



ORIGINAL PAPER

Religion, Politics, and Trust: A Review of Romania's Social Fabric Across 20 Years

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Abstract:

This study investigates the evolution of Romania's social fabric over 20 years, utilizing aggregate data from the World Values Survey (WVS). The research examines changes in social norms, attitudes, and values across political, religious, and national identities, and their impact on subjective well-being. Findings reveal a persistence of collectivist values centered on family and community, alongside an increase in national pride but not necessarily a willingness for collective action. Religiosity shows a rise in personal belief but a decline in organized participation. Political engagement and trust in institutions, however, declined significantly. Despite these trends, subjective well-being improved, suggesting that evolving social attitudes and values positively influence life satisfaction. The study concludes with a discussion of the interplay between tradition and modernity in shaping Romania's evolving social landscape and highlights future potential directions for research.

Keywords: *social fabric, religiosity, well-being, Romania, World Values Survey*

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Introduction

Since the collapse of the Communist regime in 1989, Romania has faced the ongoing challenge of developing its economy and social capital, and of reshaping a participative civil society. One of the main goals of European social policy is to promote social cohesion and support people's well-being. However, few studies show whether there is a relationship between these goals in Romania, and even fewer are focused on the measurement of these variables across time. This project uses aggregate data from the World Values Survey (WVS) to measure the changing nature of Romania's sociocultural values across an analytical timeframe of 20 years. Social fabric is defined as the normative orientations that underlie a community's beliefs and way of life. This encompasses the cultural values, attitudes, and norms that make up a social system. Subjective well-being refers to an individual's own assessment of their health and quality of life (Das, K.V., Jones-Harrell, C., Fan, Y., 2020). The end of this research, on a micro-level, is to locate Romania in the larger landscape of the process of globalization and assess the resulting sociocultural changes on the population. Specifically, the three research questions to be answered are:

1. How much continuity or change has there been in Romania's social norms, attitudes, and beliefs?
2. What are the most salient and persistent characteristics in political, religious, and national identity?
3. What is the effect of social attitudes and values on subjective well-being?

On a macro-level, this project aims to use Romania as a case study of social change. From its position in the midst of a socio-political transition, Romania can provide insight into the implications of societal traumas and on implementing institutional change after a mass social crisis, which is a pressing need in the face of the cascading collective traumas marking this decade.

Literature Review

Research using the World Values Survey (WVS) provides insights into cultural, social, and political values across different societies. The survey's longitudinal nature enables researchers to track changes in values over time within societies, identifying societal trends and shifts in attitudes towards various issues such as democracy, gender roles, and environmental concerns. Specifically, WVS research can provide insight in two domains. First, by examining values related to trust, tolerance, and social capital, WVS research can shed light on factors contributing to social cohesion and integration within societies. Secondly, WVS data can provide insights into the effects of globalization on cultural values, including changes in attitudes toward traditional norms, individualism, and cosmopolitanism. Both of these areas can provide valuable contextual contributions to policymakers.

Research based on the World Values Survey (WVS) and other such data sources have probed the cultural shifts in Romania since its Communist Revolution in 1989, although much of this literature is dated. Several studies have observed that Romania has remained a traditional society in terms of religious authority, risk avoidance, focus on discipline, and conservatism (Friedlmeier & Graveliuc, 2013). One study observing transgenerational patterns in three generational cohorts found that young Romanians implicitly assume the same values and attitudes as the older generation, reinforcing collective narratives and social strata (Gavreliuc, 2012). A comparative analysis of historical regions of Romania found that individualistic values

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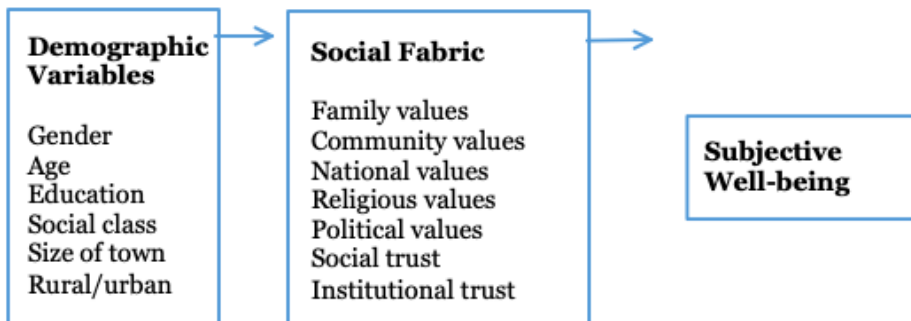
characteristic of competition and independence are still sparse, and that negative attitudes towards institutions which result in lack of social trust and involvement are still prevalent (Iacobuta, Baci, & Asandului, 2009). The economic recession has been cited as a possible obstacle to a postmodern value orientation (Friedlmeier & Graveliuc, 2013). Another study analyzing why political participation is weaker in Romania than in the West found that economic resources and human capital (e.g. education, urban residence, employment, and socioeconomic status) impacted civic participation (Dragoman, 2009).

Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index report on Romania notes that the public's satisfaction with democracy has declined markedly in the last two years and that levels of trust in society are low (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2024). Blatant cases of corruption are less frequent, but the political system has been slow to respond to direct societal pressure. Interestingly, as a long-term trend, the Orthodox Church is the leading institution in terms of public trust (67%), scoring above national political institutions like the government or parliament. Overall, Romania's internal challenges are related to the enduring consequences of ineffective governance and include limited administrative capacity, delayed reforms in key sectors, clientelism, and a declining commitment to continue the anti-corruption fight.

Methodology

The WVS is a representative comparative time series of the sociocultural, political, economic, and religious positions of people from 120 countries. Conducted every five years by global research teams and used to analyze economic development, democratization, and social capital, its data has proved the instrumental role of a country's social fabric in the stability of its political institutions, the flourishing of its civil society, and the effectiveness of its policy. This study uses all available data on Romania [waves 3 (1998), waves 5 (2005), waves 6 (2012) and 7 (2017)] from the WVS. To maximize the reliability of the longitudinal analysis, the set of questions selected was consistent in wording and response categories across the waves.

This study identifies seven measures of the social fabric on three indicators of well-being, together with a number of sociodemographic controls:



Based on the theoretical outline presented above and the contextual landscape of previous findings, three predictions were made:

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Hypothesis 1: Across all cohorts, it is expected that the scores of religiosity will decrease and the scores of political participation will increase across time.

Hypothesis 2: Political identity will be characterized by restored trust and engagement in political institutions; religious identity will be characterized by an emphasis on personal belief over organized participation; and national identity will be characterized by collective action.

Hypothesis 3: Self-reported well-being will increase across the waves as Romania shows a shift towards more modern and European social values.

Measures

Social fabric was operationalized by seven normative orientations: family values, community values, national values, social trust, institutional trust, religious values, and political values. *Family values* and *community values* are calculated using the questions on the importance of family and the importance of friends (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = important, 2 = not important) respectively. To measure *national values*, I used two survey items—one asking about willingness to fight for country (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = yes, 2 = no) and the other about national pride (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = proud, 2 = not proud)—to create a three-point scale of national fidelity. *Social trust* was measured using the survey item asking whether most people can be trusted (1 = yes, 2 = no). *Institutional trust* was measured as *confidence in government* and *confidence in political parties*.

The variables *political values* and *religious values* were coded into additive scales made of survey items that captured the degree of importance and of participation in politics or religion. The variables were operationalized using questions that measured either attitudes or participation. *Political attitude* was assessed by the questions on importance of politics in life and interest in politics. *Political participation* was assessed through questions on party membership, frequency of discussing political matters with friends, and various political actions such as signing a petition. These variables were combined to encapsulate *political values*. *Religious attitude* was assessed by questions on belief in God, the importance of God in one's life, and the importance of religion in one's life. *Religious participation* was assessed by identification as a religious person, membership of a church or religious organization, and frequency of attending religious services. These variables were combined to encapsulate *religious values*. Each respective scale has a minimum value of zero (not religious/political at all) and a maximum value of three (religiously/politically active).

To measure *subjective well-being*, I used three survey items: feeling of happiness (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = happy, 2 = not happy), satisfaction with life (collapses and recoded as: 1 = satisfied, 2 = ambivalent, 3 = not satisfied), and subjective state of health (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = good, 2 = fair, 3 = not good).

Six single-item covariate control variables are used in these analyses to account for variation due to demographics. These are *gender* (0 = male, 1 = female), *age* (coded as 1 = <29, 2 = 30-49, 3 = >50), *size of town* (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = <2000, 2 = 5-20,000, 3 = >20,000), *education* (eight ordinal categories from 1 = “inadequately completed elementary education” to 8 = “university with degree/higher education—upper-level tertiary certificate”), *employment status* (collapsed and recoded as: 1 = not employed, 2 = part-time, 3 = full-time or self-employed), and *social class* (a subjective self-rating, recoded as: 1 = “lower class,” 2 = “working class,” 3 = “lower middle class,” 4 = “upper middle class,” 5 = “upper class”).

Results

Demographics. The final sample consists of 7,391 respondents across 20 years. The descriptive statistics include age, gender, education level, and size of settlement size. The mean percentage of the female population across the four time periods is 52.275%. The mean age of the participants is 45.35 years with a standard deviation of 1.92 years.

Family Values. The measure for the importance of family was stable and high (89-91%) across the chronology of the waves, indicating collectivistic attitudes and the primacy of familial ties. This trend suggests that in Romanian culture family is still considered a core value and among the most important aspects of life.

Community Values. The measure for the importance of friends increased across the chronology of the waves (percentage of participants responding 'very important' increased from 21% to 38%), affirming that Romania can still be considered a collectivistic society that values commitment to the member 'group' above the individual.

National Values. The national values measure consisted of two variables: (1) willingness to fight for country, and (2) pride in nationality. These offer a broad overview of changes in public sentiment regarding collective identity and the propensity towards collective action over time. Firstly, there was a decrease in the proportion of participants willing to fight for their country between the first wave (1994-1998) and the final wave (2017-2022), indicating a potential decrease in nationalistic sentiment or increase in pacifism or passivity. Secondly, a consistent majority of respondents report being 'Very proud' or 'Quite proud' of their Romanian nationality, with a notable increase in those 'Very proud' from 1994-1998 to 2017-2022. While national pride seems to be increasing, with more individuals identifying strongly with their nationality, the willingness to fight for one's country is not increasing. This suggests that while Romanians are confident in their nationality, it does not necessarily translate into a willingness to engage in collective action such as combat.

Religious Values. Religiosity consisted of two sets of measures: (1) religious attitude, which was assessed by questions on belief in God, the importance of God in one's life, and the importance of religion in one's life; and (2) religious participation, which was assessed by identification as a religious person, membership of a church or religious organization, and frequency of attending religious services. In the variables that make up the religious attitude measure, there was an upward trend in self-reported belief in God, importance of religion, and importance of God increased over time, which indicates an increase in religiosity in Romania since 1998. In the variables that make up the religious participation measure, there was a decrease in self-reported religious membership and religious attendance, which indicates a decrease in religious activity. Specifically, there was a decrease in more frequent attendance (more than once a week and once a week) and an increase in attendance on special holidays. Given that a large portion of the WVS sample reported not being members of a church, this suggests that religiosity is less associated with or attached to an organized institution and more to individual belief. These trends collectively suggest a complex religious landscape mediated by political attitudes.

Political Values. Political values consisted of two sets of measures: (1) political attitude, which was assessed by the questions on the importance of politics in life and interest in politics; and (2) political participation, which was assessed through questions

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on party membership, frequency of discussing political matters with friends, and various political actions such as signing a petition. In the variables that make up the political attitude measure, there was a decline in self-reported importance and interest in politics, suggesting a trend toward disengagement over the years. In the variables that make up the political participation measure, there was a decrease in political actions such as signing a petition and attending a demonstration, and in party membership. These measures indicate an overall trend of low confidence, dissatisfaction, or mistrust in political parties and in the government.

Social Trust. Social trust was measured using the survey item asking whether participants agree that “most people can be trusted.” Overall, there was a downturn in participants who agreed with this statement, implying a perceived decrease in trustworthiness among people.

Institutional Trust. Institutional trust was measured using two variables: (1) confidence in government and (2) confidence in political parties. The number of participants signalling ‘No confidence at all’ increased from 27% to 43% and from 37% to 50% respectively. This trend indicates a notable increase in skepticism towards government and political parties, with more Romanians expressing very low or no confidence in these institutions.

Subjective Well-being. The subjective well-being measure consisted of the following variables: self-reported feelings of happiness, satisfaction with life, and subjective state of health. There was a positive trend across all aspects of well-being measured, indicating perceived improvement in quality of life and well-being in the population across 20 years.

Discussion

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The first research question guiding the study concerned how much continuity or change has there been in Romania's social norms, attitudes, and beliefs across the waves of data. It is clear that Romania has experienced both continuity and change in its social norms, as family values remain strong and collectivism persists despite a gradual shift towards individualism and increasing reliance on personal autonomy and self-expression. Contrary to the hypothesis that religiosity scores would decrease and political participation scores would increase across all cohorts over time, the findings revealed a notable increase in religiosity, while political participation consistently declined.

The second question sought to identify the persistent characteristics in Romania's political, religious, and national identity. In political identity, there was a notable decline in engagement and trust in political institutions; in religious identity, an increase in personal belief and the importance of religion persisted despite decreased church attendance; and in national identity, a sense of pride was not accompanied by a corresponding willingness to engage in national defense or collective action. As such, the initial hypothesis was incorrect.

The third question concerned the effect of social attitudes and values on subjective well-being. Positive trends in subjective well-being, as indicated by self-reported happiness and life satisfaction, suggest that the evolving social attitudes and values—such as increased family loyalty and spiritual commitment—contribute to an improved perception of quality of life in Romanian society. The third hypothesis was correct in anticipating increased well-being. The finding suggest that social attitudes and

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values prioritizing family loyalty, personal religiosity, increased recognition of diversity, evolving attitudes towards individual autonomy positively influence subjective well-being, leading to higher levels of reported happiness and life satisfaction among individuals. However, this shift is accompanied by challenges such as declining social trust and political engagement, indicating a complex interplay between tradition and modernity.

Analysis

Overall, the WVS data presents a multifaceted view of native Romanian society in transition from 1998 to 2017, reflecting a tension between individualism and collective identity. While the increased recognition of diversity could indicate a shift toward a more multicultural society, the lack of a corresponding increase in social trust poses challenges to social cohesion. The analysis of the data reveals a significant downward trend in social trust among the native Romanian population from 1998 to 2017, as evidenced by a marked decline in the belief that "most people can be trusted." These transitions suggest a broader societal trend characterized by eroding faith in political structures and a retreat from communal engagement, possibly reflecting a larger global movement toward individualism and skepticism of political entities and collective initiatives.

The interplay between societal engagement and trust illustrates a concerning trend: as political involvement declines and social trust erodes, an increasing number of individuals express caution in their interactions with others. Examining neighborly relationships, there is an interesting juxtaposition within this timeframe. Historically, mentions of immigrants and foreign workers as neighbors saw a substantial drop between 2005 and 2009, followed by a noticeable resurgence from 2010 to 2014. This pattern may indicate an increased visibility or awareness of these communities. Additionally, the data shows an upward trend in the acknowledgment of neighbors of different races and religions from 1994 to 2017, signaling potential growth in community diversity and possibly increased tolerance. However, the initial decline in the mention of neighbors from different religious backgrounds—followed by a resurgence in the later years—hints at evolving societal perspectives on religious diversity. Despite signs of increasing diversity in certain respects, a concurrent decline in generalized social trust suggests that while native Romanian communities may be diversifying in terms of race, religion, and immigrant status, it has not yet engendered a corresponding increase in social cohesion or trust. Factors such as socio-economic disparities, changing political landscapes, and growing individualism may contribute to this complex relationship (Bălăţescu, 2004).

It was expected that participants would give more importance to political participation and national identity in response to Europeanization and democratization. While there remains a robust sense of national pride among Romanians, the correlation between this pride and the readiness to defend the country has weakened over time. This disparity raises critical questions about national identity and collective purpose in the contemporary context. Interest in political matters shows a clear trend of disengagement among native Romanians from 1998 to 2017, evidenced by a declining interest in politics and the perceived importance of political involvement. Conversely, the data indicates a resilient commitment to religious identities, with a noted rise in the percentage of individuals who consider religion vital in their lives. This shift suggests a reorientation toward more spiritual values amid political and social uncertainty, indicating that many individuals may seek solace and community through their faith.

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Family, too, remains a central mechanism for the transmission of values. Although there has been a gradual shift towards greater individualism in Romanian society, as evidenced by changing attitudes towards personal autonomy and self-expression, collectivist values such as family loyalty and solidarity continue to hold significance. Previous research has affirmed the role of cohesion (Voinea, 2005) and solidarity, defined as “mutual trust and support, mutual respect and understanding, fidelity” (Popescu, 2009. p. 58, p. 73) in familial norms. The societal concept of family was influenced by the social and demographic policies enacted during the Communist era, which considered the family to be “the vital cell of the society” (Fodor et. al., 2002; Potârca, G., Mills, M., & Lesnard, L., 2013). Most recently, Matei and Bobârnat (2022) observed how familial solidarity affected and was affected by transnational migration. Previous research however has suggested that value transmission between Romanian parents and offspring was weak and limited to collectivist values (Friedlmeier, 2006).

Research on subjective well-being in Romania has been varied. A cross-sectional study investigated analyzing of happiness and life satisfaction across 59 countries using the WVS survey conducted from 2010 to 2014 placed Romania in the bottom 10 countries in terms of happiness (Ngamaba, 2017). This study found that the significant factors driving happiness and life satisfaction included freedom of choice, trust, national pride, importance of friends and family, and weekly religious attendance. A study on the relationship between social capital and well-being in Romania found that a unit increase in social capital, which was measured by generalized social trust and membership of in voluntary organizations, would increase well-being of individuals by 4.9% (Kumar, 2017). The International Survey on Child Well-Being (ISCWeB) project found that Romanian children reported higher levels of subjective well-being than their counterparts in other countries (Bălătescu & Bacter, 2016, 2020). Despite the number of such studies, research on the predictors of well-being Romania remains vague and imprecise (Serban-Oprescu, Dedu, & Serban-Oprescu, 2019).

While the World Values Survey (WVS) data provides valuable insights into the changing social and cultural dynamics in Romania, several limitations must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings. First, the reliance on self-reported survey data introduces potential biases such as social desirability bias and measurement error. Second, although the WVS data is longitudinal, there are variations in sample sizes and survey methodologies across different waves. Lastly, because it cannot encompass all relevant variables, the survey only intuitively broad societal trends and may overlook nuanced or localized experiences within specific Romanian communities. Future research can use these trends to develop insight into their implications: How are changing cultural values and social norms shaping identity formation and social cohesion in Romanian communities? What are the social and cultural implications of increasing diversity and migration flow in Romania, and how can policies promote social integration and intercultural dialogue?

Conclusion

Overall, WVS data offers valuable insights into the values and cultural shifts occurring in Romania since the Communist era. These trends highlight the complex interplay between historical legacies, socio-economic changes, and cultural shifts in shaping the values of the native Romanian population. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for policymakers, community leaders, and researchers as they seek to navigate

Romania's evolving social fabric and inform policies and interventions aimed at promoting social cohesion, democratic governance, and economic development.

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