RELIGION AND IDENTITY IN THE ROMANIAN DIASPORA. A CASE STUDY ON THE FORMATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ROLE OF THE ROMANIAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCH IN AUSTRIA

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Abstract. *This study examines the relationship between religion and identity in the context of contemporary Romanian migration, focusing on the formation and socio-cultural functions of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria. The analysis highlights the ways in which this religious institution contributes to identity reconstruction, community cohesion, and the social integration of Romanians settled in the diaspora. The historical evolution of the community, the territorial expansion of the church network, and the diversification of its functions reflect a continuous adaptation to the demographic, economic, and cultural conditions of Austrian society. The church not only preserves religious values and practices but also provides tangible educational and social resources within a transnational framework in which new generations simultaneously negotiate cultural belonging and local integration. By analysing this case, the article contributes to a deeper understanding of religion's role as an institutional and identity-shaping vector within the Romanian community in Austria.*

Introduction

In a global context marked by the intensification of international mobility and the diversification of migratory flows, religion emerges as a key element in the articulation of diasporic identities. Beyond its spiritual dimension, the religious space becomes a framework for social cohesion, a source of tangible support for migrant integration, and a means of preserving cultural values within host societies. The Romanian community in Austria reflects this complexity, particularly through the activity of neo-Protestant denominations, which have developed consolidated institutional forms and effective mechanisms of community support. This article analyses the ways in which the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria (Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich) has contributed to the formation and cohesion of the Romanian diaspora, fulfilling a role that transcends the strictly liturgical sphere. Through support networks, educational activities, and an infrastructure adapted to local realities, the church operates as a social, cultural, and identity-shaping actor. The applied methodology combines qualitative data (interviews with religious leaders), the analysis of internal documents, and demographic data on community distribution. Therefore, the study provides a transnational perspective

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on religion as a resource for integration, community support, and identity maintenance within the contemporary Romanian diaspora.

1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Religion plays a fundamental role in the process of identity reconstruction among migrants, especially in diasporic contexts where forms of belonging are constantly renegotiated. This study focuses on the ways in which the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria functions as a social actor in shaping the collective identity of the Romanian community. It is examined not only as a religious institution in the traditional sense but also as a space of cohesion, cultural continuity, and support for social integration. To grasp the complexity of these processes, the research relies on a theoretical framework that combines a transnational approach with a constructivist perspective. The former highlights how migrants' social, cultural, and institutional networks develop simultaneously across multiple geographical areas without severing ties to the country of origin. The latter emphasizes that identity is socially constructed, shaped by norms, interactions, and institutions that give meaning to belonging in a context of mobility. In this way, religion becomes a mechanism through which not only individual beliefs, but also collective values and community capital are articulated within a transnational space in constant transformation.

1.1 Religion in a Transnational Context

Transnationalism provides a solid conceptual framework for the analysis of Romanian migration, as it highlights the ways in which migrants maintain stable relationships with both their places of origin and destination. According to Thomas Faist (2006), these relationships develop within "transnational social spaces," complex networks of symbolic, social, and institutional ties that transcend state borders. Within these spaces, religion holds a central place. Faist emphasizes that the paradigmatic form of transnational communities is made up of religious groups and cross-border churches such as Christian, Islamic, Jewish, or Hindu communities which function as agents of solidarity and cohesion beyond the national framework. These religious institutions predate the emergence of modern states and continue to sustain diasporic collective identities through symbolic and organizational networks that connect members located in different regions of the world (Faist 2006: p. 5).

This approach is reinforced by the research of Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc, who introduced the concept of "transmigrants," individuals who actively maintain familial, economic, social, and religious relationships across countries, asserting that "transmigrants develop multiple relationships that cross borders" (N.G. Schiller, L. Basch, and C.S. Blanc,1995: pp. 48–50). Within this framework, religious networks facilitate interaction and solidarity among geographically dispersed communities, providing a platform for cohesion and collective action.

Peggy Levitt (2002) makes a significant theoretical contribution by focusing on the institutional dimension of religion in the context of transnational migration. She shows that the structure and organization of religious institutions directly influence the direction and intensity of migrants' engagements. Some institutional configurations encourage a strong orientation toward the community of origin, while others facilitate involvement in globally spanning networks. In this sense, religion not only mediates symbolic continuity but also guides migrants' participation in multiple social spaces

(local, national, and transnational), thereby reshaping forms of belonging and identity (Levitt, 2002: p. 2).

Steven Vertovec (2009) deepens this approach by emphasizing that religion in the diaspora is manifested through institutional networks and rituals that operate simultaneously across multiple social spaces. These religious structures contribute to maintaining symbolic cohesion, reproducing identities, and generating transnational social fields where norms and meanings are shared among community members regardless of their geographic location (Vertovec, 2009: pp. 146–147). Migration, diaspora, and transnationalism thus become interconnected analytical frameworks within which religion plays an active role in shaping behaviour, norms, and belonging.

1.2 Religious Identity and the Constructivist Approach

In the context of migration, identity becomes a process of continuous reconstruction, shaped by the tension between adapting to the host society and preserving one's own values. Religion plays a central role in this equation, functioning not only as a spiritual space but also as a mechanism of cohesion and as a stable point of reference for collective belonging.

Constructivist approaches argue that identity is the result of social and symbolic processes, shaped through interactions and norms internalized in multiple contexts (Wendt, 1992: p. 397). In the diaspora, this construction of identity becomes more complex, and religion takes on an amplified role: that of maintaining the symbolic coherence of the group and articulating continuity with the place of origin. In this regard, José Casanova's (1994) theory provides a relevant interpretative framework. His analysis of the "return of religion in the public sphere" shows that in late modernity religion is no longer excluded from social life but is rearticulated as an active public actor, with enhanced identity and civic functions (Casanova, 1994: p. 5). This phenomenon is also visible in the diaspora, where religion becomes a form of asserting collective identity in pluralist contexts. This approach is compatible with the constructivist perspective on identity, which views identity not as an essential, fixed trait, but as a social construction shaped through interactions, norms, and processes of socialization.

At the empirical level, Romanian research confirms this identity-forming function of religion within the diaspora. More than a simple spiritual reference point, religion emerges as a key pillar of cultural identity. Although the norms and traditions of the host society are respected by migrants, they are not fully internalized as part of their own cultural repertoire. Religion thus becomes the element of continuity that provides stability in the process of identity reconfiguration (Cormoş, 2011: p. 196). By preserving traditions, religion acts as an anchor of cultural memory and as a mechanism of resistance to assimilation pressures. This function is further reinforced by the intergenerational dimension of religion in the diaspora. In Romanian families, the first generations consciously invest in preserving religion, considering it essential for transmitting cultural identity to younger generations (Ducu, 2018: pp. 71–72). Even in contexts marked by secularization or religious pluralism, religion remains an active marker of identity. Participation in religious rituals within Romanian communities abroad represents a public reaffirmation of belonging to a collective identity.

Therefore, applying a constructivist perspective to religious identity makes it possible to understand how diasporic communities articulate symbolic coherence in pluralist contexts. In the case of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria, religious identity is not simply preserved but is reinterpreted and adapted according to the

requirements of the host environment. The institution thus becomes a space of identity negotiation, where elements of Romanian tradition are combined with forms of religious expression adapted to the pluralism and norms of Austrian society.

1.3 Religion and Integration

The integration of migrants into host societies cannot be reduced to a simple individual adaptation to dominant norms but entails a complex process of identity negotiation, the affirmation of belonging, and active participation in public life. In this context, religion emerges as a key pillar supporting the connection between the preservation of original cultural values and adaptation to the new socio-cultural environment.

Religious institutions function not only as spaces for preserving the traditions and cultural values of migrant communities but also as active actors in facilitating their integration. According to a study conducted by Vigneri (2022), religious institutions in Europe act as trusted intermediaries between migrants and administrative structures, facilitating access to housing, employment, legal guidance, and emotional stability (Vigneri, 2022: pp. 4–6). They thus serve as resources for everyday integration, particularly for newly arrived migrants, for whom these networks often represent the first point of contact with the host society.

Martikainen (2006) shows that for migrants, participation in a religious community provides "opportunities for building social capital, finding employment and a partner, as well as a framework that offers comfort in an initially foreign environment" (Martikainen, 2006: p. 8). In this regard, religion functions as a mechanism for reducing social vulnerability, offering practical guidance, emotional support, and symbolic mediation in a context marked by uncertainty and change. Religious communities thus become spaces of integration, where individuals develop social and relational skills relevant to the host society. These observations support the idea that religion can make a pragmatic contribution, complementary to institutional interventions, within the broader process of migrants' social inclusion.

From a comparative perspective, Connor (2014) highlights the ways in which religious participation contributes positively to migrant integration, particularly for those belonging to religious minorities. Regular participation in religious activities is associated with higher rates of citizenship acquisition in the United States and with more active electoral participation among religious minorities in Europe (Connor, 2014: p. 90). In Canada, frequent religious participation appears to facilitate interaction between Christian immigrants and individuals from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. From both psychological and social perspectives, religion supports integration by reducing emotional stress and providing symbolic and relational support in an initially foreign environment. Thus, religion facilitates the building of bridges between the individual and the host community. Connor summarizes these effects by stating that, in such contexts, "immigrant religion is an integrated faith".

In light of these contributions, the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria represents a compelling example of a religious institution with multiple functions within the Romanian community. It not only ensures the continuity of Romanian religious values but also provides tangible support in the integration process: language mediation, administrative assistance, spiritual counselling, moral guidance, and collaboration with Austrian institutions. Thus, the church becomes both a platform of community solidarity

and a relevant institutional actor in the social inclusion of Romanian migrants, encompassing identity, civic, and pragmatic dimensions alike.

2. Confessional Diversity in the Romanian Diaspora in Austria

The confessional landscape of the Romanian diaspora in Austria is remarkable for both its density and diversity, faithfully reflecting the religious structure of Romania as well as the processes of reconfiguration generated by migration. The main historical and Neo-Protestant denominations from the country of origin are represented through well-organized local networks with national territorial coverage and roles that go beyond the religious sphere, functioning simultaneously as places of worship, community centres, and significant social actors in the integration of migrants.

The Romanian Orthodox Church is the oldest form of Romanian religious organization in Austria, documented as early as 1902, when General Alexandru Lupu brought together the Romanian community in Vienna and established a chapel in the Dietrichstein Palace. Today, the Romanian Orthodox Church has 34 parishes under the jurisdiction of the Romanian Orthodox Metropolitanate of Germany and Central Europe, with vicariate status since 1998, which grants it administrative coherence and institutional visibility (Cutoi, 2025: p. 197).

The Romanian Pentecostal Church (Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich) was founded in 1984 in Vienna and expanded rapidly after 1989 (Andreiescu, 2012: p. 545). With 51 locations and 19,336 members at the end of 2024 (Pădurețu, 2025), it represents one of the most dynamic Romanian Neo-Protestant structures in Austria. The religious organization combines liturgical activity with educational programs (Sunday schools, Romanian language courses, etc.) and intercultural projects aimed both at Romanians and at the Austrian majority community.

The Romanian Greek-Catholic Church operates under the Ordinariate for the Faithful of the Eastern Catholic Churches and is present in seven parishes located in key cities such as Vienna, Linz, and Graz. Its activity was revitalized in the postwar period through the involvement of missionary priests of the exile, and after 1993 it was institutionally reorganized by Fr. Vasile Luțai (Cutoi, 2025: p. 198). The Romanian Baptist Church was founded in 1986 with the support of the Austrian Baptist community and expanded considerably after 1990. At present, it comprises eight locations, offering religious services in the Romanian language as well as support for migrant integration (Cutoi, 2025: p. 199).

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was established in 1986 with the support of the Austrian Adventist community, and in 1988 it began offering services in the Romanian language under the leadership of Pastor Eugen Bostan. It currently has two locations in Vienna and maintains close collaboration with Austrian structures (Cutoi, 2025: p. 199).

The Free Christian Community – Romanian Branch is part of Die Freie Christengemeinde – Pfingstgemeinde in Österreich (FCGÖ), officially recognized in 2013. The branch includes 21 locations and emerged in the 1990s through the integration of Romanian communities into the structure of an already recognized religious denomination (Cutoi, 2025: p. 200). The Christian Evangelical Church is present in two locations in Vienna (districts 10 and 13), with a pastoral mission focused on providing spiritual and social support to newly arrived Romanians (Cutoi, 2025: p. 200).

Through their extensive presence and confessional diversity, Romanian churches in Austria constitute a central element of community life. They ensure identity continuity

by preserving traditions, function as support networks in the process of integration, and promote intercultural dialogue within Austria's pluralist context.

3. The Evolution of the Romanian Pentecostal Church (1984–2024)

The Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria represents a relevant case study for understanding the mechanisms of formation, development, and adaptation of confessional structures within the diaspora. Between 1984 and 2024, its trajectory was shaped by the interaction between the dynamics of Romanian migration and the European politico-economic context, illustrating the ways in which macro-structural factors drive institutional transformations. The evolution of this community can be analysed in three main stages: the formative period of 1984–1989, associated with asylum migration; the phase of accelerated expansion (1990–2006), generated by post-communist openness and the accompanying migratory flows; and the stage of consolidation and diversification (2007–2024), determined by Romania's integration into the European Union and economic migration. This trajectory reflects not only numerical growth and geographical expansion, but also the social, cultural, and identity functions that the church fulfils within the Romanian community in Austria, confirming its role as a central actor in the life of the diaspora (Cutoi, 2025: p. 185).

Context of Formation (1984–1989)

The origins of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria can be traced to the refugee reception camp in Traiskirchen and the accommodation centers where asylum seekers were redistributed. In 1984, the first community was founded: the "Elim" Pentecostal Church in Vienna, with 12 members (Valeriu Andreiescu, 2012, p. 545). At this stage, the community was composed almost exclusively of individuals with asylum status. By 1989, membership had increased to around 150, and the network expanded through the establishment of churches in Hartberg (approximately 50 members) and Linz (around 25 members). Also in 1989, the church submitted the documents for official recognition to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, being registered on May 31 under the name Verein zur Unterstützung der Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich, and from August 8 under the name Verein der Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich (Cutoi, 2025: p. 181).

Accelerated Expansion (1990–2006)

Between 1990 and 1995, immediately after the regime change in Romania, the opening of borders and the possibility of obtaining refugee status in Austria generated a significant migratory flow, which led to an unprecedented growth of the Romanian Pentecostal community. Membership increased by over 650%, reaching 2,291 individuals, and the network expanded through the establishment of 14 churches in the following locations: Vienna (Emanuel and Betel), Kapfenberg (Maranatha), Braunau, Feldkirchen, Graz, Amstetten, Krems, Wolfsegg, and Waldhausen. Between 1995 and 2001, in a context marked by Austria's accession to the European Union (1995), which strengthened political and economic stability and created a more predictable framework for migrant integration, the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria gained an additional 1,931 members, representing 29.4% of all Romanian emigrants who settled permanently in the country during this period. This growth was accompanied by significant institutional expansion, with the founding of six new churches in Wiener Neustadt, Vienna, Linz, Gleisdorf, Salzburg, and Bruck an der Leitha, reflecting the community's capacity to respond to the growing demand for religious services and social

support among newcomers (Cutoi, 2025: p.181). A key moment of this stage was the official recognition, on October 13, 2001, as Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes, a religious community with legal personality. The period 2002–2006 was shaped by the effects of the elimination of visas for Romanian citizens in 2001, a measure that granted them the right to free movement within the European Union and stimulated transnational mobility. Although the pace of numerical growth slowed to 14.2% (2.8% annually), the church network continued to expand through the establishment of three new congregations in Wels, Oberwart, and Klagenfurt, reflecting institutional maturity and geographical expansion into areas with emerging Romanian communities (Cutoi, 2025: pp.181–184).

Consolidation and Diversification (2007–2024)

Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007 marked the beginning of a new stage of growth for the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria, facilitated by freedom of movement and broader access to economic opportunities within the EU. Between 2007 and 2013, membership increased by 71.6%, corresponding to an average annual growth rate of 10.24%. Although significant, this growth was approximately half the general pace of the Romanian community in Austria, suggesting the influence of internal factors of organization and integration. During the period 2014–2024, the gradual removal of labour market restrictions for Romanian citizens consolidated this trend, bringing an additional 8,309 members, equivalent to a total growth of 75.3% and an average annual rate of 5.8%. In the same period, the territorial network expanded from 38 to 51 congregations (Ion Pădurețu, 2025), reflecting both the institution's capacity to integrate newcomers and its strengthened role as a pole of spiritual and social cohesion within the Romanian diaspora in Austria.

The longitudinal analysis confirms that the development of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria has been closely linked to two major macro-level factors: the regime changes of 1989, which generated family reunification migration, and European integration in 2007, which stimulated labour migration and facilitated the numerical and geographical expansion of the community. The combined effect of these two contexts enabled not only an increase in membership, but also the diversification of activities, consolidating the church's position as a central social and cultural actor within the Romanian community in Austria.

4. Demographic and Geographical Distribution

The geographical distribution of the 51 Romanian Pentecostal churches affiliated with Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich faithfully reflects both the territorial dynamics of Romanian migration in Austria and the institution's capacity to adapt to the social and demographic realities of the diaspora. Predominantly located in the regions of Vienna, Lower Austria, and Upper Austria, these churches follow the most common routes of economic migration, covering the territories where Romanians have settled in significant numbers. The high concentration of churches in these regions is not coincidental, but rather the expression of a pragmatic institutional organization, through which spiritual and communal support is provided in close proximity to the migrants' areas of residence. The present analysis integrates thematic maps based on data from Statistik Austria (2024) and the denomination's membership report (2024), with the aim of correlating the geographical placement of the churches with the distribution and structure of the Romanian population in Austria.

The cartographic representation of the confessional network allows for the rapid identification of metropolitan clusters, peri-urban continuities and regional nodes, essential elements for understanding processes of localization and institutional consolidation.

Figure 1. Distribution of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes Churches in Austria (2024)
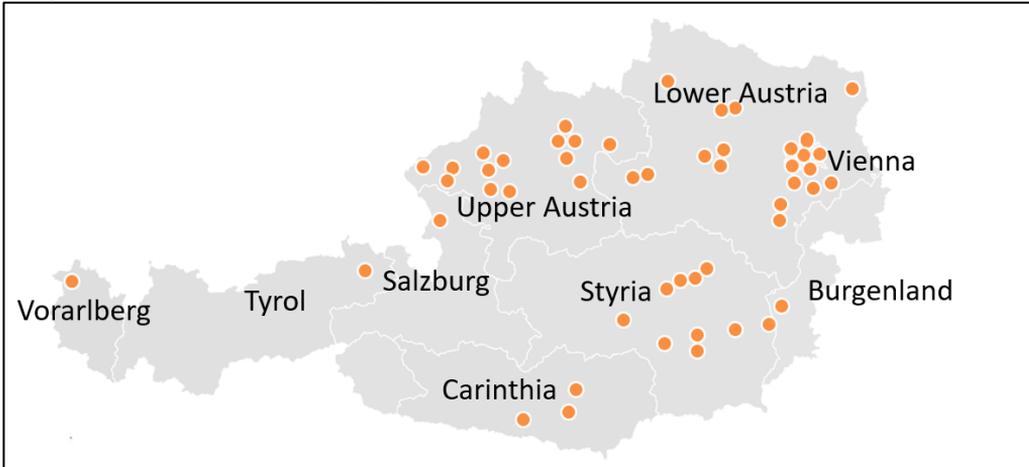
Author's own elaboration. Source: *The Communities in Austria*, official website of the Pentecostal Church

The confessional network takes shape in a polycentric model with an eastern focus, displaying a pronounced concentration in Vienna and in the peri-urban area of Lower Austria, which continues into Upper Austria through a coherent succession of communities arranged along internal mobility routes between residential areas and industrial centres. In the south (Styria, Carinthia) and in the west (Salzburg, Tyrol, Vorarlberg), the locations are fewer and the distances between them greater, which suggests a nodal functioning, with large regional service areas.

The correlation with the presence of the Romanian-origin population is more complex than a simple proportionality. Numerically, there is an overlap with the major urban centres, but density and positioning are mediated by contextual factors such as housing costs, internal mobility, and the maturity of community networks. After 2007, with an intensification following 2014 once full access to the labour market was liberalized, a trend of confessional peri-urbanization emerged. Communities expanded beyond the central nuclei toward satellite localities, such as Brunn am Gebirge. The church network does not automatically reproduce population density, but rather optimizes local access, placing communities in proximity to areas with a stable Romanian population, where confessional nuclei have been consolidated through processes of durable settlement and community cohesion. The resulting configuration indicates a model of controlled expansion, in which new locations appear on the margins of mature urban areas, while in the southern and western regions they function as regional poles of cohesion.

In order to provide demographic context for the placement of the network, the following map illustrates the numerical distribution of the Romanian-origin population across administrative regions.

Figure 2. Geographic distribution of the Romanian-origin population by region (2024)
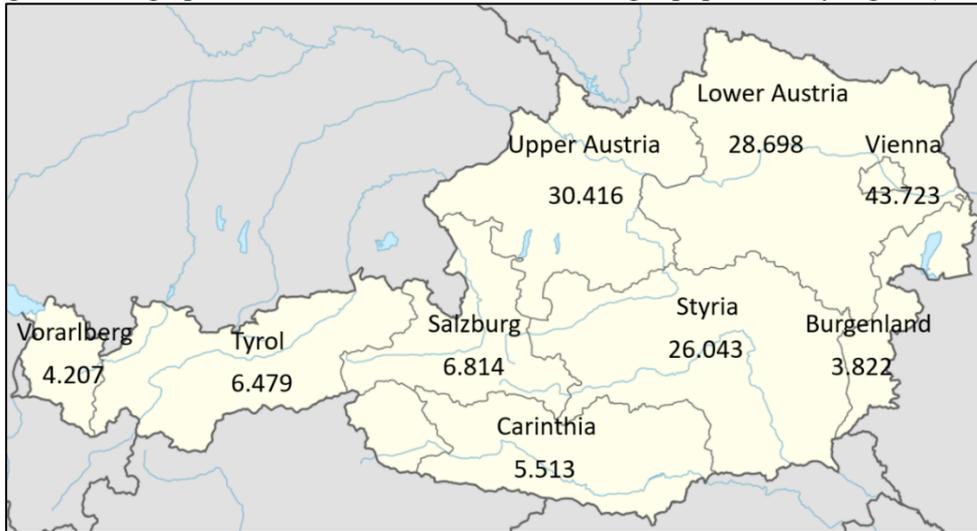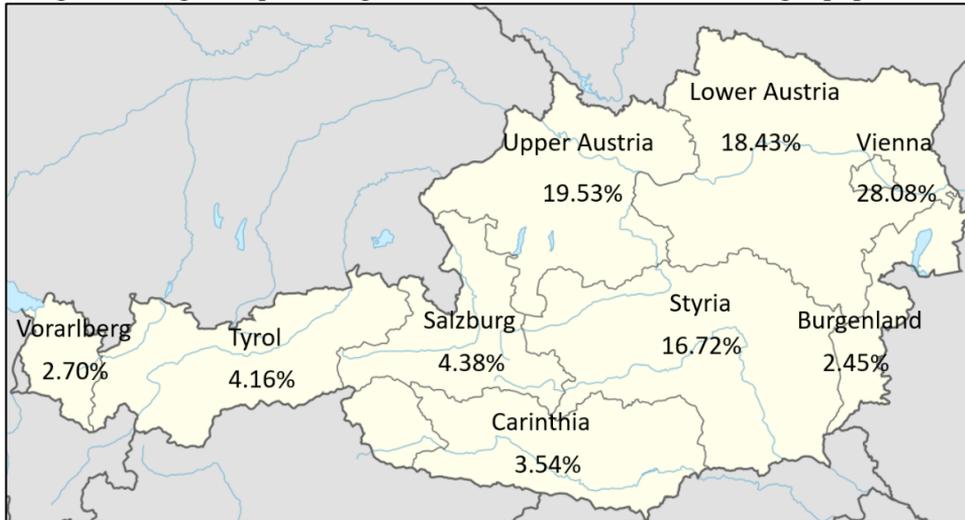

Author's own elaboration, data provided by Federal Statistic Office Austria

      The numerical distribution of the Romanian population across administrative regions confirms this dynamic. Four major nuclei are outlined in the eastern and southeastern parts of Austria, while the western regions are visibly less populated. This demographic geography directly influences the architecture of the confessional network: where communities are numerous and compact, the density of churches is higher; in areas with smaller and more dispersed populations, religious communities are fewer and assume regional roles. Thus, a clear correlation emerges between the concentration of the Romanian population and the location of the churches.

      For greater nuance, the analysis of proportions by federal state is essential. Regions with high shares of Romanian-origin population (Vienna, Lower Austria, and Upper Austria) support a dense and diversified ecclesial infrastructure. By contrast, regions such as Carinthia or Styria, although more modest in numerical terms, host well-cohesive communities, a sign of confessional intensity exceeding the expectations suggested by group size. This disproportionate confessional intensity in relation to numerical dimension suggests an accentuated religious mobilization in certain territories, where the church functions as a central pillar of identity.

Figure 3. Regional percentage distribution of the Romanian-origin population

Author's own elaboration, data provided by Federal Statistic Office Austria.

he percentage data provide a complementary perspective on the distribution: approximately 28% of all Romanians in Austria reside in Vienna, while Lower Austria and Upper Austria together account for almost 38%. Styria contributes another 17%. The western regions, such as Tyrol, Vorarlberg, and Burgenland, register much smaller demographic shares. This structure supports the organization of a dense confessional network in the east and southeast, while in the federal states with smaller shares, nodal organizational models prevail, with regional centres serving several dispersed localities.

To evaluate the institutional response, the following map displays the number of members of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes by federal state.

Figure 4. Distribution of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes members by administrative region (2024)
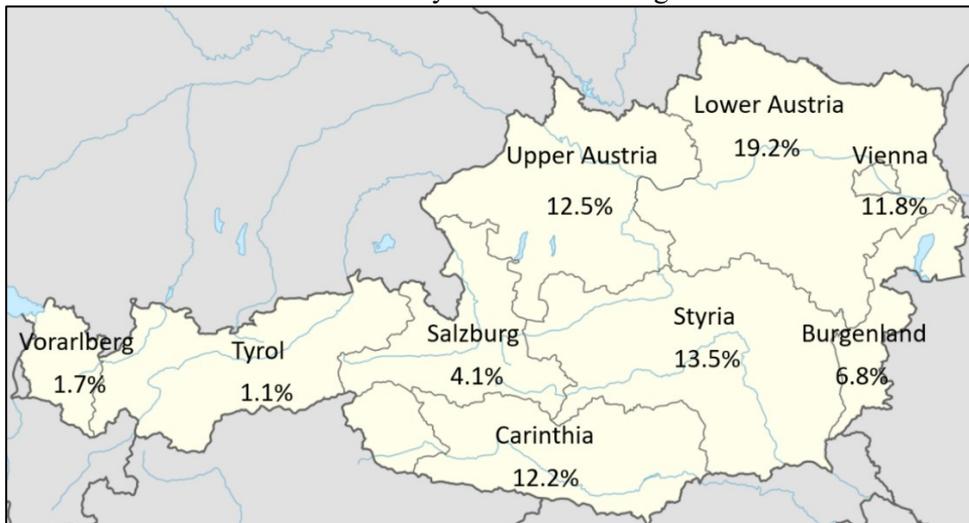

Author's own elaboration. Source: *number of members* according to the 2024 membership report of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich.

The distribution of members confirms these observations. Lower Austria (5,505) and Vienna (5,147) concentrate the largest communities, followed by Upper Austria (3,808) and Styria (3,521). Carinthia (672), Salzburg (277), and Burgenland (260) maintain smaller but stable communities, while Tyrol and Vorarlberg (73 members each) remain peripheral. A notable phenomenon of recent years is the transfer of the confessional centre from the capital to the peri-urban area. The locality of Brunn am Gebirge, which since 2020 has become the main Pentecostal nucleus of Lower Austria, illustrates this process, surpassing Vienna in terms of membership. This shift can be interpreted both as an adaptation to socio-economic realities and as an expression of a stage of institutional maturation.

To estimate confessional intensity at the local level, the map below relates the number of members to the total number of residents of Romanian origin in each federal state.

Figure 5. Share of the Pentecostal community within the Romanian population and its distribution by administrative region

Author's own elaboration. Source: *number of members* according to the 2024 membership report of Pfingstkirche Gemeinde Gottes in Österreich.

The proportion of Pentecostal church members relative to the total Romanian population in each federal state varies considerably at the national level. The highest values are recorded in Lower Austria, where approximately 19.2% of Romanians are affiliated with this denomination, followed by Styria with 13.5%, Upper Austria with 12.5%, Carinthia with 12.2%, and Vienna with 11.8%. In contrast, Salzburg and Burgenland present intermediate values, around 4.1% and 6.8%, while in Tyrol and Vorarlberg the proportions remain very low, below 2%. This heterogeneous profile of confessional intensity reflects not only the numerical distribution of the population, but above all the capacity of local communities to generate, sustain, and reproduce institutionalized forms of religious life. Regions with higher proportions generally correspond to social and economic contexts favourable to migrant stabilization, where housing infrastructure, access to employment, and relative community cohesion create

conditions conducive to consistent confessional participation. Conversely, in regions with lower proportions, the territorial profile is marked by dispersion, high mobility, and seasonal economic opportunities, which make it more difficult to form stable religious centres.

Viewed as a whole, the proportion of Pentecostal members within the Romanian population in Austria stands at around 12.4%. This level is significantly higher than in Romania, where, according to the 2021 census, the Pentecostal denomination represented approximately 2.12% of the general population (National Institute of Statistics (Romania), Resident Population by Religion, 2021). This difference is not accidental and reflects a phenomenon relevant to the analysis of contemporary migration: confessional selection. Recent studies indicate that migration does not affect all religious categories within a society equally. Individuals with an active religious life and a clearly defined sense of community belonging tend to mobilize more easily within already existing diasporic networks, where they can find support, recognition, and a familiar framework.

The distribution of Romanian Pentecostal churches in Austria reflects a pragmatic adaptation to the residential realities of the diaspora, shaping a polycentric and flexible network. Communities are not concentrated exclusively in major urban centres but also extend to neighbouring localities and rural areas, following the residential stabilization paths of migrants. Compared to Romania, confessional mobilization is higher, which indicates a religious selection specific to migration and highlights the institutional role of the church as a form of community organization.

5. Social, Cultural, and Identity Functions of the Church

In the context of Romanian migration to Austria, the Romanian Pentecostal Church has naturally extended its traditional role, becoming a complex institution of community cohesion, practical support, and identity reconstruction. This extended functionality reflects the adaptation of a diasporic community to a different socio-cultural environment, responding to its members' needs for stability, belonging, and orientation.

Community Support and Social Integration

Since the 1990s, the church has functioned as a support network for migrants. According to Pastor Ionel Vlas, the church was a point of refuge for newcomers (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). In his words, "the church was the first place of hope" for those arriving without resources or personal networks. The community provided temporary accommodation, administrative support, free German language courses, and informal networks of community assistance, contributing to the integration of the most vulnerable, including undocumented individuals or those recently released from immigrant camps (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). This informal infrastructure became an essential component of the social integration process, particularly in the absence of institutional support from the host state. The church thus functioned as a mediator between migrants and Austrian society, emphasizing values such as hospitality, belonging, and trust. The relationships established with local authorities, schools, and the police extended the role of the community from one of ad-hoc charity to that of an intermediary institution, capable of generating internal cohesion and external bridges of collaboration. Through the active involvement of its leaders and members, the church encouraged civic participation and the socio-professional formation of its adherents. Pastor Ruben Avram emphasizes the importance of responsible integration: "you cannot be a citizen here and remain only culturally in Romania" (Ruben Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). In this

sense, the church also functions as an informal educational space for understanding the values and structures of Austrian society.

Religious Education and the Formation of the New Generation

One of the central objectives of the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria is the spiritual education of young people, situated within the context of their belonging to two distinct cultural spheres: the Romanian and the Austrian. The generation born and raised in the diaspora frequently faces an identity in the process of definition, oscillating between the familiarity of ethnic heritage and the demands of social adaptation. Some young people maintain their connection to Romania through language, family, or artistic expressions, while others gravitate toward the German language and the values of the host society. However, most, as Pastor Ruben Avram observes, position themselves in a middle ground, regarding this hybrid stance as an opportunity to affirm a personal and nuanced identity (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025).

Within this framework, Sunday school[1] plays a fundamental role. It does not provide only biblical instruction but also addresses a complex educational need, becoming a space of moral, theological, and cultural formation that is not ordinarily accessible in the family environment. Avram points out that many parents, although well-intentioned, do not possess sufficient linguistic or cultural competencies to transmit to their children a faith articulated in the terms of the Austrian context. In this sense, the church fills a major gap in the process of mediation between religious values and contemporary cultural challenges. The educational purpose is not merely catechetical but formative in a broad sense: young people are taught to distinguish between the essentials of faith and its contingent cultural forms. This distinction is crucial for maintaining a living faith in a pluralistic environment. "Young people must know what must be firmly preserved and what is negotiable," Avram argues, advocating for a transcultural approach that avoids confusing tradition with faith (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). Thus, the church becomes not only a framework for religious learning but also a symbolic space of identity negotiation, offering an anchoring point for those who do not feel fully represented either by Romania or by Austria. In this process, Sunday school acquires a strategic function: it shapes a generation capable of internalizing Christian values in a way that is relevant for their life in the diaspora. It does not merely transmit religious information but cultivates cultural discernment and identity stability, providing young people with the necessary resources to assume a conscious, non-conflictual belonging within the context of a secularized Western society.

Cultural and Identity Dimension

On the cultural level, the Church functions as a bridge between tradition and the present. Through events organized in the Romanian language, as well as through bilingual initiatives (German–Romanian), it preserves the connection with Romanian heritage while simultaneously facilitating openness toward the host society. Christmas, Easter, and other holidays become occasions not only for religious celebration but also

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[1] Within the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria, Sunday School is organized into age-homogeneous groups, closely aligned with the structure of public education. It includes children between the ages of 4 and 16, with each group composed of participants of the same age, allowing for a consistent educational process tailored to the children's developmental and cognitive levels.

for the reaffirmation of collective identity within a multicultural space. According to Ionel Vlas, these events are conducted primarily in Romanian; however, there is a clear trend of linguistic adaptation, especially among young people. Some churches already organize programs in German, particularly on the occasion of holidays, evangelistic campaigns, or special youth events (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). This openness reflects both the need for communication with the host society and the desire to maintain religious relevance in an intercultural context.

For many young people born or raised in the diaspora, Romania is not a lived reality but rather an imagined construct, an idealized 'home' transmitted through the language of parents, sermons, and childhood stories, observes Ruben Avram. "This mythical Romania functions as an affective reference point for their identity, but it is not always compatible with the everyday experiences lived in Austria" (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). In this context, the church becomes the space in which young people can consciously navigate this tension between the idealized cultural heritage and the pluralistic reality in which they live. It provides a framework in which collective memory is articulated with the present, and traditional values can be reinterpreted in a way that is meaningful for diaspora identity.

Institutional Representation and Public Dialogue

The Church is also active at the institutional level, being a member of the Evangelical Alliance of Austria[2] and participating in civic initiatives such as the "March for Life" or the "Prayer Breakfast" organized in the Austrian Parliament. Ruben Avram, in his capacity as coordinator of interdenominational relations and liaison with state authorities, argues that such initiatives contribute to increasing the visibility of the Romanian community and to consolidating a positive public image. In parallel, there are Romanian interdenominational collaborations with Orthodox, Baptist, and Greek Catholic churches, reflecting a growing interest in the spiritual unity of the diaspora beyond doctrinal differences (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). These relationships contribute to a form of pragmatic ecumenism centered on solidarity rather than theological fusion. Thus, the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria emerges as an essential node in the social and symbolic ecology of the Romanian diaspora, functioning simultaneously as a space of worship, a support network, and a framework for identity formation.

6. Interpretive Analysis: Religion as an Identity and Institutional Vector in the Diaspora

Religion represents one of the essential resources through which diasporic communities negotiate their identity and consolidate their institutional presence in host societies. In the case of the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria, the role of religion goes beyond the spiritual and liturgical framework, simultaneously functioning as an identity mechanism, a community institution, and an affective space.

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[2] The Evangelical Alliance of Austria (Evangelische Allianz Österreich) is a national network that brings together Protestant and evangelical churches, organizations, and communities. It functions as part of the European Evangelical Alliance and provides a platform for interdenominational cooperation, public advocacy, and dialogue with state institutions. The Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria is an affiliated member through its designated representatives.

Religion as a Mechanism of Identity Continuity

One of the major effects of religion in the diaspora is the creation of a framework of continuity within a context characterized by mobility and exposure to different cultures. The presence of the Romanian language in worship services, the organization of religious programs for children and young people, contribute to the formation of a space in which belonging to Romanian identity is cultivated consistently. This process is not limited to the reproduction of cultural forms but involves an affective and spiritual rootedness that provides a sense of continuity and stability in relation to one's origins. The responses of interviewees confirm this identity dimension. Ruben Avram observes, for instance, that for many young people born or raised in Austria, Romania is no longer an everyday reality but rather a symbolic reference, an imagined framework that nurtures belonging. In this sense, the church becomes the space that translates the symbolic dimension into practical belonging, offering a common language and a set of values in which members of the community can recognize themselves, even when the direct experience of Romania is absent. This form of identity continuity is, however, dynamic. It presupposes a process of adaptation to the realities of life in the diaspora and a negotiation between inherited values and those encountered in the host society. In this respect, the religious community becomes a framework for reflection and balance between tradition and change. Through educational activities and pastoral involvement, it seeks to identify and preserve the elements considered fundamental, such as Christian moral values and the mother tongue, while more flexible cultural aspects are adapted according to the needs and expectations of the new generation (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). Thus, religion contributes not only to the preservation of Romanian identity but also to the formation of a coherent personal and communal identity, capable of responding to the challenges of life in a multicultural environment.

Religious Recognition and Institutional Consolidation of the Community

An essential aspect in the current dynamics of the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria is the endeavours to obtain official recognition as a religion within the Austrian state. This process is perceived by community leaders as a natural but fundamental stage in the institutional maturation and the consolidation of the public visibility of the Romanian religious community in the diaspora. At present, the Romanian Pentecostal Church operates under the legal status of religious denomination (staatlich eingetragene religiöse Bekenntnisgemeinschaft), which allows the conduct of religious activities but limits access to certain rights and forms of official representation (Avram, interview, July 15, 2025). The status of recognized religion (anerkannte Kirchen und Religionsgesellschaften)[3], regulated by Austrian legislation, grants access to a series of

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[3] In Austria, legal recognition (gesetzliche Anerkennung) constitutes the highest status that the state can confer upon a church or religious society. It entails the granting of public-law legal personality (Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts) and full private legal capacity. Recognized religious bodies are considered to serve the public interest, including religious, social, and cultural functions. According to the Staatsgrundgesetz (Basic Law on the General Rights of Citizens), they are guaranteed the right to public religious practice and internal self-governance. Recognition is subject to several conditions, including a minimum of 20 years of presence in Austria (with at least 10 years in organized form and 5 years as a registered confessional community) and a membership representing at least 0.2% of the total Austrian population, based on the latest census.

important benefits: the teaching of religion in schools, tax deductibility of donations, extended legal protection, and, above all, participation in advisory councils in the dialogue between the state and religious communities. According to Ruben Avram, the process is at an advanced stage: the official dossier has been prepared and already submitted to the Ministry of Culture and is currently under review in accordance with Austrian institutional procedures. Behind this endeavor lie years of administrative work and internal mobilization.

From the perspective of the community, recognition would officially validate not only the existence of an active and organized religious reality but also its contribution to social and educational life in Austria. It would also provide a framework through which young people in the community could learn religion in schools with teachers trained in the specific confessional tradition. In addition, recognized status would allow for the consolidation of institutional partnerships at the local and regional level, including collaboration with municipalities, schools, the police, and other civic structures, areas in which the church is already actively involved on an informal basis. This legal endeavour is not motivated solely by administrative benefits. In a pluralist and secularized society, where access to the public sphere is mediated through structures of official recognition, legal status is also an indicator of symbolic legitimacy. In this context, obtaining recognition means not only being tolerated but being regarded as a legitimate dialogue partner, an integral part of the religious diversity acknowledged by the Austrian state. This process expresses the transition of the religious community from a stage characterized by organization based on internal solidarity and local resources to a mature institutional form capable of interacting formally and equitably with the institutions of the host state. At the same time, it marks a repositioning of Romanian religious identity within the Austrian space: from a tolerated community to one affirmed, recognized, and actively involved in civic life.

The Transnational Dimension of Religion and the Consolidation of European Ties

An important feature of the Romanian Pentecostal community in Austria is the maintenance of consistent transnational relations, both with the Pentecostal Church in Romania and with other Romanian communities in the European diaspora. These ties support confessional and identity cohesion and facilitate a broad framework of spiritual and organizational cooperation. Collaboration with the Pentecostal Church in Romania is both formal and informal. Before the pandemic, an official protocol of collaboration and fraternal connection was signed, formalizing the relationship between the community in Austria and the Christian Pentecostal Denomination – Church of God Apostolic of Romania (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025). According to Pastor Ionel Vlas, this relationship is natural and profound, since "for the majority of members, the moment of conversion and the first religious experiences took place in the home country, so the spiritual roots remain there." Exchanges of ministers, invitations to conferences, and participation in joint evangelistic campaigns are constant manifestations of these ties.

At the international level, the church in Austria is affiliated with the Church of God, a global Pentecostal organization headquartered in the United States, recognized for its extensive network of communities in Europe and worldwide. This affiliation provides a stable confessional framework, supports spiritual formation, and grants access to organizational, theological, and educational resources. Although participation in international meetings is sometimes limited by logistical resources, the church in Austria

is an active part of this network: "We are part of an international network, we maintain regular ties with them, and we are invited to conferences and meetings. We cannot always participate, but we are included and count within their structure" (Vlas, interview, July 15, 2025).

With regard to relations with other Romanian communities in the European diaspora, cooperation generally has an informal character and develops through occasional participation in conferences, youth gatherings, or missionary events. Pastor Vlas mentions, for example, participation in a European youth meeting organized in Lignano, Italy, before the pandemic. Although the involvement was not structural, such initiatives contribute to maintaining fraternal bonds and strengthening the sense of common belonging: "We rejoice whenever we meet, even if we do not have a solid common structure at the European level".

Through these multiple networks, the church in Austria is inscribed within a transnational logic of faith, in which confessional identity is consolidated through simultaneous belonging to several spheres: spiritual, cultural, and institutional. Religion thus becomes a vector of cohesion between communities separated by distance but united through beliefs, practices, and doctrinal loyalty.

Religion as an Affective Space and the Reconstruction of the Idea of "Home"

In the context of migration, the notion of "home" becomes an affective and symbolic construct rather than a fixed geographical reality. For many members of the Romanian community, the experience of leaving the country and adapting to a new socio-cultural environment entails a profound reconfiguration of identity and emotional reference points. Religion plays an essential role in this process, offering a framework of stability, belonging, and continuity in a reality marked by transition and mobility. Pastor Ruben Avram summarized this experience through the idea of a "sacred mobility": the divine presence accompanies the believer regardless of place, offering spiritual stability even under conditions of mobility. Religion thus becomes an affective vehicle of continuity, an anchor that accompanies the individual across borders and transforms uncertainty into belonging. Pastor Ionel Vlas adds a further nuance: for many believers, especially those who have formed their families and lives in the diaspora, "home" is no longer Romania, but the place where they live day by day: "for some, home is Romania; for others, home is here, where they raise their children, work, and where their church is". This "home" is no longer tied to national origin but to the networks of support, community, and faith that give meaning to everyday life in a new context. In this framework, the church becomes a space where the spiritual dimension intersects with the need for social and emotional stability. It is the place where believers find community support, cultural continuity, and identity recognition. Here the Romanian language is preserved, religious values are transmitted, and relationships of solidarity are built, in an environment free from the pressure to conform to the majority norms of the host society. For many migrants, the church functions as a point of safety and belonging, offering a form of "home" that does not depend on geography but on relationships, faith, and shared values. In this way, religion acquires an extended social function, becoming a stabilizing framework under the conditions of mobility and uncertainty that characterize life in the diaspora.

Conclusions

This study has highlighted the way in which the Romanian Pentecostal Church in Austria has been constituted and consolidated as an essential actor in the life of the Romanian community in Austria, going beyond the strictly religious sphere and assuming social, educational, and identity functions. The analysis has shown that this institution provides not only a framework for worship but also concrete resources for migrant integration, ranging from administrative support and language courses to activities of community cohesion and the formation of new generations. The geographical distribution and institutional organization reflect continuous adaptation to the territorial and demographic realities of Austria, confirming its pragmatic character and its capacity to respond to the needs of the community. The data also indicate a more intense confessional mobilization than in Romania, a sign that migration favours the selection and consolidation of religious forms with a high degree of community functionality. On the identity level, the church contributes decisively to maintaining symbolic continuity and to articulating a collective belonging that is no longer defined exclusively by geography, but by social networks, shared values, and community solidarity. Through the preservation of the Romanian language, the transmission of religious traditions, and engagement in public life, the institution provides its members with stability and coherence in a pluralist and constantly changing environment. Overall, the case analysed confirms that religion, in the context of the diaspora, is not reduced to a form of tradition preservation, but becomes a catalyst for social integration, community cohesion, and identity reconstruction within a transnational framework.

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