

# RELIGION AND VIOLENCE IN ROMANIA: THE IMPACT OF SECULARIZATION ON INTERRELIGIOUS CONFLICTS

**Dr. Laurențiu D. TĂNASE**

*Religious studies lecturer at the University of Bucharest;  
Scientific researcher, ICCV - Quality of Life Research Institute, Romanian  
Academy, laurentiu.tanase@unibuc.ro*

**Dr. Cezar DASCĂLU**

*Scientific researcher, ICCV - Quality of Life Research Institute,  
Romanian Academy  
cezar.dascalu@iccv.ro*

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## **ABSTRACT: Religion and Violence in Romania: The Impact of Secularization on Interreligious Conflicts.**

The analysis examines the trajectories of violence among religious groups in Romania, focusing on conflicts between Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities and between Orthodox and neo-Protestant communities. Forms of verbal, psychological, physical, and spiritual violence were tracked based on definitions provided by Romanian legislation. The research hypothesis posits that the intensification of secularization and anticlericalism has contributed to the reduction of violence between Orthodox and Greek Catholic/neo-Protestant communities in Romania from 1990 to 2023.

In Orthodox-Greek Catholic conflicts, the central issue is patrimonial, while tensions between Orthodox and neo-Protestant communities stem primarily from proselytism and the migration of believers. Notable reductions in violence are observed, particularly after 2007, when secularization and anticlericalism became common adversaries for religious groups. The study analyzed all U.S. Department of State Reports on Religious Freedom in Romania, reports by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, Synodal reports of the Romanian Orthodox Church, all issues of *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei* and *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*<sup>1</sup>, as well as 112 articles on religious conflicts from local and national media from 1990 to 2023. Numerous semi-structured interviews were

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<sup>1</sup> *Magazines and newspapers of the Romanian Orthodox Church*

conducted with Baptist, Adventist and Pentecostal pastors, between October 2023 and March 2024.

**Keywords:** *Romanian Orthodox Church, religion, violence, secularization, Greek Catholics, neo-Protestant denominations.*

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## I. Introduction

The fall of the communist regime in Romania in 1990 opened the religious market, allowing new religious goods and actors to enter and intensifying competition between state-recognized and unrecognized religious institutions. There was a marked increase in the evangelical missions of Neo-Protestant denominations, alongside a growing presence of foreign missionaries in Romania, often employing practices and methods typical of American religious life for instance. This competition between religious denominations, particularly between the majority Orthodox Church and minority Neo-Protestant denominations<sup>2</sup>, sometimes led to tension and conflict. Additionally, there were instances of violence between Orthodox and Greek-Catholic communities following the re-establishment of the Romanian Church United with Rome on December 31, 1989, with disputes primarily centered on property.

The scholarly literature on the relationship between religion and violence in Romania is limited<sup>3</sup>, generally focusing on how religion can influence the development or alteration of individual violent behaviors. In this context, we propose a complementary approach that utilizes frameworks

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2 By the expression, *minority Neo-Protestant denominations*, we mean the neo-Protestant churches recognised by law 489/2006, i.e. Adventist, Baptist, Gospel Christians and Pentecostal Church. They represent a minority position of believers, of max. 4% (per cent) of the Romanian population, according to the National Censuses (2021).

3 Example: S. ASAY, „Awareness of Domestic Violence Within the Evangelical Community: Romania and Moldova”, in *Journal of Family Violence*, 26, 2011, pp. 131-138. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-010-9350-4>; L. Turcescu, & L. Stan, „Religion, Politics and Sexuality in Romania”, in *Europe-Asia Studies*, 57, 2005, pp. 291 - 310. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130500051924>; G. Horvath, & R. Bakó, „Religious Icons in Romanian Schools: Text and Context”, in *Journal for The Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 8, 2010, pp. 189-206; I. CHIFU, „Religie și conflict. Violența motivată religios”, in *Sfera Politicii*, (10) 164, 2011, pp. 22-31; T. Pitulac, S. Năstută, „Choosing to be Stigmatized: Rational calculus in religious conversion”, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 6(16), 2007, pp. 80-97.

suggested by Laurence R. Iannaccone, Rodney Stark, and Jörg Stolz regarding rational choice theory. Our analysis will thus examine interactions among religious actors/communities (clergy and believers) in Romania and how tensions, conflicts, and violence manifested between 1990 and 2023. This study will concentrate on two main axes of analysis: *between the Orthodox and Greek-Catholic denominations, as well as between the majority church, the Orthodox and the recognized Neo-Protestant denominations in Romania*<sup>4</sup>.

## II. Methodology

Our research hypothesis suggests that the *rise of secularization and anticlericalism has contributed to the decline of violence among Orthodox and Greek-Catholic/Neo-Protestant communities in Romania from 1990 to 2023*.

Romania is considered a functional democratic state that upholds religious freedom and tolerance. Dobrogea, a region in the southeastern part of Romania on the Black Sea coast where numerous ethnicities and religions have existed peacefully for centuries, exemplifies successful interethnic and interfaith coexistence. However, there were instances of violence and conflicts among religious communities, particularly in the earlier part of the studied period. The role of religious institutions in the life of the nation and Romanian society was affirmed in Law No. 489 of December 28, 2006, on religious freedom and the general regime of religious denominations, which states that the State “*recognizes the spiritual, educational, social-charitable, cultural, and social partnership roles of religious denominations, as well as their status as factors of social peace*” (art. 7). For the State, the religious sphere must remain free from conflicts that could escalate into social crises<sup>5</sup>.

Pew Research Center study titled “Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities” (2015) underlined that tensions exist among religious groups in Romania, including incidents of physical violence<sup>6</sup>. In

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4 In this text, no distinctions were made between Neo-Protestant denominations regarding doctrinal aspects, worship practices, membership size, etc.

5 L. Tănase, C. Dascălu, „Perspectives on religious denominations and social crises in Romania”, in *Sociologie Românească*, 22 (1), An 2024, pp. 116-136.

6 Pew Research Center, Feb. 26, 2015, “Latest Trends in Religious Restrictions and Hostilities”, pp. 40-47.; [https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2015/02/Restrictions2015\\_fullReport.pdf](https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2015/02/Restrictions2015_fullReport.pdf) (12.10.2024).

2014, Romania was the only European country to report hostilities related to the conversion to a different religious denomination. Social tensions surrounding proselytism were also observed in both Romania and Russia<sup>7</sup>.

To provide an overview of violence within the religious sphere, we consulted statistics from the National Council for Combating Discrimination<sup>8</sup> and the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR)<sup>9</sup>. However, these sources provided inconclusive data, as incidents related to religious life (conflicts, aggressions, offenses) were not always reported, and data collection methodologies have changed over time.

Given that statistics alone do not fully capture reality and do not encompass the entire study period, we employed empirical research, document analysis, and qualitative research methods such as semi-structured interviews and observations. We analyzed all reports from the U.S. Department of State on religious freedom in Romania, reports from the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, records of the sessions of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, all issues of the Patriarchate's journal *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei* and the *Romanian Orthodox Church* magazine, as well as 112 articles on religious conflicts from both local and national press (e.g., *Dilema Veche*, *Adevărul*, *Evenimentul Zilei*, *Cotidianul*, *Mesagerul de Neamț*) for the period 1990–2023. Additionally, numerous semi-structured interviews were conducted with Baptist, Adventist and Pentecostal pastors, between October 2023 and March 2024.

The forms of violence addressed in this study include **verbal, psychological, physical, and spiritual violence**. The definitions of these forms, as well as related offences (e.g., threat per Art. 206 of the Penal Code; harassment per Art. 208 of the Penal Code), are regulated by the Penal Code, Law no. 217/2003 on preventing and combating domestic violence, and Law no. 26 of February 28, 2024, on protection orders.

Regarding relations among religious denominations in Romania, Law 489/2006 stipulates that they must be conducted on “the basis of mutual understanding and respect” (art. 13, 1). “*In Romania, any form, means, acts, or actions of religious defamation and incitement, as well as a public offen-*

7 *Ibidem*, p. 31.

8 Consiliul Național pentru Combaterea Discriminării, *Raport de activitate 2023*, p.8; <https://www.cncd.ro/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/Raport-de-activitate-CNCD-2023-RO.pdf>. (12.10.2024).

9 ODIHR: <https://hatecrime.osce.org/romania>. (12.10.2024).

ce against religious symbols, are prohibited" (art. 13, 2). Law no. 286/2009 on the Penal Code specifies a prison sentence of 3 months to 2 years or a fine for "impeding or disturbing the free exercise of the ritual of a religious denomination that is organized and operates legally" (art. 381, 1). Article 382 regulates penalties for the desecration of a place of worship or religious object belonging to a legally recognized religious denomination.

### III. Theoretical Framework

One of the most prominent theories in the sociology of religion is the rational choice theory. This theory seeks to decipher societal dynamics and religious life by employing fundamental concepts borrowed from economics. Notions such as *religious markets*, *religious economies*, and *religious goods consumers* are central. Religious engagement in this market operates on the same vectors as secular models: costs and benefits. Producers strive to offer religious goods that are more attractive than those of competitors and to respond to market needs, which are regulated by supply and demand. Consumer choice exerts pressure on providers of religious goods, compelling them to improve quality to remain viable in the market<sup>10</sup>.

This pluralism among providers of religious goods is thought to increase competitiveness, which exerts a positive influence on religiosity. Individuals gain access to a broader and higher-quality array of spiritual goods, inefficient providers are eliminated, and believers' religiosity grows.

In the European context, Iannaccone and Stark argue that the decline in religious practices and beliefs and the public importance of religion in many countries stems from the limited supply of religious goods providers. They contend that religious organizations appear inefficient within highly regulated religious economies, with individual religious demand being a less significant factor.<sup>11</sup>

Conversely, secularization theory suggests that heightened competition among religious actors will undermine their credibility. The existence of only one religion is seen as validating the correctness of its beliefs, while

10 L. R. Iannaccone, "Religious Markets and the Economics of Religion", in *Social Compass*, 39(1), 1992, pp. 123–131.

11 Laurence R. Iannaccone, Rodney stark, "A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the – Secularization of Europe", in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, Nr.3, September 1994, pp. 230–232.

religious pluralism may erode adherents' confidence in their own denomination's doctrinal structure. With multiple options available, individuals' confidence in their religion is expected to wane, potentially reducing religious engagement. Religious diversity is thus likely to lead to a decline in religiosity<sup>12</sup>. Concerning religious goods, secularization theories posit that demand will diminish with societal modernization as religion struggles to offer relevant responses to everyday challenges. The need for the supernatural will wane, with secular institutions taking religion's place<sup>13</sup>.

#### IV. Religious Goods

Several concepts within the rational choice theory are essential: *religion*, *religious economy*, and *religious firms*. Religion is viewed as “any system of beliefs and practices concerned with ultimate meaning that assumes the existence of the supernatural.” At the same time, religious firms are “social enterprises whose primary purpose is to create, maintain and supply religion to some set of individuals”. The religious economy encompasses the entire spectrum of religious activity within a society, a religious market, with clients, potential clients, and religious goods and services offered by firms<sup>14</sup>.

Iannaccone and Stark suggest shifting focus from consumers of religious goods to their providers. They believe that analyzing the providers of religious goods could yield insights into the causes behind the decline in consumption. They inquire, “Under what conditions can religious firms generate demand? What happens when only a few idle religious firms face a potentially religious consumer?” This inquiry juxtaposes low demand, product quality, and the ability of religious actors to market these goods<sup>15</sup>.

Jörg Stolz offers another perspective, defining religious goods as “a goal, or a means of reaching a goal, which is proposed by a religion”<sup>16</sup>, divi-

12 Matthias Opfinger, „Religious Market Theory vs. Secularization: The Role of Religious Diversity Revisited”, 2011. <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/73119> (22.10.2024).

13 Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith, *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 296.

14 Laurence R. Iannaccone, Rodney STARK, *op.cit.*, pp. 230- 232.

15 Laurence R. Iannaccone, Rodney STARK, “A Supply-Side Reinterpretation of the – Secularization of Europe”, in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 33, Nr.3, Septembrie 1994, pp. 230- 232.

16 Jörg Stolz, „Salvation Goods and Religious Markets: Integrating Rational Choice and Weberian Perspectives” în Jörg STOLZ, *Salvation Goods and Religious Markets Theory and Applications*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2008, p.64.

ding them into transcendent and immanent, individual/collective, future, or present goods. These *goods* are generally produced within institutional and cultural frameworks. Stolz's structure categorizes religious goods into two significant types: *individual religious goods* ("consumer, membership, and personal goods") and *social religious goods* ("communal, collective, and positional goods"). In the individual category, consumer religious goods are "transferable, divisible, exclusive, and without external effects" (e.g., religious books, CDs, magazines). The membership category refers to the good of belonging to a religious group.

To illustrate, Stolz provides the example of the Roman Catholic Church, where "we find consumer goods, such as devotional items (e.g., images of saints); membership goods (being an official Catholic); personal goods (e.g., sacraments such as baptism, Eucharist, penance and reconciliation, grace and justification, a holy life); communal goods (e.g., the Mass); collective goods (e.g., the Church's financial, structural, and cultural aspects); and positional goods (e.g., depending on whether the Catholic Church is a dominant or marginal group in a given country). These different types of goods are often closely linked. For example, an individual may acquire personal goods, such as a holy life, only by being a member (membership good), attending Mass (communal good), and paying the church tax (collective good)"<sup>17</sup>.

## **I. Religious Goods and Property Dispute: The Relationship Between Orthodox and Greek Catholics**

The establishment of the communist regime in Romania led to the dissolution of the Greek Catholic Church through Decree No. 358/1948. This action involved confiscating its properties by the Romanian State and the transfer of churches and parish houses to the Orthodox Church. After the 1989 Revolution, Decree-Law No. 9, issued on December 31, 1989, repealed the act of dissolution and reestablished the Romanian Greek Catholic Church<sup>18</sup>. This restoration initiated an extensive process of reclaiming adherents who had previously joined Orthodoxy and regaining church-

17 *Ibidem*, p. 75.

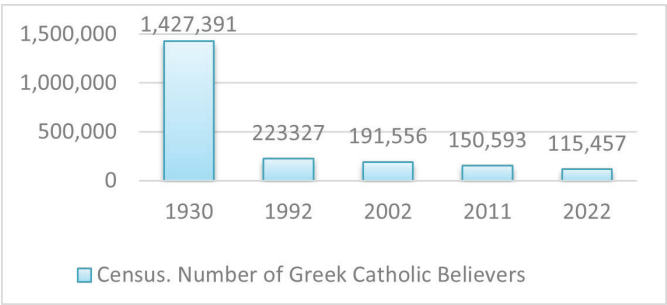
18 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, *Statul și cultele religioase*, București, Editura Litera, 2018, pp.34-142.



ches and parish houses transferred to the Orthodox Church. The property dispute remains active today, viewed as a latent religious conflict<sup>19</sup>, and over the past 34 years, it has fueled numerous tensions, some escalating into verbal and physical violence.

Although multiple censuses were conducted during the communist period, they omitted data on religious affiliation<sup>20</sup>. The first census after the fall of the communist regime revealed that, while approximately 7.9% of the population identified as Greek Catholic in 1930, the community had shrunk to 0.98% by 1992. This downward trend has continued across all subsequent data collections.

Census. Percent of Greek Catholic Believers				
1930	1992	2002	2011	2022
7,9%	0,98%	0,88%	0,80%	0,70%



Source: *National Institute of Statistics in Romania*, [https://insse.ro/cms/files/publicatii/pliante%20statistice/08-Recensamintele%20despre%20religie\\_n.pdf](https://insse.ro/cms/files/publicatii/pliante%20statistice/08-Recensamintele%20despre%20religie_n.pdf) (11.09.2024)

This view of the evolution of the number of believers is essential to understanding the property dispute between the Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church. In response to requests from the Romanian Church United with Rome regarding the restitution of properties

19 I. Orlich, „Understanding latent religious conflict: The case of frictions between the Greek Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Romania”, in *East European Quarterly*, 42(4), 2008, pp. 405-417.  
20 Sorin Negruți, „The Evolution of the Religious Structure in Romania since 1859 to the Present Day”, in *Revista Română de Statistică*, Supliment Nr. 6 / 2014, p. 42.



confiscated by the communist regime, the Legislator established, through Decree-Law No. 126 of April 24, 1990, that “the legal status of places of worship and parish houses that belonged to the Romanian Church United with Rome (Greek Catholic) and were taken over by the Romanian Orthodox Church shall be determined by a joint commission composed of clerical representatives from both religious denominations, taking into account the wishes of the believers in the communities that hold these properties” (Article 3). Article 4 of the same legislation states that the State is obligated to support (with land and financial resources) the construction of new places of worship where the number of churches is insufficient concerning the number of believers.

As dialogue through the joint commissions failed to yield the expected results, and tensions continued within communities, Parliament issued Law No. 182 on June 13, 2005, which provided that “*the interested party has recourse to legal action, according to common law.*”(art.1).

In this context, a 2018 report by the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs highlighted that the Romanian Orthodox Church had returned 242 churches by the time of publication, including four out of five episcopal cathedrals, and that during the same period, the Greek Catholic Church had either completed or was constructing over 310 new places of worship.

As of January 1, 2018, the Romanian Church United with Rome had submitted 6,723 restitution claims, of which 3,180 had been resolved (either in kind or through compensation)<sup>21</sup>. The total number of churches and chapels nationalized by the communists and transferred to the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1948 was approximately 2,600 buildings<sup>22</sup>.

### **a) The Evolution of Tensions Between the Two Religious Actors: Property Disputes**

Since the enactment of Decree-Law No. 9 on December 31, 1989, Greek Catholic believers have sought to reclaim churches and parish houses within their communities. These actions were noted in the January

21 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, *Statul și cultele religioase*, București, Editura Litera, 2018, p. 115.

22 U.S. Department of State, *International Report on Freedom of Religion*, An 2000.; <https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/132848.pdf> (15.10.2024)

1990 meeting of the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, where it was stated:

“Taking note of attempts by certain Greek Catholic groups in Transylvania to **forcibly occupy** Orthodox churches, the Holy Synod expressed its desire to resolve any disputes peacefully and legally”<sup>23</sup>.

Fearing an escalation of conflict, Ion Iliescu, President of the Provisional Council of National Unity, met with representatives of both Churches on April 9, 1990, “emphasizing the necessity of initiating a dialogue between the two sides to resolve litigated issues”<sup>24</sup>. However, the dialogue soon reached an impasse, as “the Greek Catholic theologians sought to address the issue in civil law terms”<sup>25</sup>, while Orthodox Church representatives asserted that places of worship and parish houses belonged to religious communities and that only the parishioners had the authority to decide on these ecclesiastical assets. Furthermore, they stated that neither the Ministry of Religious Affairs nor the State should intervene, as these properties were “owned by the parish as a legal entity”<sup>26</sup>.

This polarized stance is similarly reflected in court rulings, with one stance “denying judicial authority over disputes regarding the ownership or use of places of worship and parish houses formerly belonging to the Romanian Church United with Rome, and the other affirming that courts have jurisdiction to adjudicate such disputes”<sup>27</sup>. This situation has led to an “*apparently insoluble problem, where restitution restricts the religious freedom of Orthodox believers, and non-restitution limits the freedom of Greek Catholic believers to manifest their faith*”<sup>28</sup>. This raises the question of which right should prevail: *the right to property or religious freedom*. For instance, in the case between the Greek Catholic Parish of Săpânța and the Orthodox

23 Ședințele extraordinare ale Sfântului Sinod, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, An CVI-II, Nr. 1-2, Ianuarie-Februarie 1990, pp. 6-7.

24 „Comunicat”, in *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*, An II, Nr. 7-8, 1-30 Aprilie 1990, p. 8.

25 Pr. Adrian Niculcea, „Libertatea de conștiință și greco-catolicismul”, *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*, An II, Nr. 13-14, 1-30 Iulie 1990, p. 4.

26 „Comunicate ale Sfântului Sinod”, in *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*, An II, Nr. 7-8, 1-30 Aprilie 1990, p. 8.

27 Ioan-Daniel Chiș, „Problema restituirii lacasurilor de cult ce au aparținut cultului greco-catolic”, in *Studia Universitatis Babeș Bolyai – Iurisprudentia*, Nr. 1-2/2004, An 49, pp. 162-191.; <http://arhiva-studia.law.ubbcluj.ro/articol/147> (12.10.2024).

28 *Ibidem*.

Parish of Săpânța over the local church, the court needed to determine whether transferring the place of worship to the Orthodox community in 2014 would replicate the injustice experienced by the Greek Catholic community in 1948<sup>29</sup>.

Inconsistent court rulings and the failure of dialogue commissions have perpetuated conflicts in many communities where Greek Catholic parishes were re-established. Tensions and acts of violence have arisen on both sides, involving both clergy and laity. This situation is evident in a statement by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church around Easter 1990, which declared that “representatives of both Churches also decided to cease all polemics, at all levels”<sup>30</sup>. The “Memorandum to the Romanian State from Greek Catholic Believers in Romania and Worldwide,” issued in 2002 (p. 139), indicated that only six churches had been returned through the six rounds of dialogue between Greek Catholics and Orthodox, with alternative worship services denied; another 100 churches were recovered through other means (“**through lawsuits or by force**, outside the framework of Decree 126”) <sup>31</sup>.

Both Orthodox and Greek Catholic believers and clergy actively engaged in these disputes, spanning a range of violent behaviors: **verbal** (insults, threats, etc.), **physical** (assaults, beatings, etc.), **psychological**, and **spiritual** (ostracism, denial of religious assistance, such as for funerals, etc.).

We present several examples of the different forms of violence between the two religious communities, as documented in local and national newspapers starting in 1990. In most cases, newly re-established Greek Catholic parishes initially attempted to reclaim their former churches and parish houses through **negotiation** with the Orthodox proprietors. If negotiations failed, they sought the intervention of local or central authorities. For instance, in December 1990, the Prefecture of Sălaj County received a petition from the Parish Council of the United Church with Rome (Greek

29 România. Înalta Curte de Casație și Justiție. Decizia nr. 1553/2015. Dosar nr. 4355/100/2009\*

Ședința publică din 10 iunie 2015.; <https://licodu.cois.it/?p=10400> (22.09.2024).

30 „Comunicate ale Sfântului Sinod”, in *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei*, An II, Nr. 7-8, 1-30 Aprilie 1990, p. 16.

31 *Memorandum către Statul român al credincioșilor greco-catolici din România și din întreaga lume*, 2002-09-09; <https://digiteka.ro/publikacio/altera/2002-viii-evfolyam/75791> (22.09.2024).

Catholic) in Zalău, requesting assistance “in reaching an agreement with the Orthodox Protopresbyter to allow alternating liturgies in the *Adormirea Maicii Domnului Cathedral*”<sup>32</sup>. The county prefect was requested to mediate between the two parties to prevent the situation from escalating into violence. However, the prefect could neither intervene in the restitution process nor compel Orthodox believers to forgo the use of the place of worship.

There were instances when the local authorities' failure to mediate led to **protests** from the Greek Catholic community. For example, in November 1990, the Maramureș County Prefecture temporarily suspended public services due to repeated demonstrations by Greek Catholic believers at its headquarters in Baia Mare<sup>33</sup>.

In October 1997, Greek Catholic believers protested for two weeks in front of the Satu Mare Prefecture, demanding a church, chapel, and cemetery. The protests ended when the Romanian president promised a resolution following a visit to Satu Mare<sup>34</sup>. Protests continued after 2000, as in April 2002, when groups of Greek Catholic believers from the Archdiocese of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș protested at the Orthodox Archdiocese and Prefecture in Alba-Iulia. Around 200 individuals, alongside Greek Catholic priests, submitted an open letter to authorities requesting resolution of the property dispute<sup>35</sup>.

Orthodox believers also resorted to this form of protest, often challenging court rulings that dispossessed them of properties claimed by Greek Catholics. For example, in December 2006, 100 Orthodox parishioners protested in front of the Petroșani Town Hall against the Greek Catholic Church's request to return three places of worship in the city<sup>36</sup>.

In some cases, religious communities involved in these property disputes crossed into *physical violence*. A close instance was the 1996 conflict

32 „Întâlnire la Prefectură”, in *Graiul Sălajului*, An II, Nr. 219, 18 Decembrie 1990, p.1.

33 „Să gândim creștinește”, in *Renașterea Bănățeană*, Nr. 222, 7 Noiembrie 1990, p.1.

34 Raul BURA, „Greco-catolicii din Satu Mare au încetat protestele”, in *Ziua*, Nr. 777, 28 octombrie 1997, p.3.

35 Florian Bichir, „Scandalurile de la Ocna-Mureș și Mihalț au provocat proteste ale greco-catolicilor la Alba-Iulia”, in *Cotidianul*, An XII, Nr. 93 (3257) 20-21 aprilie 2002, p.3.

36 Marius Mitache, „Tensiuni între enoriașii ortodocși și greco-catolici din Valea Jiului”, in *Evenimentul Zilei*, An 15, Nr. 4661, 12 Decembrie 2006, p. 11.

between Orthodox and Greek Catholic believers in Șinca Veche (Brașov County), stemming from alternating services in the only village church. After the Sunday service led by the Orthodox, parishioners refused to vacate the building even though the Greek Catholic liturgy was scheduled. The situation escalated with shouting, insults from both sides and the intervention of eight police officers to restore calm<sup>37</sup>. Another example occurred in 1998 in the village of Lăpușel, Maramureș, where a conflict arose over the kindergarten building used for Sunday services by Greek Catholics. Greek Catholics locked the entrance, prompting “around 40 Orthodox believers to break the lock to allow children into the kindergarten, sparking protests, shoving, and verbal altercations”<sup>38</sup>. In 2002, Orthodox believers in Ocna Mureș (Alba) forcibly attempted to retake a church after the Supreme Court suspended an Appeals Court decision from Alba-Iulia that had granted the Greek Catholics the right to use the building. The Orthodox priest, along with 60 parishioners, gendarmes, and police, entered the church at night, forcibly removing Greek Catholic believers<sup>39</sup>. Another “forced restitution” of a contested church occurred in 1994 in Fizeș, where Greek Catholic believers rejected the arrangement for alternating services<sup>40</sup>.

One of the most well-known *verbal and physical confrontations* involved the restitution of the “Minoriților” Church on Eroilor Boulevard in Cluj. The Greek Catholic Eparchy of Cluj-Gherla obtained a court ruling granting them possession, requiring the Orthodox parish to vacate by March 13, 1998, at 9:00 a.m. When the church was not returned, Greek Catholic believers and seminarians entered the building, which was occupied by Orthodox clergy conducting the liturgy. Greek Catholic seminarians were confronted by Orthodox counterparts blocking their path to the altar; confrontations ensued, with shoving and fights between the groups<sup>41</sup>. “Greek Catholic priests began their liturgy while believers climbed onto

37 „Ortodocșii și greco-catolicii își dispută același spațiu”, in *Rondul*, Anul 4, Nr. 1008, 14 August 1996, p. 8.

38 Nicolae Teremtus, Adrian Vălureanu, „Ortodocșii și greco-catolicii din Lăpușse ceartă pentru grădinița din sat”, in *Ziua*, An V, Nr. 842, 16 Ianuarie 1998, p. 3.

39 „Conflict între ortodocșii și greco-catolici”, in *Agenda Zilei*, An VII, Nr. 64, 18 Martie 2002, p. 16.

40 „În numele Crucii, cu pumnii!”, in *Sălajul*, An V, Nr. 336, 22 Iulie 1994, p. 3.

41 Endina Roatis Liviu Mani, „Războiul Crucii”, in *Ziua*, Anul 5, nr. 901, 14 martie 1998, p. 3.

the church benches, striking and forcing the Orthodox out of the church. Greek Catholics called Orthodox believers' traitors' and accused them of ill-will for refusing to return to the Episcopal Cathedral building"<sup>42</sup>.

In this mosaic of violent patterns, one form goes beyond property disputes, reflecting competition between the two faiths for retaining or attracting believers. The issue of cemetery access and burials for believers returning to the Greek Catholic Church recurs throughout the period analyzed. Though rare, cases exist where Orthodox believers opposed the burial of Greek Catholics in the local cemetery. For instance, an article in *Flacăra* in 1991 highlighted that "Greek Catholic priests face boycotts at funerals", with the majority community's stance being: "We will not bury your dead if you return to the Catholics; only if you remain Orthodox"<sup>43</sup>. This stance reflects the theological discourse of the 1990s, a period marked by intensified religious competition and increased evangelism by Neo-Protestant denominations that influenced shifts in believers. Orthodox theological discourse regarded the shift of parishioners to the Greek Catholic Church as a result of "Uniate religious proselytism"<sup>44</sup>.

### **b) U.S. Department of State Reports on Religious Freedom in Romania**

The U.S. Department of State's reports on religious freedom in Romania consistently reference tensions between Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities. These reports provide statistical data regarding the number of churches returned and examples of localities where conflicts were ongoing. The Timișoara Orthodox Archdiocese, led by Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu, was highlighted as a positive model of interfaith cooperation due to its amicable stance and nearly complete restitution of properties in the post-Revolution period. Similarly, "the Orthodox Episco-

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42 „Executarea silită de la Catedrala Episcopală din Cluj a generat un mare scandal între ortodocși și greco-catolici. Câteva sute de credincioși ai ambelor culte s-au bătut, ieri, în lăcașul bisericesc”, in *Agenda Zilei*, An 3, Nr. 61, 14 Martie 1998, p. 4.

43 Ion ZUBAȘCU, „Prohod în mijlocul casei”, in *Flacăra*, An LXXXI, Nr. 24, 12-18 Iunie, București, 1991, p.13.

44 „A IV-A Conferința Internațională a Facultăților de Teologie Ortodoxă (București, 12—17 august 1996)”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, Anul CXIY, Nr. 7—12, iulie – decembrie, 1996, p. 245.



pates of Caransebeş and Oradea have engaged in positive dialogues with the Greek Catholic Church concerning the restitution of certain churches” (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

Several of the U.S. Department of State reports on religious freedom in Romania also track fluctuations in the number of violent incidents between Orthodox and Greek Catholics, noting either an increase or decrease in intensity. No specific statistics on these incidents are provided, making it difficult to ascertain the exact number. The **2001** report observes that the number of violent cases decreased during the period analyzed. By **2002**, it was concluded that “*dialogue between the Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches had not eliminated local-level disputes and led to few real advances in resolving the issue of Greek Catholic property restitution,*” with the number of tensions “over church ownership between Greek Catholics and Orthodox believers increasing.” In **2003**, the Department of State suggested that the number of disputes was again on a downward trend, stating that “in many cases, Greek Catholics chose to build new churches, given the lack of progress in reclaiming their properties through either dialogue with the Orthodox Church or the courts.” In **2004**, disputes between Greek Catholics and Orthodox believers rose once more, and by **2005**, the report introduced a new metric—intensity. Thus, although the number of conflict cases remained steady, their intensity escalated. The situation was similar in **2006**, **2007**, **2008**, and **2010**, when the U.S. report underscored that “disputes between the two religious groups over church property increased in both number and intensity.” Reports after 2010 no longer include such assessments, though they remain significant for understanding the dynamics of the tensions.

The property dispute between the two religious communities fluctuated in intensity and frequency, influenced by court decisions, the Orthodox community’s willingness to return places of worship or offer shared services, and the Greek Catholics’ ability and desire to construct new churches. Reports post-2015 note progressively fewer examples of communities experiencing such conflicts.



## II. Evolution of Tensions between the Orthodox Majority Church and Neo-Protestant Denominations: Competition in the Religious Market

Article 29 of the Romanian Constitution guarantees freedom of thought and opinion, ensuring that no one can be compelled to adhere to a specific religious belief. It states that “religious denominations are free and organized according to their statutes” (paragraph 3) and that in relations among them, “any forms, means, acts, or actions inciting religious discord are prohibited” (paragraph 4). In Romania, the status of a religious denomination is granted through a specific process regulated by Law No. 489 of December 28, 2006, concerning religious freedom and the general regime of denominations. Upon state recognition, denominations gain “*legal status as entities of public utility*” (art. 8.1), are supported by public authorities, and cooperate with them in areas of mutual interest (art. 9.3). Recognition as an official denomination is available to religious associations that, “*through their activities and membership, provide guarantees of durability, stability, and public interest*” (art. 17.1) and whose beliefs “*do not endanger public security, order, health, public morals, or fundamental human rights and freedoms*” (art. 17.2). A significant aspect of this status lies in the benefits accorded to recognized denominations, including eligibility, upon request, for “*material support from the state for the operation of worship units, for repairs, and for new construction*” (art. 10.7), as well as for social services provided, and for the remuneration of both clerical and non-clerical personnel (art. 10.8,9).

In scholarly and legal discourse, free from pejorative connotations, the religious groups that emerged in Romania following the fall of communism in 1989 are categorized as *new religious movements* (NRMs). These groups operate legally either as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or as religious associations under the recognized status granted by Law 489/2006 on Religious Freedom, with the possibility of applying for full recognition as a denomination if they meet the requirements stipulated by law.

However, in the public mindset, the difference between recognized and unrecognized denominations is critical to understanding religious tensions and conflicts in Romania. State recognition of a religious denomination serves as a guarantee to the religious market that the newly accredited institution will not, above all, disturb social peace and that it can integrate into the

*religious landscape*. Certain minority denominations, as well as those that have not yet acquired recognized status, are frequently labeled as “sects” in the theological language used by the majority church—often with a pejorative connotation<sup>45</sup>. The term “sect” refers to minority religious groups that have separated from “the Church or the main and consecrated body of a religion”<sup>46</sup>.

This separation typically involves the development of distinct doctrines (“truths of faith” and new ideological frameworks) and the emergence of charismatic leaders who form religious communities with a strong group identity, unique rituals, and distinct religious practices. Sects engage in competition—and frequently in conflict—with traditional churches, from which they attempt to attract new followers<sup>47</sup>.

For the majority denomination, distinguishing between recognized denominations and sects is fundamental to its approach toward other religious groups. The Orthodox Church treats these two categories differently, viewing sects as a threat and positioning them in opposition and competition. This perspective is exemplified in discussions surrounding the establishment of the Romanian Bible Society (of which the Romanian Orthodox Church has been a founding member since 1992), where the organizing and operational statutes were debated. The Orthodox Synod recommended that “in Art. 5 of the draft Statute, the term ‘denominations’ should be replaced with ‘recognized denominations in Romania’ **to avoid confusion between recognized denominations and sects**”<sup>48</sup>.

Tensions between the majority denomination and “sects” stem primarily from their doctrinal differences (referred to as “*truths of faith*”) that distinguish them from one another. The Romanian Orthodox Church em-

45 Pentru o perspectivă aprofundată asupra definițiilor și a raportării Bisericii Ortodoxe Române la noțiunea de „sectă” vezi: Diac. P.I. David, *Invazia sectelor*, vol. 1, București, Editura Crist-1, 1997; Pr. prof. G. Pietraru, *Misiologie ortodoxă*, Iași, Editura Panfilus, 2004; Pr. Prof. Dr. Valer Bel (coordinator), *Misiologie ortodoxă*, Editura Basilica, București – 2021; Gheorghe Petraru, *Teologie Fundamentală și Misionară. Ecumenism*, Iași, Editura Performantica, 2006; Nicolae Achimescu, *Noile mișcări religioase*, Cluj, Editura Limes, 2004; Dan Bădulescu, *Ortodoxie și erezie*, Făgăraș, Editura Agaton, 2006; Ciprian Marius Cloșca, *Ortodoxia și noile mișcări religioase*, Iași, Lumen, 2009.

46 Mihai Himcinschi, „Sectă”, in Pr. Stefan Buchiu, Pr. Ioan Tulcan, *Dictionar de Teologie Ortodoxă*, București, Editura Basilica, 2019, p. 817.

47 *Ibidem*.

48 „Sfintul Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane. Sumarul ședinței de lucru din 23-25 ianuarie 1992”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, CX, nr.1-3 ianuarie-martie, 1992, p. 203.

phasizes its apostolic character, claiming an unbroken historical continuity dating back to the Apostle Andrew, traditionally regarded as “the Christianizer of Romanians.” Consequently, the majority denomination challenges any religious doctrine or tradition lacking its historical continuity and doctrinal fidelity.

For example, following the significant increase in missionary activity in Romania shortly after the fall of the communist regime, Patriarch Teoctist urged the Orthodox Church not to remain indifferent to the “rather severe attacks from sects, from so-called ‘evangelists,’” but rather to “counter these with its own treasure of faith”<sup>49</sup>. This call to “counterattack” recurred throughout the first 20 years after the Revolution. The Orthodox hierarchy emphasized the importance of the faithful rediscovering orthodoxy, its tenets of faith, and its life principles to avoid straying “from the spirit in which they were born and raised”<sup>50</sup>.

A second significant factor in the conflict between the Orthodox Church and other denominations and religious movements pertains to the *close association between the Orthodox Church and the Romanian nation*<sup>51</sup>. The Romanian Orthodox Church maintains fidelity to the national project in which the State involved it<sup>52</sup> and strives to remain integrated within it even after the change in the communist regime. This relationship is highlighted by the statement of Metropolitan Daniel (the future Patriarch of Romania) in 1990:

“The role of the Church is to preserve the spiritual unity or cohesion of the nation. In this sense, to be and remain Orthodox in Romania is not a coincidence, but a fidelity to the true faith of our ancestors and

49 „Vizita în România a Î.P.S. Ioan, arhiepiscopul Kareliei și al întregii Finlande”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CXII, Nr. 1–6, ianuarie–iunie, 1994, p. 113.

50 „Vizita Oficială, în România, a Prea Fericirii Sale Ignatie al IV-lea, Patriarh al Antiohiei și al întregului Orient”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CXIY, Nr. 7–12, iulie–decembrie, 1996, p. 117.

51 Constantin Schifirneț, “Orthodoxy, Church, State, and National Identity in the Context of Tendential Modernity”, in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies*, 12 (March 1, 2013): 173–208; Lavinia Stan, Lucian Turcescu, “Religion and Politics in Romania: From Public Affairs to Church-State Models”, in *Journal of Global Initiatives* 6 (December 1, 2011), pp. 97–108.

52 Cezar Mihai Dascalu, *Teorii ale Secularizării. Analogii între cazurile românesc și german*, teză de doctorat publicată la Facultatea de Științe Politice, Universitatea din București, 2017, pp. 62–112.

parents, to the values of Christianity as they have been preserved and transmitted to us, despite the trials and hardships of the past”<sup>53</sup>.

Thus, any new religious competition emerging from outside Romania and altering the tradition and “truth of faith” was perceived (especially in the 1990s) as a threat to the survival of the national project. Orthodoxy was regarded, as noted by Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae (one of the foremost theologians of the 20th century), as responsible for constructing and preserving the “spiritual identity of Romanians.” Stăniloae highlighted that “the existence of the nation” had endured “through centuries of political division due to spiritual unity in faith”<sup>54</sup>.

Numerous secular press articles also reflected the threat posed by “religious sects” to the nation, suggesting that these groups introduced “*intolerance, fanaticism, religious extremism, and occult ideas that contradict the precepts of traditional churches*”<sup>55</sup>.

Among the causes fueling the conflict, *religious proselytism is most frequently cited*, both in reports from the U.S. Department of State and decisions by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as well as in theological debates on the topic. Religious proselytism refers to efforts to persuade someone to join another religious faith. In the Russian Church, proselytism is defined as “the active or passive encouragement of members of a specific ethnic or national group to join a religion, denomination, or sect without historical roots in that ethnic or national group”<sup>56</sup>.

Beginning in the early 1990s, accusations of proselytism were not only directed at unrecognized denominations but also at Neo-Protestant groups that were part of the Romanian religious mosaic prior to the establishment of the communist regime (including Adventist and Baptist missionaries). For instance, in 1996, Patriarch Teoctist remarked at an inter-

53 Bogdan Mihai Mandache, “Revenirea la credință este revenirea la viață” Interview acordat de I.P.S. Mitropolit Daniel”, in *Cronica*, Anul 25, nr. 51-52, 21.12. 1990, p. 3.

54 Pr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Unitatea spirituală a neamului nostru și libertatea*, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CVII, Nr. 1–2, Ianuarie–Februarie, 1990, p. 49.

55 I. Pop C. Mucichescu, “Sectele pot reprezenta un posibil atentat la siguranța națională a României” in *Agenda Zilei*, Anul 4, nr. 145, 22 iunie 1999, p. 5; Vasile BRICEAG, “SRI stă cu ochii pe secte, extremiști și teroriști”, in *Cotidianul*, Anul 11, nr. 225, marți 25 septembrie 2001, p. 2.

56 D. A. Kerr, “Christian Understandings of Proselytism”, in *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, 23(1), 1999, p. 9.

national conference of theological faculties that “numerous sects and even Christian denominations have begun to carry out an unparalleled, aggressive proselytizing activity against the Church.” The Christian denominations he referred to included recognized groups with members documented in the 1992 census (Adventists, Baptists, and Pentecostals). In his address, the Patriarch concluded that “ecumenism and dialogue as common testimonies are the best means of combatting proselytism”<sup>57</sup>.

Religious proselytism is viewed as a highly provocative method of conveying religious messages, often employing manipulative techniques. In this context, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church called on priests, in the first years after the Revolution, to reassess their “pastoral-missionary, charitable-social, and worship-care activities” to counteract the “aggressive” proselytism of Neo-Protestant denominations, which “exploited the precarious material condition of the majority of the faithful”<sup>58</sup>. This stance was reiterated in dialogues with international religious institutions (e.g., the Consultation of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue Group, Geneva, Switzerland, October 22-26, 1992), where it was emphasized that in Romania, denominations coexist peacefully and in a spirit of tolerance and that any tensions have been provoked by proselytizing practices directed against the Orthodox Church<sup>59</sup>.

Among the Neo-Protestant groups, Jehovah’s Witnesses are considered by the Orthodox Church to be among the most “aggressive” missionaries<sup>60</sup>. Reports on religious freedom from the U.S. Department of State continue to cite Jehovah’s Witnesses in multiple religious conflicts, though these have significantly diminished, especially following the establishment of the Consultative Council of Religious Denominations in 2011 at the initiative of Patriarch Daniel.

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57 „A IV-a Conferința Internațională a Facultăților de Teologie Ortodoxă (București, 12—17 august 1996)”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CXIY, Nr. 7—12, iulie—decembrie, 1996, p. 245.

58 „Lucrările Sfântului Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române. Ședința de lucru din 6 februarie 1995”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CXIII, Nr. 1—6, ianuarie—iunie, 1995, p. 299.

59 „Lucrările Sfântului Sinod al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române. Sumarul Ședinței de Lucru din 19—23 Ianuarie 1993”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CXI, Nr. 1—3, ianuarie—martie, 1993, p. 145.

60 „Vizita Oficială în România a Sanctității sale Ilie al II-lea, Patriarhul Catolicos a toata Georgia (26—30 septembrie 1996)”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, anul CXIY, Nr. 7—12, iulie—decembrie, 1996, p. 51.

Secular media also provides examples of tensions between Neo-Protestant missionaries and followers of other faiths whom they attempted to convert, often indicating that these tensions were caused by the missionaries' persistent, at times intrusive, approach<sup>61</sup>.

### a) United States Department of State Reports on Religious Freedom in Romania

The 2000 U.S. Department of State Report on Religious Freedom in Romania highlights the generally amicable relationships between religious denominations while also noting the Orthodox Church's repeated denunciations of "aggressive proselytism by Protestant communities and other religious groups". A significant aspect concerning religious proselytism involves the reaction of "certain prominent members of society" who have publicly disapproved of proselytism (U.S. Department of State, 2000). The same report notes that Romania lacks legislation against proselytism and offers no clear framework defining what constitutes a "proselytizing act." This discrepancy between the Orthodox Church's understanding and the interpretation of proselytism by active neo-Protestant denominations as a component of evangelization *contributes to the broader religious conflict*.

Regarding violence associated with door-to-door proselytism, the Religious Freedom Report offers numerous examples of **verbal** and **physical aggression**. Neo-Protestant missionaries often risked being insulted, cursed, spat upon, pushed, threatened, and even physically assaulted. For instance, the 2005 report recounts how four individuals in Constanța physically assaulted two missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, threatening them with a knife. In November 2005, "two Mormon missionaries were physically attacked in Iași, Iași County, by an individual who attempted to push them down a staircase and struck one of them with a bottle" (U.S. Department of State, 2005).

In addition to door-to-door evangelizing, neo-Protestant groups organized religious events in public venues (e.g., cultural centers, town halls) or private spaces attended by church members, local pastors, guests, and interested individuals. In many cases, local Orthodox communities protes-

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61 Luminița Tudor, „Membrii cultelor religioase din ușa în ușa, pentru a racola noi adepți”, in *Cuvântul Libertății*, Anul 16, nr. 4588, 18 noiembrie 2004, p. 3.



ted these gatherings, blocking access for neo-Protestant participants and, at times, escalating into violence.

The U.S. Department of State Religious Freedom Reports and Romanian press sources offer various examples illustrating situations where neo-Protestant community gatherings encountered interference. According to the 2001 U.S. Report, Orthodox priests “incited the local population against activities sponsored by the Adventist Church. Religious activities of the Baptist Church and the Evangelical Alliance were frequently obstructed by local authorities influenced by the local Orthodox clergy in areas including Crucea, Valul lui Traian (Constanța County), Isaccea (Tulcea County), Frățilești, Savești (Ialomița County), Vinatori, Tulucești (Galați County), Sutestii, and Gemenele (Brăila County)” (U.S. Department of State, 2001). The local newspaper *Timpul* describes a conflict in Cornereva (Caraș-Severin), where approximately 60 Orthodox individuals trapped 12 Baptists in their vehicle, necessitating police intervention to safely escort them to another location<sup>62</sup>. In 2001, a dispute in Pristol (Mehedinți County) arose when neo-Protestants sought to rent a cultural hall for evangelization<sup>63</sup>. Similar conflicts occurred in Braniste, Mehedinți (1998)<sup>64</sup>, Ruginoasa<sup>65</sup> (Timiș, 1997), and others.

Another recurring issue is Orthodox priests’ opposition to the burial of neo-Protestant individuals in local cemeteries. This issue is noted in press articles and U.S. Department of State Religious Freedom Reports. The 2003 report mentions that an Evangelical Christian pastor was denied access to a Mehedinți cemetery for multiple burials. Similar complaints were raised by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Coșoveni (Dolj County) and Poieni (Prahova County) (U.S. Department of State, 2003). In 2005, the Adventist Church requested land from local authorities for cemetery use, receiving positive responses for only 12 out of 700 applications (U.S. Department of State, 2005). The 2008 report highlights that non-Or-

62 Marcel Pușcaș, „Conflict religios la Cornereva”, in *Timpul*, Anul 9, Nr. 104, 6 mai 1998, p. 1.

63 Iulia Cergan, „Conflictul între ortodocși și adventiști poate izbucni oricând”, in *Gazeta de Sud*, Anul 7, nr. 1805, 7 februarie 2001, p. 3.

64 Romeo Crîșmaru, „Conflict interconfesional la Braniste - Mehedinți Primând comunei Vinători este acuzat de complicitate la un scandal de proporții între ortodocși și adventiști”, in *Gazeta de Sud*, Anul 4, nr. 919, 17 martie 1998, p. 3.

65 Eleonora V. Popa, „La Ruginoasa a început războiul între ortodocși și bapțiști”, in *Renașterea Bănățeană*, Anul 9, nr. 2175, 9 aprilie 1997, p. 7.



thodox burials were often relegated to isolated cemetery areas, contingent upon Orthodox community approval (U.S. Department of State, 2008). Similar incidents continued post-2008; the 2014 report describes an Orthodox priest interrupting an Adventist funeral and refusing to allow the burial in a public cemetery in Costești (Argeș County).

Regarding violence between Orthodox believers and members/pastors/missionaries of recognized and unrecognized neo-Protestant denominations, the U.S. Department of State Reports on Religious Freedom in Romania do not provide exact statistics. These reports generally cite examples rather than giving precise numbers. However, *analysis of reports from 2001 to 2022 reveals a noticeable decrease in cases starting in 2007*. The 2008 report notes that “in contrast to previous periods, minority religious groups no longer reported difficulties in accessing public spaces” for religious activities (U.S. Department of State, 2008), while the 2009 report states that *no incidents of physical violence* were reported. The press has also observed a decline in incidents where minority religious group members faced obstruction in practicing their faith or when authorities failed to intervene on their behalf. Unlike previous years, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported reduced instances of verbal and physical abuse by Orthodox priests and noticed improved police enforcement. In 2012, Jehovah’s Witnesses reported no significant incidents impacting their activities for the first time (although they later reported renewed tensions with Orthodox communities in 2017).

Another key point is the ongoing improvement in central and local authorities’ attitudes toward minority religious groups. The 2003 report noted that central government officials were generally more cooperative than local authorities, with the primary cause of local resistance being pressure from the Orthodox clergy. By 2012, relations between the majority Orthodox Church and neo-Protestant denominations had significantly improved, as had relations between neo-Protestant communities and local authorities.

### **III. Secularization and Anticlericalism: Common Adversaries of Religious Denominations**

Our previous analysis highlighted two distinct trajectories of violence among religious actors. Between Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities, the primary conflict centers on patrimonial issues involving “collective religious assets” (following Jorg Stolz’s model), as well as tensions concer-

ning individual religious identities (involving a return to a faith affiliation after 45 years of integration into a different doctrinal community). Both religious actors enact the violence and tensions at the levels of both clergy and lay members. The range of violence includes verbal (insults, threats), physical (physical assaults, shoving, striking), and emotional forms (isolation, denial of religious assistance in situations such as funerals). Although cases of violence have notably decreased over the past 15 years, the still significant number of ongoing legal cases between religious institutions maintains the potential core of future conflicts.

In contrast, the tensions between Orthodox and neo-Protestant communities reveal a conflict with multiple facets: doctrinal (preserving the “truth of faith”) within Romania’s Christian church landscape, perceived threats to national identity and “national security,” or concerns over religious “proselytism” and faith migration. The neo-Protestant denominations actively seek to evangelize and gain new followers. Here, the range of violent responses mirrors that observed in Orthodox-Greek Catholic conflicts; however, the violence and tensions are exclusively perpetrated by the majority denomination. A significant reduction in verbal and physical violence has been noted since 2007-2008, with Jehovah’s Witnesses reporting in 2012 that, for the first time in Romania, no incidents were impacting their activities.

**a) Given these two trajectories of violence, a central question arises: “What has led to the decrease in the number of cases and the reduced intensity of these conflicts?”**

Drawing on information from the U.S. Department of State’s Reports on Religious Freedom in Romania, the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs, the Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church, data from the Romanian Orthodox Church’s official periodicals *Vestitorul Ortodoxiei* and *Biserica Ortodoxă Română*, as well as over 112 articles on religious conflicts in local and national media from 1990 to 2023, *a comprehensive view of these two conflict trajectories has emerged.*

In the case of Orthodox-neo-Protestant conflicts, a gradual increase is observable from the early 1990s, peaking in the mid-2000s, followed by a steady and marked decline post-2007. Conversely, Orthodox-Greek Catholic tensions did not follow a specific trajectory; they began in the

early 1990s with significant violence, fluctuating in number and intensity, yet subsiding in areas where Greek Catholics received a church or were able to build one. Tensions persist in locations with unresolved cases in both Romanian and international courts.

Thus, the reduction of tensions between Orthodox and Greek Catholic communities could also be attributed to additional factors, such as population aging (especially in rural areas, where violence was most prevalent), the declining number of Greek Catholic adherents (a 50% decrease from 1992 to 2022), and emigration among young Greek Catholic families.

Regarding the Orthodox-neo-Protestant conflict, criteria for resolving disputes related to property confiscated by the Romanian state in 1948 do not apply. To expand the understanding of factors influencing the reduction of violence, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Baptist pastors and three Adventist pastors between October 2023 and March 2024. These pastors confirmed earlier conclusions, emphasizing a pattern of fluctuating tensions. Although they offered varied timelines, all agreed that the number and intensity of violent incidents increased from the early 1990s until the early 2000s, then plateaued until 2006-2007, after which they decreased.

Another critical factor in reducing conflicts is *the growing emphasis on interfaith dialogue*. All interviewed pastors noted that ecumenical initiatives, conferences between theology faculties, doctrinal debates, and similar events have defused tensions in the “religious marketplace.” Developing interfaith dialogue among Romania’s denominations remains a top priority for the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs. For instance, in 2004, in partnership with the “Conscience and Freedom Association,” the Secretariat sponsored meetings across various counties on religious freedom with different denominations and local authorities, also consulting European experts to help shape legislation regulating religious life (U.S. Department of State, 2004, 2005). The most significant step in interreligious dialogue came with founding the Consultative Council of Religious Denominations in 2011. This non-governmental, nonprofit body provides a platform for unified positions on crucial social issues. Participants at its inaugural session on April 14, 2011, included the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Diocese of Timisoara, the Roman Catholic Church, the Romanian Greek Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Archdiocese, the Old Rite Russian Orthodox Church in Romania, the

Reformed Church in Romania, the Evangelical Church A.C. in Romania, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Romania, the Unitarian Church of Transylvania, the Pentecostal Christian Cult - Apostolic Church of God in Romania, the Union of Seventh-day Adventist Churches, the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania – Mosaic Cult, and the Muslim Cult in Romania. Observers included the Christian Baptist Cult - Union of Baptist Churches in Romania and the Christian Evangelical Church - Union of Christian Evangelical Churches in Romania<sup>66</sup>. The Council's objectives include adopting "common positions and attitudes on important social issues, promoting solidarity and cooperation among denominations in spiritual, cultural, educational, and social domains, and preventing and mediating interfaith and interreligious disputes, including rejecting and discouraging all forms of extremism"<sup>67</sup>. The Council has taken positions on topics with major societal impact in Romania, such as religious education in public schools<sup>68</sup>, the 2018 referendum on amending the Constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman<sup>69</sup>, and the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine "crisis"<sup>70</sup>.

The interviews with neo-protestant pastors also highlighted a consistent decline in the number of neo-Protestant missionaries since 2008-2009, correlating with a decrease in new conversions. Furthermore, *the dwindling presence of neo-Protestant missionaries in Orthodox communities areas for evangelization has directly influenced the reduction in potential cases of conflict.*

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66 Secretariatul Consiliului Consultativ al Cultelor din România, „Constituirea Consiliului Consultativ al Cultelor din România”, in *Ziarul Lumina*, 14.04.2011.; <https://ziarulumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/stiri/constituirea-consiliului-consultativ-al-cultelor-din-romania-12348.html> (22.09.2024).

67 *Ibidem*.

68 Secretariatul Consiliului Consultativ al Cultelor din România, *Lumină pentru viață. Importanța orei de Religie pentru educația copiilor și tinerilor* (Apelul Consiliului Consultativ al Cultelor din România – 28.02.2015).; <https://basilica.ro/consiliul-consultativ-al-cultelor-din-romania-reafirma-importanta-orei-de-religie-pentru-educatia-copii-lor-si-tinerilor/> (16.09.2024).

69 Iulian Dumitrașcu, „Consiliul Consultativ al Cultelor din România susține referendumul pentru definirea căsătoriei ca uniune între un bărbat și o femeie”, 02.10.2018.; <https://basilica.ro/consiliul-consultativ-al-cultelor-din-romania-sustine-referendumul-pentru-definirea-casatoriei-ca-uniune-intre-un-barbat-si-o-femeie/> (12.10.2024).

70 Gheorghe Anghel, „Consiliul Consultativ al Cultelor îndeamnă la rugăciune, solidaritate și responsabilitate”, 03.04.2020.; <https://basilica.ro/consiliul-consultativ-al-cultelor-indeamna-la-rugaciune-solidaritate-si-responsabilitate/> (16.09.2024).

Therefore, while the religious fervor of the post-1989 period placed the Orthodox Church in a competitive stance against neo-Protestant denominations, this perspective has significantly shifted after 2011. The founding of the Consultative Council of Religious Denominations, we consider that, marked an increase in cooperation between neo-Protestant denominations and the majority church.

### **b) Common Adversaries: Secularization and Anticlericalism**

Another significant source providing insights into the decreasing trend of interreligious tensions and conflicts was the international debate “*Multiple Religious Secularizations and Contemporary Social Crises*,” organized by the Research Institute for Quality of Life of the Romanian Academy in April 2023. Participants included representatives from the Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, Baptist, Adventist, Muslim, Jewish, and Anglican faiths. The Greek-Catholic and some Protestant representatives emphasized the challenges secularization poses for their religious institutions. Secularization/self-secularization<sup>71</sup> is considered *the most critical threat* facing these religious groups. Participants highlighted both *the decline in new adherents and a marked decrease in missionary and evangelistic activities* within communities.

Alongside secularization, the topic of *anticlericalism* was introduced, particularly underscored by Orthodox theologians. *The decline in religiosity* (individual beliefs and practices) and decreasing public trust in the Church is evident in opinion polls (EVS 1990, 1999, 2008, 2017)<sup>72</sup>, showing, by 2017, a general return to levels similar to those in 1990 across several indicators of religious belief and practice.

The anticlerical process is viewed as an “opposition against religious authority,” a sentiment that has grown significantly in Romania, particularly since the commencement of the Cathedral of National Salvation’s construction<sup>73</sup>. Anticlerical attitudes were strongly encouraged by the

71 Cezar Mihai Dascalu, *Teorii ale Secularizării. Analogii între cazurile românesc și german*, teză de doctorat publicată la Facultatea de Științe Politice, Universitatea din București, 2017.

72 Source: [atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu](https://atlasofeuropeanvalues.eu) cf. EVS 1990, 1999, 2008, 2017

73 Cezar Mihai Dascalu, *Teorii ale Secularizării. Analogii între cazurile românesc și german*, teză de doctorat publicată la Facultatea de Științe Politice, Universitatea din București, 2017; Giuseppe Tateo, *Under the Sign of the Cross: The People’s Salvation Cathedral and the Church-Building Industry in Postsocialist Romania*. Vol. 18. Berghahn Books, 2020.

Communist regime, which demolished churches, removed religion from schools, relegated it to society's margins, dissolved monasteries, and forced monastics to renounce their status. Communist officials promoted atheism as a state agenda, seeking to replace religious values.

After 1989, anticlericalism and open atheism greatly declined as many Romanians saw them as vestiges of the former dictatorship<sup>74</sup>. However, anticlerical sentiments resurfaced after scandals involving the Romanian Orthodox Church in the mid-2000s (e.g., the Tanacu exorcism case, disclosures of clergy collaboration with the Communist regime, funding issues, and fees for religious services), giving rise to organized anticlerical voices.

One notable example is the Secular-Humanist Association of Romania (ASUR), a non-governmental organization established in 2010. "ASUR promotes humanistic ethical principles, critical thinking, scientific knowledge, and the separation of state and church."<sup>75</sup> Members and volunteers of the association initiated a variety of protests against the Orthodox Church, the most prominent carrying the slogan "We want hospitals, not cathedrals"<sup>76</sup>. This slogan became widely chanted by protestors nationwide following the tragic 2015 Colectiv nightclub fire, which left 64 people dead and 146 injured. Among the calls for political accountability, protestors also targeted the Orthodox Church, chanting slogans such as "Down with the Patriarch" and "Resign," with some individuals throwing stones at churches and confronting priests on the church steps<sup>77</sup>.

Thus, **2015 marked a turning point in Romania's secularization process and the intensification of anticlericalism.** Western secular influence<sup>78</sup> has compounded public dissatisfaction with the Orthodox Church.

74 Lucian Turcescu, "Romania: Between freethought, atheism and religion", in *Freethought and Atheism in Central and Eastern Europe*, Routledge, 2020.p. 207.

75 Informații despre Asociația Secular-Umanistă din România. Sursa: <https://asur.ro/despre-noi/>.

76 Georgeta Petrovici, "Premieră. Protest față de politicieni și de Biserică.", "Vrem spitale, nu catedrale", in *Evenimentul Zilei*, Anul 22, nr. 6992, decembrie 2013, p. 2.

77 „Revoltă antisistem. Românii, nemulțumiți doar cu demisiile lui Ponta și Piedone. Patriarhul Daniel, vizat și el de proteste”, in *Adevărul* 04.11.2015.; <https://adevarul.ro/stiri-interne/evenimente/revolta-antisistem-romanii-nemultumiti-doar-cu-1663973.html> (22.09.2024).

78 Cezar Mihai Dascalu, *Teorii ale Secularizării. Analogii între cazurile românesc și german*, teză de doctorat publicată la Facultatea de Științe Politice, Universitatea din București, 2017; Marius Rotar, "The use of history in debates on the presence of religious education in public schools in Romania (2015)", in *Journal of Religious Education*, Nr. 66, 2018, p. 184.



ch, a trend observable in opinion surveys measuring trust in the Church. Census data also reflect a growth in categories such as “non-religious” and “atheist,” though these remained below 0.93% of the population in 2021. Additionally, the most recent census revealed a new trend: approximately 2.7 million Romanians *did not declare any religious affiliation*.

In understanding the trajectory of violence between Protestant and Orthodox communities in a broader context, adding both interreligious dialogue (at all levels) and the impact of secularization, it is evident that: **competition within the religious “market” has significantly diminished since 2015, while anticlericalism and secularization have notably increased.**

Simply put, for the majority faith, Protestant communities no longer represent a threat likely to draw believers away from the Orthodox Church. Instead, *the common adversaries for all religious groups have become secularization and anticlericalism*. With the decline in interfaith competition, paired with the rise of secularization and anticlericalism, a significant decrease in cases of violence (across all categories mentioned in the text) has also been observed.

## Conclusions

The research hypothesis is confirmed: *the intensification of secularization and anticlericalism has influenced the reduction of violence between Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, and Neo-Protestant communities in Romania from 1990 to 2023*. This study is underpinned by the theoretical frameworks proposed by Laurence R. Iannaccone, Rodney Stark, and Jörg Stolz, particularly their ‘rational choice’ theory, which provides a robust academic foundation for our findings.

Two distinct trajectories of violence between religious actors were identified. Between Orthodox and Greek-Catholic communities, there is primarily a patrimonial conflict concerning “*collective religious assets*” and tensions over *religious identity*. These tensions and acts of violence - whether verbal, physical, or emotional - *are reciprocal*. Although cases of violence have significantly decreased over the past 15 years, ongoing legal cases maintain a core of potential conflicts.

In contrast, the conflict between Orthodox and Neo-Protestant communities is more complex, involving *doctrinal differences*, perceived threats to national identity, and *religious proselytism*. Although the forms



of violence were similar to those between Orthodox and Greek-Catholic communities, they are unilateral in nature. Since 2007-2008, incidents have considerably diminished, with Jehovah's Witnesses reporting no incidents by 2012.

Regarding these two distinct trajectories, analysis of official reports and press articles indicates that, in the case of Orthodox and Neo-Protestant communities, violence gradually increased from the early 1990s, peaking around 2000, and subsequently declined after 2007. For tensions between Orthodox and Greek Catholics, violence began in 1990, fluctuated in intensity and frequency, but declined in areas where Greek Catholics were granted churches or constructed new ones. The reduction in conflict between Orthodox and Greek Catholics may also be *attributed to an aging population, declining numbers of adherents, and the emigration of young Greek Catholics.*

Secularization<sup>79</sup> and anticlericalism are viewed as the primary threats to religious denominations, as reflected in the decline of adherents and missionary activities. Trust in the Church has diminished, especially following scandals in the 2000s, while organizations such as the Secular-Humanist Association of Romania (ASUR) have continued to promote an *openly anticlerical agenda*. Furthermore, events in 2015 accelerated secularization and anticlericalism within religious life. Consequently, for the majority denomination, Neo-Protestant communities *are no longer perceived as threats but rather as partners in facing shared challenges of secularization and anticlericalism*. The emergence of a common adversary for all denominations has de-escalated the religious landscape, fostered greater dialogue and collaboration, and led to a decrease in violence between Orthodox, Greek-Catholic, and Neo-Protestant communities in Romania.

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<sup>79</sup> Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Aspecte ale secularizării și ale omului secularizat", *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai, Theologia Orthodoxa*, (2006), L-LI, nr.1, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, pp. 251-266.

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