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RELIGIOUS ICONS IN ROMANIAN SCHOOLS: TEXT AND CONTEXT

Public discourse on religious matters is a sensitive issue in Romania. It has raised heated debates for at least two reasons: on the one hand, the repressive policy of the Communist regime concerning religion created a strong boomerang-effect, a religious renaissance after 1989; on the other hand, there is a deep cleavage between the “two Romanias:” the urban and the rural, the modernized and the traditionalist, the liberal and the conservative. Religion still serves as a major cultural marker of national identity, and the church is one of the most trusted institutions in Romania. We are exploring the hypothesis that the 2006-2007 religious icon scandal in Romania is a typical example of heated public debate in a transitional society.

Factual background: the main events that stirred the debate on religious icons

On June 11, 2008, the Romanian Supreme Court’s decision concerning the right to display religious symbols in schools across Romania put an end to the legal side of a heated public debate. The dispute was sparked by a parent’s protest letter in August 2006 against the practice of displaying religious icons in his daughter’s school, and reached its peak between November 2006 and January 2007. Our empirical analysis is focused on this time frame.

In December 2006, the Romanian media was bombarded by headlines such as: “The war of icons”¹, “The scandal of icons exiled from schools”², “The trial of icons – part of a plan to destroy faith”³, “The renaissance of iconoclasm, the first step to the pursuit of Christianity in Romania”⁴. A web page was also created: “*Save children’s icons - against the discrimination of the majority*”⁵. The topic was mainstreamed by the Romanian media during 2007.

What happened? In August 2006, Emil Moise, a philosophy teacher from the Romanian town Buzău, submitted a request to the National Council for Combating Discrimination, requesting:

- the withdrawal of religious symbols from the classrooms and corridors of his daughter’s high school;
- the withdrawal of religious symbols from all public schools in Romania.

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Key Words:

religious symbols, debate, state neutrality, democracy, Romania

He argued that the display of religious symbols on the walls of public schools was discriminating against atheists, agnostics, indifferentists or persons belonging to denominations other than those represented by these symbols. The National Council for Combating Discrimination did not adopt a resolution on the first request, for the Court had already rejected the teacher's position on the trial preceding the request.

As for the second point, The National Council for Combating Discrimination decided to recommend the Ministry of Education and Research that they elaborate and implement an internal rule that would regulate the presence of religious symbols in public schools. This rule should rely on several principles:

- ensuring the equal practise of the right to education and equal access to culture
- respecting the parents' right to assure their children the education befitting their religious and philosophical beliefs
- respecting the lay character of the state and the autonomy of denominations
- ensuring the free choice of religion, the freedom of conscience, the freedom of beliefs for all children equally
- displaying religious symbols only during religion classes or in spaces intended for the teaching of religion⁶.

This decision triggered a strong reaction from the opposite party. A few days later, on November 28, 2006, the representatives of several denominations (the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Evangelical, Lutheran, Calvinist, and Armenian communities) gathered in The Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Romanian Churches and decided to defend the display of religious symbols in public places as the expression of religious freedom. The Muslim and Jewish communities' representatives joined in later. On December 3, 2006, a group of representatives of the civil society (NGO representatives, academics, lawyers) wrote an open letter to Mihail Hărdău, the Minister of Education and Research, to express their support for the ruling of the National Council for Combating Discrimination. The Ministry of Education and Research declined his competence, and specified in his answer:

The Ministry of Education and Research appreciates that the Romanian people is religious and has resisted interdictions in the past fifty years through faith. The intervention of the Ministry of Education and Research in order to remove religious symbols from public schools would be totally inappropriate and may restrain the freedom of choice. The presence of icons in school should not be the consequence of a ministerial order, but that of the civil society. Therefore, the decision of

removal should be taken by parents, schools and local communities.

The Ministry of Education and Research wants each school's internal rules regarding the presence of religious symbols to be established by the local communities, and it approves of a diversified approach to the issue depending on the people's various denominations. However, observing the Law of Education, which prohibits religious proselytism, is strongly required. (*Letter of the Ministry of Education*, December 12, 2006).

As many as 150 organizations, mostly non-governmental, founded the Coalition for the Observance of Religious Faith, whose members began sending personal letters to the National Council for Combating Discrimination (NCCD) and on May 1, 2007, took legal action against the Council. The Romanian Ministry of Education put the NCCD on trial on 22 February 2007, in a bid to outlaw the NCCD recommendation. On June 15, 2007, the claim was rejected by the Bucharest Court of Justice, who argued that the NCCD recommendation is rooted in the human rights principles and the pluralism of faith. Surprisingly, Decision No. 2393/2008 of the Romanian Supreme Court of Justice declared the NCCD recommendation "obviously illegal", arguing that it implied state intervention in private issues that should be decided on by teachers, students and parents. Arguments were based on the principles of religious freedom and the norms of the European Convention on Human Rights, prescribing state neutrality concerning religious matters⁷.

The incident related to the removal of icons from public schools triggered a strong reaction from Romanian Orthodox personalities, groups and organizations. Christian symbols, relevant for Orthodox and Catholic communities, but irrelevant for the Protestant and non-Christian (Jewish, Turkish, Chinese, Arab, atheist) became the topic of a heated debate lasting for more than a year, involving state officials, opinion leaders, priests and scholars.

After the decision of The National Council for Combating Discrimination the "icon defenders" party was larger and louder than the icon contesters. The plethora of discourses in favour of displaying religious symbols in schools can be explained by the high status of the Orthodox Church in Romania and its strong nationalist commitment. While the Catholic and Protestant Churches picture themselves as universal, Orthodox churches are strongly rooted in their ethnic communities, be they Romanian, Serbian or Russian. This explains why the Romanian state, while favouring the French modernization patterns, was not so radical concerning the separation between the state and the church.

During Communism (1949-1989), the split between the state and the church was dramatic in Romania: the self-proclaimed atheist authorities persecuted religion in general and the Greek-Catholic and Neo-Protestant denominations in particular.

After the fall of the Ceaușescu regime, churches began to recover the previously lost public space. The Orthodox Church has enjoyed the support of both the population and the political elite: many orthodox churches were built, the Romanian Orthodox Church leaders were present at all important political and cultural events, new buildings were consecrated, various – cultural, educational, sportive, political, even business – events were blessed by the Orthodox priests. Many people, who had been ignoring faith for the past 40 years, rediscovered religious fervour, and one of the strong markers of this radical shift was precisely the display of icons in schools.

In Romania, according to the national census held in 2002, 86.8% of the population declared themselves Orthodox, 4.5% Catholic, 3.7% Calvinist, 1.5% Pentecostal, and 0.9% Greek-Catholic. A small Muslim minority and a small number of people who were atheists or didn't declare their religion were also recorded.

Even while politicians' popularity decreased dramatically, surveys showed that the Orthodox Church remained the most credible institution in the eyes of the Romanian population⁸. Its high social status is also reflected in the Law on religious freedom⁹, declaring that the state is neutral and there is no state religion (Article 9, Paragraph 1), but another article stresses the importance of the Romanian Orthodox Church and refers to the other denominations without specifying them¹⁰. The close intertwining between the Orthodox Church and the political class has been remarked on by scholars:

Indeed, in the post-1989 era, politicians frequently attended important religious celebrations (Christmas, Easter, etc.), while high-ranking Orthodox priests also gave their blessings to secular, political or other public events with high media coverage (such as the inauguration of new institutions or the opening of political party congresses). The mutual presence of politicians and of members of the church hierarchy at each other's events is, in fact, a symbolic gesture reinforcing and demonstrating their power-sharing alliance. Apparently, for both sides asserting this partnership in public was essential.¹¹

This phenomenon is not surprising in a transitional society, if only we consider that in France the principle of *laïcité* was not applied rigorously. Analysing the relationship between *laïcité* and public schools in France, Bérengère Massignon states that "religious affiliation is taken into account

on a case-by-case basis, at times arbitrary, which conceals an implicit hierarchy of religions, whereas the Law of Separation of 1905 was intended to guarantee equality among religions, irrespective of their numerical, historical or symbolic importance”¹².

Icons, veils and crucifixes: the Romanian case in European context

The presence of religious symbols in public schools was mainstreamed by the media in France, the UK, and Germany (Bavaria).

In France, the debate was known as “the veil affair.” In 1989, three Muslim girls wearing headscarves were forbidden to enter a school in northern Paris. This incident led to a national controversy, where the problem of *laïcité* was raised regarding the French state, religious pluralism and integration. The principle of *laïcité* is a concrete form of state neutrality regarding different ethnic groups, religions and cultures. As Dianne Gereluk remarked, “unlike the USA, where the separation between the church and state is based on a notion of neutrality of equal inclusion – that is, all conceptions of the good are accommodated in schools (at least in theory) – the French state founded its notion of neutrality on equal *exclusion*”¹³.

Lina Molokotos Liederman’s analysis¹⁴ proved that in France there was a strong consensus between politicians *against* the wearing of the veil in schools. The teachers also firmly opposed the wearing of the veil, which was considered a disruptive element in school.

It was expected that Muslim mothers would be the most vocal defenders of the wearing of headscarves in schools. A study by Caitlin Killian, who interviewed Maghrebien women on the issue, came to a surprising result. She found that:

The women who reject the veil because they believe the purpose of school is integration are agreeing with French public opinion, yet they are not the only participants demonstrating adaptation to French culture. The respondents who support the veil because they believe girls should have the freedom to express themselves are well versed in the Western discourse of rights and freedom and can use these arguments to their advantage.¹⁵

The dispute around wearing headscarves in schools continued until President Jacques Chirac signed, in 2004, the law which bans wearing conspicuous religious symbols in primary and secondary French public schools. Instructions referred to Muslim headscarves, to the Jewish kippa and to large Christian crucifixes. Small symbols – as little crucifixes, David stars, hands of Fatima – were allowed.

In the UK, in 1990, two Muslim girls wearing headscarves were not allowed to enter a school in Manchester. The problem was solved on a

local level and in view of some pragmatic aspects – such as individual security at gymnastics classes or the observance of the school's specific policies. The UK registered broad consensus over wearing the veil as the expression of religious tolerance.

In Bavaria, the crucifix affair flared up in 1995. Ten years before, the father of a student in a little Bavarian school had tried to convince the school headmaster to remove the crucifix from the wall of his daughter's classroom, because she had been traumatised by seeing Christ dying on the cross. After four years of fruitless discussions with the teachers and the school principal, the father took legal proceedings against the school. The Bavarian Court rejected the plaintiff's action, asserting that the crucifix was a valuable symbol of the general Christian Western tradition. At this stage, the case arrived at the Constitutional Court, which decided that the obligation of displaying crucifixes in schools was not constitutional. In Germany there are some states which allow the presence of crucifixes (Baden-Württemberg, North-Rhine Westphalia, Hesse, Rhineland Palatinate, Saarland, and Thuringia), while there are others that prohibit it (Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Western-Pomerania, Hamburg). Only Bavaria *requires* the presence of crucifixes. This decision of the Constitutional Court was severely criticized in Bavaria and it was interpreted as an interference of the central power in the internal affairs of Bavaria.

The similarities of these cases consist in the presence of religious symbols in public schools in terms of legitimacy, cultural diversity and individual rights. Differences between the Romanian case and the broadly publicized French, English or Bavarian ones are connected despite the culturally specific country contexts:

- The French debate was about *allowing* a sign of religious identification *inside* schools; the German debate was about *removing* a sign of religious identification *from* schools¹⁶. From this point of view, the Romanian case is closer to the Bavarian one.
- In the French and British cases, the problem was whether the state could restrict children's and their families' initiative of wearing religious symbols on their own body, while in Bavaria the issue was the legitimacy of the decision the Constitutional Court on withdrawing crucifixes from schools. This approach makes the Romanian case similar to the Bavarian one too, because rules refer to the attitude of institutions, not of individuals.
- In France, the restriction could be perceived as discriminatory for the minorities, while in Bavaria and Romania the discussion seemed to affect the sentiments of the majority.
- Apart from similarities, there are major differences between the Bavarian and the Romanian cases:

- In Bavaria, a law prescribed the mandatory presence of crucifixes in schools. This rule can be seen as a reaction to the prohibition by the Nazi regime in 1936. In Romania, there was also a prohibition during communism. After 1989, icons appeared on walls of several schools as a result of the local school communities' initiative, in the absence of a law on the subject.
- In Bavaria, the suspension of the compulsory character of crucifixes on school walls does not mean interdiction: schools have the possibility of displaying religious symbols in the future. In Romania, if the decision of the National Council for Combating Discrimination became effective, schools may not display these symbols in future.
- All these cases were widely discussed and presented in the local and international media.

Premises and hypotheses: methodological framework of the analysis

In order to perform a systematic analysis of the religious icon debate, we carried out an empirical analysis of the discourses on this topic as developed in:

- (1) mainstream Romanian media from November 1, 2006 to January 31, 2007;
- (2) key institutional actors' official statements;
- (3) civil society opinion leaders' formal positions and protests;
- (4) informal follow-up debates stirred by a blog article.

The focus of the discourse analysis has been *to map the quality and the style of argumentation* of both the PROs and the CONs concerning the legitimacy of displaying Orthodox religious icons in the Romanian public schools. We depicted and clustered our arguments around language use, rhetoric, logical consistency and emotional involvement.

Following the theoretical and methodological mainframe proposed by critical discourse analysts (Van Dijk and Fairclough), we carefully analysed the stakeholders involved in the debate within the power-sharing context. Since the order of discourses is tightly intertwined with the order of social realities (as Fairclough claims¹⁷), context analysis is necessary in order to understand interests and values that guide key players' discourses. The Romanian icon scandal was played by institutional actors mainly, therefore it is significant to approach it as a power-game, as the effort of elite representatives to reinforce their dominance through discursive means¹⁸. Discourses are significant elements of social realities for several reasons, Fairclough¹⁹ suggests: firstly, they are part of our daily practices and henceforth deserve our attention; secondly, they reinforce and reiterate other elements of social reality in a representational manner, through re-producing them within the order of language; thirdly, discourses act as catalysts, not only re-producing, but also creating new social realities (Fairclough 91). Powerful actors' discourses are more likely to comprise

successful performatives,²⁰ with the ability of converting them into effective actions. A core principle of critical discourse analysis is the thesis of reinforcing discriminative practices through the dominant actors' reiterated power-language.

The dominance of a certain type of discourse reflects, reinforces and creates certain types of social realities. In our case, the clear dominance of the pro-icon discourse within the Romanian public space shows the strong ties between the political elite and the Orthodox church.

Based on the European cases presented above and the background knowledge on the Romanian political context, our empirical analysis was guided by three hypotheses:

H1 It is likely that governmental stakeholders have a neutral position concerning religious icons in public schools.

H2 A clash between different religious communities, given the topic of the debate: Orthodox religious symbols, is only to be expected.

H3 The dispute will focus on human rights and discrimination issues.

Argumentation content and style: analysis of the debate on religious icons

Texts and contexts: the main clashing sides

The icon issue made the headlines after professor Moise handed in his petition to the National Council for Combating Discrimination in August 2006, and peaked from November 2006 to January 2007. Views on the matter were expressed in various forms:

Moise's request to remove religious symbols from schools

Open letter of Emil Moise's supporters against the presence of religious symbols. The letter requesting the removal of religious symbols from all Romanian schools, colleges and state universities was signed by 22 public personalities, some of whom were representatives of non-governmental organizations. Excerpts from the letter were published in newspapers.

The National Council for Combating Discrimination's recommendation against the presence of religious symbols in schools.

The Civic Media Association – the official objection against the decision of the National Council for Combating Discrimination. In order to give weight to their contestation the Association started gathering signatures and founded the *Coalition for religious faith*, whose appeal was signed by 150 non-governmental organizations and well-known political and cultural personalities in Romania.

Official position of the Ministry of Education – in fact declining any responsibility, in which the Ministry admits to the argument of private initiative and wishes for the matter to be solved by the local communities.

View points expressed by different religious cults. Representatives of religious cults – the Romanian Orthodox Church, the Evangelic Church, the Reformed, the Lutheran and the Armenian Evangelic Church – met in the General Assembly of the Ecumenical Association of Romanian Churches and consensually decided to maintain religious symbols in public places as a sign of religious freedom.

Views expressed in the Romanian Parliament. In the archives of the House of Commons three addresses were found under the following titles: *Do we eliminate Christianity from Romanian schools? We denounce the repeated attacks against the Romanian Orthodox Church, Appeal addressed on Orthodox Sunday: defend the icons in schools.*” We did not find any parliamentary discourse against the existence of icons in schools. On the other hand, the Chairman of the Education Commission of the Deputy Chamber made public her strong support for the presence of religious symbols.

Newspaper articles. We studied the archives of seven Romanian daily newspapers between November 2006 and January 2007 (*Adevărul, Cotidianul, Gândul, Gardianul, Jurnalul Național, Realitatea Românească, Ziua*) as well as the issue of *Dilema Veche* dealing with the topic, and the monthly magazine 22. In the above mentioned newspapers we found a number of 72 articles dealing with the topic, out of which 45 (61%) were in support of the presence of icons in schools, 8 against the presence of religious symbols in schools (11%), and 20 were neutral and presented both sides objectively. The *Ziua* newspaper was the one which dealt most with the issue – 33 articles out of which 24 (72%) advocated for the icons.

Alternative spaces of expression: a blog debate on the topic. On September 27, 2007, an interesting follow-up discussion took place on a public community blog starting from a similar protest: a mother in Bucharest complained about her daughter’s school exhibiting Orthodox icons in the classroom²¹. The blog-post entitled “O clasă, o biserică” (A Classroom, a Church) was followed by a heated discussion involving as many as 268 responses from the Romanian blogger community. Most of the responses advocated the interdiction of exhibiting religious icons in schools in a rather emotional tone of discourse and employing *ad homini* types of arguments. In a general remark concerning this debate it can be said that it was less topical than the mainstream media discussion, ranging from the issue of religion in a post-Communist society to the role of Orthodoxy in Romanian culture. The main topical argument in favour of icons was the freedom of expression,

whereas the contesters advocated the separation between the state and the Church as a principle of democracy.

The mainstream media covered the “pro-icons” attitude more visibly than the opposite. None of the religious cults that had made public their position over the matter agreed with the removal of religious symbols or insisted that their own symbols be displayed.

Analysis of the debate

In this section we analyze article titles, the argumentation and style from the perspective of the mainframe debate evaluation practices. We shall look at the content, the logical flow and the rhetorical means used by the “pro-icon” and the “con-icon” sides.

Article titles The “PRO-icons” articles often have titles that make use of rhetorical means inducing emotional reactions in the reader. Most of the titles reduce the issue of the presence of religious symbols in schools to the presence of the orthodox icons. (*Attack on Icons*²²; *The War of Icons Tears Apart the Country*²³). Some titles even make use of battle metaphors inducing the perception that this conflict of ideas is a major, if vital, conflict of interests. (i.e. *Removal of Icons from Schools – an Attack against Romanian Spirituality?*²⁴). Other articles operate with the metaphor of prison (*Lock on Icons*²⁵), which suggests that the removal of icons would mean limiting the freedom to express religious feelings.

A title can sometimes be conceived as a personal attack, enemies being labeled or even stigmatized (*21st century Iconoclasts*²⁶; *They Who Bark at Icons*²⁷). Titles like *How Does Santa Soros Want to Steal Our Christmas*²⁸ suggest a conspiracy argument with xenophobic implications.

In the case of the CONs we rarely found any title suggesting affective attitudes or reactions.

Arguments. In a debate that refers to principles (the lay character of the state, the relationship between the state and the church) we expect solid arguments on both sides. In this case, professor Moise’s opening argument was taken over by those who signed the letter in support of the NCCD decision. Later, a wave of arguments appeared in favor of religious symbols. The CON part was forced into refuting the PRO position. Subsequently, we will be trying to separate acceptable arguments from the sophistic ones and follow the arguments in their dynamics (arguments-counterarguments).

Initial arguments opposing the presence of religious symbols in schools

The human rights argument. Equal rights

Though the initial petition referred to religious symbols in general, soon the focus shifted to the more specific topic of Orthodox icons. Since the display of icons is specific for the orthodox cult, their presence in Romanian schools was considered to be an infringement of other religions' rights to representation. The presence of other symbols (the Semi Luna, verses from the Koran, the David Star) were only vaguely mentioned. Passages from the Romanian Constitution are mentioned in support of the petition.

Minority discrimination

This argument refers to the fact that through displaying religious symbols that are specific for a certain religion, members of other religious cults are being discriminated against. The focus of the discussion was the icons representing the Orthodox faith, as well as the fact that their presence in classrooms meant the discrimination of atheist pupils or pupils belonging to other religious cults. The icons on the wall make pupils of other religions feel being excluded.

Endangering children's rights

The main argument against the presence of icons in schools is Article 14 in the Convention regarding children's rights, to which Romania is also part. This stipulates that only parents or tutors are entitled to choose the type of religious education for their children up to the age of 16. When they are 16, youth are free to choose their own religion. Being continuously exposed to the presence of religious symbols belonging to one cult only, children come under unilateral pressure ("indoctrination," as some call it).

Arguments concerning the lay character of the state

One of the fundamental arguments of those who request the removal of religious symbols is based on the secular character of the state. It should be mentioned that the Romanian Constitution does not state *expressis verbis* the lay character of the state; in the Law on religious freedom and denomination adopted on December 28, 2006, the state is declared neutral.

All arguments against religious icons focus on the secular character of the state: participants in the discussion consider that the presence of icons in schools is in total contradiction with the lay character of the state and public institutions.

Arguments in favour of maintaining religious symbols in schools

In the case of the PRO-icon arguments, the reasoning was rarely related to the opponents' argumentation.

Human rights argument: freedom to express religious feelings

The defenders of icons, as they call themselves, consider that if they were removed from schools, it would harm parents and children. It goes without saying that the religious parents and children, namely the Orthodox, have the right to freely express their religious feelings, which includes the display of icons in public schools.

Private, community initiative argument

There is the frequently mentioned argument that no law imposes the display of icons and their display is not a state initiative. The Ministry of Education made use of this argument declaring that the presence of icons is not the result of a Ministry resolution, but the decision of civil society. Consequently, the decision of their removal should be taken by the local community, parents and schools.

The tolerance argument

This argument was raised in defense of icons by the representatives of the cults that do not use religious symbols, respectively the cults whose religious symbols do not appear within the premises of public schools. Thus, Osman Aziz, Hogeia of the Bucharest Islamic Community declared: "The Islamic commandment is to live in fraternity. That is why we respect the way members of each religious community pray and we hold their symbols in esteem. We are not disturbed by them."²⁹

The moral argument

The moral argument is based on the implicit relationship between religion and morality. The presence of religion in schools – under any form – is considered beneficial, for it improves ethical education.

The traditionalist – nationalist fallacy

It is one of the most reiterated arguments. It is based on commonplaces such as: the Romanian people are Orthodox, the Romanian people were born Christian, the Romanian people are religious. These notions of ideology are taught in schools through subjects such as

literature and history, they frequently appear in the media, and thus common people do not even doubt them, but take them for granted.

The “import” fallacy

Many participants in this discussion consider that the problem is not specific for the Romanian cultural space, but is rather a replica of similar problems in Europe (i.e. the veil issue in France). We come across a similar attitude with Jusuf Muurat, the Mufti of the Muslim cult: “Romania should not take over foreign issues,” he says “for Europe is faced with lack of faith while we, Romanians, have proved to be deeply religious and have great respect for God”³⁰. Let us not forget that these are the words of the representative of the Turkish community, who presents his identity through his Romanian citizenship and not through his Turkish ethnicity, and who won’t even accidentally mention the name of Allah. We assume that behind this denial of his cultural identity there lurks a tense atmosphere that is perceived as threatening and inimical.

The conspiracy fallacy

Arguments in favour of maintaining religious symbols in classrooms have taken on apocalyptic dimensions. The teacher’s petition is presented as part of an extended conspiracy against the Orthodox Church and, eventually, the Romanian people. Worry about the nation produces texts like: “Who is hiding behind the Moise puppet?”³¹ Discourses become aggressive and offensive: “An anti-Christian gang remote-controlled from outside the country attacks our national identity in a sub-human manner”³² making it obvious that the conspiracy is masterminded by foreigners. The brain behind this diabolical plan is supposed to be George Soros.

Ad hominem fallacy

The quality of the icon debate is clearly reflected by the frequent occurrence of the *ad hominem* arguments, their aggressivity – sometimes taking the forms of insults. The *ad hominem* argument turned into personal attack when it was targeted against its initiator and well known civil society opinion leaders in Romania (e.g. Renate Weber, Smaranda Enache, Alina Mungiu Pippidi). The supporters of icon banning were called godless individuals, anti-Christ, hateful, reckless, uprooted, foolish, dogmatic, extremist activists.

Fallacious analogy with the communist regime

This argument is founded on the idea that during the communist regime religion was oppressed and attending church was unacceptable. After 1989 people were relieved by the fact that they could freely express their religious feelings. Many feared that removing religious symbols from schools would mean the elimination of the Church from public life.

Style

There is a great difference concerning the style used by the opposing sides. While the pro-icon side used a more inflamed discourse, expressed their feelings more openly, using labels and sometimes insults, the opponents' style was closer to the academic language, their arguments more intellectual, using humor and irony. The pro-icon side often used value statements: the petitioners' arguments were considered to be shocking, while those of the icon-defenders seemed to be supporting a state of normality. Labels used referred to evil Communist past and immoral present: "bolshevist heathen"³³, "anti-Christ reaction"³⁴, "Talibans at Cotroceni"³⁵ (the State Presidency headquarters), or "moral idiocy"³⁶.

Such stylistic elements were not specific to the protesters against icons. They used a more sophisticated, intellectual style.

Rhetoric

The language used by the icon-defenders abounds in rhetorical means. Hyperboles are used to present the removal of icons as an attack on the national spirit or an attempt to eliminate the (Orthodox) church from the public space. Professor Moise is viewed as a person who "wants to destroy the icons keeping vigil over our children in schools"³⁷.

The metaphors used are loaded with feelings. Icons are presented as constitutive parts of the soul of the Romanians, thus making use of the "organicist metaphor": icons can not be torn out of the soul of Romanians.

The opponent party made use of less rhetoric and used a more neutral tone of the discourse.

Conclusions: dialogue, clash and dissent beyond religious symbols

Our aim has been to explore the mainframe hypothesis that the religious icon debate was a typical example of an asymmetric, emotional dialogue in a post-communist, transitional society. We analyzed the text and the context of a heated public debate on religious icons in Romania, guided by three main assumptions.

Firstly, we assumed that the governmental stakeholders had a neutral position concerning religious icons in public schools. We found that

governmental actors' clash on legal issues used similar arguments rooted in the principle of state neutrality in religious matters, but with different interpretations. While the National Council for Combating Discrimination advocated against religious icons based on the *laïcité* principle, the Ministry of Education defended them based on the right for religious pluralism. At the same time, state neutrality seems to bear different interpretations by the various church representatives, alternately as autonomy of religious practices and non-intervention even while claiming state funding³⁸.

Secondly, we expected a clash between the different religious communities, given the spark and the topic of the debate: the Orthodox religious symbols. This assumption was not supported by facts: all religious communities advocated for maintaining religious icons in schools. Banning Orthodox religious symbols was interpreted as an offence against religious freedom in Romania.

Thirdly, we presumed there was a focus on the human rights and discrimination issues of the debate. Indeed, these elements were widely used both by the defenders and the protesters in different rhetorical contexts: while the pro-icon side highlighted the drama of discriminating the Romanian Orthodox majority, the protesters' party pictured a failure of democracy in terms of a dysfunctional relationship between state neutrality, religious life and individual freedom.

The empirical and theoretical analyses have shown that the religious icon topic was closer to a scandal than to a debate, because of the abundance of personal attacks, offensive language and emotional approach to the issue. Mainstream media and official statements showed a more offensive and emotional approach to the pro-icon side, while alternative spaces of informal expression (blog debates on the topic) showed a strong emotional involvement on both the pro-icon and counter-icon sides. The critical discourse analysis approach highlighted that beyond the variedly interpreted state neutrality the power-groups reinforced their interests and values in the public sphere.

As a final remark, the religious icon scandal in Romania was a clash of values between a vocal, traditionalist majority and a liberal, less rooted minority.

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- 2 http://2006.informatia.ro/Scandalul_icoanelor_din_scoli_este_departe_de_a_se_incheia-196904

- 3 http://www.ziare.com/Procesul_icoanelor_parte_dintr_un_plan_de_distrugere_a_credintei-99716.html
- 4 http://www.catacombeortodoxiei.ro/index.php?Itemid=27&id=18&option=com_content&task=blogcategory
- 5 <http://www.salvati-icoanele.info/2006/12/04/un-nou-episod-din-razboiul-icoanelor/>
- 6 The National Council for Combating Discrimination's Decision no. 323 on 21 November 2006
- 7 Decision no. 2393/2008 of the Romanian Supreme Court of Justice.
- 8 Surveys show that almost 90% of population trust the Church (e.g. http://stiri.kappa.ro/politica/romanii-au-multa-incredere-in-biserica-presarmata-si-nato/stire_31177.html, <http://www.jurnalulbtd.ro/articol-Romanii-au-cea-mai-mare-incredere-in-Biserica-35-687.html>, <http://www.dilemaveche.ro/index.php?nr=192&cmd=articol&id=6778>)
- 9 The Law on religious freedom and denomination status, adopted on the 28th of December 2006.
- 10 Article 7, Paragraph 2: "The Romanian State acknowledges the important role of the Romanian Orthodox Church and of the other recognized denominations in the national history of Romania and in the life of the Romanian society."
- 11 Gavril Flora et al., "Religion and national identity in post-communist Romania", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans* 7.1 (2005): 42-43.
- 12 Bérengère Massignon, "Laïcité et gestion de la diversité religieuse à l'école publique en France", *Social Compass* 47.3(2000): 353.
- 13 Dianne Gereluk, "Should Muslim headscarves be banned in French schools?", *Theory and Research in Education* 3.3(2005): 264.
- 14 Lina Molokotos Liederman, "Religious Diversity in Schools: the Muslim Headscarf Controversy and Beyond" *Social Compass* 47.3(2000): 367 – 381.
- 15 Caitlin Killian, "The Other Side of the Veil: North African Women in France. Respond to the Headscarf Affair", *Gender & Society* 17.4(2003): 588.
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- 17 Norman Fairclough, "The Dialectics of Discourse" *Textus* 14.2(2001):232.
- 18 Teun A Van Dijk, "Discourse and Manipulation" *Discourse and Society* 17.3(2006): 359.
- 19 Fairclough, Norman. "Critical Discourse Analysis" *Marges Linguistiques* 9(2005): 91.
- 20 See Austin's speech act theory for the description of performatives.
- 21 <http://andreanum.wordpress.com/2007/09/27/o-clasa-o-biserica/>
- 22 <http://www.ziua.net/display.php?data=2006-11-22&id=211622>
- 23 <http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/r-x103-zboiul-cu-icoanele-sf-x15f-ie-x163-ara/207639>
- 24 http://www.gardianul.ro/2006/11/25/religie-c22/eliminarea_icoanelor_din_scoli_atac_impotriva_spiritualitatii_rom_nesti_-s87306.html
- 25 <http://www.ziua.net/display.php?data=2006-11-18&id=211401>
- 26 http://www.realitatearomaneasca.ro/content.php?c=articol&id_categorie=1&rticol_id=5058&article=iconoclastii+secolului+xxi
- 27 http://www.realitatearomaneasca.ro/content.php?c=articol&id_categorie=1&rticol_id=5064&article=latratorii+la+icoane

- 28 <http://www.ziua.net/display.php?data=2006-12-11&id=212609>
- 29 <http://www.adevarul.ro/articole/icoanele-exclusiv-material-didactic/207578>
- 30 <http://www.ziua.net/display.php?data=2006-11-29&id=211988>
- 31 <http://www.ziua.net/display.php?data=2006-12-11&id=212609>
- 32 <http://www.ziua.net/display.php?data=2006-11-27&id=211860>
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- 38 Moise, Emil. "Interpretarea Bibliei, sursă a discriminărilor în practica religioasă. O analiză de gen a trei dintre practicile religioase creștine din România", *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 6 Winter (2003):161.