2017), pp. 1–16.

Table 1. The Profile of Interviewees.

No.	Initials	County	Age	Experience (years)	Length of Interview (minutes)
1	I.S.	CJ	57	25+	45
2	A.N.	CJ	45	20+	50
3	D.P.	IS	38	10+	60
4	L.R.	AG	61	30+	75
5	M.O.	AB	54	25+	65
6	P.C.	BC	41	15+	60
7	V.I.	SV	35	10+	70
8	C.M.	SV	63	25+	75
9	I.S.	CT	50	20+	65
10	T.R.	CT	43	15+	60
11	C.G.	AG	46	20+	55
12	B.B.	AG	68	30+	80
13	E.Z.	AR	30	5+	60
14	P.H.	VS	41	15+	65
15	I.P.	DB	56	25+	75
16	L.M.	HD	60	30+	80
17	C.S.	IS	48	20+	70
18	N.P.	MH	39	15+	75

Note: The county acronyms are the official ones that appear on every map. They can be easily matched with the historic regions.

supported AUR. The following section provides an overview of the relationship between the Church and political parties in post-Communist Romania, and outlines AUR's characteristics.

Church and politics in post-Communist Romania

The relations between the Church and politics in the last three decades are built on strong ties established a long time ago. Since the formation of the Romanian nation-state in the mid-nineteenth century, the Orthodox Church has tried to play an important role in defining the official national narrative. The first major tensions emerged in 1863 with the law of secularization of monastic estates and continued until World War I.³⁸ Between 1918 and 1923 the country's population of non-Orthodox believers evolved from 6% to 29%. The 1923 Constitution granted the Orthodox Church the status of 'dominant church' and all its archbishops and bishops became statutory Senate members (Art. 22 and 72, 1923 Constitution). The first Orthodox Patriarch served as a Regent (1927-1930) and then as Prime Minister (1938-1939). The radicalization of the nationalist-orthodox groups within the Church contributed partially to the emergence and the consolidation of the fascist and anti-Semitic Iron Guard in the interwar period.³⁹ During the Communist regime (1945-1989), the Orthodox Church accommodated itself with the new political regime for a rather privileged position within the new system. It took advantage of the dissolution of the Greek-Catholic Church and seized or used, along with the state authorities, some considerable shares of its patrimony, especially churches and parochial buildings. It implicitly (and sometimes openly) supported the regime in various forms in spite of the large number of anti-religious actions taken by the country's leader.⁴⁰

³⁸Keith Hitchens, *The Romanians, 1774–1866* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³⁹William O. Oldson, 'Alibi for Prejudice: Eastern Orthodoxy, the Holocaust, and Romanian Nationalism', *East European Quarterly* 36:3 (2002), pp. 301–311.

After the regime change in 1989, the Church justified its collaboration with the Communist authorities as a survival strategy. It played the nationalist card in order to restore and reinforce its position, by canonizing historical heroes of the national fight for independence and by feeding the people a narrative about its own role in the formation and consolidation of the nation state. It also tried to restore the status of senators for all the members of the Synod in the 1991 Constitution. While this was not accepted by the government of the time, other privileges were granted such as discretion in nominating Church leaders.⁴¹ The Church gained more autonomy – as opposed to the direct control exerted by the state before 1989 – but maintained financial dependence on state resources, which made the priests vulnerable to political and administrative pressures.⁴²

This vulnerability led to a ‘spiral of seduction’ between the Church and the main political parties. The latter tried to mobilize the electorate using people’s broad trust in Church. National and international surveys show that Romanian citizens have levels of trust in the Church that are continuously higher than 60%. In comparison, less than 15% of the population trust political parties.⁴³ To capitalize on this trust in Church, political parties included prominent priests or monks on their electoral lists. This approach was used by several political parties across the political spectrum: the Social Democratic Party had good connections with the Orthodox Church, and the National Peasant Party with the Greek-Catholic Church, while the National Liberal Party established ties with the neo-protestant congregational networks.

These close relations led to a series of initiatives favorable to the Church, some of which were implemented by the state such as the introduction of religion as an optional discipline for all the levels of school and high school education. However, other claims of the Orthodox Church were not implemented such as the second attempt to make the members of the Synod *de jure* senators (1999) and the recurrent demands to re-penalize abortion and maintain some penalties for homosexuality.⁴⁴ Related to the latter, Neo-Protestant, Roman-Catholic, Greek-Catholic and Orthodox religious groups joined forces to create the Coalition for the Family that gathered, mainly with the support of the Orthodox Church, 3,000,000 signatures for a citizen-initiated referendum in 2018. This was meant to change the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage. The referendum had the support of the government party and of some opposition parties, but failed to reach the required participation threshold to be deemed valid.⁴⁵

AUR was formed in September 2019 and has a nationalist radical-right rhetoric. The party refers to the unification of all Romanians from the current country territory, from the historic provinces belonging to Romania in the past and from the diaspora. Its discourse combines elements of anti-equality and anti-multiculturalism with soft

⁴⁰Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, ‘The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-Communist Democratisation’, *Europe-Asia Studies* 52:8 (2000), pp. 1467–1488.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Anca Gorgan, ‘Relația Stat-Biserică În România Postcomunistă (State-Church Relations in Post-Communist Romania)’, *Revista Română de Sociologie* 23:1–2 (2012), pp. 141–146.

⁴³Ro Insider, ‘Survey: Army, Church are the National Institutions Romanians Trust Most’, *Romania-Insider.Com*, no. 14 February (2019), <https://www.romania-insider.com/army-church-most-trusted-february-2019>.

⁴⁴Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu, ‘Romania’ in *Church, State, and Democracy in Expanding Europe*, edited by Lavinia Stan and Lucian Turcescu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 134–149.

⁴⁵Sergiu Gherghina and Nanuli Silagadze, ‘Selective Equality: Social Democratic Parties and the Referendums on Same-Sex Marriage in Eastern Europe’, *Europe-Asia Studies*, online first (2021).

Euroscepticism and strong conservative values.⁴⁶ The party program outlines the four self-described pillars of its ideology: family, the country, faith, and freedom (AUR Program, 2019). This newly emerged political party is more appealing to the Church compared to the established mainstream parties for at least two reasons. First, the party explicitly promotes the religious cause and thus displays a convergence of values with the church. Second, the party is in the early stages of its involvement in political competition, does not have a broad agenda and thus the Church could have an impact on the prominence of religious topics in party's discourse. There is evidence regarding the active involvement of the Church in the 2020 election campaign to support AUR.⁴⁷ In the aftermath of the national elections, one of the two party leaders claimed that AUR is the defender of the Church and aims to promote a conservative Christian ideology.⁴⁸ While this is one reason for the electoral support, the following section reveals several other important drivers.

Analysis and results

Similar to other Eastern European churches that are not monolithic⁴⁹, the Romanian Orthodox Church includes at least two groups of attitudes towards the Church's involvement in politics. These groups, whose existence we had limited knowledge of before the fieldwork, were revealed during the interviews. First, there are the traditionalist priests (12 out of 18 respondents) who favor a strict national-Orthodox view of the Romanian collective identity and who are critical of the gradual loss of traditional values and of the local communities' social cohesion. They believe that the Church must support the political forces that are favorable to it. These priests were actively involved in the electoral campaign and supported AUR mainly because of the restrictions, imposed by state authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limited interactions between the Church and believers.

A second group includes the more progressive priests who share a nuanced view about Orthodoxy and national identity. They have a critical attitude towards the actions of the Romanian Orthodox Church leaders and are less preoccupied by the dilution of the Romanians' traditional values. They prefer a neutral position of the Church when it comes to politics and do not see reasons to become involved in election campaigns. They draw a relatively thick line between religion and politics, and do not discuss election-related issues with people. None of these voted for AUR in the 2020 elections: two of them voted with PSD (the Social Democratic Party), one with PNL (the National-Liberal Party), one with PMP (the Party for a Popular Movement), one with PRO Romania and one did not vote.

⁴⁶Sergiu Mișcoiu, 'Eine Geschichte von Spaltungen Und Fusionen. Politische Parteien Und Wahlen in Rumänien, 1990 Bis 2021', in *Das Politische System Rumäniens*, edited by Astrid Lorenz and Daniela-Maria Mariș (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2022), pp. 143–167.

⁴⁷Reman, op. cit.

⁴⁸Radio Free Europe, 'AUR Obține Peste 8% (AUR Gets More than 8%)', no. 6 December (2020), <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/draft-aur/30986837.html>.

⁴⁹Katarzyna Dospiał-Borysiak, 'Religion and Political Parties in Poland' in *The Routledge Handbook to Religion and Political Parties*, edited by Jeffrey Haynes (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 249–260.

Electoral support

Most of the traditionalist priests that we interviewed campaigned directly or indirectly for AUR. They often discussed political issues with the members of their congregations. Significantly, they did this in a systematic and consistent manner for the December 2020 elections. Some acknowledge or openly claim support for AUR, while others admit it more implicitly. For example, several traditionalist priests argue that, even if they tried, 'it was impossible not to discuss politics with the constituents' (C.G.). This happens mainly because the community members 'look up to the priest', whom they consider a leading figure or at least 'somebody who can correctly advise' (B.B.). The demand for political counselling comes from the community members and the priests usually do not 'directly identify the most suitable candidates or parties' (T.R.). Instead, they offer guidance and explain what is at stake, since many people do not have a very in-depth understanding of politics (B.B., L.M.).

However, the priests' behavior in the December 2020 legislative elections was different because their support of this party in particular was due to the fact that 'we had reached a very high level of dissatisfaction, since we were crushed by our enemies like never before' (C.M.). This situation persuaded many priests to start talking about their political options with the community members and to explain why the 'newly created force' deserved their attention:

If people asked me, yes, I told them what party I was going to vote for. And they asked me more insistently than before, precisely because this movement had appeared that was not talked about on TV. The government tried to hide the existence of AUR, but AUR was more and more present on the ground, among the ordinary people (...). The result was good here, AUR won almost a quarter of the votes (V.I.).

In other cases, some priests suggested in an unequivocal way what candidates and parties should be preferred: 'I talked to people and urged them to wake up the moment they choose, to be aware who wants the best for us and who does not (...). Some had not even heard of AUR, but they heard from me and then told me that they were thankful, as they had made the right choice' (C.M.). In a less subtle way, some priests confirmed that they believed AUR was the best option as the voters hesitated:

As usual, many asked me what I thought about the parties, and many asked if it was worth voting and for whom. Some even asked if this new party, AUR, deserved to be voted for. I told them to think with their own minds, to consider everything I told them. Some told me directly that it was as they thought, that AUR was their only hope (C.G.).

Several respondents indicated that they discussed or at least mentioned the qualities and strengths of the AUR candidates during their chats with the local constituents. As one of them argues: 'I noticed, together with my parishioners, that the mobilization in favor of AUR was also due to the party's direct presence in the field; the AUR candidates were not afraid to meet the people' (L.M.). By the immediacy of their presence, by the novelty of their political movement and, for several priests, by the intellectual qualities of some of their leaders, and by their open preference 'for the Church and for the nation', AUR 'naturally became the only real option' (P.H.).

Finally, the priests' mobilization in favor of AUR is linked to their hopes regarding the AUR's next moves in Parliament. Such hopes were 'definitely not only ours, but those of

all the Christian families in my parish and in the whole area' (C.S.), namely to 'propose and support some bills in favor of religious education, of national integrity and against the moral decay' (E.Z.). The religious references made by AUR determined the decision by several priests to associate the party with a broader mission: 'if people keep hearing that someone defends the faith and the country up there in Parliament they will also be thinking of God and will forget about all kinds of troubles and temptations' (C.M.).

The semi-structured interviews cover three themes, which are discussed in detail in the following sub-sections. First, the recent debates and tensions about the place and the role of the Orthodox Church within Romanian society caused feelings of anxiety and frustration among some Orthodox priests, as well as a profound disappointment about the mainstream political parties, leading to their political support for AUR. Second, the COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions imposed by the national authorities determined a counter-reaction of radicalization among the Orthodox priests, which favored their pro-AUR involvement in the electoral campaign. Third, although Romania's membership of the EU is positively perceived by the respondents overall, the priests consider the EU a threat to the Romanian traditional values and way of life. This led them to support AUR, seen as a rampart against the loss of the Romanian national identity due to Europeanization.

Frustration and disillusion with the mainstream political parties

During the last decade and, more prominently, within the three waves of protests (2012-13, 2015, 2017-2018) in the last decade, several segments of Romanian society have displayed anti-clerical attitudes. These consist of a broad criticism of all religious institutions but particularly against the Romanian Orthodox Church, denounced as being part of the post-communist oligarchic decision-making system.⁵⁰ With several high-profile cases of alleged corruption, abuses and misconduct against its top officials⁵¹, along with its perceived association with the government party⁵², the Romanian Orthodox Church became one of the targets of the anti-government protests in 2017 and 2018. In this period, the Church reinforced its conservative societal discourse and actively participated in the 2018 campaign of the constitutional referendum for the traditional family.⁵³

The traditionalist priests believe that these debates sought to deprive the Church of its traditional role as defender of the Christian national unity of Romanians. In relation to this specific referendum, the respondents refer to the 'subversive actions' of the NGOs campaigning against the Church, as they used 'Marxist propaganda against our saints and martyrs' (C.M.).

One priest describes civil society as 'associations who defend gay marriage and other such practices against nature' (B.B.), while another speaks about the existence of a 'silent majority of genuine Romanians' who despise those 'godless trouble-makers [...] from the

⁵⁰Lucian Turcescu and Lavinia Stan, 'The Romanian Orthodox Church and Democratization: Twenty Years Later', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 10:2-3 (2010), pp. 144-159.

⁵¹Cristian Pantazi, 'Sultana Intangibila (The Untouchable Garment)', *G4Media.Ro* 28 mai (2020), <https://www.g4media.ro/sutana-intangibila-scandalosul-caz-al-lui-ips-teodosie-oghlinda-unui-stat-slab-si-corupt.html>.

⁵²Gherghina and Silagadze, op. cit..

⁵³Ibid.

so-called civil society' (I.S.). They insist that the response of the Church was insufficiently strong or clear: 'There were many attempts to mock the mission of the Church and to reduce the faith of the people, but we always stood against such attempts [...] Unfortunately, I believe that we became too soft to fight our opponents' (V.I.). Under these circumstances, the Church engaged in politics by providing support to some mainstream political parties, but the latter did not meet expectations. As such, one respondent refers to 'deceiving politicians who look only for votes and hope that the Church will mobilize the voters for them' (I.P.).

These priests wish to engage in politics to limit the influence of anti-Church groups. So far, engagement with political parties has not been satisfactory and they have turned to a newly-formed party that is more promising in that direction. One of them formulates the following rhetorical key question: 'How did the old parties help us when the Church was mocked and humiliated?' (I.S.). These priests felt 'disappointed and betrayed' by the 'lack of determination of the authorities, of social democrats and liberals to stand with the Church' (C.S.). Most disappointed priests argue that the mainstream parties are made up of 'politicians who remember the Church only during the election campaigns' (P.H.).

In contrast, AUR's message and the attitude of its candidates were perceived by many respondents as being strikingly favorable. Unlike the mainstream parties, AUR was considered to take a solid moral stance against 'homosexual deviations', and to be patriotic and willing to defend the Church and the traditional values (B.B., C.M., E.Z., V.I.). The AUR candidates proved to be 'close to our stances in a genuine way' and consequently 'the men of the Church have a natural duty to support this national force' (E.Z.). The traditionalist priests also believe that AUR will 'contribute in Parliament to the making of good laws for our Church and nation' (C.G.). For them, the emergence of AUR offered 'a unique chance to make the believers' voice count in Parliament' (T.R.) and 'our involvement in supporting this movement was much needed' (C.M.).

The progressive priests were open to publicly discussing the Church's role, mission and actions; they are also much more open to criticism and keen to engage in institutional reforms. They admit that the Church has not always considered 'the evolution of the modern society' (D.P.). Some acknowledge the need for an extensive dialogue and for the adaptation of the Church with reforms to its rituals (P.C.). These respondents do not convey the message of a binary clash between pro- and anti-church forces. Instead, as one of them argues, 'there is a need for discussion, for moderation, for mutual understanding and collaboration' (A.N.). Generally, this group rejected both extremist forces – meaning those who pretend to defend the Church but 'promote an intolerant agenda' (P.C.) and those who 'attack the Church but have their own interests' (L.R.).

Pandemic restrictions and ultra-conservatism

The COVID-19 lockdown measures and restrictions imposed by the Romanian authorities in 2020 were similar to those used in other European countries. They started with a long period of lockdown (March-May 2020), followed by a relative relaxation (June-September 2020) and new restrictive measures were introduced at the local level between October 2020 and May 2021. During these periods, and especially on the occasion of major Christian celebrations, the restrictions prevented or limited the participation of believers in the holy services. This led to a series of controversies, as the Church

was accused of disobeying the regulations and endangering the lives of its believers. In their turn, several representatives of the Church publicly criticized the authorities and their lack of consideration for the Romanians' need for spiritual comfort.⁵⁴

The interviews show how these restrictions were an important driver of the direct support provided by the traditionalist camp in the Church for AUR, the party that openly and publicly opposed the restrictions, which were considered by respondents as 'excessive, abusive' (V.I.) or as 'another attempt to ruin the faith of the Romanians' (B.B.). The magnitude and even the existence of the pandemic were brought into question and the authorities were accused of having 'real but concealed purposes' as one of the respondents explicitly states:

I'm honestly telling you: I'm not very convinced that this virus circulates so much, that people are actually dying because of it. I see in this whole story an attempt to manipulate us, to keep the people locked in, to make them even more divided, so as they can take what is left without anyone being able to say anything (N.P.).

Several respondents explained that this manipulation and attempt to alienate people from the Church must be met with action. As such, the support for AUR came as an opportunity to defend the cause of the Church (B.B. and T.R.), since the other parties did not care about what happened with the Church (C.M.). Many respondents considered that AUR was the only party defending a Church whose reputation had been sullied: 'During the last few months, I've seen AUR standing with the Church on each occasion when very ugly things have been said about the Church, including bashing our Church leaders, [these were] untrue things' (P.H.). The AUR's pro-Church attitude in the midst of the controversy related to the Church's behavior about the restrictions was a sufficiently strong argument to endorse this new party: '[...] the only party, [which is] young, vigorous and with people who, even if they didn't all go to the best universities, are patriotic and faithful' (C.M.).

For several respondents, the link between the anti-restriction attitude and the electoral support for AUR was obvious. As one of them said, 'these unprecedented restrictions, which offended us all, required an answer [...] and we all knew that the new party was the best answer!' (T.R.). They appreciated in a particular way the fact that AUR openly 'defied the wrong attitude of the authorities, which imposed disproportionate restrictions' and did not hesitate to 'defend the Church even in court by contesting the government's restriction against holy services and against other religious gatherings' (N.P.).

The progressive priests agree that the anti-pandemic restrictions have had negative effects on spiritual life in the country. However, they do not accept this as sufficient reason to support AUR in the specific political context. Some of them even admitted that 'restrictive measures were necessary' (P.C.) or that 'They did what others in other parts of the world have done, imposed restrictions in hopes of limiting the circulation of the virus. And maybe they succeeded, maybe it would have been much, much worse' (M.O.). Some respondents did not interpret the restrictions as being targeted

⁵⁴Matei Alexandru, 'Arhiepiscopul Tomisului, Teodosie, Sfidează Din Nou Restricțiile (The Tomis Archbishop Defies Again the Restrictions)', *G4Media.Ro* 13 November (2020), <https://www.g4media.ro/video-arhiepiscopul-tomisului-teodosie-sfideaza-din-nou-restrictiile-si-spune-ca-vrea-sa-organizeze-pelerinajul-de-sf-andrei-cum-sa-nu-ajung-eu-la-pestera-este-imposibil-si-cum-sa-nu-ajunga-cons.html>.

mainly against the Church, although the ‘consequences were serious for the psychological balance of some, for the feeling that they belong to a group, a parish, a Church’ (D.P.). At the same time, one respondent sees the positive effects of the restrictions as uniting people and bringing them closer to the Church (E.Z.). This group of priests was not stimulated to take a partisan stance due to the anti-pandemic restrictions.

Romanian values under threat

Romania is one of the most Europhile countries in the European Union (EU). There was a high level of agreement between the political elites and citizens about the importance of joining the EU.⁵⁵ Even the radical-right Greater Romania Party, with a strong nationalist discourse, favored the EU accession in the 2000s.⁵⁶ The pro-European consensus is mainly due to a generalized belief that the benefits of membership exceed the costs. In Romania, as illustrated by the data in national and international surveys (e.g. Eurobarometer), the perception of the EU as a wide economic, free-trade and free-travel bloc prevails by far over the one depicting the EU as an area of shared cultural values.

In line with this broad consensus in society, both progressive and traditionalist priests support the country’s membership in the EU. For most of them, ‘it is an opportunity, a step forward for the country’s development’ (I.P.), a ‘return to the European family’ and a ‘great chance to escape from poverty and isolation’ (A.N.). Almost all respondents appreciate the economic contribution of the EU to the country’s development (C.S., P.H.). Some respondents indicate that the Church itself used EU structural funds in partnership with other institutions and organizations. As such, they describe the EU accession as one of the most important achievements of the post-communist period (see, for example, P.C.).

However, most participants express major concerns about the negative influence of Westernization and Europeanization. In particular, they refer to a possible ‘contagion’ of practices such as same-sex marriage, although they are not ‘convinced that Europe actually demands the recognition of such things’ (M.O.). The respondents favor resistance to external influences that are against the national values: ‘Romanians need to be firm on denying such demands, like the Hungarians or the Czechoslovaks are, these people do not bow immediately, and they live very well’ (L.R.). Even if for some priests Europe is an ‘area of great Christian civilization’ (P.C.), many are afraid of what could happen if some Western practices are imported into Romania: ‘There, people have given up their faith and everywhere you go, you see sodomy, drug use, churches are empty and have remained so for years [...] These misfortunes will come to us too’ (I.S.). As such, measures are required ‘before it is too late’ (E.Z.) and AUR is considered the appropriate political actor to help with them.

The ‘moral decay of the world’ (I.P.), the threat of ‘addiction, prostitution, pederasty, atheism and other plagues that flourish in the Western countries’ (B.B.) could be met in the view of many respondents by ‘support for the national and spiritual forces embodied

⁵⁵Petar Bankov and Sergiu Gherghina, ‘Post-Accession Congruence in Bulgaria and Romania: Measuring Mass-Elite Congruence of Opinions on European Integration through Mixed Methods’, *European Political Science* 19:1 (2019), pp. 562–572.

⁵⁶Sergiu Mişcoiu, ‘Balkan Populisms’, *Southeastern Europe* 38:1 (2014), pp. 1–24.

by AUR, which represents the true people' (V.I.). AUR is the counterbalance to Westernization, Europeanization, and the rule of the foreigners. One of the traditionalist priests explicitly claimed that 'the European diversity brought us a German President and also leaders such as Orban, Arafat and Hunor'⁵⁷ (I.S.). The support for AUR could bring all this to an end and facilitate the 'restoration of the Romanian ownership of the country of our ancestors' (L.M.).

The need to counterattack by backing a party that 'will not hesitate to say 'No' to the European Union when our values – family, faith, language – are threatened' came as a 'natural solution' (C.G.). Preserving and defending national and traditional values was also 'the believers' demand [...] and priests need to find answers to their parishioners' prayers' (C.S.). In light of all these considerations, the priests mobilized the electorate to support 'the only real political option we have had for a very long time' (P.H.). For several respondents, the reasons to support AUR match the party's political program mentioned above. Some priests expressed a genuine belief that the party would 'defend national interests, cultural and spiritual values above all, against our enemies inside and outside the country, against Europe or America, if needed' (B.B.).

Conclusions

This article has aimed to explain why many members of the Orthodox Church openly supported a newly-emerged political party in Romania. The results of our qualitative research, based on 18 semi-structured interviews with priests, provide relevant insights. Similar to previous studies in other countries, we show that the Romanian Orthodox Church is divided between traditionalist and progressive members. The traditionalist priests actively supported AUR during the electoral campaign. Their reasons for this support are threefold and combine long-lasting problems with contextual issues, which move beyond the convergence of general values between the Church and AUR that can be observed in their discourses. The traditionalist priests who participated in our study felt cornered by the existing anti-clerical attitudes in Romanian society and declared themselves disappointed by the mainstream parties for abandoning the Church. Another persistent problem driving the support for AUR was the perception of the EU as a threat to the traditional Romanian values and way of life, which are defended by the traditionalist priests. AUR has a strong nationalist, anti-multiculturalist, anti-equality and partially anti-EU discourse that works in parallel with the idea that the Romanian values are under threat. The priests associate the party with the possibility to defend these values in an effective and persistent manner.

The contextual reason driving the traditional priests' support is related to the anti-pandemic restrictions imposed by the national authorities, which affected the Church's activities and made it turn to the party publicly contesting these measures. Overall, we show that the support provided by the Orthodox Church is not related to the setting of agenda based on religious issues. Instead, the traditionalist members of the Church act as principals who expect to be defended by the party (the agent) against threats

⁵⁷The President of Romania, re-elected in 2019, Klaus Iohannis, belongs to the German ethnic minority. The National Liberal Party (PNL) leader, Ludovic Orban, has Hungarian ancestry, the State Secretary in charge of the anti-pandemic fight, Raed Arafat, was born in Damascus. Kelemen Hunor is the leader of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania (UDMR) and one of the two deputy Prime Ministers at the time of the interviews.

such as anti-clerical attitudes in society or liberal European values. These can be seen as rewards once the party was elected to Parliament, which brings the Church's approach close to that of an interest group.

These findings have implications for the broader study of the relation between Church and political parties beyond the case study analyzed here. This study shows that the usual convergence of ideas emphasized in the literature as a key driver for electoral support is only one side of the story. Shared ideas about the importance of nation, faith and traditional values are relevant because they bring the Church and AUR onto the same page. Equally important, the traditionalist priests see the party as a reliable ally for the Church in politics and society. The party plays an instrumental role in defending the Church against heavy criticism, to uphold the traditional values and to be the bearer of the religious message in the decision-making process. The study also shows that support for the party is the result of persistent problems combined with context-specific issues, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The reaction to contemporary developments and the identification of a political partner to help in addressing the emerging challenges reflects the high capacity for adaptation of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Its distancing of itself from its previous political partners, the mainstream parties, and focused electoral support – as opposed to the isolated, diluted efforts in the past – resulted in goal achievement. AUR gained parliamentary representation and continued showing support for the cause of the Church after reaching public office.

Further research can build on these findings and compare this recent case in Romania with those countries where the relationship between the Church and political parties has a longer tradition. Such a comparison could outline similarities or differences of approach and would bring clarity to the bigger picture regarding the political support provided by the Church to parties across countries in contemporary times. Another avenue for research could include interviews with party representatives. These would reflect how parties see their relationship with the Church and provide information about potential future developments.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Sergiu Gherghina is an Associate Professor in Comparative Politics, Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Glasgow. His research interests lie in party politics, legislative and voting behavior, democratization, and direct democracy.

Sergiu Mişcoiu is Professor of Political Science at the Faculty of European Studies, Babes-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, Romania. His research interests are the constructivist and the alternative theories applied to nation building, populism and political transition.

Appendix 1: The Guide used for Semi-Structured Interviews

1. How would you define the community in which you are active (how large is the parish, how often do people attend services, any other relevant details)?

- a) To what extent do you get involved in the community's social life?
2. What are the values that guide your professional activity and personal life?
 - a) What is the relationship between your mission as a priest and these values?
3. Thinking about the restrictions imposed by the Romanian state during the pandemic, what do you think is their impact on Romanians' spiritual life?
4. Thinking about the last 10 years, how would you describe the attitude of politicians towards religion and the Romanian Orthodox Church?
 - a) How would you describe the attitude of civil society?
5. In your opinion, how did Romania's accession to the EU influence citizens' behavior relative to traditional values?
6. To what extent are there political formations in Romania that are close to the Church, which can be supported by the Romanian Orthodox Church?
7. To what extent do you advise citizens about their political and electoral choices?
8. Thinking about the parliamentary elections in December 2020, did you have such an engagement?
 - a) If yes, can you please elaborate?
 - b) What made you engage?
 - c) To the best of your knowledge, did your advice have an effect on citizens' voting behavior?
9. In general, what can parliamentary elections change in the state-society-Church relationship?
 - a) How about the effects on faith and traditional values?
 - b) How about the effects on Romanians' attitudes towards national identity and religiosity?
 - c) In particular, to what extent did the 2020 parliamentary elections have an effect on any of these dimensions?

Note: The main questions are the ones with numbers. The follow-up questions are those with letters and these were asked only if the respondent did not cover these areas in the answer to the main question.