
A CATHOLIC IN THE SERVICE OF THE TRANSYLVANIAN PROJECT BISHOP GEORGE MARTINUZZI (1541-1547)

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Abstract

Bishop Martinuzzi, a high state dignitary and faithful servant to King John Szapolyai, defended the integrity of the Hungarian Kingdom until 1541. Thereafter, with Hungary divided and the Habsburgs and Ottomans struggling for control in Central Europe, Martinuzzi's political action underwent substantial change. It is traditionally claimed that he set out to build a state in Transylvania around which other territories would coalesce, with the aim of eventually reuniting Hungary. Yet he had no such plan at this time. The Ottoman Porte allowed Martinuzzi to govern Transylvania and adjacent territories under limited and strictly defined conditions, on behalf of the Sultan. Hence, Martinuzzi sought no more than to consolidate his position to the detriment of the dowager Queen Isabella. Habsburg authorities in Vienna held no effective control over the eastern regions of the former Hungarian Kingdom at the time, so that Martinuzzi had little reason to deal with them in the years immediately following 1541. He was aware of their weakness and also aware that Vienna saw him as an old and tenacious opponent of the House of Habsburg, so he never presented them with any major state-building project. If the Habsburgs ever established control over Transylvania, Martinuzzi's political aims were strictly personal: to be accepted as Bishop of Oradea and treasurer of Transylvania. When Vienna and the Porte reached agreement over Hungary in the Truce of 1547, Martinuzzi felt endangered realizing that he was at least temporarily no longer part of any Habsburg-Ottoman negotiations over Transylvania, Martinuzzi adopted an opportunistic, cautious and turncoat approach, pursuing personal interests rather than brave statist tactics which would benefit the community.

Keywords: Martinuzzi, Transylvanian project, Vienna, Ottoman Porte

1. Introduction

The Bishop of Oradea, Gheorghe Martinuzzi (1482-1551), was one of the most important political figures in the Kingdom of Hungary in the 1530s and 1540s. Born George Utjesenović and named for his father, a Croatian noble, he preferred the name Martinuzzi out of admiration for his Venetian mother but also for pragmatic, careerist reasons. After taking monastic vows in 1504 he was

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known as Frater George or the Friar [1]. In official correspondence, especially after he was appointed Bishop of Oradea (1534) by King John I Szapolyai, he would sign *Frater Georgius* or *Frater Georgius episcopus Waradiensis* [2]. His political career began in 1529 when he was appointed counsellor and treasurer to John I, whose service he had entered in 1527 [3]. From that point on, Martinuzzi would serve the Szapolyai dynasty faithfully for nearly two decades. The most important service Bishop Martinuzzi did to his king was to negotiate the Treaty of Oradea, signed in February 1538 [2, p. 65-85], an opportunity to reveal his outstanding diplomatic skills [4].

Until the summer of 1541, Martinuzzi's political activity reveals no 'Transylvanian project' in the sense of autonomous state-building. Rather the bishop devoted himself entirely to accomplishing John I's political objectives: to promote friendly relations with the Ottoman Porte; to consolidate the king's authority and legitimacy amidst reopened conflict with Ferdinand I Habsburg following Szapolyai's marriage to Isabella Jagiello, daughter of the Polish king, and the Transylvanian uprising led by Ştefan Mailat; and to ensure John Sigismund Szapolyai's succession to the throne after his father John's death in July 1540. These three political aims were intended to keep the Hungarian kingdom united under Szapolyai rule, with Ottoman support. Martinuzzi never suggested any other policy; he endorsed the idea of a 'full and legitimate Hungarian royalty'. Perhaps this is what led many historians, especially Hungarian scholars, to assert for more than a century and a half that Martinuzzi fought all his life for the unity and integrity of the Hungarian Kingdom [5-8].

The fundamental question is whether this also holds true for the period between 1541, when the Ottomans took Buda, and 1547, when the Habsburg-Ottoman truce was signed. Was Martinuzzi during these years the same faithful defender of the Kingdom of Hungary's unity as he was in the time of John I Szapolyai? Did he, as has often been argued, fight for the reunification Hungary after 1541 [9]? In this reading he is an outstanding political figure who could not accept the autonomy of Transylvania. Was he truly a great patriot, serving a noble idea, who contrived a policy to rebuild Hungarian unity starting with the coalescence of certain territories around Transylvania? Working from the actual state of affairs in Transylvania, did Martinuzzi create functional and state-like institutions in the tradition of the old kingdom? Does recent research, and especially the state of documentary sources, allow now a more nuanced interpretation of the scale and scope of the bishop's political work in Transylvania?

The first and most obvious limit to Martinuzzi's action was the state of mind among the political and cultural elite of the Hungarian Kingdom after the Ottomans occupied lower Hungary and established the *beylerbeylik* of Buda. These events undoubtedly shocked the collective consciousness, though not so much as an 'encounter' with the Ottomans (since such things had happened before and perhaps in a more dramatic manner) but because for the first time an Ottoman garrison and administration had settled in the capital of the kingdom, obviously intending to remain. However, as Ágnes R. Várkonyi argues with

ample documentary proof, the idea of the unitary Hungarian state did not cease to exist [10, 11]. Martinuzzi however was not among the most famous Hungarian scholars and political figures of the time. He had neither the political vision of a Zrínyi, Frangepán or Werbőczy, nor Nicolaus Olahus' humanist ideas, however utopian, to reconstruct the Hungarian state. Martinuzzi's education was not cosmopolitan, humanist or European; he was trained in Hungary for an administrative and church career. He left no political or historiographical oeuvre to express his thinking about events in his lifetime and our only sources, his diplomatic correspondence, reveal a pragmatic man of action with an outstanding political instinct rather than a long-term project builder [12].

From all that is said here it follows that in 1541, Martinuzzi was caught up in events rather than directing them, but this does not mean that he did not come out well. The question is which political ideas Martinuzzi had in mind as he acted? Did he have a state-building project in 1541?

2. Martinuzzi and the Habsburg and Ottoman projects on Transylvania (1541-1547)

Martinuzzi faced a particular challenge in early September 1541. The year before Sultan Süleymân I had recognised the child king John Sigismund as legitimate heir to the throne of Hungary following Martinuzzi's political coup.

Following the successful campaign in Hungary, the Sultan now demanded that the child be presented before him. The queen dowager Isabella and the heir to the throne went to the sultan's camp near Buda, accompanied by a delegation of high Hungarian dignitaries including Martinuzzi and Peter Petrovics – the guardians of the infant king. The members of the delegation were basically held hostage in the Ottoman camp for an entire week before some, including Martinuzzi, were released. We should note that this was when the Sultan decided the status of the Hungarian Kingdom, in terms of both territory and governance. First of all, the plan adopted by the Sultan envisioned an Ottoman administration of Lower Hungary with the *beylerbeylik* of Buda, so that the Hungarian royal court had to leave their residence. By order of the Sultan, Queen Isabella, the infant king John Sigismund and their servants moved to the royal estates at Lipova [13].

Secondly, the Sultan imposed a regime of 'semi-conquest' on the regions beyond the Tisa, granting them to John Sigismund under the name of *sancak*. As such, although the Sultan recognised John Sigismund as John I's legitimate heir, in September 1541 he neither transferred nor recognised Szapolyai rule over these eastern territories except in the much inferior capacity of direct subordination as *sancakbey*. At the Diet of Târgu-Mureş on 26th January 1542 Martinuzzi invoked an imperial diploma of the Porte, stating that the Sultan had granted John Sigismund the *sancak* of Transylvania as well as "regions and parts of Hungary by the river Tisa" (*Regio et Pars Regni Hungariae, ultra Thÿciam et Regnum Transylvanicum collata sunt filio Regis Joannis*) [14].

Thirdly, the Sultan took two important decisions about the governance of the territories under John Sigismund's nominal authority: he granted Peter Petrovics the rank of 'captain of Lower Hungary' giving him Timișoara and its dependencies as *sancak* (*quod Castrum Themessvár cum suis pertinenciis Petro Petrowith Sua Majestas ad possidendum Szancsaksággol (igy) dedit*) [14, p. 78]; Cristina Feneșan cites an Ottoman document of 1545 to the effect that the Sultan gave Peter Petrovics the investiture diploma (*berât*) and the flag, at the moment of his investiture on 4th September 1541 [15]. He also entrusted Martinuzzi with the country's government during John Sigismund's minority, with raising tribute for the Porte and with the personal administration of several important domains ([...] *quoadusque filius Regius adoleverit, Frater Georgius possideat has duas Regiones videlicet: Hungariam et Transylvaniam. [...] Quod sua Maiestas Varadinum, Fogoras, Cassoviam cum omnibus suis pertinentiis Fratri Georgio contulit. [...] Item Transylvania et portio regni Hungariae Filii Regii ad Censum S. Michaelis annuatim cogantur decem milia florenorum in Aureis Caesareae Majestati, in manusque Fratris Georgii assignare [...]*). [14, p. 77-78].

Though we do not know what Süleymân I and Martinuzzi discussed in camp, we may assume that the Sultan's decisions about the eastern parts of the kingdom in September 1541 were an immediate, personal measure to solve a current situation. This was not a long-term project of the Porte, the 'ultimate solution' to the 'Hungarian inheritance'. We do not know the Sultan's exact reasons for including Martinuzzi in the scheme. The bishop had been loyal to John I, the Sultan's vassal, and honourably fulfilled his role of *locumtenens regius* after John's death. These considerations weighed in the Sultan's decision to assign him certain temporary responsibilities in administering Transylvanian and adjacent territories [16]. At the same time the Sultan knew of his other actions, especially his role in the Treaty of Oradea in 1538, and was suitably wary. Martinuzzi received a limited mandate in which the ultimate decision belonged to the Sultan; formally, he governed the *sancak* of Transylvania. Ferdinand I Habsburg's emissaries to the Sultan's camp emphasized in an extensive report of early September 1541 that the Sultan was unwilling to negotiate the issue of Hungary's governance in any way or with anybody. Moreover, concluded the Habsburg envoys, the Sultan was determined to entrust Hungary to John I Szapolyai's son and to no one else (*Wir haben etlich mal in der angeenden handlung zuvernemen begert, ob der Kaiser des Kunig Hanssen sun das kunigreich oder succession lassen welle*). The name of Bishop Martinuzzi is missing altogether and no mention is made of the eastern parts of the Hungarian Kingdom over which the Sultan ruled or was to rule during his stay in Hungary [1, p. 15].

A second political project in which Martinuzzi was involved took shape in latter 1541 and also involved Transylvania, as the result of negotiations between Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand I Habsburg [17]. Once again, the context of the negotiations was Ottoman rule over Hungary, especially the Sultan's decisions in this respect. First contacts took place several weeks after the Ottoman occupation of Buda, and were carried out by Ferdinand I Habsburg's

commander of troops in Upper Hungary, Gáspár Serédy, and the Queen's counsellor [2, p. 93-94]. The Queen was prepared to make important concessions in negotiations with the Habsburgs, given the humiliating situation the Sultan placed her in; she found forced residence in Lipova unbearable [18]. The Queen and the Viennese diplomats believed that the time had come to enforce the provisions of the Treaty of Oradea of 1538.

Queen Isabella empowered the Bishop of Alba Iulia, John Statileus, the Bishop of Oradea, Martinuzzi, and the captain of Lower Hungary, Peter Petrovics, to negotiate for her and her son. Discussions took place in December 1541 and resulted in the Treaty of Gilău, mostly an agreement of principle between Isabella and Ferdinand I Habsburg, where the parties agree that further details will be settled in two years' time. The Treaty was ratified by Ferdinand I on 23rd April 1542 and by Isabella on 26th July 1542. Although the treaty covers many issues regarding the compensation due to the Queen and her son after they handed over the royal crown, it does not fall exclusively in the domain of private law. The treaty essentially belongs to public law, aiming at a transfer of sovereignty [9]. Here is a significant passage in this regard: [...] *vicissim autem serenissima domina Isabella regina, quaslibet civitates et arces and corona regni Hungariae in Hungaria et Transylvania existents et pertinences inquest minibus suis fideliumque suorum habitas saccrassimo Ferdinando regni, domino meo clementissimo assignet* [...] [2, p. 97].

What was Martinuzzi's role here? What do his diplomatic actions suggest? Can we talk of a first project for Transylvania? Is this still a project to reunify Hungary? How did the Habsburgs accept Martinuzzi to the negotiations, he of all people, who had interfered with the Treaty of Oradea in 1540? Unlike the meeting with the Sultan of August/September, this time Martinuzzi felt that he could intervene directly in the negotiations to support his own interests. Thus he told Ferdinand of his claims right in the middle of negotiations. Ferdinand, who was interested in winning the bishop to his own side, gave an immediate positive answer. According to a letter sent to Martinuzzi from Linz in November 1541, Ferdinand undertook to grant him special advantages, accepting him into his grace, forgiving all hostile attitudes expressed under John I, maintaining him in the positions of bishop and treasurer in Transylvania, guaranteeing him further possession of fortresses and cities from Upper Hungary and Transylvania [12, p. 41-42]. Martinuzzi replied promptly. Satisfied with Ferdinand I's written promises, the bishop sent him a letter of faith, together with the agreement of Gilău, in which he undertook to serve Ferdinand I faithfully and recognise him as the rightfully crowned King of Hungary ([...] *me Suae maiestatis fidelitati addixerim et uti verum honestum fidelem decet, ea quae in rem et utilitatem Suae Maiestatis ac huius regni Ungariae fore cognovero, pro virili mea praestitutum, promittens me Suam Maiestatem pro vero legitimo coronato Ungariae rege habiturum, fidelitatem et fidelem servitutem Suae sacratissimae Maiestati cum plena animi constantia exhibiturum*) [2]. This is the first concrete step in which we can see Martinuzzi's intentions clearly and see how far his political project aimed at Transylvanian goals.

Thus in early 1542, two important things were clear to Martinuzzi. He had acquired an important share in the administration of eastern Hungary from both the Sultan and the Habsburg monarch, with the prospect of eventually achieving full governing power. Within either of these political projects, Martinuzzi could preserve and enhance his role in Transylvania only to the extent that he managed to earn the trust and support of the ruler who could control the situation in Eastern Hungary/Transylvania. Since for the time being the only real option was the Ottoman one, the Austrian plan depending entirely on a conjectured reconquest of Hungary which had not (yet) taken place, Martinuzzi took relations with Istanbul very seriously; as we have seen, the Sultan had actually appointed him to the position.

Secondly, in neither situation was Martinuzzi even for a moment led to believe that he could hope to acquire and exercise sovereignty in the eastern territories; his functions, whatever they were, related to the administration and possibly to government. Only in the Ottoman project could Martinuzzi hope for more, because in the form chosen by the Sultan, royal rule could not be fully exercised by the infant John Sigismund. Consequently, Martinuzzi had to try to acquire those dignities that would allow him some share of sovereignty in the territories granted by the Sultan. Here his best allies were the representatives of the three *nationes* in Transylvania and *Partium*, the only ones who could invest Martinuzzi with new state functions. To the extent that Ferdinand I's project was even workable, Martinuzzi would end up with less power than the Sultan had given him. In the best case, if Ferdinand could keep his promises, from an administrative perspective the bishop would be left only with his see and with the position of treasurer of Transylvania – no more than that. To achieve this Martinuzzi would have to work to accomplish the transfer of royal authority from Queen Isabella and the infant John Sigismund to Ferdinand I Habsburg. As he could foresee nothing attainable here, Martinuzzi stalled the implementation of the Treaty of Gilău and, for the same reason, considered that he must not interrupt negotiations with the Austrians [14, p. 154-155, 158-161].

In the logic presented above, it seems groundless to claim that in the immediate aftermath of the establishment of Ottoman rule in Hungary Martinuzzi, by skill, diligence and duplicitous policy, deliberately tried to neutralise the regime of 'semi-conquest' and turn Transylvania and the *Partium* into a vassal state to the Porte, an autonomous principality where he would rule until John Sigismund reached adulthood [16, p. 88, 92]. Yes, Martinuzzi was a skilful politician, very persistent, duplicitous and a great opportunist, but he was not a utopian, much less a patriot in the modern sense, dreaming of restoring Greater Hungary. To him and his contemporaries, the end of the Hungarian Kingdom was too recent to have become an idea.

After the experience of 1541, Martinuzzi became well aware of what was and was not politically feasible in that decade and in the decades to come. In the following four or five years, Martinuzzi's activity can be subsumed to several sequential, interlinked objectives.

First of all, he focused on consolidating his power in Transylvania, a project dear to his heart, and held all the instruments to achieve this: he could summon and control the representatives of the three nations in the *Partium* and Transylvania, using the prestige he had enjoyed for some time and the power of his dignities. Martinuzzi managed to impose on the Diet of January 1542 in Târgu-Mureş to recognise him as *locumtenens regius* and treasurer. When the representatives of the three *nationes* gathered in Turda on 29th March of the same year, the bishop argued that he needed an advisory council of 22 representatives of the Transylvanian estates and that the royal residence should be in Alba Iulia. In both cases, the three nations voted in favour. The bishop's intentions did not stop here. He aimed higher, namely to enjoy royal prerogatives, starting from the ambiguous institutional position of the widow and child in Alba Iulia: although John Sigismund was called king, he had never been crowned, and as for Isabella, although she had been crowned Queen of Hungary, she was only a regent now. However, Martinuzzi could reach his objective only if first elected governor, in which capacity he would govern together with the *nationes* represented by the Diet or the Council of Twenty-Two. However, he only succeeded in persuading the Diet of Turda of August 1544 to elect him supreme judge (*supremus iudex*) and to increase his foreign policy prerogatives [14, p. 188]; from that moment on, the Transylvanian *nationes* constantly opposed granting him new powers, as in the Diet of Turda of 24th April 1545 [14, p. 217-221]. He never became governor, though this does not mean that he ever abandoned the goal.

Secondly, Martinuzzi maintained good relations with the Porte. There is no evidence that he ever proposed plans for joint action against the Ottomans to any of the Christian courts of Europe. He sometimes consented to the departure of emissaries to Ferdinand I Habsburg's court, for example in October 1542 [14, p. 141-152] or in August 1543 [2, p. 111], but this does not change the situation. Moreover, after the Ottomans defeated Ferdinand in 1542-1543, the *nationes* themselves completely and publicly distanced themselves in early 1545 from any commitment to the Habsburg monarch [14, p. 217-221]. Martinuzzi repeatedly discussed the issue of keeping peace with the Sultan at the Transylvanian Diet, for example in the Diet of Cluj from February 1543, but also discussed other aspects regarding tribute or sending envoys to the Porte. The Sultan in turn often contacted Martinuzzi but also Queen Isabella [1, p. 95] through letters and envoys, each time reminding them that he was the ruler of Transylvania by right of conquest. In June and July 1542, for example, the Sultan sent three such letters to the Transylvanian authorities [19] simultaneously dispatching an Ottoman envoy [20].

Until the end of 1546, no report from the Austrian diplomats in Istanbul indicated that the Porte saw Martinuzzi as working against its interests in any way. However, the start of Habsburg-Ottoman negotiations about the Hungarian issue put Martinuzzi on his guard. At the beginning of 1547 the Austrian embassy signalled the first signs of Transylvanian political action at the Porte aiming to persuade the Sultan to consider the principality as a region in its own

right [1, p. 138-139]. For the moment, say Austrian reports from Istanbul, Martinuzzi is uneasy [1, p. 159]. He wanted to get hold of as much information as possible; his instinct for self-preservation was telling him, correctly, that something was wrong.

The peace was signed without his knowledge, with no prior consultation with Transylvanian authorities [21] and with no mention of the status and situation of Transylvania [22, 23]. The peace of 1547 was in fact a truce based on the *status quo* in Hungary, from which every party expected immediate returns: Ferdinand I wanted continued negotiations, in the hope that the Sultan would *nolens volens* give up Hungary to the House of Austria; the Sultan wanted the necessary respite for his military campaign in Persia. Martinuzzi felt cut out, having no guarantee from either signatory, either to him personally or to his realm. This explains his irritation, hostility and diplomatic manoeuvres against the truce in the second half of 1547, once he had become acquainted with its provisions.

Martinuzzi's opposition attracted hostility from both sides – the Sultan, and the king in Vienna. They kept one another informed of Martinuzzi's actions, but for different reasons: the Habsburgs to discredit him before the Sultan, hoping to overthrow the bishop, who opposed them ever more fiercely in Transylvania; the Porte to show Ferdinand that he did not comply with the peace and was working against all previous agreements.

3. Conclusions

Under the circumstances, Martinuzzi was left with only one solution: to play the hand that fate had dealt him. In his relations with the Porte, he sought to keep the Sultan's goodwill, as he was convinced that after so many years this was the only way to preserve his political status in Transylvania. As for Ferdinand, Martinuzzi aimed to win his favour once more, to be perceived as indispensable in Vienna's attempts to take Transylvania in the future and, consequently, to obtain more than the Habsburg had promised him in 1541-42. Otherwise, he gave no sign of any Transylvanian project, except to preserve the country's political status and hence his own privileges. In both cases, Martinuzzi faced the opposition of the Queen and Transylvanian *nationes*, as he was playing a very dangerous political game. For the time being, Martinuzzi did not opt for any of the diplomatic options set out above; he waited, adapted, prepared himself for future situations, but he did not start any project of which the Transylvanian authorities would be part and pursue it regardless of personal risk. No courage, no spirit of sacrifice, but rather opportunism and self-preservation.

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