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Religious Fundamentalism and Gender Ideology: Implications for Democracy and Human Rights in Romania

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Research Topic and Relevance

The doctoral thesis *Religious Fundamentalism and Gender Ideology: Implications for Democracy and Human Rights in Romania* examines the relationship between conservative religious mobilizations, the discourse surrounding the so-called “gender ideology,” and the dynamics of liberal democracy in contemporary Romania. The research starts from the observation that, in recent decades, transformations within liberal democracies have been accompanied by the emergence and consolidation of political and social movements that challenge pluralism, equality, and certain categories of fundamental rights.

In Central and Eastern Europe, these processes are shaped by the particularities of the post-communist transition, the role of religion in the public sphere, and the transnational circulation of conservative ideas and strategies. In Romania, mobilizations against sexual and reproductive rights, gender studies, sexuality education, and LGBT rights have, over the past decade, constituted one of the main arenas for the public articulation of religious-conservative positions.

The research seeks to move beyond interpretations of these phenomena exclusively through the lens of social conservatism or the broader relationship between religion and politics. The central question of the thesis is whether, and to what extent, certain conservative religious mobilizations in Romania can be interpreted as contemporary forms of religious fundamentalism, and how this perspective contributes to understanding their intervention in the democratic sphere.

A central role is played by the discourse surrounding “gender ideology,” a discursive construction employed by the actors under analysis. The construct functions as an empty signifier capable of bringing together, within a common narrative, diverse issues such as family, sexuality, education, LGBT rights, reproductive rights, the protection of children, national identity, sovereignty, and relations with international institutions.

From this perspective, the thesis lies at the intersection of three fields of research: the literature on religious fundamentalism, research on anti-gender mobilizations, and the literature on liberal democracy, illiberalism, and democratic backsliding. In the Romanian

context, these dimensions have so far been examined largely separately. The thesis proposes their integration within a common analytical framework.

At the same time, Romania constitutes a relevant case because of a certain disjunction between the intensity of discursive mobilization and its direct institutional impact. Unlike other Central and Eastern European states, where anti-gender mobilizations have been associated with advanced processes of illiberal transformation, the Romanian case makes it possible to observe how fundamentalist-type discourses can operate within a formal democratic framework, influence the public agenda, and redefine the boundaries of pluralism without necessarily leading to immediate legislative changes.

Objectives, Research Questions, and Analytical Hypothesis

The research pursues two main objectives. The first is to analyze how certain conservative religious mobilizations in Romania constitute themselves and operate as fundamentalist-type movements. The second is to examine how these mobilizations use the discourse surrounding “gender ideology” as an instrument of mobilization and legitimation in the public sphere.

These general objectives are complemented by the identification of the characteristics that allow the mobilizations under analysis to be interpreted through the lens of religious fundamentalism; the analysis of how the discourse surrounding “gender ideology” aggregates social anxieties and contributes to the construction of forms of moral panic; the examination of the repertoires of action, strategies, and networks of influence through which the actors under study intervene in the public agenda and decision-making processes; and the analysis of the relationship between these mobilizations and the principles of liberal democracy, particularly fundamental rights, pluralism, and the relationship between religion and politics.

The thesis is structured around two main research questions: How do fundamentalist-type religious mobilizations manifest themselves in Romania? and How is the discourse surrounding “gender ideology” used as an instrument of mobilization and legitimation to challenge rights and influence the boundaries of liberal democracy?

To explore these questions in greater depth, a series of secondary questions are formulated concerning the discursive, organizational, and political characteristics of these mobilizations, the construction and articulation of the discourse surrounding “gender

ideology,” the strategies and repertoires of action employed, and the relationship between these mobilizations and the principles of liberal democracy.

The analytical hypothesis underpinning the research is that certain conservative religious mobilizations in Romania should be understood not only as expressions of social conservatism but also as forms of action characteristic of religious fundamentalism. They claim an absolute moral authority, seek to translate religious norms into social and legal norms, and use the discourse surrounding “gender ideology” as a central instrument of legitimation and public action.

At the same time, the research proceeds from the premise that “gender ideology” functions as an umbrella term capable of aggregating diverse social anxieties, producing moral antagonisms, and legitimizing the intervention of religious actors in debates concerning rights and social norms.

Within this framework, liberal democracy is understood as an arena of conflict and negotiation between different forms of authority, within which the boundaries of rights, pluralism, and the relationship between religion and the state are negotiated. The thesis does not, however, assume an automatic causal relationship between the mobilizations under analysis and democratic decline. The hypothesis is more precise: through their fundamentalist characteristics and their use of anti-gender discourse, these mobilizations contribute to reshaping public debate and to placing certain core principles of liberal democracy under strain.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework of the research is constructed by bringing together the literature on religious fundamentalism (Marty and Appleby; Almond, Appleby and Sivan; Herriot; Frey), theories of liberal democracy (the tension between majority rule and the protection of rights and pluralism), and contemporary research on anti-gender mobilizations (Kuhar and Paternotte; Korolczuk; Graff; Oana Băluță; Ionela Băluță; Dragolea). The research draws on conceptual tools from the Foucauldian tradition (governmentality, regime of truth) and from Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s discourse theory (empty signifier).

The thesis first reconstructs the genealogy of the concept of fundamentalism, from its origins in early twentieth-century American Protestantism to its comparative extension to

other religious traditions. Religious fundamentalism is defined not as a fixed identity or normative label, but as a mode of action characterized by reactivity towards modernity, the absolute authority of sacred texts, selectivity in the interpretation of sacred texts and in the relationship to tradition, moral dualism, and a restorative, messianic dimension. The contested nature of the concept and the risk of using it as a normative label are also discussed. For this reason, fundamentalism is not employed as a means of essentializing or classifying particular actors, but as an analytical tool for identifying recurring patterns of discourse and action.

From this perspective, contemporary fundamentalism does not necessarily entail withdrawal from modernity or the rejection of democratic institutions. On the contrary, fundamentalist actors may strategically use the instruments provided by democracy, such as electoral participation, citizens' initiatives, referendums, public campaigns, lobbying, advocacy, or political networks, to promote a normative order grounded in the claim to a religious moral truth regarded as superior.

The Foucauldian concept of a "regime of truth" is used to analyze how certain discourses produce criteria through which particular statements, identities, and norms are presented as natural and legitimate, while alternatives are defined as false, deviant, or dangerous. From this perspective, fundamentalism can be analyzed not only as a set of religious beliefs, but also as a mechanism for producing and organizing social truth.

The concept of the "empty signifier," in turn, helps explain the political flexibility of the construct "gender ideology." It is precisely its imprecise character that enables it to bring together heterogeneous claims and fears within a common opposition. Family, homosexuality, sexuality education, abortion, gender studies, feminism, or the intervention of European institutions can thus be presented as manifestations of the same threat. This function is also linked to the mechanism of moral panic. Mobilization involves not only the communication of arguments, but also the production of affective states of fear, insecurity, indignation, or a sense of moral crisis, which contribute to the construction of a community that perceives itself as being under threat.

With regard to liberal democracy, the research starts from the distinction between the procedural dimension of democracy and its liberal dimension. Elections and majority rule are indispensable elements of democracy, but they are not sufficient. The rule of law, pluralism,

fundamental freedoms, and the protection of minorities constrain the power of the majority and constitute essential components of the liberal democratic order.

From this perspective, the participation of religion in the public sphere is legitimate within a pluralistic democracy. The analytical problem arises when a particular religious conception claims the status of universal truth and seeks to transform that truth into a binding norm for the entire community.

Research Methodology

The research is qualitative and combines content analysis, thematic analysis, and critical discourse analysis, applied to a corpus of 1,310 publicly available documents collected through desk research: official statements, public declarations, campaign materials, posts on websites and social media platforms, video transcripts, sermons, legislative proposals, and press articles. The corpus covers the period 2013–2025 (extended back to 1993 for the documentation of the Parliamentary Prayer Group) and is distributed as follows: the Coalition for the Family (1,106 documents), the Prayer Group in the Romanian Parliament (100), and Profides Church (100). Differences in corpus size reflect the distinct conditions under which data were collected rather than a methodological asymmetry; in all three cases, the analysis sought to reach a threshold of theoretical saturation.

The research design follows a multiple-case study approach. The three cases were selected both for their visible and influential role in the Romanian public and political sphere and for the diversity of the forms of mobilization they illustrate: civic mobilization (the Coalition for the Family), institutional embeddedness (the Prayer Group in the Romanian Parliament), and charismatic/affective mobilization (Profides Church).

The central concepts: religious fundamentalism, the discourse surrounding “gender ideology,” and liberal democracy, were operationalized through a framework of empirical indicators derived from the relevant literature (for example, in the case of fundamentalism: reactivity towards modernity, the authority of sacred texts, selectivity, dualism, a restorative dimension, and militancy), which was systematically applied to the corpus under analysis.

Case Study 1 – The Coalition for the Family

The analysis of the Coalition for the Family, which organized the 2018 referendum aimed at constitutionally redefining the family, shows that it can be interpreted not merely as a specific civic initiative, but as a fundamentalist-type movement that consistently reproduces reactivity towards modernity, appeals to a transcendent moral authority, moral dualism, and collective mobilization around a restorative project. The discourse surrounding “gender ideology” functions here as an empty signifier, aggregating diverse issues (LGBT rights, feminism, sexuality education) into a chain of threat centered on an absolutized definition of the family as “natural” and “ordained by God.” The analysis shows that this construction does not take place in direct opposition to liberal democracy, but rather through its own instruments: the referendum, appeals to the Constitution, and the invocation of the will of the majority, in order, paradoxically, to support the restriction of the rights of certain minority groups.

Case Study 2 – The Prayer Group in the Romanian Parliament

The case study of the Prayer Group, active since 1993, captures a less visible but more stable form of religious fundamentalism: discreet and cross-party institutional embeddedness within the legislative branch. Although publicly presented as a spiritual or ecumenical framework, the group functions, from an analytical perspective, as an informal space of ideological consolidation in which conservative religious beliefs concerning family, sexuality, and education are translated into legal and parliamentary language. The group does not directly challenge democratic institutions; rather, it illustrates a strategy of normative “colonization” from within, confirming the observation that contemporary religious fundamentalism is not necessarily anti-modern, but can use the very instruments of political modernity to advance its agenda.

Case Study 3 – Profides Church and Related Events

The case of mobilizations associated with Profides Church adds a further dimension to the analysis: fundamentalism as a collective experience that is lived, performed, and emotionally internalized through marches, rituals, public prayers, and symbols displayed in urban public space. Although the mobilization makes use of the freedoms provided by the democratic framework: freedom of expression and the right of assembly, its discourse and demands tend to undermine pluralism and the protection of minority rights, shifting the source of legitimacy away from democratic procedures towards an absolutized religious

moral truth. This case confirms the central hypothesis of the research: contemporary religious fundamentalism does not operate outside democracy, but within it, using its mechanisms to pursue a project of morally reordering society.

Comparative Analysis

The comparison of the three cases shows that contemporary religious fundamentalism in Romania does not manifest itself through a single form, but through a plurality of organizational configurations—a broad civic platform, an informal institutional network, and a charismatic community—which nevertheless operate according to a common discursive logic: reactivity towards modernity, absolute moral authority (the sacred text), selectivity, dualism, and a restorative, messianic project, articulated around the discourse surrounding “gender ideology.” Taken together, the three cases illustrate a circuit through which influence is produced, linking affective mobilization (social legitimacy) to political influence and, subsequently, to legal and constitutional initiatives.

Discussion and Interpretations

The analysis of the three case studies shows that contemporary religious fundamentalism in Romania should be interpreted not as a mere cultural or moral-religious reaction, but as a dynamic process of the politicization of religion, with structural effects on democracy. In Foucauldian terms, the discourse surrounding “gender ideology” produces a regime of truth in which pluralism is re-signified as deviance, while the expansion of rights is interpreted as a form of moral corruption. When such regimes of truth become sufficiently stabilized and socially recognized, religious fundamentalism moves beyond the status of a marginal discourse and becomes a political actor capable of redefining the rules of the democratic game.

The research highlights a structural, rather than accidental, tension between the democratic component (majority rule) and the liberal component (the protection of rights and pluralism) of liberal democracy. The case of the Coalition for the Family is emblematic: appeals to the majority and to democratic procedures are used to restrict the rights of a minority, illustrating what the classical literature refers to as the “tyranny of the majority.” Considered in relation to Jürgen Habermas’s post-secular theory, which makes the integration of religion into the public sphere conditional upon the “translation” of religious arguments

into a universally accessible language, the analysis shows that this condition is only partially fulfilled in the cases studied. The result is not a deliberative dialogue, but rather a competition between regimes of truth, in which certain positions tend to be imposed as absolute.

Conclusions

The research shows that the mobilizations under analysis can be interpreted as fundamentalist-type movements through a set of converging characteristics: at the discursive level, they construct social reality in binary terms; at the organizational level, they operate through flexible networks connecting religious, civic, and political actors; at the political level, they explicitly seek to influence the legislative and constitutional framework.

The discourse about “gender ideology” functions as a central discursive framework capable of aggregating diverse issues into a coherent narrative of threat, transforming rights-based claims into a perceived danger to the moral and social order. In terms of strategies, the research shows that these mobilizations combine legal and constitutional initiatives with direct political influence and public actions carrying a strong symbolic and affective charge.

Finally, in relation to liberal democracy, these mobilizations do not operate outside the democratic framework, but from within it, making use of its mechanisms, appeals to the majority and freedom of expression, to promote normative projects that challenge pluralism and fundamental rights.

Contribution of the Thesis to the Literature

The main contribution of the thesis lies in proposing an integrated analytical framework that brings together three strands of research that are generally treated separately: religious fundamentalism, anti-gender discourse, and democratic backsliding, as well as in conceptualizing religious fundamentalism as an ecosystem of mobilization that operates simultaneously at the legal, institutional, and affective levels, within a coherent circuit through which influence is produced.

A second contribution lies in the use of the Foucauldian concept of the regime of truth to analyze the discourse surrounding “gender ideology” as a technology of moral

governmentality, rather than merely as a rhetorical symbolic enemy. The thesis also contributes to the literature on anti-gender mobilizations by integrating their affective and performative dimensions (illustrated by the Profides case) and makes an empirical contribution to debates on “illiberal democracies” by demonstrating concretely how democratic mechanisms are used to advance illiberal projects in the Romanian context.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The research has a number of explicitly acknowledged limitations: the analysis is based exclusively on publicly available materials, without access to the organizations’ internal practices; discourse analysis involves a certain degree of subjective interpretation, mitigated through the systematic use of an explicit coding framework; and the concept of “religious fundamentalism” is contested and limited, being used as an analytical tool rather than as a normative label.

The proposed directions for future research include: expanding the analysis through interviews and participant observation; conducting a regional or European comparative analysis; exploring the role of the digital environment in amplifying these discourses; analyzing counter-mobilizations and institutional responses; and investigating the transnational dimension of these mobilizations, including the circulation of ideas, strategies, and resources across different national contexts.