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ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS RIVALRY IN THE STRUCTURAL ARCHITECTURE OF VRANCEA COUNTY

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Abstract: Studied by means of the statistical data provided by the censuses carried on in 1930, 1992 and 2002, the religious structure of the population of Vrancea County obviously outlines this territory as a genuine nucleus of Orthodoxy resistance with a visible tendency of strengthening its denomination homogeneity in the last two census years, primarily as a consequence of the vanishing of a component with a significant specific weight in the past local religious landscape (the Mosaic one). However, the recent aggressive dynamics of the Neo-Protestant branches can be regarded as a vector which is favourable to the propagation of some novelty religious trends and ideas, able to alter the hierarchy of the religious minorities.

Keywords: *Orthodoxy bastion, competing minorities, Neo-Protestant emergence*

I. INTRODUCTION

The investigation of the population’s religious belonging represents a fruitful demarche, the shaping of a certain religious consciousness being able to become a useful instrument in understanding both the demographic mechanisms and the way in which specific habitudes and behaviours are perpetuated or taken over through imitation.

In opposition not only to the neighbouring Transylvanian territories but also to the Moldavian ones (especially those situated in the northern part of this province), the space overlapping the present administrative limits of Vrancea County has always been a real bastion of Orthodoxy, providing confined room to the other denominations. Nevertheless, in close relation to the ethnic structure, the analysis of the statistical data collected on the occasion of the 1930, 1992 and 2002 censuses reveals a significant rivalry relationship between the religious minorities.

II. THE ETHNICAL STRUCTURE – PREMISE FOR RELIGIOUS DIVERSIFICATION

Although standing out through the remarkable unity of the Romanian ethnic bloc, Vrancea County has also faced *certain elements of ethnic diversification, often visibly transposed in its religious landscape.*

The statistical data provided by the **1930** census (Table 1) bring forward the net prevalence of both *the Romanian (94.35%) and Orthodox population (95.49%), representing the strikingly majority background against which the other structural categories are profiled.*

Table no. 1. Evolution of the religious structure of the population of Vrancea County at the 1930, 1992 and 2002 censuses

Religion	1930		1992		2002	
	Abs.	%	Abs.	%	Abs.	%
Orthodox	250118	95.49	384155	97.65	376854	97.22
Roman-Catholic	3678	1.40	5075	1.29	5145	1.33
Greek-Catholic	393	0.15	63	0.02	43	0.01
Reformate	251	0.10	30	0.01	66	0.02
Lutheran	109	0.04	41	0.01	29	0.01
Unitarian	8	0.003	7	0.002	13	0.003
Old Calendar						
Orthodox Church	-	-	1467	0.37	815	0.21
Old Rite						
Christian	-	-	185	0.05	207	0.05
Armenian	201	0.08	12	0.003	22	0.01
Baptist	19	0.01	65	0.02	170	0.04
Adventist	197	0.08	813	0.21	829	0.21
Pentecostal	-	-	619	0.16	2242	0.58
Evangelical						
Christian	-	-	418	0.11	790	0.20
Mosaic	6759	2.58	50	0.01	30	0.01
Muslim	45	0.001	19	0.005	64	0.02
Other religion	32	0.01	202	0.05	235	0.06
Atheists	-	-	68	0.02	33	0.01
No religion	91	0.03	70	0.02	25	0.01
Undeclared	33	0.01	49	0.01	20	0.01

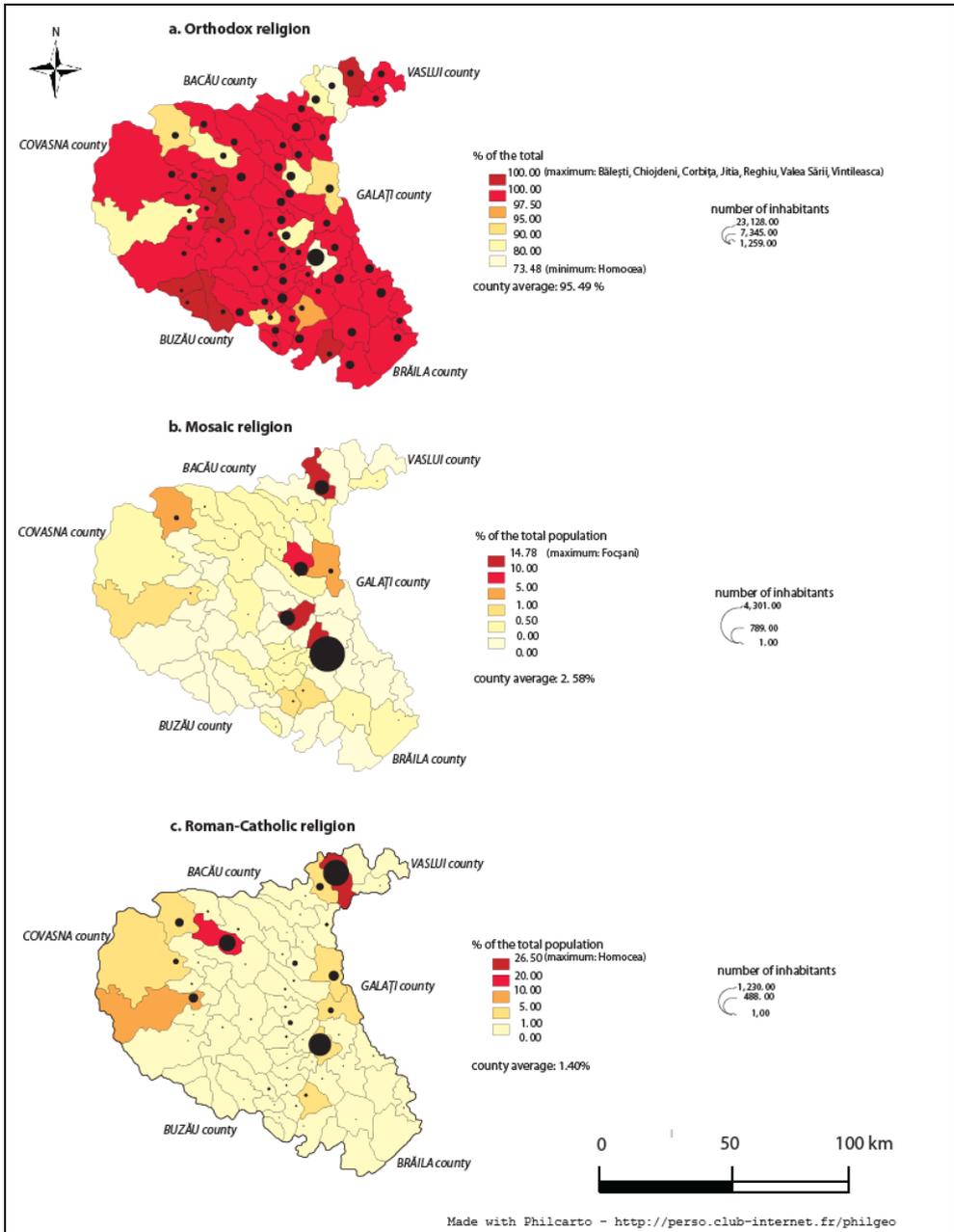


Figure 1. 1930 Census – The spatial distribution of the population of Orthodox religion (a.), Mosaic religion (b.) and Roman-Catholic religion (c.)

The map of the spatial distribution of the **Orthodox** population (Fig. 1) points out the clear pre-eminence of this denomination at the territorial level, 84.4% of the fundamental administrative units recording a percentage above the average. Out of these, 7 nuclei are particularly distinguishable due to the fact that they lack any religious interference, being located primarily in the Subcarpathian area (Reghiu, Vintileasca, Jitia, Chiojdeni, Valea Sării), but also in Tutova Hills (Corbița) and southern Râmnic Plain (Bălești) – out of these, the last 4 statistically overlap some purely Romanian communities.

In interrelation with the architecture of the national structure as reflected by the 1930 census, the most powerful religious minority is represented by the **Mosaic** one, the convergence between it and the Jewish population being nearly perfect (6.58 % compared to 6.52 %). Under these circumstances, the invocation of the essentially urban character of this ethnic group (actively involved in the social and economic life of towns) justifies the transformation of the urban settlements in the main Mosaic poles of the county – with a percentage of 14.78 % Focsani ranks first, but well coagulated communities can also be found in Odobești (12.4%), Adjud (11.3 %) and Panciu (9.7 %). The presence of the Mosaic population in the rural environment is much attenuated and indissolubly related to their sharp entrepreneurial spirit – forestry operation activities in the mountainous and Subcarpathian areas (especially those situated northwards of Putna river, with a maximum value of 2.11 % in Soveja) or processing industries in highly accessible rural settlements (Gugești – 0.69 %).

Far from having the same structural diversification force as at the national (Romania – 8.2 %) or regional level (Moldova – 4.5 %), **Roman-Catholicism** still represents the second most important minority religion in Vrancea County (1.49%). Just like in the previous case, its territorial configuration accurately overlaps the ethnical composition, this time in connection to the presence of the Hungarian populations – on the one hand in Siret Passage (with an absolute value of 26.5 % in Homocea, but also with good representation in Mărășești, Adjud, Garoafa, Pufești); on the other hand in Putna and Șușița superior basins (Vizantea-Livezi – 13.42 %, Nistorești – 8.29 %, Soveja, Tulnici). Between these two territorial assemblies, Focșani (3.19 %) and Gugești (1.16 %) also stand out due to a greater degree of religious variety. The presence of the other denominations is extremely discrete in the 1930 religious balance of the population of Vrancea County: *Greek-Catholicism* – 0.15%, *Protestantism* – 0.14 %, *Neo-Protestantism* – 0.09 %.

III. INCREASED RELIGIOUS HOMOGENEITY

The first post communist census (carried out in the year **1992**) expresses the clear tendency of religious homogeneity strengthening, the consolidation of Orthodoxy being due primarily to the quasi-disappearance of the Mosaic and Protestant denominations. Besides the Orthodox religion, only Protestant branches

distinguish themselves through a positive dynamics (even more spectacular considering its very low initial level).

The cartogram of the spatial distribution of the **Orthodox** population (Fig. 2) reveals a much more distinct spatialization of the centres with a more diversified religious landscape, centres which are concentrated in the southern piedmont area, in the superior basin of Şuşiţa extending southwards to that of Putna and in the extreme north of Siret Passage (with an absolute minimum value of 74.94 % in Homocea commune). The degree of religious heterogeneity of most towns (except for Adjud) fades away, but some periurban communes experience a certain recrudescence. The distinct prevalence of Orthodoxy at the 1992 census is very well illustrated by the statistical reality, 59.4 % of the administrative units recording percentages of above 99 % and 89.1 % above 95 %.

Due to the quasi-disappearance of the Mosaic population (0.01%), in 1992 **Roman-Catholics** represent *the main element of religious differentiation* within the structure of the population of Vrancea County, even though its percentage is slightly smaller. Through the assimilation of the former Hungarian population in the superior basins of Putna and Şuşiţa, the communes Nistoreşti, Tulnici and Soveja became invisible on the map of the distribution of the Catholic population, Vizantea-Livezi concentrating the only significant community in the Carpathian and Subcarpathian area. Therefore, the most important Catholic pole of Vrancea County remains quartered in the northern part of Siret Passage, with a maximum percentage of 26.5 % in the case of Homocea commune.

Protestantism *visibly loses ground*, its regress being expressed by the modest percentage of 0.02 %. As compared to the former dispersion tendency, the present trend is one of accumulation in the centre-eastern part of the county, where Focsani holds the largest number of Reformat and Lutheran adherents.

The aggressive dynamics of the **Neo-Protestant** denominations can be inferred from the increase of their percentage from 0.09 % in 1930 to 0.49 % in 1992 (although this value is inferior to those recorded both at the regional and especially national level – Moldova: 1.70 %; Romania: 2.01 %). Whereas at the previous census 51 of the 64 urban and rural settlements had no Neo-Protestant adherent, in 1992 their number diminishes to 14, primarily gathered in the internal Subcarpathians (Bârseşti, Vrâncioaia, Valea Sării, Năruja, Andreiaşu de Jos), acknowledged fief of Orthodoxy. Against the background of a rather ubiquitous presence, two categories of centres stand out due to their overrepresentation: on the one hand those settlements that have a tradition certified by the 1930 census (Bordeşti, Câmpuri, Fitioneşti, Ciorăşti, Gugeşti, Adjud); on the other hand a series of administrative units with a relatively recent but conspicuously manifested emergence (Slobozia Bradului, Măicanеşti, Năneşti, Dumitreşti, Corbiţa).

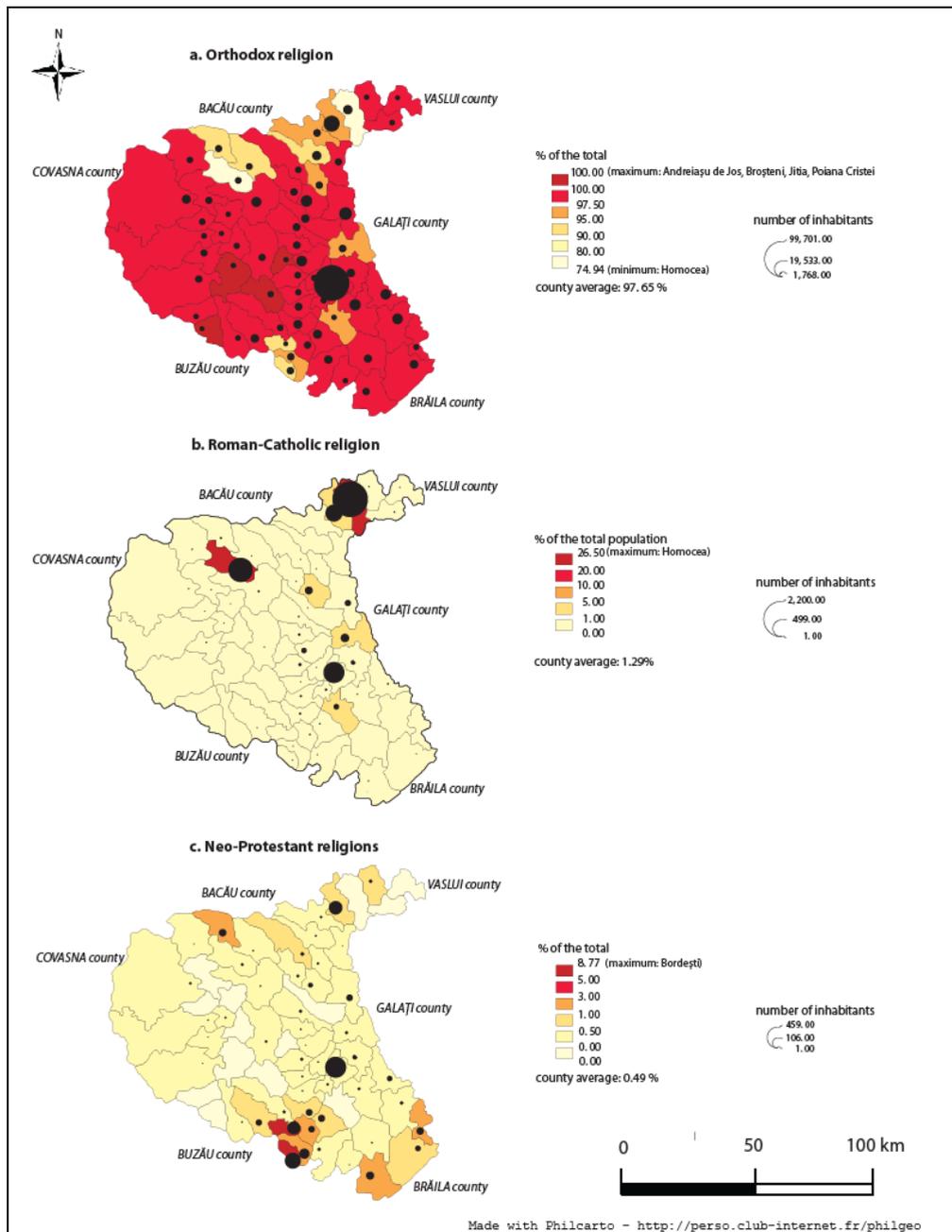


Figure 2. 1992 Census – The spatial distribution of the population of Orthodox religion (a.), Roman-Catholic religion (b.) and Neo-Protestant religions (c.)

Baptists are very little present in the local Neo-Protestant configuration (0.02 %), in opposition to *Adventists*, who represent the largest Neo-Protestant group (0.21 %), mainly centred on the south Piedmont area (Bordești – 8.72 %, Tâmbioiești – 2.06 %, Dumbrăveni, Urechești). However, significant communities can also isolatedly be found in Șușița basin (Câmpuri) and south-eastern part of the plain area (Ciorăști, Nănești).

Undoubtedly, the most spectacular dynamics is that of *Pentecostals* (0.16%) and *Evangelical Christians* (0.11 %). Although not legally recorded at the 1930 census, this positive dynamics can be inferred from the infinitesimal percentages of „other religion” (0.01 %) and „undeclared religion” (0.01 %) subcategories, drawing attention on the extremely modest number of people converted to these denominations.

While *Greek-Catholics* experience a decrease in their percentage (from 0.15 % to 0.02 %), the *Old Calendar Orthodox* population is obviously distinguishable, the average of 0.37 % being comparable to that recorded at the regional level (Moldova – 0.49 %) but clearly superior to the national value (Romania – 0.14 %). The most part of this structural category is primarily concentrated in Zăbrăuți Piedmont, explaining the underrepresentation in comparison to the average of the Orthodox population in this area.

IV. THE SOCIAL VULNERABILITY – PREMISE FOR NEO-PROTESTANTISM TERRITORIAL INSERTION

The **2002** census displays a religious architecture in which Orthodoxy remains the majority background in the case of Vrancea County (97.22 %). Nevertheless, *the gap of 0.37 %* (in comparison to the previous census), although infinitesimal as a percentage value, can be regarded as *a vector favourable to the insertion of new religious trends and ideas, able to alter the hierarchy of the religious minorities.*

At the end of the intercensitary decade 1992-2002, the **Neo-Protestant** branches assume *the most interesting evolution* (Fig. 3), although the increase is more impressive in absolute values (from 1915 to 4031 followers) rather than in relative values (from 0.49 % to 1.04 %, a value which is however below both the regional and national level: Moldova – 2.42 %, Romania – 2.72 %).

The difference in comparison to the year 1992 is not so much given by an extensive dynamics (through the expansion of the manifestation area) but rather by an *intensive* one (through the intensification of their presence in the territory). Several areas are conspicuously visible: the Subcarpathian basin of Șușița extending northwards, towards that of Zăbrăuț, Siret Passage between Adjud and Mărășești and especially the south extremity of the piedmont area, regions acknowledged both for their *low living standard* and for the presence of some *significant gipsy communities*, which can outline the assumption that this was the breach speculated by the

promoters of these religious trends, well-known for the financial and material propagandistic support provided.

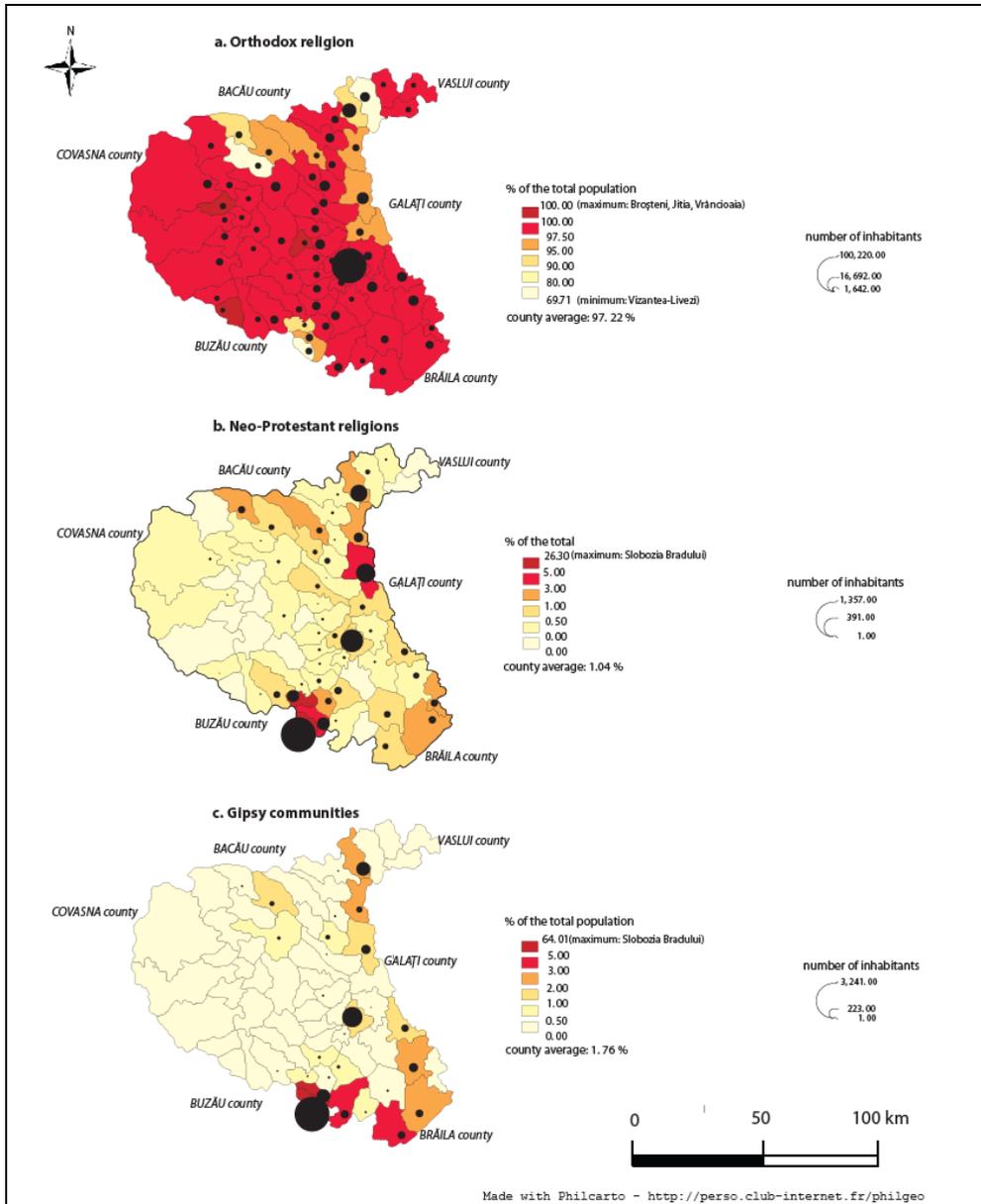


Figure 3. 2002 Census – The spatial distribution of the population of Orthodox religion (a.), Neo-Protestant religions (b.) and Gipsy communities (c.)

Representing the most numerous group in 1992, *Adventists* (0.21 %) experience a certain numerical stabilization in the 1992-2002 decade, the nuclei of maximum concentration remaining the same: Bordești (8.73 %), Tâmbioești, Câmpuri. *Baptists'* statistical visibility strenghtens (0.02 %), the followers of this denomination being recorded primarily in urban centres (Focșani, Panciu, Mărășești) but secondarily in some rural ones (Slobozia Bradului, Răcoasa. Corbița). The most alert growth rate belongs to *Pentecostals* (from 0.16 % to 0.58 %), residents both in the urban (Mărășești, Adjud) and rural environment (Tâmbioești, Pufești, with an absolute maximum percentage of 26.3 % in the case of Slobozia Bradului), mainly areas holding important communities of gypsy population. Evangelical Christians preserve their urban propension (Focșani, Mărășești, Adjud).

V. CONCLUSIONS

The religious structure of the population of Vrancea County has always stood out due to its highly cohesive character, the remarkable resistance of Orthodoxy relying on the impressive unity of the Romanian ethnic bloc. Nevertheless, in close relation to the population's ethnic configuration, there can be identified significant elements of religious rivalry, particularly in the first half of the 20th century (the Mosaic and Roman-Catholic religions supported by the presence of some Jewish and Hungarian communities). Through disappearance or assimilation of these competing religious minorities, the structure of Vrancea population tends to strengthen its homogeneity during the last half of a century. However, the first two post communist censuses clearly anticipate a reconfiguration of the hierarchy of the religious minorities through the recent momentum gathered by Neo-Protestant branches, many times speculating the social vulnerability of the local communities.

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