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DOCTORAL THESIS - SUMMARY

*The Romanian Orthodox Church and the Mass Media in Romania. Perspectives on
Communication in the Public Sphere*

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Rationale of research topic choice

The topic of the present thesis concerns the way in which the activity of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) is reflected by the *mass media* and the way in which the ROC's communication is conducted via the Christian media. This theme is topical and of considerable interest, generating numerous contradictory opinions. We find that it is necessary to create a better understanding, among both the professional and the general public, of the phenomena that impact on the process of public and interinstitutional communication.

Research background

The first decades of the 21st century have brought unprecedented innovations into the everyday life of communities around the globe. These have unquestionably triggered significant changes in the life of both the individual and certain social groups. The mentality, behaviour, world view and, last, but not least, the religiousness or spirituality of communities have been affected. One important channel through which these innovations have been propagated involves the diversification of means of communication and easy access to them for nearly any social category. The large-scale use of the new means of communication has brought about many questions as to their positive or negative impact on users, as well as to the manner in which they might become means of manipulation.

In Romania, one of the institutions that has directly (and, probably, the most vehemently) opposed the unconditional use of the new communication tools has undoubtedly been the Romanian Orthodox Church. The present research aims to put forward a comparative view of the Orthodox denomination and the Roman-Catholic one.

There are two dimensions of the issue that we follow closely: the ROC's relationship with the mainstream media and with the Christian media.

The aim of the present work is to contribute to narrowing the gaps in knowledge in the field of communication, by analysing the means of communication available to the Church (in this case, the Orthodox Church), the effects of their use and the way in which Christian denominations relate and adapt to the new communication technology and to digital media in particular. We will mainly focus on the manner in which the Romanian Orthodox Church

(Romania's majority church¹) has communicated with the mainstream media in recent years. To that purpose, we take into consideration both types of relationships, by analysing the constructs and positions expressed by the Church and addressed to the *mass media*, as well as vice versa. We are also interested in the way in which this (apparent) dialogue has been reflected and perceived in the public space.

Furthermore, we aim to follow the Romanian Orthodox Church's relationship with its faithful via the modern *mass media*, such as it is, from 2005 onwards. We have selected this interval because the advised and organised debut of the Romanian Orthodox Church's religious message into the digital world came rather late.

Elements of novelty and interdisciplinarity

Considering that, in most cases up to the present, topics such as the one of this thesis have mostly been approached in a unilateral and monodisciplinary manner, the present theoretical enterprise aims to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, facilitated by the examination of specialised literature pertaining to several fields of interest, such as: communication science, theology, history, anthropology. The intended result is the construction of an integrative, innovative perspective from the point of view of a specialist in communication who studies and combines multiple angles from different areas of activity.

Both theology and sociology provide a vast array of research instruments and ways of understanding the reality around us. In spite of borrowing elements from the conduct of a historical researcher, theology aims to internalise phenomena from a transcendental point of view, reaching beyond the epistemes of the eras and contexts that have given rise to them.

We find that this research topic is all the more relevant now that the interaction between the mass media and the Church is more intense than ever before. Issues regarding events such as revelations from within the Church institution feed ordinary people's propensity for the sensational and the mysterious, thus constituting a direction that is fully capitalised on in terms of rating. The public become increasingly interested in learning about the irregularities occurring inside the Church (see Recorder's journalistic investigations, among which *The Clan of the Great White*, *The First Sermon of an Atheistic Priest* and *The People's Humiliation*

¹ *Statutul pentru organizarea și funcționarea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române din 16.01.2008* [The Statute for the Organisation and Functioning of the Romanian Orthodox Church of 16.01.2008], <https://lege5.ro/Gratuit/gezdamrrge/statutul-pentru-organizarea-si-functionarea-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane-din-16012008>, retrieved on 2.07.2019.

Cathedral are the most watched stories). Therefore, the communication specialist has the role of interpreting this picture with the aid of research instruments, in order to contribute to the comprehension of the broader phenomenon of media communication.

Methodological design

The questions that lie at the foundation of the present research are the following:

1. *How is the image and activity of the ROC reflected in the Romanian mass media?*
2. *What is the role of the media for young Christians who participate in the ROC's activities?*

In order to answer the research question '*How is the image and activity of the ROC reflected in the Romanian mass media?*', seven case studies have been analysed: (1) the Tanacu case, (2) charity work within the Romanian Orthodox Church – the case of Father Nicolae Tănase of Valea Plopului and that of His Grace Bishop Longhin Jar of Bănceni, Ukraine, (3) the Colectiv case, (4) the controversies surrounding the People's Salvation Cathedral, (5) the 'Pomohaci' case and the 'Bishop of Huși' case, (6) the referendum to redefine family and (7) the case of Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis. These are described and interpreted from the point of view of the chronological evolution of the events' notoriety and their impact is subsequently analysed with the aid of digital instruments.

The research also includes a comparative-history perspective. First, we sought to examine the approach of Christian denominations other than Orthodox to the issues of using the *mass media* to disseminate their message. We also wanted to observe whether this phenomenon registered the same evolution in the case of other Orthodox churches in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and even in Asia. Thus, we selected several case studies that illustrate the relationship between the *mass media* and the Church, including the manner in which the latter has made use of modern means of communication to propagate its messages. More specifically, we have presented the following examples: the Russian Orthodox Church, the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Church of China. We were also interested in the impact of socio-historical factors on the subsequent evolution of the relationship between the *mass media* and the Church. This is the rationale that informed the choice to present each of these Churches diachronically.

The specific sociological research methodology includes both quantitative and qualitative instruments. From a quantitative point of view, we have employed the sampling-based social survey method, by means of a data collection instrument – the questionnaire – to

answer the question ‘*What is the role of the media for young Christians who participate in the ROC’s activities?*’. The questionnaire was administered between 27th October and 11th December 2020 to 5545 young people with a Christian religious orientation who were members of associations and were aged between 18 and 35.

Most of the subjects were students of prestigious higher-education centres and resided in county capitals. 74% of them came from an urban environment, while 26% had a rural background. The questionnaire graphs were created with the aid of Microsoft Excel.

The questionnaire comprises closed and semi-closed questions and was administered *online* (on the Asociația Studenților Creștin-Ortodocși Români Cluj (the Association of Romanian Christian Orthodox Students of Cluj) Facebook group), whence it was reshared in other *online* Christian groups.

In terms of quality, we resorted to the content-analysis method, examining various official documents issued by representative institutions and media articles (in print and *online* form). The analysis of the materials was conducted based on titles or themes with a major impact on the investigated topics.

Furthermore, a significant contribution to the present research comes from applying the qualitative method of thematic analysis by means of the semi-structured interview. More specifically, we conducted six interviews (by telephone, face to face, and via e-mail) in August 2018, thus inviting representative opinion leaders with experience in the fields of culture, ecclesiology, and the media – which are fields of interest for the theme of the thesis – to share their views as to the topic of the present doctoral research. The interview questions they received coincided, as we sought to outline a comprehensive and coherent view of the topic by involving personalities pertaining to multiple fields relevant to our research area.

The structure of the thesis

The thesis consists of eight chapters. The first one, titled ‘Communication from a Theological Perspective. Communication Models within the Christian Church’, aims to identify a tradition of communication within the history of the Church, the ways of conveying information to the first Christian and non-Christian communities, the interest shown by theological studies in the topic of the communication between the Church and the world.

The second chapter, ‘The Church and the Mass Media – The Case of the Romanian Orthodox Church’, constitutes an incursion into the recent history of the Romanian Orthodox Church after 1990, on the one hand, and into the history of means of mass communication, on

the other. Moreover, it tackles aspects such as the evolution of the churchly press, the ROC's relation to the mainstream media and vice versa, the Church's use of the *mass media*, the lapses or defects of this relation.

The third chapter, called 'The Relationship between the *Mass Media* and the ROC: Facets of Communication within the Catholic Church', presents a brief history of the Catholic Church and of the communication phenomenon within it, the positive and negative effects of the process of opening up to the community and the *mass media*. Furthermore, it features a comparison with the evolution of communication within the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The fourth chapter, 'Other Orthodox Churches' Use of the Mass Media', is dedicated to a comparative approach to the manner in which the other Orthodox churches use the communication apparatus and shows the differences between them.

In the fifth chapter, 'Research Methodology', we analyse the questionnaires, the seven case studies, the interviews with opinion leaders, the public's perception of the Church and the *mass media*, the measuring of the impact on the mass media of topics that the ROC was involved in, and other Orthodox churches' use of the *mass media*.

The sixth chapter, 'Case Studies Relevant to the ROC's Relationship with the *Mass Media* in Recent Years', seeks to show the impact of the seven case studies selected on the mass media and their effects on the ROC's image in the eyes of the public.

In the seventh chapter, titled 'Results of Interviews with Opinion Leaders', we analyse the opinions of seven names well-known in the public space for taking a stand, either to criticise or defend the ROC in recent years. The aim was to have the questions answered by personalities pertaining to various fields, of different ages and with diverse biographies, life experiences and views.

Chapter eight, 'Results of the Questionnaire-Based Social Survey', captures the extent to which the *mass media* influences the opinions/positions of young faithful at a time of peak intensity of the relationship between the *mass media* and the Church.

The final chapter is dedicated to 'Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research Directions'.

Research methodology

The practical dimension of the research has the role of supporting the theoretical enterprise and provide an updated, complex and unbiased view of the aspects concerning the vast phenomenon of the Church's communication through the modern means available.

The questions which have guided the present research are the following:

1. *How is the image and activity of the ROC reflected in the Romanian mass media?*
2. *What is the role of the media for young Christians who participate in the ROC's activities?*

Various professionals, who are active members of the Church and possess relevant expertise in the fields of theology, culture, and communication (mass media), alongside a segment of the general public, comprising people of various ages and professions who consented to answer our interview questions or to take part in our survey, make up the *observation unit* which strengthens and exemplifies, through particularisation, the theoretical considerations found in the present doctoral thesis, thus contributing significantly to the research area of interinstitutional and public communication.

Quantitative methodology

The first scientific domain which has provided us with a series of research methods is sociology. Since it is concerned with studying the patterns of social interaction between certain individuals² and between groups of individuals in specific situations, it is of particular interest to the present research (questionnaires, graphs, etc). Along the decades, sociology has significantly diversified its research methods, which are not merely qualitative and quantitative, but even propose a combination of elements of hermeneutics, philosophy, mathematics, digital technology, etc.³

Quantitative research has allowed us to measure concrete aspects based on samples (as part of the questionnaire, for the present thesis) and thus check the theoretical basis against empirical research⁴.

As far as the social survey is concerned, the questionnaire was administered to a group of religiously oriented young people who were members of Christian associations. The survey was conducted online (on the Asociația Studenților Creștin-Ortodocși Români Cluj (the Association of Romanian Christian Orthodox Students of Cluj) Facebook group) between 27th October and 11th December 2020 and involved 5545 young people aged 18 to 35, as they are predominantly the ones who use the new technologies. The questionnaire was disseminated using the snowball method and circulated initially within the scope of Cluj-Napoca city, but,

² See David Ashley, David M. Orenstein, *Sociological Theory: Classical Statements*, Boston Pearson Education, Boston, 2005.

³ Michael W Macy, Robert Willer, *From Factors to Actors: Computational Sociology and Agent-Based Modelling in Annual Review of Sociology* 28, 2002, pp. 143- 154.

⁴ Petru Iluț, *Abordarea calitativă a socioumanului* [A Qualitative Approach to Social and Human Sciences], Polirom, Iași, 1997, p. 63.

through resharing, it subsequently reached other cities in Romania and even abroad. The purpose of the questionnaire was to answer the question ‘*What is the role of the media for young Christians who participate in the ROC’s activities?*’, or, more specifically, to find out to what extent the participants use modern *mass media* to stay informed regarding the activities of the Church and how they perceive the way in which the image of the Church is reflected by the *mass media*. Among others, we also sought to learn whether the *mass media* – both lay and churchly – had any influence on their religious behaviour.

The questionnaire can be viewed in the appendices to the study and contains closed and semi-closed questions.

Some answer options in the questionnaire involve ordinal variables⁵ (e.g. to a very large extent, to a large extent, to a small extent, to a very small extent, not at all, etc.). In terms of data analysis techniques, we followed the pattern described by Milles and Huberman’s theory – reduction of metrics (the set of measured aspects), data presentation, and conclusions deriving from them.⁶

The tables and graphs included in the thesis represent another point of reference for the quantitative analysis. The measuring of the impact of topics that the ROC was involved in on the digital press includes statistical data: how many Google pages contain references to the topic in question, how many results are generated in total for the Internet user (relevant results according to the Google search engine, including other omitted similar results). For that purpose, we used the *Tools* section to customise the search interval and select the desired period.

Furthermore, the Google Trends digital search instrument has enabled us to statistically determine (in the form of graphs) the public’s interest in searching for punctual topics regarding the selected case studies and related topics in the previously selected time interval. Using this tool, we were also able to carry out certain comparisons between the topics searched for *online* concerning the case studies.

Qualitative methodology

The employment of qualitative methodology consisted in approaching the topic from multiple individual perspectives, thus integrating the opinions of various experts and practitioners with relevant experience. The analysis of the *secondary* data (content analysis) entails an inductive reasoning, exemplifying and interpreting particular phenomena which

⁵ Ingrid Storm, *Researching religion using quantitative methods*, Institute for Social Change, University of Manchester, 2020, p. 6.

⁶ Suci Ramadhanti Febriani, Apri Wardana Ritonga, “The Perception of Millennial Generation on Religious Moderation through Social Media in the Digital Era”, in *Millah: Jurnal Studi Agama*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2022, p.319.

support the overall research⁷. We are therefore dealing with a thematic analysis, which implies explicit values and a strong cultural significance of social reality⁸.

Furthermore, the manner in which we approached certain more intensely publicised topics, which are still present in the collective mind, was by resorting to *case studies*.

As far as the categories of documents that we analysed are concerned, we would like to specify that we also looked at documents issued by certain institutions. To that purpose, we conducted an analysis of the way in which the lay press has presented the image of the Church from 2005 onwards. We set our priorities after consulting the public agenda assumed by certain *mass media* establishments (Digi TV, Adevărul, Pro TV, etc.) and by the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Another important source we used were press articles. The content analysis we conducted of both print and online articles sought mainly to observe the relationship between the *mass media* and the ROC. The analysis was carried out based on the titles and themes which had a major impact on the topics in question. We opted for this type of sampling because we were interested in certain journalistic investigations which triggered communication issues within the Church. By using this method, we aimed to answer the question '*How is the image and activity of the ROC reflected in the Romanian mass media?*'.

We sought to study oral and written language in relation to the social environment and context in which it was employed⁹. The content analysis – which we used to decipher certain statements made by commentators in the *mass media*, as well as by clerics – differs in several respects from other, linguistic methods. First, content analysis is focused on investigating the socio-psychological aspects underlying a text and less on linguistic aspects and phenomena. Second, in most cases, the structure of the text is of mere secondary interest.

To supplement the results of the content analysis, a second qualitative research instrument from the field of sociology was used for research and data collection, namely the semi-structured interview. By carrying out interviews with certain opinion leaders, we sought to obtain additional information to complete the press articles or bibliography consulted. As far as the interviews are concerned, they highlight the *pro*-Church or, on the contrary, Church-critical views of personalities whose voices shape and steer the opinions of the masses in the

⁷ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*. SAGE Publications, Inc., Thousand Oaks, 1998, p. 16.

⁸ W.L. Neuman, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, 3rd edition, Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1997, p. 14.

⁹ Teun Van Dijk, *Critical discourse analysis* in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen, E. Heidi (eds.), *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden, Massachusetts, 2005, pp. 352-365.

ROC-media equation. Thus, we interviewed representatives of the cultural, ecclesiological and media sphere. We would like to mention here writer and diplomat Teodor Baconchi, theologian Radu Preda, lecturer at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Cluj-Napoca, Adrian Papahagi, lecturer at the Faculty of Letters of Cluj-Napoca, journalist Lucian Mândruță, Professor Stelian Tofană of the Faculty of Orthodox Theology of Cluj-Napoca, and writer Mihail Neamțu. We also contacted journalist Cristian Tudor Popescu and activist Remus Cernea, but they declined our invitation to participate in the present study. The questions addressed to them mainly refer to the relationship between the *mass media* and the ROC in post-December 1989 Romania. Furthermore, we were interested in identifying subjective positions as to the assimilation of modern means of communication by the ROC and to the communication methods that the Church will turn to in order to be closer to the people.

Both the interviews and the questionnaire-based social survey are sources of *primary* data.

Theology is another field that provides a series of specific research instruments of its own. Aside from employing similar methods to those of a historian, theology sets out to understand the revelation that transcends cultures and ages – in other words, it seeks to understand the revealed truth¹⁰. In the view of theology, such a goal can only be attained with the aid of the Holy Spirit. However, the theological method makes use of operations which seek to combine and understand facts by taking into account at least three dimensions: the historical one, the rational one, and the one of supernatural revelation¹¹.

In order to achieve this goal, first of all, we set out to go through the specialised literature pertaining to fields such as communication science, theology, history, anthropology. Unfortunately, in most cases so far, topics such as the present one have been approached only from a monodisciplinary perspective. A researcher is forced to study the way in which specialists in each field in turn (theology, history, journalism, or sociology) express their opinions or research results in an isolated manner, within the same narrow group. In the present circumstances, in the absence of dialogue, a genuine debate between specialists in these fields with the aim of conducting an interdisciplinary study is not an easily attainable goal. It is not rarely the case that a researcher is forced to analyse different and apparently incompatible

¹⁰ Kelly M. Kopic, *A Little Book for New Theologians. Why and How to Study Theology*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, , 2012, p. 36.

¹¹ See Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, Eeasman, 2004.

perspectives. That is why we have striven to provide a balanced account of each point of view relevant to the present study.

To that end, we have gone through bibliographical sources in both Romanian and English, to ensure a deeper grounding of the research.

It is worth mentioning that our enterprise has been considerably facilitated by the online space. Many of the sources, especially the specialised literature in English, were easy to access online. Today's researcher is privileged due to the development of a new field called 'digital studies'. This scientific initiative is most useful for research within the humanities, thanks to the inclusion of digital technology in order to spread and facilitate access to a set of primary and secondary sources¹².

Having gone through the bibliography concerning the present theme, we concluded that our topic of choice has been studied insufficiently and only from a unilateral perspective, which is the very reason why we initiated this research. We find that this theme is one of national interest, while also being challenging and topical. The purpose of this research is not to issue moral judgements or to come up with definitive solutions to the situations under analysis. What we sought was for our analysis, conducted from the perspective of a specialist in communication, to contribute to outlining a more complex picture and a better understanding of the phenomena in question, for both the professional and the general public.

Conclusions, limitations and future research directions

At the moment, there is a limited number of studies that approach the relationship between the *mass media* and the Church in an unbiased way. Moreover, in many cases, the complex facets of this relationship – which are by no means few – have been ignored. One might even say that we are dealing with a stereotypical projection constantly propagated by one alterity onto the other rather than with two entities which can regard each other with detachment. In addition, there are still many reservations on the part of the *mass media*, as well as on that of the Orthodox Church, that hinder mutual understanding. That is why a pertinent debate between the two parties is difficult to achieve. At best, what we have today is a debate and relationship

¹² Anne Burdick, Johanna Drucker, Peter Lunenfeld, Todd Presner, Jeffrey Schnapp, *Digital Humanities*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, London, 2012, pp. 122-124.

between the lay *mass media* and the Church that are considerably encumbered by preconceptions on both sides.

Another issue that we have come across in conducting the present study is the existence of a certain incompatibility between the methods specific to theology and those of other humanities, such as sociology, psychology, history. Thus, we found that it is still relatively difficult for a researcher who wishes to combine a theological perspective with a critical view specific to other humanities to uphold sceptical academic rigor while, at the same time, maintaining their connection to the Christian faith and values and, implicitly, to their relation to 'the revealed truth'. It is apparent throughout this work that we have also been interested in the impact of socio-historical factors on the subsequent evolution of the relationship between the *mass media* and the Church. We have also noted that the historical evolution of each case is considerably responsible for various present situations and accounts to a great extent for a lot of the specificities and sometimes even shortcomings of the Church.

Nevertheless, this research manages to contribute to the specialised literature by adopting a comprehensive approach that comprises multiple dimensions of understanding the topic from the integrative perspective of the specialist in communication.

As part of this thesis, we have tackled various aspects regarding communication situations within the Catholic Church and within Orthodox Churches, as well as the manner in which each Church approached the introduction and use of the *mass media*. In spite of the comparative perspective we have chosen, the study has mostly focused on the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Our research strategy included both quantitative and qualitative methods. From a quantitative point of view, we resorted to the sampling-based social survey method, the data-collection tool employed being the questionnaire.

In terms of qualitative empirical research, we used the content-analysis method, thus analysing a series of official documents issued by representative institutions, as well as articles in the print and online press. Semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis contribute significantly to the present work. As part of the research, in August 2018, we conducted a number of six interviews, by telephone, face to face, and online (via e-mail), with representative opinion leaders in the fields of ecclesiology, culture, and the media, who provided their view on the topic in question. The questions received by the interviewees coincided, as our aim was to outline a comprehensive picture of the topic, drawing from multiple fields of significant importance to our research.

Some key concepts relevant to the present study are the following: communication, sender, recipient, message, means of transmitting information, community, interlocutor, social group, influence, power, verbal communication, non-verbal communication, written communication, dialogue, human relations, synchronous communication, asynchronous communication, *situational milieu*, direct communication, indirect communication, public relations, Socratic dialogue, structured dialogue, moral dialogue, ecumenical dialogue, Christian doctrine, non-Christian culture, monopoly, clergy, lay person, parish priest, Latin rite, Western rite, Great Schism, papal primacy, critical thinking, scholasticism, Inquisition, Protestant Reformation, Counter-Reformation, proselytism, negotiation, ressourcement, diversity, local culture, celibacy, disinformation, manipulation, fake news, autocephalous church, canonical, social doctrine, censorship, objectivity, homogeneous culture, mass communication, interpersonal communication, mentality, taboo, ontological, rating, behavioural model, cliché, consumerism, addiction, Christian media, eschatological, Android operating system, Google Play, widget, conservative, modern, (religious) syncretism, imaginary, ecumenism, press centre, broadcaster, news flow, media ecology, complementarity, media partnership, cyberspace, pan-Orthodox, social theology, freedom of conscience, CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), diaspora, Marxism, socialism, materialism, theosophy, mysticism, pan-Slavism, westernisation, atheism, canonical obedience, dissident, revival, industrialisation, urbanisation, Protestantism, Tolstoyism, Slavophile, messianic mission, antisemitism, Dostoyevskian irrationalism, sophiology, bogomilism, hagiographic, segregation.

The conclusions we reached in answer to the research questions are found below.

With respect to the question '*How is the image and activity of the ROC reflected in the Romanian mass media?*', it is necessary to specify from the very beginning that the image and activity of the ROC in the mass media differ depending on the type of media referred to. As we have shown in the study, one can distinguish between the lay media and the religious media. In general, the religious mass media (the Church's official channels in particular) aims to highlight the unaltered, concise, transparent institutional message in order to inform and instil a certain moral and spiritual conduct. There are also (unofficial) religious media channels with a different approach and language, which sometimes even stand in contradiction to the official message (see, for instance, the matter of biometric passports or the account of the Pan-Orthodox Council).

On the other hand, in the lay mass media, the image of the ecclesiastical institution is different from the perspective offered by the official religious media and is generally unitary throughout this type of media, the approach (language) usually being neutral to critical.

In order to answer the first query, we analysed seven intensely publicised cases related to the Romanian Orthodox Church, with the aim of tapping into the mechanisms governing the relationship between the Church and the *mass media*. These were described and interpreted from the point of view of the chronological evolution and the notoriety of the events, then their impact was measured with the aid of digital tools.

One might affirm that a considerable portion of the *mass media* suffers from a lack of the minimal theological culture required to tackle such topics. Moreover, some journalists have a tendency to speculate certain situations in a tendentious way, unknowingly most of the time.

One attitude we have noted is the Romanian Orthodox Church's position with respect to the authorities, more specifically, its relationships with controversial politicians accused of corruption. Continuing along this path will bring it into the limelight increasingly often and put it under pressure from a highly critical press. We believe that the Church's efforts in the following years will be directed towards casting off its label of collaborator with the corrupt political sphere in exchange for material benefits.

The unpopularity of the Romanian Orthodox Church's positions in recent years has also been caused by the fact that it has behaved as if it had a monopoly over the establishment of social models. The dissolution of traditional communities, the secularisation of more and more social areas – a phenomenon which started on Romanian territory as early as the second half of the 19th century – make it increasingly difficult for the Church to impose its vision without the opportunity for previous debates and without considering alternative points of view, which it is forced to coexist with.

Another phenomenon worth mentioning is a predilection of a part of the public to insist on seeking out negative and scandalous aspects regarding the Romanian Orthodox Church, as Mirel Bănică himself noted in an interview with Europa Liberă: 'The Church has become a tabloid topic, as Romanians consume a lot of tabloid press, as we know, and I think that what is happening now with the presence of the Orthodox Church in the press or the media is actually a sublimated form of popular religion and culture. We no longer consume religion through customs and rituals we did not understand the meaning of, but through the *mass media*: we get annoyed, we cry, we laugh, etc., etc.'¹³.

¹³ *Cum a devenit lingurița de împărtășanie „punctul nodal al secularizării” și de ce „fără BOR nu vom mai exista”* [How the Communion Spoon Became the 'Focal Point' of Secularisation and Why 'We Will Cease to Exist without the ROC], <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/cum-a-devenit-linguri%C8%9Ba-de-%C3%AEmp%C4%83rt%C4%83%C8%99anie-punctul-nodal-al-seculariz%C4%83rii-%C8%99i-de-ce-f%C4%83r%C4%83-bor-nu-vom-mai-exista-interviu-cu-mirel-b%C4%83nic%C4%83/30636133.html>, retrieved on 2.07.2020.

In spite of this apparent incompatibility, we believe that both the press and the Romanian Orthodox Church have essentially realised that it would be more beneficial to have a relationship of complementarity rather than one of mutual opposition. While we can say that significant progress has been made in that sense in the last few years, we are still at the beginning of a tortuous journey.

We resorted to a sampling-based social survey, using the questionnaire as a data-collection tool, in order to find revealing answers to the research question ‘*What is the role of the media for young Christians who participate in the ROC’s activities?*’. The questionnaire was administered between 27th October and 11th December 2020 to 5545 young people of Christian religious orientation, aged 18 to 35. It comprised closed and semi-closed questions and it was administered online (on the Asociația Studenților Creștin-Ortodocși Români Cluj (the Association of Romanian Christian Orthodox Students of Cluj) Facebook group), whence it was reshared in other online groups.

One conclusion one may draw is that the answers given by many of the young respondents tend to be strongly influenced by their own background knowledge of theology. In spite of the fact that most of them are involved in Church activities, young people dedicate very little time to actually getting informed, which is surprising. Furthermore, their use of communication tools turns out to be fairly limited as well.

With respect to the influence of the media on religious conduct, we note that opinions vary and are directly dependent on each person’s individual experience, so it is not possible to draw a categorical conclusion. Even though they use modern technology to communicate in everyday life, the members of the target group do not regularly resort to the Church’s official communication instruments.

One obvious influence on the subjects’ choices is exerted by the environment they come from, as well as by their level of education. In addition, those with a higher-education background are more susceptible to adopt a critical or, at least, nuanced position as to the *mass media*’s accounts of events.

As we have shown, there is no question of the Church communicating exclusively through the Patriarchal Synod and official press establishments. There are other voices that convey the message to recipients. Most of the time, when the press comments on the silence of the Church, opining that it should take a stand in certain cases, we notice that there are those who do take a stand, but it is people who have a stronger influence on ordinary Christians, namely well-known spiritual figures of authority.

Conclusions regarding the interviews

The analysis of the interviews has revealed that the Church is forced to adapt its communication methods to the tendencies of the contemporary world. Moreover, the Church should discard the so-called besieged-fortress syndrome by setting a limit to the use of means of communication. As for a potential reconciliation between the lay *mass media* and the Church, we have concluded that it is not unattainable, but, given the current situation, it will most likely be a lengthy process that will depend on numerous circumstances (social, political, etc.).

Furthermore, we sought to determine whether the Romanian Orthodox Church's inadequate use of certain communication channels might have led to a decrease in the population's trust in it. The answer leans towards the affirmative, even though the impact is difficult to calculate. In some cases, it is visible that the Romanian Orthodox Church lacked the knowledge or the ability to manage certain internal situations more efficiently with the aid of the traditional communication apparatus or with that of modern means of communication.

The answers we have received suggest that, after December 1989, the ROC has focused more on building exaggeratedly large churches, to the detriment of solving parishioners' problems.

Going forward, the ROC should invest more care in choosing the messages it conveys and the voices who convey them. Recent years have seen the emergence of an increasing number of people who speak in the name of the Church without any mandate from the said institution. Moreover, the ROC should not underestimate those who disseminate fake news, cause disinformation and even contrive manipulations with respect to the Church.

We believe that we have managed to show that the Church's entire history revolves around the need to communicate and convey information. Evidence to that effect is provided by the first Christians, who converted as a result of the Apostles' sermons and writings. Similarly, practices regarding the faith were regulated by the ecumenical councils, which also relied on the sharing of information, on debating, and on communicating their conclusions to the faithful. There are, of course, plenty of other examples. There is certainly no solid reason why the ROC should reject means of communication. The only solution in this regard would be to regulate them.

Limitations

Like any other research, the present one has its limitations. The first one we came across was the vast amount of information on this topic available online. Even though we strove to go through most of the data and select the most relevant examples, it is possible that some articles, official data, statistics, interviews, or video broadcasts may have escaped the scrutiny of this research.

Another important limitation is related to the statistical component. In the absence of the means available to an institution specialising in conducting social surveys, we were forced to confine ourselves to a non-probabilistic convenience sample, which does not allow for the generalisation of the results.

One constraint that any doctoral research is faced with is time, a resource that is difficult to divide between planning, researching, drafting and revising the paper.

One might ask why we left out other potential case studies, other opinion leaders or other facets of the cases under analysis. These are definitely topics to be explored through future research projects.

The thesis had several clear objectives, thus focusing more on the way in which the lay press interpreted the messages issued by the ROC, without any closer analysis of articles in churchly newspapers and magazines.

We were more interested in the digital than the traditional press, as the latter is not particularly relevant to or accessed by young people, who represent the very age category that the empirical analyses were based on.

Future research directions

With the relationship between the ROC and the *media* as the starting point, a future study could be extended to include the other denominations in Romania in order to conduct a comparative research of the phenomenon.

Another direction that would further this research consists in including the situation in the diaspora in the study – does the Orthodox Church abroad follow the communication model of the other denominations in the host country or does it lean towards the Romanian patterns?

One could also tackle the Orthodox Church's position with respect to the war (in both Ukraine and Russia, the Orthodox denomination is predominant) and its message with regard to it. How has social media influenced people's perception of the war and what part did the messages conveyed by the two Churches play? Such questions could be answered by future studies.

For an even more detailed analysis of the phenomena discussed in the present research, we find that it would be useful to expand the group of questionnaire subjects to include other age/social-professional categories. In addition, one can expand the study to cover the new channels: Instagram, TikTok, YouTube vlogs, podcasts.

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