

**RIVALRY BETWEEN THE BESSARABIAN
AND MOLDOVAN CHURCHES WITHIN
THE CONTEXT OF SUPPORT
OF THE RUSSIAN CHURCH AND POLITICS**

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Abstract. *The research is based on data and supplemented by findings from interviews with a representative of the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia and a historian at the Moldova State University in Chisinau. This study provides an analysis of the specific nature of communication and relationships between the Moldovan nation and the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia, as well as of the attitudes of the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia towards the government of the Republic of Moldova. The arguments put forward are justified by the historical tradition of the State and Church relationship to specify what this historical tradition is in Moldova. The analyses are all implemented with an emphasis on the intranational relations among Moldova, Romania and Russia.*

Keywords: *Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia, Moldovan Orthodox Church, Russian Orthodox Church, Moldova, Romania, Russia, relationships, conflicts.*

Introduction

Even in the 21st century, religion plays an important role in society within the spiritual dimension and also as a source of political legitimation. Particularly in societies disrupted by communist ideology, religious organisations established themselves as significant actors to express their opinion on fundamental questions of morality, politics as well as economics. For these societies, revitalisation of religion represents in particular the retrieval of a forgotten heritage, historical memory and, ultimately, a recovery of national identity. With the collapse of bipolar rivalry, a brand-new theory emerged, built on the religious definition of structures of civilisation and their opponents (Huntington, 2005). The phenomenon of religion

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resurrection began to gain importance in political life. For this reason, religious doctrines and the functioning of religious institutions have become an important platform for relevant research in the social sciences. In particular, the connection of religious institutions with political structures enables the clarification a certain sphere of complicated relationships within society, and their reflection on the shaping of national identities.

With the creation of new national states, one of these – Moldova – differs to a large extent. Unlike other former republics of the Soviet Union, the population of Moldova was bound to the national state beyond the Prut River (Romania). For this reason, the Soviet regime opposed Moldovan national liberation movement and tried to implement cultural, linguistic and religious projects aimed at convincing the local population that their identity was different from Romanian. And despite the fact that Romanians and Moldovans practise the same religion – Orthodox Christianity – this became one of the main obstacles to the restoration of a shared national identity with roots in a centuries-old history.

The renewal of spiritual legacies and religious affinities was initiated by a group of priests and intelligentsia who were deeply concerned about the actions of the local Orthodox Church belonging to the Russian Patriarchate. Moldova, torn by problems and the re-emergence of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, or the Metropolitan Church of Bessarabia within the Romanian Orthodox Church, posed many questions to local political elites. Which direction would Moldova take? Which religious identity would prevail? The religious factor is the most sensitive indicator of helping to hide or reveal the objective criteria in the formation of these anticipated answers (Munteanu, 2002: 98).

Moldova is a state whose borders underwent several changes in the course of its development. The territory between the Prut and Dniester Rivers was part of the Moldavian Principality from the 15th century until 1812, when it was occupied by Russia. The territory was thus connected to the coastal area of Budzhak belonging to the Ottoman Empire. Part of Budzhak was ceded to Romania in 1856, but returned to Russia after the 1878 Berlin Congress. This was not for long, as in 1918 the entire Russian conquest was ceded to Romania. Russia, or the new Soviet Union, did not recognise this integration and created a separate state called the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic on the left bank of the Dniester in a small part of Ukraine. Its existence was to remind Romania that USSR would reclaim the territory between the Prut and Dniester Rivers at the earliest opportunity. In 1940, this was codified by the treaty with Nazi Germany (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) on the division of spheres of influence. Along with the new annexation, the coastal zone of historical Budzhak was divided, and the borders on the left bank of the Dniester were slightly adjusted. The border was returned to the 1940 status, although Romania regained the whole area from 1941 to 1944. This condition lasted until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, when Moldova gained independence. However, local pro-Russian separatists on the left bank of the Dniester declared independence under the name of the Transnistrian Moldovan Republic. This exists as a de facto state to this day, with its independence not recognised by any other state. It is considered de jure as part of Moldova. The alternating integration

of Moldova into Romanian and USSR also resulted in a changing religious jurisdiction. This is reflected by tradition, language, as well as faith. Nevertheless, religion is shared with Romanians and Russians, but differs in organisation – some people are inclined to the Russian, others to the Romanian Orthodox Church.

Definition and Methodology

Church organisations have their own interests in politics and in society within the State. The ability to enforce the interests of a Church depends on the influence of the organisation, based on size, attractiveness, material resources and contacts. The traditional interests of a religious organisation include the propagation of own faith and retaining as many believers as possible. Other interests include what the respective religious organisation considers as good and correct on the basis of its values. Naturally, as many critics of religion claim, the interests of religious groups may also relate to the appreciation of assets, or accumulation of wealth, and the strengthening of power. Similar to the State, religious organisations also declare their interests in their documents and statements, which may take the form of saintly texts, declarations, encyclicals, pastoral sheets and the like (Števkov, 2014: 31). However, in the case of Moldova, we see that the major local Orthodox Churches are subordinate to the patriarchs residing across its borders, shifting mutual relations to the level of international relations and religious diplomacy. Alicja Curanović is one of the first to elaborate this concept, defining it as a “*State activity taking advantage, or applying the religious factor in foreign policy; i.e. a whole set of mechanisms of cooperation of the State with religious associations in order to achieve a pragmatically determined national interest, take advantage of international activity of religious institutions, ideas and religious symbols (appropriately presented in conformity with the current political objectives)*” (Curanović, 2012, p. 353).

From the methodological perspective, this is a comparative analysis of the Orthodox Church institutions in Moldova. This type of comparative study is based on the analysis of religious institutions. The objective is not to describe the entire system, but to understand the partial problems of specific processes, their causes and consequences for the system as a whole. By its nature, this type of comparative study is based on the structurally functional analysis by G. Almond of the 1960s, which presupposes the existence of the same types of functions in all political systems (significantly, this is specifically manifested in the comparison of institutions). It is typical that a synchronous comparison is based on the analysis of selected elements (churches, in this case) within a specific time period (Říchová, 2010).

The author’s study trips to Moldova, including the Transnistrian region, as well as his study stays in Romania and Russia, were the motivation for writing this paper. Some data gathered directly in the field are supplemented by data from other sources, i.e. reports by non-governmental organisations and media which cover the studied area (e.g. *CIVIS – Centre of Sociological, Political and Psychological Analysis and Investigation*; *IDIS – Institute for Development and Social Initiatives*;

Radio Europa Liberă). During the research trips, interviews were conducted in an environment of local religious institutions, as well as in the broader environment of civil and political society, with representatives of civil society in Moldova and in Transnistria. It is quite rare to hear authentic and critical voices, in particular from representatives of the Church. A total of 15 interviews were carried out in Moldova, with 10 male and 5 female respondents. All interviews were conducted personally and without an interpreter; 13 in Russian and two in the Romanian language. 10 respondents held definite pro-Russian and 5 pro-Romanian attitudes.

During the research, a *gatekeeper*¹ became the key person. This was a woman who held the position of President of the Association of Guides in Moldova. She was well acquainted with the environment of civil society, religious institutions and political parties. The acquisition of respondents was agreed in advance by the aforementioned *gatekeeper*. The conducted interviews were semi-structured in character. In the introduction of the interview, respondents were given space to express their opinion in general on the discussed issues. Thereafter, the interview continued with the objective of covering selected areas of Church-related issues – reactivation, conflicts, foreign influences. An important part of the research was observation of the environment in which people are living. Acceptance on the part of the persons contacted was very friendly. In addition to official interviews, the author was able to participate in other diverse activities, such as discussion evenings and informal gatherings with academics. The names of the interviewees are not revealed due to a concern for their safety.

Overview of the History of the Church in Moldova

The oldest cult described in the territory of present-day Moldova is the cult of Zalmoxis, worshipped by Geto-Dacians, the ancestors of contemporary Moldovans. However, we do not have much information about this cult. Disputes still exist as to whether this religion was monotheistic or polytheistic. However, we know that the cult was eradicated soon after the arrival of the Romans in 106 AD, probably due to their efforts to rapidly Romanise the local population (Treptow, 2000).

However, traces of early Christian life in the territory of the Prut region have already been found from the 1st century AD, when Andrew the Apostle preached there. He preached in the territory between the Danube River and the Black Sea, as well as north of the Black Sea in the territory inhabited by the Scythians, later named Bessarabia. St Andrew also visited the ancient colony of Tyras, founded by merchants from Miletus at the mouth of the Dniester River.² Nevertheless, all historical-literary and archaeological sources relating to Christianity prove that the expansion of Christianity began only with the arrival of the Romans. The Moldovans, like the Romanians, Greeks and Albanians, do not know the exact date of the acceptance of Christianity. Nevertheless, we know that in the present-day

¹ 'Gatekeeper' is the term for a contacted person, who due to his/her position mediates contact with other interviewees. For further examples, see Hoch, Kopeček, Baar (2012, p. 23).

² Today we can see the ruins of this town in Bilhorod-Dnistrovskyi and Odessa.

Romanian territory, Christianity was accepted several centuries earlier (probably already between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD) than in neighbouring Kiev (as late as 988 AD). From the perspective of the Church, from their beginnings, the territories of present-day Moldova and Romania belonged to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (Gombos, 2011).

Between 500-1000 AD, the Church hierarchy in Romanian territory was not well organised. Although organisation of the Church had already begun after the arrival of the Slavs in the Balkans after 600 AD, connected to the beginning of Slavonisation of the Church, the creation of the classic Church structure took several more centuries (Bălan, 2010). Slavic became the official language of the Church in approximately 1000 AD, when it replaced Latin in Romanian countries (Pacurariu, 2012).

After 1300, the efforts of Hungary and Poland were intensified to expand their influence in the region. Therefore, at the beginning of the 14th century, Catholic efforts to control this territory continued. However, Romanians did not submit to this pressure and interpreted their dissatisfaction directly to the Pope. According to Pope Gregory XI, *“that part of the Romanian nation which lives in the area along the borders of the Hungarian Kingdom near the Tatars are called Moldavians, they do not accept the Catholic faith, because they are dissatisfied with the religious services performed by the Hungarian priests”* (Treptow, 2000: 54).

Romanian countries thus began to form a border area between the Western and Eastern Church, between Orthodoxy and Catholicism. At the end of the 14th century, after the creation of the Polish-Hungarian personal union, the seat of the Metropolitan subordinate to Byzantium was established in Moldavia. In 1401, the ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople recognised Iosif I Muşat as canonical Metropolitan of the Moldavian Archbishopric (founded in 1386³). The territory of Eastern Moldavia between the Prut and Dniester Rivers was part of the Moldavian Metropolitanship, administered by Romanian bishops who were based in Suceava and later in Iasi. Less than half a century later, a fundamental event occurred in distant Moscow. In 1448, the Russian Orthodox Church, represented by Metropolitan Ioan, declared autocephaly, but without the blessing of Constantinople. It was only recognised in 1589. At that time, Russia had already won over the Tatars and expanded its territory beyond the Urals. In the following centuries, the expansion turned westwards and, after the triple division of Poland and annexation of the Crimean Khanate, Russia became Moldavia's neighbour, which country appeared to be an obstacle to their further expansion into the Balkans.

In 1453, the Turks conquered Constantinople. This event significantly affected the international situation in south-eastern Europe. The Moldavian Principality defended itself valiantly against the enemy raids that plagued Romanian lands at that time. However, in 1484 the Ottoman army led by Sultan Bayezid II conquered the cities of Chilia and Cetatea Albă, Moldavia then became a Turkish vassal in 1489 and was forced to pay a tribute. However, at the beginning of the 16th century,

³ The Moldavian Prince obstructed the filling of the office of the Metropolitan, and only in 1401 agreed, but appointed his relative to the function of Metropolitan.

Moldavian ruler Stephen III the Great (1457-1504) abolished this obligation. The territory of the Moldavian Principality of that time was again conquered by the Ottomans. The city of Tighina (Bender) fell in 1538, followed by Brăilei (Brăila) in 1542. Consequently, these cities were removed from the jurisdiction of the Wallachian and Moldavian hierarchs and newly included directly into the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, to the Bishopric of Proilavia and Ismail (Episcopia Proilaviei/Brăilei și Ismailului)^{4, 5}, led by Greek hierarchs. This Bishopric operated until 1813, when it was merged with the Dristrei Diocese (Bălan, 2010: 16).

In 1812, the Russian Empire annexed the eastern part of Moldavia and, at the same time, also the coastal region of Budzhak, until then belonging to the Ottoman Empire. The entire territory was reorganised as a guberniya called Bessarabia.⁶ Regardless of the canonical rights of Constantinople, all Orthodox believers in the annexed territory were subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church.

The establishment of the Eparchy of Chisinau and Khotyn was headed by the Moldavian Metropolitan, Gavril Bănulescu-Bodoni.⁷ After Bănulescu-Bodoni's death in 1821, the entire Moldavian territory was led only by non-Romanian Church officials, who had significantly contributed to the process of denationalisation of the Bessarabian Romanians through the Russification of the Church. Because churches and monasteries served as places where reading and writing was taught, the Church remained the main architect of cultural development even in its new form. The Orthodox faith shared with the Russians undoubtedly facilitated the process of Russification. Nevertheless, the low level of literacy, especially in rural areas, ensured the survival of the Romanian language even in subsequent generations.

However, the development of Romanian culture in the period between 1812 and 1917 was affected by many adverse conditions, especially with regard to the efforts of the governing structures to assimilate it within the Russian culture. The extent of the use of the Romanian language was restricted. In 1870, it was totally prohibited in State administration, education and the Church. A policy of national and cultural isolation towards Romania was supported (King, 2000: 23).

The situation began to change at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, when diplomatic relations between Russia and Romania improved. Moreover, this breakthrough coincided with the extraordinary development of Orthodox spirituality in Russia, depicted in religious texts and theological studies as well as in literature. During this period, in 1905, the Russian Orthodox Church started a campaign for independence from the State, and Bessarabian clergymen began to promote the use of Romanian language in religious ceremonies (Pacurariu, 2012:155).

⁴ The territory of this metropolis was situated for the most part in Budzhak and therefore did not belong to any Romanian metropolitanship, which was one of the reasons why this territory was later handed over to Ukraine.

⁵ The city of Brăila was known as Proilavon in Turkish.

⁶ This name was only used for Ottoman Budzhak in the Orthodox environment.

⁷ The Eparchy of Chisinau and Khotyn was founded on the insistence of the Moldavian Metropolitan, G. Banulescu Bodoni, and covered not only the Bessarabian area, but also Kherson province with the cities of Odessa, Ananiev, Kirovohrad-Elisavetgrad (today Kropyvnytskiy), located in Ukraine (Grigore, 2009).

In April 1918, after the First World War, Bessarabia was returned to Romania at the request of local elites, creating a “Greater Romania”. On 14th and 16th June 1918, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church accepted two ecclesiastical documents – a Decision on Church affairs in Bessarabia, and the Pastoral Book, according to which the clergy and people of Bessarabia again became part of their parent Church, i.e. the Romanian Orthodox Church. Russian Bishops refused to recognise the authority of the Romanian Synod and left Bessarabia. Subsequently, Gurie Grosu (the first Romanian to head the Church after a century of Russian occupation) was elected as the new Archbishop on 19th February 1919.

The Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church established two new eparchies in 1922, separate from the Chisinau Archdiocese – the Eparchy of Khotyn, based in Bălți, and the Eparchy of Cetatea Albă, based in the town of the same name. By a Synod Decision in 1927, all three eparchies were thereafter officially joined the Bessarabian Metropolitanate with a certain degree of autonomy (Gombos, 2011: 6).

Due to geopolitical changes, the return to Romanian traditions was not of long duration. Soviet and German territorial ambitions, secretly negotiated in the famous Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, led to the re-annexation of Bessarabia to the Soviet Union in 1940, together with Northern Bukovina and Hertza⁸. The Bessarabian Metropolitanate was immediately abolished and the whole church was again transferred to the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, but also just for a short period. In 1941, the Romanian army reconquered the territory of Bessarabia. This was only due to Germany changing its policies and launching a war against the USSR. Romania thus became an ally of the aggressor, which had consequences at the end of the war. Bessarabian eparchies renewed their activities and functioned until 1944, when they were forced by the Soviet offensive again to terminate their activities. From 1944 to 1949, Bessarabians suffered widespread repressions, priests were tortured, killed and exiled to Siberia, Kazakhstan and other regions of the Soviet Union. Approximately half of the churches in Bessarabia were closed, including the Cathedral in Chisinau (Cemârtan, 2004: 12). The assets of the Bessarabian Church passed into State ownership. Treasures from Bessarabian churches were either stolen or relocated to State museums or to Russia. A new generation of Bessarabian priests was educated in the Odessa Seminary, in the Zagorsk Theological Academy (near Moscow) and in the city then called Leningrad. Priests were forced to buy books only in Russian. The lack of religious literature in Romanian led to the gradual Russification of local inhabitants. Russification of the Church thus supplemented the promotion of the Russian language through the educational system. After 1958, another wave of closures of local churches followed. It may be stated that the Soviet Union, in fact, used the anti-religious policy for denationalisation of Bessarabian Romanians until the collapse of the USSR (Cemârtan, 2004: 12). Although the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in the reopening of churches,

⁸ These territories were not previously part of Russian Bessarabia – Bukovina (Rom. *Bucovina*) was administered from 1775 to 1918 by Austria, while Hertza (rum. *Herța*) was part of Moldavia under the Ottoman Protectorate, until its amalgamation with Walachia and the creation of Romania.

monasteries and theological schools, many buildings did not physically survive the period of atheism.

This brief outline of Church history in Moldavian territory shows that the competition among churches, as known, for example, in western Europe, was avoided for centuries here. This was prevented by political power. Russia liquidated the Romanian structures, while Romania tried twice to reverse Russian interventions. Russia intensified the pressure on the de-Romanisation of the Moldavian population after each annexation. The fact that the policy of “Moldavianism” was to a large extent successful is shown in developments after the creation of the independent Moldova.

On 27th August 1991, Moldova took advantage of the collapse of Soviet power by declaring its independence. The new State formation began to democratise the Soviet system. This was also reflected in religious freedom. The era of Soviet religious persecution ended and the Moldovan government adopted a law on religion, which was to guarantee the freedom of religious faith. However, the disintegration of the USSR led to a peculiar situation within the Russian Orthodox Church. Although it reacted positively to the destruction of the communist regime, it perceived the disintegration of the Soviet Union into 15 new countries negatively. The Holy Synod approved the doctrine to declare a clear position regarding the meaning of “several states – one patriarchate” (Lomagin, 2012, p. 503). The Russian Orthodox Church thus clearly expressed that the disintegration of USSR was not a reason to abolish religious unity. Thus, it tried to prevent the trends, which had led in the past within the sphere of Eastern Christianity to the creation of a new State, as well as to the creation of a new autocephalous Orthodox Church. However, such violation of canon law was not recognised. More precisely, it took decades before its recognition⁹. The canonical territory of the Russian Orthodox Church is therefore understood as its natural sphere of influence, transcending national borders, as in the case of the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, the Russian Patriarch reacted flexibly to the political changes. Still in the Soviet period, between 1989 and 1991, it enabled the formation of autonomous Orthodox Churches in Byelorussia, Latvia, Estonia and Ukraine.

On 2nd October 1992, the autonomous Orthodox Church was established in Moldova by a Holy Synod Decision. This was a reaction to the reactivation of the Bessarabian Metropolitanship on 14th September 1992 within the Romanian Orthodox Church. There are several other non-canonical Churches professing Orthodoxy in Moldova (including the “Old Believers”). However, these only have a marginal number of members, in terms of hundreds. It is significant that there is no ecclesiastical organisation to promote autocephaly – i.e. independence from Russian, Romanian or any other Church.¹⁰

⁹ Coincidentally, the Russian Orthodox Church had the same experience after breaking away from the Constantinople Church in 1448. Constantinople only recognised Russian autocephaly in 1589. Also, for example, the Macedonian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches still await recognition.

¹⁰ Although there is a miniature Moldovan Orthodox Autocephalous Church, it is part of the non-canonical Russian Orthodox Church (*Российская православная церковь*) – the difference is in the Russian title (the canonical church is *Русская*).

93.3% of Moldovan believers are Orthodox Christians (Cojocaru, 2010: 235), while approximately 70% belong to the Moldovan Orthodox Church¹¹, canonically subordinate to the Russian Orthodox Church. The remaining approximately 23% belong to the Bessarabian Orthodox Church (infotag.md, 2000), subordinate to the Romanian Orthodox Church. The relationship between these two Churches is not ideal, as there are often conflicts and mutual recriminations.

Bessarabian Orthodox Church

The Bessarabian Orthodox Church, officially called the Metropolitanate of Bessarabia (Rom. *Mitropolia Basarabiei*), was founded in 1927 within the Romanian Patriarchate. Its activities ended in 1944 after the arrival of Soviet troops, when it fell under the patronage of the Moscow Patriarchate. Most clergymen of the Bessarabian Church found refuge in Romania (Melinti, 2013). Subsequently, the main representatives of the Moldovan Orthodox Church were primarily appointed from the ranks of ethnic Russians. However, repressions mainly served for the consolidation of Soviet influence in Moldavia – deportations of peasants, priests and intellectuals to labour camps in Siberia, organised famine from 1946 to 1947, forced collectivisation, conscription to forced labour in mines of Ukraine and Russia, among other things. According to the 2011 research carried out in the Chisinau archives, approximately 300 000 Bessarabian citizens were killed in the 1940-1941 and 1944-1956 periods (Buzu, 2012: 80). It is also necessary to mention that several thousand Bessarabian intellectuals escaped from the communist regime to the Romanian kingdom (Buzu, 2012: 81).

For decades, the communist regime had suppressed religious life. A fundamental change only came about in 1985 with the Russian politician Mikhail Gorbachev. Through *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms, he opened up new possibilities within the Soviet empire. The collapse of the Eastern bloc at the end of the 1980s also entailed a significant change for Moldavia, despite the population not being prepared for it. Persecution of Romanian priests ended in 1990 and 1991. The long-closed churches and cathedrals were reopened. Russian Church officials began to be replaced by local clergymen. The possibility of connection to the Romanian Church re-emerged, together with the possibility of amalgamation of the whole of Moldova with Romania. In March 1992, a group of young people from Bessarabia, led by Vlad Ceremuș (youth leader of the Popular Front of Moldova), undertook a walking pilgrimage from Chisinau to Bucharest, carrying a cross. This pilgrimage symbolised the blood connection in honour of the Romanians who had died during the December 1989 uprising in Timisoara. It was also a sign of hope for the reunification of Romania and Bessarabia. Moldovan clergymen were divided as much as politicians on the question of the future of the country. The congress of Chisinau clergymen on 8th September 1992 declared the wish to remain within the Russian Orthodox Church. However, on the contrary,

¹¹ The official name is the Orthodox Church of Moldova (rus. *Православная церковь Молдовы*, rum. *Biserica Ortodoxă din Moldova*).

just a week later, on 14th September, another group of priests led by Bishop Petru Păduraru, demanded transfer to the leadership of the Romanian Orthodox Church. On the next day, this resulted in the rapid reaction by the Moscow Patriarchate to transform the former Chisinau Bishopric into the autonomous Moldovan Church, headed by Metropolitan Vladimir (real name, Nicholas Cantarean)¹². On 20th October, the Holy Synod RPC officially forbade Romanian priests from performing religious services. For that reason, in December 1992 Bishop Petru Păduraru participated in a meeting of the Romanian Synod, which was officially approved on 19th December (Roncea, 2001: 8). One of the triggers for its reactivation was the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church openly politically supported separatists in Transnistria. This was used by the Russian press and subsequently by radical nationalists in Moscow, Kiev and Simferopol (Munteanu, 2002: 99). To ensure continuity of the Church in the country, activities of the Theological Faculty at the State University in Chisinau were renewed.¹³ At the same time, the Moldovan parliament asked Patriarch Alexei (Russian Orthodox Church) and Teoctist (Romanian Orthodox Church) to start a dialogue to resolve the very complicated religious situation. No results were achieved.

On 19th December 1992, the Bessarabian Church was again recognised by the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church as part of the Romanian Orthodox Church. At that time, the Moldovan political scene was at the crossroads of whether to move in the direction of the European Union or to remain in the Russian embrace. In spite of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia still had a very noticeable influence there. On 17th May 1993, the Romanian Patriarch Teoctist wrote a letter to Moldovan Prime Minister Sangheli: *“It is incomprehensible that the acceptance of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church by the Holy Synod is considered by the Moldovan government as interference of Romania in the internal affairs of Moldova, while the operation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the territory of Moldova is not considered as interference or is even considered as being justifiable”* (Roncea, 2001: 10).

The person of the Patriarch Teoctist (Toader Arăpașu, Patriarch from 1986) is interesting in terms of his attitudes in the epoch-making period of destruction of the communist regime. For example, in 1989 the Patriarch agreed with repressions against demonstrators in Timisoara, where the first demonstrations of the Romanian revolutions took place (Romania.libera, 2007). He offered his resignation in 1990, but the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church did not accept it. Romanian intelligentsia deemed this decision as incorrect (presidency.ro, 2007). Nevertheless, the Teoctist stayed in office until 2007, when he died at the age of 92 years.

Acceptance of the new Moldovan Constitution by the pro-Russian government in 1994 brought about a change in Moldovan politics. Pro-Russian oriented elites supported Moldovan national identity and the existence of a specific Moldovan

¹² Three new bishoprics (Cahul and Comrat, Edinet and Briceni, Tiraspol and Dubasari) were singled out from the Chisinau Bishopric in 1998 and 2 more in 2006 (Basti and Falesti, Ungheni and Nisporeni).

¹³ The Theological Faculty had already been founded in Chisinau in 1926, but for political reasons were terminated in 1941. Although its activities were renewed in 1990, it was transformed into a Russian-type Theological Academy in 1993, subordinate to the Moldovan Orthodox Church.

language, and supported campaigns against Romania that were aimed at destabilising relations between ethnicities living in Moldova (Buzu, 2012: 86). The main representatives of the State as well as the President focused on eastern politics and the stabilisation of relations with Russia. President Petru Lucinschi, who was re-elected in 1996, also adhered to this direction, motivated by economic and commodity dependency.

The refusal by Moldovan authorities for the registration of the Bessarabian Church culminated on 3rd June 1998, when Bessarabian Metropolitan Petru Păduraru filed a complaint to the European Court of Human Rights. On 13th December 2001, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Moldova for a violation of the rights set out in Articles 9 and 13 of the Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Freedoms, specifically for the legislative refusal to renew the Bessarabian Orthodox Church. Nevertheless, on 26th September 2001, the Moldovan parliament went even further when it passed Decision No. 1008 regarding the change of status of the Moldovan Orthodox Church. By this Decision, the Moldovan government proclaimed the Moldovan Orthodox Church to be the only successor to the Diocese of the Chisinau Eparchy. The Bessarabian Church again turned to the Court. After considerable delays, the Supreme Court acknowledged the position of the Church and abolished Decision No. 1008 of 2001. In November 2004, Bessarabian Church leaders concluded the process of restoration, which had already begun in 1992¹⁴. In 2006, the Supreme Court of Moldova recognised the autonomous Bessarabian Orthodox Church as the spiritual successor of the Metropolitan Bessarabian Church, which had functioned until 1944. This Decision confirmed the historical and canonical right of existence of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church. In October 2007, the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church officially blessed the autonomous Bessarabian Church (Gombos, 2011: 9). The legal dispute between the Bessarabian Church and the Moldovan institutions lasted for more than 14 years. Nevertheless, the tension between Bessarabian and Moldovan Churches did not disappear. According to a representative of the Bessarabian Church, the majority of Moldovan Church believers are under the control of Moscow. Indications of a transition of believers from the Moldovan Church to the Bessarabian Church are noticeable, but slow. A representative of the Bessarabian Church commented that believers fear transition, due to the risk of conflicts.¹⁵

After the declaration of independence, most Orthodox Churches in Moldova remained subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate. Only a small number of churches, mostly newly built, were connected to the Bessarabian Church. Today, both Churches perform religious services in the Romanian language and the only noticeable difference between the two Churches, from a liturgical perspective, is the use of the Christian liturgical calendar. The Moldovan Orthodox Church uses the old Julian calendar, while the Bessarabian Church, together with the Romanian Orthodox Church, uses the Gregorian calendar (Cojocaru, 2010: 235).

¹⁴ In 2004, the Chisinau Archbishopric and Bălți Bishopric (in place of the former Khotyn Bishopric) and in 2006 also the Bishopric of Southern Bessarabia and Bishopric of Dubasari and Transnistria.

¹⁵ Source: Personal interview with a priest of the Bessarabian Church conducted in February 2015.

The Bessarabian Church is characterised by a strong pro-Romanian orientation and also supports the efforts of the Moldovan government to join the European Union. On the political level, the greatest ally of the Bessarabian Church is the Christian-Democratic People's Party of Moldova¹⁶, which supported this Church in the course of the process of new registration. On the other hand, the Moldovan Orthodox Church is supported by parties that have a pro-Russian orientation. In particular, these are the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova, and the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova.

The democratic character of the Bessarabian Church appealed to some priests of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, who subsequently went over to the pro-Romanian Bessarabian Church. There are cases of both physical and verbal attacks on priests of the Bessarabian Church. There is also clear evidence that proves the direct participation of followers of the Moldovan Orthodox Church in these provocations.¹⁷ The Synod of the Moldovan Orthodox Church, which was held in 1997, indicated the Bessarabian Church as a negative factor which, among other things, has a negative effect on the ethnic division of believers, change of calendar, meddling in political opinions, destruction of ethnic harmony between Romanians and non-Romanians, and deterioration of peace negotiations between Chisinau and Tiraspol (Cemârtan, 2004: 26). These negative prognoses, as we know, did not come true, but their aim was to deceive the public and to motivate aggressive individuals against the Bessarabian Church.

Under conditions of deepening social and political crises, the prestige of religion is increasing (confidence of the population in the Church ranges between 78 and 80%) and symbolises the changing role of the Church in society. The result is that many intellectuals see religion as an alternative and dominant player in the social system. Moldovan national traditions are interspersed with ethical and religious aspects, inseparably associated with the characteristics of Romanian identity (Cemârtan, 2004: 40).

However, it should be stated that the Church actually contributed to the division of the Moldovan population into Romanians and non-Romanians, when it became the initiator of discussions on cultural, spiritual, linguistic and national identity. The Orthodox Church, led by pro-Russian patriots, together with Moscow created an ideological basis for the existence of the Moldovan State. In their opinion, this includes the Moldovan language, religion, nation, as well as a history different from Romania (Cemârtan, 2004: 41).

In contrast, the political influence of the Bessarabian Church is minimal. The Bessarabian Church does not try to instigate its followers. It only offers Romanian-speaking Moldovans the possibility of returning to the original Church. In personal interviews with representatives of the Bessarabian Church and Moldovan Orthodox Church, we cannot fail to notice a contradiction in the presentation of relations between both Churches. When interviewing pro-Russian representatives, the

¹⁶ This party had parliamentary representation (8-11 members) until the election in April 2009. However, in the 2005-2009 period, it concluded an informal coalition partnership with the Communist Party and consequently did not get into parliament, receiving fewer than 1 % of votes in the election.

¹⁷ Source: Personal interview with a priest of the Bessarabian Church conducted in February 2015.

answer to the question of the occurrence of any conflicts with the Bessarabian Church was always an univocal denial.¹⁸ On the contrary, a representative of the Bessarabian Church claimed that they are constantly the target of verbal or physical attacks.¹⁹

On 18th April 2014, the Metropolitan of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, Petru Paduraru, stated in an interview for an Orthodox portal: *“The conditions under which the Bessarabian Church was reactivated, were extremely challenging. We were accused of being against the State, that we wanted to destroy Moldova with an emphasis on belonging under the Romanian Patriarchate. Of course, none of these assertions was confirmed. In 1992, the Bessarabian Orthodox Church had 5-6 priests and 4-5 churches, while at the present time we have 130 priests and 107 parishes. After 2002, we managed to register other parts of the Bessarabian Church: the Bishopric in Bălți, the Bishopric of Southern Bessarabia and the Orthodox Diocese of Dubăsari and all Transnistria”* (doxologia.ro, 2014).

Moldovan Orthodox Church

As was already mentioned, the Moldovan Orthodox Church, established in 1992, immediately refused to recognise the Bessarabian Orthodox Church, which had requested reactivation in the same year. Since its creation, it has created geopolitical tension of a religious nature, into which Romania, Moldova as well as Russia were dragged. By its activities, the Moldovan Orthodox Church became part of Russian geopolitical projects and Moldovan society found itself as hostage in this conflict. For example, in 2010 the Moldovan Orthodox Church openly supported the Humanist Party of Moldova. The former Director of the Moldovan Security and Information Service was Valeriu Pasat, whose electoral programme was primarily based on the amalgamation of Moldova in a Customs Union with Russia, Belorussia and Kazakhstan (azi.md, 2010). However, this party did not succeed in the elections, as it obtained only 0.9 % of votes (e-democracy.md, 2010).

A solution which could prevent the deepening of social conflict within this context is not only the creation of a modern State, with clear legislation and open discussion with all involved parties, including the Churches, but also the re-evaluation of relationships among State, Church and society. The initiative should also come from the Russian Orthodox Church. If this does not happen, a new relationship would not be institutionalised between the Moldovan State and the Church, subordinate to the Russian Patriarchate and contributing to Russian State policies. The meeting of the Synod of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was held from 13th to 16th August 2000, approved the new concept of the Russian Orthodox Church. This comprises the basic principles of relations between State and Church. The second chapter, called “The Church and the Nation”, states: *The universal character of the Church does not mean that Christians are not entitled to a national identity and national self-expression. On the contrary, the*

¹⁸ Source: Personal interviews with representatives of the Party of Socialists of the Republic of Moldova and the Party of Communists of the Republic of Moldova in February 2015.

¹⁹ Source: Personal interview with a priest of the Bessarabian Church conducted in February 2015.

Church combines within itself the principle of universalism and nationality that is why the Church consists of autocephalous national Churches (Țugui, 2011:6).

According to the Constitution, Moldova is a secular state which guarantees the freedom of religion to each citizen. At the same time, Law nr. 125 of 2007 on religious freedom explicitly recognises the “special meaning and the leading role of the Orthodox Church”. The importance of the Orthodox Church in Moldova in the past as well as at present is indisputable. However, from the perspective of human rights, the formal content of this law is a problem, as it explicitly highlights one religion and thus violates the principle of equality and non-discrimination. The Moldovan Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate, enjoys a privileged position in many areas, including the restitution of property confiscated during the Soviet era. Priests of this Church are very active in schools as well as in the army.

Members of political movements who identify themselves as followers of the Orthodox Church express the views that the recognition of human rights has nothing to do with Orthodox Christianity. They claim that it is the regulation by countries who want to violate the national religious identity of Moldova. Priests of the Moldovan Church often use strong words, comparing the willingness of the Moldovan government to adopt European standards and international law in the area of human rights to the act of “political prostitution”.²⁰ The position of the Orthodox Church, subordinate to the Russian Patriarchate, is also very significant in the Transnistrian region.

To the impartial observer, some steps taken by the Russian Orthodox Church can seem to be an attempt to provoke a schism in Moldovan society. This is illustrated, among other things, by the assertion of Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, who stated in August 2010 that Moldova is part of “Holy Russia” (Plugaru, 2011:5).

A representative of the Bessarabian Church also mentioned acts of disrespect towards minorities, and even intimidation and vandalism, particularly in rural areas. According to him, it is known that rural authorities in Transnistria do not allow gatherings of religious minorities without consulting a local Orthodox priest who has the right to veto any such events. The representative of the Bessarabian Church also said that even funerals of members of religious minorities sometimes face resistance from religious groups, who do not wish to taint the local cemetery with the remains of Baptists, Methodists and representatives of other minorities. The best documented case of public religious intolerance against a religious minority was the removal and demolition of the Jewish Candelabrum on Chisinau Square in December 2009. Demonstrators belonged to the Orthodox Church and were led by Orthodox priest Anatol Cibric (Eftode, 2010).

A study on the right to freedom of religion in Moldova, carried out in 2012 by the Information Centre for Human Rights non-governmental organisation, concluded that the situation of the fundamental right to religious freedom is improving, but still does not fully comply with international human rights standards (CIDO, 2012). Violations of the basic religious rights and freedoms are more frequent and serious

²⁰ Source: Personal interview with a Professor of History at Chisinau University conducted in February 2015.

in rural areas. This trend is caused by a lower level of education, lack of information and, in some cases, by the involvement of the priests themselves. The Moldovan Orthodox Church has a privileged position among local State authorities, which contradicts constitutional provisions on the separation of Church and State (Ajder, Balan, 2015). The Moldovan Orthodox Church is aware of its influence in the country and of the support by Moscow. The strength of its position is evidenced, among other factors, by the fact that during a discussion on the law of non-discrimination (of sexual minorities), it threatened excommunication to politicians if they voted for the adoption of this law²¹. However, despite protests, the law was eventually passed in 2012.

In 2013, Patriarch Kirill visited Moldova. His visit was of a political as well as of a pastoral nature (200 years of the Chisinau Eparchy). Several days before the arrival of the Patriarch, Chisinau and Tiraspol were visited by a specially authorised representative of the Russian President for Transnistria, and the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, Dmitry Rogozin. The Patriarch's visit did not raise much enthusiasm in the Bessarabian Orthodox Church. This was also because of the Patriarch's words that he would pray for the future of Moldova, for the preservation of Moldova within the sphere of Russian influence and for Moldova to join the Eurasian Customs Union. "*A visit by a Patriarch is usually a joyful occasion for Orthodox believers, but we did not feel this joy,*" said Bessarabian Church spokesman, Ioann Kosoj (Maľcev, 2013).

Another visit in 2013 by Patriarch Kirill was to Tiraspol (also due to the strong pro-Russian orientation in Transnistria), where tens of thousands of inhabitants welcomed him. Already before the Patriarch's visit, there had been assertions that a Transnistrian Archbishopric should be created within the Russian Orthodox Church. This statement was made on Romanian Publica Television on 20th April 2013 by Archimandrite Savati Bashtov of the Chisinau Monastery in Transnistria. (Maľcev, 2013).

The visit by Patriarch Kirill to Transnistria had already been planned for 2011, but had been cancelled. Artjom Filipenko (Director of the Odessa branch of the National Institute of Political Research) believes that this could be regarded as a sign of a lack of confidence in Igor Smirnov, the former President of the unrecognised Transnistrian Republic, who had tried to be re-elected to this post despite the opinion of the Russian leadership (Maľcev, 2013). Conversely, the visit by the Patriarch in 2013 could be perceived as support for the current Transnistrian President, Jevgeny Shevchuk. He is characterised by strong loyalty to Russia and is also ready to work actively in the mainstream of Russian foreign politics. Regarding information on the establishment of the Transnistrian Archbishopric itself, Filipenko holds the opinion that it may be a "*way to put pressure on the Moldovan government to force it to re-evaluate its plans for joining the European Union*" (Maľcev, 2013).

²¹ Source: Personal interview with the Professor of History at Chisinau University conducted in February 2015.

Conclusion

The situation in Moldova is unique, compared to other countries of the Orthodox world. This is because, throughout history, the creation of a new State with a predominantly Orthodox population has always been accompanied by efforts to establish its own Orthodox Church. This was the case in the more distant past in Bulgaria, Serbia and Russia, in 19th century Greece, Romania and Montenegro, and in the past century in Albania, Macedonia, Ukraine and Belarus. Not all attempts have ended in recognition of a full autocephaly. The Belarussian Orthodox Autocephalous Church is even outlawed in Belarus, with the only permitted Orthodox Church being the Byelorussian Exarchate falling under the Moscow Patriarchate. However, in Ukraine, next to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church under Moscow, an independent Kiev Patriarchate is gaining strength. Similarly, the Macedonian and Montenegrin Orthodox Churches are involved in a power struggle with the Serbian Church. However, no independent Church has been established in Moldova, where autonomous churches falling under Moscow and Bucharest compete with each other.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church has great potential for soft power and is understood as an important element to connect Moldova with the “Russian World”. Interests of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian Federation in Moldova (similarly to other post-Soviet states) overlap to a large extent. The objective of Russia is to prevent the integration of Moldova into western political structures, or even its connection with neighbouring Romania. In this context, after joining the EU and becoming the main supporter of Moldova and its pro-European ambitions, Bucharest has been Russia’s greatest rival.

The Moldovan Orthodox Church perceives its operations purely from a territorial perspective and considers the existence of the Bessarabian Orthodox Church to be a violation of canon law. Regardless of the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church already violated canon law for the first time in 1813 and for the second time in 1940, and definitely in 1944, the Moldovan Orthodox Church has long been supported in its position by the Moldovan government, which did not want to allow the registration of the Bessarabian Church. Moldovan authorities claim that the Bessarabian Orthodox Church is the tool of pro-Russian aspirations and that it threatens the very independence of Moldova.

It follows from the presented analysis that the Bessarabian Orthodox Church is involved in the ecclesiastical life in Moldova. Nevertheless, its influence cannot be regarded as being limited. The antagonism between the Bessarabian and Moldovan Orthodox Churches and the above-mentioned states will continue in the territory of Moldova, due to the clash of interests between Russia and the “West”. Owing to the fact that Russian foreign policy in recent years has been dominated by the application of political influence as well as by military means, as witnessed in Ukraine, Moldova has a reason to be worried.

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