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Table of Contents

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ONE CHURCH, DIFFERENT ROLES, DIFFERENT MISSIONS. CASE STUDY ON THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA LIVING IN SPAIN

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Abstract

Religious organizations and churches are considered to play an important role in communities, by mediating and enabling social interactions between peers, by creating social networks of trust, delivering social services and enhancing civic engagement. All these assumptions were tested in Western societies, but there are few studies that focus especially on the role that church plays for the Romanian Diaspora living in Spain. Based on the concept of "fictive kin" or ritual kin, this paper explores the role of the faith based organizations and churches in creating ties among Romanian migrants living in Spain. In this perspective, fictive kin networks are considered to develop efficiently among church and religious organizations, since these organizations usually overlap ethnicity with the social and faith mandates. Moreover, fictive kin networks created inside church represent a resource for migrants, by providing social support and services and by facilitating their integration in the new host society. Data were collected through interviews, focus groups and participatory observation. Preliminary results indicate that fictive kin networks usually develop in migrant communities where priests are interested in creating social ties among Romanians living in Spain.

Introduction

Religious[1] organizations and churches are considered to play an important role in communities, by mediating and enabling social interactions between peers, by creating social networks of trust, delivering social services and enhancing civic engagement (Putnam, 1993, 1995; Norris, Inglehart, 2004). The large academic debate surrounding these assumptions were tested in various Western societies and the conclusions seem to indicate that religious organizations have rather a positive influence for communities, by

creating social ties among people and transferring tolerant values among citizens (Stromsnes, 2008; Norris, Inglehart, 2004; Lam, 2006). In other words, churches and religious organizations are places where social capital is formed and transferred; for the aim of this paper, social capital is understood as a set of norms of reciprocity, civic engagement and social trust among peers, and all these elements have a positive impact on improving democratic processes (Putnam, 1993, 1995). In this perspective, in "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital", Putnam (1995) argues that communities with high social capital live an easier life since people interact based on reciprocity and social trust. Moreover, citizens manage to create networks of collaboration, where problems are discussed and opportunism is easier to avoid. In the United States, religious affiliation represents one of the most common membership affiliations, bringing people together in a similar fashion as sports clubs, parent-teacher associations or professional unions (Putnam, 1995). Therefore, religious-based communities represent a space for interaction and collaboration, where people with similar beliefs come together, discuss, exchange ideas and even design and implement common projects. All these activities happen because people trust each other, or phrase it differently, there is a high level of social capital inside these communities. Equally important, Norris and Inglehart (2004) ask whether secularization had any effect on religious participation and civic networks that formed around faith-based organizations. The research was conducted in the United States and evidence indicate that, even though faith-based activities have declined in the past decades, attending religious services is still positively correlated to membership in other religious and non-religious organizations. Moreover, people involved in religious organizations, but not necessarily attending services, developed an active political behaviour and had positive social attitudes towards their peers.

Beside their role of social capital catalysers, religious organizations and religion itself were also considered status makers for followers or volunteers. Even though modern societies have known a decrease of religiosity, Lam (2006) argues that civic engagement is still influenced by religion. From the denominations studied, Protestants appear to volunteer in more civic organizations than Catholics, but religious customs and national identities seem to be, as well, good predictors for religiosity. In this sense, after running a hierarchical nonlinear model, the results indicate that citizens of Catholic nations are less likely to involve in volunteering

activities or associations, religious activities being perceived more as a status enhancer into community (Lam, 2006).

Since there is a large debate around the religious organization and their role in social capital formation in United States, some of these assumptions presented above were tested in other European countries in order to see if there are any similarities with the existing theories.

In this sense, Stromsnes (2008) explores the role that church attendance and membership in religious organizations play in creating and transferring social capital in Norwegian society. Based on a survey conducted in 2001 and acknowledging the fact that Norwegians have a high rate of volunteering participation, the study has the aim to verify if attending services has any influence on political behaviour and if religious organizations represent a place of developing and transferring social trust. The results indicate that people who attend services are more politically involved than the ones who seldom go to church. Moreover, politically active are also the citizens who volunteer in religious organizations. For this category, the difference between active and passive volunteers was not statistically significant, both categories having a high level of social trust in their peers (Stromsnes, 2008).

Similar studies conducted on youth in Netherlands indicate that religious organizations represent one of the good mediators of social and altruistic behaviours for youth, but parents' attitudes towards volunteering and education are as well significant variables that influence youngsters' philanthropic and social attitudes (Bekkers, 2005). In addition, results indicate that the parents' former volunteering influences youth civic activism, because pro-social values are shared inside family and represent a behavioural model for children. While looking at the understandings and influences of spiritual capital in the life of people living in the UK, the study conducted by Baker and Smith (2010) presents several interesting findings, such as: religious persons tend to endorse social actions, regardless of their faith; buildings are not only spaces for worship, but also places where communities can socialize and meet; there is a tendency for believers to socialize mainly with people from their own congregation or similar spiritual affiliation. Even though these ideas might sound clichéd, in fact, not only active religious participation to services or volunteering in religious organization have a positive impact on civic behaviour, but also the activities that are grouped around these faith organizations and the

interactions among people are as relevant and important in forming and transferring social capital.

As presented above, one can see that the debate surrounding the role of religious organization in promoting civic behaviour and social trust in Western societies is very vivid and nuanced. Few studies have inquired other geographical spaces and faiths. For instance, Win (1998) and Shin (1999) argue that even though Confucian values are based on a clear hierarchical model, civil society in South Korea and Taiwan were largely influenced by these religious models. Poorly studied is also the Orthodox Church and the former Communist space. Gavrilovic and Jovanovic (2012) argue that, while Western societies confronted with a process of secularization, in Serbia Orthodox church is part of the national identity and represented a catalyser for former conflicts in the region. Being a hierarchical institution, the Serbian Orthodox Church does not represent an enabler for social capital formation and people who declare themselves believers and attend services tend to have low levels of trust in their peers. However, altruistic behaviour appears to the citizens that go frequently to church, but they prefer to help their common in religion peers (Gavrilovic, Jovanovic, 2012).

These debates open new discussions on the role of the Orthodox Church in creating and transferring social capital among Romanians living inside and outside of state borders. In this perspective, this paper has the aim to explore the role of faith-based organizations and churches in creating ties among Romanian migrants living in Spain. While being aware that churches and religious organizations play an important role in the Romanian society, 86% percent of Romanian identifying themselves as Orthodox (Pew Research Centre, 2017), in diaspora communities, the situation might look different since the context of migration overlaps religiosity and faith activities. Therefore, based on extensive interviews and focus groups with Romanian Orthodox priests and members of the community, the study will explain how churches and religious organizations adapt to a new environment and how social ties are formed around the priest, as a leader in the community of believers.

Data and Methodology

Data were collected in three different periods of time through extended interviews with Orthodox priests and member of the communities, focus

groups and participatory observations. First interviews were conducted in October 2016 in Romanian communities surrounding Madrid (Parla and Getafe). The second fieldwork was organized in April 2017 in Romanian communities from Getafe, Leganes, Valdemoro and Alcorcon. In September 2017 were conducted the final interviews in Valencia. The interviews and focus groups touched several important areas, such as: the relevance of Romanian traditions abroad, the role of priest in the community and the activities he organizes for various categories of believers (children, youth, adults), general attitudes towards different categories of people and how Romanians felt and involved in their new host countries.

Facts and Discussions

Based on the theory of fictive kin or ritual kin which refers to all types of relationships and connections that form not on family ties, but on religious ceremonies and friendships (Ebaugh, Curry, 2000), the analysis of data collected tries to determine whether religious communities substitute family ties and replicate networks of trust for Romanians living in the Spanish diaspora (Madrid and Valencia). Romanians represent the largest diaspora group living in Spain[2] and previous studies conducted on this group focused more on the reasons why Romanians have chosen this country and their perceptions as workers and community members in various Spanish settlements (Sandu, 2006). Even though Sandu (2006) touched upon the religious phenomenon surrounding Romanian communities, his inquiry was focused more on how perishes were formed abroad and how Romanians participate in religious services. His extensive study was not focused on how social capital is formed inside religious communities and if the new members are forming new relationships that substitute family connections. Analysing the Ministry of Romanian Living Abroad webpage, one can see that preserving ethnic, cultural and religious identity is considered one of the main tasks that Romanian officials had to promote in various projects designed for diaspora groups. In this sense, Romanian priests take these tasks and inside their communities they promote ethnic and religious values in order to maintain as vivid as possible the national identity.

From all the interviews conducted in communities, it appeared that the priest is a node that coordinates the entire activities related to religious,

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[2] According to National Institute of Statistics Spain – ine.es- and Romanian National Institute of Statistics - www.insse.ro.

cultural and social activities. "*I have Facebook and What's Up groups with all the believers that are close to church and I post various news, such as: dates and hours for religious services, different humanitarian calls if families are in need, different meetings with Romanians in order to organize our National Day or Parish Celebration*". Also, upon request, priests organize various religious services for community members (baptism, religious wedding ceremonies, car "baptism", religious services in the memory of the deceased and even funerals).

At weddings and baptisms, Romanians living in communities do not ask anymore their family relatives to become godparents for their children, but they prefer to create kin ties with their friends they met at church or in the working place. "*It is nice that here we do not care anymore if we come from Transylvania or Moldova, we are just Romanians and some of use become family members because we become godparents for our friends' kids or even spiritual parents for future brides and grooms. And we help each other with jobs or at least a good word.*" When asked about how they found out about the parish or how they met their new friends, people declared that most of the news are broadcasted via social media and this is how they found about the priest, services and his activities. "*The priest is kind with us and at different events he has been organizing we have met with other Romanians and we became friends*".

While the story seems very idyllic, the priests have all the interest to keep the community together and expend their messages to potential not church attendees. Since Orthodox priests do not get a salary for working abroad, their family survival is directly influenced by the members of the community. If Romanians are happy with the activities the priest is doing for them, then it is easier to obtain donations for paying the rent for the church and for their daily survival. "*Here we have to adapt and pay attention to the community needs. That is why we try to involve in social and humanitarian activities, because, beside promoting Christian messages, we have to be Romanian advocates in various situation*". When asked about the specific situations, all the priests explained that they perceive themselves as a node in a network where they have to interact with administrative officials or even the Romanian Embassy, they post messages with job openings and sometimes, they even look for jobs for Romanians in their network of acquaintances. However, since each priest is responsible for the way he builds his own parish, not all of them are so successful in collecting donations from the members of the community. "*People see what you are doing and if they start trusting you, they become loyal and interested in building the religious network.*

*They are interested in celebrating our National Holiday on the 1st of December or they bring their children to our Saturday activities. And with the children we organize some events on Christmas eve and we sing Romanian carols or we (*priest and his wife*) teach them about Romania and our national values. But this takes time and when we came to Spain we had to build this Romanian religious community from scratch. It is very hard for new priests. Some of them or their wives work in agriculture or housekeeping.*" It is worth mentioning that, beside the community financial support, some priests were helped by the Catholic Church and they have good relationships with other religious denominations (for instance, the Catholic Church donates the space for the Romanian Orthodox Community from Valencia or they organize common services on different religious celebrations). As it seems from the interviews, in Spain priests embrace ecumenic values and collaborate with peers from other denominations.

When talking with Romanians about how they feel about the religious community, they usually say they come to church not only for the religious service, but also because they meet here their friends and it is a great opportunity to chit chat and exchange news after a week of hard work. Also, church is a community space where they can find information about job openings, social events and even cultural venues. Some priests invite Romanian writers or singers on various occasions in order to bring closer the national values. "*Here we do not forget that we are Romanians and the priest takes care to remind us about our national identity. And it is nice because we met so many Romanians that are confronted with similar issues and we can help each other*". When asked how they feel about the Spanish people, most Romanians said they felt welcome and the Spanish were very nice to them. However, Romanians tend to share similar social values and altruistic behaviours only with the peers they have met at church or with other members of the community they trust. In this sense, there is no generalized trust for all the ethnic or religious groups living in Spain. "*We help among each other especially if there is someone in need and the priest is telling us about a case, but we try to avoid Roma because they still embarrass us and we cannot trust them*". The priests interviewed for this study had mixed opinions about this issue. Some of them reinforced community's opinions and others tried to avoid the subject, by saying they work for all Romanians regardless their ethnic background.

The subject of civic engagement was, as well, tackled during interviews and focus groups. While most priests encourage their parishioners to involve in local politics and negotiate with political leaders more benefits for

Romanian diaspora, there are not so many people willing to dedicate their time for this kind of actions. Romanians prefer to become involved in other civic actions such as: running in humanitarian marathons, participating in their children's school activities or getting involved in local Romanian NGO's. "*We have an association around the religious community and we hope to obtain benefits from the city council for our church or our gathering places*". If bringing Romanians together in religious communities does not represent an impossible mission, things look different when it comes to youth involvement into parish activities. "*We want to have as many Romanians as possible in our communities, but youngsters do not come to church that much after they turn 16. They return when they get married and make babies. We organize activities with our youth, but they lose their interest since there are so many opportunities in Spain for them*". Even though the Orthodox church has an NGO specially tailored for youth needs, all priests said that youngsters prefer to spend their time with their friends or become involved in school-based activities and come to church mainly on very important religious events (Christmas, Easter, National Holiday, 8th of March).

In the majority of interviews and focus groups we had in Spain, there were several iterative ideas: people go to church not only for the religious services, but also for interacting with their peers and involving in different activities organized by the priest; once people gained trust in their peers, they are willing to help each other, but this trust is not generalized for the entire community; inside the church, Romanians meet new people and create new friendships that substitute family connections; priests have a key role in creating and developing these communities and they also perpetrate national values among believers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to explore the role of faith-based organizations and churches in creating ties among Romanian migrants living in Spain. From the interviews conducted in the Madrid area (Parla, Getafe, Leganes, Valdemoro, Alcorcon) and in Valencia, it seems that the priests have a key role in creating and developing religious communities. Once people gained trust in the priest, they are willing to become actively involved in parish activities (donations, organizing celebrations, helping the ones in need, etc). Also, the priest is a catalyser in enabling social interactions among parishioners. During religious services and other celebrations organized by the priest for the community, Romanians had the

opportunity to meet with their peers, interact, and actually develop kin ties that substitute family connections. In this sense, Romanians are willing to help each other, become godparents or offer spiritual guidance for future brides and grooms once they gained trust and share similar values with other members of the community. However, these attitudes and behaviours are limited to the network created around the priest and the church. When it comes to political behaviour, priests encourage Romanians to get involve in local politics, but it seems that there is poor interest in this case. As one can see, Orthodox churches in the Diaspora are an enabler of social capital and have a great potential to bring Romanians together. Though the role of the priest is essential in this process, it is very important how local religious leaders perceive their status and what activities and services they offer to the community.

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