

Religion, Confessional Communities, and State–Church Relations in the Republic of Moldova

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Abstract

Religion occupies a central position in the social, cultural, and political life of the Republic of Moldova, a post-Soviet state marked by high levels of religiosity, contested national identity, and persistent geopolitical polarization. This article examines the role of religion in Moldovan society by analysing the configuration of confessional communities and the evolving relationship between religious institutions and the state. It argues that while Moldova formally adheres to principles of religious freedom and state neutrality, informal practices and symbolic hierarchies continue to privilege dominant religious actors, particularly Orthodox institutions. Drawing on contemporary debates in the sociology of religion and political science, the article explores how religion functions simultaneously as a source of social cohesion, a marker of identity, and a tool of political mobilisation. The analysis highlights the tension between democratic norms of equality and pluralism on the one hand, and the instrumentalisation of religion in identity politics and geopolitical narratives on the other. By situating the Moldovan case within broader post-Soviet and Eastern European contexts, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on religion, governance, and democratic resilience in transitional societies.

Keywords

Religion, Orthodoxy, state–church relations, pluralism, identity politics, Republic of Moldova

1. Introduction and Methodology

More than three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, religion remains one of the most influential and contested dimensions of public life in the Republic of Moldova. Contrary to early post-independence expectations that secularisation would accompany democratic transition and Europeanisation, Moldovan society has experienced a pronounced religious revival. Surveys consistently place Moldova among the most religious countries in Europe, with high levels of belief, ritual participation, and trust in religious institutions. This revival, however, has not been confined to the private sphere. Instead, religion has become deeply

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embedded in public discourse, political competition, and debates over national identity. The prominence of religion in Moldova cannot be understood solely in theological or spiritual terms. Rather, it reflects a complex interaction between historical legacies, institutional arrangements, and contemporary political struggles. Under Soviet rule, religion was officially marginalised and subjected to systematic repression. Yet religious traditions, particularly Orthodoxy, survived as cultural and symbolic resources, closely intertwined with notions of *ethnicity, language, and historical continuity*. Following independence in 1991, these resources were rapidly reactivated, filling the ideological vacuum left by the collapse of communism and contributing to the redefinition of collective identity.

At the same time, Moldova's post-Soviet transformation has been marked by persistent ambiguity regarding its national project and geopolitical orientation. The country's divided identity, variously framed as Moldovan, Romanian, or civic, has intersected with competing narratives about Europe, Russia, and the post-Soviet space.

Religion has played a significant role in these narratives, often serving as a symbolic anchor for broader political and cultural alignments. Orthodox Christianity, in particular, has been mobilised as a marker of authenticity, tradition, and moral order, frequently positioned in opposition to perceived external threats such as liberalism, secularism, or Western influence.

This article examines the role of religion in Moldovan society through the lens of confessional communities and state - church relations. It seeks to move beyond descriptive accounts of religiosity by analysing how religious institutions interact with political power, how pluralism is structured and constrained, and how religion is mobilised in public debates. The central argument is that despite formal commitments to religious freedom and state neutrality, Moldova exhibits a pattern of asymmetric pluralism in which dominant religious actors enjoy privileged access to symbolic and institutional resources. At the same time, minority confessions face structural and discursive disadvantages. By focusing on the interplay between religion, identity, and governance, the article addresses a broader theoretical question relevant to post-Soviet and Eastern European contexts: *how does religion shape democratic trajectories in societies where institutional secularism coexists with high public religiosity and contested identities?* The Moldovan case offers valuable insights into this question, revealing both the integrative and destabilising potential of religion in transitional democracies.

2. Post-Soviet Identity Formation

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, religion has re-emerged as a significant public force across much of Eastern Europe. In the Republic of

Moldova, this resurgence has been particularly pronounced. Empirical studies consistently indicate high levels of religious belief and trust in religious institutions, placing Moldova among the most religious societies on the European continent (Carnevale 2019; Soros Foundation Moldova, 2023). Far from being confined to the private sphere, religion has become deeply embedded in public discourse, political competition, and debates over national identity.

This development challenges classical secularisation assumptions that linked modernisation to the marginalisation of religion in public life. Instead, the Moldovan case confirms broader findings from post-socialist contexts, where religious revival has accompanied processes of nation-building and political transition (Karpov, Lisovskaia, and Barry, 2012). Religion, particularly Orthodox Christianity, has served as a reservoir of symbolic meaning and moral authority in a society marked by institutional fragility, economic uncertainty, and unresolved identity conflicts.

The institutional development of churches in the territory of present-day Moldova was profoundly shaped by the Soviet policy of state atheism and the broader system of religious governance imposed after the incorporation of Bessarabia into the USSR in 1940. Rather than aiming at the immediate elimination of religion, Soviet authorities sought to subject religious life to strict administrative control, marginalizing it as a potential source of social authority and political loyalty outside the Communist Party. The long-term objective was to erode religious influence gradually, allowing religious institutions to survive only in a highly circumscribed and depoliticized form (Bercken, 1989: 107-109).

In the Moldovan Soviet Socialist Republic, the Orthodox Church was prohibited from engaging openly in public debate or from articulating independent moral or social positions. At the same time, atheism was actively promoted through the educational system, cultural institutions, and mass organizations as an integral component of socialist socialization. Clergy were denied access to key public institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the military, and pastoral activity was confined almost exclusively to liturgical functions within registered places of worship. Religious education of minors was discouraged or informally sanctioned, reinforcing the privatization of religious practice (Hug, 2015: 7).

The Orthodox Church in Moldova, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, experienced periodic waves of repression, most notably during the Stalinist campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s and again during Khrushchev's renewed anti-religious drive in the late 1950s and early 1960s. These periods of intensified persecution were interspersed with phases of relative tolerance, during which church authorities were permitted limited

institutional survival in exchange for political loyalty and compliance with state regulations. This pattern fostered a mode of ecclesiastical adaptation characterized less by overt resistance than by pragmatic accommodation to state power.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Orthodox Church came under the “patronage” of the new Russian state, reviving the old tradition of caesaropapism characteristic of the Tsarist period. This development mechanically entailed the reintegration of the Orthodox dimension into Russia’s neo-imperial ideology, insofar as the Church remained the only surviving “custodian”—albeit in a spiritual sense—of the borders of the former empire. According to the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church, its jurisdiction encompasses Orthodox believers living within the Church’s canonical territory (the geographical area under an ecclesiastical authority), which includes Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Estonia, as well as other Orthodox believers residing in different countries who have voluntarily adhered to this jurisdiction (Țugui, 2011: 3-5).

This legacy has had lasting consequences for post-Soviet Moldova. Unlike some Western narratives that emphasize dissident religiosity and underground religious activism, the Moldovan Orthodox experience was marked predominantly by institutional endurance through accommodation rather than sustained confrontation. As a result, after 1991 the Orthodox Church re-emerged not primarily as a vehicle of moral opposition or civil resistance, but as a culturally authoritative institution closely aligned with state structures and national identity formation. The memory of Soviet repression nevertheless continues to shape public discourse, reinforcing perceptions of the Church as a historical victim while simultaneously legitimizing its contemporary claims to social authority and public influence. Similar to other post-Soviet nations, Moldova initially saw a tremendous increase in the number of official believers and the registration of a wide variety of churches following the fall of the Soviet Union (Munteanu, 2015: 161).

With the 94,3% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024) of its citizens officially identifying as Orthodox, Moldova, along with Greece, has the largest percentage of Orthodox believers among all Central and Eastern European nations (Pew Research Center, 2017: 49-50). Furthermore, in Orthodox-majority societies across the region, a substantial majority of adults emphasize the importance of Orthodoxy to national identity, with a median of 70 % associating national belonging with being Orthodox (Pew Research Center, 2017: 9).

According to the 2024 Census out of the total population of 2,409.2 thousand persons, 2,391.1 thousand (99.2%) responded to the question on religious affiliation, while only 18.1 thousand (0.8%) did not declare any confessional affiliation. Affiliation with a religious denomination was declared by 2,354.2 thousand persons, of whom an absolute majority—2,271.1 thousand (94.3%)—identified themselves as Orthodox. Among other religious denominations, the most numerous were members of Neo-Protestant churches, including Baptists (26.2 thousand or 1.1%), Pentecostals (12.6 thousand or 0.5%), Adventists (6.9 thousand or 0.3%), Evangelical Christians (6.3 thousand or 0.3%), as well as Jehovah's Witnesses (16.5 thousand or 0.7%). Other denominations with more significant shares included Old Believers / the Russian Orthodox Church of the Old Rite (*staroobryadtsy*) (4.0 thousand or 0.2%), Catholics (2.5 thousand or 0.1%), and Muslims (3.1 thousand or 0.1%). Adherents of other religions accounted for 4.7 thousand persons or 0.2% of the population. A total of 36.8 thousand persons (1.5%) reported not belonging to any religious denomination, including 20.0 thousand without religion, 14.2 thousand atheists, 2.1 thousand agnostics, and 0.4 thousand free thinkers) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

Compared to the 2014 census, the confessional structure of the population did not undergo major changes, with the notable exception of the share of persons who did not declare their religion, which declined substantially—from 6.4% in 2014 to 0.8% in 2024. At the same time, the proportion of those declaring themselves without religion increased by 0.8 percentage points, atheists by 0.4 percentage points, as well as agnostics and free thinkers) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2024).

In the separatist Transnistria region, *de facto* authorities estimate 80 percent of the population belongs to the MOC. Other religious groups in the region include Catholics, followers of Old Rite Russian Orthodoxy, Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, evangelical and charismatic Christians, Jews, Lutherans, Muslims, and Jehovah's Witnesses (US department of State, 2023).

Belonging to one of the two Orthodox jurisdictions in Moldova—the *Moldovan Orthodox Church*, operating under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, and the *Bessarabian Orthodox Church*, subordinated to the Romanian Orthodox Church, can be understood as a secondary effect of the broader cleavage between Moldovan and Romanian identity narratives. From a linguistic perspective, Moldovan and Romanian are virtually identical languages; nevertheless, political and symbolic distinctions between the two identities have been institutionalized and reproduced through religious structures. Both Orthodox churches have developed explicit ambitions to intervene in the public sphere, including in areas

traditionally associated with state sovereignty such as domestic politics and foreign policy orientation. Their engagement extends beyond pastoral activity, positioning them as influential actors in debates over national identity, geopolitical alignment, and Moldova's relationship with external partners. In this context, religious affiliation functions not merely as a matter of personal belief, but as a marker of collective belonging and political orientation (Baar and Jakubek, 2017: 59-60).

3. Religion as a Public Institution

In Moldova religious affiliation is deeply intertwined with politics, national identity, and collective belonging, not just individual spirituality. Orthodoxy functions as a *symbolic public good* that political actors and parties use to anchor broader socio-political projects (Sprînceană, 2013).

The public relevance of religion in Moldova is closely connected to the country's contested national identity. Scholarly analyses have demonstrated that Moldovan identity remains divided along linguistic, historical, and geopolitical lines, producing competing narratives of belonging and statehood (Baar and Jakubek, 2017). Religion intersects with these divisions by providing symbolic resources that are mobilised in support of different political and cultural projects. Orthodoxy, in particular, is frequently invoked as a marker of authenticity, tradition, and continuity, often contrasted with liberal or "Western" values associated with European integration.

At the institutional level, Moldova formally adheres to principles of religious freedom and state neutrality. The Constitution guarantees freedom of conscience and equality of religious denominations before the law. The state must acknowledge and protect every citizen's freedom to maintain, grow, and express their religious identity, according to the constitution. It guarantees freedom of conscience, expressed in "a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect," and religious worship, and it ensures that all people are treated equally regardless of their religious beliefs. It states that religious organizations are free to organize and function in accordance with their own laws and are not subject to official interference. All religious organizations are forbidden under the constitution from employing, expressing, or promoting hostility or enmity in their interactions with one another. According to the constitution, the state must encourage religious practice, including providing religious support in the army, hospitals, jails, nursing homes, and orphanages (Constitution of the Republic of Moldova, 1994).

There is no state religion in Moldova, however the *Law on Religious Denominations and Their Constituent Parts* as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience, Thought and Religion, and on the Organization and Functioning*

of *Religious Entities* (Law nr.278/2011)², thought and religion emphasizes that “the State recognizes the importance and the primary role of the Christian Orthodox religion, namely, the Moldovan Orthodox Church in the life, history and culture of Moldova” (Suveica and Sprinceana, 2015: 106).

The formal procedure for the registration of religious organizations in the Republic of Moldova is, in principle, uniform across denominations. The most illustrative case concerns the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia, established in 1992 and canonically subordinated to the Romanian Orthodox Church. Moldovan authorities repeatedly refused its registration, invoking the risk of internal Orthodox conflict and public disorder, arguments that were ultimately rejected by the European Court of Human Rights, which found a violation of religious freedom and obliged the state to grant legal recognition. The resistance to registration was particularly strong during the Communist Party’s period in power (2001–2009), when the Church’s association with Romanian Orthodoxy was perceived as incompatible with a state-sponsored Moldovan identity project. As human rights scholarship has emphasized, state neutrality requires the registration of all religious organizations that meet legal criteria, without privileging or limiting particular denominations. Nonetheless, both before and after the ECHR ruling, Moldovan authorities have continued to apply differential standards, including delays in the registration of Muslim and Pentecostal communities, reflecting a persistent Orthodox majoritarian bias in the interpretation and implementation of the law.

Despite the formal guarantees of religious freedom, multiple reports indicate the persistence of societal discrimination and hostility based on religious affiliation in the Republic of Moldova. Such incidents are particularly salient in smaller towns and rural areas, where members of Jehovah’s Witnesses have reported recurrent verbal harassment and, in some cases, physical aggression. Although complaints were filed with law

² In the process of revising the legal framework governing religion, Moldovan authorities proposed renaming the *Law on Religious Denominations and Their Constituent Parts* as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience, Thought and Religion, and on the Organization and Functioning of Religious Entities*. According to the Minister of Justice, this change was necessary to eliminate a discrepancy between the law’s title and its actual object of regulation, since Article 1 refers broadly to freedom of conscience and religion, while the previous title suggested a narrow focus on religious denominations alone. The revised title was also intended to align the legislation with European legal standards in the field of religious freedom. In the same reform package, the term “religious denomination” (*cult religios*) was replaced with “religious organization,” and the registration procedure was clarified by explicitly listing the required documents in the law. Furthermore, the registration deadline for religious organizations was harmonized with the general timeframe applicable to other non-commercial organizations, namely 30 days (IPN, 2011).

enforcement authorities, available evidence suggests a lack of effective accountability, as perpetrators were rarely identified or sanctioned, pointing to weaknesses in the practical enforcement of legal protections.

Antisemitic incidents further illustrate the vulnerability of religious minorities in the public sphere. On 11 September, the Chabad Lubavitch Synagogue in Chişinău was vandalised with swastikas and SS symbols. While the Acting President Mihai Ghimpu publicly condemned the act and stated that it did not reflect the values of Moldovan society, the investigation remained ongoing at the end of the reporting period, underscoring challenges in addressing hate-motivated crimes.

Tensions surrounding religious symbols in public space were also evident during a public demonstration on 10 November, when several hundred Orthodox believers protested against the proposed installation of a menorah in a central park near a monument associated with medieval Christian statehood. Statements by representatives of Orthodox youth organisations framed the presence of the menorah as an affront to Christian identity. In response, Mayor Dorin Chirtoacă intervened to mediate the dispute, ultimately facilitating the menorah's placement within the courtyard of the Jewish Cultural Center, where its dedication proceeded without incident.

Taken together, these cases highlight the gap between formal religious freedom and its social realization, revealing how dominant religious identities can inform informal boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in public space. They also illustrate how local authorities may play a crucial mediating role in preventing escalation, even as underlying patterns of religious majoritarianism and social intolerance persist (US Department of State, 2011).

The *Islamic League of Moldova* reported that municipal authorities in Chişinău twice rejected its formal requests for a designated plot of land for Islamic burials within the state-administered cemetery. These refusals occurred despite legal provisions granting all registered religious organisations the right to burial space in public cemeteries. Requests submitted by the Muslim community in January and March were denied by the mayoralty, underscoring the discretionary nature of local decision-making and the vulnerability of minority confessions to administrative exclusion. Similar tensions have been reported by the *Catholic Diocese of Chişinău*, which has repeatedly raised concerns regarding the compatibility of Moldova's registration legislation with Catholic canon law. According to representatives of the Catholic Church, canon law accords bishops the authority to establish parishes and appoint clergy, whereas Moldovan legislation requires that newly registered religious communities be

constituted through initiatives of lay members, with leadership elected internally. Longstanding written complaints submitted by the Diocese to state authorities have remained unaddressed, highlighting structural frictions between universal religious governance systems and nationally defined regulatory frameworks (US State Department, 2023).

These cases reveal how ostensibly neutral legal norms can produce disproportionate constraints on minority confessions, particularly those whose internal organisational principles diverge from the assumptions embedded in national legislation. However, a growing body of research suggests that these formal guarantees coexist with informal arrangements that privilege dominant religious actors, especially Orthodox institutions (Carnevale 2019). This discrepancy between legal norms and social practices raises critical questions about the nature of secularism, pluralism, and democratic governance in Moldova.

The concept of religious freedom employed in this article moves beyond a purely legal-normative understanding and adopts a context-grounded perspective. Classical liberal theory conceptualizes religious freedom primarily as an individual right, protected through constitutional guarantees and international legal instruments (Dworkin 1986). In post-authoritarian and post-Soviet contexts, however, the practical realization of religious freedom is deeply shaped by historical legacies, informal power relations, and the asymmetric positioning of religious communities vis-à-vis the state. Sociological approaches emphasize that religious freedom is not only a matter of formal equality before the law, but also of *de facto* access to public recognition, material resources, and symbolic legitimacy. In many post-Soviet societies, including Moldova, formal guarantees of equality coexist with informal practices that reproduce privilege and exclusion. Carnevale (2019) demonstrates that in Moldova, Orthodox institutions benefit from preferential treatment in areas such as public visibility, access to state officials, and symbolic recognition. Minority confessions, while legally recognised, often encounter bureaucratic obstacles and social prejudice. This pattern reflects broader post-Soviet dynamics, where dominant religions are closely associated with national culture and political legitimacy.

From a formal legal perspective, the Republic of Moldova recognises religious pluralism. The *Constitution* (1994, art. 31) guarantees *freedom of conscience and the equality of religious denominations before the law*, while the *Law on Religious Denominations and Their Constituent Parts* as the *Law on Freedom of Conscience, Thought and Religion, and on the Organization and Functioning of Religious Entities* (Law nr.278/2011) establishes procedures for registration and operation of religious communities. In theory, this framework reflects international standards on freedom of religion and belief.

However, empirical research consistently shows that legal pluralism coexists with a hierarchical religious order in practice. This asymmetry is not unique to Moldova but reflects broader post-Soviet patterns in which dominant religious traditions are closely linked to national culture and political legitimacy (Karpov, Lisovskaia, and Barry 2012). In such contexts, the distinction between cultural heritage and religious privilege becomes blurred, complicating the implementation of neutral state policies.

Orthodox dominance is manifested in multiple domains of public life. Orthodox symbols and rituals are integrated into national commemorations, public ceremonies, and educational contexts. Clergy frequently participate in state-sponsored events, and Orthodox discourse shapes public debates on morality, family, and social values (Doroftei 2018). These practices contribute to the perception of Orthodoxy as the default or “natural” religion of the nation. Importantly, Orthodox influence is not exercised solely through institutional channels but also through symbolic authority. Orthodox leaders are often perceived as moral arbiters whose opinions carry weight beyond their religious constituency. This moral authority enables Orthodox institutions to intervene in political debates without formally engaging in party politics, thereby maintaining plausible deniability while exerting real influence.

Alongside the Orthodox majority, Moldova hosts a variety of minority confessions, including *Roman Catholics*, *Greek Catholics*, *Baptists*, *Pentecostals*, *Seventh-day Adventists*, *Jehovah’s Witnesses*, *Jewish communities*, and a small Muslim population. These groups differ significantly in size, organisation, and historical presence, yet they share common challenges stemming from their marginal position within the religious hierarchy.

Empirical studies and policy reports indicate that minority confessions often face bureaucratic obstacles in registration, property restitution, and access to public space (Soros Foundation Moldova 2023, US State Department, 2011, US State Department, 2023). While such obstacles are rarely codified in law, they emerge through administrative discretion and local-level practices, highlighting the importance of informal governance in shaping religious freedom.

Social attitudes toward minority religions further compound these institutional challenges. Surveys conducted by the *Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination and Ensuring Equality* (PPEDAE 2014) reveal persistent stereotypes and distrust toward certain religious groups, particularly those perceived as “*non-traditional*” or externally connected. These perceptions reflect broader patterns of social exclusion and are closely linked to narratives of national identity and moral order.

The asymmetric structure of the confessional landscape has important implications for *democracy and social cohesion*. *On the one hand*, the dominance of Orthodoxy provides a shared cultural reference point that can foster social solidarity. *On the other hand*, it risks marginalising alternative identities and constraining the space for pluralism and dissent.

4. Religion, Values, and Political Mobilisation

Religion plays a structurally significant role in the political life of the Republic of Moldova, where it is deeply intertwined with competing national identity projects and broader geopolitical narratives. In public discourse, religious affiliation—particularly Orthodox Christianity—is frequently associated with opposing geopolitical orientations, most notably the tension between European integration and alignment with Russia or the post-Soviet space. Within this context, Orthodoxy functions not only as a marker of religious belonging, but also as a symbolic bridge linking cultural identity, moral values, and geopolitical preference (Baar and Jakubek 2017).

From an analytical perspective, the political relevance of religion in Moldova can be understood through the interaction between two closely related processes: the *politicization of religion* and the *religionization of politics*. The politicization of religion refers to situations in which political or religious actors strategically invoke religious symbols, institutions, or moral authority in order to legitimize political actions, policy goals, or particular visions of social order (Zúquete 2017). In contrast, the religionization of politics describes a deeper transformation, whereby religious language and moral frameworks come to structure political competition itself, framing political conflict as a struggle between moral virtue and moral transgression (Yabancı and Taleski 2018). These processes are especially pronounced in societies characterized by high levels of religious identification and unresolved debates over national identity.

Given the exceptionally high proportion of the population identifying as Orthodox believers, Orthodoxy has become a central symbolic resource in competing national narratives in the Republic of Moldova. In the immediate post-independence period, the (pan-)Romanian identity project—most visibly promoted by the Popular Front of Moldova—conceptualized Moldova as an integral part of the Romanian nation, united by common language, historical memory, and Orthodox Christianity (Țicu 2016; Baar and Jakubek 2017). Within this framework, Orthodoxy functioned as a key marker of shared belonging, reinforcing claims for cultural and political reunification with Romania.

This identity narrative was institutionally reinforced by the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which was re-established under the

jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Church following the collapse of the Soviet regime. Although the Bessarabian Orthodox Church sought to present itself as the historical continuation of pre-Soviet Orthodoxy in the region, it encountered sustained political resistance from Moldovan authorities and obtained legal recognition only after a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights. This prolonged registration process illustrates the extent to which ecclesiastical pluralism was perceived as politically sensitive and potentially destabilizing in the context of contested national identity.

By contrast, the Moldovan Orthodox Church became increasingly embedded in the Moldovenist nation-building project, which emphasizes state sovereignty, political independence, and cultural distinctiveness from Romania (Țicu 2016). Rooted in the institutional legacy of the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Moldovenist narrative depicts the inhabitants of Moldova as a distinct nation with its own historical trajectory, traditions, and cultural specificities. Within this framework, Orthodoxy is frequently invoked as a unifying moral and cultural foundation of national identity, reinforcing continuity and social cohesion (Carnevale 2019).

As the Orthodox institution with the largest number of adherents, the Moldovan Orthodox Church has been implicitly, and at times explicitly, framed by successive governments as the country's majority or "national" church. This perception is reflected both in political practice and in the legal framework regulating religious life. Although the Moldovan Constitution formally defines the state as secular and affirms the separation of church and state, the symbolic privileging of the Moldovan Orthodox Church has contributed to an asymmetric religious landscape. In this context, Orthodoxy functions not merely as a personal religious identity, but as a moralized framework through which political authority, national belonging, and legitimacy are articulated. This dynamic constitutes a clear example of the religionization of politics, whereby religious symbolism is mobilized to structure and legitimize competing political projects (Gohlke 2024).

These identity dynamics are further reinforced through media discourse and public debate, in which religious arguments are frequently mobilized to frame geopolitical choices in moral and civilizational terms. European integration is often portrayed as a threat to faith, tradition, and social cohesion, while alternative geopolitical alignments are presented as culturally and spiritually authentic (RFE/RL 2017). As a result, confessional affiliation increasingly functions as a proxy for broader ideological and geopolitical positions, intensifying political polarization and reinforcing value-based divisions within society.

Scholarly analyses link these developments to broader patterns of populism, in which religion supplies moral narratives that oppose a virtuous and “authentic” people to corrupt elites or external influences (DeHanas and Shterin 2018). In the Moldovan context, such narratives are frequently mobilized in opposition to European integration, gender equality policies, and minority rights, including LGBTQ+ protections (Doroftei 2018). Orthodox discourse on these issues typically frames them not as matters of individual rights or policy choice, but as existential threats to the moral foundations of the nation. By positioning themselves as defenders of tradition and faith, religious actors reinforce populist frames that resonate with segments of the population experiencing social insecurity, demographic decline, and geopolitical uncertainty (Baar and Jakubek, 2017).

Importantly, these domestic processes do not unfold in isolation from the broader geopolitical environment. The geopolitical use of religion by the Russian Federation—particularly through the institutional and symbolic resources of the Russian Orthodox Church, acquires concrete analytical relevance when examined at the level of domestic political arrangements in post-Soviet states. Following the so-called *colour revolutions* and the evident limits of overt political intervention, Russia increasingly recalibrated its external strategy by privileging soft power instruments, with Orthodoxy emerging as a key vehicle of influence in the “near abroad” (Tuğui, 2011).

In Moldova, interaction between political elites and the Moldovan Orthodox Church reflects a process of selective accommodation, whereby religious authority is integrated into local strategies of political legitimation while remaining embedded within the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church. This configuration allows external influence to operate indirectly, through institutional continuity, symbolic practices, and reciprocal recognition between political and ecclesiastical elites³. The Moldovan case thus illustrates how religious soft power becomes effective

³ It is worth noting that Vladimir Voronin has been the recipient of several religious and religiously affiliated distinctions, reflecting a sustained pattern of symbolic recognition by Orthodox institutions. These include the Order of *Saint Equal-to-the-Apostles Grand Prince Vladimir*; the Order of *Saint Right-Believing Prince Dmitry Donskoy* (First Class), awarded in 2005 by the Russian Orthodox Church; the Order of *Prince Yaroslav the Wise* (First Class), conferred in 2005 by Ukraine; the Order of *The Pious Voivode Stephen the Great and Saint* (First Class), awarded in 2005 by the Moldovan Orthodox Church; and the Order of the *Holy Sepulchre*, conferred in 2009 by the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem. In addition, Voronin has received high state distinctions from Bulgaria, Croatia, and Greece. He is also the recipient of the award *For Outstanding Contribution to the Consolidation of the Unity of Orthodox Peoples* (2008), granted by the International Foundation for the Unity of Orthodox Peoples, and was named an honorary citizen of the city of Miletus in Greece in 2005 (Doroftei, 2018).

primarily through its alignment with domestic identity narratives and political interests, reinforcing the entanglement of religion, populism, and geopolitics in contemporary political mobilisation.

Recent electoral cycles in the Republic of Moldova (2024, 2025) have provided further empirical evidence of the informal involvement of religious actors in electoral mobilisation. Monitoring reports produced during the 2024 presidential election and the 2025 electoral cycle indicate that, while religious institutions did not formally endorse political parties or candidates, religious discourse and clerical authority were intermittently employed to frame electoral choices in moral and civilisational terms.

According to election observation reports published by Promo-LEX Association, several instances were documented in which clergy members publicly commented on political issues during religious services or community gatherings, particularly in rural areas (Promo-LEX, 2024). These interventions often emphasised the protection of *traditional values*, opposition to perceived moral decay, or the defence of national and spiritual identity, frames that implicitly resonated with specific political agendas without constituting explicit electoral endorsements.

Similar patterns were noted by international observers. The OSCE in its election assessment missions, highlighted the blurred boundaries between religious authority and political messaging, particularly where religious leaders addressed electoral themes in ways that could influence voters' perceptions. Although such practices did not generally violate electoral law, OSCE observers stressed that they risk undermining the principle of equal electoral competition by leveraging the high level of public trust enjoyed by religious institutions (OSCE/ODIHR, 2024). During the 2024–2025 period, religious narratives were also visible in public debates surrounding European integration, gender equality, and family policy—issues that featured prominently in electoral campaigns. As several civil society reports note, these topics were frequently framed by religious actors as existential threats to national morality or cultural continuity, thereby reinforcing value-based polarisation within the electorate (Soros Foundation Moldova, 2023). This form of mobilisation exemplifies what the literature describes as the religionization of politics, whereby religious symbolism and moral authority are used to structure political competition without direct institutional engagement in party politics.

Taken together, these developments suggest that the role of religion in Moldovan elections operates primarily through indirect and symbolic mechanisms rather than formal political participation. While such involvement remains largely informal, its cumulative effect contributes to the reinforcement of asymmetric pluralism within the public sphere,

privileging dominant religious narratives and shaping electoral behaviour in ways that challenge strict interpretations of political neutrality.

5. Conclusions

This article has examined the role of religion in the Republic of Moldova as a public institution embedded in processes of identity formation, political mobilisation, and geopolitical contestation. The analysis demonstrates that religion, particularly Orthodox Christianity, cannot be understood solely as a matter of individual belief, but must be approached as a structural component of Moldova's social and political order.

The findings reveal a persistent gap between formal legal guarantees of religious freedom and their practical implementation. Although Moldova's constitutional and legislative framework affirms equality among religious denominations, empirical evidence indicates the existence of an asymmetric confessional landscape. Orthodox institutions benefit from preferential access to symbolic recognition, public visibility, and informal political influence, while minority confessions often encounter administrative obstacles, social marginalisation, and uneven enforcement of legal protections. This pattern of asymmetric pluralism complicates conventional understandings of secularism and raises important questions about democratic equality and state neutrality.

At the level of identity politics, religion functions as a key symbolic resource through which competing national narratives are articulated. The division between Moldovan and Romanian identity projects is reproduced and institutionalised through the existence of parallel Orthodox jurisdictions, transforming ecclesiastical affiliation into a marker of collective belonging and political orientation. In this context, Orthodoxy contributes to the moralisation of politics, framing policy debates and geopolitical choices in terms of cultural authenticity and civilisational alignment.

The Moldovan case also illustrates how religious influence operates within broader regional dynamics. Situated within the canonical space of the Russian Orthodox Church, domestic church–state relations intersect with transnational networks of symbolic authority and historical memory. Rather than manifesting through direct political control, religious soft power functions through institutional continuity, symbolic practices, and reciprocal recognition between political and ecclesiastical elites.

External influence thus becomes effective primarily when aligned with domestic identity narratives and political interests. Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of examining religion not only as a legal category or cultural tradition, but as a dynamic social institution embedded

in power relations. While the Moldovan case is shaped by specific historical and geopolitical conditions, the patterns identified here resonate with broader post-Soviet experiences. Understanding how religion structures public authority, inclusion, and exclusion is therefore essential for assessing the prospects of democratic pluralism and governance in societies marked by contested identities and post-imperial legacies.

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