

EDITOR'S CHOICE OF THE MONTH

ISSUE 13.1 | APRIL 2025



**CENTRUL PENTRU STUDIUL DEZVOLTĂRII
INTERNAȚIONALE ȘI MIGRAȚIEI**

CENTRE FOR THE STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND MIGRATION

The Position of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) on International Migration and the Romanian Diaspora

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Introduction

Romanian migration has evolved significantly over time, influenced by economic, political, and social factors. This phenomenon has had a major impact on Romania's demographic and economic structures, as well as on the cultural identity of diaspora communities. A thorough analysis of this dynamic is essential to understanding how the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) relates to international migration and contributes to maintaining Romanian identity beyond the country's borders.

Like many other Eastern European countries, Romania faces migration in multiple forms, including brain drain, which affects social, economic, and demographic development. The benefits of free movement, facilitated by globalization and European Union integration, have made labor mobility easier but have also intensified challenges associated with the loss of skilled workforce. While the communist regime from 1945 to 1989 imposed severe restrictions on freedom of movement (Bălan & Olteanu, 2017, p. 32), today, millions of Romanians live and work abroad, forming significant communities in countries such as Italy, Spain, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Romanian migration is characterized by a diversity of motivations and typologies. According to Anghel (2013), there are three main categories:

- Temporary migration – Romanians working seasonally in agriculture or construction in countries like Spain or Italy.
- Permanent migration – Individuals who settle permanently in destination countries, often reuniting with their families.

- Highly skilled migration – Professionals working in fields such as IT, medicine, or engineering in countries like Germany, the United Kingdom, or the United States (Anghel, 2013, p. 56).

In this context, the Romanian Orthodox Church plays a crucial role in maintaining the cohesion of Romanian communities in the diaspora by offering spiritual, social, and cultural support. The Church is not only a religious institution but also a cultural and social actor, contributing both to migrants' integration into host countries and to preserving their ties with their homeland. Roudometof (2015) emphasizes that Orthodox Christianity has a transnational character, influencing relationships between the diaspora and the home state, thus highlighting the importance of the Romanian Orthodox Church as a factor of identity and spiritual cohesion.

The analysis of official speeches and statements will focus on how BOR representatives—including the Patriarch of Romania, metropolitans, and bishops—address the topics of migration and diaspora. Sermons, interviews, and public statements will be examined to identify recurring themes, promoted values, and potential tensions between the official discourse and the realities faced by the diaspora. This method will shed light on how the Romanian Orthodox Church builds its legitimacy and influence among Orthodox communities outside Romania's borders.

Methodology

To address the research question: "How does the Romanian Orthodox Church position itself regarding international migration, and what initiatives does it adopt for the diaspora?", this study will employ two primary methods: document analysis and analysis of speeches and official statements. These methods provide a rigorous and systematic approach to examining the position of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) on international migration, focusing on official and academic sources.

Document analysis will involve examining official BOR publications, such as press releases, reports from the Romanian Patriarchate, pastoral messages addressed to the diaspora, and documents issued by Orthodox Metropolises and Dioceses abroad. Additionally, studies and reports on the Church's role in the diaspora, published by religious organizations and academic institutions, will be included. This method will help identify the institutional strategies of BOR regarding the diaspora, as well as the main initiatives undertaken to support Orthodox communities outside Romania.

The hypothesis of this study is that the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) positions itself as an active and responsible actor in relation to international migration, adopting initiatives aimed at preserving the cultural and religious identity of Romanians in the diaspora. This is achieved through the organization of parishes, cultural centers, and educational projects, while also engaging in efforts to facilitate their integration into host societies.

Theoretical Framework

In the context of migration and the involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), political theology explores the relationship between religion and state authority. Kitromilides (2006) analyzes the role of the Orthodox Church, particularly the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, in preserving Orthodox traditions and influencing politics and society, having a significant impact on the diaspora. In this regard, BOR shapes migration and relations with the diaspora, serving not only a religious function but also a cultural and social one (Kitromilides, 2006, pp. 79–89).

Koellner (2020) emphasizes that religion plays a crucial role in preserving the cultural identity of migrants and that Orthodoxy became a symbol of national unity during the interwar period, closely linked to the "Romanian spirit" (Koellner, 2020, p. 99). The Romanian Orthodox Church

has been perceived as a pillar of spirituality and national identity, reinforcing the connection between religion and nationalism, which influenced public discourse throughout the 20th century and after 1989.

The Romanian Orthodox Church has historically played a central role in maintaining national identity, especially during the interwar period and in response to external domination. According to Kitromilides (2006, pp. 109–110), BOR has been regarded as a symbol of national unity, significantly influencing religious nationalism. In the context of migration, BOR continues to play a crucial role in preserving Romanian identity within the diaspora.

The Official Position of the Romanian Orthodox Church on Migration and the Diaspora

In 2015, Patriarch Daniel addressed a special message to Romanians in the diaspora, emphasizing the importance of the Romanian Orthodox Church's (BOR) mission in supporting them. He highlighted that, although Romanian migrants face challenges and homesickness, BOR provides support through parishes, liturgical and cultural activities designed to maintain a connection with Romanian traditions and identity. The message encouraged family unity and active participation in church life, underlining the importance of spiritual communion and preserving cultural roots despite the difficulties encountered in foreign countries. He stated that "The Church reaches out to all Romanians, but especially to migrants, understanding the difficulties they face, supporting, encouraging, and sustaining them through its constant prayers and concrete pastoral, social-philanthropic, and cultural activities" (Pușcaș, 2015).

In 2018, on the occasion of Romanian Migrants' Day, Patriarch Daniel delivered a message of blessing and spiritual encouragement to Romanians in the diaspora. In this message, he expressed gratitude to the faithful both in Romania and abroad, acknowledging their significant

financial contributions to the completion of the National Cathedral. He also emphasized the continued support of the Romanian Orthodox Church in strengthening Romanian communities abroad through the establishment of parishes and dioceses, the organization of educational, cultural, and social activities, and the promotion of Romanian values. The importance of preserving national unity and the spiritual identity of Romanians abroad was highlighted, with an encouragement to remain connected to the Orthodox faith. In this context, the Patriarch also offered a prayerful message: "We pray to the Merciful God to grant all Romanians living abroad health and salvation, peace and happiness, along with the joy of always preserving their Orthodox faith, national unity, and Romanian spirituality!" (Drăgușin, 2018).

In 2024, on the occasion of the Day of Romanians Everywhere, Patriarch Daniel delivered a message emphasizing the fundamental role of the Church and the family in preserving the Orthodox and national values of Romanians in the diaspora. "The beneficial influence of the Church is received, lived, and transmitted to children primarily through families that are deeply attached to Orthodox values," the Patriarch emphasized, noting that the family is "the primary environment where faith is embraced, practiced, and passed on to future generations" (Patriarch Daniel, 2024). In the context of global migration, the Patriarch highlighted the importance of the Romanian Orthodox Church's mission in supporting Romanian communities abroad, stressing that the Church continually works to strengthen the spiritual and cultural ties of Romanians outside the country. He also emphasized the necessity of educating younger generations in the spirit of love for God, the Church, and the Nation, while also fostering virtue, compassion, and solidarity.

The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) reaffirmed its strong commitment to Romania's membership in the European Union in a recent statement (BOR, 2024), emphasizing the importance of this space of "prosperity and cooperation among the peoples of Europe." This message holds significant relevance not only for Romanian society but also for the

diaspora, considering that Romania's integration into the EU has facilitated the free mobility of Romanian citizens and opened new economic and social opportunities for them. In the context of migration, BOR's support for the European Union is crucial, as a pro-EU stance ensures continued access to essential rights and benefits, including the right to work and live in other member states without major restrictions.

Furthermore, BOR reaffirmed in this statement that Christian values and European democracy are deeply intertwined, and that Romania's EU membership is not merely a political issue but also one of cultural and spiritual identity. Thus, its support for the European Union reflects not only an economic choice but also a commitment to a project of unity and stability that benefits both Romania and its diaspora.

Concrete Initiatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church for the Diaspora

The "Alege Școala!" ("Choose School!") project is an initiative carried out by the World Vision Romania Foundation in partnership with the Romanian Patriarchate, aimed at preventing early school dropout and facilitating access to quality education in rural communities in Romania. This project is co-financed by the European Social Fund through the Human Capital Operational Program 2014-2020 and focuses on combating school abandonment through various educational and support activities for children and parents. The project includes parental education sessions, educational camps for children, psychological and vocational counseling, as well as reintegrating adults into education through the "Second Chance" program.

A key aspect of this initiative is addressing the needs of children left behind due to parental migration, providing them with resources and support to prevent school dropout and ensure continuous, high-quality education. The involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in this

project plays a crucial role in mobilizing communities and raising parental awareness about the importance of education for their children's future.

The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) has recognized the phenomenon of migration and its effects on Romanian communities abroad, taking concrete measures to help preserve their identity. In this regard, Patriarch Daniel emphasized in 2017 the importance of an effective pastoral strategy for Romanians in the diaspora, stating that one of his main objectives upon assuming office was "more efficient pastoral organization, with increased care for Romanians in the diaspora" (Drăgușin, 2018). As a result of this initiative, Romanian parishes abroad have expanded significantly, becoming far more effective in their mission than Romania's diplomatic efforts. This expansion has successfully helped Romanians abroad maintain a strong connection to their religious and cultural traditions.

A central aspect of this pastoral strategy has been the promotion of "unity of faith and nation," a concept that has helped Romanian communities abroad remain culturally and religiously united. However, this vision also presents certain risks, particularly concerning Romanians within the country. Oliver Jens Schmitt, the author of the cited article, highlights that while the "unity of faith and nation" supports cultural identity preservation for Romanians abroad, it may become problematic within Romania, potentially leading to exclusion and ethnic nationalism.

In the absence of a critical reflection on BOR's historical past, this notion of "unity" could encourage a narrow perception of Romanian identity, where ethnicity and religion are seen as inseparable components of national identity. Schmitt warns that applying this vision within Romania could negatively impact social cohesion and interethnic dialogue, particularly given BOR's historical role during past authoritarian regimes (Drăgușin, 2018).

Thus, while BOR has made genuine efforts to assist Romanians in the diaspora, both in preserving religious traditions and integrating them into host societies, the institution must also be aware of the internal

challenges that the concept of "unity" may pose within Romania. Consequently, BOR faces the challenge of finding a balance between fostering cohesion in the diaspora and avoiding an exclusive narrative that could marginalize certain segments of Romanian society.

Conclusions and Limitations

This study has addressed the research question by investigating the involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR) in supporting the Romanian diaspora, highlighting the Church's initiatives aimed at preserving the cultural and religious identity of Romanians abroad. The findings demonstrate that BOR plays a significant role in strengthening ties with the homeland. However, while the concept of "unity of faith and nation" serves to reinforce cohesion among Romanians in the diaspora, it may have controversial implications within the Romanian domestic context. Nevertheless, BOR primarily focuses on spiritual engagement rather than political or nationalistic discourse.

The limitations of this study include restricted access to BOR archives and the difficulty in locating older, relevant official sources. While the research largely relied on publicly available sources, including the official BOR website "basilica.ro", gathering applied data proved challenging due to the large volume of publications associated with BOR.

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