

POLITICS AND RELIGION. THE HUNGARIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH DURING THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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Abstract: For the Romanians in Hungary the only reliable institution in their life was the church.. In 1920, on Hungary’s territory there were nine Orthodox communities, which belonged to the Arad Episcopate and eleven to the Oradea Vicarship. However, in the context of the 1918-1919 events, a large part of the clerical elites left the religious communities, settling in Romania. For the 20 Orthodox communities only four priests remained: Ghenadie Gh. Bogoevici in Budapest, Petru Biberia in Gyula II, Vasile Beleş in Chitighaz and Simion Cornea in Bățania.

Keywords: Hungary, Romanians, Interwar period, Church

At the end of the First World War, by applying the principles regarding the nations’ rights to self-determination, enunciated by the US President Woodrow Wilson, the nations in the form’er Austro-Hungarian Empire broke away from Vienna’s authority, creating the succession states. The self-determination principle was accepted in the case of the majority of nations, except for the Germans, Austrians, and, partly, in the case of the Romanians in Hungary. On 29 October 1918, the German delegates in the Austrian Reichsrat, who represented the Bohemia and Moravia electoral circumscriptions, assembled in Vienna and declared the Independent Republic of German Bohemia, with the capital in Reichenberg (Liberec). France opposed and the Republic was occupied by Czech armies.² In the virtue of the same principle of self-determination, in the conditions of the Austro-Hungarian Empire’s dissolution, Austria requested unification with Germany. France opposed again and the Austrian independent state was created. To compensate for Austria’s request, at the Peace

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² R. J. Crampton, *Europa Răsăriteană în secolul al XX-lea [Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century]*, Bucharest Curtea Veche, 2002, p.80.

Conference it was allotted with the Burgenland region, which was claimed by Hungary. Later, a referendum partially modified the situation, the city of Sopron being allotted to Hungary. Also, at the American delegation's proposal at the Peace Conference, it was decided that the area surrounding Bratislava to be given to Czechoslovakia, and Hungary to be rewarded with the Szeged region.³ In this way, a series of localities, such as Gyula, city from where Romanians had representatives at the Alba Iulia National Assembly on 1 December 1918, was allotted to Hungary through the Paris Conference decisions. The Romanian community in Hungary was thus born.

According to the official data, in 1920, 26,000 Romanians remained on Hungarian territory⁴. Other sources speak about 40,000. In 1920, according to official data, 25,695 Romanians lived there. Apart from these, there were 88,871 Romanian language speakers. In the first interwar decade, Hungarian representative Viktor Knaller and Romanian diplomat Vasile Stoica estimated that there were around 50,000 Romanians in Hungary⁵. Generally, the data on the number of Romanians that remained on Hungarian territory after the Trianon Treaty are contradictory⁶. The Romanian historiography tries to overbid their number, the Hungarian historiography to minimize it. The fact is that in the Aletea, Apateu, Bătania, Bichiș, Bichișciaba (Bekescsaba), Cenadul Unguresc, Ciorvaș, Crîstor, Darvaș, Jula (Gyula), Jaca, Leucușhaz, Micherechi, Otlaca Pustă, Peterd, Săcal, Szeged and Veched localities there were important Romanian communities of Orthodox religion. All the settlements belong to the region between the West of Tisza and the North of Mureș. Part of the Romanians lived in Budapest, where the 1910 census recorded 2,777 Romanians.⁷ Then, there were important Romanian communities of Greek-Catholic religion in the Pocei, Leta Mare, Macău and Bedeu localities. After 1918, many of them left the Hungarian capital, settling in Romania.

³ Corneliu-Cezar Sigmirean, *Românii din Ungaria în corespondența Ministerului de Externe al Ungariei* [Romanians from Hungary in the Hungarian Foreign Ministry Correspondence], in: Simpozion. Comunicările celui de al XVII-lea Simpozion al Cercetătorilor Români din Ungaria [Symposium. The Papers from the Seventeenth Symposium of Romanian Researchers in Hungary], Gyula, 2008, p.86.

⁴ Gheorghe Petrușan, Emilia Martin, Mihai Cozma, *Românii din Ungaria* [Romanians from Hungary], Budapest, Press Publica, 2000, p.9.

⁵ Gheorghe Petrușan, Emilia Martin, *Românii din Ungaria* [Romanians from Hungary], Budapest, Editura Press Publica, 2000, p.9.

⁶ On the history and evolution of the Romanians in Hungary, see at length Elena Csobai, „Istoricul românilor din Ungaria [The History of the Romanians from Hungary]”, in Gabriel Moisa (editor), *Cultura și istoria românilor din Ungaria* [The Culture and History of the Romanians in Hungary], Cluj-Napoca, The Romanian Academy. Centrul de Studii Transilvane [The Center for Transylvanian Studies], 2013, pp.77-132.

⁷ Budapest Székes főváros statisztikai és közigazgatási évkönyve, XI, évfozam 1902-1912, Budapest, 1914, p.43.

For the Romanians in Hungary the only reliable institution in their life was the church⁸. In 1920, on Hungary's territory there were nine Orthodox communities, which belonged to the Arad Episcopate and eleven to the Oradea Vicarship. However, in the context of the 1918-1919 events, a large part of the clerical elites left the religious communities, settling in Romania. For the 20 Orthodox communities only four priests remained: Ghenadie Gh. Bogoievici in Budapest, Petru Biberia in Gyula II, Vasile Beleş in Chitighaz and Simion Cornea in Bătania⁹.

A letter addressed to the Ministry of Cults and Arts, on the basis of the data from the Informative Bulletin of the Ministry of War, issue 37, from 23 January 1920, described the particularly difficult situation of the Romanians in Hungary, *“who lacking priests and other leading intellectuals, are exposed to Magyarization, due to their disorganization and the lack of contact with our Church authorities, to which they belonged until the border with Hungary was established”*¹⁰.

In the situation in which the connections with the Hungarian church communities were increasingly burdened after 1918, the Oradea Orthodox Consistory requested the Budapest government to establish an “Orthodox vicariate” on account of the Orthodox Romanians in Hungary. For the beginning, through the address no. 1636/1920, the Oradea Consistory entrusted Protosingel Ghenadie Gh. Bogoievici, the Budapest parishioner, as the spiritual leader for the Romanian communities in Hungary¹¹. The Oradea Consistory's Proposition was also accepted by the Arad Episcopate. Nevertheless, the Hungarian government, above the Budapest parishioner's authority, created a royal commissariat to represent the interests of the Romanians in Hungary, led by Iosif Siegescu, Greek-Catholic prelate.

In this context of organizing the Romanians' religious life in Hungary at the beginning of the 1920s, as it results from the documents in the Archives of the Foreign Ministry of Romania, the idea of founding an episcopate for the Romanians in Hungary was born. The

⁸ On the history of the Orthodox Church of the Romanians in Hungary, see Elena Csobai, Emilia Martin, *Vestigiile Bisericii Ortodoxe Române din Ungaria/A Magyarországi Román Ortodox Egyház kincsei* [The Vestiges of the Romanian Orthodox Church in Hungary], Gyula, 1999.

⁹ Teodor Misaroș, *Din istoria comunităților bisericești ortodoxe române din Ungaria* [On the History of the Romanian Orthodox Communities in Hungary], second revised edition, Gyula, 2002, p.235.

¹⁰ Arhiva Ministerului de Externe [Ministry of Exterior Archive], Fond Chestiunea bisericilor ortodoxe române din alte țări [The Issue of Romanian Orthodox Churches in Other Countries Fund], File no.36, page 4.

¹¹ Teodor Misaroș, op.cit., p.236.

initiative belonged to the Hungarian government, and the proposed bishop was Ghenadie Gh. Bogoievici. As a response to the Oradea Consistory's request to establish an Orthodox vicariate, Hungary's Foreign Ministry, in the 16 November 1920 address, no. 7968, submitted to the Bishop of Oradea, states: *"Your Excellency deigned to communicate us the presidential act of 7 November 1920, that the Romanian Greek-Orthodox episcopate vicar from Oradea would wish to organize the church affairs in the Romanian oriental communities under the rule of the Hungarian state, which belong to its jurisdictions and in that sense requests the support of the Hungarian state"*¹². As a result, in the reply letter, it was shown that: *"the Hungarian government kindly takes note of Mr. episcopate vicar's intention,"* and communicates the fact that it entrusted archpriest Gh. Bogoievici of Budapest to visit the church communities in Hungary and on the basis of what he saw to intervene to the church authorities. Then, the Hungarian government expresses its point of view in the following terms: *"The Royal Hungarian government believes that through the peace treaty no change was brought in the church authorities jurisdictions. The church communities continue to belong to those authorities under which they were before the treaty."* Finally, it proposed the creation of an episcopate on the account of the Orthodox Romanians in Hungary.

The Orthodox hierarchy and the Romanian government are surprised by the Hungarian government's proposal. Romania's Metropolitan Primate and the Holy Synod President, Dr. Miron Cristea, is informed of the situation generated by the Oradea Consistory's request, and the Hungarian government's initiative, mentioning the fact that: *"Because the Orthodox Church in its organization always took the state's sovereignty into account and has not extended its jurisdiction beyond the country's territory, we cannot interfere in the organization of the Romanian Orthodox churchgoers in Hungary, which is Hungary's internal affair. Each religion will be organized inside its country and cannot belong to another state's church."*¹³ The Romanian Orthodox hierarchy's decision not to become involved with the Orthodox communities in Hungary considered the sub-layer of the Budapest government's initiative.

In a report by the Romanian Legation in Budapest addressed to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, no. 17 886/1921, it was shown: *"I have the honor to communicate the*

¹² Arhiva Ministerului de Externe, op.cit., page 5.

¹³ Ibidem, fila 7.

following: in Budapest there is Protosingel Bogoievici Ghenadie, the Romanian Orthodox priest who has been officiating for 30 years at the Romanian chapel, which is installed in the apartment of one of the houses belonging to the “Gojdu Foundation”. This foundation has great wealth (it is said of almost half a billion Kronas) and is administered by the Sibiu Metropolitan Consistory.

In the late Gojdu’s will it is provided that his fortune’s income will be used as the Greek-Oriental bishops in Transylvania, Banat and Hungarian parts will decide. These parts being separated through the union of most of them to the Romanian Kingdom and the continuation under the Hungarian rule only for a very small Romanian-Orthodox population (maximum 40,000 souls), according to the will it results that only the bishops in the Kingdom have to decide on the fate of this large income. Certainly, this was not satisfactory for the Hungarians and the Budapest Government has been endeavoring for several months to find a solution to their favor.

It has recently decided to create a Greek-Orthodox episcopate for the above mentioned population and certain proposals were made, to Father Bogoievici to accept being appointed as bishop, being in fact the only one in Hungary, who could occupy such a dignity. Through this, Hungary will win two advantages:

- 1) It has a bishop among the bishops who decide on the use of the foundation’s funds and taking into account the liquidation operations between the two states, it will be able to request that part of the fortune to remain in Hungary and, therefore, under the government’s direct influence.*
- 2) It proves to the foreign public opinion that, having wide religious views, it has immediately founded an Orthodox episcopate for the Romanians. So it prepares its ground to request the rightful organization to maintain the four Hungarian episcopates in Romania and out of which two were already dissolved¹⁴.*

In the report sent to the Ministry of External Affairs by the Legation it was mentioned that Bogoievici intends to request the advice regarding his appointment as bishop, and that “he will be discouraged in order not to enter in the Hungarian diplomacy’s game.”

¹⁴ Ibid., page 17.

In the lack of a person to occupy the episcopal see, the Hungarian government founded a ministry of minorities, where it created two sections for minorities, institutions through which the State had total control over the minorities in Hungary.

The Hungarian government's initiative comes in 1920, when the "Gojdu" Foundation Representation delegated Ioan Lapedatu, the foundation's financial counselor, to travel to Budapest in order to discuss with the Hungarian political authorities the problem of unblocking the "Gojdu" Foundation funds, blocked by the Hungarian government. In the same year, the Hungarian government intended to distribute the fortune to the successor states that had Orthodox subjects on their territory¹⁵.

Unfortunately, the foundation's fortune remained an unresolved issue to this day, even though the "*Agreement between Romania and Hungary Regarding the "Gojdu" Foundation*" was signed in 1937, ratified by the two countries' parliaments, in truth, only on 4 June 1940 by the Hungarian government¹⁶.

The Orthodox Romanians remained in an interim situation from an administrative point of view. Ghenadie Bogoevici did not exert the authority with which he was invested. After his death, which occurred in 1932, on 24 June 1934, the Protopresbyterial Synod of the Orthodox Romanians in Hungary gathered to elect the Orthodox Romanians' Protopresbyter¹⁷. 9 priests and 31 layman representatives participated in the meeting, which was presided by the priest Petre Mândruțau from Gyula II. Ioan Ola from Micheregi was elected Protopresbyter. In the same meeting of the Deanery Synod, transformed into the National Congress of the Orthodox Romanians in Hungary, it was requested that an independent eparchy to be established, led by a synod and a diocesan consistory. In the eparchy's organization project four deaneries were considered, in Gyula, Chitighaz, Micherechi and Budapest. The decision was forwarded to the Budapest government, which tacitly acknowledged the Orthodox Romanian's project. However, the Romanians' action was discouraged by the Hungarian government, which intervened to the Ecumenical Patriarchy in Constantinople, to create an Orthodox metropolitan see in Hungary, with three suffragan

¹⁵ Cornel Sigmirean, Aurel Pavel, „Fundația Gojdu” 1871-2001 [“The Gojdu Foundation” 1871-2001], Târgu Mureș, Editura Universității „Petru Maior”, 2002, p.60.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁷ T. Misaroș, op. cit., p.242.

episcopates, one for the Serbians, one for the Romanians and one for the Greeks, with an Arch-Episcopal degree, having its headquarters in Budapest. The Hungarian project was discussed by Patriarch Veniamin I of Constantinople with the Romanian Patriarchy as well, which proposed that the Romanian Episcopate should be led by the Organic Statute, with the headquarters in Gyula. The three episcopates' leadership was to belong to a synod. If a synod could not be assembled, each episcopate had to belong to its "mother church". But this project failed as well. The war brought the Romanians in Hungary new experiences, through the creation of the Hungarian Orthodox Church and of an Orthodox Theology faculty in Budapest. The Romanians' wish for an autonomous administration was partially fulfilled in 1946, when the National Church Congress of the Romanian Orthodox Church, at the proposal of the Transylvanian Metropolitan, Nicolae Bălan, of the Bishop of Arad Andrei Magieru and of Nicolae Popovici, the Bishop of Oradea, approved the founding of an Orthodox Episcopate for the Romanians in Hungary. The installation of a bishop in Gyula would only be accomplished in 1999¹⁸.

The Romanians in Hungary have been part of a troubled history until now, the decisions being often made without their consultation. Thus they remained in the condition of victims to political and diplomatic interests.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p.243.