

## II. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

# THE POLITICAL ROLE OF THE ORTHODOX CLERGY IN THE UNION OF THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES (1859)

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**ABSTRACT.** The union of the Romanian Principalities was a decisive moment in the history and evolution of the modern Romanian state, but its realization cannot be separated from the actions of the bishops and clergy, who were co-opted in the electoral process from the very beginning. The activity of the clergy was not strictly limited to the bureaucratic management of the elections but revealed a set of political beliefs, actively supporting the idea of Romanians' national unity. This paper aims to insist on the political partisanship of the clergy respectively, on the immediate consequences of their involvement in political life.

**Keywords:** Romanian Orthodox Church, Union of the Romanian Principalities, State and Church, Sofronie Miclescu, Nifon Rusăilă, Alexandru Ioan Cuza

According to the Canonical Tradition of the Orthodox Church, the clergy are categorically prohibited from being part of a political party under punishment of defrocking because pastoral care transcends politics: "Politics means a descent into the immanent, into narrow interests and temporary visions. Instead, pastoral care means the exact opposite of politics, that is, the spiritual ascent to the eternal, the renunciation of self and one's own interests, always bearing in mind and heart an eschatological vision of the world."<sup>2</sup>

The incompatibility between the priestly mission and the "worldly cares" was ascertained from the early age of the Church and was incriminated by canons (6, 81, 83 of the Apostolic Canons, 3 and 7 of the IV<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council, 10 of

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<sup>2</sup> Irimie Marga, *Drept Canonic* (Sibiu: Ed. Universității "Lucian Blaga", 2009), 2.

the VII<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical Council, 11 of Constantinople 861). But at the same time, the concept of Byzantine symphony legitimized the principle of harmonizing the action of the Church with the political interests of the Empire. Moreover, the Church spiritually justifies and ideologically legitimizes the activity of the state<sup>3</sup>. The legacy of the Byzantine vision of close collaboration between the autocrat and the patriarch of Constantinople has survived in a form that has undergone no significant changes in all the medieval states of south-eastern and eastern Europe where there were Orthodox Churches. The two great disadvantages of this symphonic relationship have survived and have been perpetuated: the abuse or temptation of politics to impose on the Church a certain vision, whose ethical consequences were in contradiction with the teaching of the Gospel, but also the desire of certain clergy to intervene in political life, interfering in support of one political actor to the detriment of another.

The Romanian principalities were no exception to this perpetuation of the Byzantine paradigm, and the fragility of the relationship between Orthodoxy and politics became even more obvious during the Phanariot era (1711/1716-1821) when the Ottoman Empire imposed Greek aristocrats – from Istanbul's Fanar district – to rule Moldavia and Walachia. But the power vacuum emerging against the background of frequent changes of Phanariot rulers led to the bishops taking on an implicit political role, because they were constant presences in the life of the principalities and guaranteed a form of stability and continuity through their spiritual authority. Thus, the bishops and the clergy of the Orthodox Church ended up having a decisive contribution to the political destiny of Moldavia and Walachia.

An extremely relevant episode for understanding the political impact the Orthodox Church had in Romania through its clergy is represented by the Union of the Romanian Principalities of Moldavia and Walachia in 1859.

## Context

The idea of uniting the Romanians in a single state had been taking shape since the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, but in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was outlined more and more clearly, such as during the uprising of Tudor Vladimirescu (1821) and during the Revolution of 1848, when the 1848 European revolutions ignited Romanian national movements in Walachia and Moldavia – which were (with some interruptions) under the suzerainty of the Porte since the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>3</sup> A contemporary eloquent example is the position of Russian Patriarch Kirill on the conflict in Ukraine.

Fearful that the revolution might spread into Russia, the Tsar invaded Moldavia and pressured the Porte to crush the rebels in Bucharest (Walachia). Dissatisfied with Turkey's weak resolve, Russia invaded Walachia as well. Russia withdrew from Walachia and Moldavia in 1851 but returned yet again in the summer of 1853, thus precipitating the Crimean War (1853-1856). In 1854 Franz Joseph and the sultan forced Tsar Nicholas I to withdraw his troops from the principalities, and imperial and Ottoman soldiers soon occupied these territories. Russia's defeat in Crimea forced the Tsar to seek peace, ratified in 1856 by the Treaty of Paris, which abolished the Russian protectorate and replaced it with a joint European guarantee.

In 1856 the active campaign for the union of Walachia and Moldavia began. The movement had the support of France because many Romanian revolutionaries took refuge there after 1848 and lobbied Napoleon III to press for unification; the Habsburg Empire, the British Empire, and the Ottomans, however, opposed the unification efforts, while Russia opted to let the Romanians decide.

A decisive contribution to the achievement of this political goal was made by the Orthodox Church of the two Principalities, because of the long-standing intertwined relations between state and Church. The fortunes of the Church had been closely bound to the political destiny of the two principalities ever since their founding. The bishops did not conceive of the state as separate from the Church and did not engage the prince and boyars in a contest for supremacy<sup>4</sup>.

The Church of Moldavia had the status of a metropolis (with two suffragan bishoprics: Roman and Huși), being led by Metropolitan Sofronie Miclescu (1851-1861). The Walchian church was also organized as a metropolis (with three suffragan bishoprics: Râmnic, Argeș and Buzău) and was led by Metropolitan Nifon Rusăilă (1849-1875). A special place in the structure of the Romanian Orthodox Church belonged to the dedicated monasteries in Romania (Romanian monasteries dedicated to the Holy Places of the East), so called because the main part of their incomes was set aside for good works in the East, and thus contributed crucial resources to the survival of Orthodoxy under Muslim rule.

### **The Orthodox Church and the support of the Union of Principalities**

With the 1856 Peace Treaty of Paris, the seven-year terms of the two rulers [Grigore Ghica in Moldavia, and Barbu Știrbei in Walachia] expired, and the Porte appointed two kaymakams (deputies): Teodor Balș in Moldavia, and Alexandru Ghica in Walachia. Their mission was to prevent or at least to delay

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<sup>4</sup> Keith Hitchins, *România. 1774-1866*, (București: Humanitas, 2013), 67.

as much as possible the union of the Romanian principalities. On the other hand, both the Moldavian Orthodox Church and the Walachian Church joined the unionist parties and supported their actions.

As Alexandru Ghica (1856-1858) allowed the Romanian revolutionaries to return from exile and sided with the Unionists, the efforts of Walachian clergy were harmoniously combined with the government's support, engaging in the elections for Ad hoc Divans.

Following the Conference of European Powers reunited in Constantinople on January 13, 1857, it was decided to convene these Ad hoc Divans; these were consultative assemblies whose purpose was to express the will of the people regarding the final organization of the principalities. The Ad hoc Divans were made up of representatives of the Church, of the great nobility, of the bourgeoisie, as well as of delegates of the townspeople and peasants.

The circular and pastoral letters addressed by the bishops to the priests gave testimony of the instructions meant to contribute to the formation of a general opinion favourable to the Union. Thus Calinic, the bishop of Râmnicu Vâlcea (1850-1868), addressed on April 15/27, 1857, an exhortation to his priests according to which "one of the duties that behoves our position in such a serious circumstance, is to raise prayers to the Heavenly Father for the unification of the Romanians, in a single will and thought"<sup>5</sup>. In a letter dated November 2, 1857, addressed to the Ad hoc Divan, the same bishop stressed that

"so far I have not ceased to pray to the merciful God, both myself and all the churches in our diocese, to perform this mercy of His, for the unification of Moldo-Romania into a single state and under a single government, as contained in the four points of the national program, as brothers united in the faith in God, orthodox, sons of the Eastern Church, of the same language and of the same nation"<sup>6</sup>.

In his turn, Bishop Filotei of Buzău (1850-1860) sent a circular letter in January 1857 urging the clergy to pray for the unification and brotherhood of Romanians in "one will and a thought to elect their deputies worthy of their trust, to support and demand the rights and life of their homeland"<sup>7</sup>.

However, Metropolitan Nifon Rusăilă turned out to be a bit more reserved. He initially hesitated to give his support to the unionists, and even

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<sup>5</sup> Ene Braniște, "Din activitatea Sfântului Calinic Cernicanul, episcopul Râmnicului-Noului Severin (1850-1868) în perioada Unirii Principatelor", *Glăsu Bisericii* 27:11-12 (1968): 1161.

<sup>6</sup> Ene Braniște, "Din activitatea Sfântului Calinic Cernicanul", 1162.

<sup>7</sup> Gabriel Cocora, "Episcopul Filotei al Buzăului, luptător pentru unirea Țărilor Române", *BOR* 77:1 (1959):44.

delimited himself from them in the first phase of their actions<sup>8</sup>. However, from 1857 onwards he joined the other bishops, composing a series of prayers and special requests that were to be included in the litany and the divine service officiated throughout Walachia<sup>9</sup>. As chairman of the Ad hoc Divan, he delivered a speech at the opening of the proceedings designed to persuade even the most sceptical about embracing the idea of unified principalities. He said:

“Look, gentlemen, and you will see that we are all Romanians, the same feelings bind us, and the same blood unites us. We all have a homeland before us, let us have a single thought and a single purpose. Let us be inspired by the same love and the same holy faith, so that the Heaven may bless our efforts [...]. Unite in the same fraternal and national thought, with that strength of soul that I believe you have made it so that the interest of all may take the place of particular interests and with a clear mind, with a steadfast faith in the Almighty, with courage and peace the foundations of the great and glorious edifice of the Romanian people”<sup>10</sup>.

Following the consultations within these public assemblies, four essential points were established: 1. The authority and neutrality of the principalities; 2. Their union in a single state under the name of Romania; 3. A foreign hereditary prince from a European dynasty whose descendants were to be raised in the country's religion; 4. Representative and constitutional government.

The political influence exerted on the people by Metropolitan Nifon, the suffragan bishops, and the clergy in general is highlighted by the request made by the new kaymakams on October 18, 1858: “The clergy, as people who according to the word of Holy Scripture, and according to their position in society, are to be the teachers and rulers of the people, are compelled to be in today's important circumstances with special regard to the duties of their calling, as spiritual fathers”<sup>11</sup>.

Meanwhile in Moldavia the clergy were even more engaged in unionist actions, all the more so as the kaymakam Teodor Balș did everything he could to prevent Moldavia and Walachia from reaching an agreement in principle. He suppressed press freedom and instituted censorship so that unionist ideas could no longer be promoted, and he replaced Union supporters in central and local administration<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, it was natural for Teodor Balș to direct his

<sup>8</sup> Corneliu Zăvoianu, “Mitropolitul Nifon al Ungrovlahiei și Unirea Principatelor”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română și Unirea Principatelor – Moment aniversar (1859-2009)* (București: Cuvântul vieții, 2009):70-71.

<sup>9</sup> Corneliu Zăvoianu, “Mitropolitul Nifon al Ungrovlahiei”, 78-79.

<sup>10</sup> *Românul* 26 (1/13 oct 1857): 80-81.

<sup>11</sup> *Buletinul oficial* 85 (24 oct.1858): 370.

<sup>12</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, “Atitudinea slujitorilor Bisericii Ortodoxe Române față de actul Unirii Principatelor”, *BOR* 85:1-2 (1967): 78-79.

attacks against the leaders of the Moldavian clergy who supported the Union of Principalities, a hostile attitude that manifested itself immediately after reading the firman convening Ad hoc Divans, which had to include bishops and representatives of the clergy.

Probably the most important unionist centre in Moldavia was located at the Socola monastery in Iași where the abbot and director of the Seminary established here was Filaret Scriban. Together with Neofit Scriban, his brother and teacher at the same Seminary, they led a real offensive to support the union between the two Romanian provinces. Neofit Scriban wrote a series of articles published until the establishment of censorship, such as the **Unirea și neunirea Principatelor Române** [*The Union and non-union of the Romanian Principalities*] (June 1856), **Foloasele Unirii Principatelor Române** [*The Benefits of the Union of Romanian Principalities*] (July 1856) in which he approached this political ideal in an extremely serious note: Moldavia's destiny is at the crossroads, and the options were to either embrace light (union) or death<sup>13</sup>. Published in the form of a brochure, the two extracts were printed in tens of thousands of copies and had a high impact on the awareness of the population on the issue of the union.

In the unionist propaganda, the Scriban brothers were supported by all the students of the Central Seminary, by the priests and deacons from the villages, by the "catechists" (Religion teachers) from the districts, who had studied at Socola and were trained as active promoters of the union<sup>14</sup>.

Another apostle of the unification of the Romanians in the principalities was Archimandrite Melchisedec Ștefănescu, rector of the Seminary from Huși (1856-1861), future bishop of Ismail (1865-1879) and Roman (1879-1892). On June 29, 1856, he delivered an emotional speech entitled "Jertfă pentru unirea Principatelor" [Sacrifice for the Union of Principalities], in which he argued that "if for the Romanians in the principalities a new era has arrived, which calls them to 'Union', this is a proof that they are on the way of mankind's universal progress"<sup>15</sup>.

However, among the main anti-unionists, besides the kaymakam Teodor Balș, there was also the Metropolitan of Moldavia, Sofronie Miclescu<sup>16</sup>. It seems that this attitude was motivated by the uncertainty regarding the fate of the Orthodox metropolis of Iași after the potential union. This happened due to the

<sup>13</sup> D. Hrițcu, "Arhimandritul Neofit Scriban, fruntaș unionist și poet al Unirii", *MO* 36:1-2 (1984): 43-44.

<sup>14</sup> D. Hrițcu, "Arhimandritul Neofit Scriban", 45-46.

<sup>15</sup> Eftimie Luca, "Referiri ale episcopului Melchisedec la unirea și unitatea românilor", *MMS* 54:1-2 (1978), 9-12:664.

<sup>16</sup> Iustin Androne, "Câteva aspecte cu privire la Unirea Principatelor Române din 1859 – detalii inedite", <https://episcopia-italiei.it/index.php/ro/comunicate/8144-cateva-aspecte-cu-privire-la-unirea-principatelor-romane-din-1859-detalii-inedite> (22.03.2022).

anti-union influences which, to a certain extent, had come to convince him that a common legislation could demote the Metropolis of Moldavia to the rank of a simple diocese<sup>17</sup>. In the meeting with Victor Place, the French consul in Iași, the metropolitan made his concerns public, but in the end he was convinced that these fears were unfounded. From this moment Sofronie Miclescu became a fervent supporter of the Union of Principalities.

Due to the unionist attitude of Metropolitan Sofronie, a great dispute started between the political authorities and the representatives of the Church. The government and Bishop Meletie Istrati of Huși, a staunch supporter of the anti-union current, called on the metropolitan to sign a letter of thanks to the Sublime Porte for the appointment of Balș as kaymakam. In exchange for this gesture, Sofronie was promised that his nephew, Calinic Miclescu, abbot of the Slatina monastery, would be promoted to the rank of bishop of Roman<sup>18</sup>. The two, however, flatly refused and that is why the kaymakam's supporters started a furious campaign to denigrate Sofronie among the clergy with the idea of compromising him. Calinic Miclescu was removed from his position of abbot by the prefect of Fălticeni under the accusation that he disturbed the people with his unionist ideas<sup>19</sup>.

As already mentioned, in January 1857 was issued the Sultan's firman by which it was decided to convene Ad-hoc Divans, both in Moldavia and in Walachia. First, elections had to be held to send deputies to these meetings. In order to force Sofronie Miclescu to exclude the unionists from the representatives at the consultative assemblies, on February 10, 1857, the kaymakam tried to remove from the metropolitan's jurisdiction the territories recently returned in 1856 (southern Bessarabia), invoking the canonical authority of Bishop Meletie Istrati. On February 12, the French consul Victor Place wrote to Count Walewski (the French Foreign Minister), informing him of the political interferences in the Moldovan Church, of the defamations brought to Sofronie and of the canonical situation of southern Bessarabia. Tensions eased after the unexpected death of Teodor Balș, on February 17 / March 1, 1857<sup>20</sup>.

Nicolae Vogoride was appointed kaymakam in his place, another declared anti-unionist, who continued the pressures and denigration of Sofronie, initiated by his predecessor. He also carried on the fierce campaign against the realization of the Union of the two Romanian Provinces.

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<sup>17</sup> C.I. Ialomiteanu, *Nifon, mitropolitul Ungrovlahiei. Viața și activitatea sa* (București, 1896): 21-23.

<sup>18</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, "125 de ani de la Unirea Principatelor Române. Participarea mitropolitului Moldovei Sofronie Miclescu la înfăptuirea Unirii Principatelor Române - 1859", *BOR* 102: 1-2 (1984): 79-111

<sup>19</sup> Iustin Androne, "Câteva aspecte".

<sup>20</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, "Atitudinea slujitorilor", 78.

On March 20, 1857, Vogoride resumed the manoeuvres initiated by Bals and demanded that southern Bessarabia be placed under the canonical protection of the Huși Diocese. Sofronie Miclescu remained steadfast in his views and wrote a letter of protest, on March 22, in which he condemned with strong arguments the interference of politics in the internal life of the Church. On March 26, the Metropolitan Church of Moldavia issued the act of organizing the Consistory for the Church in southern Bessarabia, led by Archimandrite Filaret Scriban, who remained in this position until May 1857.

On the occasion of compiling the electoral lists, the political authority urgently asked Miclescu to exclude the Scriban brothers and the unionist clergy and encouraged the abbots of the dedicated monasteries not to participate in the vote. In the end Sofronie won the battle, all the abbots of the dedicated monasteries being on the electoral lists. Desperate, Vogoride dismissed Filaret Scriban from the position of director of the Socola Seminary and from the position of abbot of the homonymous monastery, but also as president of the church consistory for the three counties in southern Bessarabia.

In parallel with the domestic actions against Sofronie, the kaymakam took steps in Constantinople to accuse, defame and even dismiss him. Vogoride's campaign was supported by representatives of the Habsburgs, the British and the Ottoman Empire, so Austria's representative in Iasi, Gödel-Lannoy, in a letter to Vienna's foreign minister, said it was very important that the metropolitan not be part of the unionists and even that severe measures should be taken against him<sup>21</sup>.

On April 19, 1857, Vogoride obtained the support of the ecumenical patriarch Cyril VII, who sent an epistle to Metropolitan Sofronie in which he spoke of unworthy conduct incompatible with the high ecclesiastical office he held. Consequently, the patriarch recommended that the Church of Moldavia support the local government and advised him to renounce this attitude, otherwise much more energetic measures would be taken. Sofronie responded at the end of April with a letter rejecting the accusations against him, showing a lot of tact and courage. However, the ecumenical patriarch ignored Sofronie's arguments and decided to remove him from his see. This did not happen due to the intervention of the representative of France in Constantinople (Édouard Antoine Thouvenel). Vogoride also raised the issue of the dismissal of the metropolitan in front of the government, without obtaining the support of the ministers, even dividing the anti-unionist party.

In this situation, the only option left for Vogoride was to falsify the elections for the Ad hoc Divan, hastening and setting their dates between July 7 and 10, 1857; furthermore, the electoral lists were drawn up arbitrarily, removing

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<sup>21</sup> Iustin Androne "Câteva aspecte".



many of the Union's supporters. Consequently, the clergy, discovering this deceit, boycotted the elections by not voting. Thus, out of 3263 priests from Moldavia, only 191 were registered on the lists, out of which only 16 voted<sup>22</sup>. Sofronie Miclescu also did not participate in the elections "which are not able to meet the purpose of the Treaty of Paris" and withdrew to Cucuteni, where he notified the European Commission in Bucharest of the illegalities and arbitrary procedures of the government. The ambassadors of France, Russia, Prussia, and Sardinia to Istanbul protested and severed diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire, which were resumed only after the Osborne Pact of August 9, 1857, between France and England. The Sublime Porte was forced to cancel the Moldavian elections and hold new elections in August-September 1857.

The Consul of Austria in Iași, Gödel Lannoy, noted that "the abbots of the monasteries and the priesthood chose under the influence of the Metropolitan the most notorious unionist deputies [...] in addition to all this, the Metropolitan arbitrarily made use of the Seminary of Socola, the monks of the monasteries and of this Seminary, and apart from these, the whole priesthood from Iași is influenced by him"<sup>23</sup>.

The presence of elected clergy in the Ad hoc Divans of Moldavia and Walachia (September-December 1857) certainly had a favourable effect on making the Union of Principalities happen, as the metropolitans were the presidents of the consultative assemblies. On this occasion, a series of common demands were made regarding the authority and independence of the principalities, as well as their union in a single state under the name of Romania, under the leadership of a foreign prince, chosen from a ruling dynasty of Western Europe.

Despite the election results, an international conference in Paris (March 22-August 19 1858) reaffirmed the separation of Walachia and Moldavia under Ottoman sovereignty, but it allowed for a common coinage and uniform laws and titled the two states the "United Principalities", even though they were ruled by two distinct governors, two governments, and two deliberative assemblies.

### **The Unification of the Romanian Principalities**

The Romanians themselves overcame the imposed separation in 1859 when the separate assemblies at Bucharest and Iași unanimously elected the same man, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, governor of both principalities. A crucial role in this double election was once again played by the Orthodox clergy, led by the two metropolitans.

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<sup>22</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, "Atitudinea slujitorilor", 84.

<sup>23</sup> *Rapoartele consulatului Austriei din Iași (1856-1859)*, edit. Dan Berindei (București, 1959): 208, 221.

Based on Article 49 of the Paris Convention (1858), the kaymakams of the Romanian principalities were each replaced by a “collective” of kaymakams. Thus, Nicolae Vogoride handed over the leadership of Moldavia to Anastasie Panu, Vasile Sturdza and Ștefan Catargiu<sup>24</sup>, while in Walachia Alexandru Ghica was replaced by Ioan Manu, Emanoil Băleanu, Ioan Al. Filipescu. The role of these lieutenants was to ensure that the deadlines for drawing up the lists of those with the right to vote and the representatives eligible for the election of the new governor of each principality were met. It was also implied that they had to oversee the entire electoral process, which also involved managing the position of the Orthodox Church in the Principalities on this issue. But the way in which the role of the clergy in the two principalities was approached was quite different.

In Moldavia, on December 10, 1858, Panu and Sturdza asked Metropolitan Sofronie Miclescu to release the “voters’ minds” from the “vows with which they could be burdened by cunning party conspiracies and to instil in them the redeeming feelings of impartiality and duty to the motherland”. These prayers for being released were to be read in all churches in Moldavia on December 14, 16, 17 and 18 in the presence of local authorities and voters, who thus became free from the vows “with which they would have been bound to a party or another”<sup>25</sup>.

In Walachia, the group of kaymakams warned Metropolitan Nifon on October 18, 1858, to take the necessary measures to weigh the enthusiasm of the clergy who had come under

“deceptive entanglements and not to be preachers of cunning conspiracies; but in the contact in which they will put themselves with the people, let them first be a model of moderation and love, of peace and public concord, to instruct the people not to get lost in deceptive ideas, which would disturb the public peace and bring the country to ruin, to seek to appease any spirit of disillusionment, to urge all to renounce all personal passion, all envy and to unite all spirits, to unite them in the care of good order, and to gain from the co-operation in which the public it is now called, a result worthy for the country”<sup>26</sup>.

One can easily read between the lines the fear of Ottoman reprisals if the people would boycott the elective process already established in agreement with the European powers and the mediation of the clergy required to maintain order.

Thus one can see how important the Church’s mission was in the political destiny of the two principalities, but at the same time the nuances of the clergy’s involvement in political life became clear: in Moldavia they had to ensure and even encourage the freedom of conscience for a fair electoral process. While

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<sup>24</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, “125 de ani de la Unirea Principatelor”, 104.

<sup>25</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, “125 de ani de la Unirea Principatelor”, 105.

<sup>26</sup> *Buletinul oficial* 85 (24 oct. 1858):370

in Walachia any attempt to slip away from established procedures had to be mitigated, thus discouraging the manifestation of freedom of conscience. On the other hand, the respective requests from the secular authority also reflect the specific situations faced by each principality. In Moldavia, the stake was also the release of Metropolitan Sofronie from the unfortunate influence of the conservative Stefan Catargiu, while in Wallachia there were unsuccessful attempts to stop a “revolutionary” trend expressed by the population. On January 23, 1859, as the results of the Bucharest elections seemed favourable to the Conservatives, the National Party would mobilize an impressive number of union supporters who would put pressure on voters<sup>27</sup>: members of the lower strata broke the cordons of law enforcement and stormed the elective assembly, to prevent the election of any former ruler or of their descendants<sup>28</sup>.

If we take into account these requests made by the kaymakams, we can appreciate even better how important the role of the Orthodox clergy was in creating a special political destiny, especially since they distanced themselves from the instructions received and went much further than the provisions established by the Paris Conventions (1856 and 1858).

Thus, under the presidency of Metropolitan Sofronie Miculescu, the elective assembly of Moldavia elected Colonel Alexandru Ioan Cuza as ruler on January 5, 1859. The vote was preceded by a new urge addressed by the bishop to the 48 deputies to seek “only the good of United principalities and the future of the Romanian Nation”<sup>29</sup>. The last vote belonged to the President of the Assembly, Metropolitan Sofronie Miculescu, who once again uttered the words from the proclamation of the Union in the ad-hoc Divan: “Where the flock is, there is also the shepherd”.

More daring is the attitude of Metropolitan Nifon, who, as president of the elective assembly in Walachia, encouraged the cessation of the meeting of January 24, 1859, for the organization of a secret deliberation which ignored the international provisions, and the 64 deputies led by the metropolitan unanimously elected Alexandru Ioan Cuza as ruler also. This act defied the Paris Convention and consecrated the union of Moldavia with Walachia.

Metropolitan Nifon’s national policy was even bolder as he took the initiative to unite the two legislative assemblies of Moldavia and Walachia in a single representative body (January 24, 1862), convened under the leadership of the Metropolitan of Bucharest, who subsequently became the first president of the

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<sup>27</sup> Radu Mișu, “Clerici și mireni promotori ai Unirii Principatelor”, in *Biserica Ortodoxă Română și Unirea Principatelor – Moment aniversar (1859-2009)* (București: Cuvântul vieții, 2009): 256.

<sup>28</sup> Corneliu Zăvoianu, “Mitropolitul Nifon al Ungrovlahiei”, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Nestor Vornicescu, “125 de ani de la Unirea Principatelor”, 109.

Senate<sup>30</sup>. At the same time, the name “United Principalities” was abandoned and replaced, at least in the internal documents, with “Romania”.

### **No good deed goes unpunished**

Despite the substantial support offered by bishops and clergy for the creation of this political ideal, immediately after the historic union of January 24, 1859, the Orthodox Church found itself in a delicate position, targeted by several reforms and legislative acts that profoundly affected its activity and the position it held in society.

From the beginning of his reign, “Cuza proved to be an ardent supporter of the secular state. He was determined to place the Orthodox Church under the supervision of the state in all matters, except the strictly theological ones, an objective which he largely achieved”<sup>31</sup>. Thus, in almost all sectors of church life, Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza brought renewals.

The first episode took place in the second half of 1859 when Metropolitan Sofronie Miculescu came into conflict with Cuza over the administration of the estates of the Romanian non-dedicated monasteries. At that time, the dedicated monasteries in Walachia owned 11.14% of the arable fields and forests, and the non-dedicated monasteries owned 16.55%. In Moldavia, the dedicated monasteries owned 12.16%, while the non-dedicated monasteries owned another 10.17% of the country’s arable fields and forests. To these surfaces were added those estates held directly by the metropolises and bishoprics<sup>32</sup>. That is, about a quarter of the exploitable areas of Romania were in possession of the Orthodox Church, and therefore the economic stake was very high.

Under the pretext that the monasteries’ estates were not well administrated, some of their assets were transferred by the government to the state administration. The biggest impact of this measure was felt by the monasteries of Neamț, Secu Vărativ, Agapia, Vorona, while two other monasteries and 31 hermitages were disbanded (August 16, 1860). Two months later, Cuza would promulgate the law “on the transfer rate on the properties of public establishments”, which provided that 10% of the net income of real estate owned by the Church should reach state ownership. In the next two years, through successive procedures and legislative dexterity, all the arable fields and forests of the non-dedicated monasteries were to be secularized<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Corneliu Zăvoianu, “Mitropolitul Nifon al Ungrovlahiei”, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Keith Hitchins, *Români, 1774-1866*, 382.

<sup>32</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, **Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române**, vol. III (București: EIBMBOR, 1994) 116.

<sup>33</sup> Adrian Ignat, “The Law on the Secularisation of monastic estates and the consequences of the application thereof”, *RT* 101:2 (2020): 149.

Metropolitan Sofronie expressed his disagreement with these measures, stating: “Alexander the First (1400-1432) endowed the Church, and Alexander II robs it. I will ring out the bells of all the churches and announce his tyranny.”<sup>34</sup>

It was not long before the government retaliated and on November 7, 1860, a decree was issued to suspend the metropolitan and send him into exile with a considerable escort of gendarmes at the Slatina Monastery. On December 9, 1860, the Legislative Assembly of Moldavia decided to appoint a special 5-member commission to examine the government’s decision against Metropolitan Sofronie. The result was unexpected. On January 17, 1861, the commission presented the findings of its investigation, challenging the accusations against the high hierarch and accusing the government of abuse of power. As a result, the government resigned. However, on January 18, 1861, Metropolitan Sofronie sent to Prince Cuza the act of resignation from the Metropolitan see of Moldavia, and four months later, on May 18, 1861, he died<sup>35</sup>. After a vacation of almost two years, Sofronie’s nephew, Calinic Miclescu, was elected deputy (1863) and later he became Metropolitan of Moldavia (1865). The delay in the appointment ensured a reasonable period for other reforms to be enforced without encountering any serious resistance in Moldavia.

The process of secularization or transfer of church and monastery assets to state property will continue with the “Law for the secularization of monastic estates” of December 13, 1863, which provided in the first article that all monastic estates in Romania are and remain state assets. This time the possessions of the dedicated monasteries were targeted – a point very strongly highlighted by Prime Minister Mihail Kogălniceanu, who claimed before the voting that:

“foreign monks, with income from Romanian estates, gave the example of the scandal, they used the income of dedicated monasteries to support an anti-national policy, in order to fight the Romanian nationality [...]. It would be a national sin to leave so many goods in the hands of foreign monks and always rebellious against the local laws”<sup>36</sup>.

This law also completed the process of secularizing the estates of non-dedicated monasteries, but the president of the Senate, Metropolitan Nifon, did

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<sup>34</sup> Constantin N. Tomescu, *Scurtă povestire istorică despre Sfânta Mănăstire Neamțu și despre așezările monahale supuse ei (mănăstirea Secu și schiturile Vovidenia, Pocrov, Sihăstria, Sihla și Icoana)*, 1942: 55.

<sup>35</sup> Bogdan Racu, „Mitropolitul Sofronie Miclescu al Moldovei: retragerea din scaun și trecerea la cele veșnice”, <https://doxologia.ro/viata-bisericii/biografii-luminoase/mitropolitul-sofronie-miclescu-al-moldovei-retragerea-din-scaun>

<sup>36</sup> M. Kogălniceanu, *Discursurile parlamentare din Epoca unirii (22 septembrie 1859-14 decembrie 1881)*, (București, 1959) 167.

not take any official position. This fact is very well underlined by Nicolae Dobrescu, who states that

“One thing was not done on the occasion of secularization, and it is unfortunate that it was not done; namely, a special purpose Fund hasn’t been set up to serve the maintenance of the Churches, the support of the clergy, as has been done in other countries, in Austria (Bukovina), France, Italy and even Russia. It is the fault of the hierarchs of that time ... for not having said their word in favour of the Church, of the clergy”<sup>37</sup>.

One reason we can speculate is that Metropolitan Nifon was very careful not to find himself in Sofronie Miclescu’s situation.

Conventionally, it is considered that the reasoning based on which the Romanian Orthodox Church surrendered without too much resistance was the hope that the state would assume responsibility for the maintenance of places of worship and the material support of the clergy. Unfortunately, for almost five decades, these wishes remained at the level of mere intention, without concrete actions on the part of the state. For example, the Communal Law of 1864 provided that “Every commune is obliged to take care of the cult, the church or the churches to which it belongs. The commune is obliged to pay the priests of its churches”. Unfortunately, the local administration did nothing to improve the material condition of the priests and parish churches, which remained as they were before, supported only by the contributions offered by the community members.

However, today both the representatives of the Orthodox Church<sup>38</sup> and those of the Romanian state<sup>39</sup> consider that by taking over the church estates by the state, during Cuza’s reign, the legal principles by which the state undertakes to support the Church were regulated. In this sense, the law established the payment of a part of the salary for clerics from the state budget. This argument is invoked by the Church every time the state considers giving up the financing of cults.

The Romanian Orthodox Church received a more concrete support from the secular authorities in the issue of affirming the autocephaly of the Romanian Orthodox Church in 1864 (acknowledged by the Ecumenical Patriarchate in 1885). In addition, it ensured the legal conditions for administrative-church

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<sup>37</sup> Nicolae Dobrescu, *Studii de Istoria Bisericii Române contemporane*, vol. I (București, 1905): 151-152.

<sup>38</sup> † Daniel Ciobotea, “Unirea Principatelor s-a făcut pe Dealul Mitropoliei din București”, <https://ziarullumina.ro/actualitate-religioasa/stiri/unirea-principatelor-s-a-facut-pe-dealul-mitropoliei-din-bucuresti-16413.html> (19.03.2022).

<sup>39</sup> *Statul și cultele religioase / Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte* (București: Litera, 2018): 17, 86.

unification in 1865 – when the Metropolitan of Walachia became the “primate” of the Orthodox Church in the new state of Romania. This act was followed by the establishment of the Holy Synod in 1872 as the central governing body and the reform of theological education<sup>40</sup>.

In such a context, we are not surprised by the attitude of some bishops such as Metropolitan Calinic Miclescu, who after the abdication of Alexandru Ioan Cuza (February 23, 1866) tried to dismantle the political unity created to return to the *status ante quo*. The metropolitan’s participation in the anti-union movement of April 3, 1866, is notorious, when many inhabitants of the city of Iași tried to storm the palace where resided Lascăr Catargiu, the locum tenens after Cuza’s departure. Calinic blessed the crowd, signed the separatist declaration, and, with the cross in his hand, set out at the head of the rebels, who were eventually dispersed with gunfire, among those wounded by bullets being the metropolitan himself<sup>41</sup>.

## Conclusions

The investigation of this historical episode shows the crucial role played by the bishops and clergy of the Orthodox Church in the Romanian Principalities, which became according to the Constitution of 1866 the dominant Church in Romania. In just a few years (1856-1859) the Orthodox bishops and priests managed to create a radical political change in Romanian society, by actively supporting the idea of Romanians’ national unity. As can be seen, the Orthodox bishops exceeded their mandate under the Ottoman firman (1857) or the Paris Convention (1858) and showed a surprising spirit of initiative, proposing and guaranteeing bold political solutions – the union under one ruler. Thus, the great European powers were faced with an accomplished fact.

Although visibly weakened by social changes, but especially by the evolution of cultural paradigms in the last three decades, the political role of Romanian Orthodoxy is far from over. Increasingly challenged by the Millennials, the political commitment of the Romanian Orthodox Church is not officially approved or supported by the synodal authority. However, in practice, bishops and priests still have a notable influence among Romanian citizens, especially in rural areas, as reported in the 2014 presidential election, when the clerics

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<sup>40</sup> Mircea Păcurariu, **Istoria Bisericii Ortodoxe Române**, vol. III, 109.

<sup>41</sup> Al Florin Țene, “Rolul clerului în realizarea Micii Unirii al Țărilor Române de la 1859 și al elaborării Legii presei din timpul domniei lui Grigore Alexandru Ghica”, *Lucafaurul* 12:1 (2020), <https://lucafaurul.net/rolul-clerului-in-realizarea-micii-unirii-al-tarilor-romane-de-la-1859-si-al-elaborarii-legii-presei-din-timpul-domniei-lui-grigore-alexandru-ghica> (20.03.2022)

supported the “Romanian, Orthodox” candidate, to the detriment of to the one who was a “foreigner and of another denomination”. Even if after this “election campaign” the candidate supported by the Orthodox Church lost, it was found that the support of the Church in Romania is still an important factor in shaping public opinion or political attitude.

It remains to be appreciated by posterity whether this involvement against the backdrop of ideological sympathies, or in the hope of material benefits, was favourable to the Church in the long-term. And at the same time, it will be possible to determine whether the bishops and clergy were puppet masters or mere puppets.