

Religion, homosexuality, and the EU: Grasping the beliefs of Romanian Orthodox priests

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Abstract

The European Union and the Church often have contrasting positions toward the rights, freedoms, and status of sexual minorities. Earlier research illustrates that the Church opposes the EU as a promoter of homosexuality and brings a critique based on national identity. In spite of these debates, we know very little about how the priests perceive the relationship between homosexuality and the EU. The priests' beliefs and opinions can provide insights into what is beyond the official Church statements. This article seeks to address that gap in the literature and analyzes the ways in which the Romanian Orthodox priests link the EU and the topic of homosexuality. Our qualitative study uses inductive thematic analysis and draws on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with priests in December 2020–February 2021. The findings indicate the existence of three main points of criticism against what the respondents perceive as an increasing pressure by the EU to adopt a favorable treatment of homosexuals.

KEYWORDS

EU, homosexuality, Orthodox Church, religion, Romania

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1 | INTRODUCTION

The rights, freedoms, and status of sexual minorities are approached extensively by two strands of literature: Europeanization and religious studies. The Europeanization literature emphasizes the adoption of norms across the European Union (EU) Member States in line with the principles of equality and inclusiveness of sexual minorities. The religious studies literature includes, on the one hand, critical and conservative perspectives (based on faith, tradition, and national culture) toward sexual minorities and, on the other hand, ways in which the Church can adapt to post-modernity and the respect and partial acceptance of human rights (Ford, 2020; Webster, 1995). The latter includes the occasional adoption of a Church strategy of silence about the subject of homosexuality and a permanent reference to “Christian love” among all people (Jovanović, 2013; Papadaki & Papadaki, 2011).

The contrasting positions of the Church and of the EU on the topic of sexual minorities are gauged by previous studies. Although the Church and the EU cooperate for the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon, religious officials and the Church position themselves against EU policies that run against the national interest (Leustean, 2018). Some studies identify the existence of a critique brought by religion to the modern Western societies, their understanding of the human rights, and the EU’s political actions (Leustean, 2014b; Makrides, 2012). One example of opposition to human rights and the process of Europeanization comes from the Republic of Moldova where the Orthodox Church opposed the adoption of antidiscrimination law backed up by the EU (Iordache, 2019). Another example shows that the official discourse of the Church is that the spread of homosexuality is related to the Europeanization and EU’s promotion of LGBTQ+ rights (Guglielmi, 2021; Spina, 2016; Tarta, 2015b).

In spite of this rich evidence, we know very little about how the priests perceive the relationship between homosexuality and the EU. This is important because the priests are those who interact with ordinary people. Their perceptions can be translated into sermons or behaviors (ceremonies, pastoral encounters, or public statements) with which citizens interact on a daily basis. The priests’ beliefs and opinions can provide insights into what is beyond the official Church statements. This article seeks to address that gap in the literature and analyzes the ways in which the Romanian Orthodox priests link the EU and the topic of homosexuality. Our qualitative study uses inductive thematic analysis and draws on 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with priests in December 2020–February 2021. The Romanian Orthodox Church is an appropriate case for our analysis because the Church is important in society and it has been proactive against sexual minorities. For example, it argued publicly against the decriminalization of homosexuality by parliament in 2000 and encouraged Romanians to protest against it. Along these lines, it “mobilized numerous resources, from press campaigns to letters sent to MPs and theological writings denouncing homosexuality” (Turcescu & Stan, 2019, pp. 47–48). Almost two decades later, in the context of the 2018 referendum to amend the Article 48 of the Constitution to explicitly ban same-sex marriage, the Romanian Orthodox Church supported the “traditional family” and engaged to some extent in the referendum campaign (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2022).

The next section reviews the literature about how the topic of sexual minorities is approached in studies of Europeanization and/or religion. It covers also the perceptions of priests since this lies at the core of our analysis. The third section provides details about the case selection, interviewees’ profile, and methods of data analysis. The fourth section provides an overview of the Romanian Orthodox Church with emphasis on its characteristics and evolution in post-communist Romania. Next, we present and interpret the results of the interviews. The conclusions summarize the key findings and discuss their implications for the broader field of religious studies.

2 | SEXUAL MINORITIES, THE EU, AND RELIGION

This section reviews two different strands of literature: the literature on Europeanization including the topic of sexual minorities rights and the literature in religious studies regarding the perceptions and perspectives of religious actors on sexual minorities. First, the literature on Europeanization highlights that the EU has legislation to protect sexual minorities. This legislation protects civil partnership, marriages, and adoptions by sexual minorities. It also ensured their right to sue in court through the European Court of Justice (ECJ) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) to claim their rights. As such, there is a European framework of anti-discrimination that provides many opportunities for the LGBTQ+ groups to enjoy and expand their rights (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020, p. 227).

Earlier research shows that pro-LGBTQ+ institutional perspectives have become a “soft norm” in the EU (Kollman, 2009). Others illustrate that there is an understanding among the EU officials that European citizenship means ultimately being also a supporter of the rights of sexual minorities (Pelz, 2016). Through the process of implementation and enforcement of supranational rules in domestic contexts (i.e., Europeanization), the Member States are expected to implement EU rules on sexual minority rights (Slootmaeckers et al., 2016). The process of Europeanization has sometimes a direct effect on social movement organizations, which is a horizontal process of diffusion for the European norms (Paternotte, 2016).

In addition to supranational norms, there is the transnational activity of nongovernmental organizations, social movement organizations, and advocacy groups that support sexual minorities. The literature emphasizes that more legislation referring to the LGBTQ+ community increases when domestic organizations belonging to this community “become embedded in the transnational activist networks Europe provides” (Ayoub, 2015, p. 298). Without domestic support in promoting the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, those organizations address directly the EU institutions. Nongovernmental organizations and lobby groups associate the issue of accepting sexual minorities and respecting their rights with democratic accountability and responsibility as Member States of the EU (Ayoub, 2017). This, in the end, generated even more pressure on the nation states (O’Dwyer, 2018; Pelz, 2016). However, as far as Central and Eastern Europe is concerned, in the last 30 years, there has been only recognition of civil partnerships and only in certain countries (Czech Republic, Slovenia, Hungary, Croatia, and Estonia), mostly facing a difficult, slow, and limited implementation process (Guasti & Bustikova, 2020).

The perception of religious actors, clergy, and believers about sexual minorities and their rights evolve around several themes. One debate covered by the literature refers to an authoritarian biblical theology often irreconcilable toward sexual minorities. In some cases, this means that the LGBTQ+ people “must choose between their sexuality and their faith/religious community” (Gushee, 2015, p. 141). Although the recognition of sexual minorities seems to be on the agenda even in the case of more conservative churches such as the Orthodox Church, the biblical-theological foundation about same-sex marriage is similar among the major Christian denominations of Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox (Metso & Kallatsa, 2018). In response to this conservative theology, a “queer theology” has gradually developed from the idea that “queer Christians deserve a queer theology that is not just inclusive, but takes into account their distinct experiences” (Kraus, 2011, p. 10). The essence of this new theological approach is a new biblical exegesis based on the concept of “liberation theology.” The God who delivered the oppressed from the Old Testament is a God who must deliver the oppressed of today—namely, sexual minorities (Clever, 1995). At the same time, there is a reinterpretation of the seven biblical verses often used to condemn sexual minorities, none of which are attributed to Jesus (Rogers, 2009).

Based on the biblical and theological debate, a spiritual and missionary perspective highlights the sociopsychological effects on sexual minorities. Studies show that religious tropes such as “love the sinners, hate the sin” contributes to and encourage ignorant or even negative perceptions of heterosexual believers about religious people belonging to sexual minorities. Sermons and religious ceremonies convey messages about what it means to be religious and how negative it is to be part of an LGBTQ+ group compared to the spiritual and religious experiences of heterosexual believers. The authoritarian biblical theology ends up preaching often against sexual minorities (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Deguara, 2020). In some religious cultures, believers and persons who are members of sexual minorities cannot be at the same time part of the clergy or cannot be consecrated into deacons, priests, or bishops (Kappler et al., 2013).

Some denominations try to negotiate an official institutional position that supports LGBTQ+ communities and emphasize acceptance for queer clergy, while in the “backstage,” the Churches and religious organizations constrain the clergy to hide their affiliation and their identities (Keenan, 2009). Despite this, other ecclesiological and religious organizational cultures find a way to fully integrate homosexual members into the institutional framework, especially in the Protestant segment of the Christian faith (Gustav-Wrathall, 2020; Hibbs, 2006). Also, even if synodal decisions were made to ostracize clergy belonging to sexual minorities, these decisions were amended over time allowing homosexual priests and bishops to serve under specific circumstances (Hunt, 2009). From a theological point of view, the perception of sexual minorities among Orthodox theologians is that of promoters of sin (Ford, 2020, p. 298). The Autocephalous and Autonomous Orthodox Churches expressed their position clearly against the promotion of sexual minorities and their rights and even supported national policies and laws against them (Duhaček, 2015; Khlusova, 2017).

The Romanian Orthodox Church is in line with this general position of the Orthodox world regarding the homosexuality. It mobilized numerous resources, from press campaigns to letters sent to MPs and theological writings denouncing homosexuality, also gaining the support of some political parties such as “the extremist Party of Romanian National Unity and the Greater Romania Party, for which Orthodoxy and moral cleanliness represented the quintessence of Romanianism” (Turcescu & Stan, 2019, pp. 47–49). If the conservative perspective on the issue of sexual minorities remains central to the Orthodox world, there are some well-educated voices urging for a more open approach to this issue, highlighting that the traditional Christian understanding of homosexual activity as sinful is an “outdated” and “premodern” false understanding. The main source of this new thinking among Orthodox clergy seems to be “the current view of the ‘power elite’ of the political Left (sometimes called Neoliberalism or ‘Progressive Liberalism’)” (Ford, 2020).

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

There are two reasons for which Romania is an appropriate case for this study: the importance of Church in society and its active behavior against sexual minorities. First, the Romanian Orthodox Church 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 (Marica, 2018; Naletova, 2009). Second, the Romanian Orthodox Church has been very active during the 2018 referendum about the definition of the family in the Romanian Constitution. The referendum asked voters whether or not they approve a change to the family’s definition as provided by Article 48 of the Constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage (Gherghina &

Silagadze, 2022). It was initiated by the Coalition for the Family, an inter-confessional alliance of conservative religious organizations, that gathered three million signatures for its initiative (Gherghina & Silagadze, 2022). The Church was active during both the signature collection and referendum campaign. The referendum failed, as the turnout was roughly 21%, considerably below the required threshold of 30%.

Our study uses 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with Orthodox priests who 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 comes from the same locality, although some of them share the same county. The profile of the interviewees is presented in Table 1. For confidentiality and anonymity purposes, the initials of their names are fictional. The interviews were conducted face-to-face (12) and online (6) between December 15, 2020, and February 8, 2021. Our interview guide includes, among others, questions about the parish, the respondents' values and principles, their perceptions about their social role within their community, and the EU's effects on the Romanian society.

We use inductive thematic analysis to identify the ways in which the Romanian Orthodox priests see homosexuality and the EU's relation to this topic. 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 (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). In our case, the themes correspond to the general approaches used by the respondents to characterize the EU and homosexuality.

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.

4 | THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH

After the fall of the communist regime, the Romanian Orthodox Church sought to resume its activity both at the socio-pastoral and missionary level and in redefining relations with the secular state (Leustean, 2014a). In post-communist Romania, several prominent political actors inclined to provide privileged positions to the Orthodox Church and to formalize this position by including it into the law (Turcescu & Stan, 2010). Based on models of collaboration between the state and the Church available in the United Kingdom, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Greece, members of the Romanian Orthodox clergy and politicians tried to establish a church model that recognized its role as defender of Romanian identity, ensured state financial support, and guaranteed representation in parliament (Turcescu & Stan, 2010). Under pressure from civil society and members of other religious denominations in Romania, this legislative initiative was abandoned. Moreover, under the leadership of the patriarch Daniel Ciobotea, the Romanian Orthodox Church seems to have abandoned these claims. The patriarch's approach abandons the idea of the “Byzantine symphony” between the state and the Church and proposes a collaboration based on bilateral agreements that ensure religious plurality and allows the Orthodox Church to remain an important and active actor at sociopolitical level (Turcescu & Stan, 2014).

The Orthodox Church in Romania, from a pastoral and missionary point of view, is distinguished by the constant construction of religious buildings and churches (Andreescu, 2007; Stan & Turcescu, 2006). The Romanian Patriarchate stands out through the social and philanthropic projects it carries out (Dan, 2007) and through its care for the Romanians living abroad (Hlandan, 2021). For the latter, the Church is a spiritual and a community center, a place for integration in the new society, and a space for the reproduction of the Romanian ethno-religious identity (Ihlamur-Öner, 2014).

From a sociopolitical point of view, although the Orthodox Church gave up its “privileged cult” claims, it continued to remain active in the debates on human rights (especially regarding the rights of sexual minorities) and religious education in schools (Preda, 2012; Tarta, 2015a). It remains the most vocal among the country's religious denominations in defending traditional views and opposing a more permissive understanding of sexuality (Turcescu & Stan, 2005, 2019). Another debate in which the Romanian Orthodox Church was actively involved refers to religion as an object of study in public schools and its confessional character. Although the legislation offers the quality of an “optional subject” for the discipline of religion, the confessional character of the discipline was maintained under pressure from the leaders of the Orthodox Church. This allows a direct intervention of the Church in the public educational system (Ilie, 2018).

The Church seeks to make its voice heard through modern technology. It has an active presence both in the mass media, through its own channels (e.g., Radio Trinitas, Radio Renasterea, Trinitas TV), as well as in the online environment. The activity in the digital sphere is coordinated through the Basilica News Agency, the Press, and Public Relations Office of the Patriarchate and through the over 5000 official online pages created on web.com and pages on social media or on other digital platforms, managed by dioceses and parishes within the canonical territory of the Church—Romania and Romanian diaspora (Vidican-Manci, 2020).

Over the last three decades, the Orthodox Church has been increasingly challenged by various neo-Protestant churches, which progressed in terms of number of believers, available resources, notoriety, and influence. The particular capacity of the Baptist and Pentecostal Churches to obtain US-sponsored financial and logistical support allowed them to be

increasingly influential in economic and social terms. Politically, these churches penetrated the mainstream parties and succeeded in electing an increasing number of MPs, especially for the National Liberal Party (PNL). Through their capacity of mobilization and persuasion, they have exerted an ultra-conservative influence on the Romanian society, putting pressure on the Romanian Orthodox Church to augment its discourse (Mişcoiu, 2022).

5 | ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The vast majority of our respondents believed that Romania was, is, and will be increasingly under pressure by the EU to have a much more favorable treatment of nonheterosexual persons, couples and groups, including the institutionalization of same-sex marriage. This led to a specific feeling of distrust and in many cases to a direct rejection of the EU. There are three main themes that are discussed in the following subsections: (1) “homosexualization,” denationalization, and of loss of the traditional orthodox “straight” identity; (2) concerns about the indirect contagion; and (3) fears related to the EU’s intention to impose the legalization of same-sex marriage.

5.1 | “Homosexualization” and the loss of the Orthodox “straight” identity

The idea that the EU exerts both a direct and an indirect influence over its Member States is consensual among the respondents. Most believe that the cultural values and the way of life promoted by the EU are not in line with the Romanian traditions, at the core of which lies “normality, and we all understand what this means” (P.C.). In this particular understanding of normality, this is the equivalent of heterosexuality, “to be straight is a paramount value of the Romanian tradition” (L.R.). For another respondent, “this matter cannot even to be discussed: human beings are made straight by God and homosexuality is the work of Satan on Earth” (I.S.). Several priests underlined that the loss of the main yardsticks of national and religious identity go hand in hand with the assimilation of “practices against nature” (P.C.). As an elder priest explains, “there [in the EU], there is no conscience, there is no fear of God and so pederasty, narcotics and other abominations are free to flourish” (L.M.). Consequently, “we see that those who lose their Romanian-ness, automatically lose their Orthodox faith and become vulnerable to all these abnormal things, including same-sex mating” (C.M.).

This process of moving away from the “normality” is often guided by the EU. The latter is portrayed in opposition with the Romanian nation-state and with the traditional values. The relationship between the EU and Romania is seen as hierarchical with the former seeking to impose regulations and norms that will influence negatively the traditional identity of Romania. For example, one respondent explicitly argues that “proclaiming the supremacy of a continent over our country leads to our disintegration” (T.R.), while another identifies a risk of national dissolution: “Romania will melt itself into the European Babylon” (C.M.). Metaphorically, one of the respondents draws a parallel between two resorts known in the country for their balneal treatments and two biblical places known for their homosexual practices: “instead of Sovata and Govora we will have Sodom and Gomorrah” (B.B.).

Some respondents go further to argue that the loss of national identity will be complemented through the appropriation of the Romanian assets and properties by non-Romanian and

non-Orthodox citizens, “like it happened before, under the Ottomans our under the Austrians or the Hungarians” (I.P.). Another respondent explicitly links the wealth of foreigners, their interest in purchasing properties in Romania, and the incidence of homosexuality in their countries of origin:

There are hectares of land and hundreds of buildings bought by the wealthy Westerners all over Romania, as we have traitors who sell the country piece by piece. [...] There, the rule of law is no longer made by the Romanians and, consequently, behaviours that are unnatural to our way of life, such as pederasty, are allowed and even encouraged. (V.I.)

The EU encourages the “homosexualization” of the Romanian society starting with the school handbooks, “where our kids learn that they need to become homosexual before they have the age for normal relations” (I.S.). As a remedy and an appropriate reaction to such situations, the Hungarian model—where the issue of an anti-LGBTQI+ referendum was on the public agenda when conducting these interviews—seemed to be appreciated by several respondents. This is because “even if they [the Hungarians] are not Orthodox, they are Christian, and Christianity rejects such abject conducts” (E.Z.). While disclaiming any intention to “betray” Romania’s interests in relation with its “historic rivals,” one of the interviewees explained why the EU is not defensible as far as its societal and cultural options are concerned:

Look at me! I’m not a Hungarian, I’m not a Russian, I’m a purely blooded Romanian for generations. But I can’t avoid observing that the Hungarians, the Poles or the Russians protect their families, defend their children and reject these EU nonsense lesbian and gay ideology. We, the Romanians, bend our heads and accept whatever we are told to do. (P.H.)

5.2 | Concerns about the indirect moral “contagion”

The previous section indicates how for many interviewees the denationalization and the loss of religious identity that go hand in hand with the acceptance of nonheterosexual practices by the Romanian society are the direct and visible consequences of the EU integration. Nevertheless, most respondents believe there are other subtler ways in which the EU acts to support its objective of ruling over its Member States. Some literally stated that there is a process of continuous moral “contagion” of Romania with the “unhealthy, preposterous ideas related to the acceptance of intimate relations against nature” (L.M.). According to them, there are two categories of people likely to be exposed to this process of contagion: Romanians abroad and young people living in large cities.

First, the Romanians in the diaspora, are considered as victims who “have to accept daily those realities—gay marriage, transsexuality, violence, drugs and who knows what other monstrosities” (B.B.). Another priest explains that the Romanians who live in Western Europe “end up by taking all these things for being natural” and “they sometimes spread such ideas among their parents, their children, their other relatives who live in Romania” (C.G.). In the diaspora, there is an even more vulnerable group that is exposed to the “queer propaganda”: the children and the youngsters. One of the respondents elaborated on the “perverted ideas that our Romanian children are impregnated with in countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark or

Belgium” (I.P.). In a rhetorical way, a younger priest asked himself: “If you teach children that there is no difference between man and women, if you teach them, like I found out that the Dutch do, that homosexuality is natural, what could you expect? Normality?” (V.I.)

Second, several priests pointed out that the LGBTQ+ “contagion” affects particularly the younger people living in the large cities. This is because they “spend their lives on Facebook, in front of their TVs where they watch propaganda movies” (P.H.). And because they “imitate the living model – in fact a counter-model – of the Westerners” (L.M.). This way of living that our respondents despise is based on “irresponsibility and limitless enjoyment” (V.I.), especially in terms of sexual freedom, and it legitimizes “practices against nature like they were the most normal thing on Earth” (L.R.). One of the interviewees insisted that “nowadays, there is no movie, no book, no documentary without pro-sexual minority pages or scenes” (A.N.). Another respondent deplored the lack of “spirit of resistance” among the Romanian youngsters who imitate what they see in other EU countries (P.H.).

Overall, the EU is considered as a “vast unclear entity” where these ideas “that are totally opposed to our multi-secular traditions” (T.R.) have flourished. Another respondent explicitly states that the EU “made all this moral decay possible” by “not taking into consideration the voice of the real people, of those who work hard, of those who believe in God and totally reject sodomy and other deviances” (B.B.).

5.3 | Fears about the imposition of same-sex marriage

In addition to the direct and indirect influences, the strongest argument is their belief that the EU will impose the acceptance of same-sex marriage and will push for its inclusion in the Romanian legislation. In the words of one respondent:

I used to favor the EU and I still do in terms of the economic opportunities for Romania. But lately I observed that the EU requires that its members recognize the relations against nature as marriage. This is a line I cannot cross. Better out of the EU than becoming a nation of pederasts! (N.P.)

Several priests indicated that the EU attitude about the 2018 Referendum for the Traditional Family was decisive in their conviction that the EU would end up by imposing the recognition of same-sex marriage by its Member States as a mandatory requirement. The EU did not have an official position toward the referendum against the same-sex marriage in Romania. Nevertheless, several respondents consider that the EU was actively involved in the public debates around the referendum. They explained that before the referendum they were not aware of the EU’s pro-active attitude about the acceptance and the recognition of same-sex marriage. One argues that “When I saw that the Romanian officials were summoned by the Parliament of the Council of Europe¹ to explain why they supported this absolutely natural demand of the people, I understood that nothing good could come with our so-called European integration” (C.S.).

Another respondent explains that during the campaign for the “most normal thing you can imagine—that marriage is obviously between one man and one woman,” he discovered that “Europe interfered to prevent people to go to vote” (L.M.). The attitude of the EU was perceived by the interviewees as “an act of intrusion in our domestic affairs” (T.R.) or even as “the very proof homosexuals lead the EU and wish to grab the power all over the world” (C.S.). Another

respondent connected the EU's messages during the referendum campaign with "some decisions of the European Courts that imposed marital rights for the homosexuals" (C.M.) and complained about the constant attitude of the EU on the matter. Indeed, in June 2018, several months before the referendum in Romania, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruled that under certain circumstances, same-sex married partners of EU citizens are granted the right of residency in Romania under Directive 2004/38. In the spring of 2021, the same ECJ deplored the lack of implementation of EU law to enable freedom of movement for same-sex spouses by Romania (ILGA Europe, 2021). The respondent was probably aware of the 2018 ECJ ruling and inferred that the EU launched messages during the referendum consistent with this approach. However, this is not the case since the EU did not engage in any way—directly or indirectly—in the debates for the referendum.

The respondents also refer to messages of some West European government officials or to those of some members of the European Parliament about the 2018 referendum. It is unclear to what messages the interviewees refer since such speeches from foreign officials were not presented in the media. Nevertheless, the interviewees consider these speeches as "an attempt to divide the Romanian society" (N.P.) and to "deprive it of its right to say 'No'" although "our poor and maltreated people always complied with the EU rules" (I.P.). The failure of the referendum was explained through reference to the EU and its perceived positive attitude toward homosexuals: "That was the moment I realized that the Orthodox Church had only enemies in the West. Enemies who seek to defeat us by imposing their insane ideas that perverted their own societies" (B.B.).

The referendum was about defining the family in the Constitution as the union between a man and a woman. Its failure meant that this definition was not introduced in the country Constitution. Nevertheless, several respondents were convinced that after this failure the EU may go a step further and push to legalize the same-sex marriage in Romania (I.S.; V.I). The respondents expressed concerns that such a marriage will be included in legislation: "the pro-homosexual Romanian lobbyists and their European friends would attempt to rapidly promote a bill in favor of homosexual marriage" (I.S.). Behind these "unholy schemes," they see the existence of "very strong European interests" (V.I). According to an even more radical member of the clergy who answered our questions, "They are looking for the best moment to operate this change and to please their Brussels-based masters" (E.Z.). Under these circumstances, the EU is "particularly dangerous for the sanity of our people" (C.G.), and, consequently, "measures of rejection against its pro-gay actions need to be taken" (C.S.).

In spite of this Eurosceptic radicalization of many Orthodox priests, some members of the clergy display moderate opinions. Four interviewees show a limited penchant in connecting the European integration with an obligation of granting extensive rights for sexual minorities. Out of these, two are openly Europhile and reject a connection between belonging to the EU and being forced to accept same-sex marriage. One of them explicitly argues: "there are many instances in the EU: some countries legalized homosexual marriage—like the Netherlands or even France—while others will probably never do it like the countries in Eastern Europe. Nobody forces nobody" (A.N.). For the other moderate and pro-European priest, it would be a "huge error to believe that Europe means same-sex marriage and we should leave the EU because of that. That is what the extremists want us to do" (M.O.). However, as recent research illustrates, these moderate discourses and attitudes are in minority and continue to shrink in the aftermath of the 2018 Referendum and of the 2020 parliamentary elections (Gherghina & Mişcoiu, 2022).

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This article analyzed how the Romanian Orthodox priests see the relationship between the EU and homosexuality. The results of the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study indicate that most priests perceive the EU as imposing norms and regulations about homosexual relations. The respondents explicitly outlined their fears that this process of “homosexualization” was likely to result in a loss of faith, tradition, and national identity. The conservative values are a counter-weight to the EU’s attempts to adopt policies that would destabilize the religious values of ordinary citizens. Some segments in society are more exposed to the ideas of enhanced rights for sexual minorities. More precisely, the Romanians abroad and the young people in large cities may be influenced strongly by the EU since they see the example of other countries and their ties with religion are weaker. Finally, the priests expressed concerns about the EU policies meant to legalize same-sex marriage. These three elements led to a specific feeling of distrust and often direct rejection of the EU.

The findings of our analysis have broader implications that go beyond the single-case study investigated here. At theoretical level, there is among the clergy a relationship between the EU and homosexuality that requires further investigation. We illustrate how this perception is based on a messianic or apocalyptic interpretation of events, truncated knowledge, or false memories. The views expressed by respondents contrast the values and norms of the EU—reflected in the process of Europeanization over time—with the conservative approaches toward traditions, national values, and beliefs. The existence of such a perception among the clergy confirms earlier accounts about the Church’s institutional discourse toward the EU in many new Member States. In this sense, it highlights the importance of including the views on homosexuality in future analytical frameworks aiming to understand the support for the EU or national identity.

At empirical level, our analysis identifies the existence of a top-down mechanism in the eyes of many Orthodox priests according to which the EU seeks to impose policies that do not belong to the culture and tradition of Member States. The absence of post-accession conditionality contrasts sharply with this belief that the EU imposes the acceptance of sexual minorities’ rights and freedoms. Equally important, the EU’s image is shaped by this top-down effect. It is considered an institution governed by decaying norms and values that can hardly provide any benefits to the nation. This rhetoric of “us” versus “them” is reflected in the politics of East European countries, where an increasing number of anti-EU actors gain seats in national parliaments. In Romania, the match between the religious and political discourses is not accidental since the Church actively supported an anti-EU party in the 2020 legislative elections. As such, homosexuality may be part of a larger agenda against the EU (Mişcoiu, 2021).

Along similar lines, given the apparently entrenched view of Orthodox clergy and their urgent need to retain moral power in Romania, the analysis could be replicated in other countries or regions where a relatively small cluster of religious elites use the issue of (homo)sexuality to maintain power. Some theocratic states—Christian or Muslim—construct sexuality as a threat from “the West” and implicitly as a threat to their own influence and power. The Romanian case provides several important findings that could be investigated in other regimes—more or less theocratic—to reflect the extent to which the symbolic mission to assert common values is targeted against the public anathematization of sexuality.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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ENDNOTE

¹ This institution does not exist and the respondent merges the European Parliament, which is a EU institution, with the Council of Europe, which is a non-EU institution. This reference indicates the degree of confusion and limited factual knowledge about the EU among the respondents.

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