MEDIATIZATION OF PUBLIC CONTROVERSIES
IN THE ROMANIAN ONLINE PRESS:
THE RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASS

DANA MIHAELA RADU[*]

ABSTRACT

The article examines the media construction of public controversies in the Romanian online press, starting from the issue of the presence of religious education in public schools (the Religious education class). We situate this research within a literature that studies the interplay between media, religion and the public sphere and we privilege the mediatization paradigm (Hjarvard, 2013; Lundby, 2014) in investigating this triad in relation to the "new visibility" of religion (Hjelm, 2015). Underpinned by a methodological design including an exploratory thematic content analysis and elements from critical discourse analysis, the study highlights the dynamics of this controversy in two Romanian mainstream newspapers, between 2013 and 2017. The analysis identifies several recurrent thematic categories referring to religion and demonstrates how some of these themes have been recontextualized and employed as argumentation strategies within the controversy. The findings are interpreted from the perspective of the media role in the construction of public space and the "new visibility" of religion in the Romanian media discourse.

Keywords: controversy, media discourse, the "new visibility" of religion, public space.

INTRODUCTION

Global paradigmatic developments, among which the meta-process of mediatization[1] (Hjarvard, 2013; Hepp, 2013; Lundby, 2014), or digitalization

[*] PhD student, Faculty of Journalism and Communication Sciences, University of Bucharest, and Assistant Professor, Faculty of Engineering in Foreign Languages, Technical University of Civil Engineering, Bucharest; email: *dn_miha25@yahoo.com*.
[1] Understood as "long-term structural transformations of media's role in contemporary culture and society", as a process by which ongoing mediations generate long-term transformations of the social, political or cultural environment, and which cannot be reduced to technical media alone (...) as

(Ahlbäch and Dahla, 2013; Campbell, 2010; 2013), alongside phenomena such as individualization and commercialization (Gauthier, 2015), have in late years been coupled in the dedicated literature with intensifying reflection on the *"new visibility" of* religion (Hjelm, 2015; Hoelzl and Ward, 2008), the religious sphere[2] thus becoming the object of ever-flourishing debates, positioning, controversies and discourse. (Granholm, Moberg and Sjö, 2015)

This "new visibility", as structuring change impacting the religious as well as all social spheres (Hjarvard, 2013), can be grasped in today's mediatized world through topics that refer to the presence of religious education and symbols in public life, the legitimate boundaries between state and religion[3], the allegedly religious motivation of worldwide terrorist/violence acts (reinforcing religion as an identity ingredient), the public attention given to diversity, negative effects conflated with religion or the "banalization[4]" of the latter through the encounter between the new digital media and the profusion of *popular culture* forms which nowadays form convictions and identities.

Following international trends, the Romanian media have become, in recent years, true spheres of (contention for the prevalence of) opinions[5] in which more and more controversies develop around religious topics.

Public spaces (i.e. positionings) nowadays are formed around *society issues* as diverse as politics or religion, being essentially structured by arguments articulated in the space of media opinions, a site which, beyond the deliberative possibilities it offers[6], has a major importance particularly from the perspective of the capacity to define the sphere of collective representations and opinion formation in present-day civil societies. (Jacobs and Townsley, 2011: 9)

"there are other factors in operation, not only the media". (Lundby, 2014, 8) Attempting to explain how the media affect the social spheres (and how mediatization is actually generated), authors such as Schulz (2008) (who uses the term "medialization") or Krotz (2014), underline that the media have become actors *of a new type* in the political field of today's societies as they increasingly do *not only* report and comment on what has happened *or serve as arenas*, as in former times, but appear as *actors* with their own interests in shaping politics and thus, must be taken into consideration by the traditional actors, and, in fact, all democratic institutions have to learn to relate in new ways to the media. (Krotz, 2014: 138, the author's emphasis, D.M.R.) Also, this view on mediatization entails that "the contexts of communication", in general, "more and more are media-related" (ibidem: 139), hence labels such as 'mediatized communication', 'mediatized reality' etc. Following mediatization theorists (e.g. ibidem, 2014) who consider media as technology *and* cultural form (emphasis in original), this article understands media change, cultural and social change as a dialectical process with media being "created, formed and influenced by culture and society in an ongoing process, while being vice versa influential for culture and society and its social construction". (ibid., 2014: 145)

    [2] This article understands religion, in a broad sense, as the totality of forms, expressions and manifestations which can be associated to religiosity, institutions and formal leaders, therefore rather as a comprehensive media construct, than as theology or ontology.

    [3] Mainly institutional, but not limited to it.

    [4] Also in Hjarvard's acceptance of the term. (Hjarvard, 2013)

    [5] According to Jacobs and Townsley's terminology (2011).

    [6] By the diversity of access to opinion, the variety of arguments and the possibility to influence the political agenda / policy-making etc.

As a general objective, this article aims to outline the *diversity of topics related to religion* around which the media agenda has been articulated in the past few years, as was manifest in two Romanian mainstream newspapers, *Adevărul* ('*The truth*') and *Evenimentul zilei* ('*Event of the day*'). Thus, the main question to answer is how did the typology of topics relating to religion evolve in the Romanian public media sphere, most notably in the arenas made available by *Adevărul* and *Evenimentul zilei*? More specifically, our research aims to investigate *which* thematic occurrences underpinned the media framing (i.e. were turned into thematization and interpretation resources) of one of the most mediatized national controversies sparked by topics relating to the religious sphere – namely that surrounding religious education (henceforth referred to as the '*Religious education class*' controversy).

Why examine a thematic typology of the religion-related subjects which gained salience with these media actors between 2013–2017, an interval in which several major religious controversies were framed and promoted to the public's attention? Our argument is that such a thematic mapping may not only offer relevant insights into global problematics currently being studied as "the new visibility of religion" (and in which the relationship religion-public space is a key issue), but at the same time, while situating controversies into broader contexts, it can also help to explain *which* particular issues from all that the media selected and constructed as important *were also problematized* (i.e. transferred to a problematization register and used as framing resources) within the controversies.

Thus, we aim to highlight, on the one hand, what *types of topics* constituted the object of intense mediatization by media institutions in an interval marked by several religion-related controversies[7], and, whether the media *thematization strategy* can be correlated with a particular interpretation of these controversies, on the other.

One important mention is that the selected publications – and implicitly the identified thematic typologies – have been monitored at the time of the

---

[7] The timeframe 2013–2017 – and the years that preceded it – is one marked by bitter transnational controversies and contestation over the presence of religion and religious symbols within the public sphere (e.g. the islamic veil, the Christian cross or crucifix, central figures of the main religions etc.): in 2005, the publication by *Jyllands-Posten* of 12 cartoons of Mahommed (the *Danish cartoons* controversy) triggers ample protests within the Muslim world and the killing of approx. 100 persons; subsequently, in 2015, the *Charlie Hebdo* episode brought the violent sanctioning of satirical expressions aimed at religion by the assassination of the cartoonists from the French weekly, who had been publishing cartoons targeting the Prophet (or the Catholic Church, or the Orthodox symbols) for about a decade. Also, it is an interval marked by attacks claimed by particular islamic organizations on people belonging to a different religion than the Muslim one as well as by attacks claimed by the same organizations in the main European metropolises: Paris, Nice, Madrid, London, Brussells etc.).

manifestation (i.e. mediatization) of two[8] of the fiercest controversies in the Romanian media surrounding religion and its public role as part of a larger research on the dynamics of religious controversies (and their 'converting' to public issues[9]); such a panoramic perspective of thematic contents can therefore – besides outlining the visibility frames for the media disputes in question – also serve to indicate which issues have become topics of debates at a particular time in Romania.

The essential function of this thematic typology[10] would then be to specify the prevailing contexts in which these controversies were gradually articulated (*how* they were built), and the configuration of public spheres in relation to the religious problematics subjected to democratic scrutiny by the two media outlets (*who*, *what* and *to what extent)*.

In a nutshell, a survey of the major thematic dominants of the sampled articles is considered relevant for the manner in which the media have contributed to the deliberative character of the discourse.

Having defined the stake of this article in terms of an investigation of *how* the press actually *constructed religion thematically* in the Romanian public space, we go on and advance the hypothesis that there is a visible interest of the media in the sphere of religion, measurable in the ascending trend of frequencies and significance of opinion articles on this topic; also, in the increasingly intense mediatization of religious subjects from year to year, which is paralleled by a diversification of the thematic contents.

According to the data included below, which offer an overview of the particular topics that have been debated in recent years in the Romanian public space, we have a first image regarding the typology of the issues that constituted the dominant of media scrutiny in the analyzed timeframe (what the frequency of these topics was and who were the actors who addressed them); the frequencies, salience and other contextual information (f.i. the moment they were introduced in the public discussion) will contribute to explaining the *dynamics* of these debates (what events functioned as 'triggers' of the controversies, what was the context in which an upward trend, fluctuations, reiteration or, on the contrary, a downward trend, or an abandoning of the subject occurred).

Another important aspect to bear in mind when analyzing the main topics that the two media actors used in order to frame the major controversies mentioned, and the '*Religious education class*' in particular, refers to a distinction that needs to be made between the topics that were *explicitly* linked to religion (the institution of the Church or the sphere of religion in general, i.e. belief or practice) and those

---

[8] i.e. the controversy regarding religious classes taught in public schools and that regarding the erection of the Nation's Salvation Cathedral (which emerged in the media space beginning with 2010 and also thoroughly divided the Romanian society into supporters and opponents of the project).

[9] The dedicated literature considers the controversy to be a first stage in the formation of a public issue. (see for ex. Badouard and Mabi, 2015)

[10] See also Hepp's concept of *thematic framing* which characterizes 'communicative figurations' and "orients communicative action and sense-making". (Hepp, 2014: 88)

subjects that didn't relate to religion/the Church directly, but the way they were problematized created a link with religion and its visibility as an institution or as a socio-cultural practice within the public sphere (e.g. framing responsibility of the religious leaders in various specific cases).[11]

The main hypothesis of the paper is that the dynamics of the thematic typology, besides providing information regarding the *visibility* of the topic of religious education in the analyzed publications and timeframes (i.e. extent of *media coverage*), may also contribute to explaining its *importance* (i.e. a *hierarchy of salience* within the media agenda) in the articulation of the controversy and implicitly, of the public spaces related to this topic.

The paper will focus on the following research questions:

1. Which were the most mediatized topics used as resources to generate visibility frames and hence *orient* the interpretation of controversies in the sampled interval?

2. How was the '*Religious education class'* controversy gradually articulated from the perspective of specific topics used as framing and positioning / interpretation resources?

3. To what extent was the thematization manner indicative of deliberative media practices in the construction of the controversy?

Analitically, we are interested, on the one hand, in the dynamics of these topics over several years (2013–2017), with an emphasis on each 'apogee' of the public debate, while, on the other hand, we situate these dynamics in the context of the '*Religious education class*' controversy and examine how these topics become interpretation resources within the controversy.

The article is structured into several sections: an analytical overview, the corpus and methodology, and finally a section of findings. The first part of this last section will discuss the most frequently mediatized topics that the media used to generate visibility and interpretation frames for the controversies emerging in the interval, while the second part will focus on the development of the '*Religious education class'* controversy and the specific topics the media used for its thematization.

ANALYTICAL OVERVIEW

Recent research on the media space (Dahlgren, 2005; Couldry, 2008; Cefaï and Pasquier, 2003; Coleman and Ross, 2010; Jacobs and Townsley, 2011; Beciu, 2011; Hepp, 2014; Lundby, 2014) and the dynamics of controversies (Badouard and Mabi, 2015; Charaudeau, 2014) converges on the conclusion that public debate

---

[11] As with the media framing on the Bodnarius' cases, or the definition of family in the Constitution etc.

today is organized typically through and by media institutions. Thus, arguments for the elucidation of a controversial problem (formation of public opinion) emerge from interactions between journalists, politicians, 'opinion specialists' (*think tank experts*), public intellectuals, representatives (*insiders*) of competent institutions etc.; while deliberating on several competing views (that come to (in)form public opinion on the respective topic), such actors are struggling to (be the ones to) define the public interest, to "extend a particular vision of the social good and to bend the levers of power and public policy in a way that is consistent with the vision they have identified". (Jacobs and Townsley, 2011: 10)

Starting from the emerging paradigm of mediatization which we attempt to operationalize in an analysis of a media controversy around religion, we take into consideration the various media and communication approaches and concepts useful when attempting to pinpoint "*the relevance of media in (present) processes of social construction*" (Hepp, 2014: 84). Concepts like "polymedia" (Madianou and Miller, 2012, 2013), or "media manifold" (Couldry, 2012) reflect an understanding that it is the *interconnectedness* of all media environments that is crucial for any social construction (and construal) and that is what Hepp insightfully calls *a transmedia perspective.* (Hepp, 2014: 84)

Considering these phenomena, we situate this study within a literature that investigates the ways in which a particular interpretation of certain controversial significances comes to be instituted in the public sphere after long-lived deliberations, contradiction, contesting and negotiation. (Lemieux, 2007; Badouard, Mabi and Monnoyer-Smith, 2016)

In this article we consider public debate and mobilization practices which afford an understanding of the "logics of interaction between different arenas" as a controversy "is built through circulation of arguments between different spaces: it can be initiated in a laboratory, it can be revealed in the press, it can develop in a tribunal" (ibidem: 10). From this perspective, an essential concept is that of *arena* (Wojcik, 2018), introduced in order to emphasize the ways in which publics can become actors within the debate and especially how public debate circulates (and develops) between the different public spaces; understanding this circulation between a diversity of such arenas means apprehending the ways in which each of these arenas operates a reconfiguration of the debate permitting the access (and visibility) of new actors, "proposing new rules of the argument exchange and ensuring the mobilization of new resources within the debate". (Badouard, Mabi and Monnoyer-Smith, 2016: 15) Hence the concept of *arena* is cardinal as it links a series of problematics concerning public space, collective mobilizations, public problems and the more recent one of participatory democracy (Wojcik, 2018[12]). Pertinent to the discussion of how this system of arenas actually works is some authors' approaching participation to the public sphere in terms of hegemonic (i.e.

---

[12] Available at *http://publictionnaire.humanum.fr/notice/arene/.*

which produce dominant significances/interpretations of events) or counter-hegemonic public spaces (which propose alternative interpretations[13]).

Another line of research that we consider, and which is complementary to the first, refers to the relation between mediatized religion and publicization, or the possibility for the former to be subject to contestation, criticism or negociation in the public sphere (Herbert, 2012, 2015; Lövheim and Axner, 2015; Lundby, 2014; Hjelm, 2015). Also relevant in this respect is the research of certain Romanian authors who approach the particularities of the religious sphere in relation to the public sphere. (Voicu, 2007; Carp, 2009, Preda, 2009, Bănică, 2011; Ungureanu, 2011; Naclad, 2013)

This article undertakes a treatment of the most frequently mediatized topics relating to religion which have engendered a lot of controversy in the Romanian public sphere in recent years – which still have a strong hold on the Romanian public opinion, receding and coming back to the fore at particular times, as different events are changing the course of the social dispute. Considering several ongoing national controversies, we focus on that sparked by the presence of religious education in public schools, as we aim to spotlight the typology (and diversity) of the topics used by media as interpretation resources in framing this controversy and the ways in which these topics have been appropriated to generate for or against positioning (as arguments and modes of problematizing controversies in general).

In light of these developments, and grounding our study in the literature on emerging mediatization theory and the understanding of the public sphere (of opinions) as a "transformational sphere" articulated in and by the media (Martín-Barbero in Lundby, 2014: 10), the analysis endeavors to relate mediatization and new visibility theoretical insights[14] with the empirical investigation of specific themes that the media used to construct visibility of a major Romanian controversy with implications reaching far beyond religious positioning, social engagement or democratic participation.

CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

In order to outline the main strands in the media thematization of religion in the debates included by the sampled mainstream newspapers (*Adevărul* and *Evenimentul zilei*) in the announced interval[15], we will start from a few patterns identified as a result of the application of a thematic content analysis on a corpus of selected opinion articles (329 in *Adevărul*, 154 in *Evenimentul*).

---

[13] See also the concept of *subaltern counter-publics*. (Fraser, 1992, 1995)
[14] Regarding the dynamics of controversies and public issue construction.
[15] We also considered the debates broadcast in the same timeframe at the public and private televisions.

For grasping the dynamics of the thematic typology configured around the chosen controversy over religious education we designed a research instrument, i.e. a grid of categories resulting from the thematic contents we identified in the corpus. For the construction of the research tool we considered a series of premises regarding media discourse and the way in which media thematizes events[16], thereby instituting an agenda.

For the purpose of the present discussion of the '*Religious education class*'media controversy, a distinction should be made between the topics the media introduced in *direct* relation to the debate regarding the opportunity and utility of religion as a school subject (to generate explicit associations and hence a type of positioning or interpretation within the controversy), versus those topics that related to the current media agenda i.e. to everyday mediatization of religion (and which gradually turned into pretexts for new debates in the respective controversy). On the one hand, thematic diversity defines the apogee of the controversy, while on the other, the same variety can be identified in the case of background topics which, though not explicitly linked to the subject of the controversy may yet be considered to have influenced – as a *meta-frame* – the way in which the public received the '*Religious education class*' at a particular time.

In short, we need to bear in mind that, on the one hand, the media included topics relating to the international context (current media agenda) or punctual events relevant to the Romanian society, while on the other hand topics that closely related to the subject of the controversy (religion as school discipline) acquired visibility.

The research tool includes categories of topics recurrently mediatized in the analyzed interval. Importantly, we focus chiefly on what we call "explicit reference topics", i.e. content has been coded according to aspects and types of topics the media used *explicitly* in order to generate arguments and positioning within the controversy. Consequently, we are interested in answering the following *specific questions*: which were the main topics which the media used expressly to build the '*Religious education class*' controversy? What background topics have indirectly configured the debate? What are the dynamics associated with these topics, and can we identify emerging topics exclusively in the maximum intensity timeframe of the public dispute, as compared with topics recurring also in periods of so called "inactivity" of the social controversy?

The articles were identified by internet search of key words such as *religion*, *the religious education class*, *ROC*[17], *church*, *religion textbooks* etc., while the criteria for the selection of the newspapers will be discussed later on.

A first delineation of the investigation area involved scrutinizing the profile of the newspaper in which the respective thematic occurrences have been identified. The identity of each media outlet is considered relevant in the context of

---

[16] Increasingly relying more on *commentary*, and not facts, as it had been in the past.
[17] Romanian Orthodox Church.

the Romanian media landscape: from the viewpoint of their content, though both newspapers are mainstream / generalist and have been subject to successive reconfigurations since the '90s, *Adevărul* is what might be called a "quality" newspaper, whereas *Evenimentul zilei* also includes sensationalist contents, which make it a "semi-quality" and more popular daily. From the perspective of their online profiles – which are the focus of our analysis – the two newspapers differ significantly: alongside (or parallel to) its traditional journalistic area, *Adevărul* also includes the rubric of *Adevărul blogs*, (similar to *op-eds*[18] in that they represent opinions not necessarily affiliated to the respective media institution or unaffiliated to the newspaper's editorial policy), which enable diversity as regards the access to opinion, extremely important to any democracy. This online media device, which constitutes one of *Adevărul*'s particularities, and a maximization of its deliberative potential, facilitating communication or dialogue between voices (e.g. blogs often represent a positioning with respect to an article published by the paper, either in the traditional rubrics, or a direct response to a different blog article), has a corresponding section in *Evenimentul zilei*, where, starting from 2013, the opinion rubric (*EVZ SENATE*, or *Voices of the Right*), assumed as a 'public debate pole' becomes more frequent as well as of a greater impact as compared to previous formulas, judging by the number of comments or positions expressed in relation to included articles.

For the purposes of this research, the empirical area in the case of *Adevărul* mainly includes blog-type articles, analyses, comments or opinions expressed in *Adevărul Blogs or Adevărul Live* debates, while from *Evenimentul* we sampled opinion articles published in rubrics such as *EVZ Opinions, EVZ SENATE* or *Voices of the Right*.

The results of the content analysis will be interpreted by taking into account particular conditions regarding the formation of controversies such as media formats, actors and events. For instance, the typology of topics will be discussed in relation to the actors and contexts which acquired media visibility and the dynamics of events likely to reframe the controversies (ex. re-formulation of positions) which is the expression of a social construction of the debate.

THEMATIC PATTERNS IN THE MEDIATIZATION OF PUBLIC CONTROVERSIES

The sampled thematic typology has been surveyed as part of a larger research on the development of two major national controversies around topics involving religion and spanning several years[19]. Thus, the topics included here illustrate the occurrences most frequently debated in the analyzed interval and which have been

---

[18] See Jacobs and Townsley, 2011.
[19] On the Religion course in public school curricula and the construction of the Cathedral, respectively.

explicitly or indirectly coupled at a particular time with the two ongoing debates, or used merely as background topics with a more or less visible reference to the controversy. Although there have been additional issues mediatized in the same timeframe, those failing to garner significant frequencies (i.e. which have been discussed in lesser proportion) f.i. *religion and lifestyle*, *Saints, miracles, feast days and superstition* etc., have not been included in the corpus and graphic representation for this research. By discussing the *dynamics of these debate topics*, we do not aim to undertake a comparison between the two newspapers or their different manner in constructing a controversy but we correlate these most prominent thematic strands they approached with certain specificities of the media discourse and the mediatization and articulation of public issues.

Furthermore, our objective is not the history of the controversies themselves, but reconstituting the media discourse on public issues stemming from religious debates through the main thematic patterns underpinning these controversies. The topics discussed as well as the pro and against positionings are illustrations of what media *chooses to make visible*, so topics that were less visible or absent altogether are indicative of media tendencies, interests and orientations. The below overview spotlights the topics that maintained all through the selected interval (and some are still enjoying media attention at present[20]):
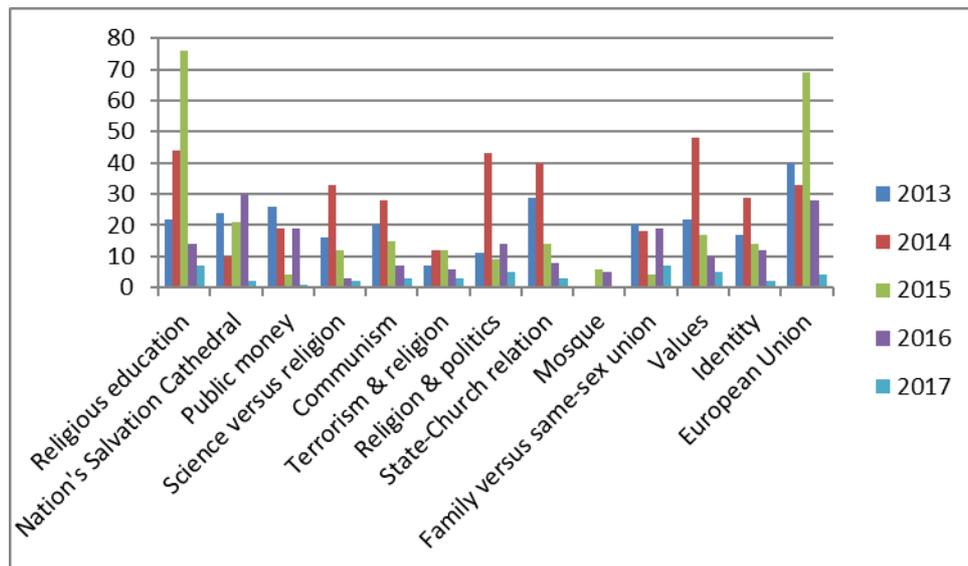

Figure 1 – Most frequent debate topics in *Adevărul* between 2013 and 2017.

---

[20] For instance, the ample debates and campaigns (to gain the Parliament's ratification) in 2016 and 2017 on the topic of the definition of family as the union between a man and a woman to be clearly stated in the fundamental law have resulted in the 2018 referendum on family.
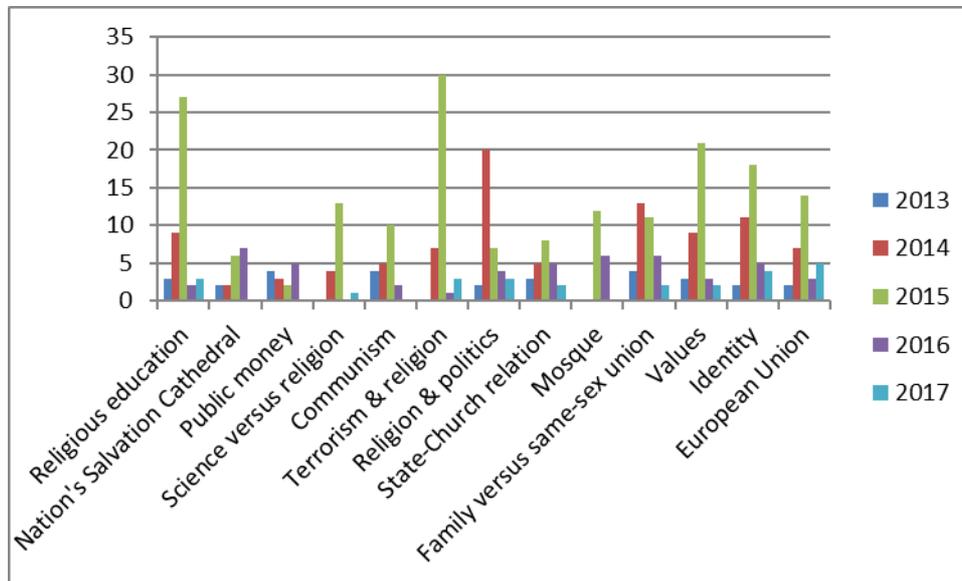
Figure 2 – Most frequent debate topics in *Evenimentul zilei* between 2013 and 2017.

We chose to begin this analysis particularly with the year 2013 as this is a year marking a radical change as concerns the configuration or content of the cited newspapers (i.e. the ratio of opinions to news), the first in a row of many years when trends towards diversification become manifest. In *Adevărul*, where these developments are more obvious, there is a proliferation of blog-type and debate articles (*Adevărul Live*; Blogurile *adevarul.ro* etc.), which almost replace news completely (e.g. 99 opinions vs. 20 news on topics related to religion for the entire year). *Evenimentul zilei* included significantly less opinion articles, but this daily also witnesses a transition to a new stage towards a 'culture of debate', through the introduction of a new rubric destined to opinions, entitled "Vocile Dreptei" ("Voices of the Right") and defined as a "new opinion and debate pole on this platform"[21]. In short, both publications tend to include increasingly diversified topics of debate, rubrics, events and actors with diverse positions on these topics), the difference between the two lying in the more massive amount of opinions on religion included in *Adevărul*.

Thus, a first result regarding the analyzed thematic typology refers to the outstanding *diversity* of topics mediatized, explicable by the lengthy timeframe considered, but also by the number of events, actors and issues, the varied formats

---

[21] "With famous authors who will explain, promote and debate a set of ideas which could underpin new perspectives for Romania's future. Opinions from "*Voices of the Right*" are intended to give the general public a clear overview of the present, a better understanding of the past and a perspective to the future" (as stated in the online pages of *Evenimentul zilei* from 2013, www.evz.ro).

and rubrics the media made available. Triggered by macro international events, some topics generated debates on religion in the national public (media) space in relation to multiple aspects, not only to those causing the controversy. A case in point is the social dispute on the topic of *family* versus *homosexuality* which was engendered by international developments, (i.e. the legalization of gay civil partnerships), but also by local events in the Romanian society (a political event such as the reviewing of the Constitution). Overhanging the controversy surrounding the definition of family was the question of the legitimacy of reviewing the Constitution in either of the two directions: one requested by the secular organizations promoting lay values (laicism), modern and European views, the clear separation between State and the Church – and in this context the boundaries between the two actors were frequently brought into discussion[22] from the decision-making perspective – and the other, requested by the Christian majority, and endorsed by the Church, promoting the traditional, natural family made of a man and a woman.

The mediatized subject stirring up controversy is not always triggered by external events, but it may often be a pretext for the media to approach other urgent matters. Thus, a topic like that of *family* gathers the highest number of occurrences in 2013, almost as much the following year, decreases to an insignificant value in 2015 (rather it is replaced by the debate on religious education) comes back to the same prominence in 2016 and is on the increase again in 2017[23]. The initiative by a religious actor to explicitly include in the text of the Constitution that family is made up of a man and a woman generated heated public contention on the laicity of the state and its separation from the Church, an argument of certain NGOs that cropped up in all the controversies surrounding religious issues. Some NGOs formed the *Coalition for Family* whose mobilization between 2015–2016 resulted in the gathering of over 3 million signatures and the right to a referendum that occurred in 2018.[24] In the context of the ratification by the Romanian Parliament of the civil partnership[25] (2015), the polemic on same sex marriages and their legitimacy resurfaced in the Romanian media sphere for a third time in the analyzed timeframe.

---

[22] In April 2013 *Adevărul* launched a debate on the topic of homosexuality (where they belonged in the Romanian society), to which the Patriarchy reacted by press communications (on what they considered to be the real stake of the debate: not the possibility of debating the theme, but its normativity).

[23] It is a topic that still gives rise to much dissension in 2018, a time set for a democratic test as regards this issue, in the form of the previously mentioned referendum. The events that have given rise to such (media and) public polarization included requests from a gay couple (a Romanian and an American) that the Romanian state acknowledge their marriage performed in a European country, and were followed by the initiative of the Archbishopry of Moldova and Bucovina to explicitly include in the text of the Constitution, among other things, that family is made up of a man and a woman.

[24] Due to high levels of absenteeism, the referendum on family did not meet the threshold needed for validation.

[25] This already being a reality in many European countries and a topic intensely debated since 2013.

In spite of an apparently remarkable diversity, equivalent to concentration, rather than dispersion, the subject that has generated the highest number of debates in the analyzed interval outnumbering all others in terms of frequencies and maintaining to the present day is that of the presence of religious education in public schools. Although it had not been the most debated topic in 2013, when media / public opinion was more concerned with the State-Church relationship, the public funds allotted to the religious denominations or the correct ways to relate to European Union standards, practices and recommendations, the *'Religious education class'* became so between 2014 and 2015. The debate reached an apogee in 2015 when Romania witnessed a campaign similar to a referendum in which, following the decision of the Romanian Constitutional Court from 12 November 2014 (which came after several years[26] of NGO lobbying), it was officially decided that the enrollment procedure for the religion course be changed: those who wanted to participate were to submit a request, as opposed to previous practice, when everyone was included by default and only those who explicitly declined to attend submitted requests in that direction.

It is important to note that in the beginning of the interval (2013), we have maximum values[27] for several other topics that either emerged at this point (as was the case with the polemics on the legitimate definition of family) or marked an upsurge due to macro or micro contexts after having been under public scrutiny for some years (e.g. the construction of the Cathedral, with the related subject of state funding the religious denominations, the topic of communism, that of EU reference, values and identity – religious, national, moral, European).

As the data included in the tables clearly shows, the media granted visibility at different stages to *all* the identified themes. The most salient debate topics which our statistics illustrate included the *European Union* reference, the *State-Church relation* and *Public funding* in 2013; the *'Religious education class'*, the relationship between *politics and religion*, *Values* and *the EU* benchmark in 2014; again the *'Religious education class'*, with the highest frequencies in the entire interval (76), followed by the *European Union*, the *Cathedral* and *Values* in 2015; the *Cathedral*, the *European Union*, *Public funding* and *Values* in 2016; and again the *'Religious education class'* and *Family* in 2017. The answer to why some of these debate topics were more visible (i.e. mediatized) and at what particular time (e.g. the *'Religious education class'* was largely debated after the decision of the Romanian Constitutional Court in November 2014 and even more so during the campaign in March 2015, though it had already been subject of debates organized by the civil society[28] in June 2014) is undoubtedly connected to a dynamic of

---

[26] Between 2005–2006 and 2014.

[27] For the overall timeframe.

[28] See the debate launched by the Social Dialogue Group (SDG) in June 2014 following the conclusion of a protocol between the Ministry of Education and the Patriarchy, which was mediatised as secret until its publication.

events surfacing in the public and media space. A correlation worth mentioning would be that of the media introduction of the *Science versus religion* topic following several secular-humanist associations'/NGOs' campaigns against teaching religion in schools[29]. As a result, the '*reason' versus 'blind belief'* (and often enough, even superstition)' frame was mediatized intensely enough at every key interval during the '*Religious education class'* controversy and came to be instituted as a *rationality meta-frame* entailing the *preeminence of science over religion* thereby thematizing the debate and 'orienting' its interpretation regarding the prevailing of one significance over another. Other correlations that the media actors explicitly or indirectly made manifest refer to the *State-Church relation*, the Romanians' trust in the institution of the Church or the behavior of the clergy, the priests' interference in politics as well as the legitimate boundaries between the two actors' actions, the allegedly suspect relation between the State funding the Church and (the Church 'returning') political votes, and which were all topics subsumed under the *State and Church* or *religion and politics* categories which heavily and almost constantly contributed to the thematization of the controversies mentioned.

As the aim of this article is not only to map the most mediatized topics underlying the most compelling religious controversies that have polarized the Romanian society in late years, but, to focus on how this mediatization mode was used to thematize a particular controversy, we move on to showing which of these topics were used explicitly, indirectly or only as background topics in framing the debate on religious education.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE *RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CLASS* CONTROVERSY

In this section we discuss in more detail the manner in which media articulated the '*Religious education class'* as a controversial topic and we highlight the dominant topics associated to a more or less explicit extent to a particular interpretation of this social dispute.

Given the space limitations, we have chosen to exemplify the timeframe when the controversy was mediatized (i.e. publicized) most to show the ways in which these topics came to constitute main modes of argumentation of a controversy. We therefore focus on its apogee when these topics gathered the

---

[29] See ASUR's (Romanian Secular-Humanist Association or RSHA) campaigns from *Light up the blaze of science* (February 2010), to promote critical thinking and scientific education, Darwin's and evolutionists' Day; to *Stop religious indoctrination in schools* (2013) aimed at "informing parents and pupils on the status of religion as discipline", rehashed in 2014 and at the beginning of every school year as well as during the climactic interval of the *Religious education class* controversy. The action was to be followed by another campaign entitled *We want hospitals, not cathedrals!* – intended as a protest against the State subsidizing the Church (according to the Association's website, *www.asur.ro*).

highest number of frequencies, namely February–March 2015[30], to illustrate the particular significances used at the time to generate interpretations and definitions of the public good as compared to other stages of the controversy.

Mediatization equals visibility but what exactly triggers the staging of this visibility particularly at this time and to such an arresting extent? Especially since the '*Religious education class*' topic had been present in the media for many years[31] but had not reached such climactic intensity of polarization before, nor had it overtopped other parallel debates as was the case with the interval we are analyzing. To answer the question above we should take into account that the upsurging frequencies registered in *Adevărul* reflect a series of developments that cover precisely the time frame that we have chosen to examine (2013–2017). It is a time when the media took up the secular civil society's (NGOs') campaigns referring to religious education. But, at least in the initial stages of the controversy, while both the analyzed newspapers included the campaigns and positions of these secular organizations, they did not mediatize the positions of the NGOs upholding the presence of religious symbols in schools, for instance.[32] Again, visibility means presence.

Yet, to understand how the '*Religious education class*' (also known to Romanians as '*Religion-in-schools*') controversy was framed and delivered to the public during the last few years (2013–2017) we now focus on the plethora of topics acquiring visibility in the same period and which were used explicitly, indirectly or only as background topics (coextensive thematic contents) to generate a particular argument in the controversy.

> a. *MEDIATIZATION VIA THEMATIC MAPPING. EXPLICIT AND INDIRECT TOPICS*

Under the label "explicit frames" we included those opinion pieces expressly referring to the '*Religious education class*', or the presence of religious education in general in the national or international systems, while indirect ones refer to occurrences that despite approaching a different topic eventually turn to or hint at the object of the controversy (often without naming it straightforwardly).

---

[30] Also the end of 2014.

[31] The roots of this controversy can be traced back in 2005–2006, when the controversial issue of the presence of religious symbols in schools strongly divided public opinion.

[32] The *Coalition for Respecting Religious Sentiment* (founded in 2006) was never referred to in any stage of the mediatization of the '*Religious education class*'controversy, though associations established in the same period in support of the evacuation of religious symbols from schools and mainly against public expressions of religion were granted extensive media space and visibility throughout the controversy (ex. the *Association for the Freedom of Conscience*, also founded in the same period and chaired by the same person who a few years later [2014] was to obtain the Romanian Constitutional Court's decision regarding the unconstitutionality of the enrollment procedure for Religion classes).

First, we should remark that in the beginning of the interval (2013) the thematization is done mainly through indirect and background reference (i.e. the topics used do not refer directly to the '*Religious education class*', but to either an aspect that can be coupled with the controversy or to an apparently unconnected subject which – through its synchronicity with a particular stage of the controversy – may be interpreted as being significantly related with it or as carrying a certain significance that the media do not make explicit (right away). Starting with 2014 (and 2015) the topics used in reference to the '*Religious education class*' controversy relate to it predominantly in a direct or explicit manner, but that is not to say that the background topics are less frequent or diverse. In 2016 and 2017 the topics referring to the controversy in an explicit fashion also prevail over the indirect ones, though they decrease substantially, as the controversy gradually fades or is replaced by that surrounding the *Cathedral*.

Coming back to the explicit topics relating to the public dispute over religious education, these were fairly significant in 2014 and included topics such as the suitability of teaching religion in a context of growingly lay (secular) modernity, human rights and liberties (democracy), European practices and recommendations (all subsumed under the thematic category of the EU reference), and from this perspective, the '*Religious education class*' will be framed this year as a "threat"[33] to progress, diversity and multiculturalism, to pluralism and the new realities the Romanian society allegedly fails to adapt to due to this 'relic of the past.[34]' In 2014, in the context of the news about a runaway adolescent from a famous highschool in Bucharest seeking shelter from the world in a remote monastery, the *Religious education class* had been – directly and indirectly – integrated in a discussion about the youth's problems and particularly the lack of values which was deemed a problem of the entire Romanian society. The case was mediatized as another example (along other famous negatives) of what religious education 'does' to the young generation and therefore used as an argument against its presence among school subjects. Also, in the same context, the *Religion class* was framed from the State–Church relationship as one of the most profound responsibility that the Church has with respect to society. It is from this period also that the *science / reason* versus *religion* dichotomy dates, with the implication liberalism / democracy versus religious (antidemocratic / illiberal) values.

Among the relevant and most intensely mediatized thematic categories, an occurrence equally prominent and intriguing, is that of the *Science* versus *religion* binomial which emerged in 2013 and maintained all through to 2017 (a maximum value being registered in 2014, when the social dispute on the topic of the presence

---

[33] The term belongs to one of *Adevarul*'s bloggers, Paul Stan ("*The danger of teaching religion in schools!*", *Adevărul*, 14 May 2014). See also the "*Adevărul Live debate about religion in schools and the danger of Religarchy*",13 June 2014, by *Adevărul* editorial office.
[34] The term "ancient practice/law of the land" [in Romanian: "cutumă"] repeatedly surfaces in the publicized debate as well as in some of the bloggers' discourses.

of religion in public schools reaches a culminating point). Its emergence is mainly connected with those associations' (NGOs') agendas as promotors of the preeminence of reason (or free thinking) over religion which they equate with the irrational and superstition; the fact of media introducing this topic at the very time of particular NGOs'[35] campaigning against public religion is particularly relevant. What particularly calls attention is that this thematic category or '*science* versus *religion*' dichotomy has been included at different tiers – and thus invested with a double function – in the controversy: on the one hand, it was used directly / explicitly by contestants[36] of religion's presence in schools (to contend that religion is the opposite of everything denoting enlightenment, progress, civilization etc.) and supporters (to argue for the complementariness and benefits of the collaboration between the two); on the other hand, the '*science versus religion*' or the *rationality (meta)frame* was used as an almost constant background topic from 2013 to 2015, and especially during the apogee of the controversy (the series of articles on the persecution of scientists f.i. Bruno, Copernic or Galilei by the Church and the "*guilty of free thinking*" frame are a case in point).

A topic that functioned in a similar way in this culminating controversy interval was that of *communism*, which was, on the one hand, used in direct reference to the '*Religious education class*' as an argument to either relate the teaching of religion to coercive communist practices (therefore as an argument against, used by contestants), or as an argument in favor of maintaining religion in schools (assumed by supporters), as a restitution of a freedom once denied to Romanians; on the other hand, the issue of *communism* was extensively used as a background topic in different stages of the controversy as an almost constant frame juxtaposing (or superposing) a present of democracy and freedom (religious also) to a past of deprivation and coercion, or, in rarer cases, as a term of analogy with present-day "dictatorships" of any kind – whether in the form of European Union decisions / recommendations or of globalizing policies in general.

Another topic that was also identifiable as a pervasive argument in the '*Religious education class*' controversy (again, directly and indirectly, and upholding mainly antagonists' views) and a constant point of contention[37] was that of the *politics – religion* relationship, also amply represented through background thematization. The electoral campaigns, both for representation in the European Parliament and the national presidential elections provided contexts in which

---

[35] RSHA/ASUR (The Romanian Secular-Humanist Association).

[36] A letter sent by RSHA (ASUR) to the Ministry of Education requesting the engagement of the civil society in assessing the content of the textbooks of religion used the terms "discriminating and anti-scientific" to describe these contents.

[37] The interaction between politics and religion has a long history of contention, this being a most debated aspect of every controversy surrounding religion: the collaboration of priests with political structures during communism, as well as present interference of the church leaders in political affairs etc.

religion was frequently related to politics and the political actors/actions, the legitimacy of its sphere of action (State-Church relationship between neutrality and imposition of one's authority over the other), the (in)congruity between the politicians' and decision makers' views on one hand and religious values or a particular vision of democracy which is inclusive – and *not* exclusive – of religion, on the other etc. Examples of how different bloggers define the '*Religious education class*' as an instance of "political-religious missionarying"[38] and of a massive influence of the Church over the political sphere and the state (and actually the public space) emerge especially in the November 2014–March 2015 interval. As regards the indirect thematization of the controversy by reference to the *politics-religion* association, among the abounding examples of how different actors used this overarching theme to underpin their argumentation *against* the cooperation between the two spheres and ultimately against the presence of the *Religious education class* itself in the national education system, here is an instance where a blogger argues against the politicians close rapport with the Church's representatives dating from the 90s and resulting in the Church's "pre-emption rights" in the case of present-day education also.[39]

A less frequent, but very significant, occurrence in this interval (and particularly in 2014 and 2015, i.e. spanning the very peak of the controversy), only occasionally as a direct association, but preponderantly as background/coextensive reference, was the topic of (Islamic) terrorism or fundamentalism which the two media conflated with the '*Religious education class*' debate.[40]

A most representative timeframe for a picture of the *direct* associations and hence interpretations of the '*Religious education class*' public dispute was that between February–March 2015, though the entire year appears to be representative of such explicit means of thematizing and thus constructing the visibility of this controversy. Judging by the frequency of occurrence, the dominant thematic categories coupled at the time of maximum intensity of deliberations with the subject of teaching religion in national schools included the relationship *religion-European Union* (*the EU reference*) as the leading category, followed by that of *Values*, *Communism*, the *State-Church relation*, *Identity*, *Science versus religion* and *Terrorism*.

---

[38] Ex. the article "*Religion, a plural*", *Adevărul*, 14 November 2014, by Eugen Ciurtin or the articles "*The electoral campaign of the Church – a prime minister nomination*", *Adevărul*, 7 March 2015, by Teodor Răileanu, or "*VOICES OF THE RIGHT. Arguments against the Religion class. Why trust in the Head of the Anticorruption National Authority exceeds that in the Patriarch and why bad things happen to children*?", *Evenimentul zilei*, 6 March 2015, by Ioan Angelin.

[39] See "*The stormy concubinage between politician and hierarch*", *Adevărul*, 24 March 2015, by Mircea Kivu.

[40] For a direct reference to fundamentalists and the way beheadings reflect the inflexibility of religious beliefs see articles "*For and against Religion in schools on adevarul.ro. How the readers commented*", *Adevărul*, 23 October 2014, by Oana Crăciun, or the article "*How to let our children beheaded at school*", *Evenimentul zilei*, 23 March 2015, by Gabriel Diaconu and Mihnea-Petru Pârvu.

As the topic with the highest number of mentions in relation to the polemics on religious education, emerging in recent years but gaining remarkable prominence beginning with 2013, the *religion-European Union* thematic category could be considered a macrocategory subsuming several others covering the spectrum of democracy. The EU topic was used as a symbol of democracy denoting everything connected to this liberty sphere from freedom of expression, human rights, constitutional options and free will and it was debated either from the viewpoint of its authority, for instance, the recommendations applicable to religion, that of the values promoted[41] or of religious diplomacy and positioning with respect to interdenominational clashes.[42]

What were the developments and contexts underpinning these visibility degrees and justifying these figures? One such development is the number of debates organized in the public sphere by the intellectual elite[43] (which the media took up and expanded) and this is how the visibility of topics such as the legitimate boundaries between *State and religion* or *Values* could be explained (religious education being largely thematized as a confrontation between values, specifically between traditional versus democratic / European ones).

The *religion-politics* relationship (again framed in tight relation with the laicity of the State and the – contested – legitimacy of the State-Church relationship) was a topic emerging as a result of internal events such as the presidential elections[44] or those for representation in the European Parliament; but it was used by the media in 2015 to frame the controversy of the '*Religious education class*' as at this time of heated controversy on religious education, the religion-politics relation was defined so as to uphold different (media) positionings: religion was mainly defined as an exponent of tradition/conservatism as opposed to politics often identified with modernity, progress and the EU, or more commonly, the definition / framing was done in reference to two compelling referentials – dictatorship and democracy[45] – which acquired meaning depending on the adherence to one of the parties involved in the controversy; thus, for secular-humanists 'dictatorship' equaled religion and the 'coercion' appertaining to its

---

[41] See the article "*A new religion: Europeanism*", *Adevărul*, 24 April 2013, by Eugen Tănăsescu.

[42] E.g. "*The enslavement of European prejudice against other civilizations*", *Adevărul*, 26 May 2013, by Ion Cristoiu.

[43] E.g., the debate initiated by SDG (Social Dialogue Group) in June 2014 following the bitter controversy dividing the Romanian public space after the publication of a protocol between the Ministry of Education and the Religious Denominations considered to have been secret until media and civil society took the matter in their hands; the SDG debate was of paramount importance as it got together representatives of almost all social categories involved in the controversy; the arguments expounded can be accessed at http://revista22online.ro/43667/religia-n-spaiul-public-i-n-nvmntul-scolar.html.

[44] 2014 was a year with national elections, when Klaus Iohannis, a Lutheran Church member, outscored the Orthodox Victor Ponta and became the president of Romania.

[45] E.g., the article "*Boycotting by vote*", *Adevărul*, 23 May 2014, by Eugen Tănăsescu.

presence in the school curricula, and 'democracy' meant doing away with religion and replacing it by free thought/option. On the other hand, the religious party (discursively) defined dictatorship as religious censorship or the sterilization of public life from religion (which accompanied other historical periods as well), while democracy was, in their view, defined as the right to religion in the public sphere, alongside all other forms of expression. From this perspective (and given the constant deliberations on the State-Church prerogatives and limits), the '*Religious education class*' controversy has largely been framed as an issue of control/power over the public space, symbolic and otherwise.

b.   *FROM PERIPHERY TO THE CENTRE OF THE DEBATE. BACKGROUND TOPICS*

The increased diversity of these years we are analyzing illustrates the extent to which the media approaches almost every aspect implied by the presence of religion in society, but these are set largely as the background for the main debate: from religiosity and practices of Orthodox Romanians, a recurrent theme in the analyzed interval[46], the state of the Romanian society (in the context of the relation between State and Church, most frequently defined as the latter's interference in the former's affairs), political decisions marked by lack of responsibility, uncritical acceptance of EU decisions etc. The notions of rights, freedom and responsibilities are also very common debate issues of this period.[47]

An intensely debated background category in 2014, *Same-sex unions* was implicitly linked to education (both religious and sexual) (again, the implication is that ideas and practices once appertaining to communism – coercion, censorship – are now paralleled by "modernisms"). Also, a prominent topic that started as a background one (via events such as the spring elections for European Parliament and the national presidential elections) was that of the *politics-religion* topic that virtually spanned the "*Religious education class*" controversy as a direct or indirect link in its periods of "activity", or as a significant background in its period of so called "inactivity".

As a background topic the thematic category *Religion and communism* also reached conspicuous values in the interval we are discussing, a possible explanation referring to the many thematic strands it has been linked to: "communism" was used to furnish a countermodel for present day democracy in most the electoral and religion-related debates, and religion was in turn linked to communist dictatorship (by the secular actors) and the conservative stumbling

---

[46] E.g. the article "*Pseudofaith*", *Adevărul*, 23 April 2014, by Paul Stan; or the article "*Religiosity. Essential, complex and hard to parallel*", *Adevărul*, 16 May 2014, by Eugen Tănăsescu.

[47] E.g. the article "*On the freedom of thinking and expression*", *Adevărul*, 18 Feb. 2014, by Deutsche Welle, also the article "*The right to study religion or not*", *Adevărul*, 14 Nov. 2014, by Eugen Tănăsescu; or the article "*Freedom, a two-edged sword*", *Adevărul*, 10 Dec. 2014, by Eugen Tănăsescu).

block in the way of European democratization, that while the supporters equated communism with secularism. The topic of communism is one that generates ample debate, either in relation with the censorship of religious education and of religion in general during communism[48], the minimization of the Church's role in the communist society with the priests as the most persecuted social category during communism or the political prisoners who became martyrs of the Communist prisons and epitomes of the resistance of faith in the era of atheism, or in relation with the Church seen as an ultimate obstacle to total subjugation by Communist totalitarianism.

National identity was also very extensively approached in this controversial interval, not only indirectly, as an argument in support of keeping religious education in schools equated with the legacy handed down to Romanians by their ancestors. In this context, religion (and the Church) has been identified with the nation / national identity, history / the glorious past, resistance (especially during communism), culture and the people. Symmetrically, the evacuation of religion from schools was conflated with the 'disinheritance' and 'denationalization' of the Romanian people. Thus, the thematic categories of *Identity* and *Values* were commonly used in alliance and chiefly occurred in the supporters' argumentation.

An all-encompassing category that virtually paralleled the '*Religious education class*' debate (at some point even overshadowing it) ever since the decision of the Romanian Constitutional Court from November 2014[49] which triggered an outbreak of public disputes and an avalanche of for and against positionings[50] was the topic of the relationship between *religion and politics*. In the context of national presidential elections, since the debate on the politics-religion came before but also merged with the '*Religious education class*' controversy, the former also functioned as a pretext and a way to enhance the controversy, producing new arguments regarding the problematic issues in the relation between the two actors (e.g. the domination of the political by the Church in terms of decision-making, the Church supplying the political with the great numbers it needs to accede or remain in power, the issues of the past relationship between the Church and the structures of the communist state and most importantly, the legitimacy of their partnership). Thus, once more, the background thematization, be it the *politics-religion partnership*, or stemming from it, the topic of *State-Church/religion*, functions to integrate the debate on religious education into a

---

[48] E.g. the article "*Macovei's ideal: a nation with no religion, no past, no identity*", 25 Sept. 2014, by Bogdan Diaconu: "Monica Macovei wants to save Romanian children from the 'people's opiate', just as communism did".

[49] As a result of a series of actions by a teacher in Buzău who sued his daughter's teachers of religion for having enrolled her (i.e. expected her to participate) for the course without a prior consent and obtained the verdict of unconstitutionality and the change of the enrollment procedure for Religious education classes.

[50] F.i. articles "*Managing the religion class*", *Adevărul*, 9 December 2014, by Eugen Ciurtin, or "*Religion, school and fair judgement*", *Adevărul*, 29 December 2014, by Andrei Pleşu etc.

larger discussion on democracy and the attributes of a democratic society (forever aspiring to the European democracy model). The abounding background framings of terrorism as well as communism dictatorship uphold the same argumentation regarding (absolute) freedom / democracy, built on the already mentioned dichotomies: communism versus the EU / liberalism, terrorism[51] versus democracy, science versus religion. The antithesis between the darkness of communism and present-day European modernity and diversity had the function to enhance these correlations, while in the background there was always the national controversy on religion courses in state schools to which all the rest of the debates were but a nexus and a binding element. In the same context, it was possible for the implications of the recent election of Klaus Iohannis as president of Romania to be linked with the overarching debate on religious education, through aspects such as the potential model of approach that was to be adopted by the new president with respect to existing religious denominations.

The interpellating positionings aimed at the Church as an institution date from the same period – these had been prominent during the apogee of the controversy (early March 2015, a decisive timeframe for establishing the number of participation requests for Religion in national schools, as well as during times approaching the '*Religious education class*' social dispute, though they were also generated by other controversial topics like the erection of the Nation's Salvation Cathedral, the involvement of priests in electoral campaigns etc.). Articles on the evaluation of the Church included, on the one hand, criticisms and interpellations[52] but also recommendations and constructive critical observations[53], or even unofficial justifications (for instance of the allegedly exorbitant revenues of the Church circulating in surveys and opinions expressed in the online environment).[54]

Towards the end of 2015 a new event resets the parameters of the '*Religious education class*' debate: the fire at *Colectiv* Club, a tremendous tragedy resulting in massive mobilization and street protests against the establishment and corruption. In this context some public voices identifie[55] communication errors done by the Patriarch, who becomes the main target of the media and public discontent. This major tragedy re-ignites the controversy on religious issues generating increased

---

[51] In full course of the deliberations on the implications of the RCC decision, international events surface that change the course of the public polemics (e.g. the attacks in Paris at the Charlie Hebdo editorial house, an event which caused the trajectory of religion-related debates to shift to freedom of expression and liberties/freedom at large, the legitimate borders between religion, rights and responsibilities, the instrumentalization of religion by interest groups, the values of democracy, (non)negotiabile values, correlations between religion and intolerance.

[52] E.g .“*Patriarch Daniel faced with reaction*”, *Adevărul*, 2 March 2015, by Dan Mazilu; also the article “*The Patriarch's Spring*”, *Adevărul*, 4 March 2015, by Mihaela Apetrei.

[53] E.g. “*Is there a problem with the Church?*”, *Adevărul*, 2 March 2015, by Andrei Plesu; also the article “*Marketing and the Church*”, 4 March 2015, by Mircea Vasilescu.

[54] E.g. “*Let us tax the Church. That is ourselves*”, *Adevărul*,18 Feb. 2015, by Eugen Tănăsescu.

[55] Especially by the media actors.

media space on topics such as the utility of churches (especially of a large Cathedral), of religious education itself, the corruption of the system and will virtually impact all discussions over religious or church-related topics. No topic relating to religion will hereafter be discussed as before these events, the religious education being no exception.

In 2016 the state of Romanian democracy (in direct relation to the recent events at Colectiv Club) and the debate over the construction of the Nation's Salvation Cathedral will replace the '*Religious education class*' controversy[56] almost completely. The latter nevertheless resurfaces in 2017[57], when the publication of the methodology for teaching Religion in schools fails to bring the amendments long contended for by a part of the Romanian civil society, i.e. the introduction of alternative courses for pupils who did not opt for Religion. This year marks an aggravation of the social dispute on questions of religion in the sense of the multiplication of the opinion articles displaying a negative (or rather contesting) tonality, but also of the register of topics debated at this level. Thus, in 2017[58] the visibility of the *religion-in-schools* topic significantly decreases, as it is replaced by issues such as the problematic behavior of certain clergy representatives[59], numerous correlations between religion and intolerance, implications of religious belief, religious freedom and anti-religious hatred, the question of family definition in the context of a large number of signatures in favor of reviewing the Constitution and a thorough emphasis on problematic issues and behaviors concerning the religious sphere. Among the leading topics governing this year, the highest frequencies are held by *family*, the *politics and religion* relation and *EU* reference. The topic of the legitimate definition of family (i.e. from a religious / traditional or a laic viewpoint) is linked in the media frames to political decisions, e.g. as a counterpoint to the referendum on corruption proposed by the president. Though 2017 marks a return of the '*Religious education class*' topic which is debated from the perspective of the lack of alternative(s) and justifications for maintaining religion to the detriment of a course in the History of religions, the responsibility pertaining to the Ministry of Education, the preeminence of the Romanian Orthodox Church over the State or the imperative of diversity and EU

---

[56] Due to developments such as the publicization of a single intended as a manifest against the opulence of the Church by a Romanian band involving a multitude of personalities in the Romanian public life (intellectuals, media people, celebrities etc).

[57] Though this study has sampled only the first half of 2017, data in this timeframe were sufficient to delineate a few tendencies with respect to the media thematization of religion and the '*Religious education class*' controversy in particular.

[58] Again, the analysis spans only up to June 2017.

[59] In full flow of the campaign for raising signatures in order to organize a referendum and change the ambiguous definition of family in the Constitution, a series of events regarding the involvement of a famous priest and a hierarch in homosexuality scandals added fuel to the ongoing controversy over public manifestations of religion (of any kind).

recommendations and standards, the debate no longer rises to the effervescence it had in the timespan 2014–2015.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has focused on the manner in which media employed a diverse typology of topics to construct one of the most important controversies sparked by religious topics in the Romanian public sphere in recent years.

Also, we have attempted to outline the visibility of the '*Religious education class*' controversy which we found to have been accompanied by various implications of mediatization or, in other words, which is a result of certain mediatization practices.

The thematic content analysis has spotlighted an inventory of topics that were mediatized (and therefore made prominent) at the expense of others (which were either not visible, or not *that* visible), a particular group of voices/actors (e.g. NGOs' representatives) who were more visible than others, and hence a type of argumentation and definition of the issues that "won" the status of public problem in the public arena, while the discourse analysis outlined particular correlations between the specific typology of topics used and its functions in the thematization and interpretation of a major social controversy.

As main findings, the analysis revealed that the same categories of topics that were approached the years preceding the controversy over religious education in public schools are also those that came to be appropriated as main arguments at the time of maximum clash of opinions over religion in the Romanian public sphere, therefore background topics at certain stages became explicit argumentation resources in others and often enough a topic surfaced with both functions in the same interval. In this sense, the mediatization of the '*Religious education class*' controversy can be said to have been accompanied by specific strategies of thematization substantiating media particularities and orientation (as theorists say, media development has been confirmed to relate to power relations in society).

If media came to construct these controversies, this may be explained by the fact that, after years since the fall of the communist regime, the media practices have diversified heavily (in terms of a greater emphasis on opinion articles and formats that favour opinion expression etc), thus mediatization processes occur in a context of changes in participation practices, with media orienting towards types of debates and thematic inventories extremely diversified but which might not have been possible before the 90s.

The topmost presence among the most visible of the sampled timeframe, the '*Religious education class*' topic or the issue of the utility of Religion among the compulsory subjects of school curricula at the time we chose to investigate the media controversy (2013) had already been under public scrutiny for over seven

years in the Romanian agora being related with a series of problematic aspects generating profuse debates both nationally and transnationally. Interestingly enough, despite the manifold deliberations spanning over a decade, religious education is still at issue in 2017, the other limit of our survey.

In the period we devoted to the analysis of the most visible topics the media selected to publicize the sampled controversy, the '*Religious education class*' was debated from the perspective of the right to civilization, and particularly of the aspiration/'right' to democracy ; the positionings introducing trenchant dichotomies of the type communism (limitation of freedom) versus European/democratic society and symbolic analogies of the type 'communist religion' versus 'civilizing democracy' are a case in point, recurring not only in the beginning of the interval, but also in the apogee of the controversy. Thus, we can conclude that the polemic surrounding the '*Religious education class*' was from the beginning integrated into an argumentation about democracy, human rights and liberties. It is particularly interesting to note how one of the most frequently mediatized topics – *communism* – became a resource for the argumentation and legitimation of a particular definition of the '*Religious education class*' public issue in terms of individual (and later on, also national and universal etc.) freedom.Though the controversy acquired a multitude of interpretations in the national public sphere, the dominant definition was that in terms of freedom/free will and relative to it, the valorization of the arguments related to democracy.

A second well-rounded profile has been identified for a topic that also gained significant prominence within the controversies of recent years surrounding the presence of religion in the public sphere, namely, the topic of *EU reference* (standards/recommendations). The highest value of frequencies was registered in 2015 (that is, at the time of the apogee of the controversy) a year when the media most referred to EU as a standard – with all the inhering connotations[60] – to refer the debate on religious education and by extension, the entire positioning with respect to religion, to justify positions in support of maintaining religion in public schools or, on the contrary, of substituting the course by the more generic History of religions, by Ethics and civic culture or a different optional course.

Also highly frequent in the media thematization of the '*Religion class*' controversy was the subject of the *Church-politics* interaction (the implications of the influence of the two spheres were debated at length and from multiple perspectives: the boundaries between their actions, the religious belonging of the then president-to-be of Romania, the annexation of religion for marketing and electoral purposes, religion as an identity issue etc., with the problematic involvement of priests in electoral campaigns as the most vigorously debated aspect and an overarching argument during both the *Religion class* and the

---

[60] Civilization, progress, modernity, pluralism, multiculturalism, diversity, EU recommendations in reference to teaching religion, tolerance, inclusion, enlightenment, culture etc.

Cathedral debates, and practically during all debates on religion, substantiating public discontent regarding the legitimacy of the two actors' joining their hands etc).

This analysis carried out from the perspective of the most mediatized topics referring to religion has revealed a dynamics and stages of the controversy and indicated that the diversity of voices and arguments at different levels and time intervals can be related to particular deliberative practices. We can thus conclude that this deliberative character of the media discourse varied according to the different stages of the controversy as it was possible to identify a plethora of voices/positions and find that clearly, some were more visible than others. However, notwithstanding the compelling evidence of the diversity of arguments and types of positioning the media included, at certain levels particular actors or institutions, such as the Church, for instance, were less visible (while some of the NGOs were prominent throughout the controversy and since its very beginning).

All the selected topics as well as emerging events have constituted, on the one hand the context and triggers of the debates while on the other they can be understood as mediatization lines which allow the evidencing of the construction of the media agenda, the particular issues that were valorized by media at a particular time.

REFERENCES

1. Ahlbäch, T., Dahla, B. (eds.) (2013). *Digital Religion*. Vammalan Kirjapaino Oy. Sastamala.
2. Badouard, R., Mabi, C., Monnoyer-Smith, L. (2016). «Le débat et ses arènes», *Questions de communication*, 30, 7–23, available at http://questionsdecommunication.revues.org/10700, accessed on 6 April 2017.
3. Badouard, R.; Mabi, C. (coord.) (2015). "*Controverses et communication*", *Hermès*, CNRS Éditions, Paris.
4. Banică, M. (2011). *Religia în fapt. Studii, schi e şi momente*. Cluj-Napoca: EIKON.
5. Beciu, C., Lazăr, M., Mădroane, I.D. (2017). Mediating Public Issues in Romanian Broadcast Talk: Personalized Communication Strategies. In *Television & New Media* 1–18, SAGE Publications.
6. Beciu, C. (2011). *Sociologia comunicării şi a spaţiului public*, Iaşi: Polirom.
7. Cammaerts, B. (2007). Citizenship, the Public Sphere and Media. In B. Cammaerts, N. Carpentier, (eds.), *Reclaiming the Media: Communication Rights and Democratic Media Roles*. European communication research and education association series, 3, Bristol, Intellect, 1–8, available at *http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/39663/*, accessed on 30 June 2016).
8. Campbell, H. (2010). *When Religion Meets New Media*, London: Routledge.
9. Campbell, H. (2013). *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in New Media Worlds*, London and New York: Routledge.
10. Carp, R. (2009). *Dumnezeu la Bruxelles: religia în spaţiul public european*, Cluj-Napoca: Eikon.
11. Carpentier, N. (2011). *Media and Participation. A site of ideological-democratic struggle*, Bristol: Intellect.
12. Cefaï, D., Pasquier, D. (2003). *Les sens du public. Publics politiques, publics médiatiques*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
13. Cefaï, D. (2002). Qu'est-ce qu'une arène publique? Quelques pistes pour une perspective pragmatiste. In D. Cefaï, I.Joseph (eds.), *L'héritage du pragmatisme*, La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'Aube (51–83).

14. Cefaï, D. (1996). La construction des problèmes publics. Définitions de situations dans des arènes publiques. *Réseaux*. Communication – Technologie – Société, Vol. 14, no. 75, 43–66.

15. Charaudeau, P. (2014). La situation de communication comme fondatrice d'un genre: la Controverse. In Monte M. et Philippe G. (dir.), *Genres et textes. Déterminations, évolutions, confrontations*, Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2014, 49–57, available at http://www.patrick-charaudeau.com/La-situation-de-communication,321.html, accessed on 10 June 2018.

16. Coleman, S., Ross, K. (2010). *The Media and the Public*. *"Them" and "Us" in Media Discourse.* The Atrium,Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell.

17. Coman, M. (2003). *Mass-media, mit şi ritual. O perspectivă antropologică*, Iaşi: Polirom.

18. Couldry, N. (2008). Mediatization or mediation? Alternative under standings of the emergent space of digital storytelling, *New media and society*, vol 10(3), p. 373–391, *https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1461444808089414*.

19. Dahlgren, P. (2005). The Internet, public spheres, and political communication: dispersion and deliberation.*Political Communication*, 22:2, 147–162, *http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600590933160.*

20. Dahlgren, P. (2006). Doing Citizenship. The Cultural Origins of Civic Agency in the Public Sphere, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9(3), Sage Publications, 267–286.

21. Dungaciu, D. (2004). Alternative Modernities in Europe. Modernity, Religion and Secularization in South-Eastern Europe: the Romanian Case. In *Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology Working Papers*, Halle/Saale.

22. Fraser, N. (1990). Rethinking the Public Sphere: a Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy, *Social Text*, 25/26 (1990), Duke University Press, 56–80, available at http://www.jstor.org/stable/466240 (accessed on 26 Oct. 2011).

23. Fraser, N. (1992). Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actuallyexisting democracy. In Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 109–142, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

24. Fraser, N. (1995). Politics, Culture and the Public Sphere: toward a Postmodern Conception. In L. Nicholson, S. Seidman (eds.), *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 287–314.

25. Granholm, K., Moberg, M., Sjö, S. (eds.) (2015). *Religion, Media, and Social Change*, London, New York: Routledge.

26. Gusfield, J. (1981). *The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

27. Habermas, J. (2006). Religion in the Public Sphere, *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no.1, 2006, http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2006.00241.x/pdf.

28. Hassenteufel, P. (2010). Les processus de mise sur agenda: sélection et construction des problèmes publics, *Informations sociales*, 2010, 1, nr. 157, 50–58.

29. Hepp, A. (2013). *Cultures of Mediatization*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

30. Hepp, A. (2014). Communicative Figurations. Research Cultures of Mediatization, 83–100. In L. Kramp, N. Carpentier, A. Hepp, I. Tomanić Trivundža, H. Nieminen, R. Kunelius, T. Olsson, E. Sundin, R. Kilborn (eds.) *Media Practice and Everyday Agency in Europe*, Bremen: EditionsLumière.

31. Herbert, D. (2012). Why Has Religion Gone Public Again? Towards a Theory of Media and Religious Re-Publicization. In G. Lynch, J. Mitchell, A. Strhan (ed.), *Religion, Media and Culture: A Reader*, London: Routledge.

32. Herbert, D. (2015). Theorizing Religious Republicization in Europe: Religion, Media and Public Controversy in the Netherlands and Poland, 2002–2012. In K. Granholm, M. Moberg, S. Sjo (ed.), *Religion, Media, and Social Change*, London and New York: Routledge.

33. Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The Mediatization of Religion*. In *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*, London and New York: Routledge.

34. Hjelm, T. (ed.) (2015). *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion*. Bloomsbury.

35. Hoover, S.M. (2006). *Religion in the Media Age*, London and New York: Routledge.

36. Jacobs, R.N., Townsley, E. (2011). *The Space of Opinion: Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

37. Lemieux, C. (2007). A quoi sert l'analyse des controverses? *Mil neuf cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*. 2007, 1 (no. 25), p. 191–212.

38. Lövheim, M., Axner, M. (2015). Mediatized Religion and Public Spheres: Current Approaches and New Questions. In K. Granholm, M. Moberg, Sjö, S. (ed.), *Religion, Media, and Social Change,* London and New York: Routledge.

39. Lövheim, M. (2014). Mediatization and religion. In K. Lundby, ed., *Mediatization of Communication*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter Gmbh, 547–570.

40. Lundby, K., (ed.) (2014). *Mediatization of Communication*, Walter de Gruyter Gmbh, Berlin.

41. Naclad, L. (2013). *Discursul religios în mass-media. Cazul României postdecembriste*. Iaşi: Institutul European.

42. Negt, O. (transl. by Neumann, Al.) (2007). *L'espace public oppositionnel*, Paris: Éditions Payot & Rivages.

43. Page, B.I. (1996). *Who Deliberates? Mass Media in Modern Democracy*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

44. Preda,R. (2009).*Cultura dialogului. Pledoarii şi exerciţii*, Cluj-Napoca: Eikon.

45. Şandru, D., Bocancea, S.(coord.) (2013). *Mass-media şi democraţia în România postcomunistă*, Iaşi: Institutul European.

46.Ungureanu, C., (coord.) (2011). *Religia în democraţie. O dilemă a modernităţii*. Iaşi: Polirom.

47. Voicu, M. (2007). *România religioasă*, Iaşi: Institutul European.

48. Wodak, R. (2010). "Us" and "Them": Inclusion and Exclusion-Discrimination Via Discourse. In G. Delanty, P. Jones, R. Wodak (eds.), *Identity, Belonging and Migration*, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 54–77.

49. Wojcik, S., (2018). "Arène". *Publictionnaire. Dictionnaire encyclopédique et critique des publics*. Available at *http://publictionnaire.humanum.fr/notice/arene/*.