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HARMONIOUS AND DISCORDANT
ELEMENTS IN THE "SYMPHONY" OF THE
ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH – THE
ROMANIAN STATE AFTER DECEMBER
1989

Soon after December 1989, the Romanian political power and the Romanian Orthodox Church have established that they had common interests regarding the preservation of several elements of the old leadership structures. A radical severance with the past has never been accomplished, for, a certain fear for a complete unbalance and of an uncontrollable evolution of the State's institutions and of the Church's hierarchy became manifest at that time. Thus, the Orthodox Church and the leading political post-communist party have made a series of mutual good turns, with a view to maintaining the status-quo.

At the same time, the political leadership manifested occult trends in order to control the Orthodox Church and to monopolize its huge sphere of influence for political purposes, since the State had no interest in the existence of a very strong and independent Church. This article shortly analyzes some of these cases.

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The collaboration between national orthodox churches and the national states in general finds itself on historical grounds, with variable relevance over time.¹

The State exerts sovereignty over a territory, which, at the same time, is usually the canonic territory of that nation's Orthodox Church. When a state extends its rule in one way or another, the Orthodox Church follows and conquers, as well, from a canonic point of view, the new territories. The most relevant case of this type is that of Russia/former USSR (within which the Russian Orthodox Church no longer considered itself as a "national" Russian church, but rather as the "third Rome", after Rome and Constantinople). When Romania re-integrated Basarabia into its territory, for a short while, during the war, new orthodox bishoprics subordinated to the Patriarchy of Bucharest were established there between 1941 and 1944. After 1945, the Russian Orthodox Church canonically reclaimed that territory etc. Often using military means, the State protects the national territory, which is also a territory that pertains to the church, and, in exchange, the church provides the state with its moral support, offers the political power its own power of influence, which is considerable and,

explicitly or implicitly, legitimates the political power and the lay rulers as having a divine right. In itself, this is a prolonged symbiosis, manifested politically and from an ecclesiological point of view as a principle of „symphony”, a political/homiletic/ethical discourse harmonized for two voices, that of the emperor/ruler and that of the patriarch/metropolitan bishop.²

In the case of post-1989 contemporary Romania, the harmonies as well as the false notes, the stridence and the interferences of the state/church „symphony”, all originate in the administrative measures undertaken by the ruler A.I. Cuza. By means of the 1865 Secularization Law, Cuza sought to bring the Orthodox Church under the total control of the state. The bishops were appointed directly by the ruler, thus gravely infringing the canons and the church tradition. The main properties of the Church were expropriated, and the priests became employees of the state.³ The Church itself became a simple department within the state, which was meant to deal with the management of the population's religious needs. The Civil Status Services and the schools were transferred from the administration of the Church to that of the state. The remuneration of priests by the state chained the Church in a strong dependency on the state. Deprived of its properties, the Church was forced to renounce to its social care establishments, its hospitals, orphanages, asylums, which were also taken over by the state.

The social role of the Church was, thus, considerably diminished. Likewise, the State exclusively took over the affirmation of the national interest and if the Church wanted to serve the national interest, could do so only indirectly, having the state as an intermediary. Thus, a specific ethnical spirit has developed within the Romanian Orthodox Church, with a few significant long-term consequences. On the one hand, during the inter-war period, the far-right nationalistic movements were significantly nourished by the spirit and the servants of the Church, clerics, church-goers or orthodox believers. The members and sympathizers of the Romanian Iron Guard organized memorial services before or instead of party meetings. Later, during the communist dictatorship and in opposition to the official atheistic propaganda, the Romanian Orthodox Church was prepared for survival – and it survived – exclusively due to its liturgical function, being essentially deprived of its cultural and social attributions. Collaborationism with the communist power was even more pronounced and, at any rate, more sincere when, at the end of the sixties and during the seventies and eighties, the official policy of the communist regime imposed limits within the usable national culture, with the accompanying propagandistic exaggeration and falsification. On the other hand, the ethnical spirit of the ROC negatively influenced the pan-orthodox collaboration, and the systematic discussions with other Orthodox Churches, regarding, first and foremost, canonic issues. The inter-orthodox dialogue became formal, complacent, devoid of substance,

veiling selfish or divergent national interest under the cloak of the Byzantine-type of diplomacy.

Immediately after December 1989, both the Romanian political power and the Romanian Orthodox Church were confronted with similar problems in terms of legitimacy, as well as with the need to manipulate the masses, which led to the tacit instauration of an apparently inexplicable solidarity between the first post-communist political leading party (FSN-PDSR) on the one hand, and ROC on the other hand.

The temporary, (interim) political power existing between 22 December, 1989 and 20 May 1990 was forced, under the pressure of street demonstrations, to verbally declare itself as anti-communist, but, in fact, it massively resorted to the preservation of former power structures, altering their denominations, and to keeping persons who, along the communist period, held different high rank political functions, especially in the second echelon.⁴ In order to ensure certain stability of the administration and of the governing act, the interim power, compared to some actual anti-communist tendencies, was struck by uncertainties and unrealistic political assumptions, by a kind of „revolutionary romanticism” and utopia. This led to the creation of a stereotype that the Romanian society had practically no choice, that the alternatives to a post-communist democratized power could only be anarchy or military dictatorship. The pre-communist political elites, which would have been a real alternative to post-communist political leadership, had long been exterminated.

An analogous fact occurred in the Orthodox Church. Immediately after December the 22nd 1989, at the beginning of January 1990, the well-known Reflection Group for the Renewal of the Church was founded. This was a fairly heterogeneous association, consisting of high-class priests alongside doubtful laypeople, many of them having had, up to that moment, no connection to the church whatsoever, a group which, in fact, behaved more like a pressure group against the *status quo* in the church hierarchy, without any clear objectives for the future. In this state of spirits, a first relative victory arose. Almost all the priests in the Eparchy gathered in Alba Iulia to picket the Bishopric, requesting the deposition of the hierarch, compromised because of his collaborationism with the communist power.⁵ The priests succeeded in organizing a marathon meeting, comprising permanently around two and three hundred priests, for several days, until bishop Emilian Bîrdaş resigned and withdrew to a monastery. The assembly of priests, constituted *ad hoc*, elected instead, as bishop, a celibate priest from among them, the current archbishop Andrei. The St. Synod of Bucharest, facing this fact, posed no problems in regard of canonicity or legality, but rather, has confirmed the election and proceeded to his ordainment as bishop. A precedent was, thus, created. The idea began to take shape and expand. In Buzău, at the bishopric seat, priests began to gather for the same purpose as in Alba Iulia. Yet, here in Buzău, was possible that the events would be abruptly ended by the

intervention of a high representative of the political power, the deputy Prime Minister Gelu Voican Voiculescu. It happened that the latter entered the bishopric palace armed, summoned the protesting priests in the council room, where he explained to them, calmly and tenderly, that if they wanted to overthrow bishop Epifanie they were free to do so, but that...the time was not right, that the Church was menaced by the „sects” (neo-protestant cults), that there was the danger that those would destabilize the Orthodox Church. He advised them to put this affair off for another day.⁶ Thus, people returned to their homes, and the „revolution” failed to take place, because there was no approval from the government.

Meanwhile, on the 18th of January 1990, patriarch Teoctist, at that moment strongly contested by various parties, announced his withdrawal from the position he had held, for reasons of poor health, was initially hospitalized in a hospital in Bucharest, and then stayed at the Monastery of Sinaia and patiently waited for the events to follow their course. The retirement of patriarch Teoctist led the Church to the risk of opening a terrible Pandora box, which was acknowledged, with a remarkable rapidity, by the clergy and the hierarchy.

The Romanian Orthodox Church was threatened by major risks, both from the inside and from the outside. From the inside, it was the assembly of the Synod, which put forth the election of a new patriarch. Because Moldova did not have a metropolitan bishop, the chair of Iași having been vacant since 1986, there could be no question, from the standpoint of tradition, of electing a patriarchal council of deputies (*locum tenens*). It was then that Antonie, the metropolitan bishop of Transylvania and Nestor, the metropolitan bishop of Oltenia, announced their willingness and availability to run for patriarch. However, unlike the previous election, in January 1990, a free press had already begun to function. By means of the press, it was publicly revealed that the candidates for the patriarch chair, Antonie Plămădeală and Nestor Vornicescu, had made more and graver compromises with the communist power than patriarch Teoctist. In all likelihood, this would have happened for any other priest eligible for being a patriarch, and the Romanian public opinion of those days, heavily biased in terms of politics, was expecting immediate punitive measures and did not have the slightest exercise of calm evaluation through press demarches of the public personas. The entire hierarchy of ROC could have, basically, been blamed and rendered illegitimate.

From the outside, the Romanian Orthodox Church was indeed, confronted to a „strong, particularly active, diversified and vehement wave of neo-protestant proselytism”.⁷ This proselytism enjoyed, yet, a limited success, as it was based on an erroneous assessment of the Romanian realities. The neo-protestant preachers, especially those from abroad, knew that Romania had been a country with an atheistic dictatorship and formalistic and obedient official Orthodox Church, so they assumed that Romanians had been completely de-Christianized and that the gospel

teaching activity had to start from scratch. Genuinely, the Romanians' folk religion substratum and religious feeling were much stronger and more persistent than it had been imagined. Moreover, the Orthodox Church had to face, also, an „aggressive laicization”,⁸ coming from the direction of incipient forms of non-confessional and/or anti-orthodox civil society organizations, which, in the name of „modernizing” orthodoxy and the freedom of conscience, imperatively and haughtily demanded impossible things of the Church, which could not be accepted by the Church without infringing its canonic principles and abdicating from its soteriological mission. These errors of assessment and wrongly conducted initiatives had a rather paradoxical effect, and pushed again most Romanians towards the Orthodox Church.

The result was that in April 1990 St. Synod was assembled again in an extraordinary meeting, which cancelled the Decision of approval for the patriarch's resignation in January, and Teoctist was called again from Sinaia and reinstated to his former position. Prior to this meeting, all archpriests around the country, on behalf of all priests and parishioners, sent telegrams to the St. Synod by which they requested P. F. Teoctist to be re-called from Sinaia and reinstated as patriarch.

If we were to put forth, by way of comparison, an imaginary exercise of counter-factual history and to suppose that Ion Iliescu, then president of the state, would have simulated his resignation, so vehemently demanded by the opposition and street protesters, it is very plausible that all county/local CPUN would have immediately sent telegrams, on behalf of the people, to the central CPUN, asking Mr. Iliescu to reconsider his resignation, as being the only one who had, at the time, the necessary and sufficient authority in the state to ensure the relative stability of the institutions and to prevent the country from falling into anarchy.

With all common interests, it must be pointed out that, however, even after 1989, the relationship between the Romanian State and the Romanian Orthodox Church was not always a symmetric one, but rather „asymmetric and uneven”.⁹ After 1989, as well as before, in observance to the medieval canons and traditions, the Orthodox Church continues to pray for the State, for the rulers of the country and for those of the local communities, whomsoever they might be, and the State also permanently seeks, more directly or more subtly, to subdue the ecclesial institutions or at least to gain its influence in time of political elections.

Formally, the Romanian Constitution (article 29) guarantees the freedom of religious conscience for all cults, the freedom of the cults in terms of forms of organization, as well as the autonomy of the church with respect to the state, as the separation between the state and the church and the autonomy of the church with respect to the state were stipulated even in the Romanian Communist Constitution.¹⁰ Yet, this autonomy was, practically, permanently limited and devalued, including the post-communist period, due to the informal pressures from factors of political

power. Even though, within its autonomy, as a different scope of power, the Orthodox Church has never been a rival or a political opponent of the state, the State has still permanently and secretly sought to limit the power of the Church; whomever was at power was not interested in the existence of a truly strong church, but in that of „a church serving the interests of the party”.¹¹

This is clearly noticeable in the failure to retrocede some properties of the ROC, which had been confiscated by the communists, and which, if they had been given back, would have ensured a proper economic, social and political independence for parishes and eparchies with respect to the state. The classic case is that of the Romanian Orthodox Church Fund in Bucovina, that is, of the Archbishopric of Suceava and Rădăuți.

Following Bucovina's integration into the Austrian territory, an Orthodox Church Fund was constituted in Bucovina in 1783, consisting, among other things, of approx. 200.000 hectares of forest, an immense area which was to be administered by imperial officers on behalf of the Orthodox Church. The Status of this Fund stipulated that the income acquired should be employed in paying the wages of the clergy, in maintaining the churches and monasteries, some carrying a remarkable historical and architectural value, in ensuring the Church's social care mission and in setting up and financing a theological school of a higher level in Cernăuți.¹² In almost one century and a half of existence, before the First World War, we can say that the Orthodox Church Fund in Bucovina fully achieved its objectives. Then, during the inter-war period, within the new framework of the Romanian states, the Church Fund preserved its patrimony intact, under the administration of the Metropolitan Bishopric of Bucovina. In 1948, the Metropolitan Bishopric of Bucovina, which had moved from the soviet-occupied Cernăuți to Suceava, was abolished, as well as the Church Fund, and the 192.000 remaining hectares of forest were nationalized.

After 1990, the Archbishopric of Suceava and Rădăuți was reestablished and received its seat in Suceava, but the properties of the Church Fund could not be retrieved from the today's Romanian state. The new archbishop of Suceava, IPS Pimen reestablished the Church Fund with the status of Association subordinated to the Archbishopric, but his demarches of regaining the patrimony were constantly hindered by the political power for two decades. During each year of electoral campaign for the Parliament and Presidency of Romania, from 1992 on, the most important political leaders asked IPS Pimen for electoral support and firmly promised, in exchange, the retrocession of properties following the elections, then, after having risen to power, they duped him every time. Bizarre as it may seem, the farce was repeatedly successful. The politicians in Bucharest maintained, at the same time, tight financial relations to those who illegally exploited the forests of the Church Fund. Finally, in 2004, IPS Pimen could not bear it any longer and made the affair public. He

gave several interviews to the press, in which he denounced the existing state of things, „the clique involving the wood mob and the political class”, the interferences in the judicial process, explaining everything by the fact that „greed had dulled the minds of politicians”.¹³ Back then, in the summer of 2004, the president of the state was still Ion Iliescu. The latter was utterly surprised by the audacity of hierarch at criticizing politicians; he severely scolded IPS Pimen through a Communiqué of the Romanian Presidency and asked him to apologize publicly. There were no public apologies, maybe also due to the fact that the press produced, on this occasion, a strong anti-Iliescu rumor, but one cannot overlook the fact that the former state president instinctively reacted, at that time, like a politician accustomed to give orders or imperative suggestions to the heads of the Church, as if they had been his subordinates within the party. Subsequently, with or without relation to this incident, archbishop Pimen was subject to an abasement process. This process meant the publication of parts from his Secret Police file, and in 2008 the high church official was no longer significantly involved in electoral actions. According to some authors,¹⁴ this fact was an attempt at compromising the hierarch, for his attempt at retrieving the Church patrimony, thus starting a local conflict with the wood mob, and centrally, with the political authorities.

Another relevant, classic example of occult interference of the State into the internal issues of the Church is constituted by the interventions of some political leaders in the election procedure of the hierarch for the Archbishopric of Tomis, which took place on the 21st of February 2001. There were two candidates, bishops Galaction Stângă and Teodosie Petrescu. As it was known at the time, the patriarch himself, as well as the majority of the synod members preferred PS Galaction, for his qualities as a theologian, as an archpriest, but also as a person. However, for reasons that we cannot extended here, PS Teodosie was strongly supported by the then Prime Minister of Romania, Adrian Năstase. It was publicly known that the two were very close. The latter already envisaged himself, in the not-so-far future, as the new president of Romania, and the former as the new patriarch. Adrian Năstase intervened diplomatically with the former patriarch Teoctist in favor of his protégé. The patriarch firmly turned him down, saying that the election of the bishops was in the charge of the Saint Synod and the representatives of the Eparchial Assembly of Constanța. Năstase insisted, but to no avail. He managed to capacitate Ion Iliescu, the president of the state at that time, into intervening in favor of Teodosie, but the patriarch remained inflexible. Then, Ion Iliescu, not being used to the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church disobeying him, lost his temper and threatened patriarch Teoctist, directly and brutally over the telephone, with the words: „Perhaps you already miss Sinaia!”.¹⁵ Confronted to this perfidious threat, the patriarch gave in and accepted to preside over a meeting of the St. Synod in which a primitive falsification of the vote was

made in favor of bishop Teodosie, the present-day archbishop of Constanța, a scene worthy of the fictional prose of Damian Stănoiu.

Certainly, many other examples can be cited in order to illustrate the ambivalent and ambiguous relation between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the political power in Romania after December 1989, regarding the mutual political services and the tendencies of subordinating the Church by factors of political power. A church whose clergy is paid by the state, with a theological education financed by the state and with places of worship sponsored by the state will necessarily, tacitly be relatively obedient to the governing parties, will have an often opportunistic and double-faced clergy with respect to the power. Also, we have discussed here about a majority Church (comprising, according to the last census, 87 per cent of the Romanian population), which holds a considerable influence, including in the electoral field, a power which the Orthodox Church is well aware of and which it deems proper to make use of with a maximum of advantage for itself. To the same extent, we were talking here about a Church which has been, at the same time, for several centuries, a creator of national specificity and will, therefore, be supported and favored, to a certain extent, by the state. But it is a Church which will also represent a much more important stake when the political power resorts to interferences, be they disguised or open, in order to ensure a relative control over it. Without the common interest in preserving the *status quo*, one cannot explain the solidarity of action between the ROC and the post-communist parties created immediately after 1990, just as one cannot explain the hidden fight led by politicians for politically monopolizing and manipulating this influencing capacity without taking into account the real influence of ROC among its followers.

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Notes

¹ Cf. H. Ahrweiler, *L'Ideologie politique de l'Empire byzantin* (Paris, PUF, 1975).

² Cf. G. Dagron, *Empereur et pretre. Etude sur le "cesaropapisme" byzantin* (Paris, Gallimard, 1996).

³ George Enache, „In căutarea Bisericii pierdute”, *Rost*, 47-48 (ian-feb 2007): 16-24.

⁴ M. Berindei, A. Combes, Planche A., *Roumanie: le livre blanc. La realite d'un pouvoir neo-communiste* (Paris: Ed, La Decouverte, 1990), 16.

⁵ Nicolae Iuga, *Bisericile creștine tradiționale spre o Etică globală* (Cluj-Napoca: Grinta, 2006), 19-20.

⁶ Ion Buga, *Rugați-vă pentru fratele Teoctist* (București: Coresi, 2005), 340.

⁷ Nicolae Iuga, *Bisericile creștine tradiționale spre o Etică globală* (Cluj-Napoca: Grinta, 2006), 20.

⁸ Alexandru Duțu, „Ortodoxie și laicitate”, *Almanah bisericesc* (București, 1999), 66.

⁹ Stelian Gomboș, „Relația Stat-Biserică în prag de aderare la UE”, *Rost*, 42-42 (august-septembrie 2006), 32-37.

¹⁰ Adrian Lemeni and Florin Frunză, *Viața religioasă în România* (București: Ed. Bizantină, 2005), 10-11.

¹¹ George Enache, „Ierarhul și comunistul cu față umană”, *Rost* 18 (august 2004), 42-44.

¹² Petre Ciobanu, „Fondul Bisericesc Ortodox din Bucovina”, *Bucovina* 1-2 (1993), 26.

¹³ Nicolae Iuga, *Un muzeu de caricaturi* (Cluj-Napoca: Grinta, 2007), 107-109.

¹⁴ Mihai Valica, „Biserica și Securitatea”, *Puncte cardinale*, 5 (Sibiu, 2008), 14.

¹⁵ Ion Buga, *Rugați-vă pentru fratele Teoctist* (București: Coresi, 2005), 120 sq.