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Youth Religious Socialization and Social Capital. A Case Study

STUDIA I ANALIZY

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Abstract: *This research focuses on the role played by youth religious organizations in the shaping of young people's social capital in Romania. Based on a series of interviews and focus groups with young people engaged in religious organizations and the leaders of those organizations, we find that youth religious socialization is an important process in creating or reinforcing social and political values, and thus, it may be conducive to social capital. Although nuanced comparisons across denominations are difficult to make due to the unavailability of data, a distinction seems to appear between Orthodox and Catholic religiously active youth. For example, while young people in Catholic organizations are encouraged to forge relationships with people outside their organizations (bridging social capital), those belonging to Orthodox groups tend to keep to themselves, and, at times, even employ a strict access policy for newcomers wanting to join (bonding social capital). Conclusions suggest the need to approach the effects of youth religious socialization in a nuanced way.*

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Introduction

Socialization through participation in various associational contexts is critical for acquiring civic skills and democratic values. It is even more so in the case of the youth in democratizing countries. While it is not always easy to discern whether certain values and behaviors are learned through participation or, in fact, pre-exist and determine such participation, it is unquestionable that democratic political culture is formed through such participatory acts as well¹.

In this paper, we explore socialization processes within youth religious organizations in Romania. More specifically, we focus on how social capital is created within youth religious organizations in Romania, while also taking into consideration the formation of certain social values, such as tolerance for diversity and social trust. Our endeavor is informed by the long-established distinction between “bonding” and “bridging” forms of social capital².

Based on focus groups and interviews with members of (mostly) Orthodox youth organizations, and also some key adult figures representing the leaders of these organizations, we explore both motivations to join religious associations in the case of the youth, and the values and principles they adhere to, potential signs of social capital creation. Focusing on Orthodox youth organizations has a two-fold motivation. First, as it will be shown below, Orthodoxy is the majority and dominant denomination in Romania, and the Orthodox Church is a vocal and visible political and social actor. Second, including youth religious organizations affiliated with other denominations would have stretched the limits of comparative analysis, since, for example, there are many different types of Protestant and New Protestant churches, and comparing results would have been methodologically challenging. Nevertheless, we included in the analysis one Catholic religious organization, since, while different, the Catholic and Orthodox churches are similar in terms of high institutionalization and a long history in the Romanian space.

Post-communist countries have a rather short history of civil society and associational life, due to the totalitarian character of the pre-democratic regime. Moreover, Romanian communism was amongst the strictest in terms of restricting freedoms, especially in terms of the freedom of association. After the fall of the communist regime, civil society started to (re)construct itself, often with support from abroad³. In this context, and under pressure to secure

¹ A. de Toqueville, *Democracy in America*, University of Chicago Press, 2002.

² R. Putnam, *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*, Simon and Schuster, 2006.

³ T. Carothers, *Aiding Democracy Abroad. The Learning Curve*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1999.

support from the youth, churches also became involved in youth socialization processes, thus becoming rather vocal actors in the social sphere. Religious socialization has been shown to be an important process in their formation as democratic citizens, but not all associations offer the same experiences and lead to the same results⁴. Therefore, we aim to find out whether youth socialization in religious organizations in Romania leads to the formation of social capital and acceptance of certain social and political values.

Orthodox youth associations in Romania lie – most often – at the conservative end of the ideological spectrum. Consequently, the expectation was that participation in religious youth organizations would be linked with traditionalist, nationalist and anti-progressive views. Interestingly, although this expectation was broadly met, contextual findings suggest the need for a more nuanced approach.

The next section reviews literature on the relationship between religion and social capital. Section 2 presents the religious landscape in Romania, a predominantly Orthodox country, among the most religious in Europe. Section 3 focuses on analyzing information gathered through focus groups and interviews regarding social capital within youth religious organizations. The last section extracts the most important findings of this research and draws directions for further research.

Religion and social capital

The link between religion and social capital is approached in the literature from a diversity of angles, with findings that suggest a multitude of ways in which religious activism can have an impact on individuals' social values and conduct. Even though social capital is often praised for the benefits it brings to individuals and communities alike, the universality of positive externalities is disputed at times⁵. Along these lines, in an analysis that covers 19 countries from Europe, religious organizations seem to stray from the otherwise shared pattern where membership in voluntary associations is connected to democracy-supportive attitudes⁶. Even though members of associations

⁴ R.N. Bellah, *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life*, University of California Press, 1985.

⁵ J.W. Van Deth, S. Zmerli, *Introduction: Civicness, Equality, and Democracy: A "Dark Side" of Social Capital?*, «American Behavioral Scientist» 2010, vol. 53, no. 55, pp. 631–639, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209350827> (28.07.2023).

⁶ J.W. Van Deth, *Participation in Voluntary Associations: Dark Sides in a Sunny World?*, «American Behavioral Scientist» 2010, vol. 53, no. 5, pp. 640–656, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209350828> (28.07.2023).

of any type (including of religious type) are found to be more content with democracy and more engaged politically than non-members, those belonging to religious organizations stand out through the low importance attached to political issues⁷.

While focusing on the Norwegian context, which enjoys a strong tradition of voluntarism, Strømsnes examines the relationship between affiliation to religious organizations and attendance of church on the one hand and political activism and measures of social capital on the other hand. With regard to affiliation, the author finds that compared to non-belonging or passive belonging, active membership in religious organizations is associated with a more optimistic perception of people's trustworthiness, fairness and willingness to help. Additionally, active members appear to be more tolerant towards social groups that are likely to face exclusion or discriminatory attitudes. However, these seemingly encouraging results vanish once the analysis incorporates socio-demographic attributes that have a clearly better explanatory power for social trust and tolerance. Nonetheless, both membership and church attendance are found to exert a modest yet positive effect on political activism⁸.

Robert Wuthnow approaches the link between engagement in religious activities and social capital from the perspective of involvement enabling the creation of and access to networks that help individuals pursue their objectives⁹. Drawing on the consecrated delineation between the bonding and bridging forms of social capital, the author further differentiates between "identity-bridging" and "status-bridging social capital"¹⁰. The latter is particularly relevant as it refers to establishing personal connections with people who occupy prominent positions in various areas of social life. Indeed, Wuthnow finds that affiliation to religious congregations is related to having affluent people or individuals with high public visibility in one's group of friends.

Further studies add to the evidence that religious engagement is beneficial to an individual from a social network point of view. For example, Ellison and George show that in some American communities, church-going is associated with having larger networks of friends and acquaintances, with more frequent

⁷ Ibidem.

⁸ K. Strømsnes, *The Importance of Church Attendance and Membership of Religious Voluntary Associations for the Formation of Social Capital*, «Social Compass» 2008, vol. 55, no. 4, pp. 478–496, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768608097234> (28.07.2023).

⁹ R. Wuthnow, *Religious involvement and status-bridging social capital*, «Journal for the scientific study of religion» 2002, vol. 41, no. 4, pp. 669–684, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.00153> (28.07.2023).

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 670.

contact with people within these networks, and benefiting from their support, while also feeling looked after within these groups¹¹.

A perspective concerned with the welfare of disadvantaged groups is offered by Lockhart, examining the potential of secular and faith-based organizations to produce social ties that further sustain the beneficiaries of their services¹². Arguing that “faith-based organizations do provide bonding social capital”, the author is confident that these bodies are also able to “help the poor gain bridging social capital and other resources that traverse denominational, racial, economic and geographic divisions”¹³.

The link between religion-related attributes and acceptance of diversity is examined by Park and Bowman with a focus on American college students¹⁴. A central concern is related to the effect that students’ religiosity and participation in campus religious organizations have on their socialization patterns with fellows who don’t belong to their own racial/ethnic group – what the authors call “cross-racial interaction”¹⁵. The authors find that students’ religiosity has an unanticipated positive effect on cross-racial interaction. Moreover, membership in student religious organizations, even in situations when these groups are dominated by members with the same racial/ethnic background, does not rule out interaction between diverse individuals.

Due to the multiple formative experiences teenagers are exposed to/involved in, adolescence is an influential phase in one’s life course. Smith focuses on this particular life stage, in a discussion of American adolescents and the potential mechanisms by which religious involvement can impact their values and behaviors¹⁶. Along these lines, it is argued that the influence of religion can manifest with respect to “moral order”, “learned competencies”, and “social and organizational ties”¹⁷. Social capital is included in the last of the three dimensions, as religious organizations presumably enable “personal

¹¹ C.G. Ellison, L.K. George, *Religious involvement, social ties, and social support in a southeastern community*, «Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion» 1994, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 46–61, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1386636> (28.07.2023).

¹² W.H. Lockhart, *Building bridges and bonds: Generating social capital in secular and faith-based poverty-to-work programs*, «Sociology of religion» 2005, vol. 66, no. 1, pp. 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4153115> (28.07.2023).

¹³ Ibidem, pp. 57–58.

¹⁴ J.J. Park, A. Bowman, *Religion as Bridging or Bonding Social Capital: Race, religion and cross-racial interaction for college students*, «Sociology of Education» 2015, vol. 88, no. 1, pp. 20–37, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040714560172> (28.07.2023).

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 26.

¹⁶ C. Smith, *Theorizing Religious Effects among American Adolescents*, «Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion» 2003, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 1–30, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-5906.t01-1-00158> (28.07.2023).

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 19.

access to other adult members in their religious communities, affording cross-generational network ties with the potential to provide extra-familial, trusting relationships of care and accountability”, while at the same time connecting “youth to wider sources of helpful information, resources, and opportunities”¹⁸.

A study from 2001 where adolescents are the population of interest is advanced by Muller and Ellison¹⁹. The authors find that religious involvement has beneficial effects for young people’s academic outcomes, and, importantly, that this relationship is noticeably mediated by gains in social capital in relation to family and community, facilitated by engagement in religious activities and religiosity.

While religiosity is commonly assumed to include both a spiritual individual aspect and a more collective, participatory aspect, those two do not necessarily overlap²⁰. It is possible that a person is more spiritual and does not feel the need to participate in church activities, just as those participating in various church related activities may not do so for primarily spiritual reasons. Religious participation may have positive effects on joining other social networks, although it may also reduce the time available for such involvement, or limit such participation due to the often-closed nature of religious communities²¹. Nevertheless, the effect that religious participation has on social capital formation is influenced, among others, by how in-group identities are formed. Such identities need to always be conceived of as relational – meaning that context and pre-existing values and attitudes interact through activities within the group²². Joining a religious organization may be motivated by both religious and social networking reasons, but the experience of belonging to such organizations can reinforce or even change previously constructed identities.

Nevertheless, religious identification and participation may have strong positive effects on different types of civic engagement as well. For example,

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 25.

¹⁹ C. Muller, C.G. Ellison, *Religious involvement, social capital, and adolescents’ academic progress: Evidence from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988*, «Sociological focus» 2001, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 155–183, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00380237.2001.10571189> (28.07.2023).

²⁰ A. Kaasa, *Religion and social capital: evidence from European countries*, «International Review of Sociology» 2013, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 578–596, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03906701.2013.856162> (28.07.2023).

²¹ Ibidem. For more information on religion as a private and rather non participatory process see: G. Davie, *Believing without Belonging: Is This the Future of Religion in Britain?*, «Social Compass» 1990, vol. 37, no. 4, pp. 455–469, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003776890037004004> (28.07.2023).

²² N. Hopkins, *Religion and Social Capital: Identity Matters*, «J. Community Appl. Soc. Psychol.» 2011, vol. 21, pp. 528–540, <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.1120> (28.07.2023).

based on Coleman's view of social capital, Greeley notes that religious participation and engagement is a strong predictor of volunteering in the United States; moreover, this spillover effect is observed not only in terms of religious volunteering, but also in projects that are not led or implemented by churches or religious organizations (secular)²³. Other research shows that, among the youth, social capital may have an impact on moral orientations (empathy or altruism), but this is not per se a result of religious participation, but rather of the solid and trusting relationships that are formed within such participation²⁴.

In conclusion, research findings show that religious participation and socialization through religious organizations can have beneficial effects on social capital. Nevertheless, these positive effects are mediated by a host of intervening factors such as the internal culture of a particular organization, the socio-economic structure of the pool of its members, and the specificities that each organization presents, which are connected to both religious doctrine and broader, system-wide characteristics of civil society and political culture in a certain country. Additionally, not all religious participation leads to social capital that extends to different outgroups.

Religion in Romania – social capital and youth religious associations

The religious landscape in Romania is dominated by the Orthodox Church. According to a publication by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs (2015, p. 34), 86.45% of Romanians are Orthodox (based on the census from 2011), and every other religion out of the 18 recognized by the state only has less than 5% of confidants, with the Roman-Catholic, Reformed and Pentecostal amassing more than 1% each. A unique situation is represented by the Greek-Catholic Church, which, in 2011, had 0.8% of the total number of confidants, a number that could in reality be higher given the outlawing of Greek-Catholicism during communism, and the forced transfer of its churches to the Orthodox Church. The communist period was a difficult time for religious denominations other than Orthodox. The nationalist character of the regime involved an emphasis on homogeneity that built on exclusion-prone discourses already shaped dur-

²³ A. Greeley, *Coleman Revisited: Religious Structures as a Source of Social Capital*, «American Behavioral Scientist» 1997, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 587–594, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764297040005005> (28.07.2023).

²⁴ P. Ebstyn King, J.L. Furrow, *Religion as a resource for positive youth development: Religion, social capital, and moral outcomes*, «Psychology of Religion and Spirituality» 2008, vol. 5(1), pp. 34–49, <https://doi.org/10.1037/1941-1022.5.1.34> (28.07.2023).

ing the interwar years²⁵. Accordingly, the newly installed communist regime assumed that the Catholic Church's links to the Western world would grow into a threat and within this logic it forbade the Greek Catholic Church, safeguarding an unchallenged primacy for the regime-friendly Orthodox Church²⁶. Ideologically and politically imposed conversion to Orthodoxy did not result in massive re-conversion after 1989, simply because the church did not have any places of worship left. Consequently, it is possible that the share of Greek-Catholics in Romania (in fact, in Transylvania) may be or could have been much higher.

The most recent census from 2021 caused a certain commotion in the public debate, due to the unexpectedly large share of citizens (about 15%) who did not disclose their religious affiliation²⁷. In spite of this, the Orthodox affiliation continues to dominate the confessional landscape in Romania (with 85.3% declared members), yet compared to 2011, more citizens self-identified as atheist or reported no religion²⁸.

The Romanian Constitution of 1991 consecrated freedom of religion and the Law 498/2006 on the Freedom of Religion and the General Status of Religions detailed the relationship between church and state in Romania. Accordingly, although churches are encouraged to finance themselves, the state budget is a main contributor to church finances. In 2014, the state allocated about 100 million euros for churches in Romania, out of which 65% went to salaries of clergy and non-clerical staff and 35% to repairs and construction of houses of worship²⁹. State support is distributed to the 18 recognized religions according to a proportionality principle, a strategy that benefits the Orthodox Church.

Romania is one of the most religious countries in Central and Eastern Europe, if survey data is deemed valid. The most recent wave of the European Values Study (2018) shows that 97% of Romanians believe in God, 85% perceive themselves as religious, 75% believe in Heaven, while 70% believe in Hell

²⁵ U. Korkut, *Nationalism versus internationalism: The roles of political and cultural elites in interwar and communist Romania*, «Nationalities Papers» 2006, vol. 34, no. 2, pp. 131–55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990600617698> (28.07.2023).

²⁶ L.N. Leuştean, *Ethno-symbolic nationalism, Orthodoxy and the installation of communism in Romania: 23 August 1944 to 30 December 1947*, «Nationalities Papers» 2005, vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 439–458, DOI: 10.1080/00905990500353915.

²⁷ O. Cornea, *Recensământ 2022. De ce este religia marea necunoscută, cu 15% dintre români nedeclarați* [Census 2022. Why religion is the great unknown, with 15% of Romanians undeclared], Europa Liberă România, January 8, 2023, <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/religie-recensamant2022-romani-/32210549.html> (28.07.2023).

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, *State and Religions in Romania*, Litera 2015, p. 55.

or in life after death³⁰. These religiosity measures are not matched by similarly high church attendance; only about 30% of respondents are going to church once a week or more often. The discrepancy between participatory and non-participatory religiosity can be a feature of Orthodox churches themselves, where church attendance is not as strictly enforced as in Catholicism. What is even more interesting, is that confidence in church is very high among the Romanian population, the highest among European Union countries, and, if other Eastern European Orthodox-dominated countries are included in the analysis, it is second only to Georgia. Churches are active providers of social services and charity, but it is impossible to estimate the share of such services offered by churches and religious organizations in the total public and private budget allocated to them, because of the rather opaque finance situation of churches³¹. Although, traditionally, the Orthodox Church has been more focused on spiritual matters, after 1989, it engaged more actively with the social sector, especially through its own federation of religious organizations, Filantropia. Many churches in Romania have established all types of groups and associations for the youth, where different types of activities are run, in order to both bring young people closer to religion and church, and to offer alternative arenas of socialization. However, such a dense network of religious organizations is a rather recent feature of the Romanian religious landscape, given five decades of communist quasi-secularization.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is fairly visible in several important debates within the society, either supporting the pro-life movement, or opposing vigorously the emancipation of sexual minorities³². The church is unapologetic for its hard conservative stance, assuming the role of guardian of tradition and of ethnic/national identity carrier, opposing liberal values and the effects of globalization/cosmopolitanism.

The inclusion of one Greek-Catholic youth organization in the analysis was motivated by the importance of the interplay between Orthodoxy and Catholicism in the creation of national and regional/local identity in the Western part of Romania (Transylvania). The Uniate/Greek Catholic Church is a historical

³⁰ Data from the European Values Study can be accessed here, <https://europeanvaluesstudy.eu/>.

³¹ I. Conovici (coord.), A. Secal, I. Opincaru, *Organizatiile cu profil religios angajate in economia sociala in Romania [Faith based organizations engaged in social economy in Romania]*, Institutul de Economie Sociala/FDSC 2013.

³² For more information about the official position of the Romanian Orthodox Church see DIGI 24, 2018, *Pozitia Bisericii Ortodoxe fata de referendum si de parteneriatul civil [The position of the Orthodox Church towards the referendum and civil partnership]*, 26.03.2018, <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/pozitia-bisericii-ortodoxe-fata-de-referendum-si-de-parteneriatul-civil-902253> (28.07.2023).

presence in Transylvania for more than three centuries, although most of its history unfolded during times when Transylvania was not part of Romania, since the Romanian unification of historical regions only took place in 1918. Consequently, from the perspective of national and ethnic identity, the presence of Uniatism was associated with both foreign domination (for the Orthodox) and solid links with Western Christianity (for the Greek Catholics). Moreover, the outlawing of the Greek Catholic Church during communism, and its difficult re-establishment after 1989 (because of the Romanian Orthodox Church's opposition) allowed it to construct a particular kind of identity which opposed the archaic and ritualistic ethos of the Orthodox Church, and underlined its commitment to Westernization and modernization. Consequently, we expect the Greek-Catholic Church youth organization to potentially place emphasis on different values than the Orthodox organizations especially because of its historical evolution and different construction of identity.

Data analysis and key findings

The interviews and focus groups analyzed in this section were conducted in 2017, with members of several religious organizations in Romania, mostly Orthodox and one Greek-Catholic. Focus groups were conducted in 5 religious organizations, sometimes complemented with interviews with the leaders of the organizations. Two separate interviews were conducted with representatives of other organizations in those instances where focus groups could not be organized. Below, we describe the organizations whose members we interviewed. Except for the first organization which is Greek-Catholic, all other organizations are affiliated in one way or another with the Romanian Orthodox Church. To safeguard anonymity, we use pseudonyms instead of names for the organizations, and outline in the following the relevant attributes of their profile.

Organization 1. Although the organization was founded almost 100 years ago, the outlawing of Greek-Catholicism during communism made its evolution difficult. It was reactivated in 1994 in Cluj, and it was recognized as such by the Romanian state in 2003. Activities include pilgrimages, summer camps, cultural activities, lectures and debates on selected topics of interest for youth (during the focus group, one of the members mentioned ecumenism and intellectual development of the youth as part of its mission). At the focus group session, 8 members of the association were present. Unlike many Orthodox similar groups, *Organization 1* is keen to develop activities focused on acknowledging diversity and on encouraging tolerance.

Organization 2 was established in 2013, at the regional Orthodox Metropolitan structure of Cluj, Maramures and Salaj. It promotes Christian-Orthodox values, education, civic values, and active development of its members. It offers activities that include youth camps, the March for Life, culture/theater groups, networking with other Orthodox youth organizations, lectures and charity. Older members mentor younger members and seek to convey the organization's core values among the new adherents. Most activities are offered in partnership with a student Christian organization; 11 participants were present for the focus group session.

Organization 3. The group coordinator argued that it was created as an arena where the youth could share ideas and values central to Orthodox doctrine. The principles upheld by the group include: helping others, education, and a pro-life stance. The organization started its activity in 2016, with 26 members. At the moment of the focus group it had 11 active members, but sought to recruit more members in the future; 7 members participated in the focus group.

Organization 4. The organization was created in 2013, and it includes not only young people, but also adults – teachers and priests. Usually, it organizes various activities in line with Christian principles. They are keen to emphasize that their activity is not political, but civic. We interviewed the coordinator, who is a priest, and conducted a focus group session with six participants.

Organization 5. Although this is not a religious organization, religion is a key component in their activities, since the main focus is to bring traditions closer to the youth and emphasize the role of tradition in society. The focus group brought together 5 participants.

Organization 6 aims to bring young people together (14–18 years of age) and offer them opportunities for interaction and socialization. It is centered upon choral music, and an interview was conducted with the leader.

Organization 7. The organization aims to form facilitators for socio-economic activities; it consists of a small number of young people, the rest being adults, priests mostly. The interview was carried out with one of the young members.

The focus groups and interviews were structured along several lines. The overarching idea of this data gathering process was to find out what attracts youth to religious organizations, what is their motivation for joining and what are the perceived benefits from becoming a member. The common thread throughout all focus groups and interviews was the issue of **social capital**, especially the distinction between *bonding* and *bridging* social capital. Consequently, we asked questions about social trust, about norms and values in the community and the society. After presenting their organizations – in

terms of mission, membership, activities and recruitment strategies – participants answered questions regarding core social values that the organization is built upon. In so doing, respondents had to look into their own values, see how participating in the organization affected those values, and evaluate how important they are in recruiting new volunteers. Another major topic of discussion revolved around the main problems/threats in Romanian society as well as at the global level. Moreover, the role of the youth and their civic and political participation were also touched upon. The issues of **diversity and non-discrimination** were pervasive throughout the interviews and focus groups, especially since the most important topic of this research was social capital creation in youth religious organizations, and the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital is directly related to accommodating diversity.

All organizations have a spiritual dimension, as is fitting for a religious group. In all organizations, the transmission of moral values from older generations is a priority. In *Organization 1*, for example, one respondent mentioned that “it is good to see that a child, may he be as young as he is [...] that he already has an image about church”. Engaging with a religious organization is seen by *Organization 1* members as part of the process of becoming a responsible citizen: “involvement in associations is the last link in the chain of creating a human being”. In most Orthodox organizations, there is a clear priority to bring young people closer to religion and church. Especially in *Organization 2*, it is important for members to engage with non-members and attempt to change the recently formed rather negative image of the Romanian Orthodox Church: “we help people see that Orthodox religion is not about money, greed, or brain-washing”.

All organizations have common core values that bring members together: love, faith, unity, friendship, higher aspirations (spiritual), and better communication among members. Overall, all organizations aim to offer young people alternative arenas for socialization that are markedly different from the mainstream ones (e.g. bars, clubs) that focus on hedonism and consumption, thus being seen as superficial.

The issues identified by respondents as being the most pressing challenges faced by society in Romania and globally are different from organization to organization, perhaps along confessional lines. For instance, members of *Organization 1* believe that the one problem that society faces is the lack of sincerity, that is why the organization places sincerity, respect and integrity at its core. Moreover, members of *Organization 1* also believe that Romanian society is too apathetic, because citizens are not civically engaged. The lack of sincerity is also seen at the root of fake news popularity. *Organization 1* orga-

nized awareness raising activities before elections, so that voting can be an informed participatory act. For *Organization 5*, the central problem of Romanian society is the lack of trust in our kind, in our communities. In fact, several respondents mentioned that selfishness is one key problem in Romanian society: *"we live everyday with people, and if you cannot help them, you cannot help yourself"* (*Organization 7*). A respondent from *Organization 6* believes that *"the main problems that Romania faces are the lack of respect among people and the lack of responsibility of those in power; these issues originate in lack of education and a misunderstanding of freedom"* (probably referring to freedom without responsibility). In *Organization 2*, the most pressing problems are associated with manipulating mass-media, fake news, the existence of parishes that are not sufficiently involved in the lives of their confidants and an overall lack of societal cohesion. Furthermore, a pressing problem is the fact that youth are increasingly disengaged with religion: attachment to religion and church is formed in the family, and the youth need constant reminders regarding the importance of Christian values. Members of *Organization 4* mentioned that some of the most important problems of Romanian youth are lack of identity, as well as *borrowing* too much from abroad: *"we borrow too much from those around us, and we forget about our identity. We have our identity, our nation's (identity), Christian, but we take from others the sinful part of identity such as clothing and different types of behaving, we need equilibrium"*, *"one very big problem is the turning upside down of values: we relegate Christ to a little drawer and turn everything into image and consumption (social media)"*, *"people do not meet face to face although they are very active on social media"*. The priest from *Organization 4* also mentioned blaming the other (scapegoating) as a significant problem in Romanian society.

Overall, perceptions of the main problems in Romanian society can be structured along two intersecting dimensions. First, there are issues related to social values or lack thereof: lack of societal cohesion and sincerity, insufficient civic engagement, misunderstanding and abusing freedom, and the spread of fake news. Some of those issues are consequences of political transformations and democratization, although none of the respondents made the connection between social realities and political mishaps (in fact, at times, respondents were cautious to deliberately not include the political sphere in their arguments, although the latter were clearly political). Second, there is the religious dimension – focusing on increasing the role of religion and morality in everyday life: in most Orthodox organizations religious values were seen as important counter attack strategies against globalization and the pressure of Westernization (with all that the latter entails, from consumerism, to hedonism, but also minority rights and increased secularization).

When it comes to **global issues**, opinions were as divided. The respondents from *Organization 2*, for example, mentioned individualism as a threat to societal cohesion. Respondents at *Organization 4* have a markedly pessimistic view: *"security is the problem of our world, because turning values upside down leads to insecurity. Being politically correct [...] represents a threat to security. Also, we do have technology, but we do not have security, and this is because people have too much power. When God is taken out of society, what remains is the human being. And human exploits human."* The priest at *Organization 4* concurs: *"going away from Jesus Christ, people forgot God because they fell into a trap of comfort and the devil knows how to offer comfort (in a materialistic sense; this is a critique of materialism and consumerism, which is a passing fancy, it is not eternal). People forget to put something aside for the soul"*. In Orthodox associations there is quasi consensus regarding the negative effects of secularization and liberalism. Interestingly, one argument related insecurity with secularization, although it is just as obvious that too much religion can also mean a threat to security (for example religious fundamentalist terrorism). Another noteworthy connection is made between political correctness and insecurity; the explanation is that granting too many rights to different minorities creates a milieu of insecurity (for the majority).

Social trust questions were asked during all focus groups and interviews. The *Organization 6* leader believes that trust is cultivated in the family and without it, families, friendships and even public institutions do not function properly. He states: *"I start off from the premise that we need to have total trust in every person"*. Trust is a process that requires one to have *"clean thinking, based on the idea that it is the other, and not me, in the center of attention; trust cannot exist without sincerity"*. The respondent from *Organization 7* is cautious in relation to the topic of trust; she argues that she has very low trust in people she does not know, but is very trustful of those belonging to her own organization, especially because they were priests or, at least had healthy/similar principles: *"you have to be very careful whom you trust"*. This prudent approach seems to be fairly common among members of other Orthodox organizations as well. A respondent from *Organization 3* explains: *"if you want God to protect you, you have to protect yourself; we do have trust, but it is limited; one can only have unlimited trust in God [...] but yes, I have trust [...] I have more trust in the members of the organization, because we are like a family and families do not function without trust"*. Members of *Organization 4* assert that, in general, they trust others, and if they get disappointed, they do not label: *"trust in other organization members is complete. We would not sacrifice ourselves if we did not trust each other."* The priest at *Organization 4* argues that *"first, we need to trust God; then we have to trust other people, but only up to the moment when they*

prove us wrong (in giving them trust). I trust children the most [...] and I have a lot of trust in the members of the organization." He believes that trust equals intuition: *"intuitively, I can trust everybody, but there are critical moments that help you make the selection of people you trust. From my experience, there are usually very few people that you end up trusting, but this does not mean that you change your attitude towards them or disrespect them"*. Contrastingly, members from *Organization 2* argued that participation in the activities conducted by their group (especially the camps and outings) made them trust more people in their community (and not just their religious community, but, nevertheless, their community). Overall, conceptualizations of social trust are different from what Uslaner (2002) would call moralistic trust. Most respondents believe that trust is a process through which one needs to be careful not to be disappointed by others; only God benefits from complete trust, and, indeed, trust cultivated within the organization is important. It then becomes obvious that youth religious organizations are more arenas for bonding rather than bridging social capital.

A significant component of bridging social capital can be argued to be **tolerance towards the other and accommodation of diversity**. Tolerance was incorporated in the ethos of the analyzed organization to various degrees. Among all respondents, only those from *Organization 1* singled out the need to cultivate tolerance among society as a core principle of their work: *"Romanian society is not tolerant with those that are different: tensions arising from hatred towards Hungarians or Roma are examples of this"*. Moreover, *Organization 1* members believe that intolerance is usually learned in the family and oftentimes accentuated by prejudice and stereotypical thinking. One member explained: *"I found it interesting to see all these new things, to see how they are and how others perceived them, and it gave me a good impression about Cluj as a place where people are diverse and accept each other [...] practically, this makes you free"* (connection between freedom and tolerance). In addition, members of *Organization 2* explained that their camps and trips are not divided by ethnicity or in any other way, and so they are open to/embracing of minorities.

In contrast, at *Organization 7*, a respondent is reticent when it comes to minorities: *"in my class, half were Hungarians and we did not get along, we really did not get along because they did not accept to speak our Romanian language. We (Romanians) were feeling humiliated in our own country"*. Although she mentioned earlier that the most important qualities of Romanian people are warmth, openness and being welcoming (and being good at tradition keeping), she is not keen on Romania receiving refugees and migrants; she motivates her choice: *"from what I know, they created turmoil in the world and I am a peaceful person"*. Furthermore, when it comes to fighting discrimination

she argues that: *"if I don't like something, I do not take part in it"*. Members of *Organization 5* disagree and are more supportive of welcoming refugees *"even though that would increase the risk of terrorist attacks [...] also, a community that receives migrants may see threats to national values and their dilution, because of not being well consolidated"*. Given fairly low levels of social trust in general, it is possible that fear of others in fact reflects fear in one's own community. They also mention the fact that Romanians are known for authenticity and the warmth with which they welcome foreigners into their homes.

At *Organization 3* the discussion about tolerance was lengthy, and 2 respondents were particularly keen to voice their concerns. One young man had a loudly intolerant attitude, while one young woman was more supportive of diversity, at least at the level of discourse. There is acceptance of other religions, but those religions should also accept the fact that Orthodox faith is dominant: *"we respect them as long as they respect us [...] they need to understand that we are the majority, and this is sometimes not obvious, since the minority seems to have a higher status (young man)"*. Joint projects are nevertheless realized together with organizations from other religions – Pro Vita March for example. Speaking about ethnic minorities, one respondent argued: *"I see something strange: we want to forego some historical evidence [i.e. probably the fact that Transylvania is part of Romania now]; we need to respect all because all have been created by God, but, sometimes, we see that they disregard us. (young man)"*; *"but this should not affect us, but it should motivate us to create unity (young woman)"*; *"discrimination is against what we strive for (young woman)"*. The young man also believes that discrimination towards the Roma minority exists because *"the Roma beg for it (through their actions)"*. In terms of LGBT rights, both vocal respondents were against it: *"we were happy when the law about the traditional family passed [NB it did not pass, neither did the referendum]"*. The young woman believes that homosexuality is not normal but they do not consider LGBT people (if they met any) inferior, because this attitude created problems in the past: *"we do not treat them like animals, we are not hypocritical"*. Alternatively, the young man is somewhat more critical: *"there was a politically incorrect joke on the Internet that said God created Adam and Eve and not Adam and George [...] I have watched many TV shows from the US that showed that children of gay couples were traumatized"*. The same distinction between the two respondents is apparent when it comes to refugees, with the young woman arguing that *"we treat everybody as our equal, our brother, and it is our duty to help when they are in need [...] we need to treat refugees like our brothers, but, also, we cannot forget ourselves"*, while the young man asserts: *"some refugees are not extremists, but if it comes to extremism, we have to be very careful"*.

While an *Organization 4* respondent said that the refugee problem is not something they know too much about, he nevertheless claimed that, in general, *"there is a danger of diluting Christian values, a deliberate system that wants to make us all equal, without identity, easy to control; that is what globalization wants, for us to be all alike"*. The priest at *Organization 4* welcomes all ethnicities and religions in the organization. Nevertheless, although immigrants are in poor situations and we need to help them, eventually they need to be helped to go back home *"because the best place for them is their country [...] after there is no conflict and the economy is working. I don't think that they would find their roots here"*.

Accommodation of diversity is approached in different ways by *Organization 1* and the Orthodox organizations respectively. For *Organization 1*, tolerance is a value per se, and it is something that members strive for. Perhaps this is a function of the Catholic Church, being both more accommodating of diversity recently, and also of the institution itself being truly transnational. Additionally, the Greek-Catholic Church is itself a minority church in Romania, suffering at the hands of the dominant Orthodox Church.³³ Contrastingly, in Orthodox organizations, tolerance is incorporated with more difficulty and it is often regarded as posing risks to the majority. On the one hand, many young members of Orthodox organizations internalize the idea (at least at the level of discourse) that discriminating against some minority groups is wrong. On the other hand, perceptions of minorities are often associated with a threat to the majority: minorities should be respected because they have rights, but those rights extend only insofar as they do not endanger the rights of the majority. The fact that Orthodox youth religious organizations are constructed on a glorification of the majority rule principle may be an important limiting factor in the process of constructing social capital of the bridging type. Attitudes towards Roma vary from case to case, and welcoming and integration of refugees is, more often than not, a divisive issue. The only focus group where LGBT rights were discussed (in *Organization 3*) conveyed a fairly unified message: homosexuality is abnormal; accepting it or not is a more personal issue, but, overall, the view is rather against it. It is interesting that a certain kind of dissonance in terms of minorities is formed in the mentality of many Orthodox respondents: on the one hand, they mention that being hospitable and welcoming with other people is a defining feature of the Romanian people, while,

³³ The lengthy and cumbersome process of Greek-Catholic property restitution by the Orthodox Church is relevant here. For more information, see: B. Radu, *To Clash or Not To Clash? Religious Revival and Support for Democracy in Post-Communist East Central Europe*, Bucharest University Press 2016.

on the other hand, integration of minorities, or extending minorities the same rights as the majority are issues treated with, at least, reluctance.

When asked about **youth civic involvement**, everybody agreed that involvement is necessary and beneficial to society and that the youth are very important in this regard, as future engaged citizens. Once again, the members of *Organization 1* were the only ones that specifically mentioned the need to raise awareness among the youth vis-à-vis their role in society, and argued that family and school should cultivate civic engagement. They also mentioned that one of the reasons why Romanian society encounters so many problems is the lack of citizen involvement – probably a reference to the recent low election turnout. At *Organization 6*, the view is more guarded: *“youth involvement in society is beneficial as long as those that get involved are good people, with good values; we must be careful with the type of young people getting involved, so that we do not end up in anarchy”*. *Organization 2* does not promote the civic involvement of its members, however they are encouraged to be *“responsible citizens”*, whatever that may mean. At *Organization 3*, civic involvement is perceived as important, especially in relation to voting: *“protest seems to me strange, as long as you have not voted”*. The same sort of conformist view – but with touches of conspiracy – are supported by respondents from *Organization 4*: *“voting is very important for the youth, but when it comes to protest, I would rather not say [reflects on the fact that people protested when Patriarch Daniel engraved his face on the new very expensive bells of the National Cathedral]. Protest, if it is honest, is good, but not just for the purpose of protesting itself/to go out in the streets. It is ok to support your own agenda, but when you are manipulated or when there are other secret interests backing an action, then it is not interest, it is propaganda [very likely referring to PRIDE]”*.

Civic involvement of the youth is then considered a priority and a value in and of itself by the members of *Organization 1*, while Orthodox respondents have mixed feelings: voting is a responsibility, but protest is often frowned upon, and, at times, associated with foreign interests supporting liberal agendas, and therefore detrimental to religious organizations.

Each focus group session included a discussion about **defining features of Romanian identity**. The priest from *Organization 4* believes that there is a danger of diluting the values of the Romanian people because after 1989 everybody started to live by comparison: *“we compare each other, we live our lives looking at one another, we want to be higher than our neighbor or friend. This is where pride and frustration start, and then you end up judging others. Romanians gave up dignity”*. Other *Organization 4* respondents echo the priest's remarks: *“first, as a nation, we are Christian people; when there is faith in God,*

things go normally [...] there is a danger of national values dilution [because of the changes taking place after 1989, referring especially to the preeminence of individualism and extreme prioritization of financial gain, eroding social cohesion]”.

Ecumenism was not touched upon in every interview and focus group, but when it was discussed, there was usually apprehension and caution in handling the issue. Respondents recognized that the idea can be alluring, but as long as the technicalities of how ecumenism would be implemented are not clear, there is fear of some religions forcing themselves onto others. Only the respondents from *Organization 1* mentioned ecumenism as a core value of their organization, and expressed support for it, while Orthodox members were more than cautious towards it.

Conclusions, limitations and future research

All organizations seem to be efficient creators of a sense of belonging. Although only one non-Orthodox organization was included in the analysis, there are clear differences between *Organization 1* – a Greek-Catholic youth organization – and all the other Orthodox groups. *Organization 1* is centered upon cultivating tolerance and fostering civic and political engagement: young people need to become active citizens, and the society has a duty to internalize the principle of tolerance. In the Orthodox organizations, tolerance was an accepted rather than a central value, and political engagement was understood mostly in terms of voting, and, at times, opposed to protest. Some Orthodox organizations were cautious with new members, wanting to make sure that new adherents “fit” in their community, in terms of respect for the same values, and, consequently create close knitted communities, that are detrimental to constructing bridging social capital.

The closed and exclusivist character of most Orthodox youth organizations is observable in their conceptualizations of trust understood not as an a priori attitude, but a potential consequence of cautious, repeated experiences. In-group trust is usually very high, but out-group trust is, most of the time, very low. Orthodox youth organizations also display a certain type of conservative mentality, in which Orthodoxy is perceived as being under attack by various forces, from ideology to globalization. As such, among participants, keeping faith alive against these assaults is a priority. The best illustration of this argument is the intolerant attitude of respondents towards minorities. Even when minorities are accepted, there is a rather negative perspective on potential threats brought about by minorities, of all kinds, to the majority. Keeping tra-

dition is an absolute priority, and traditions are understood in antithesis to everything new, foreign, or liberal. Perhaps, the fact that Orthodoxy is clearly associated in Romania with national identity plays a big part in this mechanism of rejecting those coming from outside (the community, the country, etc.).

It is noteworthy that the degree of homogeneity of views on most topics is fairly high in all youth religious organizations. The cautious approach to trusting others coupled with high trust among organization members, for example, are shared among all respondents. The same can be said about accepting and managing diversity, in Orthodox organizations. It is impossible to establish whether this convergence of opinions is an effect of socialization within the organization or a self-selection mechanism leading to becoming a member. Although differences in views over certain topics do exist (for example regarding the acceptance of refugees), it is more at the level of nuancing the same discourse, rather than seeing instances of different discourses.

We do not fully concur with Ramet when she argues that the Orthodox Church is generally opposed to change or reform.³⁴ On the one hand, interviews and focus groups suggest that the Romanian Orthodox Church has been fairly flexible in adjusting to post-communist realities: it created youth groups in order to reach out to young people, it became involved significantly in the social service providing sphere, it developed its fundraising abilities, including applying for funds at European Union institutions, and it adjusted its discourse, to internalize tolerance (even if just at the discourse level and in a superficial manner). On the other hand, however, the Romanian Orthodox Church remained clearly rooted in an anti-liberal and anti-cosmopolitan view of the world, focusing more on creating tight knitted communities of faith that fear intruders, and on glorifying the virtues of Romanian rural traditions as a response to cosmopolitan globalizing tendencies of the modern world.

The roles assumed by churches and religious organizations within a society are tributary to complex historical evolutions. In most democracies, separation between church and state exists, to different degrees. An ideologically mandated secularization process may in fact push churches to embrace anti-democratic and anti-liberal positions.

The place of religion within society varies between both societies and, within them, between different moments in time³⁵. Even if most churches

³⁴ S. Ramet, *The way we were – and should be again? European Orthodox Churches and the “idyllic past”*, [in:] T. Byrnes, P. Katzenstein (eds.), *Religion in an Expanding Europe*, Cambridge University Press 2006, pp. 148–175, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491917.007> (28.07.2023).

³⁵ B. Radu, *To Clash or Not To Clash?...*

do take on social duties, confidants' involvement at every step of the way in formulating and implementing such programs is not the rule in every church. The role played by churches in solving social issues is surely influenced by traditional conceptualizations of the mission of churches within society, which, in turn, is a result of different secularization processes.

Furthermore, the importance of tradition in influencing the relationship between church going and increasing social capital is not to be taken lightly. Prevalent social understandings vis-à-vis the role of religion in society may place a high premium on assuming a social mission, but it is not mandatory to do so. Alternatively, religion and church may be understood primarily as creators of meaning or moral agents. As such, their effect on social capital may not be significant. Practices of church going also differ from case to case, and, in some churches, attending religious service may be more of a ritualistic act, without implying much social interaction (in the absence of which social capital cannot be constructed).

Finally, one contextual feature of different religious communities that may affect their social capital is the association between religious and ethnic or national identity. Since democratization was sometimes simultaneous with construction or re-assertion of nationhood, some churches have re-established their roles in preserving national identity. In such situations, it is possible to instrumentalize religious identity in order to create exclusive understandings of nationhood, and promote an "*us vs. them*" type of identity formation³⁶. Moreover, if mainstream churches in some democratic contexts perceive secularization as an invasive global trend, they may react by emphasizing the need for coming back into the church for fulfilling spiritual needs exclusively.

The most important limitation of this research is the lack of significant variation of youth organizations across denomination lines. With only one Greek-Catholic organization and a group of Orthodox organizations, this research is more a case study on Orthodox youth organizations rather than a comparison between different faiths. Future research needs to include religious youth groups from other religions, especially neo-protestants, since there is a significant amount of literature on those in the American context.

Moreover, the geographical distribution of organizations included in the study could be addressed differently in a potential refinement of this research. 6 of the 7 organizations whose members we interviewed are concentrated in Transylvania, with the remaining one located in Moldova. Assuming that being embedded in a specific cultural and socio-economic context might influence perceptions over social issues and patterns of inter-group relations, an exten-

³⁶ Ibidem.

sion of the research pool to capture a more diverse range of locations could be a fruitful approach for fine-tuning the analysis.

The key message we want to convey through this research is that social capital can be created in religious organizations in many diverse contexts, but – as our case study on Romania shows – its quantity and quality may vary greatly, according to different contextual features, from history of church state relationship, to traditional role of religion and church in society, or type and quality of democracy. Creating a sense of community around religion is beneficial for its members, but such benefits may not extend to the wider society. Bridging social capital and democratic externalities of religious involvement cannot be taken for granted, and more qualitative research is needed in order to capture the different facets of the processes of religious socialization and its consequences on social and political values.

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