

THE UNEVEN PATH OF SECULARIZATION: THE CASES OF THREE BALKAN SOCIETIES (BULGARIA, ROMANIA, AND TÜRKIYE)

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to trace, in comparative terms, the trajectory of secularization and religious revival in Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye. These three countries were chosen because, starting from a relatively similar position, they demonstrated three different trajectories. In all three societies, religion played a role as an element of state legitimacy during the 19th and early 20th centuries, but all three countries experienced forced top-down secularization – Kemalist modernization reforms after the foundation of the Republic of Türkiye, and socialist secularization in Bulgaria and Romania after 1944. However, the outcome in the countries under review is different – in Bulgaria, society and the state remained secularized after the end of the socialist era, in Romania, in recent years the Orthodox Church has a stronger role than the church has in Bulgaria, and in Türkiye, a number of factors have slowed down the secularization of society, and since the mid-1970s, the political Islamism has been at rise. During its rule after 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) attempted to strengthen the role of Islam in Türkiye, but, paradoxically, failed to reverse some of the secularization trends in society.

Keywords: Bulgaria; Romania; Türkiye; secularization

Introduction

The role of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria and Romania in nation-building and church-state relations has been analyzed in the scientific literature. A significant number of studies have also been devoted to the socialist authorities' policies towards the respective national churches. However, the question of their secularization has been relatively less studied. Abundant literature is also devoted to the nature of Turkish secularism. Although there are publications on these issues on the selected three individual countries (in alphabetical order) - Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye, we are not aware of any comparative study of secularization in the three states. The aim of this publication is to fill this gap in the academic literature.

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Defining the terms secularism and secularization is beyond the scope of this article. These are distinctive categories: here, secularism refers to the distinction between church and state and to constitutional and legal norms, rather than to social realities. For a state to be secular, there should not be institutional religious control over the three main powers – legislative, executive, and the justice system, as well as secular states constitutionally declare neutrality toward religions. On the other hand, secularization here is understood in the Weberian tradition as a key element of modernity, a process in which the reference framework shifts from religion to the human mind and rationality, and in which religion's public role erodes. Secularist experience across the world can be divided into two subgroups: civic-republican/assertive secularism demands that the state exclude any religious symbols, while liberal/passive secularism requires the state to tolerate both religious and secular symbols in the public sphere.¹ As per re-known author Karel Dobellaere, there are different levels of secularization. The first one is a diminishing commitment of the individuals towards the church – the difference between the actual religious knowledge, attitudes and everyday behaviour of the believers and the expectations of the church related to these (individual secularisation). The second level is institutional secularisation, which means the internal, organisational restructuring of the churches and denominations, including the changes in the message and in the values. The third level is societal secularisation.² Desecularisation can be defined as the opposite process, in which religious norms gain new ground, a rise in the practice of religion is observed, there is a revival and intensification of religious faith and/or a move of the practice from the private to the public sphere.

Methodologically, comparing these three countries is a definite challenge. First of all, the question is whether it is possible to compare Christian and Muslim countries in terms of secularism and secularization?³ Essentialist theses of researchers such as Ernest Gellner, Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, who believe that Islam is a secularization-resistant religion due to the lack of clear and distinct conceptions of “clergy” versus “laity”, answer negatively.³ The scholar Ahmet Kuru convincingly demonstrates the failure of

¹ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Charles Taylor, “Modes of Secularism,” in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 94-136; Ahmet T. Kuru, “Passive and Assertive Secularism: Historical Conditions, Ideological Struggles, and State Policies toward Religion,” *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007).

² Quoted in Dénes Kiss, “Desecularisation in Postcommunist Romania,” *Belvedere Meridionale*, 27, no. 1 (2015): 28-29.

³ It is interesting to note that sometimes similar critiques are aimed at Orthodox Christianity. See „Afterword: Why Are Orthodox Churches Prone to Political Mobilization Today?,” in *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24139-1>.

such an approach, showing that Islam is not an inherently and exceptionally political religion and 20 out of 46 Muslim-majority states are secular. Thus, scholars “should a) avoid making theological generalizations without having well-defined questions, sufficient data, and nuanced conceptualization; b) take seriously the impact of socio-cultural, economic, and political factors on diverse political interpretations of religions; and c) attach importance to the human agency that interprets religious texts and makes political decisions. Rather than analyzing the so-called essence of Islam as pro-democratic or anti-democratic, it may be more effective to examine particular thinkers and movements who produce pro-democratic or anti-democratic discourses using an Islamic terminology.”⁴

Therefore, we assume that such a comparison is possible. Next, the comparison between the three countries is favorable for other reasons. All three countries, to a different extent, belong to the post-Ottoman space. As a result of the Ottoman *millet* system, the clergy played social-leadership roles within both Muslim and non-Muslim communities. Moreover, in all three polities, the modernization and later secularization processes started from relatively similar positions, such as low economic development and lack of mass literacy. Thus, this article aims to trace the similarities and differences in the trajectories of the countries under consideration regarding the majority religions. The article will continue as follows: the three countries will be examined in separate sections, after which a conclusion will be proposed.

Bulgaria as a successful example of secularization

The Orthodox religion has historically played a role in Bulgarian society. Together with language, religion was one of the unifying factors that allowed the preservation of the consciousness of Bulgarians as different during the Ottoman rule (1396 – 1878). After several decades of struggle for its separation from the Greek Ecumenical Patriarchate, the Bulgarian Exarchate was established by a sultan's *firman* on February 27, 1870, and included 16 dioceses, to which two more were subsequently added by plebiscite. This has significance as a *de facto* recognition and separation of the Bulgarian nation within certain territorial boundaries. The Bulgarian Church was established as a conciliar one, i.e., laypeople participate in its governance at all levels. At that time, the church was considered an attribute of the nation and an instrument of national struggle, i.e., a political rather than a spiritual institution (quasi- or proto-state). After the Principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia gained *de facto* independence from the Ottoman Empire, about one million ethnic Bulgarians remained on its territory (in Thrace and Macedonia) and the Exarchate was

⁴ Ahmet T. Kuru, “A Research Note on Islam, Democracy, and Secularism,” *Insight Türkiye* 11, no. 4 (2009): 29-40, especially p. 38.

practically the only pan-Bulgarian institution. In 1890, 1894 and 1897, through diplomatic actions, the Bulgarian government obtained sultanic *berats* (documents) for the addition of seven more Bulgarian hierarchs in Macedonia and Thrace. At that time, the Exarchate also played an educational role in these lands, providing education to almost 80,000 Bulgarian students. In 1912, the Exarchate moved from Istanbul to Sofia, and after the catastrophe of the Second Balkan (Inter-Allied) War (1913), the Exarchate's activities outside Bulgaria were almost completely terminated, which also ended its national mission.⁵

After 1878, despite the state's support for the Exarchate outside the Principality, the relations between the state and the church within Bulgaria looked different. First, there was often a clash between the political authorities (the governments or Prince Ferdinand) and the higher clergy due to its Russophile orientation. Second, the attitude of the intelligentsia, formed under the influence of positivist concepts such as liberalism, proto-socialism, and later Marxism, towards the church was negative. Third, the civil rights of priests were significantly limited, and their material situation was for a long time insufficiently regulated and difficult. In general, the civil law of the Bulgarian state was secular, with only aspects of family relations – marriage and divorce – left within the competence of the church. The teaching of religious doctrine met with resistance from both the modern-minded upper-class students and the teachers, and was left in the hands of secular teachers – not least because of the lack of sufficiently qualified personnel.⁶

The Czech scholar, a contemporary of these events, Konstantin Ireček wrote that the church did not take deep roots among the Bulgarians, the reasons for this being the long struggle against the Greek clergy, the insufficient education of the lower clergy, the secular ideas among the intelligentsia, with most of the national revolutionaries being announced atheists.⁷ For centuries, the Bulgarian people practiced the Christian religion ritually, without a deep understanding of the spiritual meaning of certain rituals. Therefore, in the villages, Christianity remained at a formal level. In the cities, under the influence of books, newspapers, educated people, through emigration and the diaspora, which bring access to new knowledge, economic, production and political models, in the competition of casinos, theaters and other modern means of entertainment and socialization, the church loses importance.

After the defeat in the Inter-Allied and First World Wars and the collapse of the national ideal of unification of all Bulgarians, Bulgarian society entered a serious political, economic and spiritual crisis. The established

⁵ Румен Даскалов. *Българското общество 1878 – 1939 г.* (София, Гутенберг), т. 2, 442-444.

⁶ Даскалов, *Българското*, 445- 447, 450, 453-454.

⁷ Quoted in Даскалов, *Българското*, 447.

political and cultural models were destabilized, which led to a change in the mood of part of society and the intelligentsia, which coincided with some pan-European trends caused by the shock of the "Great War". In the capital and large cities, an influx of worshipers was observed in the temples, including from the social elite, and a tendency to demonstrate religiosity and place icons and lamps in the vestibule was increasing. Various Orthodox priestly unions were created, as well as women's and youth associations associated with the church. At the same time, a boom in various sects and (semi-)religious societies was also noted, including Tolstoyism, spiritualism, theosophy, and Petar Danov's movement, as many representatives of the intelligentsia were tempted by them.⁸ Despite their existence and the periodicals and other literature they produced, it should be noted that these movements did not exert a serious influence either in terms of secularism or secularization.

The authoritarian and non-partisan governments, which came to power after the coup of May 19, 1934, assigned an important role to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) as a supporter of statehood and monarchy. This gave the church the opportunity to insist on strengthening religious teaching and admitting church figures as teachers.⁹ However, several clarifications should be made here. This is an attempt by the church to be instrumentalized to strengthen the low legitimacy of the regime – by definition, coming to power through a coup, rather than through democratic means, undermines the legitimacy of the regime. Secondly, political science literature, based on cross-country data from around the world, has thoroughly researched that government intervention in the religious sphere or the politicization of religion has a negative impact on religiosity. There are various explanations for why this is so. Some, inspired by economic theories, argue that this is because the mobilization of religion for political purposes is usually observed during crises or in countries facing problems. Consequently, institutions there are not particularly effective. A second explanation posits that, if having state support, the clergy is more interested in receiving state aid than in reaching out to the people. A third similar explanation argues that when there is no state support and when spiritual institutions depend on believers, they are forced to be more active and reach out to people. Another theory is that when religion is politicized, public reaction against those in power inevitably turns against their preferred religion or values.¹⁰ Third, although centered around ethnic and

⁸ Galina Goncharova, "Българското 'духовно възраждане' в междувоенния период: мистични общности, морализаторски проекти и националистични програми," *Критика и хуманизъм*, no. 50 (2/2018); Даскалов, *Българското*, 451, 455-456.

⁹ Даскалов, *Българското*, 457.

¹⁰ Murat Çokgezen, "Can the State Make You More Religious? Evidence from Turkish Experience," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 61, no. 2 (2022): 350-352.

religious identity (“the ideal Bulgarian” is an Orthodox Bulgarian), Bulgarian nationalism also contains civic elements – for example, the belonging of Bulgarian Catholics or Bulgarian Protestants to the national body is not questioned, and targeted efforts are made to include Muslims with Bulgarian ethnicity in it. Fourth, despite the fact that the right-wing officers and groups used slogans such as “God, Boris,¹¹ Bulgaria” and “God, Tsar, Fatherland” and despite the repressions after 1923 against the left, its ideas, which are also secular, continue to spread in society.

In conclusion, in the period from the Bulgarian Liberation in 1878 to 1944, the church occupied a strongly subordinate position to the state, expressed in its financial dependence. The oligarchic rule of the higher clergy prevented internal reform of the church, which would have allowed the involvement of the laity in its affairs. Financial limitations constrained the development of broad social activity of the BOC. The insufficiently numerous clergy lagged behind socially and spiritually and failed to capitalize on the changing *zeitgeist* after the wars to assert its influence.¹²

After 1944, in accordance with Marxist theory, the new communist-dominated government in Bulgaria began to impose secularization reforms. Church property was nationalized, repressions were carried out against church figures, and the institution itself was placed under tighter state control, religious instruction was dropped from the school curriculum, civil marriage became legal, while church marriage was optional, the rights of men and women in divorce were equalized, and so on. The Bulgarian case is not only not an exception, but confirms the rule of such reforms carried out in the period 1948-1951 throughout Eastern Europe.¹³

The tendency towards secularization and a subordinate role of the church to the state persisted throughout the socialist period. It can be concluded that in the period 1944-1989 in Bulgaria the “strong” state with its institutions – educational, social, public, etc., significantly limited the fields in which the church could be active. This marks a significant difference from the previous period, when the church supplemented or occupied some niches left by the weaker state.

¹¹ Bulgarian King Boris III.

¹² Даскалов, *Българското*, 460.

¹³ Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 48; George Moyser (ed.), *Politics and Religion in the Modern World* (London, New York, 1991), 68, 77. Among the Bulgarian researchers, Momchil Metodiev traces repressions against the church and the clergy by the communist authorities. However, in his research, anticommunist optics is premised. See Момчил Методиев, *Между вярата и компромиса: Българската православна църква и комунистическата държава (1944-1989 г.)* (София, Институт за изследване на близкото минало/Сиела, 2010).

After 1989, in Bulgaria, as in a number of other countries in Eastern Europe, the restrictions imposed on religion were removed. The Constitution adopted in 1991 is liberal in terms of the rights and freedoms of citizens,¹⁴ including religious rights (Art. 13, Art. 37, para. 1). A kind of “religious revival” is observed throughout the region, expressed in an increased interest of citizens not only in traditional Orthodoxy, but also in other denominations. The most common explanation for this is the interest in a phenomenon that was largely tabooed in the previous period, as well as the overall frustration, confusion and uncertainty caused by economic difficulties, political, social and economic transition and the questioning of the previous values - replacing the proclaimed socialist altruism with capitalist egoism, etc.

Immediately after the beginning of the transition to democracy, some priests from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church joined politics in the ranks of the anti-communist forces. However, these acts remained more on an individual level and did not lead to the active involvement of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in politics. The fact that a church schism occurred in Bulgaria on May 18, 1992, can also be considered a “continuation of politics by other” means. Six metropolitans believe that due to corruption, the election of Maxim as patriarch in 1971 is null and void and a new election of patriarch should be held. They are supported by anti-communist politicians. In 1998, seven Orthodox patriarchs confirmed the legitimacy of Patriarch Maxim and by 2002 the schism was finally overcome.¹⁵ In our opinion, this episode cannot be considered as part of a process of desecularization, since it is primarily a politically motivated conflict over the orientation and spirit of the Church as such, and not a dispute between two tendencies to redefine its role in society.

In 2002, a Law on Religious Denominations was also adopted, which regulates church-state relations. It also reaffirms a commitment to individual freedom of religious and secular convictions, as well as a commitment to promoting mutual tolerance and understanding on matters of religious and nonreligious conviction. Its main philosophy is for the state to be a neutral observer, rather than an administrator implementing a particular religious policy. The traditional role of the BOC in Bulgarian history and the formation and development of its spiritual and intellectual history is recognized, but it is seen as a factor in the polity and community-building of the country, without these being theocratic. However, official holidays and state ceremonies with a religious element will have an Eastern Orthodox framework and will be performed by clergy from the BOC. Another specific characteristic of the BOC

¹⁴ Peter Petkoff, “Church-State Relations under the Bulgarian Denominations Act 2002: Religious Pluralism and Established Church and the Impact of Other Models of Law on Religion,” *Religion, State & Society* 33, no. 4 (2005).

¹⁵ Хронология на разкола в Българската Православна Църква (БПЦ), Православието, January 9, 2013, https://www.pravoslavieto.com/docs/razkol_chronology.htm.

is that it is a legal person *ex lege* (art. 10(2). This is the only religion of the land which has its legal status *ex lege*.¹⁶

Overall, the religiosity of the Bulgarians, measured with standard metrics such as attendance of religious services and importance of religion, is not high. The European Values Survey 2008 shows that 58,6% of the Bulgarians define themselves as Orthodox, but the vast majority go to church, if at all, only on big religious holidays or because of transition rituals (baptism, wedding, funeral service).¹⁷ The number of priests as of 2017 is about 800, while to normally cover the needs of the parish, they should be at least 2,500. The number of clergy is also many times smaller than the number of existing churches and monasteries.¹⁸ Since the early 1990s, the number of priests has decreased almost 4 times, and about 30% of active priests in our country are pensioners.¹⁹ The main reasons for this are low pay and difficult service in some unattractive regions of the country.

Currently, there are publishing houses in the country with an Orthodox focus (e.g., "Омофор"), the high-quality magazine "Christianity and Culture" with an intellectual and philosophical focus, websites and forums with Orthodox content. What they have in common is their relatively limited scope.

Although some nationalist parties emphasize Orthodox values in their programs and that there are programs dedicated to the Orthodox faith in media outlets associated with them, they also do not have a particularly significant impact on the processes of secularization. Despite some periods of peak political influence of these formations, they quickly pass. Second, such parties are more nationalist than religious. The media outlets associated with them are relatively marginal, and programs dedicated to Orthodoxy do not have high ratings and have a more symbolic role as a reverence for traditional values and the preservation of "Bulgarianness" than having an anti-secularization character. Last but not least, such types of programs, in which the host and guest/s converse, are cheap and do not require significant effort. Since 2025, debates have begun in Bulgarian society regarding the idea of introducing religious education classes, and at the time of writing the article, the practical implementation of the idea has not begun.

¹⁶ Petkoff, *Church-State Relations*, 315-317.

¹⁷ Galina Goncharova, Teodora Karamelska, "The Invention of Orthodox Traditions: Religiousness in a Post-socialist Context," Семинар_BG, December 29, 2015, <https://seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/special-issue-3/641-the-invention-of-orthodox-traditions.html>.

¹⁸ The data on the total number of churches and monasteries in Bulgaria is contradictory, and it is unclear whether some statistics include small chapels, but the total number is probably between 3,000 and 5,000. See, for example, a list at <https://www.hramove.bg/>.

¹⁹ "Глад за свещеници! Те са само 800, мнозина напускат България", October 7, 2017, <https://www.dnes.bg/a/58-obshtestvo/355538-glad-za-sveshtenitsi-te-sa-samo-800-mnozina-napuskat-balgariya>.

G. Goncharova and T. Karamocheva underline that the so-called “ordinary churchgoer” emphasizes adherence to practices rather than comprehension of content.²⁰ This is another factor that explains why dominant secular ideas are not under threat.

In recent years, the increasing number of marginalized people, inequalities in access to education, and the degradation of the educational level of large parts of the population, especially ethnic minority groups, deindustrialization and deprofessionalization have also led to the return of superstitions, beliefs in witches and other anti-modern views. The disintegration of social ties and the loneliness of people on social media also contribute to this.²¹

Overall, however, Bulgarian society remains strongly secular on all three mentioned levels – at the personal level, at the level of Church stance and activity (or the lack of it thereoff) on important public issues, and at the institutional level, such as the normative separation of church and state and the absence of influential political forces that actively use religiously tinted rhetoric.

Romania

The Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) plays just as significant a role in the process of national revival as the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, and also has a significant legitimizing role in the process of building modern Romanian statehood. In pre-modern times, religious hierarchs became close advisers to the ruling princes and to the boyars.²² От 19 век насам румънските политици смятат, че that controlling the Church hierarchy would lead to control of the masses and to the development of Romanian national identity and Orthodoxy served as a tool for historical legitimacy for the State.²³ In 1862, the Romanian Church expressed its desire to end the long period of Phanariot authority by replacing Greek liturgical usage with the Romanian language.²⁴

After the reign of Prince John of Cusa (1859–1866), who attempted to subjugate the church, during the reign of King Charles I (1866-1914) Orthodox

²⁰ Goncharova, *The Invention of Orthodox*.

²¹ Петя Пачкова, „Преход и десекуларизация,” in *Преструктуриране на политическото и идеологическото пространство в България, Европа и света* (София: УНСС, 2015, 306).

²² Claudiu Cotan, “State and Orthodox Church in Romanian History,” *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, no. 7 (2015): 86.

²³ Lucian N. Leuștean, “‘For the Glory of Romanians’: Orthodoxy and Nationalism in Greater Romania, 1918–1945,” *Nationalities Papers* 35, no. 4 (2007): 717–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905990701475111>; Lucian N. Leuștean, “The Political Control of Orthodoxy in the Construction of the Romanian State, 1859-1918,” *European History Quarterly* 37(1), (2007): 61-80, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265691407071802>.

²⁴ Rada Cristina Irimec, “Religion and Political Identification in Communist Romania,” *Polis*, vol. II, issue 2(4), (2014): 49.

clergy regain its political positions and role. For example, the new Constitution integrates the bishops and metropolitans into the Senate as members by law.²⁵

After World War I, Romania acquired vast territories populated by different ethnic and religious groups, and the ROC was an important player in the state's efforts to integrate them into the polity. ROC was in alliance with the National Liberal Party, in its successful efforts to integrate the other Orthodox churches from the new provinces into a single administration under its leadership and to establish its prevalence over the Greek and Roman Catholic Churches in the normative framework, e.g., the 1923 Constitution.²⁶ ROC was declared a patriarchate in 1925. This, as well as the recognition of the church autocephaly in 1885, was achieved with the direct contribution of the state which was a mediator between Bucharest and the Ecumenical Patriarchate.²⁷ In the interwar period, the first Romanian Patriarch would become actively engaged in political life, as Prime Minister of three governments and a member of the royal regency.²⁸ Marshal Ion Antonescu, the leader of the state (1940 - 1944), saw the Orthodox Church as a second army of the country.²⁹

Similar to Bulgaria, despite Romania emerging victorious in the “Great War”, the war caused a serious social shock, which found expression in the emergence of various religious movements, the most famous of which were the Lord’s Army (Oastea Domnului), which began its activities in 1923 in Sibiu, Transylvania, the Stork’s Nest (Cuibul cu Barză) in Bucharest, and the Romanian Orthodox Brotherhood.

The significantly stronger position of the ROC in political life until World War II also influenced the attitude of the new communist authorities after 1944. There were several periods in the relations between church and state until 1989. Repressions against the church were strongest in the early years. Until 1965, the state continued its efforts to weaken the church’s role in society and control its hierarchy. The church-state relations softened between 1965 and 1977. The state abandoned the tactic of closing monasteries, re-established good relations with the clergy through the rehabilitation of formerly imprisoned clergy and financially supported the restoration of historical churches. By 1979, religious persecution in Romania was on the rise again.

²⁵ Cotan, “State and Orthodox Church,” 87.

²⁶ After Roland Clark, *Religious Reform and Sectarianism in Interwar Romania: The Limits of Orthodoxy and Nation-Building* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

²⁷ Cotan, “State and Orthodox Church,” 89.

²⁸ Irimie, “Religion and Political,” 49-50.

²⁹ Cotan, “State and Orthodox Church,” 90; Sergiu Gherghina, Sergiu Mișcoiu, “Faith in a New Party: The Involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the 2020 Election Campaign,” *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 23:2 (2022): 232, DOI: 10.1080/21567689.2022.2080669.

The new authorities had never published a decree separating church and state, even though there was a specific reference to the Orthodox Church in the Romanian Constitution. As long as the church hierarchy supported the regime in order to bring the regime closer to the masses due to its popular position in society. ROC was able to retain part of its property and was financially supported by the State. Later on, it proved to be an excellent tool for the promotion of national policies, not only domestically, but beginning in the 1960s, the ROC had been assigned an international mission. By taking advantage of the church's international contacts, the regime aimed to foster better relations with the West and promote Romania's political and economic interests, whose financial support he badly needed for Nicolae Ceausescu's megalomaniac industrialization and architectural projects. Thus, the communists did not oppose it, and the influence of religion in Romanian society was not utterly erased.³⁰

At the societal level, after 1989, the ROC resumed its activity in army units, hospitals, and prisons as well as its philanthropic activity with orphans and the elderly, providing hot meals and medical assistance. The clerical body of the ROC would continue to receive salaries through the Ministry of Religion, while the activities in support of the church's needs were exempted from taxation, and Orthodox official oaths were sworn on the Bible³¹ - something not seen in Bulgaria.

The period between 1990 and 2003 has been characterized by an exponential increase in the number of churches and monasteries, administered by the ROC. From 12,389 churches in 1990, the total number by the end of 2003 was 13,800 despite the fact that some of the Orthodox churches counted in 1990 were returned in the meantime to the Greek Catholic Church. Regarding the Orthodox monasteries built in the same period, their number increased from 200 in 1990 to 570 in 2003. In addition, four Orthodox radio stations were opened, 74 new magazines and newspapers were established, 12 new theological colleges were added to the existing two, and 33 new theological seminaries were added to the six that existed in 1990.³²

The construction of new churches also increased. A large number of them are built on public land secured free of charge from local councils. The

³⁰ Irimie, "Religion and Political," 47-52; Kiss, "Desecularisation," 30.

³¹ Cristian Romocea, "Church-State Relations in Post-1989 Romania," *Journal of Church and State* 53(2) (Spring 2011): 245-246; The state is providing financial assistance for the recognised denominations and pays the monthly wages of not only Orthodox clergy (Law no. 142/1999); it awards recognised denominations fiscal exemptions and facilitations. However, ROC has a practical monopoly over spiritual services in the army and the penitentiary system. Liviu Andreescu, "The construction of Orthodox churches in post-communist Romania," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59(3) (April 2007): 453, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09668130701239906>.

³² Romocea, "Church-State," 246, 260, 262, 271-272.

erection of Orthodox places of worship is supported with credit or building materials by the local authorities. The central ROC authorities hardly ever provide financial assistance and parishioners are rarely sufficiently well off to help much. What all this amounts to, in practice, is constant bids for support and frequent pressures on the local and central authorities by parish priests and higher prelates. In exchange, the latter offer electoral support. Given the constant interrelations between the Church and political authorities, church construction further cements the alliance between the state and the majority denomination.³³ Analyzing statistical data, Liviu Andreescu concludes that between 1990 - 2005 r. ROC has been erecting about 140 places of worship each year or 2200 churches altogether.³⁴

Among these, the construction of the Romanian Orthodox national cathedral is the most significant. The project circulates from nineteenth century, was revisited in the 1920s, resurfaced again after 1989, and in 2004, the municipal council of Bucharest approved the church's request to build the cathedral in Carol Park, only to be moved to the Arsenal Hill behind the House of the People (the Parliament) under the name "The National Salvation Cathedral." Some critics have called the project the "Orthodox Marriott" because of its high price tag, while others criticize the obvious nationalist implications of the name.³⁵

Studies over the years have shown that the church consistently ranks first as the most trusted Romanian institution, with trust in it between 80 and 90%,³⁶ and that Romanians are one of the most religious nations in Europe.³⁷ Thus, the data for Bulgaria show a discrepancy, while those for Romania confirm the trend that predominantly Orthodox countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe constitute one of the most religious regions in Europe, as well as the tendency for the political mobilization of Orthodox Churches to be around nationalism and conservatism.³⁸

Events at the beginning and end of school years are rarely without ecclesiastic presence, and religious symbols, e.g., icons, on the walls of educational institutions are often found. Establishing school chapels and college churches is no longer merely symbolic, as there is real religious activity going on in them. Religious instruction was introduced in schools, as a result of which

³³ Andreescu, "The construction of Orthodox churches," 457.

³⁴ Andreescu, "The construction of Orthodox churches," 459, 461.

³⁵ Romocea, "Church-State," 246, 260, 262, 271-272; Kiss, "Desecularisation," 31.

³⁶ Irimie, "Religion and Political," 55.

³⁷ "Pew Research: Romania Is the Most Religious Country in Europe," *Romania Insider*, December 7, 2018, <https://www.romania-insider.com/pew-research-romania-religious-country-europe>.

³⁸ Afterword: "Why Are Orthodox Churches Prone to Political Mobilization Today?," in *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe*, ed. Sabrina P. Ramet (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan), 250-251, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24139-1>.

church representatives with a degree in theology have become a constant presence in public schools. ROC attempted to exclude the theory of evolution from the biology curriculum, as well as the philosophical concepts of God from the philosophy curriculum.³⁹

The end of the ban by the communist regime was followed by an increase in the number of clergy. In addition to the priests, there are school religion teachers with a theological degree. The expansion of the latter group was further strengthened by pairing theology with other university courses, as a result of which the availability of theological training expanded exponentially. The integration of theological education in state universities – which means the financial burden of the cost of the training does not need to be borne by the churches – resulted in the rise in the number of students and teachers. The number of institutions providing theological education increased from four to 15 in the first ten years after the regime change. And finally, there is a significant rise in the number of monks: according to the aforementioned statistics in 2011, there were 8476 monks living in the country.⁴⁰ As per Liviu Andreescu, the church's prerogative in determining the number of theology students was crucial, because by graduating twice the number of priests it needs, the ROC has not only been filling the schools with religious education teachers—it has also been churning out a large number of prospective priests looking for a parish. The pressure on the local authorities has been formidable, and in exchange for electoral assistance, the latter have supported the mushrooming of Orthodox places of worship in state hospitals, army compounds, penitentiaries and public schools. They sprang up inside crowded city quarters, on public land awarded free of charge to the ROC, sometimes in parks, often despite the protests of the local communities.⁴¹

Thus, in terms of the number of priests per 100,000 inhabitants, with 80.1, Romania ranks third in Europe after Greece (87.7) and Italy (82.8), while Bulgaria lags far behind with only 12 priests per every 100,000 people, taking the last place among European nations included in this research.⁴²

Another notable distinction between BOC and ROC is the attitude towards elections. During the first parliamentary elections in 1990, ROC forbade the clergy from entering politics and declared its neutrality from any party agenda. However, neutrality did not mean passivity and, as a result, not only did various priests obtain political positions, but the church was

³⁹ Kiss, “Desecularisation,” 30.

⁴⁰ Kiss, “Desecularisation,” 32.

⁴¹ Liviu Andreescu, “Double or Nothing: Academic Theology and Post-Communist Religious Policy,” *Journal of Church and State* 52(3) (2010): 567-568, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jcs/csq088>.

⁴² “Greece tops European list of proportion of priests to population”, *Orthodox Christianity*, November 1 (2018), <https://orthochristian.com/116951.html>.

recommending to the voters to support only political parties whose program supported Christian morality. In 1996, the influential Bartolomeu Anania, Archbishop of Cluj, Vad, and Feleac, became the herald of the proposal for priestly political involvement as electoral advisers, arguing that Orthodoxy should have political representation in parliament. The Romanian minister of culture (1990-1991) and later on foreign minister Andrei Pleșu was actively involved in church issues and has influenced the development of relations between the ROC and the secular state.⁴³

In recent years, the relationship between the ROC and politics has even strengthened, with politicians trying to profit from the high trust in the Church, compared to the much lower trust in political parties. This approach was used by parties across the political spectrum: the Social Democratic Party (PSD) had good connections with the Orthodox Church, and the National Peasant Party with the Greek-Catholic Church, while the National Liberal Party established ties with the neo-protestant congregational networks.⁴⁴ Founded in 2019, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR) gradually emerged as the main opposition party by criticizing the slow pace of reforms, widespread corruption, and the mismanagement of EU funds. Similar to other far-right parties across the EU, it capitalized on public dissatisfaction with political elites and promoted a nationalist agenda infused with religious symbolism.⁴⁵ The Church supported several mainstream parties in previous elections, but this did not happen in a systematic manner. Instead, it took place via electing priests, monks or laymen church supporters as local and county councillors or MPs. However, in the 2020 parliamentary vote, the ROC campaigned for the AUR, which won fourth place.⁴⁶

During the 2024 presidential elections, Călin Georgescu, an independent candidate, won the first round by effectively spreading nationalist and religious messages mainly through the TikTok platform, but later on the Constitutional Court annulled the results. On March 1, 2025, at the start of the run-off campaign, AUR organized a demonstration in Bucharest. At the rally, Georgescu declared: “We are united with each other and with God! (...) What God unites, no one can separate—neither man nor the system!” On March 7, Georgescu submitted his candidacy for the presidency to the Central Electoral Office, proclaiming that “democracy was resurrected” that day. He called on his

⁴³ Romocea, “Church-State,” 255.

⁴⁴ Gherghina, Mișcoiu, “Faith in a New Party,” 233, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2022.2080669>.

⁴⁵ Lucian N. Leuștean, “Romania’s 2025 Presidential Elections and the Politicization of Religion,” *Institute for Global Engagement*, June 24, 2025, <https://globalengage.org/portico/romania-2025-presidential-elections-and-the-politicization-of-religion/>; Gherghina, Sergiu Mișcoiu, *Faith in a New Party*, 234.

⁴⁶ Gherghina, Mișcoiu, “Faith in a New Party,” 227, 231.

supporters to sing the national anthem and recite the Our Father prayer in every city across the country.⁴⁷

The first round of the May 2024 presidential elections featured 11 candidates, many of whom employed religious rhetoric. Victor Ponta, a former Prime Minister and leader of the PSD, frequently portrayed himself as a devout man and made many references to religion. During a public debate, Elena Lasconi, leader of the centrist-liberal Save Romania Union, brought a Bible and asked another center-right politician, Nicușor Dan, to swear on it that he had never lied. Daniel Funeriu, a former Minister of Education, declared that “A leader without faith is just an opportunist and a cynic. Without faith, a politician has the vision of a mole: dark, groping, short-term.” Among all the presidential candidates, George Simion (who ended in second place) was the most active in combining religion with politics. He primarily communicated with supporters via TikTok, often ending his videos with “May God help”. At the end of April, he visited Mount Athos in Greece. During Holy Week before Easter, AUR sent a letter and a small financial gift (100 lei, approximately 20 euros) to all Orthodox clergy in Romania. The politicization of religion by Romania’s far-right movement mirrored similar trends in Hungary, Italy, Serbia, Greece, and Poland.⁴⁸

In terms of attempts to reverse some trends, sometimes different denominations unite around some issues. Protestant, Roman-Catholic, Greek-Catholic and Orthodox religious groups joined forces to create the Coalition for the Family that gathered, mainly with the support of the Orthodox Church, 3,000,000 signatures for a citizen-initiated referendum in 2018 to change the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage. The referendum failed to reach the required participation threshold to be deemed valid.⁴⁹

However, as per the researcher Cătălin Ionete, it seems that Orthodoxy is indeed doing excellently at a macro level, but has genuine problems at the grass-roots level. This means that the Church has political and economic power, the ability to make grand symbolic statements and help maintain power vis-à-vis other religious groups, while the grass-roots level refers to the lived Orthodoxy or to the number and quality of the active members of the ROC. What is striking about the Romanian case is that the great majority of the Romanian population declares itself as Orthodox, while the number of those who are practising Orthodoxy is much smaller. This is well- captured in this description: Romanian “Orthodoxy” appears to be rather a tradition without faith than a

⁴⁷ Leustean, “Romania’s 2025 Presidential Elections”

⁴⁸ Leustean, “Romania’s 2025 Presidential Elections”

⁴⁹ Gherghina, Mișcoiu, “Faith in a New Party,” 233.

tradition of faith.⁵⁰ According to most indicators, the religiosity of the younger generations decreases, and this linear decrease is not broken by the fact that the generation born after 1981 received full religious instruction in schools. These data thus indicate that in spite of the systemic spread of churches, in the case of individual religiosity the continuation of the trend of secularisation is to be expected in the long run.⁵¹

Also, during the three waves of protests (2012-2013, 2015, 2017-2018) in the last decade, several segments of Romanian society have displayed anti-clerical attitudes - broad criticism of all religious institutions but particularly against the ROC, denounced as being part of the oligarchic decision-making system. With several high-profile cases of alleged corruption, abuses and misconduct against its top officials, along with its perceived association with the government party, the ROC became one of the targets of the anti-government protests in 2017 and 2018.⁵²

Türkiye

World War I brought an end to the long decline of the Ottoman Empire. After the war, a group of officers led by Mustafa Kemal (later – Atatürk) opposed the humiliating terms of the Treaty of Sèvres and led a national struggle that culminated in the founding of the Republic of Türkiye on 29 October 1923. A widespread modernization of the country began.

In terms of secularism, the Republic broke with the Ottoman tradition of government, which had depended on the alliance between the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) and the Ottoman monarchy. On 3 March 1924, the Caliphate was abolished and all *madrasas* (Islamic schools) - closed. To regulate religious matters, on the same date the Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) was established under state control. A year later, all Sufi lodges (*tekke* and *zaviye*) were banned, and the saints' tombs (*türbe*) shut down. The Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic script in 1928; three years later, the same happened with the Ottoman measurement system with the metric one. In 1932, a new law banned the Arabic call to prayer (*eḡan*), and it was replaced by a call in Turkish. In the early 1930s, the Kemalists prohibited the usage of religious titles and the wearing of religious dress. The culmination of secularisation reforms was the constitutional amendment that included secularism as a fundamental characteristic of the Turkish state in 1937.⁵³ During the “single party period”

⁵⁰ Cătălin Ionete, “Majority, Minorities and Religious Pluralism in Romania,” in *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Countries*, eds. Greg Simons and David Westerlund (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 181.

⁵¹ Kiss, “Desecularisation,” 36.

⁵² Gherghina, Mişcoiu, “Faith in a New Party,” 236.

⁵³ Ahmet T. Kuru, *Secularism and Islam in Türkiye: A Century of Contention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

(1923-1950), it was relatively easy to ignore public opinion on religion and the reforms.

Thus, the foundations of a model were laid in which the policy of the Turkish state towards religion can be summarized as: 1) selective exclusion of religion from the public sphere; 2) state control of Islam through religious hierarchies; and 3) establishment of an official Islam at home with secular, nationalist and reformist ideas... to manage reactionary Islamic impulses and to boost state legitimacy and national unity.⁵⁴ Thus, the balance in Ottoman times between and co-existence of 1) scholastic ('orthodox') Islam, 2) folk beliefs and practices, and 3) mystical Islam (*tasavvuf*) has been destroyed by a model of Sunni Islam which takes state-controlled institutions as the only legal frame.⁵⁵

After the Second World War, the trajectories of the three countries diverged. Bulgaria and Romania fell under one-party and secularist socialist rule and moved from a capitalist economy of initial capital accumulation to a planned socialist economy. In Türkiye, the trajectory was exactly the opposite - a transition from a one-party to a multi-party system and from a statist to a more market-oriented economy. This also led to a moderation of secular policies. The Democratic Party, which came to power in 1950, revised some of the strictest secularization policies - a line that has been invariably followed by all other center-right governments in Türkiye since then. They began to make obeisances to some of the Turkish Islamic orders and brotherhoods in exchange for electoral support.

At least from that moment onward, two parallel "narratives", which had little in common, about the relationship between the state and religion exist in Turkish society and academic literature. The first one, supported by the Islamist tradition (parties, Islamic brotherhoods) and its associated media, publishing houses, educational institutions and businesses, describes the broad masses of people devoted to Islam as being oppressed by the Kemalist civil-military bureaucracy (judiciary, army), which imposes secularization policies. To corroborate the thesis, they argue that since the 1970's five Islamist parties from the tradition of the "National View" (Milli Görüş) movement of Necmettin Erbakan have been banned by the Constitutional Court. Also, after the military's intervention in political life in 1997, a number of restrictions have been imposed on religious people – graduates of religious schools are at a disadvantage when it comes to university admissions, and women wearing

⁵⁴ Arolda Elbasani, Murat Somer, "Muslim Secularisms in the European Context," in *Global Secularisms in a Post-Secular Age*, eds. Michael Rectenwald, Rochelle Almeida and George Levine (Berlin, München, Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 171-172, 175, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781614516750-012>.

⁵⁵ Béatrice Hendrich, "Introduction – Beyond State Islam: Religiosity and Spirituality in Contemporary Türkiye," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 13 (2011), <http://ejts.revues.org/4527>.

headscarves cannot be university students or hold a number of positions, including in the army and police.

The second narrative, favored by the secular “camp,” attacks the first, arguing that in the context of the Cold War, Turkish political Islam received state support to counter the influence of left-wing ideologies. The state was encouraging the translation and publication of Arabic Islamic authors in Turkish.⁵⁶ Political scientist Behlül Özkan notes that after losing power in 1950, the Republican People’s Party (CHP), founded by M. K. Atatürk, spent almost the entire next 70 years in opposition, and since the mid-1960s, the CHP has stopped using the term “Kemalist” to describe its policies. According to him, the trajectory of political Islam has been from a gradual penetration of state institutions through power-sharing through participation in it to complete hegemony under the Justice and Development Party (AKP).⁵⁷

In the 1970s, several interrelated events occurred in Türkiye's domestic and foreign policy, which led to the country's further departure from Kemalist principles. First, the sharp rise in oil prices ("oil shock") in 1973 faced Türkiye with a financial and economic crisis, as the country was a major importer of oil and natural gas. This forced the Turkish government to move closer to some of the conservative Arab oil monarchies. Second, a Turkish military intervention in Cyprus created serious tension between Ankara and its Western allies. This forced Türkiye to intensify its efforts to obtain political and diplomatic support from Arab and Muslim countries. Türkiye began to send more workers to Arab countries in order to simultaneously reduce high domestic unemployment and receive foreign exchange earnings from them, but this deepened the conservative beliefs of these workers.

In the 1970s, the works of Gökhan Çetinsaya, one of the founders and ideologists of the extreme nationalist and conservative Aydınlar Ocağı, also gained popularity. His ideas were the basis for the so-called Turkish-Islamic Synthesis (TİS), which was adopted as an official state doctrine after the military coup in 1980. The famous Turkish scholar Kemal Karpat summarized that on the eve of the 1980 coup, Kemalism as a state philosophy no longer had a formal, organized representation among political parties, and only the army

⁵⁶ B. Özkan, “The Cold War-era Origins of Islamism in Türkiye and its Rise to Power,” Hudson Institute, November 5, 2017, <https://www.hudson.org/national-security-defense/the-cold-war-era-origins-of-islamism-in-Türkiye-and-its-rise-to-power>; B. Özkan, “Relations between Türkiye and Syria in the 1980’s and 1990’s: Political Islam, Muslim Brotherhood and Intelligence Wars”, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, Special Issue, 2019.

⁵⁷ B. Özkan, “Türkiye’s Islamists: from Power-Sharing to Political Incumbency,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, no. 1, 73.

A similar argument is made by Murat Somer, “Is Turkish Secularism Antireligious, Reformist, Separationist, Integrationist, or Simply Undemocratic?,” *Journal of Church and State* 55(3), 595, doi:10.1093/jcs/cst052.

remained its defender. Thus, Kemalism turned out to be rooted not so much in the parties, their programs and political life, but in the bureaucracy.⁵⁸

After the military coup in 1980, the TİS was adopted as a state ideology, thus placing Islam within the state ideology. Islam started to be seen in every aspect of life, beginning to create a real alternative to the existing system and to redefine modernisation, especially from the second half of the 1980s onwards. Karpas notes that what the West meant for the Turkish elite had changed:

The cultural and political emulation of the West is no longer the axis of 'modernism'. It is rather economic development, technological advancement and material progress in all its forms... Reshaping of the national identity in the light of the Turk's own cultural and religious ethos has... to relegate the West, without abandoning it, to a secondary position, while giving priority to a new historically rooted socio-cultural Turkish identity.⁵⁹

In parallel, Islamism developed in the Arab world. It received strong impetus after the defeat of the secular Arab regimes in the war against Israel in June 1967. Later, in Egypt, the pro-secular leader Gamal Abdel Nasser was replaced by the more religious Anwar Sadat. In 1979, the Islamic Revolution broke out in Iran. The same year, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan triggered a U.S. and Saudi-backed jihad, and the Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized by a radical Islamist group.

From the 1950's onward, especially after the end of the 1970's and Turgut Özal's neoliberal reforms during the next decade, the mass rural migration to big urban centers had a two-fold effect: this population brought to the metropolises its conservative values and attitudes, while at the same time had access to better education and upward social mobility opportunities. This also had two-fold effects: first, increased visibility and support for the pro-Islamic political and societal forces, and, second, since the level of contact between the so-called "center" and "periphery" increased,⁶⁰ so did the intensity of their conflict.

The fragmentation of the party system in the 1990s led to the country being governed by 11 short-lived coalition governments over a decade. In addition to political crises, the country also experienced several economic crises (1994, 1999, 2000). The failure of the Turkish political system to produce stability and prosperity brought the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to power in November 2002.

⁵⁸ Quoted in S. Laçiner, "Turkish Foreign Policy (1971-1980): Ideologies vs. Realities," *Uluslararası Hukuk ve Politika*, no. 21 (2010): 91-93.

⁵⁹ Meliha Benli Altunışık, Özlem Tür, *Türkiye: Challenges of Continuity and Change* (London: Routledge, 2005), 43.

⁶⁰ On center and periphery: M. Karagyozyov, "Center and periphery blurred: notes on the most popular debate in social sciences on Türkiye," *Obscured Balkans*, vol. 1 (2024): 181-188, DOI <https://doi.org/10.62761/OB2024.MK>.

With respect to secularism, the AKP's record can be divided into two terms. Roughly between 2002 and 2008, the party refrained from policies that would affect secularism. During this era, the AKP was checked and balanced by the EU accession process, a watchful military, a secularist president, liberal-secular intelligentsia and civil society, and a critical and combative media. During and after 2007–2008, after coming out victorious in a number of legal-political confrontations with the military and bureaucracy, the AKP was able to free itself from secular checks and balances. The AKP's room for maneuver was drastically expanded with a new president from its ranks, a subdued military, a gradually packed bureaucracy, a heavily pressured media, weak opposition parties, and a series of electoral victories. The Islamic headscarf ban was practically eliminated for college students and civil servants.⁶¹

The AKP also increased the Islamic content of education in Türkiye, expanding compulsory religious education at state schools and introducing new elective religious courses. In 2017, the theory of evolution was excluded from the curriculum. Having gender-separated Muslim prayer rooms in every newly opened school became mandatory. In 2012, the conditions of completing education in Quran courses and summer Quran courses were abolished. The supervision authority of the Ministry of Education in summer and winter Quran courses and their facilities was terminated, and Diyanet was made the sole authority in these fields. Requirements for eligible teachers were relaxed. This change made nongovernmental institutions (like religious groups) able to establish their own Quran schools with their own teachers. Following the abolishment of the minimum age requirement for Quran courses, a project was launched in 2013 for the provision of "Quran courses for preschoolers." The number of Quran courses in Türkiye, which was 3699 in 2002, reached 18,675 in 2020. The support to non-official religious orders is provided through transferring state land and financial resources for their activities, providing privileges to members of the religious organizations through recruitment to state cadres, and condoning their illegal activities and providing legal protection when necessary.⁶²

In addition to this, Turkish scholar Gökhan Bacık has convincingly demonstrated that significant traditions in Türkiye are essentially anti-secular – some of the country's existing Sufi orders (three influential Naqshbandi brotherhoods (İşıkçılar, İskenderpaşa, and Erenköy), which control media, educational, and business institutions), as well as the religious textbooks of the state-controlled Diyanet. According to him, their content contradicts modern understanding of science and causality because they are still very much influenced by the views of one medieval school of *kalam* (Islamic theology),

⁶¹ Elbasani, Somer, "Muslim Secularisms," 184-185.

⁶² Murat Çokgezen, "Can the State Make You More Religious? Evidence from Turkish Experience," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 61(2), (2022): 357-358.

Ash'arism. For example, if God creates everything at every moment, then causality in nature and human free will is almost nonexistent.⁶³

During the AKP era, both the size and social role of Diyanet expanded. Its share in the overall government budget increased from 0.6% in 2002 to 1.24% in 2017. It became more active in issuing fatwas on a variety of subjects, and in 2016 the first religious kindergarten was opened.⁶⁴ Turkish scholar Ahmet Erdi Öztürk observes that during the AKP era, the Diyanet became a high-profile institution, with a more conservative worldview, which became synchronised with the ruling party's discourses and actions in spheres like gender, social media, and even political questions such as strikes, coup attempt reaction, etc.⁶⁵

The AKP government is increasing the number of middle and high schools that train clerics (*imam-hatip* schools, IHS) and the number of students in them. Overall, there were 434 and 442 IHS in the period 1996-2004, after which it gradually began to rise, reaching 1,729 in the 2024-2025 academic year. Currently, these schools are over 13% of the total number of schools in the country. The number of their graduates also skyrocketed. However, over the past five years, there has been a significant decline in the number of students in *imam-hatip* schools and middle schools. From 1,273,098 in the 2019-2020 academic year, they decreased by 12.33% to 1,134,374 in the 2023-2024 academic year, a drop of 138,724. This decline is related to the lower university placement rates of IHS. Another fact that shows that these schools are not preferred is that the number of students in these lyceums is about 10.3% of the total number of students in this age group, while they represent 13.49% of all schools in the country.⁶⁶ The enrollment in IHS is well below their contingents. It is claimed that many students were forced to enroll in IHS either because the transformation left no other public schooling option in some neighborhoods or because the transformation made secular public schools overcrowded, and in some cases, conversion of regular public schools to IHS is realized despite the opposition of parents.⁶⁷

Notwithstanding the AKP efforts, they failed to produce the desired results. Analyzing data from the World Values Survey between 2002 and 2018,

⁶³ Gokhan Bacik, *Islam and Muslim Resistance to Modernity in Türkiye* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁶⁴ Murat Çokgezen, "Can the State Make You More Religious?," 358.

⁶⁵ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Türkiye's Diyanet under AKP rule: from protector to imposer of state ideology?," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* (2016).

⁶⁶ "Rakamlarla imam hatip okulları," *Ensonhaber.com*, September 20, 2022, <https://www.ensonhaber.com/gundem/imam-hatip-raporu-aciklandi-okul-artiyor-ogrenci-azaliyor>; İmam Hatip, "Okullarındaki Öğrenci Sayısı Düşüyor: 2023-2024 İstatistikleri," *Merhaba İzmir*, October 7, 2024, <https://merhabaizmir.com/2024/10/imam-hatip-okullarindaki-ogrenci-sayisi-dusuyor-2023-2024-istatistikleri/>.

⁶⁷ Çokgezen, "Can the State Make You More Religious?," 357.

Turkish scholar Murat Çokgezen demonstrates that after 17 years of AKP rule, religion is less important for Turkish Muslims, and there is no change in their trust in clergy or in the frequency of men's attendance at religious services.⁶⁸ His findings are consistent with a study of another researcher, Volkan Ertit. On the basis of decreasing praying rates, the facts that extramarital sexual relationships have become prevalent, the belief in virginity is a point of honor for fewer people, people's clothes have become more attractive, including women's headscarves, secular experts rather than religious officials are being sought out for help concerning problems in daily life, homosexuality has become more socially acceptable and visible, and traditional family structures have been shattered during the AKP era, Ertit claims that there is a "failure of Islamization policies in Türkiye".⁶⁹

Another available data also points in that direction. Recently, the number of female students in Turkish universities reached 53.2% - a historical record and surpassed the number of male students.⁷⁰ A 2025 survey by the respected polling company KONDA, comparing the data from 2025 and 2008, shows a marked decline in the number of self-identified religious individuals in Türkiye, alongside a rising tide of atheism and secularism. The percentage of people identifying as "religious" fell from 55% in 2008 to 46% in 2025. Those who define themselves as "atheist or non-believing" increased from 2% to 8% over the same period. Respondents identifying as "believing but not religious" rose slightly from 31% to 34%. Interestingly, the percentage of respondents identifying as "*sofi*"—representing the most devout segment—remained unchanged over 17 years, holding steady at 12%, suggesting a consistent core of religious conservatives amid broader social change. KONDA analysts attribute the general trend to growing individualism, evolving youth values, and a cultural move toward questioning institutional religion.⁷¹

Thus, it can be concluded that although AKP employed vast state resources in raising a more pious generation, it failed to produce an ideological hegemony and a convincing narrative able to inspire the majority of the young people and to achieve a lasting cultural transformation in line with its Islamist-populist vision.

⁶⁸ Çokgezen, "Can the State Make You More Religious?," 365.

⁶⁹ Volkan Ertit, "The Failure of Islamization Policies in Türkiye: A 'Victory' of Secularization Theory?," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2024.2352893>.

⁷⁰ "Üniversitelerde kadın öğrenci oranı yüzde 53,2 ile tarihi seviyede," *Hürriyet*, February 11, 2025, <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/egitim/yuksekokretimde-kadin-sayisi-erkekleri-gecti-43105553>.

⁷¹ "Paraanaliz," <https://www.paraanaliz.com/2025/genel/konda-arastirmasi-turkiyede-dindarlik-geriliyor-inancsizlik-artiyor-g-114977/>.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis, the following conclusions can be made.

First, from a normative perspective, all three countries under consideration are legally secular states, which, however, in practice favor the dominant religion. At the societal level, the path of secularization in all three societies is uneven, as it depends not only on the development of modernization and social processes, but also on the political conjuncture, which in certain situations encourages anti- or pro-religious policies. From the founding of nation-states to the Second World War, the trajectories of the three countries are approximately similar - the state uses the dominant religion as a tool for nation- and state-building, while at the same time carrying out top-down modernization reforms. After the Second World War, Bulgaria and Romania fell under a single-party and secularist socialist rule, which somewhat limited the role of the church, and from a capitalist economy to a planned economy. In Türkiye, the trajectory is exactly the opposite - a transition from a single-party to a multi-party system and from a statist to a market economy. This also leads to the moderation of secular policies in Türkiye and a greater role of religion in society, which led to a secularist-conservative divide.

After the end of the Cold War, on the state-church relations level, Bulgaria and Romania are moving towards their separation. In both countries, the legal framework governing confessions was liberalized, and the ownership of church properties was restituted, but in the Romanian case, this happened about a decade earlier than in Bulgaria.

However, on the level of institutional secularization (internal restructuring of the churches, including the changes in the message and in the values), there are differences. The Romanian Orthodox Church retained significant proximity to the government even during the socialist period, which does not quite apply to its Bulgarian sister, which was more under the control of the socialist rulers. Taking advantage of its proximity to the Romanian authorities, the ROC, at the beginning of the transition, managed to gain positions and privileges that their colleagues from the Bulgarian Orthodox Church could envy. Among them are state support for the construction of temples; the construction of temples in educational institutions; the institutionalization of chaplains in the army, prisons, and hospitals; the study of religious doctrine in schools; and an active political role of the ROC and its priests. In recent years, not only the ROC but religion in general plays an important role in political life too.

In Türkiye, in the last two decades, although the state nominally remains secular, the AKP government imposes certain policies that promote religion. During the AKP era, the Diyanet became a high-profile institution, with a more conservative worldview, which became synchronised with the ruling party's

discourses and actions in spheres like gender, social media, and even political questions such as strikes, coup attempt reaction, etc.

In stark contrast with their counterparts from the north and south, the BOC shows the least willingness to intervene in political and public life, unlike Romanian and Turkish religious institutions. The use of religion for political purposes in Bulgarian political life is also the weakest. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church did not develop a taste for the strong nationalist discourse characteristic of the churches in Greece, Romania and Serbia.

At the individual level, all three societies are significantly secularized, despite the presence of conservative forces in Romanian and Turkish society and the preservation of conservative “pockets” due to geographical, political, socio-economic and cultural realities, as well as desecularization trends in recent years. Data indicate that secularization trends, imposed by life in large cities, education and integration into the labor market, are strengthening, especially among young people. The data indicate a stronger religiosity of Romanians compared to Bulgarians – at levels comparable to Türkiye. Thus, the data for Bulgaria show a discrepancy, while those for Romania confirm the tendency of predominantly Orthodox countries in Eastern and Southeastern Europe to constitute one of the most religious regions in Europe.