

## THE END OF A GEO-DEMOGRAPHIC SINGULARITY: THE CATHOLICS FROM MOLDAVIA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** “Well-known for their vitality, they managed after 1990 to adapt to a new social, economic and political context that re-shaped their demographic profile. Being among the first to emigrate in order to find a place to work, especially to the states in the South of Europe, the Catholic communities from Moldavia have been subjected to a double erosion of the demographic vitality: firstly, due to the final emigration of a part of the young population and secondly, due to the modification of the behaviour in the sense of the acceleration of the processes specific to the last stage of the demographic transition. Thus, the result was - only after 2 decades - the degradation of the demographical structures of the communities due to the acceleration of the demographic ageing process. If previously, they managed to maintain a certain advantage on at regional level, they currently seem to be the most vulnerable to demographic risks”.

**Key words:** rural space, religion, demography, differentiation, transition

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### INTRODUCTION

The present study, which is part of a bigger project that intends to identify the genesis and the effect of the multiple differentiations of the Moldavian rural space, proposes a diacronic analysis of the way in which the Catholic communities from Moldavia (especially from its rural part) have manifested their personality on a geo-demographic level for the latter half of the century.

The manner in which cultural peculiarities, especially the ones of a confessional nature, determine the appearance of certain demographic cleavages is apparently simple, being generated by various socio-cultural, psychological - social or economical phenomena such as marginalisation, identity retreat, discrimination. Thus, the case of the Catholic communities from Moldavia can be easily used as an example and applied wherever there is an important number of people with a significant demographic difference. This long known reality has faded in time, going from the preservation of a more traditional demographic behaviour, with some deficiencies in the quality of

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<sup>1</sup> This study refers to western part of historical Moldavia, part of Romania (8 counties of the North-East of this country). For disambiguation, in the text was used also the term Western Moldavia.

life (a shorter life span, higher infant mortality, specific morbidity) to what may be described as the Moldavian demographic pattern. A delicate subject in general, the particularism of the Catholic communities from Moldavia has been attributed to the preservation of a certain behaviour which is more faithful to the pro-natalist religious discourse of the Catholic clergy. Thus, a “reproductive and procreative behaviour” is maintained, specific to a primitive demographic regime, without an obvious intervention of planning (Trebici and Ghinoiu, 1986, p. 117). Invoking the Catholic confession as the main vector of the preservation of demographic vitality can be easily disputed if we think that a Catholic country such as France was the predecessor of the modern pattern of evolution of population (Boia, 2010, p. 227)<sup>2</sup>. If we relate to the relative isolation of these communities inside a mass of Orthodox population - an isolation which was often effective from a geographical point of view - we can easily attribute the main part in the manifestation of such singularity to the confessional factor. The manifestation of a “cultural barrier” in the accepted geographical sense (Claval, 2003, p. 102) may lead to the appearance of some mechanisms generating resistance to the process of demographic modernization. Such barriers may create different behaviours, which are difficult to analyse in the absence of specific information (our case) but authenticated by numerous comparative studies (for example Praz, 2009).

The Catholic communities from Moldavia amount to almost 270,000 persons, a number obtained by comparing the results of the 2002 census which found 243,627 Catholics in the 8 counties of the Catholic diocese of Iassy to the population dynamics from the places in which the number of the Catholics is high and by taking into account the temporary absence of the numerous population from the same localities at the time of the census (almost 30,000 person). This way, we may consider that they form about 5.6 % of the total population, a significant amount if we think that they are preferentially distributed in the 3 counties from the central part of Moldavia: Bacău, Neamţ and Iaşi (see table 1).

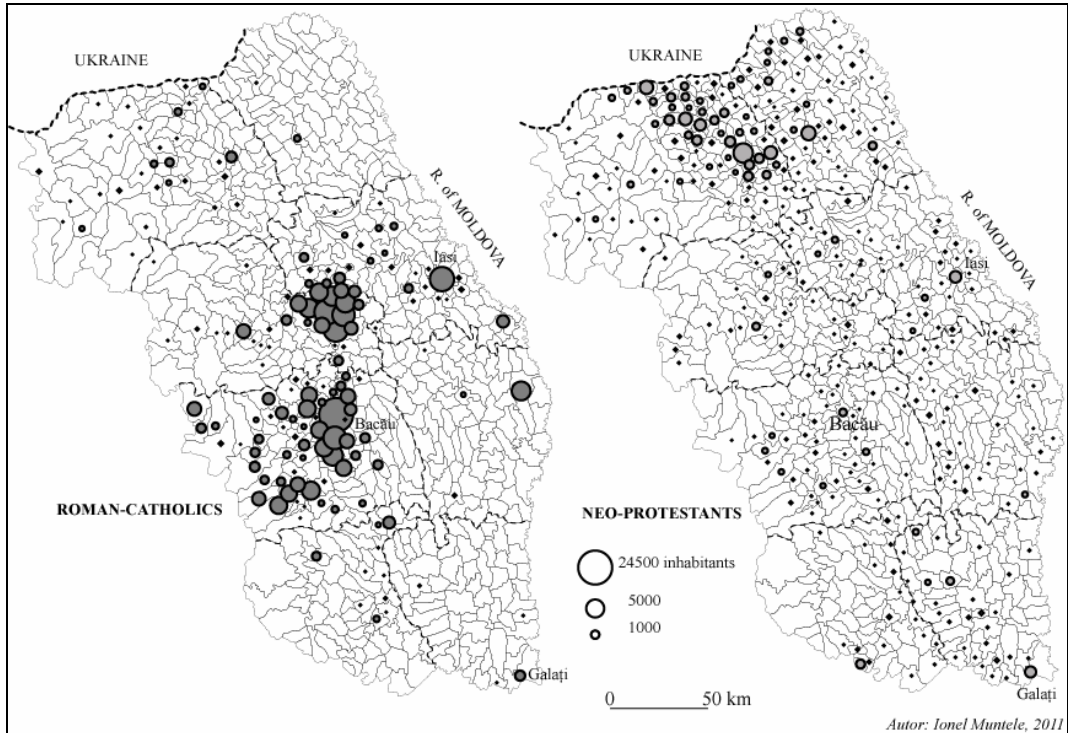
**Table 1.** The numerical evolution of the population of Catholic confession from the Diocese of Iaşi (1930 - 2002)  
(Data source: the censuses from 1930, 1992 and 2002)

County	Population (inhabitants)			Ratio (%)		
	1930	1992	2002	1930	1992	2002
Bacău	54,621	12,5805	134,516	14.5	17.1	18.3
Botoşani	1,601	865	854	0.5	0.2	0.2
Galaţi	4,397	2,463	2,227	1.4	0.4	0.4
Iaşi	19,526	39,627	43,061	4.6	4.9	5.2
Neamţ	23,844	62,374	68,745	7.7	10.8	11.9
Suceava	50,787	9,542	9,443	10.7	1.4	1.3
Vaslui	4,595	6,924	6,915	1.4	1.5	1.5
Vrancea	3,678	5,075	5,803	1.4	1.3	1.4
Diocese of Iaşi	163,049	25,2675	271,569	5.7	5.3	5.6

From this table we can differentiate between 3 types of evolution of these communities with a diverse and often controversial origin: the first type characterizes the counties with a high share of Catholic population, Bacău, Neamţ and Iaşi, where the growth rate of this population was spectacular and constant between 1930 - 2002; then, the counties with a stable share - Vaslui and Vrancea, with relatively important communities and with a growth rate similar to most regions; and last, the counties where a massive regress of such communities has been recorded: Botoşani, Galaţi and, especially Suceava. The last one, which occupies a large part of Bukovina, used to have important German, Hungarian and Polish communities that suffered the consequences of WW2, being forcefully repatriated (Germans and Hungarians) or they gradually assimilated or emigrated (Polish).

<sup>2</sup> He noticed: “A society which is more and more individualistic and less dependent on the word of God is not auspicious to natality...”

It is interesting how, in Suceava, the Neo-protestant communities have grown in time and although they didn't effectively replace the Catholic ones, they have reached a ratio compared to the Catholic one in 1930 (about 60,000 persons, mainly Pentecostals, which is almost 8.5 % of the total - see figure 1). The same situation is partially found in the other 2 counties of this group, the presence of the Catholic communities apparently diminishing the Neo-protestant proselytism.



**Figure 1.** Spatial distribution of the Romano-Catholic and Neo-Protestant communities in Western Moldavia (2002)

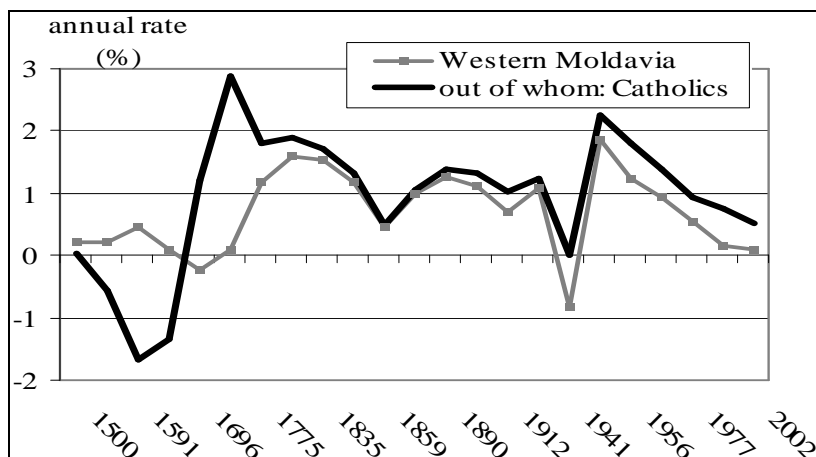
(Data source: The Population and Housing Census of 15.03.2002)

We must observe that during this period, the number of the Catholic population grew considerably in some cities. In 1930, in general, the urban Catholic communities were highly diverse ethnically, but at present, as a result of the massive migration of the rural population, we have come to a unitary population, its majority being represented by the so-called Csangos. In this sense, the communities from Bacău (almost 24,500 persons - 13 % of the total), Roman (12,000 - 17 %) and Iassy (10,000 - 3 %) are indeed remarkable.

We must also mention the meaning we confer in this study to the term of geo-demographic singularity. We understand by this the situation in which a component of a territorial demographic subsystem (geographical) manifest itself singularly, apart from the general trends manifested by that subsystem. Such a singularity may be the starting point of a new trend, which by diffusion, may conquer larger spaces, or, on the contrary, may converge to the dominant pattern of evolution in that space. Actually, in the beginning, any demographic phenomenon manifests itself more or less singularly so as the chrono-spatial evolution may lead to its disappearance or expansion. In our case, we can speak about the manifestation of a demographic singularity specific to the Catholics from Moldavia, mainly during the post-war period when, on a national as well as regional level, even if on a smaller scale, there was this fast trend to converge towards the most advanced stage of the demographic transition in an extremely complex political and economic context. We can attribute to

the majority Orthodox community a „refractory attitude towards secularization”, well-known for its role in starting the demographic transition (Bertillon, quoted by Bardet et al., 1999, p. 37<sup>3</sup>).

This manifestation of the singularity is also visible in the graphic that presents the evolution of the population from Moldavia and of the Catholic communities comparatively (figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The evolution of the annual growth rate of population (estimation for the 1500 - 2002 period) (Data sources: Tax registrations (1500 - 1835) and censuses of the population (1860 - 2002))

This way, we can distinguish between 3 periods in which, in the past, they significantly differentiated themselves from the rhythm of the numerical evolution of the population in the entire region: at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the context of an important influx of Transylvanian immigrants of Catholic religion; during the post-war period, especially after 1930, when we find an already existing trend to preserve a certain reproductive traditionalist behaviour at a moment when, on a regional level, the first stage of a demographic transition was fully manifesting itself; between 1956 - 2002, when the above mentioned trend became stronger, creating an important demographic cleavage on a local level, obvious in the numerical evolution of some rural centres found in a similar geographical context around Bacău and Roman (table 2).

**Table 2.** The evolution of the components of the 1956 - 2009 general balance of the population in the communes around Bacău and Roman (40 communes situated at 5 - 25 km distance of these)

(Data source: The statistical notebooks of the 40 analyzed communes taken from the Departmental Statistical Directions of Bacău, Neamț and Iași)

Category	Natural growth (‰, annual average)					Migratory growth (‰, annual average)				
	1956-1965	1966-1980	1981-1989	1990-2000	2001-2009	1956-1965	1966-1980	1981-1989	1990-2000	2001-2009
Orthodox	15.1	13.5	5.6	-0.8	-3.0	-3.5	-17.3	-18.4	5.2	3.6
Mixed	21.6	19.8	11.4	4.9	-1.3	-4.4	-14.5	-19.1	1.6	2.3
Catholic	28.0	22.9	16.7	8.5	-0.1	-5.3	-12.6	-18.7	-0.8	-1.3

Note: Orthodox. - communes with a predominant orthodox population; Mixed - communes with a mixed religious population; Catholic. - communes with a predominant Catholic population.

It is remarkable the difference that opposes, in the first place, the communes with a majority Orthodox population to those with a majority Catholic one: the former ones went through an attempt of modernization of the demographic behaviour much earlier, visible in the decrease of the the natural growth until the longlasting settlement of the natural deficit after 1995; the others resisted with high percentages of natural growth of population, even after 1990, and only in the

<sup>3</sup> The quoted author said, referring to role of the 1789 French Revolution: "The Revolution imbued the French spirit with 3 states of mind that continually evolved along centuries: the weakening of faith, the democratic spirit, and individualism."

last decade, under the effect of a still existing negative migratory balance did the attempt of finalising the demographic transition appear. The influence of the final migration, revealed by the evolution of the migratory balance, was important, as the communes with a majority Orthodox population entered the last stage of the rural exodus earlier (even since 1966 - 1980) as opposed to the communes with a majority Catholic population where the influence was felt after 1980 and still is as an effect of the relative superpopulation.

The absence of an obvious trend to return of a part of the population caught in the final migratory movements during the communist regime after 1990 is another feature of the Catholic population, this indicating another characteristic that makes it stand out: the early opening towards international migration of the workforce (Kinda, 2009). This also involves a major social risk linked to the separation of the couples or of the children from parents. If before 1980 they seemed more closely connected to the native places, going for pendular movements like commuting, after 1990 they became closely involved in the trend of the international movement for work, being among the first on a national level and even helping the Catholic church to support these communities. This new context generated a rapid alteration in the demographic evolution trends, the connection between international migration and devitalisation of some rural communities becoming widely known (Muntele and Iașu, 2008).

### **THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NATURAL BALANCE COMPONENTS IN THE RURAL MOLDAVIA, ACCORDING TO THE CONFESSIONAL STRUCTURE OF THE POPULATION**

This analysis observes the way in which, for more than 4 decades, we can speak of a differentiation of the types of adaptation to the difficulties of demographic transition according to confessional criteria. The prolificacy of the Catholic communities was heavily highlighted in the past, being even recorded by statistics (38,154 Catholics in 1860 but 88,676 in 1899 and 109,262 in 1930 in interwar Moldavia only<sup>4</sup>). The spectacular growth in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century can also be attributed to immigration (Italians, Germans, Polish) but especially to the extraordinary vitality of the rural Csango communities<sup>5</sup> that experienced a series of trends of population towards the less populated regions, especially as a result of the agrarian reforms in 1864 and in 1888 (Muntele, 1998, p. 99 - 100). That particularity is also the result of a more favourable age structure (a larger number of young people) or of some mentalities or behaviours oriented towards family and community values.

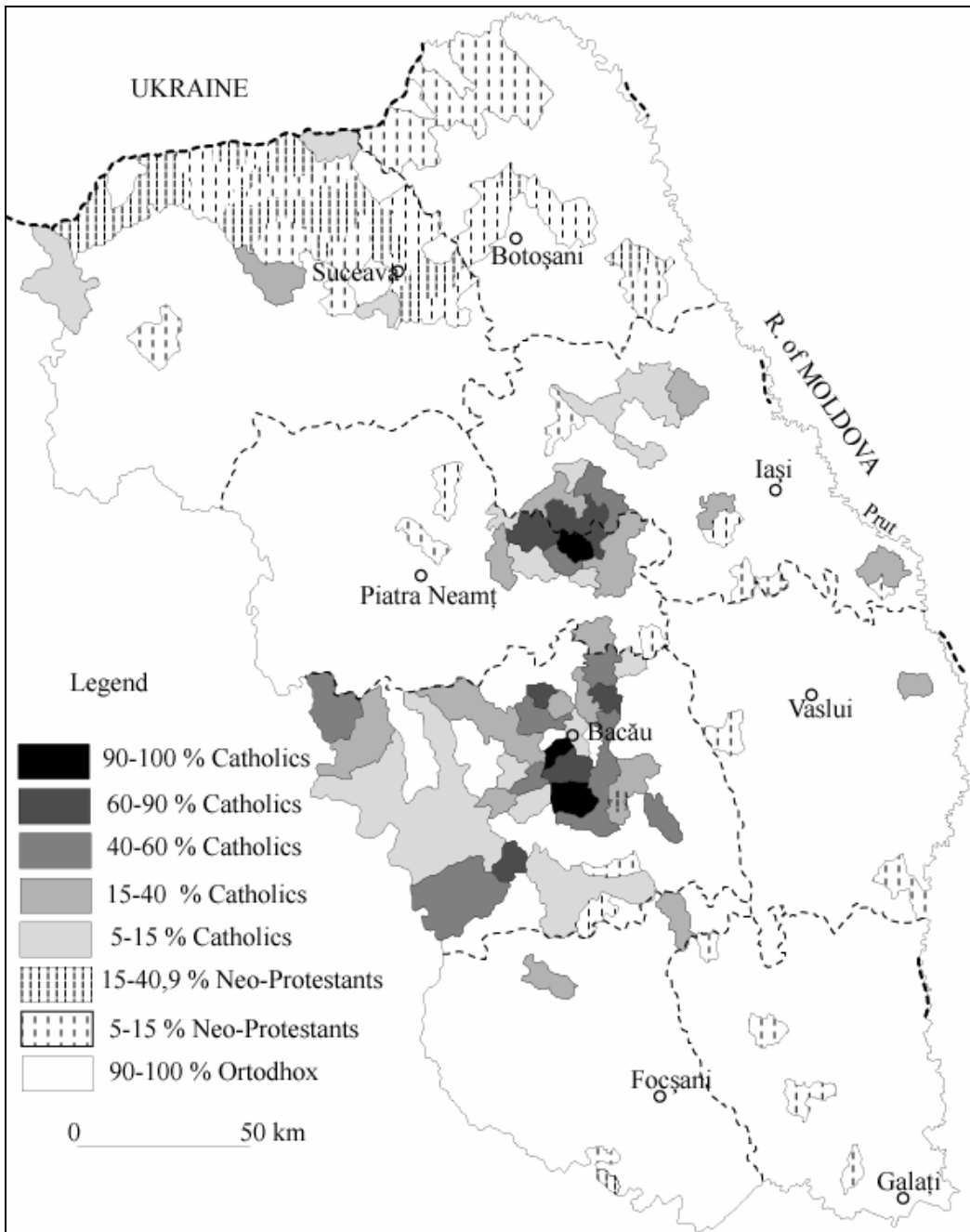
The necessary information for this analysis comes partially from the territorial data base offered by the National Institute of Statistics or published in yearbooks by the county officials. Yet, a considerable amount was gathered, in time, from the statistic documents of the localities from the counties of Moldavia, according to current laws.

This way, a new statistic data base was created, including information on the evolution of the components of the natural change (natality and mortality) and of the number of the female population of childbearing age (15 - 49 years old).

The processing and unifying of the data allowed the making of some suggestive graphical materials that capture the differences in demographic behaviour in 8 categories of rural centres, separated according to their confession: majority Catholic (over 90 %), majority Catholic (60 - 90 %), mixed (40 - 60 % Catholics), mixed (15 - 40 % Catholics), majority Orthodox, with significant Catholic communities (5 - 15 %), majority Orthodox with significant neo-protestant minorities (15 - 40.9 %, respectively 5 - 15 %), majority Orthodox (over 95 %).

<sup>4</sup> The numbers were taken from the following sources: "The Statistic Works of Moldavia. The 1859 - 1860 census, vol. I - II, Iassy, 1862; Colescu L., "The Results of the 1899 census", ICS, Bucharest, 1944; The general census of population from 29<sup>th</sup> December 1930, vol. II, ICS, Bucharest, 1941.

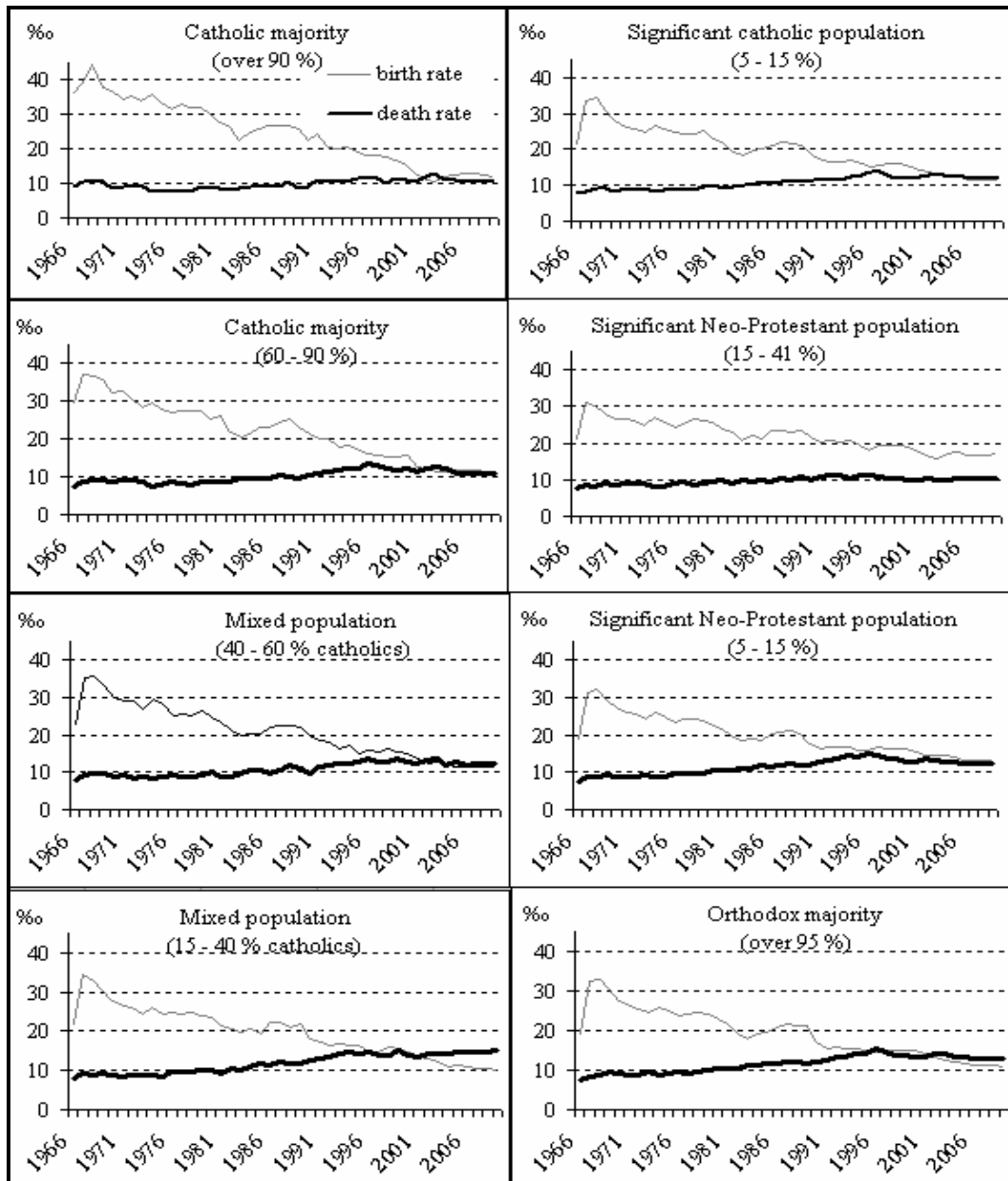
<sup>5</sup> The majority of the Catholic population from Moldavia has always been formed of the so-called Csangos, a population with a controversial genesis due to the Romanian-Hungarian bilingualism, who successively crossed the passes of the Eastern Carpathians, coming from Transylvania beginning with the Middle Ages.



**Figure 3.** The ratio of the main confessional minorities in Western Moldavia in 2002  
(Data source: The population and housing census of 2002)

Though arbitrary, this division was made with the purpose of establishing the differences induced by the presence of the Catholic communities, in the first place, and also, with the purpose of monitoring the trends to converge or diverge of the relatively unitary categories (the predominant Catholic, Orthodox or with a larger number of Neo-Protestants).

This separation may be flawed by the superposing of some ethnical particularities of demographic nature but, taking into consideration the unity of the ethno-linguistic structure of the studied space, we can deem as negligible the influence of this factor.



**Figure 4.** The evolution of the components of the natural balance in the 8 types of rural communes according to their confessional structure

(Data source: Statisticals yearbooks of the 8 Moldavian counties (1966 - 2009))

The spatial distribution of the eight categories of localities may be seen in figure 3, with the mention that the cities were eliminated from the analysis due to the behavioral peculiarities induced by the urban centres.

A first set of conclusions drawn from the resulted graphic material has as starting point the evolution of the two elements of the natural change, natality and mortality in over 44 years (1966 -2009, figure 4).

- the communes with a predominant Catholic population (at least 60 %) were less affected by the pro-birth measures taken by the communist regime in 1966 as they had preserved this indicator at a high level (over 30 ‰ in 1966 to the only 19 ‰ in the case of the majority Orthodox villages).

The detailed analysis, case by case, proves that behavioral modifications were slower in Catholic communities in the post war period and didn't depend so much on the closest urban centres or on the size of the locality, as it happened with the majority Orthodox communes. Thus, we can observe that community values were much more important, more powerful than the openness to modern life that supposedly came if interacting with urban centres, under the circumstances of the rural exodus or the increasing of commuting (daily trips to work) in the first post-war decades. The conservatism of the Catholic communities may be observed in the higher rate of mortality, when there were no significant differences between age structures, this way allowing us to speak of a delay in the settling of the demographic transition of both components;

- the conjectural character of the exceptional natality growth between 1967 - 1972, shown by the relatively fast adaptation of the population to the coercive measures generated by the political control of childbirth can't be totally found in the communes with a majority Catholic population. The evolution curve of this indicator follows a rather natural course, generated by the adoption of new behaviours which are inevitable when talking about demographic transition. Only after 1980 do we notice its rallying to the general trends manifested especially in the growth of natality values as a substantial result of the new coercive measures taken by the communist regime between 1982 - 1986. However, the Catholic communities kept the advantage of a lower level of mortality, generating a more substantial natural growth.

- the evolution of birth rate during the post-communist regime confirms the existence of relatively divergent trends: a stagnation at relatively high medium values of natality in communes with an Orthodox majority (about 15 ‰, between 1991 - 2000) and a fast, continuous degradation in the majority Catholic communes, already open to the international migration. Thus, we have a convergence of values in 12 - 15 ‰ interval in the 1991 - 2000 period, as a result of superposing of some divergent trends which characterized the two communities: a massive rural come back in the Orthodox villages/insertion in the migratory international circuit in the predominant Catholic communes.

This way, after 2000, the differences between the two categories of communities are attenuated from the natality as well as mortality point of view until the settling of the demographic deficit.

From this moment on, slowly but steadily, another singularity starts manifesting itself regionally, the one generated by the Neo-Protestant communities, which implies the preservation of a relatively high level of natality, even with the small come back after 2000, thus generating a definitely positive natural growth. Apparently at least we can speak of the convergence of the demographic patterns that characterized the Catholic and Orthodox communities from that part of the country during the post-war era, as it is well-known the influence of the structural factors. This convergence is accurately rendered in the evolution specific to Bacău county.

The start of the modifications seems to have been mainly given by the 1990 moment which meant not only the given up of the birth control policies (until the manifestation of a general indifference between 1990 - 2000) and also by the opening towards earlier international migration of the Catholic communities especially towards Italy.

Though it may seem bold without some case studies, we can estimate a contamination with behavioural patterns specific to this Mediterranean country, well-known for its extremely low level of fertility indicators.



### THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE GENERAL FERTILITY OF THE FEMALE POPULATION

In order to thoroughly study the conclusions presented previously, an analysis of the evolution of the general fertility of the female population was made for the last two decades, at the level of the same population categories, according to the confessional structures. Taking into account the variation of this factor the calculation of multiannual average for five years was preferred, this way distinguishing between four distinct subperiods compatible with the national trends. What the graphic material manages to capture is the significantly different behaviour of the population from the communes with Catholic majority: while in the others we can speak of a constant continuous decrease from generally high values in comparison to the other regions of the country (over 75 ‰), in such communes we noticed a faster decrease, accelerated in the period 1995 - 1999, in such manner that at the end of the studied period the level recorded was the lowest. Practically, in the communes with 90 % Catholic population, in twenty years, there was a shifting in values – from the highest ones (over 110 ‰) to the lowest (under 50 ‰). It's interesting to observe that in the communes with Neo-Protestant population a slower evolution was recorded, this way maintaining relatively high values (in comparison with the national average).

The connection between the ratio of the Catholic population and the evolution of this indicator is extremely obvious, allowing us to conclude that it suffered a significant modification of the demographic behaviour in these two decades (table 3). So, the decrease of natality wasn't only the result of the early manifestations of migration abroad for work, but also of the profound mentality changes to the family pattern in these formerly prolific communities. Though most studies on women's status and role in the Romanian society, especially the rural one, show that they are still in the pre-feminist phase of emancipation, the demographic reality of the past 2 decades demonstrates the interference of some rather feminist mentalities at least as far as procreation is concerned. And from this point of view, judging by the indicator of general fertility of the female population, the population of Catholic confession from Moldavian villages seems to be among the first modernists.

**Table 3.** The comparative evolution of the general fertility of female population in the rural areas from Western Moldavia

(Data source: Statistical yearbooks of the 8 Moldavian counties (1990 - 2009))

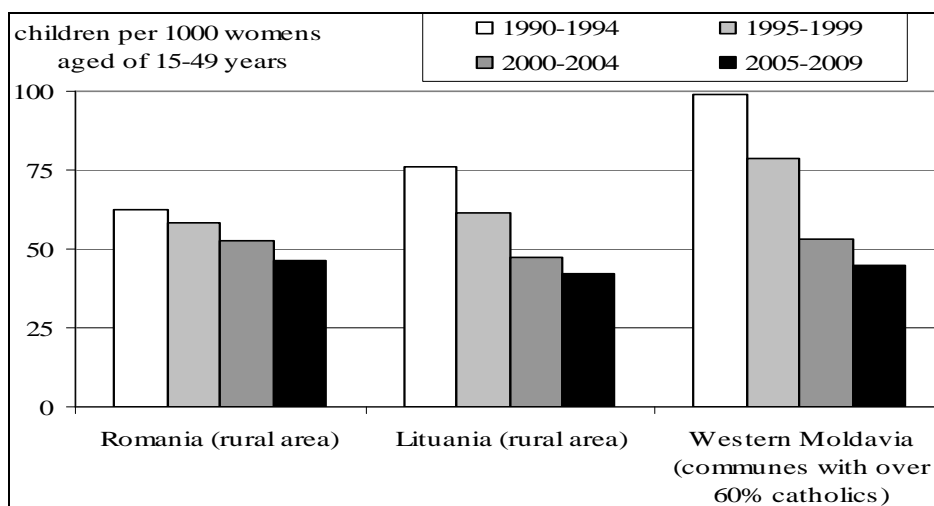
Category	1990-1994	1995-1999	2000-2004	2005-2009
Catholic majority (over 90 ‰)	107.8	84.9	53.2	46.1
Catholic majority (60 - 90 ‰)	91.9	72.8	53.1	43.6
Mixed population (40 - 60 % catholics)	86.5	76.3	62.8	52.6
Mixed population (15 - 40 % catholics)	86.2	76.7	62.3	52.8
Significant catholic population (5 - 15 ‰)	80.0	73.2	62.0	52.4
Significant neo-protestant population (15 - 41 ‰)	100.2	90.4	78.9	67.9
Significant neo-protestant population (5 - 15 ‰)	83.2	78.4	70.1	57.6
Orthodox majority (over 95 ‰)	80.3	75.0	64.6	53.6

We can thus speak of a relative union of the demographic pattern in the rural Moldavian space, although there are still some phenomena connected to the persistence of certain reserves of young population. If until 1990 the conservative confessional communities (Catholic and Neo-Protestant) distinguished themselves by an exceptional demographic vitality, the general trend is to converge towards relatively low values of the fertility indicators. This way, the Neo-Protestant communities in the area impose themselves as a new demographic singularity regionally. This can also be traced in the hierarchy of the Moldavian counties from the point of view of the fertility indicators: for a long time, Bacău and Neamț, with important Catholic minorities, registered higher values than Suceava. The latter county became well known after 1990, by maintaining the level of general fertility significantly higher, so that in 1966, the

indicator in Bacău was 86 ‰, in Neamţ, ‰ and in Suceava, 77 ‰. In 1990 the values become somewhat similar (79 ‰, 77 ‰, respectively 78 ‰) and in 2009 there was a significant difference in favour of the last county (values of 41 ‰, 38 ‰, respectively 47 ‰). The decrease of vitality of the Catholic population was apparently essential in this change of hierarchy.

We can rightfully ask ourselves if the trends manifested among the rural Catholic communities from Moldavia weren't similar to those from other East-European countries with a more conservative rural Catholic population (e.g., Lithuania and Poland). In this sense, a new comparative analysis was made, one that refers to the evolution of the general fertility of the female population from the rural areas on a national level in Romania, Lithuania and in the rural majority Catholic communities from Moldavia (figure 5).

The resulting material proves that the modifications of demographic behaviour among the Catholic communities were stronger than in the case of the majority Orthodox ones that already registered a relatively low level at that time, the further evolution being even slower. The case of the Catholic communes from Moldavia resembles the case of the rural area in Lithuania, with a sole exception - they seemed even more conservative in 1990. It is difficult to say if we can speak of a more nuanced adaptation of those to the political imperatives of that period and the effects of the dissolution of the totalitarian regime. In other words, constraints specific to this regime, especially on a demographic level, found a more suitable location in the Catholic communities from Moldavia, the latter defending itself by preserving an exceptional demographic vitality. On the contrary, their disappearance and the freedom they later won, allowed for a recuperation of the delay, the demographic transition becoming final in a very short time.



**Figure 5.** Comparative evolution of the general fertility rate of the female population (1990-2009) (Data source: web page of the Institutul Național de Statistică (Romania) and Statistikos Departamentas (Lituania), consulted in january - february 2010)

## CONCLUSION

The research so far has shown the manifestation of a clear divergence in the demographic behaviour of the Catholic communities and the rest of the rural population from Moldavia. In order to formulate hypotheses about this reality further, more thorough investigations on the patterns of social, cultural, economic behaviour of the analysed categories would be necessary. The provided statistical information always separates the well-defined trends. The fact that the ratio of the Catholic population, considered a discriminatory factor, always functions as a gradient which separates different behaviours at opposite ends is proof enough of the rightness of a possible hypothesis that postulates the existence of a distinct demographic pattern of this community, at

least until recently. The fading of the pattern and the community ceasing to act as a singularity in this domain is nothing but a conjectural situation, connected to the deep structural and dynamic transformations of the specific demographic stock.

If we analyse, for example, the evolution of the population structure according to age groups, we notice, from 1966 till present, a continuous trend of becoming similar of the values specific to the rural Catholic communities compared to the national mean. In 1966, the young population amounted to 39.8 %, respectively 31.4 %, with a significant difference, but in 1992 the values were much more similar: 27.8 %, respectively 25.1 % and later, they reached the same level; to the same effect, the elderly population evolved from 8.5 %, respectively 10.5 % in 1996 to 14.6, respectively 15.4 in 1992, with the same effective similarity of values in 2002. This short analysis allows for a significant advantage of the Catholic community who kept until 1992 an important advantage from the perspective of a more numerous female population of childbearing age, an advantage that was countered by a rapid decrease of the demographic indicators of fertility.

With present research it is difficult to say if this transitory situation may be attributed to the secularization of mentalities, the manifestation of an incipient form of feminism generated by the strong insertion in the international migratory circuits or the difficulties specific to the transition towards market economy, which hasn't avoided anyone, thus forcing the Romanian society to adapt to a situation which doesn't encourage or support the family behaviours necessary to preserve a demographic balance.

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