

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN THE LATIN-RITE CATHOLIC POPULATION, 1992–2021

DÉNES KISS¹

Abstract: This article examines the socio-demographic transformation of the Roman Catholic population in Romania between 1992 and 2021. Drawing on data from Romanian population censuses, it analyses changes in population size, ethnic composition, territorial distribution, and educational attainment. The study argues that these transformations were driven primarily by demographic and migration processes rather than by religious factors such as conversion or secularization. During the post-communist period, the number of Roman Catholics declined significantly, reflecting both Romania's overall population decrease and the specific demographic and migration patterns of the Hungarian and German minorities, which historically constituted a large share of the Catholic population. At the same time, the proportion of Romanian Catholics increased, while the shares of Hungarians and especially Germans declined. The territorial distribution of Catholics became increasingly concentrated in Szeklerland and Moldavia, whereas the relative importance of Banat and Central and Southern Transylvania decreased. The educational profile of Catholics also reflects the social characteristics of the Hungarian minority, showing lower representation among university graduates and higher representation in intermediate educational categories. The findings demonstrate that demographic, ethnic, and migration-related factors provide the most convincing explanation for recent changes in Romania's Roman Catholic population.

Keywords: Roman Catholicism; religious demography; religion and ethnicity; migration and religion; religious change.

1 Kiss Dénes is a sociologist, senior lecturer, Institute for Religious Studies, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. denes.kiss@ubbcluj.ro

Article history: Received 03.05.2026; Revised 05.05.2026; Accepted 15.05.2026.

Available online: 01. 07. 2026. Available print: 31. 07. 2026.

©2026 Studia UBB Theologia Catholica Latina. Published by Babeş-Bolyai University.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Introduction

In this study, I seek to provide a statistical description of the Roman Catholic population in Romania, as well as to examine the changes that have occurred in its main demographic characteristics over the past three decades. The analysis focuses on the transformation of the Latin-rite Catholic population from four perspectives: (1) changes in total population size, (2) the dynamics of the population's ethnic composition, (3) territorial distribution, and (4) changes in educational attainment.

The analysis relies primarily on data from the Romanian censuses conducted between 1992 and 2021, which make it possible to examine the demographic processes that unfolded during the three decades following the collapse of the socialist regime.

I argue that the transformation of Romania's Roman Catholic population between 1992 and 2021 was shaped primarily not by religious processes — such as religious conversion or secularization — but by broader demographic and migration trends, as well as by the specific minority demographic and migration patterns resulting from the ethnic composition of the Catholic population.

Factors Shaping the Size of Religious Denominations: Theoretical Considerations

The evolution of the size of individual religious denominations may be influenced by a number of factors. One such factor is (1) competition among religions for adherents, whereby individuals choose from the available religious “supply” based on personal conviction and, as a result, convert; that is, religious conversion takes place. The decision to opt for non-religion may also be included here, namely religious disaffiliation resulting from secularization. Rather than using the term religious conversion, Hackett and his co-authors refer to these two phenomena collectively as religious “switching”.²

2 Conrad HACKETT – Marcin STONAWSKI – Yunping TONG – Stephanie KRAMER – Anne SHI – Dalia FAHMY (2025). *How the global religious landscape changed from 2010 to 2020*. Pew Research Center. Source: https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/06/PR_2025.06.09_global-religious-change_report.pdf [Accessed: 22. 06. 2026] <https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11>

(2) Although in most democratically functioning countries the free competition of religious ideas is, in principle, guaranteed, and voluntary religious conversions arising from such competition should theoretically face no obstacles, in practice this competition is constrained to varying degrees by the religious policies of individual states and by the actual extent to which religious freedom is exercised. In this respect, Grim and Finke argue that at least three factors should be taken into account. The first is government regulation, that is, the laws and administrative measures governing the operation of churches and the practice of religion, including the criteria for registering new churches, the legal prohibition of certain religions, and restrictions on proselytizing and preaching, among others. The second is government favoritism, understood as the support or privileges granted by the state to one or more selected religions or religious groups. Third, free competition may also be limited by social regulation, that is, restrictions imposed by other religious groups, associations, or the broader culture.³

(3) In addition to the above, demographic processes constitute another set of factors shaping both the size of a denomination and a country's denominational structure. The number of births and deaths, as well as the age structure of the population, may lead to population growth or decline independently of religious factors.⁴ At the same time, the demographic behavior of the adherents of a denomination – above all, fertility – may be influenced by its theological teachings.⁵

(4) Migration processes may also affect denominational structure, since emigration and immigration influence the number of adherents of existing denominations and may also lead to the emergence of new religions. Migration may increase or decrease religious pluralism in both countries of origin and destination; it may also alter the internal composition, ethnic structure, and social weight of particular religious communities⁶

3 Brian J. GRIM – Roger FINKE, International religion indexes: Government regulation, government favoritism, and social regulation of religion. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 2 (2006), 2–40.

4 HACKETT C.– STONAWSKI M. – TONG Y. – KRAMER S. – SHI A. – FAHMY D., *How the global religious landscape changed*.

5 Michael HOUT – Andrew GREELEY, – Melissa J. WILDE, The demographic imperative in religious change in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 2/2001, 468–500.

6 M. T. FREDERIKS, (2015). Religion, migration and identity: A conceptual and theoretical exploration. *Mission Studies*, 32.2 (2007), 181–202.

Finally, (5) ethnopolitical factors and minority policies may also play an important role in shaping a country's denominational structure, since the boundaries of ethnic groups often coincide with denominational boundaries.⁷

In my analysis, I therefore argue that the transformation of the size and major socio-demographic characteristics of Romania's Roman Catholic population between 1992 and 2021 was shaped primarily not by religious processes, but by the country's broader demographic and migration processes, as well as by the specific demographic, social, and migration patterns of the Hungarian and, to a lesser extent, German ethnic minorities that make up a substantial part of the Catholic population. In this study, I first briefly review the historical development of the Catholic population in Romania. I then restrict the analysis to the post-communist period and examine changes in the number of adherents, transformations in the population's ethnic composition, shifts in its territorial distribution, and patterns of educational attainment.

Roman Catholics in Romania from the Roman Empire to State Socialism

Although the aim of my analysis is to examine the processes that unfolded during the three decades following the collapse of the socialist regime, understanding these developments also requires a brief overview of the demographic history of Catholicism in the territory of present-day Romania prior to this period. The history of the various groups that make up the Catholic population living in present-day Romania evolved, for much of its past, within different political formations, under distinct historical influences, and in markedly different ways.

In the territory under consideration, the emergence of Christianity can be traced back to the period of the Roman Empire. At that time, Christianity was also present in an organized form in the province of Scythia Minor, located in present-day Dobruja, with predominantly Latin affiliations. Following the formation of the Eastern Roman Empire, the Roman Catholic presence in this region declined and was replaced by Byzantine Christianity.⁸ A more limited Catholic presence re-emerged in the region only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

7 Rebecca Y. KIM, Religion and ethnicity: Theoretical connections. *Religions*, 2, 3/2011, 312–329. Claire MITCHELL, The religious content of ethnic identities. *Sociology*, 40.6 (2006), 1135–1152.

8 Emil DUMEA, On the ecclesial history of the Catholic Church of Romania: An overview. *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity*, 6.1 (2018), 23–24.

with the growing importance of port cities. The larger Catholic communities of Dobruja are still located in these cities today.

Another chapter in the history of the Roman Catholic Church relevant to the present topic begins in Transylvania, with the consolidation of the Kingdom of Hungary. By the eleventh century, three dioceses had been established in Transylvania, and Latin-rite Catholicism became the dominant form of Christianity, associated primarily with the Hungarian population and, later, to a lesser extent, with the Saxon and subsequently the Swabian populations.⁹ In the centuries following the Reformation, the Catholic presence in the region underwent a period of relative decline, followed by renewed strengthening under Habsburg rule. The first modern census data date from the end of this latter period. The first data series covering the territory of Transylvania in a uniform manner dates from 1869, when 709,501 Roman Catholics lived in the region, accounting for 16.9% of the population (Table 1). As part of the general population growth, this number had risen to 910,730 by the turn of the century, while the share of the Catholic population also increased, reaching 18.8%. Numerical growth continued after the turn of the century, reaching 985,155, although the proportion of Catholics remained stable.

Table 1. Roman Catholics in Transylvania, 1869–1910

	Total population of Transylvania	Roman Catholics	Roman Catholics (%)
1869	4,210,536	709,501	16.9
1880	4,013,822	708,182	17.6
1890	4,408,182	801,920	18.2
1900	4,848,451	910,730	18.8
1910	5,228,180	985,155	18.8

Source: Varga¹⁰

The available numerical estimates and data concerning the size of the Catholic population in Moldavia were reviewed by Vilmos Tánzos. According to the sources examined by Tánzos, in the mid-sixteenth and mid-seventeenth centuries

9 E. DUMEA, *On the ecclesial history of the Catholic Church of Romania*, 27–28.

10 VARGA, E. Árpád, *Az erdélyi megyék népességének felekezeti tagolódása 1850–2002 között*. In E. Á. Varga, *Fejezetek a jelenkori Erdély népesedéstörténetéből*, Budapest: Püski, 1998.

the number of Catholics in Moldavia barely exceeded 5,000. Subsequently, that is, following the intensification of Székely out-migration, their number began to increase rapidly: by 1807 it had reached 21,307, by 1844 it had doubled to 43,244, and by the end of the nineteenth century it had approached 90,000. As will be shown below, the number of Catholics in Moldavia continued to grow throughout the twentieth century, and this growth was reversed only toward the end of the century.

Table 2. Number of Roman Catholics in Moldavia, Early Sixteenth Century–2002

Year	Number of Roman Catholics
Early sixteenth century	25,000 – 30,000
1591	ca. 15,000
1646	5,577
1744	5,500
1807	21,307
1844	43,244
1859	52,881
1899	88,803
1930	109,953
1992	240,038
2002	232,045

Data adapted from Tánzos (2011, p. 19); the original table also lists the historical sources on which the estimates are based.

In the regions of Oltenia and Muntenia, the Catholic presence has historically always been marginal, and this remains the case today. More limited Roman Catholic in-migration occurred primarily in a few counties of Muntenia, in Bucharest as it became the capital, and, presumably, in the areas of the oil fields, which also attracted foreign labour. In Oltenia, a small number of Catholics arrived mainly as a result of the forced labour-migration system of the socialist regime, particularly through the system of compulsory job placement, and settled mostly in larger towns and cities.

As a result of these regional antecedents, in the enlarged Romania that emerged after the First World War, the 1930 census recorded 1,234,151 persons who declared themselves Roman Catholic, living primarily in Transylvania and Moldavia. Since

the territory of interwar Romania did not fully correspond to that of present-day Romania, this figure is somewhat higher than the number of Catholics who lived at that time within the country's current borders. Among the territories that belonged to Romania at the time but are no longer part of the country, Catholics of German, Polish, and Hungarian ethnicity lived mainly in Bukovina, while far fewer lived in Bessarabia. Estimating their number at approximately 100,000, there may have been around 1,134,151 Roman Catholics living within the territory of present-day Romania at that time.

In the censuses conducted after the post-Second World War transformations, religious affiliation was not recorded, reflecting the anti-religious ideology of the socialist regime. For this period, therefore, information is available only from data collected by the Ministry of the Interior.¹¹ According to various sources originating from the archives of the secret police, the number of Roman Catholics was 1,163,437 in 1965; in 1977, "there are approximately 1.3 million Roman Catholics in the country";¹² in 1982, the figure was 1,396,000 (Figure 1).¹³

Roman Catholics in Post-Communist Romania

In the post-communist period, four censuses were conducted in which the religious affiliation of the enumerated population was once again recorded. The 1992 census recorded 1,161,942 Roman Catholics; by 2002, this number had declined to 1,026,429, then to 870,774 in 2011, and further to 741,504 in 2021.

Beginning with the 2011 census, previously non-existent problems of data interpretation also emerged, as the methodology of data collection changed compared to earlier censuses.¹⁴ As a result of these methodological changes, the

11 Constantin CUCIUC – Manuela GHEORGHE, Tranziția în domeniul religiozității. *Sociologie Românească*, 5–6 (1995).

12 NAGY, Zoltán Mihály – NOVÁK, Csaba Zoltán, The Roman Catholic Church during and after the communist regime, STAN, L. – STAN, T. (eds.), *Church reckoning with communism in post-1989 Romania*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021. 94.

13 Ovidiu BOZGAN, *Cronica unui eșec previzibil: România și Sfântul Scaun în epoca pontificatului lui Paul al VI-lea (1963–1978)*. București: Editura Curtea Veche, 2004. Cited in NAGY, Z. M. – NOVÁK, Cs. Z. (2021). *The Roman Catholic Church during and after the communist regime*.

14 During the 2000s, as a result of migration reaching a scale of several million persons, a substantial transnational or bi-residential population also emerged. Although this

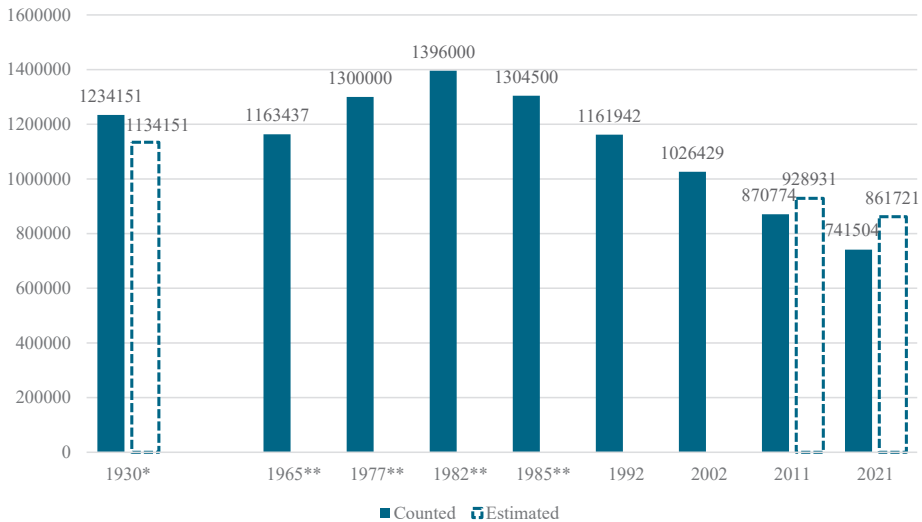
religious affiliation of approximately one million persons in 2011 and 2.65 million persons in 2021 is unknown. The emergence of the category of persons with unknown religious affiliation complicates the analysis of long-term trends, since in reality the number of Catholics in these years was substantially higher than the figures obtained from the census data.

A corrective estimate is made possible, however, by the fact that the findings of representative surveys on religiosity consistently indicate that denominational affiliation remains widespread in Romania, with those who are actually unaffiliated accounting for less than one percent of the total population.¹⁵ In other words, 99% of those recorded as having unknown religious affiliation in fact belong to some church or denomination. If we may also assume that persons with unknown religious affiliation are distributed proportionally across the country's different denominations, the number of Catholics living in Romania was 928,931 in 2011

population held Romanian citizenship, it spent a considerable part of its time abroad and was therefore difficult to reach through traditional face-to-face census-taking. For this reason, beginning with the 2011 census, persons who were not found at home by census takers were also included in the census population if they appeared in the records of various public institutions as having had contact with those institutions during the year preceding the census. In this sense, they were not considered to have emigrated permanently or to have severed all ties with the country. The 2021 census introduced a further methodological innovation by allowing the census questionnaire to be completed online, an option used by a substantial part of the population. Unfortunately, both innovations affected the data on religious affiliation. Administrative records do not contain such information, as they are limited to data included in the personal identification number, namely sex, date of birth, and place of residence. In the case of online completion, there were two reasons why these data remained unknown: first, because providing them was not mandatory and many respondents therefore left them unanswered; and second, more frequently, because for various technical reasons the question on religious affiliation, together with the question on ethnicity, often did not appear on the respondent's screen and thus remained unanswered without the respondent being aware of it.

- 15 KISS, Dénes – ROSTA, Gergely – BOGDAN VOICU, Between Romania and Hungary: Religiosity among Hungarians in Transylvania, LUIJKX R. – REESKENS T. – SIEBEN, I. (eds.), *Reflections on European values: Honouring Loek Halman's contribution to the European Values Study* Tübing: Open Press TiU, 2022, 179–195. MALINA VOICU – ANDREEA CONSTANTIN (2012). Religious revival in Romania: Between cohort replacement and contextual changes, BOROWIK, I. – TOMKA M. – POLLACK, D. (eds.), *Transformations of religiosity: Religion and religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 155–174.

and 861,721 in 2021. In Figure 1, these latter estimated figures are represented by a dashed line.



*The 1930 figure includes Catholics living in Northern Bukovina, which belonged to Romania at the time; the dashed bar represents an estimate excluding this population.

**Ministry of the Interior data, based on Nagy and Novák (2021) and Bozgan (2004).

Figure 1. Roman Catholic Population in Romania, 1930–2021

Factors Influencing Changes in the Number of Catholics

The data presented above show that the Catholic population increased steadily during the first half of the twentieth century, reached its peak in the 1980s, and then began to decline; this downward trend continues to the present day. It is useful to compare this dynamic with the evolution of the country's total population during the same period. In Romania, after the Second World War, mortality declined sharply while fertility remained high. This was the result of the modernization of the healthcare system, which primarily reduced infant mortality and combined with still-high fertility, led to rapid population growth. This growth process, referred to in demography as the first demographic transition associated with industrialization, had already begun to slow by the 1960s. In response to declining birth rates, the communist authorities introduced their notorious abortion policy,

which forcibly increased fertility again for a time and generated further population growth. As a result of this second wave of population growth, Romania's population probably reached its maximum around 1990. Thereafter, the population began to decline as natural increase diminished. From the 2000s onward, this natural decrease was accompanied by increasingly widespread emigration; these two mutually reinforcing processes, with persons of reproductive age overrepresented among emigrants, resulted in a steep population decline.¹⁶

If we examine the data presented in Figure 1, we can see that the size of the Catholic population followed a somewhat different trajectory from the overall population dynamics described above. According to the data, the number of Catholics reached its peak in 1982 and had already begun to decline before 1990. This was most likely due to the fact that, among the Hungarian minority, which constituted the majority of Catholics, and the German minority, which also accounted for a significant share, both demographic and migration processes developed somewhat differently from those of the majority population. In the case of the Hungarian population in Romania, which lived largely in Transylvania, the first demographic transition began earlier and also ended earlier; in other words, natural increase began to decline sooner. Because modern contraceptive methods were more widely used, the abortion ban also had a weaker effect. For these reasons, the Hungarian population in Romania may have reached its peak earlier than the country's total population, in 1982.¹⁷ As the data presented in the figure show, this demographic pattern characteristic of Hungarians is also reflected in the size of the Catholic population: similarly to the Hungarian population, the number of Catholics began to decline earlier than the national population, already in the second half of the 1980s.

The Hungarian minority, which constituted the majority of Catholics, differed from the majority population not only in terms of natural increase but also with regard to migration patterns. In the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, natural decrease was accompanied by a mass refugee movement toward Hungary. Between

16 Veronica DUMITRAȘCU – Alexandru Ștefan TRICĂ– Nicoleta Caragea, Population of Romania: Shapes and demographic trends. *Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies*, 2 (2018), 119–135.

17 Kiss, Tamás, *Adminisztratív tekintet: Az erdélyi magyar demográfiai diskurzus összehasonlító elemzéséhez. Az erdélyi magyar népesség statisztikai konstrukciójáról*. Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2010, 66.

1987 and 1991, approximately 100,000 Hungarians left Romania,¹⁸ and the rate of Hungarian emigration continued to exceed that of the Romanian population until Romania's accession to the European Union.

We do not have data on the specific features of demographic processes within the German minority; however, their emigration began earlier than that of the Hungarians and was more extensive. Emigration, which was also facilitated by a German–Romanian intergovernmental agreement, had reached drastic proportions by the late 1980s, with between 10,000 and 15,000 persons of German ethnicity leaving the country each year. Then, within a few years after the collapse of the socialist regime, the overwhelming majority of this population had left. While the 1977 census still recorded 359,000 persons of German ethnicity, this number had declined to 119,000 by 1992.¹⁹ Although only the Banat Swabians, that is, approximately half of this German population, were Catholic, this process nevertheless had a significant impact on changes in the size of the overall Catholic population. In the case of both the Hungarian and German minorities, these migration processes were most intense in the 1980s and 1990s and slowed down thereafter.

Figure 2 presents changes in the country's total population alongside changes in the number of Catholics. The bars represent the Catholic population, while the lines represent the total population. The solid bars and lines show the enumerated data, which therefore exclude cases with missing data in 2011 and 2021, whereas the dashed lines represent the corrected estimates. The figure clearly shows that, between 1992 and 2021, both Romania's total population and the Catholic population declined, but the decline was somewhat more pronounced among Catholics.

The fact that the development of the Catholic population was also affected by the demographic and migration processes of the Hungarian and German minority groups, which differed from those of the majority population, also led to a decline in the share of Catholics within the country's total population. As shown in the following table, while Roman Catholics accounted for 5.1% of the population in 1992, this share had declined to 4.7% by 2002 and continued to decrease, albeit at

18 Kiss, T., *Adminisztratív tekintet*, 180.

19 Remus Gabriel ANGHEL – Laura GHEORGHIU, *Refugiați, vânduți, regretați: Migrația germanilor din România, 1944–1993*, ANGHEL Remus Gabriel – TRĂȘCĂ Ottmar (eds.), *Un veac frământat: Germanii din România după 1918*, Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studiarea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2019, 308–334.

a slower pace, in the following decades. According to the most recent census data, over three decades the share of Roman Catholics declined from 5.1% to 4.5%, that is, by 0.6 percentage points.

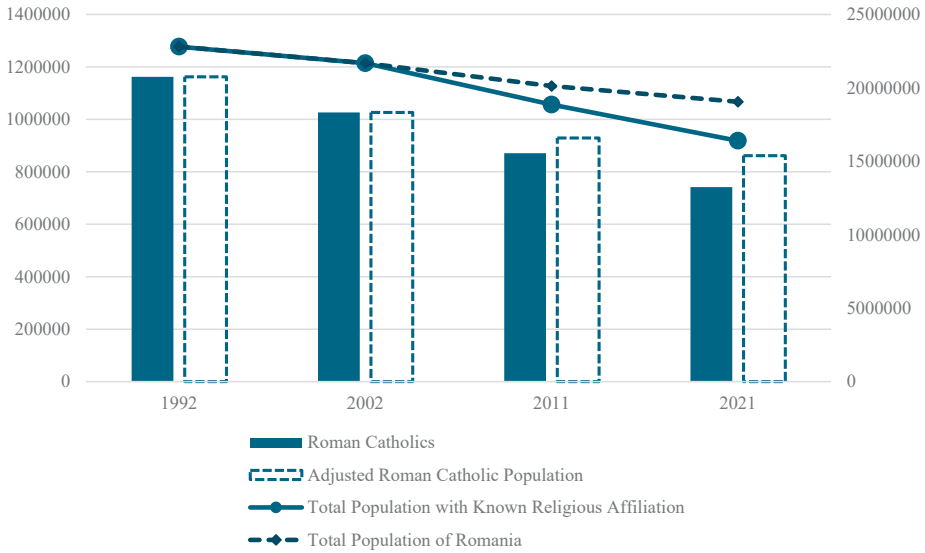


Figure 2. Romania's Total Population and Roman Catholic Population, 1992–2021

Table 3. Changes in Romania's Denominational Structure, 1992–2021 (%)

	1992	2002	2011	2021
Eastern Orthodox	86.8	86.8	86.5	85.5
Roman Catholic	5.1	4.7	4.6	4.5
Reformed	3.5	3.2	3.2	3.0
Greek Catholic	1.0	0.9	0.8	0.7
Pentecostal	1.0	1.5	1.9	2.5
Other religions	2.4	2.7	2.8	2.8
Atheist	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.5
No religion	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.4
Total	100	100	100	100

Changes in the Ethnic Composition of the Roman Catholic Population

As noted above, for historical reasons the Roman Catholic Church in Romania is a multiethnic church in which Hungarians have traditionally constituted the majority. This remains the case today; however, the demographic and migration characteristics of minority groups, which differed from those of the majority population, have significantly transformed the proportions of the various ethnic groups within the Catholic population over the past three decades. As shown in Table 4, in 1992 Hungarians constituted the largest group, accounting for 57.6% of Catholics. The second largest group was Romanians, who made up 31.1% of Catholics, followed by persons of German ethnicity, with 6.1%.

As a result of the demographic and migration characteristics summarized above, the share of Hungarians declined to 54.6%, while that of Germans fell to 1.7%. At the same time, the share of Romanian Catholics increased to 38.2%. Slovak, Bulgarian, Czech, Croatian, and Polish Catholics continue to be present in the several-thousand range; with the exception of Croats, both their numbers and their shares declined during the period under analysis. From other sources, we know that the Catholic Croatian population in fact also declined. The contrary result appearing in the census data is due to the fact that, in 1992, a significant share of Croats identified as Krashovans, a regional variant of Croatian identity. In subsequent censuses, they were classified under the Croatian category.²⁰ By contrast, Italians entered the group of Catholic ethnic communities numbering in the thousands, most of whom are Italian immigrants who moved to Romania after the collapse of the socialist regime.

Romanian Catholics constitute the only larger ethnic group whose share increased significantly within the Catholic population. The reasons for this are most likely complex. On the basis of the available literature, there is no reason to assume that this increase was the result of significant religious conversion; it is more likely that, in their case as well, non-religious processes lay behind the

20 See: VARGA, E. Árpád, *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája III. kötet: Arad, Krassó-Szörény és Temes megyék*. Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 1998. and: Kiss, Dénes – Kiss, Tamás (2024). *Carașovenii: Minoritatea croată din România în primele două decenii postsocialiste. Studiu de caz despre carașoveni*, Kiss, Dénes – PETI, Lehel (eds.), *Etnicitate cotidiană: Studii despre comunități minoritare din România*, Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2024, 17–66.

change. A systematic examination of these processes lies beyond the scope of the present study, but several possible explanations may be mentioned.

Table 4. Ethnic Composition of the Catholic Population, 1992 and 2021

	1992	2021	Share, 1992 (%)	Share, 2021 (%)	Change, 2021-1992
Hungarians	669,420	405,212	57.6	54.6	-3.0
Romanians	361,324	283,320	31.1	38.2	7.1
Germans	70,983	12,495	6.1	1.7	-4.4
Roma	19,275	16,103	1.7	2.2	0.5
Slovaks	12,974	6,853	1.1	0.9	-0.2
Bulgarians	7,351	3,583	0.6	0.5	-0.1
Czechs	4,812	1,290	0.4	0.2	-0.2
Croats	3,954	4,663	0.3	0.6	0.3
Poles	3,729	1,898	0.3	0.3	-0.1
Serbs	920	111	0.1	0.0	-0.1
Ukrainians	620	198	0.1	0.0	0.0
Jews	97	24	0.0	0.0	0.0
Lipovan Russians	94	14	0.0	0.0	0.0
Armenians	94	63	0.0	0.0	0.0
Greeks	57	24	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other ethnicities	6,173	5,649	0.5	0.8	0.2
No data	65	4	0.0	0.0	0.0
ROMANIA	1,161,942	741,504	100	100	0.0
From the category "other ethnicities": Italian		2,773			

First, it may be assumed that among the Catholic population of Moldavia, especially among the predominantly rural population of Csángó origin, the first demographic transition occurred later than in the country as a whole, and that fertility remained above the national average even in the 1990s. Second, the increase in the share of Romanian Catholics may also have been facilitated by the fact that the Catholic areas of Moldavia had greater population-retention capacity during

the period of intensified migration than many Catholic regions in Transylvania and Banat. As a result, the Romanian Catholic population around Bacău declined to a lesser extent than the Catholic population nationwide, as will be discussed later in the study.

Finally, ethnic assimilation may also have been an important factor. A strong shift in identity took place among the Catholic population of Csángó origin, a process that had begun earlier but continued during the post-communist period. According to surveys conducted by Vilmos Tánczos, the number of Hungarian-speaking Csángós declined significantly during the post-communist period.²¹ Ethnic assimilation may also operate through ethnically mixed families: where one spouse is Romanian, members of the next generation often come to identify as ethnically Romanian. This mechanism is not limited to Moldavia, since mixed marriages occur at a relatively high rate across the country.

The case of Roma Catholics deserves particular attention. According to the data, the share of Roma within the Catholic population increased from 1.7% to 2.2%. This increase is consistent with the fact that, over the three decades under analysis, the national share of the Roma population also rose, from 1.8% in 1992 to 3.0% in 2021. It is noteworthy, however, that the increase within the Catholic population lagged behind the national increase, which can probably be explained by the weakening ecclesial integration of Catholic Roma. At the same time, this phenomenon may also be related to the exceptionally strong growth of Pentecostal churches among Roma during the period under analysis,²² a growth that may have occurred partly at the expense of Catholic Roma. The case of the Roma is perhaps the only ethnic group for which religious factors, namely religious conversions to evangelical, above all Pentecostal, churches, appear to have been more decisive than demographic factors.

Compared with Romania's total population, the Catholic population is more rural. While 52.2% of the country's population lives in urban areas, less than half of Catholics, 45.5%, are urban residents. This difference is consistent with the fact

21 TÁNCZOS, Vilmos, *Madárnyelven: A moldvai csángók nyelvéről*, Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2011.

22 FOSZTÓ, László, A megtérés kommunikációja: Gondolatok a vallási változásról pünkösdzizmusra tért romák kapcsán. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, 5.1 (2007), 23–49. PETI, Lehel, „Krisztus ajándéka van bennünk”: Pünkösdzizmus moldvai román, roma és csángó közösségekben. *Vallásantropológiai tanulmányok Közép-Kelet-Európából*. Budapest–Kolozsvár: Balassi Kiadó, 2020.

that Hungarians in Romania, who constitute the majority of Catholics, are overall more rural than the national average; accordingly, 53.6% of Hungarian Catholics live in rural areas. At the same time, rural residents also constitute a majority among Catholics of Romanian ethnicity, at 55.4%. This is due to the fact that a substantial share of Catholics who identify as Romanian consists of a population of Csángó origin, most of whom live in villages.

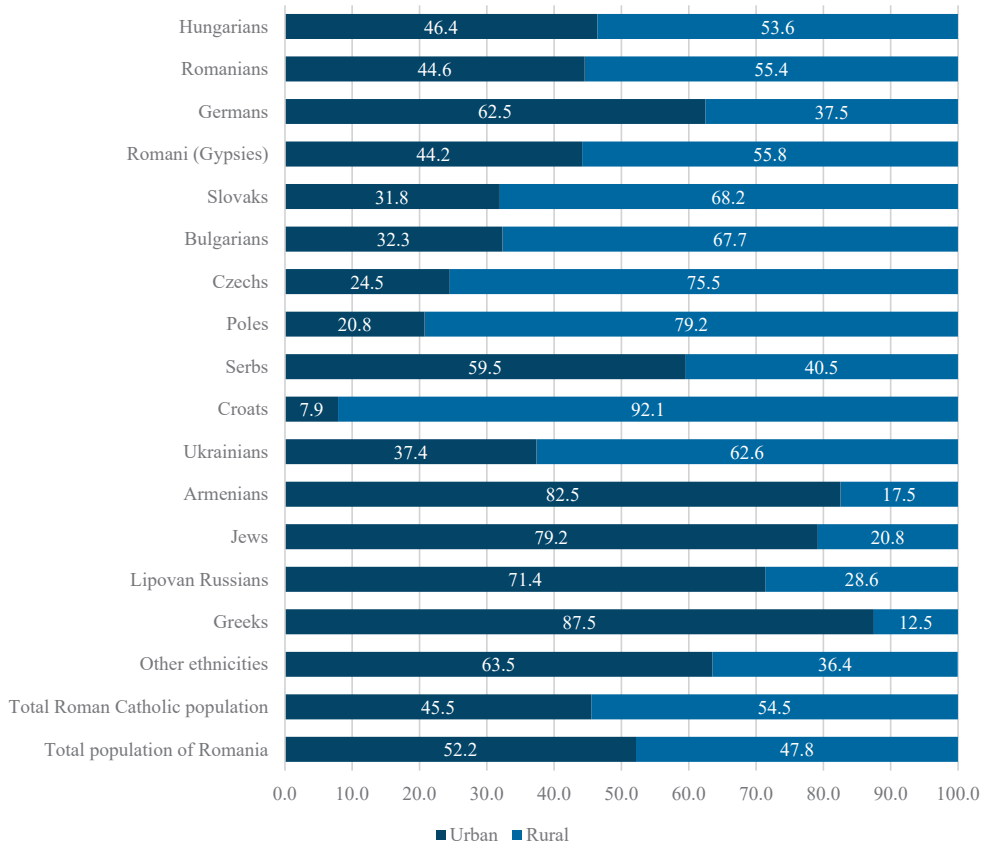


Figure 3. Distribution of Roman Catholics by Ethnicity and Settlement Type, 2021

Most Catholic ethnic minorities numbering only a few thousand persons are characteristically rural populations. Slovak, Croatian, Bulgarian, Czech, and Polish Catholics typically live in clusters of villages in which they constitute local majorities, a circumstance that contributes significantly to their religious and

ethnic reproduction. The Croatian minority is particularly notable in this respect: 92% of its members live in rural areas, largely in a compact micro-region consisting of seven villages around Caraşova.

Alongside these characteristically rural Catholic ethnic groups, there are also several Catholic ethnic groups that are predominantly urban. Thus, 62.5% of Germans who remained in Romania after mass emigration, 59.5% of Serbs, and 82.5% of Armenian Catholics live in urban areas. Those included in the category of “other ethnicities” are also predominantly urban; this category consists largely of recently immigrated ethnic groups. More than half of the entire “other ethnicities” category is made up of Italian immigrants, who typically live in county seats.

Changes in the Territorial Distribution of the Roman Catholic Population

As already indicated in the introductory historical section, the Catholic population in Romania is present to varying degrees across the country’s regions. Of all Catholics, 71.1% live in Transylvania and 23.9% in Moldavia; by contrast, 3.3% live in Bucharest, while Muntenia, Oltenia, and Dobruja together account for only 1.6%. Catholics therefore continue to be concentrated primarily in Transylvania and Moldavia. Within this broader spatial framework, however, notable changes in their territorial distribution occurred over the three decades under analysis. A comparison of the 2021 data with those from 1992 shows that, although the number of Catholics declined in every region, the current population became more concentrated in two narrower regions: Szeklerland and Moldavia.

The increase in the weight of Catholics in Szeklerland within the total Catholic population is likewise related to demographic and migration processes within the Hungarian minority. As noted above, the above-average decline of the Hungarian minority was not territorially uniform; rather, it was inversely related to the regional share of Hungarians: the higher their proportion in a given region, the smaller the extent of decline. Thus, Szeklerland, the only compact Hungarian-majority region in Transylvania, proved to be one of the regions with the strongest population-retention capacity.

In Partium, which is characterized by much more balanced ethnic relations than Szeklerland, the decline was more substantial. In the Central Transylvanian region, broadly defined as the wider sphere of influence of Cluj-Napoca, the Hungarian population, living alongside a significant Romanian majority, experienced substantial decline and loss of share almost everywhere. In the scattered minority areas of

Southern Transylvania, the Hungarian population is practically disappearing. These regionally differentiated processes have also shifted the spatial centre of gravity of the Hungarian population: Hungarians in Transylvania are increasingly concentrated in Szeklerland and Partium. In other words, a process of territorial concentration of the Hungarian population is taking place, and between these two regions Szeklerland is gaining increasing weight.²³

These processes also partly underlie the changes in the regional distribution of the Catholic population. Today, a larger share of Catholics live in Szeklerland than three decades earlier, an increase of 5.4 percentage points, while their share in Partium has remained virtually unchanged, with a change of -0.1 percentage points. By contrast, the share of Catholics living in Central and Southern Transylvania has declined significantly: whereas 12.5% of Catholics lived there in 1992, only 9.6% do so today. In Banat, where Swabian Catholics were still present to some extent in the years immediately following the collapse of the socialist regime, the Catholic presence has declined the most, from 15.8% to 10.9%.

Table 5. Regional Distribution of the Catholic Population, 1992 and 2021

Region	Counties included	Share, 1992 (%)	Share, 2021 (%)	Change, 2021-1992
Szeklerland	Harghita, Covasna, Mureş	32.6	38	5.4
Partium	Bihor, Satu Mare, Sălaj	12.7	12.6	-0.1
Central and Southern Transylvania	Cluj, Bistriţa-Năsăud, Maramureş, Alba, Hunedoara, Sibiu, Braşov	12.5	9.6	-2.9
Banat	Arad, Timiş, Caraş-Severin	15.8	10.9	-4.9
Moldavia	All Moldavian counties	21.7	23.9	2.2
Bucharest	Municipality of Bucharest	2.8	3.3	0.5
Muntenia	All Muntenian counties	0.7	0.7	0.0
Oltenia	All Oltenian counties	0.5	0.3	-0.2
Dobruja	Constanţa, Tulcea	0.6	0.6	0.0

Apart from Szeklerland, Moldavia is the other region of the country in which the Catholic population increased in relative terms. Examining the changes in Moldavia at the county level (Table 6.) shows that this increase was concentrated

23 Kiss, Tamás, A 2011-es romániai népszámlálás tanulságai és következményei. *Pro Minori-tate*, 3 (2012), 9-26.

in three counties: Bacău, Neamț, and Iași. Among these, Bacău County stands out, as it includes a large part of the settlement area of the Csángó population. Whereas in 1992, 10.8% of the country's Catholics lived in this county, by 2021 this share had increased to 12.1%.

Table 6, which presents the distribution of the Catholic population by county, also shows the numerical decline of the Catholic population in each county, as well as the share that the missing Catholic population represents relative to the county's Catholic population in 1992. In other words, it indicates the percentage by which the Catholic population of each county declined. Looking at these columns, the situation of Timiș County is particularly notable: it has more than 50,000 fewer Catholics than three decades earlier, meaning that the Catholic population there declined by 56.2%. In terms of numerical decline, Timiș County is followed by the two counties with the largest Catholic populations, Harghita and Bacău. In these counties, however, the rate of Catholic decline was below the national value: while the Catholic population declined by 36.2% nationwide, the decrease was only 22.2% in Harghita County and 28.7% in Bacău County.

A further examination of the county-level data shows that, in terms of the percentage decline of Catholics, two counties in Oltenia, Gorj and Mehedinți, rank first. In these counties, the already small Catholic population declined to one-third of its earlier size over three decades. They are followed by counties in Southern Transylvania and Banat: Caraș-Severin (-60.5%), Hunedoara (-58.7%), the already mentioned Timiș, followed by Sibiu (-55.1%) and Alba County (-54.1%).

Table 6. Number and Share of the Roman Catholic Population by County, 1992 and 2021

County	1992	2021	Change, 2021-1992	County-level decline (%)	Share of Catholics nationwide, 1992 (%)	Share of Catholics nationwide, 2021 (%)	Change in national share
Harghita	228884	178126	-50758	-22.2	19.7	24.0	4.3
Bacău	125805	89742	-36063	-28.7	10.8	12.1	1.3
Timiș	93033	40703	-52330	-56.2	8.0	5.5	-2.5
Covasna	85648	64008	-21640	-25.3	7.4	8.6	1.3
Satu Mare	74862	49946	-24916	-33.3	6.4	6.7	0.3
Bihor	64616	39893	-24723	-38.3	5.6	5.4	-0.2
Mureș	63933	39470	-24463	-38.3	5.5	5.3	-0.2

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN POST-COMMUNIST ROMANIA: SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES

County	1992	2021	Change, 2021-1992	County-level decline (%)	Share of Catholics nationwide, 1992 (%)	Share of Catholics nationwide, 2021 (%)	Change in national share
Neamț	62374	44033	-18341	-29.4	5.4	5.9	0.6
Arad	58863	27565	-31298	-53.2	5.1	3.7	-1.3
Iași	39627	29098	-10529	-26.6	3.4	3.9	0.5
Maramureș	36828	17653	-19175	-52.1	3.2	2.4	-0.8
Cluj	32729	18467	-14262	-43.6	2.8	2.5	-0.3
Ilfov and Bucharest	32454	24526	-7928	-24.4	2.8	3.3	0.5
Caraș-Severin	31896	12614	-19282	-60.5	2.7	1.7	-1.0
Brașov	29732	15105	-14627	-49.2	2.6	2.0	-0.5
Hunedoara	26981	11147	-15834	-58.7	2.3	1.5	-0.8
Suceava	9542	5304	-4238	-44.4	0.8	0.7	-0.1
Sibiu	8436	3791	-4645	-55.1	0.7	0.5	-0.2
Sălaj	7786	3904	-3882	-49.9	0.7	0.5	-0.1
Vaslui	6924	3362	-3562	-51.4	0.6	0.5	-0.1
Constanța	6546	4000	-2546	-38.9	0.6	0.5	0.0
Alba	6208	2849	-3359	-54.1	0.5	0.4	-0.2
Vrancea	5075	3818	-1257	-24.8	0.4	0.5	0.1
Bistrița-Năsăud	4500	2374	-2126	-47.2	0.4	0.3	-0.1
Prahova	3024	1722	-1302	-43.1	0.3	0.2	0.0
Galați	2463	1149	-1314	-53.3	0.2	0.2	-0.1
Mehedinți	2414	900	-1514	-62.7	0.2	0.1	-0.1
Dolj	1503	831	-672	-44.7	0.1	0.1	0.0
Brăila	1242	643	-599	-48.2	0.1	0.1	0.0
Argeș	1162	718	-444	-38.2	0.1	0.1	0.0
Gorj	1157	400	-757	-65.4	0.1	0.1	0.0
Dâmbovița	1122	709	-413	-36.8	0.1	0.1	0.0
Tulcea	883	438	-445	-50.4	0.1	0.1	0.0
Botoșani	865	547	-318	-36.8	0.1	0.1	0.0
Vâlcea	709	373	-336	-47.4	0.1	0.1	0.0

County	1992	2021	Change, 2021- 1992	County- level decline (%)	Share of Catholics nationwide, 1992 (%)	Share of Catholics nationwide, 2021 (%)	Change in national share
Buzău	500	397	-103	-20.6	0.0	0.1	0.0
Giurgiu	483	362	-121	-25.1	0.0	0.0	0.0
Călărași	353	226	-127	-36.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Olt	326	216	-110	-33.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Ialomița	323	253	-70	-21.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Teleorman	131	122	-9	-6.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
Romania	1161942	741504	-420438	-36.2	100.0	100.0	

The Educational Attainment of the Roman Catholic Population

In the final section of the study, I compare the distribution of the Roman Catholic population by educational attainment with that of the country's total population. In this respect, too, significant differences from the national pattern can be observed. In the highest educational category, that of university graduates, the Catholic population lags behind the national share by 4.4 percentage points. The proportions of those with post-secondary and upper-secondary education are similar to the national figures, whereas the shares of those who completed vocational education or only lower-secondary education are higher among Catholics than in the population as a whole. At the lowest levels, the shares of those with only primary education or only preschool education again do not differ from the national proportions.

This educational structure, which differs from the national pattern, also reflects the socio-demographic position characteristic of the Hungarian minority. As is well established in the literature, the position of the Hungarian population within Romania's social structure has demonstrably deteriorated over the past three decades.

The disadvantaged position of Hungarians within Romania's social structure emerged during the communist period as a result of a deliberate anti-minority ethnopolitics, but it deteriorated further in the post-communist era.²⁴ Three main

²⁴ Kiss, Tamás, Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában: A magyarok társadalmi pozíciói. *Regio*, 22.2 (2014), 187–245.

dimensions of this process of social marginalization in the post-communist period can be identified.

First, the already disadvantaged position of the Hungarian population within the settlement structure, which had developed during the final decades of the communist regime, worsened further. Whereas half a century ago urban residents still constituted the majority among Hungarians, this has since been reversed, and the share of rural residents among Hungarians now exceeds that among Romanians. The consequences of this were reflected above in the pronounced rural character of the Catholic population.

Second, as a result of socialist educational policy, which was likewise shaped by ethnopolitical considerations, by the end of the communist period Romanians had come to outnumber Hungarians in the higher educational categories. In the post-communist period, higher education expanded substantially, leading to a significant increase in the share of persons with tertiary education at the national level. This increase, however, was smaller among Hungarians, and the educational gap between the two ethnic groups therefore widened further.²⁵

Finally, for the same reasons, the position of the Hungarian population within the country's occupational structure also became more disadvantaged. By the end of the socialist period, Hungarians were underrepresented, relative to Romanians, in higher-prestige occupational categories, and this did not change after the collapse of the socialist regime.²⁶ Since the Hungarian population had previously occupied a more favourable position than the majority ethnicity within the country's social structure, the process of marginalization led to a deteriorating position in the upper strata and to a greater concentration in the middle strata, a form of "crowding" into middle positions. In both the educational and occupational structures, this resulted in the overrepresentation of Hungarians in medium-prestige categories.²⁷ The effects of this process are visible in the educational structure of the Catholic population: while the share of those with higher education is below the national average, the share of those with intermediate levels of education is higher.

25 KISS, T., *Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában*.

26 VERES, Valér, Népszámlálás 2011: A népességszám, foglalkozásszerkezet és iskolázottság nemzetiség szerinti megoszlása Romániában. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, 11.2 (2013), 23–54.

27 KISS, T., *Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában*. VERES, V., Népszámlálás 2011.

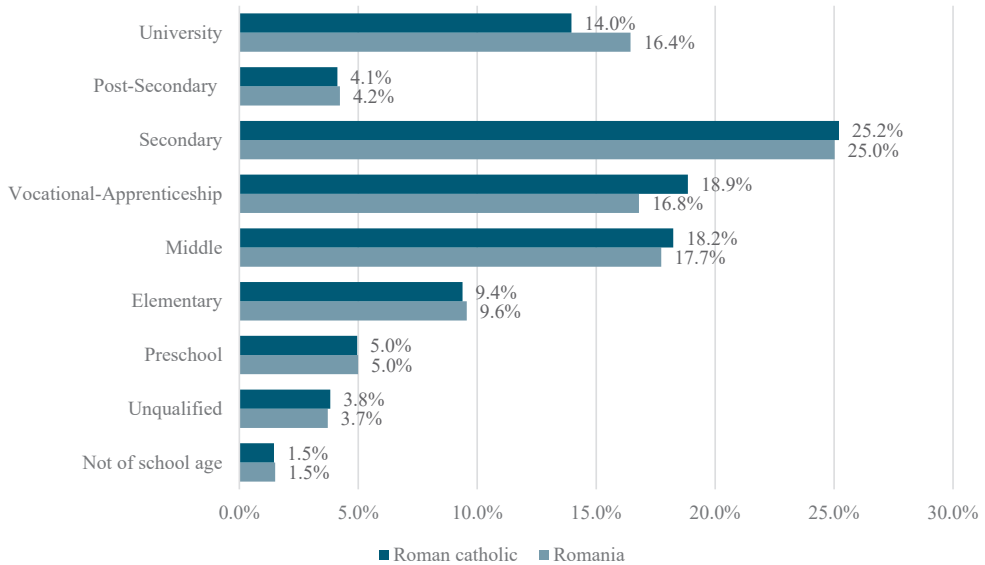


Figure 4. Romania's Roman Catholic population and total population by educational attainment. Percentages.

Conclusions

In this study, I examined changes in the size, territorial distribution, ethnic composition, and educational structure of the Roman Catholic population in Romania between 1992 and 2021. The results of the analysis show that changes in the Roman Catholic population were shaped primarily not by religious factors, but by demographic, migration-related, and ethnic processes.

The number of Catholics declined significantly during the period under analysis. This decline occurred as part of the broader decrease in Romania's total population, yet it was somewhat faster among Catholics. This more rapid decline is related to the denomination's specific ethnic composition. The demographic decline and emigration of the Hungarian population, which constitutes the majority of Catholics, as well as of the formerly significant German population, played a decisive role in the decrease of the Catholic population.

Alongside numerical decline, the internal structure of the Catholic population also changed. The share of Catholics of Romanian ethnicity increased, while the share of Hungarians and especially Germans declined. From a territorial perspective,

the concentration of the population in Szeklerland and Moldavia increased, whereas the relative weight of Banat and of the Central and Southern Transylvanian regions decreased. The specific characteristics of the Hungarian minority are strongly reflected in the social composition of the Catholic population. As in the case of the Hungarian population, Catholics are more likely than the national average to live in rural settlements; in terms of educational attainment, they are underrepresented among the highest educational categories and overrepresented among those with intermediate levels of education.

The most important conclusion of my analysis is that changes in denominational populations should not be interpreted exclusively through the categories of the sociology of religion. Although religious conversion and secularization may play a role in the case of certain groups, in the case of Roman Catholicism in Romania the explanatory power of demographic, migration-related, and ethnic processes has proved to be considerably greater.

Bibliography

- ANGHEL, Remus Gabriel – GHEORGHIU, Laura (2019). Refugiați, vânduți, regretați: Migrația germanilor din România, 1944–1993, ANGHEL Remus Gabriel – TRĂȘCĂ Ottmar (eds.), *Un veac frământat: Germanii din România după 1918*, Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 308–334.
- BENDA, Kálmán, *Moldvai csángó-magyar okmánytár*, vols. 1–2, Budapest: Teleki László Alapítvány, 2003.
- BOZGAN, Ovidiu, *Cronica unui eșec previzibil: România și Sfântul Scaun în epoca pontificatului lui Paul al VI-lea (1963–1978)*. București: Editura Curtea Veche, 2004.
- CUCIUC, Constantin – GHEORGHE, Manuela, Tranziția în domeniul religiozității. *Sociologie Românească*, 5–6 (1995).
- DUMEA, Emil, On the ecclesial history of the Catholic Church of Romania: An overview. *Romanian Journal of Artistic Creativity*, 6.1 (2018), 23–32.
- DUMITRAȘCU, Veronica – TRICĂ Alexandru Ștefan – Caragea, Nicoleta, Population of Romania: Shapes and demographic trends. *Romanian Journal of Sociological Studies*, 2/2018. 119–135.
- FOSZTÓ, László, A megtérés kommunikációja: Gondolatok a vallási változásról pünkösdzimusra tért romák kapcsán. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, 5.1 (2007), 23–49.
- FREDERIKS, M. T. (2015). Religion, migration and identity: A conceptual and theoretical exploration. *Mission Studies*, 32.2 (2007), 181–202.

- GRIM, Brian J. – FINKE, Roger, International religion indexes: Government regulation, government favoritism, and social regulation of religion. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion*, 2 (2006), 2–40.
- HACKETT Conrad – STONAWSKI Marcin – TONG Yunping – KRAMER Stephanie, SHI Anne – FAHMY Dalia (2025). *How the global religious landscape changed from 2010 to 2020*. Pew Research Center. Source: https://www.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/20/2025/06/PR_2025.06.09_global-religious-change_report.pdf Accessed: 22. 06. 2026 <https://doi.org/10.58094/fj71-ny11>
- HOUT, Michael – GREELEY, Andrew – WILDE, Melissa J., The demographic imperative in religious change in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 2/2001, 468–500.
- KIM, Rebecca Y. (2011). Religion and ethnicity: Theoretical connections. *Religions*, 2.3 (2011), 312–329.
- KISS, Dénes – Kiss, Tamás (2024). Carașovenii: Minoritatea croată din România în primele două decenii postsocialiste. Studiu de caz despre carașoveni, KISS, Dénes – PETI, Lehel (eds.), *Etnicitate cotidiană: Studii despre comunități minoritare din România*, Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2024, 17–66.
- KISS, Dénes – ROSTA, Gergely – VOICU, Bogdan, Between Romania and Hungary: Religiosity among Hungarians in Transylvania, LUIJKX R. – REESKENS T. – SIEBEN, I. (eds.), *Reflections on European values: Honouring Loek Halman's contribution to the European Values Study* Tiburg: Open Press TiU, 2022, 179–195.
- KISS, Tamás, *Adminisztratív tekintet: Az erdélyi magyar demográfiai diskurzus összehasonlító elemzéséhez. Az erdélyi magyar népesség statisztikai konstrukciójáról*. Cluj-Napoca: Institutul Pentru Studierea Problemelor Minorităților Naționale, 2010.
- KISS, Tamás, A 2011-es romániai népszámlálás tanulságai és következményei. *Pro Minoritate*, 3 (2012), 9–26.
- KISS, Tamás, Etnikai rétegződési rendszer Erdélyben és Romániában: A magyarok társadalmi pozíciói. *Regio*, 22.2 (2014), 187–245.
- MIKECS, László (1989). *Csángók* (2nd reprint ed.). Optimum. (Original work published 1941)
- MITCHELL, Claire, The religious content of ethnic identities. *Sociology*, 40.6 (2006), 1135–1152.

- NAGY, Zoltán Mihály – NOVÁK, Csaba Zoltán, The Roman Catholic Church during and after the communist regime, STAN, L. –STAN, T. (eds.), *Church reckoning with communism in post-1989 Romania*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021, 93–114
- PETI, Lehel, „Krisztus ajándéka van bennünk”: Pütkösdiizmus moldvai román, roma és csángó közösségekben. *Vallásantropológiai tanulmányok Közép-Kelet-Európából*. Budapest–Kolozsvár: Balassi Kiadó, 2020.
- TÁNCZOS, Vilmos, *Madárnyelven: A moldvai csángók nyelvéről*, Kolozsvár: Erdélyi Múzeum Egyesület, 2011.
- VARGA, E. Árpád, Az erdélyi megyék népességének felekezeti tagolódása 1850–2002 között. In E. Á. Varga, *Fejezetek a jelenkori Erdély népesedéstörténetéből*, Budapest: Püski, 1998.
- VARGA, E. Árpád, *Erdély etnikai és felekezeti statisztikája III. kötet: Arad, Krassó-Szörény és Temes megyék*. Csíkszereda: Pro-Print, 1998.
- VARGA, Norbert, A moldvai csángó migráció (1526–1914) a társadalmi, gazdasági és demográfiai változások tükrében, *Demográfiai változások, változó gazdasági kihívások Nemzetközi Tudományos Konferencia*, Sopron: University of Sopron, 2018.
- VERES, Valér, Népszámlálás 2011: A népességszám, foglalkozásszerkezet és iskolázottság nemzetiség szerinti megoszlása Romániában. *Erdélyi Társadalom*, 11, 2/2013, 23–54.
- VOICU, Malina – CONSTANTIN, Andreea (2012). Religious revival in Romania: Between cohort replacement and contextual changes, BOROWIK, I. –TOMKA M. –POLLACK, D. (eds.), *Transformations of religiosity: Religion and religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989–2010*, Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 155–174.