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# CHURCH AND POLITICAL BEHAVIOUR IN TRANSYLVANIA AT THE END OF WORLD WAR I

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## Abstract

The alleged apoliticism of the clergy was increasingly abandoned in the half century to 1918. Initially on behalf of their institutions and then within the framework of the 'Astra' association and the Romanian National Party, priests went beyond their pastoral role, assuming direct political and cultural missions. The dispute between passivity and political activism in the late nineteenth century cannot be studied without taking into account the positions of the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church. The situation was intensified with the victory of activism in the early twentieth century. After 1900, Romanian National Party conferences revealed that party electoral committees were consistently made up of clergy of both confessions at all levels of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The debate on the future political status of Transylvania in the autumn 1918 spurred an unprecedented wave of political activism. Again clergymen were the foremost representatives of the intellectual elites, exceeding even the lawyers, by profession predisposed to political involvement. Romanian bishops in office signed a document declaring their solidarity with the Romanian National Central Council programme. Priests were not limited to representing their own institutional structures (diocese, consistory, parish, etc) in the Great National Assembly of Alba Iulia but also featured significantly as delegates of electoral circles, educational institutions, cultural, economic and even women's associations. In this context, the attitudes and political ideas of the priesthood were omnipresent.

*Keywords:* church, clergy, politics, Romanian National Party, election campaigns

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## 1. Introduction

Romanian historians have treated this theme very differently depending on the politic regime under which they trained. Almost ignored as political agents before 1989, clerics became the focus of much subjective attention in historical research during the last two decades. Thus the present article seeks to present a balanced interpretation, which may on the one hand confirm the positive aspects of political activism in Transylvania by Romanian clerics, both Orthodox and Greek Catholic, and on the other hand offer a necessary re-

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evaluation of some of their choices and tactics. Actions which until recently were labelled as ‘political errors’ may be seen through the lens of motive or constraining factors. For example, if a Romanian priest supported governmental policy in Hungary around 1900, this cannot be seen exclusively as a ‘betrayal’ of the Romanian national cause. The interpretive line proposed here would hardly have been accepted in the 1990s, either in academic discourse or in public opinion. Yet historians of the younger generation have slowly begun to ‘recover’ some personalities who went through a long period of *damnatio memoriae* due to their career as deputies in the Budapest Parliament, elected on the lists of Hungarian parties. Among these were also high-profile clerics, including Iosif Goldiș (1836-1902), vicar of the Orthodox Consistory of Oradea [1], then titular of the Romanian Orthodox Diocese of Arad and Vasile Mangra and from 1916 the Orthodox bishop of Transylvania [2]. The present article presents original research based on sources little used until now and aims to examine the general attitudes held by representative categories from the ranks of the priests rather than by high-ranking Church dignitaries.

## **2. The state of research - a short evaluation of historiography on the topic**

Until 1989 the involvement of Romanian clergy from Transylvania in national politics in the first two decades of the twentieth century was only mentioned incidentally. The only approach which did not encounter obstructions of an ideological nature illustrated the ‘Church and Great Union’ paradigm, though articles of this kind were reserved to ecclesiastical publications such as *Mitropolia Ardealului* (Sibiu), *Mitropolia Banatului* (Timișoara), *Îndrumător pastoral* (Alba Iulia), etc. After 1989 the theme spread to the pages of specialist journals published by universities, research institutions and museums. The most important change was the rediscovery of the Greek Catholic Church in modern Romanian historiography and Central and Eastern European scholarship more generally. We emphasize again the present article is so far unique in the research literature [3, 4].

## **3. Forms of clerical political participation and their context**

The principal contribution of such research is at the level of interpretation. As we shall see, it is not a matter of identifying ‘positive’ or ‘negative implications’ in the topic. Such a dichotomy would be counterproductive in this case. After all, a Romanian cleric from Transylvania sitting as a member of, or standing for election, to the Budapest Parliament in 1905 or 1910 would not deny his ethnicity. His electoral discourse was that of a Romanian delegate and he was perceived as such by the Hungarian politicians. However, from the Romanian National Party’s perspective, which had long echoes in the historiography, he was a ‘renegade’. Recently, the author of a PhD thesis dared to approach this thorny problem [1, p. 417]. In November 1918 Romanian clergy took second place, right after the farmers, as delegates to the Great National

Assembly in Alba Iulia. These clergy clearly felt no doubt about the future state affiliation of Transylvania.

### ***3.1. The priest between sacerdotal mission and cultural-political commitment***

The term ‘cultural’ here has a larger denotation, an anthropological one, including social and economic aspects. In the Romanian ethnic environment of Transylvania, the Church was the only complete national institution, both at the level of institutional structures, from parish to archdeaconry and diocese, and as ecclesiastical hierarchy. Living within the parish community and obtaining his income from its contributions, the priest became the agent of a complex activism by virtue of which he could be involved in the ‘Astra’ cultural organization, in a bank-stock company and not least in the election campaigns of the Romanian National Party or of some Hungarian party.

Records show that in 1913, the last year of normal activity before the outbreak of World War I, the Association for Romanian Literature and Romanian People’s Culture (‘Astra’) had 2373 members subscribing to its statutes. Clerics held first place, followed by lawyers and Romanian bank personnel. Membership of ‘Astra’ implied the investment of time and money in adult education programmes with national content. The involvement of priests from throughout the hierarchy in ‘national pedagogy’ becomes more obvious when we discuss ‘Astra’ section directors. 46 of the 85 sections active in 1913, thus more than half, were led by clerics, followed again by lawyers, but at a greater distance (21 out of 85) [5].

In his work on the Romanian banks of Transylvania before World War I, Vasile Dobrescu recorded similar findings. The presence of clerics on the boards of administration of almost all the Romanian banks created at the time the image that the national credit was controlled by the ‘priests’ world’, to quote Dobrescu; the ‘Poporul’ Bank of Lugoj was known as the ‘bank of parsons’ [6].

Intense active involvement in the Romanian politic life of Transylvania was also the norm for a longer span, but took specific forms in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

We have said that familiarity with handling laws predisposed lawyers to political activity. To this aspect were added economic independence and their freedom in using their own time as member of the liberal professions, and the permanent contact with the Romanian communities they were serving. Clerics also benefitted from some of these conditions, with the same consequences for their predisposition to politics.

The secularization of political activity in Romanian society in Transylvania started in the first half of the nineteenth century, taking the form of a relative rise in the laity’s contribution. At the beginning of the twentieth century priestly interest in politics and their share in this area showed no signs of abating. Though we may approve of the notion that clerics showed an interest in the essential problems of the nation, this could also express insufficiency elsewhere, the lack of an educated laity which could replace the priests in

politics. Yet validation of this hypothesis depends on the state of affairs in one of the Hungarian counties inhabited by Romanians.

It seems that clerics responded very positively to the neo-activist political programme when the Romanian political organization decided to stand once more for the Budapest Parliament. 290 delegates from 20 districts participated in the Romanian National Party's National Conference in Sibiu on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1910. Among those identified by profession, the clerics are above 26%, by far the best represented category [7]. Every local branch of the Romanian National Party counted a cleric among its members and this holds true for the whole ecclesiastical hierarchy, from parish priest to bishop. For the Hungarian state authorities, however, the Romanian National Party had an uncertain political status. The organization had been dissolved in 1894 by an ordinance of the Interior minister Károly Hieronymi [8]. Nevertheless the governments that followed, even if they contested *de jure* the party's existence, recognized it *de facto*, as confirmed by ongoing negotiations between high Hungarian officials and members of the RNP executive central committee [9]. This situation also affected the nature of party membership, which was free of the official character conferred by membership in a group with juridical personality. Consequently, even if there was talk of 'members and adherents' the two terms were frequently confused [10, 11].

As members, adherents, or neither, priests were subject to political demands from multiple directions.

National leaders paid less attention to the priestly attributes of Romanian clerics of both rites. They considered that priests had a mission as guides of the people in politics as well, that each priest had to be an active member of the RNP and that the parishes should become pillars of the party's campaigns. The promoters of this concept were convinced that they were right in the religious and moral fields even as they asked clergy to submit to national political imperatives considered sacred. Several articles on the subject appeared in the Arad 'Tribuna' at a time when this journal reflected the official RNP position (1904-1911), and then in 'Românul', the official party newspaper published from 1912.

The author of a 1905 article in the 'Tribuna' attributed to priests both the victories and the 'shameful' losses of the RNP in the elections of that year. In other words, the party and through it the whole nation depended entirely on the loyalty of the priests or the lack of it [12].

Sometimes texts were attributed to clerics for journalistic effect. In 1912 an article appeared in 'Românul' entitled 'Reflections of a village priest', arguing that the supplementary wage that priests received from the Hungarian government, known as *congrua*, undermined the link between parish priests and their communities, making priests ignorant of the nation's interests and its future [13].

These publicist opinions contained serious rhetorical exaggerations, of course. It is nonetheless true that the *congrua* made priests vulnerable to pressure from the authorities. The legislation permitted that a priest's state salary

could be suspended for the smallest act that an administrative clerk considered a deviation from his civic duties.

At the elections of 1905, 1906 and 1910 the RNP nominee (Ioan Suci, Aurel Lazăr or Vasile Lucaci) in his electoral tour through the villages of the constituency, was greeted by groups of voters headed by local priests promising their votes and their full political support. After the hustings the local state clerks approached the priests and attempted to bribe them or invoked the ever-present threat of suspending the *congrua*.

The consequence was that on election day the same priests voted for the government candidate, or in some cases urged voters from their parish to follow their example. The members of the RNP executive central committee did not pause to establish whether priests supported a Romanian government candidate with a programme favourable to the local communities, or acted under the pressure of threats or blackmail. Those concerned were charged bluntly as 'renegades'.

At the 1910 elections in Năsăud district, with a majority of Romanian electors, the most votes went to the government candidate, Professor Ioan Ciocan, at the expense of the RNP candidate, the lawyer Victor Onișor [14].

Present to a certain extent throughout Transylvania, this phenomenon predominated in the western extra-Carpathian districts (in the Banat, then Arad, Bihor and Satu Mare) where the RNP had less influence. Here, the clerics and other representatives of local elites perpetuated the tradition of political activism during 1881-1914 as well, fielding Romanian candidates for the Budapest Parliament on the lists of Hungarian parties [1, p. 412]. Cases such as that of Năsăud, with priestly involvement, took place in the 1910 elections in the districts of Tinca, Bihor County and Zorlențu Mare, Caraș-Severin County.

Similar episodes can be found during World War I, when the political attitude of the Romanian clergy from Transylvania was not monolithic. This theme has been treated in another study, entitled 'From dynastic patriotism to Great Romania. Romanian churches from Transylvania in the turmoil of 1914-1918' [15]. In the content of this article we will discuss only two cases, primarily that of the Orthodox archpriest of Cluj, Tulliu Rosescu, a deputy in the Ecclesiastical National Congress preferred by the Hungarian government, who voted in 1916 for Vasile Mangra as Orthodox metropolitan of Transylvania [16].

In the Greek Catholic Church about the same time, Alexandru Breban was a titular archpriest of Baia Mare district. In this capacity, he asked Vasile Hossu, Greek Catholic bishop of Gherla to remove the brothers Vasile and Constantin Lucaci from the clergy, whom he accused of treason and of abandoning their believers [17]. In 1918 both were delegates at the Great National Assembly, having forgotten their political actions of two years before. More important than these two individual cases and others like them, was the general context towards the end of 1918 that made the survival of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy impossible.

On November 15<sup>th</sup> 1918 the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Greek Catholic Church became the only institutions from the province to receive an individual appeal to send delegates to the Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia. The Romanian National Central Council justified this call by referring to ‘the imperishable worth of our national Churches’ gained during ‘the centuries in the service of our ethnic salvation and, at the same time, as recognition of the holy bond between the faithful people and the faithful servants of the Churches [...]’.

Disregarding the centennial perspective of the RNCC appeal, we recognize in it a direct reference to the involvement of Romanian clergy in the national political life and, in general, in the public life of the province. The document reflects the official view of the level of Church representation. Both metropolitan sees, Orthodox and Greek Catholic, were vacant. Consequently, the highest-ranking dignitaries were the bishops. The chosen delegates however were the Episcopal vicars, one for each consistory and chapter, and the district archpriests in service [Arhivele Naționale, Serviciul Județean Alba, fond *Mitropolia Greco-Catolică Română, arhiva generală*, dos. 5754/1918, f. 1]. The act convening the Great National Assembly, adopted on 20<sup>th</sup> November and published the next day, certified the content of the particular appeal to the Church [18].

The events of November 1918 were unprecedented and therefor elicited no united response from the Romanian hierarchs. In the event, on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1918, in an unparalleled act of inter-confessional solidarity, they signed together an act of adherence to the politic line of the Romanian National Central Council [19]. But some further differences of attitude intervened. The Orthodox bishop of Arad, Ioan I. Papp, the vicar of the Orthodox Consistory of Oradea, Roman Ciorogariu and the Greek Catholic bishop of Oradea, Demetriu Radu, signed Credentials for the archpriests in their dioceses. The Greek Catholic bishop of Lugoj Valeriu Traian Frențiu and the chapter vicar of the diocese of Blaj Vasile Suciuciu reacted in a similar manner, and exhorted their archpriests to honour their appointment as delegates in the Great National Assembly. In the Orthodox dioceses of Sibiu and Caransebeș, and the Greek Catholic diocese of Gherla, the archpriests only found out from the press about their official role at Alba Iulia. Consequently, the number of archpriest delegates will never be known entirely; any list depends on secondary sources and remains uncertain.

The deficiency identified above is rather one of historiographical research. At the time, the archpriests’ role became apparent soon after mid-November. They often found themselves in offices as presidents of district or communal councils. These very new structures of local power were invested by the RNCC with the task of organizing local elections. Accordingly, most district presidents were named from among the archpriests, and the municipal delegates from among the parish priests. A quantitative evaluation of the delegates and elected members in the Great National Assembly highlights the constitution of a group of 1,633 people, among whom 330, or 20.2%, were clergymen. Their number would be noticeably greater if we took into account the ordained teachers, and especially the teachers at diocesan theological and pedagogical institutions and

gymnasiums, statistically treated as teachers and not as clergy. Generally, the clerics took second place, close behind the 372 farmer delegates. There are reasons to consider the farmers' representation proportional with their class share in Romanian society in Transylvania, in which case the clerics are, in relative terms, overrepresented for the reasons shown above [National Museum of the Union, *Documents. The great National Assembly convened in Alba Iulia on December 1, 1918* fund, tom I-III, passim].

If the representation of the Church followed only the norms established by the Romanian National Central Council, the number of priests would have not been so high. The priests' prestige in local communities bolstered their numbers in the elections from districts, municipalities and lay institutions.

Returning to the category of clerical delegates, we observe that the 173 Orthodox outnumbered the 157 Greek Catholic delegates, given that the latter benefitted from a more extensive and complex institutional structure for their church. We do not yet know if the greater adhesion of the Orthodox to political activism for the entire period 1867-1905 represents a viable hypothesis to explain this.

#### **4. Conclusions**

We return here to an idea from the beginning of the article, namely that clergy accounted for a consistent presence among the ranks of the members or adherents of the RNP and respected the party's programme even if, in some cases and some regions, they considered solutions opposed to the party's electoral projects. In truth, at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were multiple views of the national problem and the future of the Romanian nation in Hungary. The union of Transylvania with Romania was but one solution and, until the end of World War I, not the most important. There were Romanian politic milieus that saw their future either within a federated Habsburg Empire or in a context resulting from the reconciliation of Romanians and Hungarians; this does not mean that some among them were less nationalist, in the term's sense at the time. In their speeches in the Budapest Parliament and in articles in the 'Tribuna' and 'Românul', the RNP opinion leaders dismissed any connection to the activity of irredentist circles in Romania. Any other attitude would have compromised the Romanians' cross-border ties; from another perspective it would have prejudiced relations between Romania and Austro-Hungary, states bound to each other by treaty, thus causing trouble for the Romanians from Transylvania. The outcome of World War I annihilated other national political perspectives, bringing the union of Transylvania with Romania to the forefront. In this context, the most consistently represented and most visible professional environment was that of the priests, throughout the ecclesiastical hierarchy.

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