

The Sacred in Politics: A Retrospective on Populism and the Re-Enchantment of Politics in Contemporary Romania

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c.c.lupascu@gmail.com<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7041-5199>**Title:** “The Sacred in Politics: A Retrospective on Populism and the Re-Enchantment of Politics in Contemporary Romania”**Abstract:** This article examines the resurgence and instrumentalization of religious symbols, rhetoric, and narratives in contemporary Romanian politics, with particular attention to the 2024–2025 presidential campaign of Călin Georgescu. Situated within the broader global trends toward the sacralization of politics and the progressive erosion of boundaries between the sacred and the secular, it investigates how Christian motifs, esoteric imaginaries, and conspiracy-laden plots are deployed to legitimize new forms of charismatic leadership and construct alternative visions of collective identity. Drawing insights from phenomenology, theology, media theory, and post-communist political history, the study traces the transformation of political discourse into a hybrid space in which digital platforms facilitate the simulation of religious charisma, enabling the emergence of quasi-messianic figures such as Georgescu. The analysis concludes that these developments signal a process of political re-enchantment in Romania, in which the sacred is strategically mobilized as a resource for populist engagement in the context of an ongoing democratic crisis.**Keywords:** *sacred populism, re-enchantment, political crisis, Romanian politics, Călin Georgescu.*

REZUMAT: Acest articol examinează resurgența și instrumentalizarea simbolurilor, retoricii și narațiunilor religioase în politica românească contemporană, cu o atenție deosebită acordată campaniei prezidențiale din 2024–2025 a lui Călin Georgescu. Plasând fenomenul în contextul mai larg al tendințelor globale către sacralizarea politicului și al erodării progresive a granițelor dintre sacru și profan, studiul analizează modul în care motive creștine, imaginaruri ezoterice și intrigi impregnate de teorii conspiraționiste sunt utilizate pentru a legitima noi forme de conducere carismatică și pentru a construi viziuni alternative asupra identității colective. Pornind de la perspective desprinse din fenomenologie, teologie, teoria mass-mediei și istoria politică postcomunistă, studiul urmărește transformarea discursului politic într-un spațiu hibrid, în care platformele digitale facilitează simularea carismei religioase, făcând posibilă apariția unor figuri cvasi-mesianice precum Georgescu. Analiza concluzionează că, pe fondul unei crize democratice încă în desfășurare, aceste evoluții semnalează un proces de re-vrăjire a politicului în România, în cadrul căruia sacralul este mobilizat strategic ca o resursă pentru stimularea interacțiunii publicului cu mesajul populist.

CUVINTE-CHEIE: *populism, sacru, re-vrăjire, criză politică, politică românească, Călin Georgescu.*

Introduction

The phenomenon of secular religions – ideological formations that adopt the structure and function of religious beliefs in a post-theistic age – has been extensively documented in scholarly literature (Bellah 1967; Burrin 1997; Maier 2004; Gentile 2005; Gordon 2011; Scott 2011; Martin and Newman 2025). However, in light of the shifting global political climate at the

dawn of the 21st century, it becomes equally imperative to consider an investigation into the reverse phenomenon, the reintroduction of religious forms, symbols, and sensibilities into ostensibly secular spaces (May et al. 2014; Newman 2021; Martin and Newman 2025). This dynamic extends beyond the mere ritualization or veiling of political events (Kertzer 1988; Bell 1997). Rather, we are no longer dealing with metaphor alone, but with a fully developed arsenal of political theology, wherein the sacred is seized in order to lend legitimacy, emotion, and transcendental weight to otherwise profane acts of power (Gentile 2006; Eatwell 2006). Whether religious movements metamorphose into political parties, or political movements appropriate religious symbols, to gradually transitioning into outright political cults (Lincoln 1994; Zúquete 2017), the institutional boundary between faith and governance is rendered increasingly porous (May et al. 2014; Newman 2021).

This environment opens the way for public figures, in particular those with messianic aspirations, to present themselves not as capable administrators or effective policy-makers, but as spiritual stewards, healers promising not governance, but purification, not pragmatic solutions, but guidance through a perceived darkness of moral and civilizational decay (Willner and Willner 1965; Conger and Kanungo 1987; House and Howell 1992; Márquez 2024).

A salient example of this politico-religious entanglement occurred during the 2024–2025 presidential elections in Romania through the campaign of Călin Georgescu. Having previously positioned himself as a Euro-Atlantic technocrat, Georgescu re-emerged rebranded as an independent far-right populist. His platform was built around themes such as the importance of traditional family values, national dignity, the preservation of the Christian Orthodox Church, and the environment, both in an ecological and theological sense (Ilie, Bayer, Gray 2024; Cornea 2024).

His broader political messaging, characterized by overt hostility toward the European Union, and a declared intent to reorient Romania toward “Russian wisdom”, a trope that effectively reproduces contemporary Russian state propaganda (Marincea 2024), found a receptive audience among traditionalist elements within the Orthodox community. This alignment reinforced a spiritually inflected discourse and revealed once again the historically resilient ties between Orthodoxy and nationalism in Romania (Biliuță 2024). It further exposed the strands of Romanian Orthodoxy that remain receptive to narratives that frame Russia as a spiritual counter-civilization opposed to the secularism, liberalism, and the moral decadence associated with Western Europe.

From this point onward, Georgescu came to be widely perceived as a highly controversial political figure, with an explicitly pro-Russian, anti-Western, and anti-NATO discourse, while voicing his admiration and support for authoritarian leaders such as Russian President Vladimir Putin and Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán (Paternoster 2024).

Entering the race as a surprise candidate his candidacy in the 2024 presidential elections was submitted very discreetly with minimal public visibility, and, at the time he was described as “[...] practically, unknown on the Romanian grand political scene” (Nunuț 2024). Despite being projected by most pre-election polls to secure less than 10% of the vote (McGrath 2024), he shocked the political establishment by securing an unexpected 22.95% in the first round of voting (Autoritatea Electorală Permanentă 2024).

What raised many suspicions was the atypical nature of his campaign, which relied near-exclusively on digital platforms achieving exceptional viral traction, particularly on TikTok, while largely bypassing conventional channels of political communication (Baghiu 2025; Boțan, Ștefureac, Stancea 2025). Georgescu insisted he hadn't spent any money on promotion, attributing his reach to the popularity of his alleged grassroots movement, sustained “exclusively through voluntary and benevolent [contributions] by supporters all over the country, at their own expense and on their own initiative” (Garvey 2024). This claim further intensified public and regulatory scrutiny over the general integrity of the electoral process.

This unforeseen outcome triggered an acute electoral crisis, culminating in the annulment of the entire process by Romania's Constitutional Court on 6 December 2024. In a decision unprecedented in the country's post-communist electoral history, the Constitutional Court

ruled that the first round of elections had been “compromised throughout all stages of its conduct by multiple irregularities and violations of electoral legislation”, concluding that candidate Georgescu had “manipulated digital technologies” in ways that distorted the electoral procedure (Curtea Constituțională a României 2024). On 26 February 2025, Georgescu was brought in for questioning by judicial authorities in connection with a series of serious allegations, including actions against the constitutional order, the dissemination of false information, repeated false declarations, the initiation or establishment of an organization with a fascist, racist, and xenophobic character, and the public promotion of the cult of individuals convicted of genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes (Cărlugea and Despa 2025). He subsequently attempted to re-enter the presidential race in the rescheduled 2025 elections. However, on 11 March 2025, the Constitutional Court issued a definitive ruling rejecting his candidacy (Curtea Constituțională a României 2025). At present, Georgescu remains under judicial supervision.

1. Enchantment and Re-Enchantment in the Contemporary Age

In the aftermath of the Enlightenment and the progressive secularization of Western societies, it was long assumed that religious ways of thinking would inevitably recede into obsolescence. And yet, contrary to these expectations, the modern era has witnessed not the disappearance of religion, but its transformation (Saler 2006; Marotta 2024). Though no longer bound to traditional ecclesiastical institutions, modern secular religions and political theologies retain the core socio-epistemic functions of the sacred: the provision of existential meaning, moral orientation, collective identity, and transcendent justification (Schmitt 2005; Gentile 2006; Newman 2021). These developments are not mere residues of past belief systems, but a reflection of a structural metaphysical restlessness inherent to modernity, a yearning for significance that remains unsatisfied by the procedural rationalism of liberal democracy or the materialism of free-market economics (Casanova 1994; Han 2015). In this context, political ideologies, charismatic leaders, scientific paradigms, and even consumerism begin to take on religious characteristics, complete with prophets, dogmas, rituals, and heresies.

Swiss-French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau was among the earliest modern theorists to diagnose this malediction. In his 1762 *Social Contract*, he argued that even in the absence of concrete, institutionalized ecclesiastical structures, every society necessarily requires a form of collective belief, even if secular in nature, a so-called “civil religion” of sorts – a *theologia civilis* – in order to maintain its political unity and moral coherence (Rousseau 1999, 158ff). German sociologist Max Weber’s seminal 1905 study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, subsequently systematized the narrative of secularization, tracing how the Protestant Reformation, predominantly in its Calvinist form, paradoxically catalyzed the increasing intellectualization and rationalization of life which ultimately led to secularization and the eventual disenchantment – *Entzauberung* – of the world. What Weber (2010, 123f) recognized was a paradox at the heart of modernity: even as secularization advances, it leaves behind a moral barrenness in which old religious leftovers reappear, often stripped of their theological depth, to reclaim their influence over personal meaning and identity.

French sociologist Émile Durkheim expanded on this dynamic from an organic-functionalist perspective. Approaching religion as a collective phenomenon essential to social cohesion, like Rousseau, Durkheim argued that as traditional religions decay, secular institutions and political ideologies naturally assumed their sacred functions (Durkheim 2008, 285, 317f). Because Durkheim viewed the sacred as not necessarily tied to an ontological supernatural reality, but as a social construct through which communities projected their collective values and identity, he observed that even in the absence of transcendence, the sacred inevitably returns not as revelation but as an act of invention.

Austrian-American sociologist and theologian Peter Ludwig Berger (1969, 107f) conceptualized this dichotomy as “more than a social-structural process”. What he sought to emphasize is that even where such structural secularization has been achieved, it does not necessarily entail a corresponding “secularization of consciousness”. In other words, a society

may be formally secularized, as long as this residual religious consciousness remains embedded within the collective – as it demonstrably does – it retains the capacity to be reactivated.

British-Czech philosopher Ernest Gellner argued that although disenchantment was an inevitable consequence of modernization, some individuals and communities actively cultivate transcendence through an exercise of will. “We are not disenchanted”, he claims – or at least very many of us are not (Gellner 1987, 152). On the contrary, we continue to live meaningful lives, which we are even able to actively manipulate in order to sustain this meaning. Belief, in this modern sense, becomes an act of assertion rather than an act of knowledge, an assurance of “what one wishes to believe” grounded in subjective “self-reliant confidence” rather than objective justification (Gellner 1987, 159).

Even in systems that claim to be scientific or dialectical, belief operates in quasi-religious ways. In such cases, disenchantment is resisted not through apathy or resignation but through an existential escalation of meaning. In response, a counter-current emerges: a reactionary re-enchantment that seeks to re-infuse the world with the meaning it had perceivably lost. This yearning gave rise to so-called “re-enchantment creeds”, modern belief systems designed to fill the metaphysical vacuum left by secularization (George 2017, 98).

German-American political philosopher Eric Voegelin (1987, 163) categorized these modern political religions as not merely secular ideologies but the latest manifestations of a “Gnostic revolution”. A revolt against reality grounded in the “radical immanentization of the eschaton” and the attempt to realize a final, redemptive “dream world” within history itself. Marxism in the East, and progressivism, positivism, and scientism in the West, he claims, exemplify this modern search for a civil theology (Voegelin 1987, 164).

Ultimately, what unites these otherwise disparate movements is their attempt to salvage or restore one or more structural elements of the very religions they claim to supplant: moral orientation, metaphysical depth, ritual or symbolic coherence, or the promise of newfound transcendent meaning. In doing so, they seek to re-infuse a sense of ontological stability within an otherwise flattened modern world. An impulse that continues to shape political and spiritual discourses, especially in moments of crisis when technocratic reason fails to offer adequate solutions. The challenge, then, is whether politics as such can still operate meaningfully under these conditions, or whether, by becoming yet another layer within the cascading catalogue of crises, we are in fact also witnessing the emergence of a protracted political crisis in its own right.

2. The Advent of Sacred Populism

Berger’s distinction between structural secularization and the persistence of religious consciousness offers us a perspective for understanding contemporary political re-enchantment. While most European states are formally organized as secular democracies, the retreat of institutional religion, whether resulting from long-term historical trends or from the imposed ideology of communist regimes, has not produced the fully secular political environment that might have been expected. On the contrary, where the appropriate preconditions are present, episodic or selective processes of political re-enchantment can be activated, rendering them particularly amenable to populist appropriation. Such forms of de-secularization do not seek to outright counter or reverse secularization per se, rather paradoxically, they may coexist with secular institutions, reshaping political imaginaries in ways that fundamentally complicate the linear narratives of secular modernity. It is within this context that post-communist Eastern Europe has witnessed a progressive – or more accurately, regressive – erosion of democracy. Traditional ideological stances across the political spectrum, from social democrats to the far right, political actors of all stripes increasingly default to policies and rhetoric that fall under the umbrella of populism.

In our case, however, we are engaging a specific and distinct variant of populism. As British political sociologist Daniel Nilsson DeHanas (2023, 832) observes, in its essence “populism is a spiritual way of doing politics”. Unlike traditional secular populism which tends to construct

binary antagonisms along vertical lines (“the people” versus “the elite”) or horizontal ones (targeting perceived “others” such as immigrants, ethnic minorities, or marginalized communities, often through socio-economic or cultural anxieties) (DeHanas 2023, 833), populism in Romania operates within a sacralized register.

Portuguese political scientist José Pedro Zúquete (2013, 510), defines this sacralization as a dynamic interaction between charismatic leadership and a salvationist narrative in which a moral community is consecrated and tasked with a collective mission to defeat a conspiracy of corrupt enemies and redeem the nation from historical crisis.

These “politics of faith” constitute a post-rational means of conducting politics (DeHanas 2023, 834), wherein crises and disillusionment are met with religious or pseudo-religious narratives promising transcendence and salvation. Such narratives become especially prevalent in societies facing acute crises of legitimacy and identity, where conventional political discourse fails to inspire trust or hope. The result is a volatile hybrid – a form of sacred populism in which the language of faith, energies, purity, and the divine substitutes for political deliberation. The rise of this newfound “spirit” – the *Zeitgeist* of sacred populism – thereby functions as both a critique of, and an alternative to, secular modernity.

Politics becomes a battleground between purity and corruption, divine order and chaos. Thus, we are witnessing the emergence of what could be called a kind of “political Gnosticism”, wherein the world is split into forces of light and darkness locked in a perpetual struggle to determine its ultimate fate. The confrontation is no longer over policy, but between figures framed as embodiments of Manichaean good and evil (Zúquete 2013, 511; DeHanas 2023, 834). The stakes, therefore, extend beyond the realm of politics to encompass nothing less than the “soul” of the nation itself.

Within this milieu, spiritual populism flourishes. The sacred returns, but now in the form of ideology. The result is a new political theology of immanence – a theology without God, yet animated by the same structures of faith, destiny, and salvation. This is symptomatic of a broader post-secular condition in which traditional religious institutions, New Age spiritualities, and conspiracy theories coexist and intermingle, filling the void left by the erosion of secular ideologies and discredited civic institutions (Casanova 1994; Gog 2016).

This re-embodiment of metaphysical antagonism revives the crusading logic of the past, transposed into the language of modern populism. As German political scientist Tobias Cremer (2023, 7) argues, these new, contemporary “godless crusades” are not about genuine faith but about the politicization of religious heritage as an ethno-cultural identifier. These moralized confrontations embraced by right-wing populists push the limits of religious freedom and use religion as a tool to define who belongs and who does not, and, in turn, to promote exclusionary policies (Cremer 2023, 6).

Once in power, these populist actors gradually dismantled the very institutions that “buttress” liberal democracy: the independence of the judiciary, the transparency of state expenditures, the freedom of the press, the right to free association, and, in some cases, even the constitution itself. Their declared aim to forge a state “loyal to the will of the people” has often masked the deliberate construction of illiberal regimes, where democratic legitimacy is invoked only to justify authoritarian consolidation (Grzymala-Busse 2017).

Thus, although political religions are generally regarded as “companions” of totalitarian regimes such as Marxism-Leninism, National Socialism, and Fascism, and therefore often dismissed as relics of the past, we can observe in contemporary politics the emergence of a new form of “missionary politics” (Zúquete 2013, 509). Despite lacking the force of the once-total ideologies, this new breed of politics nevertheless retains their expansive ambitions. The driving element of missionary political movements is the very idea of crisis, while their ultimate goal, or “mission”, is salvation from said crisis (Zúquete 2013, 510). This renewed claim to universality – *catholicity*, or totality – once asserted by the Christian Church is now transposed into a modern synthetic dialectic that fuses religion and politics, spirit and state, in which the political sphere itself is transfigured into a metaphysical vocation.

3. Rampant Spirituality in Post-Communist Romania

As the ideological grip of Marxist materialism waned in the final years of the Ceaușescu regime, Romanian society experienced a gradual reawakening of its spiritual life. This resurgence manifested both institutionally, in efforts to reassert the presence of the Church, particularly the Orthodox Church, within the public sphere, and culturally through the steady integration of mystical motifs into the fabric of public discourse, often functioning as a counter-narrative advanced by elements of the political opposition (Stan and Turcescu 2000; Flora, Szilagyi, Roudometof 2005). Yet nearly half a century of being relegated to a quasi-clandestine, barely tolerated existence had severely weakened the Church's authority, especially outside official ecclesiastical structures (Voicu 2019). In the ensuing vacuum, and in the absence of a coherent position articulated by the Church itself, the population was left increasingly uncertain as to what might meaningfully constitute a renewed Romanian spiritual identity. These developments were soon to manifest on the political stage. Romanian political scientist Gabriel Andreescu (2015, 268) argues that, progressively, "[t]his evolution has led to the inclusion of theocratic elements into the political life of the Romanian state".

Yet Christianity was not the only tradition to experience a revival in the aftermath of the communist era. The spiritual crisis of the early 1990s precipitated both a longing for continuity and an unprecedented openness to the influx of alternative forms of meaning-making. Romania's post-atheist environment thus became a site of intense religious recomposition. A wide array of imported doctrines, alternative spiritualities, and esoteric healing practices began to manifest as the result of direct transplants from abroad. Others coexisted with, or became hybridized into, indigenous folk religiosity and residual magical practices. Many of these emergent formations operated through the selective reactivation of archaic symbolic structures that survived in "camouflaged" or "degraded" forms: cosmic dualisms, myths of origins, or sacralized conceptions of nature – now reframed through a postmodern scope. Others still were outright inventions crafted by self-styled visionaries. Tibetan Buddhism circulated alongside Reiki and homeopathy, remnants of Theosophy blended with local ritual practices, and New Age beliefs were integrated into nationalist or protochronist narratives.

Romania's newly deregulated media – VHS tapes, esoteric magazines, and televised programs on bioenergy, parapsychology, and ufology – further accelerated this diffusion. This emergent spiritual pluralism reflects the rise of "portable" or "modular" religiosity: fragmented beliefs detached from strict institutional regulation and capable of being selectively combined and recombined in response to new social pressures and uncertainties. What emerges is a world once again animated by the sacred, no longer as transcendence, but as immanence masquerading behind a pseudoscientific veneer, yet nonetheless rooted in a kind of magical thinking in which imagination, fables, the supernatural, and alleged moral righteousness replace the empirical to reclaim the function of truth.

Empirical grounding for the resilience of this consciousness was demonstrated in a national survey conducted by INSCOP Research in October 2025, titled *Romania between Magic and Esotericism*. Analyzing the data, institute director Remus Ștefureac noted:

"Despite accelerated modernization, and against the backdrop of the parasitic effects on universal access to information, a significant segment of the population interprets the world through symbolic and magical filters. This probably indicates a syncretic mental structure, in which traditional religious belief coexists with forms of esoteric spirituality, offering the individual a form of psychological control over everyday uncertainty. Superstitions, beliefs in invisible energies, or in special abilities coexist with modern rationalism, illustrating a dual culture in which scientific explanations and symbolic-spiritual interpretations overlap rather than exclude one another" (INSCOP Research 2025).

This type of discourse exemplifies what French-Jewish anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss termed *bricolage* (Carstensen 2016). In our case, the symbolic recombination of disparate religious, mystical, and political fragments into new structures designed to answer the ontological and identitarian needs of a society in transition.

Before the rise of viral social media, television platforms played a central role in the dissemination of content commonly associated with what would traditionally be relegated to yellow journalism. Broadcasting apparatuses functioned as primary conduits for cultivating a discursive space in which political analysis, spectacle, and scandal merged seamlessly with fiction, mysticism, and populist rhetoric, effectively giving rise to a distinct genre of infotainment.

This pseudo-journalistic tone and theatrically staged scandals cultivated a climate in which political participation became encased into what French philosopher Guy Debord (2006, §2, 6) described as a “separate pseudo-world” – a self-contained sphere of representation, an isolated “bubble” reality complete with its own particular social and epistemic relations. Through constant repetition, such practices gradually desensitized the public to the abnormality of these claims. The presence of conspiratorial, mystical, and pseudoscientific discourses was not merely tolerated but came to be normalized within the public sphere. This process contributed to the erosion of media literacy and fostered a fertile environment for the proliferation of post-truth narratives which were quickly assimilated into a mythopoetic logic that rendered them both emotionally compelling and epistemically resilient.

Yet it is precisely through digital mediation that these mythologies acquire renewed vitality. The internet, as the dominant arena of postmodern communication, transforms prophecy into performance and belief into virality. Within it, revelation is aestheticized, knowledge becomes affective, and politics is transfigured into a liturgy of a separate reality. Paradoxically, this memetic afterlife has ensured the persistence, and amplification, of such narratives within the digital public sphere.

4. A New Messiah for New Ages: Faith, Disenchantment, Dissimulation

Publicly branded as an “unexpected” or “surprise” candidate, Călin Georgescu is in fact far from being unknown. For decades, he has maintained a visible and consistent presence in Romanian political and intellectual circles (Chirileasa 2024; Cicovschi 2024; Grigorescu 2024; Marincea 2024; Șerban 2025). Both online and offline, his public persona is a carefully crafted image, specifically curated to appeal to the disillusioned and the spiritually inclined. Yet one that deliberately omits his prior affiliations and career. By obscuring his earlier political ties, he executes a classic populist inversion: rebranding an embedded member of the political establishment as a fresh, untainted figure, seemingly unburdened by the controversies of Romania’s post-communist politics.

Accordingly, his political platform is framed as a project of moral and spiritual redemption, while he himself assumes the responsibility as a providential instrument, a vessel of divine mission bearing soteriological truth, claiming to be motivated not by personal ambition, but answering a divine “calling” from God (Georgescu 2024; Cornea 2024). The result is the reactivation of an old, familiar political logic in a new digital and symbolic garb: a theology of the nation complete with saints, heretics, sacraments, eschatologies, and excommunications (Gentile 2006, 34, 56, 82, 99, 114). In this sense, he comes to embody what Agamben (1993, 67) terms an “whatever singularity”, a figure that suspends and neutralizes conventional categories of identity. He is neither left nor right, neither politician nor priest, neither technocrat nor populist, yet precisely through this indeterminacy he claims a form of absolute moral authority.

The hybrid imagery he evokes combines the somber dystopian atmosphere of British director Michael Radford’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with the intimate, reassuring confidence of American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s *Fireside Chats*. This mixture produces a disconcerting effect: a voice that simultaneously warns of imminent ruin and promises redemptive national healing. It is at once apocalyptic and paternal, fusing authoritarian overtones with the illusion of participatory closeness. In this representation, he becomes both Big Brother and benevolent shepherd, a figure who commands not only obedience, but trust, as though salvation itself were being broadcast through a webcam.

Georgescu’s public persona is cultivated not through public debates, but through YouTube

interviews, Telegram channels, and algorithmically tailored video fragments that mimic the structure of religious testimony. This is not charisma in Weber's classical sense, but a different form of charisma altogether, mediated, edited, and endlessly looped, often beyond the leader's own authorship. He is not merely followed, but shared, streamed, and invoked.

Although undeniably a product of elite structures, both in terms of education and professional development, Georgescu strategically adopts an anti-elite posturing, aligning himself rhetorically with the Romanian "people" against what is framed as a morally bankrupt political establishment. By symbolic projection, he gives the impression that he resonates with the masses, fostering the belief among his followers that he can "see" more clearly and can better ascertain the needs of "his" people, precisely because he himself emerged from said people. Thus, endowing him with a purported insider's vision, in stark contrast to the alienated and self-serving political class. This perception cultivates a sentiment of false solidarity, an affective bonding that masks structural inequalities and reduces the complexities of political representation under the simplistic guise of shared origins. Through this discursive reframing, the corrupt oligarchy becomes a profane force estranged from the true spirit of the nation, while "the people" are reimagined as a sacred community, whether understood in explicitly religious terms or not, as bearers of a latent moral and spiritual truth awaiting restoration (Grzymala-Busse 2017; DeHanas 2023, 834).

This soteriological posturing and the cult-like veneration surrounding Georgescu culminated in him being dubbed "Guru" and even "Messiah" across virtual platforms and broadcast media (Euronews România 2024; Morar 2025). Initially deployed in a derogatory tone by his detractors, the latter designation was quickly reclaimed and proudly embraced by his supporters, transforming a term of mockery into one of symbolic exaltation. His imagery and rhetoric evoke religious depth, yet this depth is hollowed out by a circulation of signs untethered to any transcendent referent, endlessly recycled through social media. Georgescu becomes "Messiah" not through ordination or doctrinal authority, but through memes.

While he ostensibly references the sacred, what he ultimately produces is a simulation of it. And he reinforces this simulation by consciously adopting a charismatic-messianic model. With this it appears as though sacredness in itself is experienced through performance, to the point that segments of his supporters actually anticipate his miraculous intervention. French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard's concept of *hyperreality* provides us a crucial analytical lens for understanding the ways in which religious and mystical languages function in contemporary politics, particularly as such discourses become entangled with digital technologies and media ecosystems.

Within these environments, religious references no longer operate as expressions of genuine theological conviction. Rather, they function as *simulacra*, representations without referents, performative gestures that imitate the form of the sacred while remaining detached from any doctrinal substance. In Baudrillardian terms, we are witnessing a *simulation of the third order* – a state that operates "beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond rational distinctions" (Baudrillard 2010, 21). In this condition, representations no longer mediate or reflect an external reality but progressively "lack" or lose their referential grounding, becoming "impossible to isolate" from the realities they ostensibly represent. What emerges instead is an aesthetic and affective construct that proves more compelling, more influential, and ultimately more real than empirical reality itself – a form of meaning produced, circulated, and consumed as "pure form".

Any critique thus becomes exceedingly difficult, as reality dissolves into its own simulation. Politics no longer hinges on the distinction between truth and falsehood, but on which image "feels" more authentic. Communication, in its social function, becomes what Baudrillard calls "a lure", to which the force of myth is attached. Belief – or more precisely, faith in information – assumes a tautological structure: one believes because one believes. Yet, such belief, he notes, is marked by the same ambiguity that once surrounded myth in archaic societies, wherein one simultaneously believes and disbelieves (Baudrillard 2010, 81). It is precisely at this point that the simulation reaches its critical threshold, producing an "implosion of

meaning", in the aftermath of which truth and illusion no longer rest on any correspondence to reality, but instead become functions of the intensity of one's affective investment (Baudrillard 2010, 31, 81).

This immixture of mysticism and media reveals a longing for immanence, for a moment in which truth and power will coincide once again and the political will be realigned with an imagined cosmic order. It is precisely this desire for sacral totality that renders such movements resistant to critique and structurally prone to authoritarian drift. French philosopher Claude Lefort (1988, 17, 225) recognized this in his theory of the "empty place of power". With the withdrawal of the transcendent foundations of authority, sovereignty in modern democracy becomes symbolically vacant. Whereas totalitarian regimes sought to abolish this indeterminacy by forcibly filling the void with an absolute power or ideology, democratic modernity leaves the locus of sovereignty open, to be permanently contested in continuous attempts at reoccupation. Georgescu appears as the latest claimant to this void, seeking to re-inscribe a visible presence of the sacred into the political field that democracy had rendered symbolically empty.

Although he makes copious allusions to the past, his rhetoric does not appeal to any concrete historical lineage, nor to the veneration of national forebears. Instead, what he advances is a largely novel construct, a fabrication that, despite its sacralized language, disregards the very historical past it appears to evoke. This represents not a continuity with any Romanian religious or political tradition, but a rupture masked as restoration. Georgescu's selective appropriation of historical memory, manifested through a growing number of references to Interwar Romania – most strikingly through the word for word reproduction of the speeches of Marshal Ion Antonescu (Toşa 2024) – and, particularly, to figures affiliated with the Legionary Movement, including its leader, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu (Pavel 2024), aligns more closely with the logic of myth-making. This serves to construct a symbolic continuity in which such controversial historical characters act as spiritual and political precursors in a narrative of national regeneration.

There is no coherent doctrinal or ideological line to be found in Georgescu's discourses. Rather, he displays an eclectic "catch-all" assemblage of tropes, and references drawn from disparate sources with little concern for their original meaning or internal consistency. The same Georgescu also cites communist figures, such as dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu and his successor Ion Iliescu (Toşa 2024). Another blatant example is his verbatim quotation from British author John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (Lefter 2025). A modern literary fantasy now repurposed to lend an epic and mythic tone to his political messaging. His references to pop culture do not stop here. His 2022 book *The Great Rebirth* is subtitled "Exiting the Matrix", directly invoking the 1999 science fiction film *The Matrix*, which enjoys an enduring popularity in Romania. The film's central themes of awakening to hidden realities, escaping illusory systems of control, and reclaiming individual agency have resonated deeply within Romanian post-communist society. Particularly among audiences already inclined to skepticism toward political and institutional authority, providing a rich mythopoetic imaginary through which political actors could articulate critiques of globalization, technocracy, and perceived moral decline.

His invocations do not, however, limit themselves to mere quotations. He often recalls the typological reasoning of Interwar Romanian far-right philosopher Nae Ionescu (1993, 136-138), where the latter constructed a hierarchy of "degrees" of Romanian-ness in which some are deemed by virtue of birth or geography as merely "implicitly" Romanian, while others, those who align with certain cultural, religious, or ideological coordinates are elevated to the status of "true" or "good" Romanians. Georgescu is taken to be the personification of the "true spirit" of the nation, presenting himself as the embodiment of this archetypal Romanian, while casting others as insufficiently authentic or spiritually compromised. He enacts a fusion of Romanian national identity with Orthodox metaphysics, presenting the two as ontologically inseparable and mutually reinforcing. To be a "true Romanian" becomes more than a simple ethno-cultural or juridical designation, but a spiritual vocation to embrace the Orthodox faith

and virtues. The circularity of this definition where “true” identity is both presupposed and confirmed by adherence to itself enables the ideological sacralization of a national type: Orthodox, traditionalist, subordinated to a quasi-mystical *Volksgeist*.

Orthodoxy is thereby elevated beyond its status as the majority religion to become the nation’s ontological substratum. The construction of Romanian identity thus proceeds apophatically, through exclusion. And here, only those who conform to the ideal type can belong. All others are strangers, deviants, or enemies. Dissent becomes heresy, which must be neutralized, with purifying violence if necessary. The figure of the “true Romanian” – Orthodox, profusely moral, and rooted in ancestral tradition – is defined in opposition to a series of internal and external enemies. These opponents are no longer treated as legitimate political rivals within a pluralist society, but as spiritual adversaries threatening the very essence of the nation: the non-Romanian, the atheist, the globalist, the secularist, the technocrat, the progressive, the intellectual, and so on. They are not portrayed as simply naively mistaken or misguided, but as profane and spiritually corrupt. The political enemy is transfigured into a theological category – the adversary of salvation. This logic can be – and historically has been – instrumentalized in the construction of nationalist and xenophobic narratives.

Here the European Union emerges as the paradigmatic hostile entity precisely because it embodies both dimensions of the perils identified within national-political theology. Externally, a quasi-imperial power imposing alien norms, and internally, a subversive ideological force dissolving the sacred moral fabric of the nation. Foreign in its many ethnicities, creeds, and cultural traditions, the European Union is framed not just as a political institution, but as the embodiment of a civilizational *Other*. One grounded in Western liberalism, a Catholic-Protestant heritage, and a cosmopolitan ethos that allegedly dilutes, or actively overrides local particularisms. Values associated with European integration, such as secularism, multiculturalism, minority rights, environmentalism, and gender equality become convenient targets for political actors seeking to generate mass hysteria and moral panics. Within nationalist discourse, these are frequently denounced as “anti-traditional” heretical doctrines, functioning as a rival civil religion perceived to be fundamentally incompatible with the Orthodox spirituality of the Romanian people. Most importantly, the European Union is represented as a danger to sovereignty, as it challenges the ultimate authority by imposing supranational constraints on national law, economic governance, and border regimes, thereby usurping the power to decide the state of exception. In this way, it becomes a synthesis of both external and internal enmity: at once the ultimate political rival, and an anti-sacred force imagined, in extremis, as a kind of modern anti-Christ in secular-political garb, seeking to unmake what is professed as the divine order of blood, faith, and soil.

Resistance to European integration is thus envisioned not merely as a political or economic stance, but as a defense of an ontological order, with Georgescu positioning himself as a guardian of continuity against a profane and disintegrative modernity. It is therefore not accidental that his rhetoric, as with numerous other political-mystical figures, assumes an explicitly apocalyptic tone: we are always on the brink, always facing the fall or the rebirth of the nation, as if forever suspended in an imminent moment of decision. Within this horizon, every election becomes a ritual of purification, every speech and every protest a reenactment of collective suffering, and every leader a potential Messiah – or Antichrist.

The ideological dissonance between Georgescu’s public discourses where he appeals to the Orthodox tradition and his personal association with alternative spiritual frameworks contributed to the ambiguous, and at times contradictory, religious overtones that came to define his electoral communication strategy. Although both formally identify as Orthodox Christians, Georgescu and his wife Cristela – who transitioned from a career in banking to one in holistic therapy – publicly endorsed practices that have been described as belonging to “a religion other than Christianity” (Goldstein 2024). Many of their claims were labelled as “not quite in line with the doctrine of the Romanian Orthodox Church”, but rather blending elements of New Age and “other ideological and spiritual thoughts” (Vasile 2024). Specifically,

they advocate “a syncretic spiritual and cultural movement that emerged in the 20th century, which promotes personal and collective transformation through esoteric practices” (Goldstein 2024). This impression was further reinforced by Georgescu's presence in non-Orthodox spaces, for example, his appearance at the Betania Pentecostal Church in Jebel, where he delivered a sermon. His participation in such a setting, despite the clear doctrinal differences between Pentecostalism and Orthodox Christianity, signaled his openness to a broader, spiritually eclectic audience and a willingness to transcend traditional confessional boundaries as a veiled form of transdenominational ecumenism. Georgescu emerges, borrowing a concept from Romanian philosopher Mircea Eliade, as a “cosmic Christian”. A figure whose spiritual posture transcends confessional boundaries while invoking a primordial, archetypal religiosity.

Conclusions

The institutional paralysis caused by the 2024–2025 electoral crisis in Romania may be understood, in effect, as a struggle over the symbolic and epistemic limits of the contemporary public sphere. The state's apparent inability or unwillingness to carry through with the democratic process betrays a marked ambivalence. In the most charitable interpretation, it assumes the posture of a detached observer; in a less generous reading, it operates as a tacit accomplice, allowing the unregulated expansion of a heterodox and increasingly fictionalized political discourse, alongside the uncontrolled proliferation of a mythologized spiritual–political imaginary.

This dynamic also highlights the acute absence of a shared civic culture of democracy in Romania. As in other European countries where post-transitional reforms have failed to deliver immediately tangible results, a widespread mentality has taken hold according to which any meaningful change is possible only through profoundly radical, often revolutionary interventions. Such expectations tend to coalesce around a singular messianic figure who, once symbolically invested, is believed capable of transforming “everything” from the roots up.

Far from constituting an anomaly, this active self-creation of the collective will resonates with a longstanding tradition of political cults of personality, which reject the premise of passive liberal citizenship in favor of a communal, almost coenobitical participation in the life of the nation-state. The attachment to charismatic leader-figures has been, and remains still, a recurring feature of Romanian political culture.

Ultimately, the Georgescu phenomenon demonstrates how the absolute convergence of deregulated media ecosystems, residual syncretic spiritualities, and populist dissimulation can successfully channel crisis into myth, disillusionment into enchantment, and public disaffection into spiritual mobilization in support of political actors. With this we are left to reflect on the resilience of secular democratic institutions and the future of political representation in a public sphere increasingly governed by affect-driven and other-than-rational forms of politics.

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