



Orthodox Christianity, Church-State relations and pro-Russia stance in contemporary Greece and Romania¹

Cristianismo ortodoxo, relações Igreja-Estado e posicionamento pró-Rússia na Grécia e Romênia contemporâneas

Cristianismo ortodoxo, relaciones Iglesia-Estado y postura prorrusa en la Grecia y Rumania contemporâneas

DOI: 10.21530/ci.v18n1.2023.1300

Luiz Felipe Dias Pereira²

Copyright:

• This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that the original author and source are credited.

• Este é um artigo publicado em acesso aberto e distribuído sob os termos da Licença de Atribuição Creative Commons, que permite uso irrestrito, distribuição e reprodução em qualquer meio, desde que o autor e a fonte originais sejam creditados.



Abstract

This research aimed to analyze the pro-Russia stance in Greece and Romania in the religious aspect. The hypothesis is that the secular environment of the favours a distancing of these countries from the European Union. This different perception of the role of religion in public life may contribute to a favourable perception of Russia as the protector of Orthodox Christians in the world. The theoretical framework was composed mainly of critical constructivism and the debate regarding religion in the field of International Relations. The applied methods were Guzzini's interpretive process tracing and content analysis.

Keywords: Religion; Secularism; International Relations; Orthodox Christianity; Russia.

1 This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.

2 Doutorando da Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais (PUC Minas), Brasil. (luizfdpereira@gmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5135-1044>. Artigo submetido em 04/09/2022 e aprovado em 25/03/2023.





Resumo

Esta pesquisa teve como objetivo analisar o posicionamento pró-Rússia na Grécia e na Romênia no aspecto religioso. A hipótese é de que o ambiente secular da União Europeia favorece um distanciamento desses países em relação à organização. Essa percepção diferente do papel da religião na vida pública contribui para uma percepção favorável da Rússia como protetora dos cristãos ortodoxos no mundo. O referencial teórico foi composto principalmente pelo construtivismo crítico e o debate referente ao papel da religião nas Relações Internacionais. Os métodos utilizados foram o *process-tracing* interpretativo de Guzzini e a análise de conteúdo.

Palavras-Chave: Religião; Secularismo; Relações Internacionais; Cristianismo Ortodoxo; Rússia.

Resumen

Esta investigación tuvo como objetivo analizar la postura prorrusa en Grecia y Rumania en el aspecto religioso. La hipótesis es que el ambiente secular de la Unión Europea favorece un distanciamiento de estos países de esta última.. Esta percepción diferente del papel de la religión en la vida pública contribuye a una percepción favorable de Rusia como protectora de los cristianos ortodoxos en el mundo. El marco teórico estuvo compuesto principalmente por el constructivismo crítico y el debate sobre la religión en las Relaciones Internacionales. Los métodos utilizados fueron el interpretive process tracing de Guzzini y el análisis de contenido.

Palabras clave: Religión; Secularismo; Relaciones Internacionales; Cristianismo Ortodoxo; Rusia.

Introduction

A research carried out by the Pew Research Center (2017) revealed a favorable perception of Russia's foreign policy – in both geopolitical and religious terms – in Orthodox-majority countries. In Catholic-majority countries, religiously mixed countries and in countries where there is no official religion, this “pro-Russian” public opinion appears to be lower in quantitative terms. The survey was carried out in 18 countries, and the data (%) obtained from people who strongly or totally agree with each of the statements:



**Table 1 – In most Orthodox-majority countries, Russia seen as buffer against West***% who completely mostly agree the statement ...*

	A strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West	It is in our country's interest to work closely with the U.S. and other Western powers	Diff.
Orthodox majority			
Russia	85 %	55 %	+ 30
Belarus	76	56	+ 20
Serbia	80	61	+ 19
Armenia	83	66	+ 17
Bulgaria	56	48	+ 8
Greece	70	62	+ 8
Moldova	61	54	+ 7
Georgia	52	69	-17
Romania	52	82	-30
Ukraine	22	62	-40
Catholic majority			
Croatia	50 %	68 %	-18
Hungary	44	63	-19
Poland	34	71	-37
Lithuania	34	74	-40
Religiously mixed			
Bosnia	55 %	66 %	-11
Latvia	40	61	-21
Estonia	34	72	-38
Majority religiously unaffiliated			
Czech Republic	49 %	67 %	-18

Source: Pew Research Center. 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.

Furthermore, it was observed that support for Russia as a buffer against the influence of the West among those who agree with the statement that “There is a conflict between our country’s traditional values and those of the West”. The results obtained were:





Table 2 – Support for Russia as buffer against West more widespread among those who see value conflict with Western countries

% who agree that a strong Russia is necessary to balance the influence of the West among those who ...

	Agree there is a values conflict with Western countries	Disagree there is a values conflict with Western countries	Diff.
Romania	68%	38%	+ 30
Moldava	71	47	+ 24
Poland	46	22	+ 24
Ukraine	38	14	+ 24
Bosnia	65	43	+ 22
Croatia	66	44	+ 22
Czech Republic	62	40	+ 22
Georgia	60	38	+ 22
Serbia	86	66	+ 20
Estonia	48	29	+ 19
Hungary	58	40	+ 18
Russia	91	75	+ 16
Lithuania	44	29	+ 15
Greece	77	63	+ 14
Belarus	84	71	+ 13
Bulgaria	68	58	+ 10
Latvia	48	38	+ 10
Armenia	86	78	+ 8

Source: Pew Research Center. 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.

Moreover, the report also informs that:

Regression analysis shows that even after controlling for age, gender, education, ethnic Russian identity, religious observance and country of residence, the perception that there is a values conflict with the West and Orthodox religious affiliation are both strongly correlated with the view that a strong Russia is needed to balance the influence of the West. (Pew Research Center 2017, 37).

Considering that both Greece and Romania are members of the European Union (EU) (since 1981 and 2007, respectively) (European Union 2020a; 2020b), it would be expected that these countries would be closer to Western European





countries in terms of common values and institutions, such as Church-State relations. However, although a substantial part of their respective populations affirms, they would also like to have relations with Western countries (Pew Research Center 2017), more than half of their populations keep close ties with Russia in religious terms. Therefore, this article is based on the following question: how is it possible to understand this pro-Russia stance in Greece and Romania?

With the aim of understanding this phenomenon, this research is guided by the following hypothesis: the secular environment of the European Union favors a distancing of these countries from the organization. The aversion to Western values (such as secularism) in Orthodox-majority countries may explain the perception of Russia as an Orthodox powerful ally in international politics. It is also argued that these societies have a perception about the role of secularism in society that is different from the Western European model of Church-State relations.

The general objective of the research is to identify the relationship between Orthodox Christianity and the pro-Russia stance in Greece and Romania presented in the aforementioned research. In order to achieve it, the following specific objectives were defined: 1) To identify the role of Orthodox Christianity in the formation of both Greek and Romanian national identities; 2) Explore the contexts of the integration processes of Greece and Romania into the EU; 3) Demonstrate the relationship between EU's secularism and the Orthodox Christian identities of Greece and Romania and 4) Investigate the histories of Greece and Romania concerning their respective spheres of influence. The analytical framework is composed of Muppidi's (2004) critical constructivism and the concepts of secular, secularization and secularism as proposed by Casanova (2007; 2011). The methodology consisted of Guzzini's interpretivist process-tracing and content analysis.

Therefore, this research attempts to provide theoretical and empirical contributions to the study of international relations/International Relations (ir/IR). Firstly, it addresses gaps regarding the role of religion in the study field of IR. It is known that religion has been overlooked in the discipline of IR (Chadha 2022) and, as argued by Jeffrey Haynes (2021), religion is still an "opaque component of how we understand international relations/International Relations" (Haynes 2021, 14). According to Hatzopoulos and Petit (2003, 1), religion has long been in "exile" from international relations. This was seen as a condition for the existence of modern international politics, since the absence of religion in international relations goes back to the Wars of Religion in Modern Europe and the perception that religion was a threat to security to order (Hatzopoulos & Petit 2003).





Sandal and Fox (2013) cite the existence of three types of debates concerning the role of religion in ir. The first would be the recognition of the absence of religion in the field of IR, while the second type refers to the reason why religion was neglected in IR, the third type includes studies that drew attention to this neglect but did not provide insights concerning the integration of religion into ir. Finally, there is also the debate regarding the attempts of approaching religion in IR theory. Thus, the present study offers a contribution to this sub-field in IR studies, not by simply recognizing the marginalization of religion in IR studies, but also providing an empirical analysis that may be generalized and compared with other cases.

In this sense, the research contributes to the study of religion in international relations by approaching the role of religion in foreign policy. Considering that empirical events are the “main driver of developments in IR theory” (Haynes 2021, 3), this study sought to contribute to the field of IR by pointing out a phenomenon that demonstrates how religion can influence in public opinion and the preferences in both states and non-statal actors (for instance, as in the cases of Russia’s religious diplomacy and the pro-Russia stance in Greece and Romania, respectively). In addition, by analysing the studied phenomenon, this research also aimed to show how the relationship between religion and politics may overlap the boundaries of the domestic and international politics (Haynes 2021, 4).

Analytical framework and methodology: secularism, social imaginaries and the interpretivist *process-tracing*

The study of Church-State relations in the field of International Relations (IR) requires the introduction of relevant concepts related to the ideas of the religious and the secular. Therefore, it is important to define three different concepts that, although interconnected, have different meanings: The “secular”, “secularization” and “secularism”.

The secular can be understood as an epistemic category in the context of modernity – to refer to a reality external to the religious (Casanova 2011). There may exist different secularities that can be “Codified, institutionalized, and experienced in various modern contexts and the parallel and correlated transformations of modern ‘religiosities’ and ‘spiritualities.’” (Casanova 2011, 54).





Casanova (2007) proposes an understanding of secularization from three different meanings:

“a) Secularization as the decline of religious beliefs and practices in modern societies, often postulated as a universal, human, developmental process; b) Secularization as privatization of religion, often understood both as a general modern historical trend and as a normative condition, indeed as a precondition for modern liberal democratic politics; c) Secularization as the differentiation of the secular spheres (State, economy, science), usually understood as “emancipation” from religious institutions and norms (Casanova 2007, 7).

Secularism may have multiple meanings. It can be understood as “modern ideologies concerning ‘religion’, “different normative-ideological state projects” different legal-constitutional frameworks of separation of state and religion and to different models of differentiation of religion, ethics, morality and law” (Casanova 2011, 66). Nevertheless, Casanova (2011) also proposes an analytical distinction between two meanings of secularism, being one of them secularism as an ideology and the other being secularism as a “statecraft doctrine” (Casanova 2011, 66). The latter refers to the separation between religion and politics in order to maintain the neutrality of the State towards all religions or for the sake of protecting people’s freedom of conscience. As for the former, Casanova (2011, 66) argues that religion “becomes an ideology the moment it entails a theory of what ‘religion’ is or does. It is this assumption that ‘religion’, in the abstract, is a thing that has an essence or that produces certain particular and predictable effects that is the defining characteristic of modern secularism”.

Critical constructivism

A critical constructivist approach, as proposed by Muppidi (2004), assumes that agents interact socially through demands. The concept of social claims is related to “Individual demands, obligations, and self-understandings, social claims furnish analysts with a way to conceptualize an agent’s actions as they relate to the actions of other units.” (Muppidi 2004, 22). In this sense, agents manifest their own interests when faced with social demands. This process requires the interaction with another agent, and these interactions only have meaning when interpreted according to each social context. Social imaginaries can be understood as “distinct fields of meanings and social power” (Muppidi 2004, 25) 21. Nevertheless, Muppidi (2004) also argues that:





Operating as a field of meanings, the social imaginary provides an organized set of interpretations—or social claims—for making sense of a complex world. Operating as a field of social power, the social imaginary works to produce specific relations of power through the production of distinctive social identities. My analytical separation notwithstanding, both operations are moments of the same process. (Muppidi 2004, 25).

In a social imaginary, symbols and meanings can be articulated. Muppidi (2004) defines the process of articulation as:

Political mechanisms produced within a social imaginary. Their production and reproduction involve political struggles over which combinations of social meanings are legitimate and which are illegitimate. Such political struggles involve critical constructivism implicit and explicit claims and contestations over social identities involving, among other things, existing imaginings of personal and community identities (Muppidi 2004, 26-27).

The process of interpellation, in turn, concerns how social agents receives these meanings. For the author (2004), the analytical utility of the interpellation is mainly given by the help with regard to understanding the persuasive power of social statements. If the processes of articulation and interpellation are confirmed (being complementary), this process gives rise to what Muppidi (2004) defines as “reciprocal circles of meanings and social powers that generate specific social identities with distinct social practices, interests and powers.” (Muppidi 2004, 27).

The main method selected to carry out this research is Guzzini’s (2012) interpretivist process-tracing. The method’s premise is that the meanings and effects of a given social phenomenon depend on the way in which it is perceived and interpreted, and that meaning is given in a certain context (Guzzini 2012). Understanding this meaning requires “placing particular beliefs/ideas within their wider cultural context or more specific discourses.” (Guzzini 2012, 255). This premise can be applied to this research since it proposes to understand the relationship between different ideational structures since “ideas are not conceptualised as objects that externally cause behaviour, but are constitutive of interests and identity” (Guzzini 2012, 255).

Interpretivist process-tracing should be “interpretivist, historical and multilayered.” (Guzzini 2012, 254). First, the method must be interpretivist, as it deals with ideational elements, considering ideas, meanings, beliefs, among





other elements of social reality that are in the context of a certain society. The interpretation of certain phenomena, instead of focusing on the effect of a certain international event on States, considers the interpretation of agents to be essential for an analysis of the phenomenon. Analyzing this interpretation also requires an investigation at the domestic level, aiming at an understanding of the influence of meanings and beliefs shared by society, since both the meaning and the effect caused by a social phenomenon depend on the way in which it was interpreted by the agents (Guzzini 2012).

The method considers relevant the interpretations of agents in the face of a social phenomenon, but it is also important to mention that, when applying the method, the analysis should not be limited to interpretations at the individual level, but observe the cultural context of each case more broadly. For this reason, interpretivist process-tracing proposes an analysis that considers not only beliefs and worldviews, but also the ideational bases from which social elements that must be contextualized and not taken as presuppositions, such as beliefs, meanings, ideas, identities and interests were constituted (Guzzini 2012).

However, interpretivist process-tracing must also be historical. Elements such as time and the idea of sequence are necessary to understand the unfolding of a given process (Guzzini 2012). About this characteristic, the author States that “as in all processes related to identities, memory and representation of history and sequence must also be incorporated in the analysis” (Guzzini 2012, 255). Another relevant feature of Guzzini’s (2012) interpretivist process-tracing is the idea of multiple layers. Instead of analyzing the process in question from a single line, but from several, *id est*, it should also consider the evolution of several autonomous processes, in different layers of society. Each layer (e.g., political, institutional, social) has its own rhythm, therefore, it is necessary to analyze the temporal relationships and intersections and their relationship with the processes studied (Guzzini 2012). Thus, it follows the logic of a “[...] the temporal intersection of distinctive trajectories of different, but connected, long-term processes. (Guzzini 2012, 256).

The other method applied was a content analysis that includes the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. The Eurobarometer publishes data on public opinion in the European Union. Qualitative data was collected from the Observatoire des Religions et de Laïcité (ORELA), which publishes reports regarding secularism in the European Union. Besides, data provided by the Pew Research Center surveys were also included in the analysis.





Reports, news and speeches by religious leaders were included. These documents were obtained from websites related to the Orthodox world and some excerpts from these documents were selected for the content analysis. Bauer's (2003) definition of content analysis was applied. The method allows the analyst to make inferences based on texts, considering the social context in which the latter is produced. Therefore, the analysis includes representations of social realities, considering texts as vehicles of expression. Texts can be interpreted as expressions of a social context since they can be understood as representations of social realities and are directed towards an audience (Bauer 2003). In this sense, the texts analysed allow the researcher to reconstruct "cosmovisions, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices and stereotypes." (Bauer 2003, 192).

The orthodox social imaginary and social mechanisms

The first step of the research process was to apply the interpretivist process-tracing in the study of the object, following its historical aspect and the idea of multiple layers. It was intended to analyse micro and macro dynamics in Greece and Romania, looking for the possible influence of intersubjective elements – such as religion and culture – in this society (e.g. the role of religion in national identity).

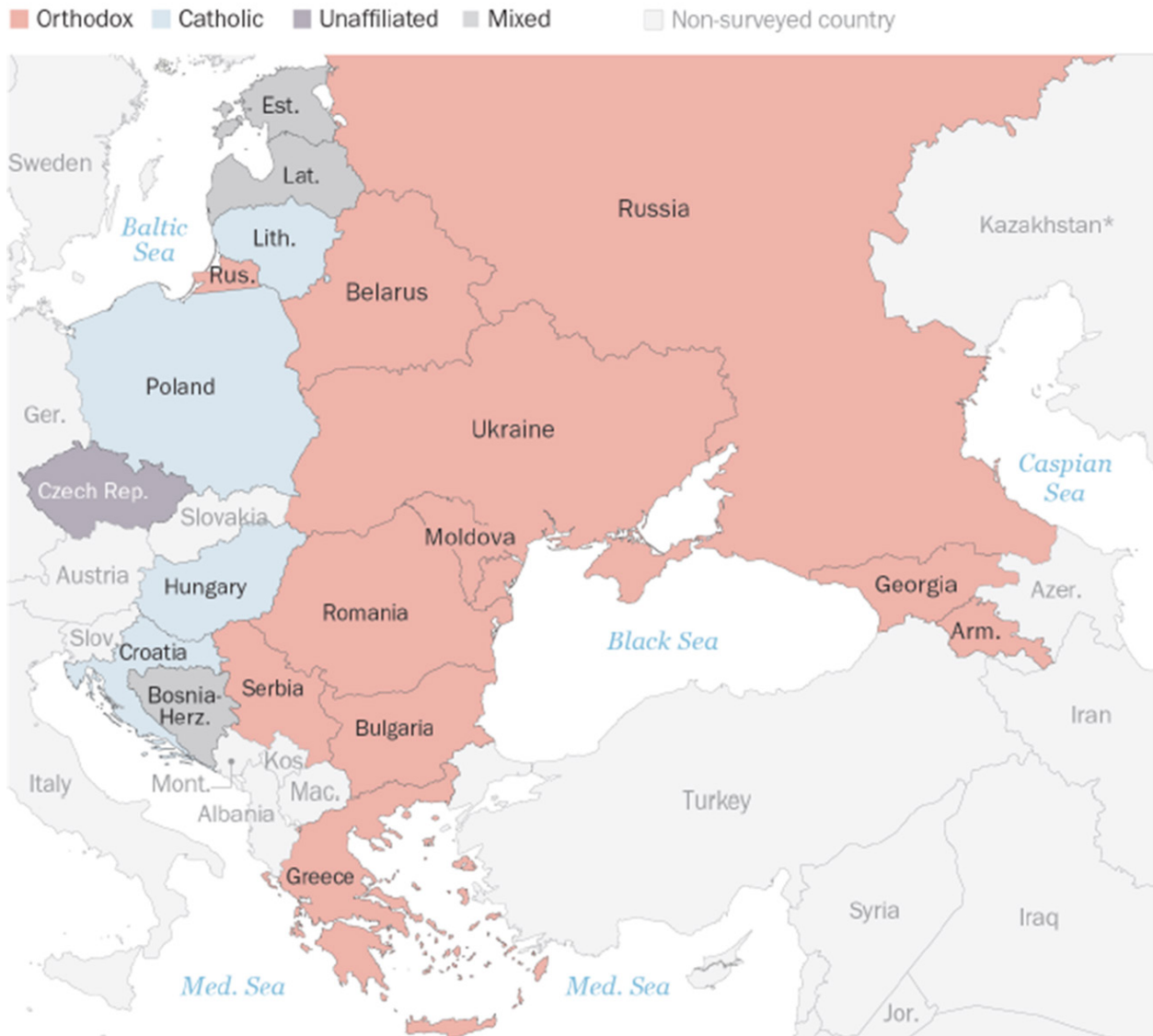
In 1054, a fragmentation in the Christian world led to the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church of the East, the latter being predominated in the nations located at the Eastern part of Christianity. The Orthodox world is composed of independent Churches and the absence of a central authority – such as the Pope – a characteristic that would contribute to the emergence of local Churches, that is, the adaptation of Orthodoxy to regional (and national) cultural elements (Ware, 1964). This fact is essential for understanding the relationship between religion and national identity in the contemporary world.

Today, it is possible to observe a sharp geographical division on the religious (primarily Christian) map of Central and Eastern Europe, as shown by the figure below:





Figure 1 – Religious majorities in Central and Eastern Europe



Source: Pew Research Center. 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.

The figure presents the relevance of Orthodox Christianity in Central and Eastern European countries. There is a positive public opinion in these countries that “Religion should be kept away from governmental policies.” (Pew Research Center 2017, 97). However, in these same societies, about a third of their respective populations agree with the idea that the government should promote religious values. This was also observed in Greece and Romania.

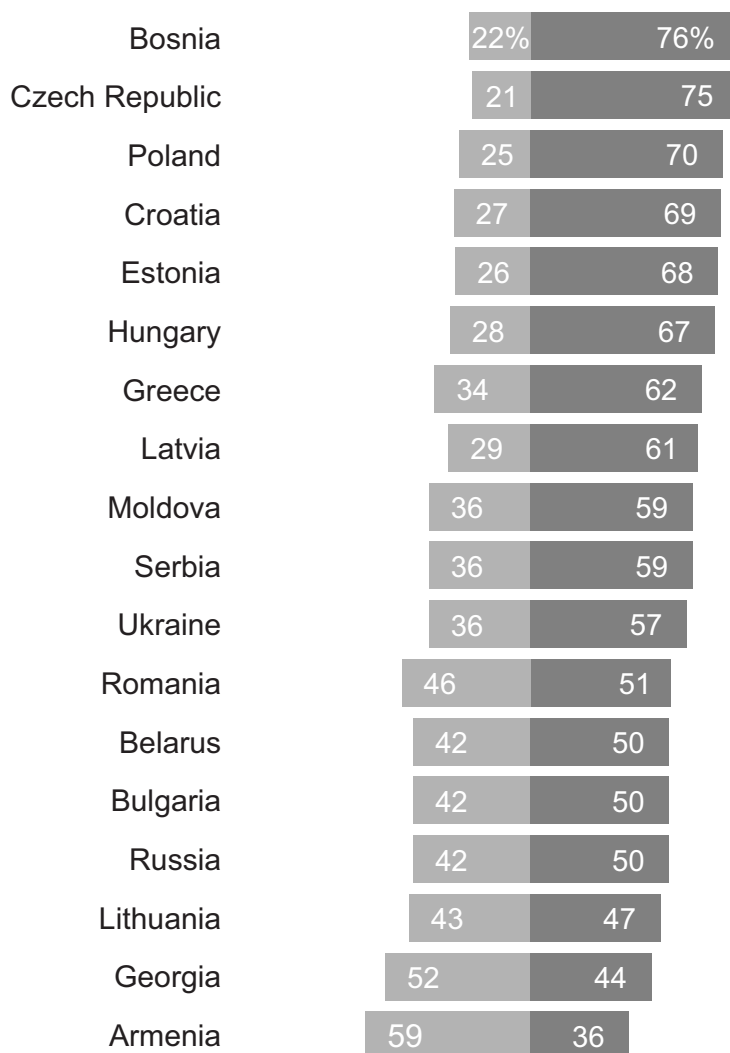




Graph 1 – Majorities favor separation of church and State, but substantial minorities disagree

% *who say ...*

- Governments should support spread of religion
- Religion and government policies should be separate



Source: Pew Research Center. 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.

However, this phenomenon presents even greater complexity. It was also observed that in Orthodox-majority countries there is greater support for the idea that governments should spread religious values when compared to Western European countries, and this opinion does not have the same popularity in Catholic-majority countries or those whose religious background is mixed or where there is no national or privileged religion (Pew Research Center 2017).

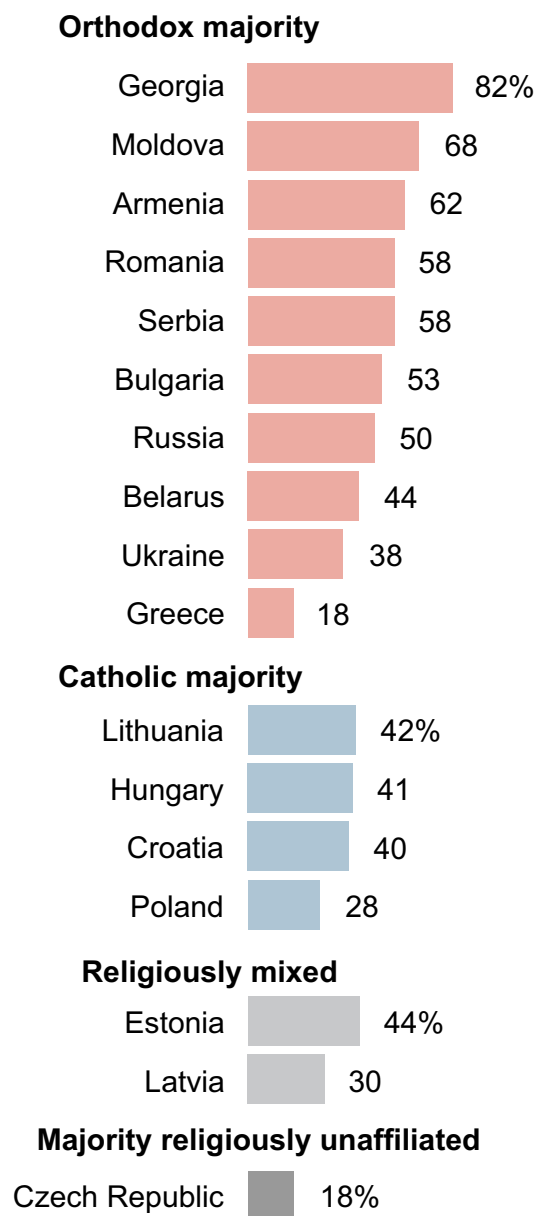




Nevertheless, at the same time, in Orthodox-majority countries, there is higher support for public funding of national churches compared to countries that do not have a privileged religion.

Graph 2 – Higher support in Orthodox countries for government funding of the dominant church

% who say the dominant church in the country should receive financial support from the government



Source: Pew Research Center. 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe.





Among Orthodox-majority countries, there was a higher percentage of individuals who agreed with a possible “conflict between our country’s traditional values and those of the West.” (Pew Research Center 2017, 151). This conflict of values is more visible in Orthodox-majority countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which have similar/common values with Russia (Pew Research Center 2017). In Greece and Romania, 70% and 51% of their respective populations agree with the aforementioned statement (Pew Research Center 2017).

In addition, the concept of “Orthodox Anti-Westernism” (Makrides 2009, 211) is primordial to understanding the differences between Western and Central/Eastern Europe concerning religious values. It is a phenomenon not restrained to the religious sphere and it refers to an aversion to Western institutions existing among Eastern Orthodox societies. It is also related to the idea that the EU neglects Orthodox demands, which, in turn, contributes to a perception of the EU as an institution at the service of the West (Makrides 2009).

The Greek Case

While “opening the black box” of the Greek State, the first element analysed was the level of attachment of Greek citizens to the European Union. In the autumn 2016 Eurobarometer, Greece had one of the lowest percentages of attachment to the institution (32%), ranking in the bottom three, along with the Czech Republic (31%) and Cyprus (26%) (European Commission 2016a). In the autumn 2017 Eurobarometer, only 8% of Greeks said they felt very attached to the bloc, and 29% felt relatively attached to the European Union, while 35% and 28% said they felt not very attached and definitely not attached, respectively (European Commission 2017).

Vasilopoulou (2018) argues that Greeks’ perception of the EU became more negative from 2009 onwards. The economic crisis led Greek society began to associate the EU with a supposed loss of sovereignty, and the reception of refugees, contributed to the construction of an opinion among Greeks that the EU would no longer be able to help the country with the crisis: this context, in turn, favored the rise of skepticism regarding integration (Vasilopoulou 2018).

It is therefore argued that, in the Greek case, there is a point of convergence between social dynamics (at different times) at the micro and macro levels (the crisis and the growing lack of identification with the EU and with Europe itself) which, at the same time, they interact with the main social mechanism





identified, i.e., Greece's entry into the European Union and its adaptation to the bloc's secularism. In the context of the crisis and skepticism towards the European Union, there are some signs of secularization in Greek society despite the fact that religion still has an influence on the daily life of the population (Orela 2018). According to Orela's dossier:

The broad social legitimization of the Orthodox Church has probably rendered it the most influential 'interest group' within Greek politics. In short, religious officials lobby in order to reproduce the Church monopoly and social capital, and try to influence the decision-making process in order to carry through their policies. In exchange for preferential treatment, the Church constitutes, historically, a pillar for the shaping of social consensus (Papastathis 2015, n/p).

Recently, Archbishop Ieronymos and former Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras reached an agreement on removing priests and bishops from their status as civil servants, a fact that has generated discontent among them, although the agreement includes maintaining the payment of their salaries (BBC 2018); agreement rejected by the Holy Synod of the GOC in 2019 (Kampouris 2019). In fact, it is possible to say that "Global economic crisis has moved religious issues to the background." (Orela 2018, 14,)110, since the country has been suffering from a humanitarian crisis since 2010 (context in which the Church assumed an important philanthropic role, providing services to the population, such as food, housing and financial assistance) (Makris; Bekridakis, 2013). Therefore, in contemporary Greek society, it is possible to observe the concepts of secularism and secularization manifesting themselves in different ways.

A report published by the European Commission points to the existence of a favorable perception of Russia in contemporary Greece. In the Special Eurobarometer 451 on the future of Europe, citizens of each member country were asked as follows: "Would you say that the political influence of the EU is currently stronger or weaker than that of...? Russia." (European Commission 2016b, 19); Greece's percentages of total numbers of "stronger" and "weaker" were 28% and 67% (European Commission, 2016b). In the same survey, faced with the question "And in your opinion, in 2030, the political influence of the EU will be stronger or weaker than that of...? Russia?", the total numbers of "stronger" and "weaker" of Greeks interviewed were 25% and 60%, respectively (European Commission, 2016b, 25). Nevertheless, the question "As regards each of





the following countries or group of countries, do you have a positive or a negative view about it?” revealed that 66% of Greeks have a positive image of Russia, while 32% have a negative view (European Commission 2016b, 38). According to Marantzidis and Siakas (2017), this “russophilia” can be understood as having an “‘emotional’ or fanciful” character, while Europeanism is characterized as “rational”, since Russia does not present itself as attractive when it comes to issues such as work and study (Marantzidis; Siakas 2017, n.p.).

The Romanian case

In the Eurobarometer of 2016 (Autumn), Romanians were asked about their feeling of attachment to the European Union. The percentages of “fully attached” and “fully non-attached” were 54% and 43%, respectively (European Commission 2016a). Romania has a relatively positive level of attachment to the EU. In the Eurobarometer survey of autumn 2017, Romania showed a feeling of belonging to the bloc slightly above the average of member countries: citizens were asked how attached they considered themselves to the EU, being able to choose between the options: “very attached”, “relatively attached”, “not very attached”, “definitely not attached” or “does not know”. While the average across countries was 14% “very attached”, 41% relatively attached, 31% “not very attached”, 12% “definitely not attached” and 2% “don’t know”, Romanians’ rates the rates of Romanians interviewed were 17%, 38%, 30%, 11% e 4%, respectively (European Commission 2017).

Since Orthodoxy is supposed to be one of the foundations for Romanian national identity, that is, it is rooted in the individual and collective identities of Romanians, it is possible that religion provides a standard model of behavior, which includes values, norms and ethics, that is, they shape attitudes (Sandor; Popescu 2008). Also, there is today in Romania a positive perception of the role of religious institutions in strengthening morality and creating social bonds (Pew Research Center 2017).

According to a report by Humanists International (2020) on freedom of thought in Romania, despite the constitution and other laws guaranteeing freedom of religion and/or belief, it is observed that the Romanian government not only favors the ROC, but also limits the freedom of beliefs and practices of other minorities, whether religious or not. The Romanian government provides public funding for religious institutions that, according to the law, receive incentives





from the State fund according to the number of believers of each denomination; consequently, the Romanian Orthodox Church receives most of this fund (Humanists International 2020).

Religion is also present in the educational system. In addition to the fact that the Romanian constitution allows for State-subsidized educational institutions, public schools offer religious education (for recognized religions), with students attending classes related to their parents' religion (Humanists International 2020). Romanian students who choose not to take religious education subjects in schools must make an application, which is "An option that had not been widely publicised before the end of 2014, and which may be socially discouraged." (Humanists International 2020, 3).

An example of Romanian perception of secularism can be the construction of the largest Orthodox cathedral in the world: The Cathedral of the Salvation of the People, whose construction began in 2010, being financed with public money and having the approval of the vast majority of the Romanian population, although there are some disagreements about the transparency of public money invested (Turp 2018). In this regard, Turp (2018) quotes the speech of a councilor from Bucharest, Ciprian Ciucu, who States that

The problem is that this is public money and yet there has been no transparency regarding the way it is spent," said Ciprian Ciucu, a Bucharest city councillor. "OK, we allocate money to the church, but the church in turn should be obliged to present quarterly reports as to what it has done with that money. I recognise the benefits of the church and the spiritual comfort it brings to people, but in a secular State the church must nevertheless respect its formal obligations. (Ciucu apud Turp 2018, n/p.).

The councilor conceives of Romania as a secular country, but its articulation in the Romanian social imaginary does not separate the Church from the State, as we could observe from the practices, both through the expression of public opinion and the influence of the ROC in public education. In this sense, it is possible to infer that Romanians find themselves in an ambiguous condition (compared to Western secularism), with its own understanding of the secular.

Romania went through the communist experience and was in the Russian sphere of influence. This trajectory is of great relevance to analyze the perception of Russia in contemporary Romania, which diverges from those previously mentioned. In a survey conducted by the Center for Insights in Survey Research





(2018) in Romania – 69% of Romanians interviewed strongly agreed with the Statement that maintaining relations with the Union European Union would be better for national interests, while 22% somewhat agreed, 5% somewhat disagreed, 2% strongly disagreed and 2% did not know or had no opinion. While the EU had the highest approval rating in this regard, Russia was second to last, on the same issue, 35% of Romanians strongly agreed with the Statement that “national interests would be better served by maintaining strong relations with” Russia, while 32% somewhat agreed, 20% somewhat disagreed, 10% strongly disagreed and 4% had no opinion (Center For Insights in Survey Research 2018).

In the 2016 Special Eurobarometer (451) on the Future of Europe, Romanians when asked whether the current EU influence would be stronger or weaker than Russia’s, or whether they believed this influence would be stronger or weaker in 2030 and the picture of each country mentioned, 36% of Romanians said that the EU’s influence in their country is currently stronger than that of Russia, while 49% believed that the EU’s influence was weaker than that of Russia. Romanians were divided on whether the EU’s influence could be stronger or weaker than Russia’s in 2030, with 38% stronger and weaker. Finally, in total numbers, 53% of Romanians claimed to have a positive image of Russia, while 41% Stated to have a negative image (European Commission, 2016b).

Russia’s religious diplomacy

Since 2012, the Russian Orthodox Church has presented a discourse that emphasizes the ideas of “family values” and “spiritual ties” in contrast to a supposed model of Western modernization; nevertheless, in this context, Orthodoxy and its traditional values are at the base of Russian society, also representing a defence against liberalism (Antunez 2017). According to Demacopolous (2017), the significance of the Moscow Patriarchate for Orthodox Christians is related not to a supposed theological statement, but to the meaning of geopolitics and the Russian State, that is, it is associated with the way in which President Putin came to highlight Orthodox Christianity as a significant feature of Russian culture. In this sense, the perception of Orthodox Christians about Putin, Russia and the Moscow Patriarchate is related to the traditional values defended by them, considering that the “Russian government’s promotion of ‘traditional values’, which are very popular among Christians orthodox, is often juxtaposed with the idea of “a godless, secular West” (Demacopolous 2017, n.p).





Secularism and identity in the orthodox social imaginary

An analysis of documents found on the websites of Churches and/or Patriarchates, produced and disseminated by important members of their respective hierarchies, aiming at an interpretation of speeches that are related to the orthodox perception of secularism was conducted during this research. The documents found were messages from religious leaders – and from President Putin – considering these speeches as an expression of Greek and Romanian social imaginaries.

The first excerpt to be explored – entitled Speech by Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea. Religious education: training young people for life. Held at the International Congress on Youth Education in the Context of Current Secularization, 2016 – was taken from a message from the Patriarch of Romania addressed to the Romanian population (Anghel 2016)³.

[...] In the context of current secularisation, when traditional values are weakened and education is subject to changes of paradigm, young people need support from Family, Church and School, since only through proper orientation and by promoting authentic models they will be able to discern between current challenges and future perspectives. [...] In the educational field, the Romanian Orthodox Church played a significant role throughout the history of the Romanian people, helping to organise and enrich education and national culture. The Romanian school was founded in the church porch and continued to exist and develop in close connection with the Church. (Ciobotea *apud* Anghel 2016).

In the first excerpt, current secularization is represented in a negative way, a threat whose effect on society can already be seen through the “weakening” of traditional values and the “paradigm shift” in education. The ROC, as a subject, is related to “education” and “national culture”, which points to the fact that these elements have always been connected by a close relationship throughout the history of the Romanian people. It is observed that, through the mentioned terms and their functions as subject/predicate, the discourse reinforces the need for the presence of the ROC in the area of education.

3 Message of His Beatitude Daniel, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, on the occasion of the International Congress of Theology Religious Education of Young People in the Context of Current Secularisation (Bucharest, 3-7 September 2016).





The second excerpt⁴ was taken from an interview by Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea about the mission of the Church in the last ten years. Among the topics addressed were the use of technology in pastoral action, the missions of the Church in society, among others (Iftimiu2017). In the speech, the Patriarch mentions secularization in three passages, which will be analyzed here:

In an environment of growing secularisation and even of hostility against religion, we are called to acknowledge our duty to confess Christ's love for humanity in its entirety. We also need to recognise the challenge of receiving His message in a society prone simply to 'tolerate' the presence of the Church, as a mere player in the reconciliation process in case of conflict, or as an institution of human charity and solidarity without reference to salvation or eternal life. (Ciobotea *apud* Iftimiu 2017, n.p.).

As in the previous speech, when mentioning secularization, it is described as a source of threat to society. Considering that the phenomenon is "growing", it is up to the subject "us" to react to secularization and resist the supposed social hostility. This hostility, in principle directed towards religion, summons the subject "we" to act actively, so that, in order to receive the divine message, it is necessary for the Church and the Romanian Orthodox Christians to seek the establishment of a greater space of the Church and religion in society. Posteriorly, secularization is mentioned one more time:

In every circumstance, we must fulfil our vocation to be servants of the Gospel of Christ's love, even if we are frequently faced with the hostility of a secularised society, defined by religious indifference. We also have the sacred calling to be defenders of life, identity and dignity of the human person, even when we encounter the icy breath of desecralisation in a globalised society, which at once 'flattens down' identities, and at the same time seeks, with an obvious bias, to marginalise the Church's role and presence in society. (Ciobotea *apud* Iftimiu 2017, n.p.).

Again, the speech contains a call against the "hostility" associated with secularization. The very construction of "gospel" and "hostility" of a "secularized society" can be interpreted in such a way that secularization is a phenomenon that necessarily interferes negatively in the relationship between God and the faithful. That is, the construction of the subject "we" – "must", "be" – also

4 4.2 Text 2: Exclusive Interview | Patriarch Daniel speaks about the mission of the Church in the past 10 years.





establishes the other, that is, the secular, as a threat directed not only to the Church, but to the lives of all the faithful. The emphasis on the processes of secularization and globalization as a threat to social identities also reinforces the idea that the Church must maintain its space in society.

The following excerpts was taken from a text on the Holy and Great Council website⁵. Having as search criteria the presence of terms such as “secular”, “secularism”, “secularization/secularized”, “identity” and “Church”. In the text, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew addresses President Pavlopoulos (of Greece). The passage was selected because of the mention of the ideal Orthodox model of relations between State and Church. In the words of the Ecumenical Patriarch himself:

It is a well-known fact that the relations between Church and State have gone through many phases, but regardless of the different ways we may characterize these relations, it is true, as a matter of fact, that both the State and the Church are concerned about man and improving the condition of his life. The State focuses her concern on the secular welfare of her citizens and the Church, while concerned about the earthly life, is also holding promise both for the present life and the life to come, to use ecclesial language. Your Excellency is certainly aware of all this for you are an expert in the field of law and political science and you are someone who knows very well our education and history since you also were raised in an Orthodox environment. You fully understand the importance of the collaboration of these two great institutions and continue this good and blessed tradition of affable relations of cooperation and non-interference between the two.[...] With these thoughts, Your Excellency Mr. President, we thank through your person the honorable Greek State and the beloved Greek people for their prayerful presence and support of the work of our Synod and we promise that Orthodoxy shall fulfill Her historic duty and responsibility that has been assigned to her by the Lord and the illumination of the Comforting Holy Spirit. eHoly and Great Council 2016).

Here, the Ecumenical Patriarch, regarded by Greek society as the highest Orthodox religious authority, mentions the general idea of *symphonia* in his speech to the Greek president. The speech has an assertive tone in relation to the

⁵ 4.34.2 Text 3: Toast by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Chairman of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church at the Official Luncheon Hosted in His Honor and in Honor of Their Beatitudes the Primates of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches by His Excellency Prokopios Pavlopoulos President of the Republic of Greece.





subject “you”, “you were also raised in an orthodox environment”, “are aware”, “completely understand”. The speech attributes to the subject “you/president”, who is also immersed in an Orthodox culture, and consequently, to the State and to the Greek nation, the maintenance of a State-Church relationship based on orthodox historical models.

The transcript of Putin’s speech on his visit to Greece in 2016 (Department for External Church Relations 2016)⁶ can be interpreted as an expression of his religious diplomacy, therefore, the selection criterion for this passage is related to an exemplification of this phenomenon. Considering the relevance of Russian diplomacy with regard to the research problem proposed here. On his trip, the Russian president sought to highlight common symbolic ties with the Greeks. On the occasion, Putin Stated that

For over a thousand years now, the spiritual traditions and our common values have been carefully preserved and enriched here. I fully agree that the role played by Mount Athos is crucial at a time when Orthodoxy is growing stronger in Russia and other countries where it is confessed. Orthodoxy is gaining ground, helping a great number of people, including Russians, to find inner support. [...] In 2016, we are holding a reciprocal Year of Culture between Russia and Greece. For centuries our people have been united by a common faith and mutual affection, which, as has already been mentioned, have helped our peoples overcome difficulties and vanquish. This was true during the liberation of the Balkans and at other stages of world history. Today’s generation of our citizens fully shares these deep mutual feelings. (Putin *apud* Department for External Church Relations 2016, n/p).

In this passage, the speech illustrates an expansion of Orthodoxy that is actively expanding, attributing part of this process to the preservation of Orthodox values on Mount Athos. In this sense, the expansion of Orthodoxy “in other countries”, Orthodoxy, as a subject, does not appear accompanied by any of the nationalities, as they usually appear; This may represent a rapprochement between peoples that is not limited to the national Churches. Furthermore, the speech does not present religion alone as the only element that unites nations.

The context of the following excerpt refers to a meeting between Patriarch Kirill of Moscow and Patriarch Daniel of Romania (Department for External

6 2.1 Text 4: President Putin visits Russian St. Panteleimon Monastery on Athos.





Church Relations 2017a)⁷. During the discussions, he commented to Patriarch Kirill of Russia that:

As we discussed in Bucharest, the main problem for the society today is secularization, which means a change in the mentality and order of human life in the way as if there is no God. [...] I think, at our further pan- Orthodox meetings we should speak of the family and secularisation. (Ciobotea *apud* Department for External Church Relations 2017a, n.p).

As in the excerpts previously presented, in this brief commentary Patriarch Daniel reinforces the idea that secularization is not just a social problem, but the “main” capable of altering the social order itself. Referring to “pan-Orthodox” meetings, the discourse attributes to secularization an issue of relevance at a global level, which probably needs an articulation between all Churches in order to be properly addressed (Department for External Church Relations 2017a).

The following excerpt was taken from a meeting of Patriarch Kirill with the Committee of Representations of Orthodox Churches for the European Union (Department for External Church Relations 2017b)⁸. The excerpt was selected with a view to demonstrating the way in which the Churches articulate between itself, defending its interests. Bearing in mind the pro-Russian stance in countries with Orthodox culture, it is important to note Patriarch Kirill’s meeting with the Orthodox representations of the EU:

We know that the process of forming this Orthodox representation was not quite easy. Yet, by God’s mercy, today there is a high level of understanding of how we should work together in our interaction with the European institutions. [...] We, as the one Orthodox Church, have common views, and we need to represent our interests together. (Kirill *apud* Department for External Church Relations 2017b, n/p).

This speech by Patriarch Kirill with representatives of the Committee of Representatives of Orthodox Churches for the European Union also builds an idea of common interests and problems. From the speeches presented, it is possible to infer that there is an alignment of narratives between the Greek, Romanian and Russian Orthodox discourses about secularization being treated as a threat (both

⁷ Patriarch Kirill meets with Patriarch Daniel of Romania.

⁸ His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with members of the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the European Union.





external and internal). Understanding this relationship between these discourses is important to understand how these religious authorities, which have influence in countries where the Orthodox religion is the majority, legitimize practices, identities and interests that can be internalized by their respective populations.

Final remarks

The favorable perception of Russia in Greece and Romania is manifested at a time when dynamics at national and international level corroborate the existence of this phenomenon. Thus, the argument of this analysis consists of the following premises:

- 1) The Orthodox social imaginaries in Greece and Romania, through the articulation of meanings, interests, power relations and identities, allowed the construction of an ideational basis, in which values, norms, and understandings about the functioning of the world led to a different interpretation of European integration and the idea of Europe. Social mechanisms, microdynamics and parallel dynamics contributed to the perception of Europe and secularism to constitute distinct meanings.
- 2) Due to different historical trajectories and Greek and Romanian Orthodox social imaginaries, modernity, human rights and secularism have different meanings from those existing in the West.
- 4) Putin's religious diplomacy – a parallel phenomenon that is, in fact, relevant – occurs at the same time that this Russophilia manifests itself in these countries, however, it should not be analyzed as the main cause of this phenomenon.

Conclusion

Based on the evidences presented, it is possible to argue religious and cultural elements may help to explain the pro-Russia stance in Greece and Romania. In both cases, this good perception of Russia seems to be related to these countries' common values and aversion to Western secularism. Future studies could benefit from analysing this type of phenomenon through the theoretical approaches of desecularization (*id est*, an analysis of the ways in which religion returns to the public sphere) and post-secularism. The concept of desecularization can





contribute to research related to contemporary Russian religious diplomacy, analysing this process as a “counter-secularization” (Karpov 2010, 236). Studies on post-secularism are relatively recent in the field (Mavelli; Petito 2014) and assume that the European secular experience did not materialize in non-Western countries, but also to the cases of the Orthodox-majority countries in the EU.

References

- Anghel, Gheorghes. 2016. Religious education – formation of young people for life. *Basilica.ro*. Available at: < <https://basilica.ro/en/religious-education-formation-of-young-people-for-life/> > . Access on: 22 April 2020.
- Antunez, Juan Carlos. 2017. *The Role of Religion and Values in Russian Policies: The Case of Hybrid Warfare*. Grupo de Estudios en Seguridad Internacional, Universidad de Granada, Granada, n/p. Available at: < <https://www.seguridadinternacional.es/?q=en/content/role-religion-and-values-russian-policies-case-hybrid-warfare> > . Access on: 20 February 2020.
- Bauer, Martin W. 2003. “Análise de conteúdo clássica: uma revisão”. In *Pesquisa qualitativa com texto, imagem e som: um manual prático*. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes (Orgs Martin W. Bauer & George Gaskell), p. 189-217.
- BBC, 2018. GREECE Church agreement to take 10,000 priests off payroll. Available at: < <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-46122997> > . Acesso em: 17 abr. 2020
- Casanova, José. 2007. “Rethinking secularization: a global comparative perspective.” In *Religion, Globalization and Culture* (Lori G Beaman; Peter Beyer eds). Leiden: Brill, pp.101-120.
- Casanova, José. 2011. “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms”. In *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford University Press, New York, p.54-74.
- Center For Insights In Survey Research. 2018. *Public Opinion in Romania*. Available at: < https://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/final_romania_poll_presentation.pdf > . Access on: 10 April 2020.
- Chadha, Astha. 2022. “Review of Religion in International Relations Theory”. *International Journal of Religion* 3 (1):3-18. <https://doi.org/10.33182/ijor.v3i1.2142>.
- Demacopolous, George. 2017. *Q&A: A closer look at Orthodox Christians*. Available at: < <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/14/qa-a-closer-look-at-orthodox-christians/> > . Access on: 20 January 2020.
- Department for External Church Relations). 2017a. *His Holiness Patriarch Kirill meets with members of the Committee of Representatives of the Orthodox Churches to the*





- European Union*. Available at: < <https://mospat.ru/en/2017/10/08/news151113/> >
Access on: 10 January 2020.
- Department for External Church Relations. 2017b. *Patriarch Kirill meets with Patriarch Daniel of Romania*. Available at:
< <https://mospat.ru/en/2017/12/04/news153997/> > . Access on: 14 February 2020.
- Department for External Church Relations. 2016. *President Putin visits Russian St. Panteleimon Monastery on Athos*. Available at: < <https://mospat.ru/en/2016/05/28/news132255/> > . Access on: 14 February 2020.
- European Commission. 2016a. *European citizenship. Standard Eurobarometer 86, Autumn, November 2016*. Available at: < <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/ResultDoc/download/DocumentKy/79411> > . Access on: 20 April 2020.
- European Commission. 2016b. *Future of Europe. Special Eurobarometer 451, October, 2016*. Available at: < https://g8fip1kplyr33r3krz5b97d1-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ebs_467_social_issues_en.pdf > Access on 20 April 2020.
- European Commission. 2017. *European citizenship. Standard Eurobarometer 88, Autumn, November 2017*. Available at: < http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/b02975b3-58b2-11e8-ab41-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1 > Access on: 20 April 2020.
- European Union. 2020a. Greece. Available at: < https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries/greece_pt > . Access on: 05 April 2020.
- European Union. 2020b. Romania. Available at: < https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries/member-countries/romania_pt > . Access on: 22 April 2020.
- Sandal, N., & Fox, J. 2013. *Religion in International Relations Theory: Interactions and Possibilities*. Routledge, London.
- Guzzini, Stefano. "Social Mechanisms as Micro-Dynamics in Constructivist Analysis." Chapter. In *The Return of Geopolitics in Europe?: Social Mechanisms and Foreign Policy Identity Crises*, edited by Stefano Guzzini, 251–77. Cambridge Studies in International Relations. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139225809.015.
- Hatzopoulos, P., & Petite, F. 2003. "The Return from Exile: An Introduction". In *Religion in International Relations. Culture and Religion in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 1-20.
- Haynes, Jeffrey. 2021. Religion and International Relations: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It? *Religions* 12: 328. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050328>
- Toast by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Chairman of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church at the Official Luncheon Hosted in His Honor and in Honor of Their Beatitudes the Primate of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches by His Excellency Prokopios Pavlopoulos President of the Republic of Greece.





- Iftimiu, Aurelian. 2017. *Exclusive Interview: Patriarch Daniel speaks about the mission of the Church in the past 10 years*. Available at: < <https://basilica.ro/en/exclusive-interview-patriarch-daniel-speaks-about-the-mission-of-the-church-in-the-past-10-years/> > . Access on: 14 February 2020.
- Kampouris, Nick. 2019. *Greek Orthodox Church Synod Rejects Deal to Cut Church and State Ties*. Available at: <https://greece.greekreporter.com/2019/03/20/greek-orthodox-church-synod-rejects-deal-to-cut-church-and-state-ties/>. Access on: 19 April 2020.
- Karpov, V. 2010. “Desecularization: A Conceptual Framework.” *Journal of Church and State* 52:232–270.
- Makrides, Vasilios. 2009. “Orthodox Anti-Westernism Today: A Hindrance to European Integration?”. *International Journal for The Study of The Christian Church*. v. 9. 209-224. 10.1080/14742250903186935.
- Makris, Gerasimos; Bekridakis, Dimitris. 2013. “The Greek Orthodox Church and the economic crisis since 2009”. *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 13:2, 111-132, DOI: 10.1080/1474225X.2013.793055
- Marantzidis, Nikos; Siakas, George. 2017. Attitudes and perceptions of the Greek public opinion towards Greece’s position in the international environment. Public Opinion Research Unit, 2017. Available at: < <http://www.poru.eu/en/2017/10/10/attitudes-and-perceptions-of-the-greek-public-opinion-towards-greeces-position-in-the-international-environment/> > . Access on: 06 April 2020.
- Mavelli, Luca., Petito, Fabio. 2014. Towards a Postsecular International Politics. In Mavelli, L., Petito, F. (eds) *Towards a Postsecular International Politics. Culture and Religion in International Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, pp. 1-26. < https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137341785_1 > .
- Muppidi, Himadeep. 2004. Critical constructivism. In *The Politics of the Global*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (org. Himadeep Muppidi), pp.19-29.
- Observatory Of Religions And Secularism (ORELA). 2018. Religion And Secularism In The European Union. Report, September 2018. Available at: < <http://www.o-re-la.org/index.php/rapports-sp-1746043843/item/download/19> > . Access on: 05 October 2019.
- Papastathis, Konstantinos. 2015. Greece. Observatoire des Religions et de la Laïcité (ORELA). Available at: < <http://www.o-re-la.org/index.php/eu-countires/item/1323-greece> > . Access on: 21 April 2020.
- Pew Research Center. 2017. Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe. Mai 2017. Available at: < <http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2017/05/15120244/CEUP-FULL-REPORT.pdf> > . Access on: 10 October 2017.
- Humanists International. 2020. Romania. Available at: < <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/europe-eastern-europe/romania/> > . Access on: 23 January 2020.





- Sandor, Dan; Popescu, Marciana. 2008. Religiosity and Values in Romania. *Transylvanian Review of Administrative Sciences*, v.4, n.22, pp. 171-180.
- Holy and Great Council. 2016. Toast by His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew Chairman of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church at the Official Luncheon Hosted in His Honor and in Honor of Their Beatitudes the Primate of the Orthodox Autocephalous Churches by His Excellency Prokopios Pavlopoulos President of the Republic of Greece. Available at: < <https://www.patriarchate.org/-/2016-06-19-toast-president-greece> > . Access on: 02 April 2023.
- Turp, Craig. 2018. Romania inaugurates grandiose new cathedral. *Emerging Europe*. Available at: < <https://emerging-europe.com/news/romania-inaugurates-grandiose-new-cathedral/> > . Access on: 22 April 2020.
- Vasilopoulou, Sofia. 2018. The party politics of Euroscepticism in times of crisis: The case of Greece. *Politics*, Thousand Oaks: v.38, n.3, pp. 311-326.
- Ware, Timothy. 1993. *The Orthodox Church*. Penguin Books, London.

