

CATHOLIC CONVERSIONS IN HABSBURG OLTENIA: RELIGIOUS CHANGE AND RESISTANCE

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During the two decades of Habsburg rule, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Oltenia has been the object of reformist interventions aimed at drifting the province away from Ottoman influence and integrating it into the Monarchy. Despite the role Catholicism still played at the time in the mind-set of the Habsburg political elite, it has received relatively little attention from historians working on the province. The present article attempts to address this shortcoming by investigating the confessional policy pursued by the Habsburgs in Oltenia. At its core sits the case of the five Orthodox abbots who acknowledged Church union with Rome, which has been propagated through the efforts of the bishop of Nikopol, Nikola Stanislavich, in the mid-1730s. Their career is discussed in order to show that the firm resistance opposed by the bishops of Râmnic prevented further defections from happening among the monks in the monasteries. At the same time, the internal frictions in the imperial administration, between the rival interests of the military and civilian officials, are emphasized in order to account for the limited support enjoyed by plans to win more converts.

Keywords: Catholic missionaries; Church union with Rome; Orthodox Church; Habsburg administration; Ottoman Balkans.

With its many overlapping religious groups and polities, the medieval and early modern Southeast Europe is a privileged space in terms of historical research focused on studying confessional change.¹ Since the Ottoman conquest in the 14th and 15th centuries the Christian denominations have been on the defensive, but the Habsburg's military successes following the relief of Vienna in 1683 sparked hopes among the Bulgarian and Serbian subjects of the sultan, who rushed to join the efforts of the Holy League. However, as Leopold I became increasingly worried of the developments on the Rhine, peace was sought on the Danube front and eventually arrived at in 1699.² The conference convened in Karlowitz

¹ I list here only some of the more recent titles on the topic: Anton Minkov, *Conversion to Islam in the Balkans: 'Kisve Bahası' Petitions and Ottoman Social Life, 1670–1730*. Leiden 2004; Marc David Baer, *Honored by the glory of Islam: Conversion and conquest in Ottoman Europe*. Oxford 2008; Tijana Krstić, *Contested conversions to Islam: Narratives of religious change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire*. Stanford 2011; Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the late Ottoman Empire*. Cambridge 2012.

² Ivan Parvev, *Balkanite mezhdu dve imperii: Habsburgskata monarkhiya i Osmanskata darzhava (1683–1739)*. Sofia 1997, p. 81–146; Heinz Schilling, *Corti e alleanze. La Germania dal 1648 al 1763*. Bologna 1999, p. 298–315; Karl Vocelka, *Glanz und Untergang der Höfischen Welt. Repräsentation, Reform und Reaktion im Habsburgischen Vielvölkerstaat*. Wien 2001, p. 144–154.

confirmed the significant gains made in Hungary and Transylvania on the expense of the Turks, but surrendered all prospects of liberating the fellow Christians under Muslim rule. The emperor remained throughout the next decade only a distant patron of the plans to restore the Catholic structures in Ottoman territory.³ A renewed campaign aimed to push the conquests even further south made good progress in 1716–1717, but the Monarchy had to settle for peace under the increasing threats of a Spanish attack against its possessions in Italy. The treaty of Passarowitz (1718) allowed the emperor to keep control of the lands his troops had occupied, mainly Belgrade, the Banat and Oltenia, which, unknowingly then, also marked the limit of territorial expansion into the Balkans.⁴

In some cases even these gains proved to be short-lived. Oltenia, which comprised the five western counties of the principality of Wallachia, remained within the Monarchy for just two decades, until the Ottomans were able to reclaim it at the peace of Belgrade (1739) and reincorporated it back to the borders of its tributary state. Despite the brief interval, the province experienced the full reformist intervention of the Habsburg state, meant to transform its institutions, social structures and economy in order to make it compatible with the new ruling centre.⁵ Apparently though, this integrative strategy dropped the confessional instruments that the Habsburgs had always used to secure the loyalty of their realms since the early seventeenth century. Whilst the scholars have been able to point to a number of individual conversions, they remained few and isolated, as there had seemed that no serious attempts have been made to spread Catholicism into this mostly Orthodox province.⁶ Following negotiations, Emperor Charles VI committed himself to respect the religious freedom of the Orthodox and not to interfere with their church organization. These solemn warranties formed integral part of the imperial decree issued in 1717 to acknowledge the takeover of the province and were confirmed in near identical terms two years later, in February 1719, in the decree that laid the basis for the future organization of the province.⁷ While it is true that these gestures of goodwill made sense when trying to win the support of local elites in the transition from the old to the new regime, nothing could have stopped Vienna from taking a more active role in matters of religion once peace was achieved. In fact, the Habsburg Monarchy was to remain a land of

³ Article 13 of the peace treaty instituted Habsburg protection over the free exercise of Catholic religion in the lands of the sultan, Charles A. Frazee, *Catholics and Sultans: The Church and the Ottoman Empire 1453–1923*. Cambridge 1983, p. 154.

⁴ Parvev, *Balkanite*, p. 175–205; Michael Hochedlinger, *Austria's Wars of Emergence: War, State and Society in the Habsburg Monarchy 1683–1797*. London 2003, p. 194–196; Charles Ingrao, Nikola Samardžić, Jovan Pešalj (eds.), *The Peace of Passarowitz, 1718*. West Lafayette 2011.

⁵ Șerban Papacostea, *Oltenia sub stăpânirea austriacă (1718–1739)*. București 1998.

⁶ Nicolae Dobrescu, *Istoria Bisericii române din Oltenia în timpul ocupațiunii austriace (1716–1739)*. București 1906, p. 44, 107; Papacostea, *Oltenia*, p. 298.

⁷ Hauptmann Jacobenz, “Die Cis-Alutanische Walachei unter kaiserlicher Verwaltung: 1717–1739”, *Mittheilungen des k. und k. Kriegsarchiv*, new series, 12 (1900), p. 171–250, here p. 176–180; Constantin Giurescu (ed.), *Material pentru istoria Olteniei supt austriaci*, 4 vols. București 1913–1947, here vol. 1, p. 349–352.

confessional absolutism well into the second half of the eighteenth century⁸ and so this deliberate refraining from the imposition of a hard-line religious policy calls for further investigation. The first task that I set for my paper is therefore to account for this absence and to inquire into why proselytizing efforts have not enjoyed the support of the central bureaucracy. All the same, I shall argue that, in spite of their modest results, wide-ranging plans to bring the Orthodox faithful to the Catholic religion were in fact imagined by some clergymen with support from segments of the local administration. Two additional approaches become thus possible, one interested in how the Orthodox hierarchy reacted to the challenge and the part it played in derailing the projects, the other in pursuing those who embraced Catholicism even temporarily and questioning what the reasons behind their choice might have been. However, since the documentary evidence largely rests on records created by the holders of power and very little survives from the converts themselves, we are inherently better informed of the former's intentions than of the latter's circumstances. Disparate and sometimes even conflicting, the clues they provide are nevertheless essential for bridging our understanding of both the grand design of state confessionalism in this provincial setting and of the individual strategies of religious affiliation.

The key figure of Catholic propaganda in Oltenia during the Habsburg rule was Nikola Stanislavich, the bishop of Nikopol for much of the period, from 1725 till 1739, when he sought refuge from the advancing Ottomans and got transferred to the see of Cenad.⁹ His early life had followed the usual path for those aspiring to a career within the Roman Church and there was hardly anything noteworthy if it wasn't for his age at ordination – indeed, Stanislavich became a bishop at the age of 30, the minimum prescribed by the canons, a clear indication of prominent qualities. Born to a Bulgarian family who had settled across the Danube to escape the Ottoman persecutions against Catholics in the wake of the failed uprising in 1688, Nikola Stanislavich started his education with the Franciscan friars in his native land. He probably had already completed his novitiate before he moved to the convent in Kłodzko, in Bohemia, to take Philosophy, which he graduated outstandingly. He then pursued his education in Venice, in the convent of San Francesco della Vigna, where he was a student in Theology from about 1716 to 1720. Probably at the call of his superiors he left his studies before completing the doctorate and was offered various positions in the convents of the Observant Franciscans of the Bulgarian province. His quick rise through the ranks was in no small part due to the family prestige and connections, as his relatives were held as noble and appear to have played a leading role in the events of 1688. Nevertheless, there were his personal merits that warranted his episcopal promotion in 1724,

⁸ Derek Beales, *Joseph II*, vol. I: *In the Shadow of Maria Theresa: 1741–1780*. Cambridge 1987, p. 465–479.

⁹ His full biography, together with complete references to earlier works on his time as bishop of Nikopol and Cenad, in my “In-between empires: Nikola Stanislavich, bishop of Nikopol and apostolic administrator of Oltenia (1725–1739)”, *Études Balkaniques* 53, 3 (2017), p. 463–484.

following the decision of the cardinals in the Congregation de Propaganda Fide who had a number of candidates to choose from. Young age, energetic attitude and education presumably shifted the balance to his side, as the members of the Curia could not ignore that the appointment concerned one of the most derelict dioceses in the Ottoman Balkans.

In total contrast with Rome's expectations and against the Tridentine regulations that imposed the duty of residence on bishops, Nikola Stanislavich established his abode in Craiova and set foot just once to the territory of his eparchy south of the Danube and only at a much later time, in 1736. On the one hand, this choice stemmed most probably from the family memories that he grew up with, which portrayed the oppressive Ottoman policies towards Catholics that the recent expulsion of Archbishop Andrijašević from Sofia served to refresh.¹⁰ On the other hand, mundane reasons must have played a strong part in his decision, since life in the capital of a Habsburg province, be it at the periphery of the Monarchy, was undoubtedly more enjoyable than that in a minor settlement in the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, the recent wars had taken their toll on Catholic communities in the diocese of Nikopol, leaving very few faithful to whom to attend and even fewer able to contribute to the maintenance of the bishop. In contrast, Stanislavich was able to secure for himself a strong position in Habsburg Oltenia. Pursuant to the right of ecclesiastical patronage, Emperor Charles VI appointed him in March 1726 vicar for the Catholics in the province and attached to the title an annual subsidy with the prospect of turning this into a permanent benefice.¹¹

Thus, Nikola Stanislavich had all the reasons to keep himself busy in Oltenia and not cross the Danube to his intended flock. In search of ways that would legitimize his questionable condition, the bishop began petitioning the Roman cardinals with requests to grant him an extension of attributes, to include Lesser Wallachia under his official jurisdiction. This legal combat took centre stage in the second half of the 1720s and the early 1730s, as the papacy was unwilling to sacrifice what it considered to be the rightful ecclesiastical province of the bishops of Bacău. However, the support lent by the imperial ambassador in 1731–1732, coupled with the signs of an attainable compromise meant that in October 1732 Stanislavich was finally created apostolic administrator of Oltenia *ad beneplacitum Sanctae Sedis*, that is a temporary formula which saved everyone's face.¹² It is in this interval that Bishop Stanislavich began to agitate the prospect of turning

¹⁰ On the peculiarities of missionary activity in Bulgaria in the eighteenth century, see Pietro Tocănel, "Assestamento delle Missioni in Bulgaria, Valachia, Transilvania e Moldavia", in: Joseph Metzler (ed.), *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide memoria rerum. 350 anni a servizio delle missioni: 1622–1972*, 3 vols. Rom 1971–1976, here vol. 2, p. 722–742.

¹¹ Claudiu Călin, Marius Oanță, "Nicola Stanislavich – episcop de Nicopolis ad Hystrum și episcop de Cenad (1725–1739/1739–1750)", *Banatica* 24, 2 (2014), p. 327–342, here p. 340–341; Kálmán Juhász, "Nikolaus Stanislavich, O.F.M., Bischof von Csanád († 1750)", *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 52, 4 (1959), p. 427–470, here p. 430.

¹² Nedici, "In-between empires", p. 475–479.

Oltenia into a Catholic province, as he set his target on the Bulgarian colonists and the autochthonous Romanian Orthodox. The plans he devised were therefore integral to his approach in trying to convince both the Habsburg and Roman decision-makers of the profits his presence would eventually bring to the common cause.

For demographic and economic reasons, the imperial authorities had encouraged the settlement of colonists from the Ottoman territory into the province, the lands south of the Danube being the second migration source area behind Wallachia throughout the period.¹³ The Bulgarian merchants, already recipients of privilege charters from various Wallachian rulers during the seventeenth century,¹⁴ attempted to elicit a similar protection from the new government as early as 1719.¹⁵ While it recognized their significant share in the overall economy of the province by organizing them in autonomous trade companies which operated in Craiova, Râmnic and Brădiceni, it wasn't until 1727 that the Habsburg authorities issued a general privilege charter for the Bulgarian community. The liberties granted comprised, in addition to the usual fiscal and custom exemptions, the permission to buy properties and estates, to take up inn-keeping and butcheries, as well as to live a communal life under the leadership and judgement of their own elected officials.¹⁶

The Catholic missionaries appear to have been quite effective in advertising the very large set of concessions to the population south of the river. According to a testimony by Raffaele Biagi, by 1729 the Ottomans were blaming the Franciscan friars for the decline in number of tax payers, as they were perceived as instruments of the Habsburgs in luring Bulgarian colonists to Lesser Wallachia.¹⁷ The role played by Bishop Stanislavich in the process was made explicit in the nobility diploma conferred by Empress Maria Theresa in 1745, which attributed him the colonization of some 300 Bulgarian families, who had initially settled in Oltenia and later transferred to the Banat in the wake of the former's handover back to Wallachia.¹⁸ However, not all of the newcomers were Catholics. According to a report dressed by councillor Haan, in 1719 the Bulgarian community in Craiova numbered 40 Catholic families and 35 Orthodox, that of Râmnic 26 Catholic to 20 Orthodox, while only Brădiceni had a uniform Catholic population of 36 families.¹⁹ It were undoubtedly these Orthodox Bulgarians the target of Stanislavich's first proselytizing campaigns, aided by the fact that they had been

¹³ Papacostea, *Oltenia*, p. 36–39.

¹⁴ Gheorghe Lazăr, *Les marchands en Valachie (XVII^e–XVIII^e siècles)*. București 2006, p. 128–130.

¹⁵ Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 1, p. 406–409.

¹⁶ *Documente privitoare la istoria Românilor culese de Eudoxiu de Hurmuzaki*, 22 vols. București 1887–1942, here vol. 6, p. 396–400; Cornelia Papacostea Danielopolu, “Le régime privilégié des marchands bulgares et grecs en Olténie pendant l’occupation autrichienne (1718–1738)”, *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes* 4, 3–4 (1966), p. 475–490; Papacostea, *Oltenia*, p. 120–124; Lazăr, *Les marchands*, p. 130–132.

¹⁷ Eusebius Fermendžin (ed.), *Acta Bulgariae ecclesiastica ab a. 1565 usque ad a. 1799*. Zagreb 1887, p. 349.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 381–382.

¹⁹ Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 1, p. 401, footnote 1.

recently displaced and had lost the traditional social ties which provided them with a strong group identity. The aspiration for recognition and for full membership within the privileged category also pushed them towards conversion, as Catholicism had become a constitutive part of Bulgarian autonomy, since religious life was placed strictly under the guidance of the Franciscan Observants.²⁰ Once more, the nobility diploma of 1745 offers invaluable evidence to Stanislavich's activity on this front, commending him for the hundreds of souls won for the Roman Church.²¹

In spite of the incentives, the growth rate was too weak to afford any serious hopes of upsetting the confessional balance in the short term, thus negating its value as an argument in the ongoing dispute for ecclesiastical jurisdiction over Oltenia. If he wanted to be successful in pleading his cause, Bishop Stanislavich had to come forward with more ambitious objectives. It is not perhaps by chance that all plans involving the catholicization of Lesser Wallachia were developed by the prelate around 1730, in that interim phase when no decision seemed to emerge from Rome. Following his stay in the imperial capital and the subsequent return to Craiova, Nikola Stanislavich outlined in a letter to nuncio Girolamo Grimaldi the means necessary to stimulate Catholicism in the predominantly Orthodox province, hence signalling for the first time his intentions in this regard.²² A year later, in a report addressed to the emperor, the bishop returned to the subject of promoting the spread of Catholic religion. Among the four points that Charles VI put up for debate to his advisers, the second concerned the opening of a Latin and German school in Craiova, next to a minor seminary.²³ Both ideas had been discussed over the previous years without any practical consequences because of the costs they entailed. In the strategy of the Habsburgs, education always had hidden confessional ends,²⁴ but it was Stanislavich who integrated it into a more coherent action plan and finally put it on the right tracks. Over the coming years, most of the measures sketched in his proposal would come to life one by one, first his appointment as apostolic administrator, then the site for the future cathedral and, in 1734, the opening of the secondary school in Craiova run by the Piarists.²⁵

²⁰ See the request to this effect in 1719, *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 406–407, together with the biased prescriptions in the 1727 charter, *Documente Hurmuzaki*, vol. 6, p. 397–398.

²¹ Fermendžin (ed.), *Acta Bulgariae*, p. 382.

²² Only short references survive in the letter dispatched to his superiors by Nuncio Grimaldi, 4 February 1730, Archivio della Congregazione per l'Evangelizzazione dei Popoli o «de Propaganda Fide» (hereafter: APF), *Scritture riferite nei Congressi, Bulgaria e Valacchia*, vol. 3, f. 133r.

²³ *Documente Hurmuzaki*, vol. 6, p. 412–414.

²⁴ See the intentions expressed in 1726: “und mit diser Gelegenheit dorthiger Schismatischen Jugend die Catholl. Religion insensibiler einflüssen zumachen”, Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 2, p. 25, and 1729: “und solche durch gute Unterweisung in Studien und Civileren sitten auferziehen zu machen, einfolglichen dise nation successive mittels derley education von ihrer ruditet, und malitiosen Naigung ab und zum guten, auch mit der Zeit etwan insensibiler zu der wahren Religion zu laithen”, *Documente Hurmuzaki*, vol. 6, p. 407.

²⁵ Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 3, p. 12–13; I. Józsa-Józsa, *Piariștii și români până la 1918*. Aiud 1940, p. 54–60.

Whereas this initiative could still only produce tangible outcomes in the long run, Bishop Stanislavich had already been working silently in the background to achieve much quicker results. It must have been clear to him that in order to make it acceptable to a majority, religious change should not require a total break with the past. To accommodate the religious sensibilities of the future converts, he imported into Oltenia the idea of church union with Rome, which at the time could still be regarded as a success story in neighbouring Transylvania.²⁶ According to the model defined at the Council of Florence in the fifteenth century, the Orthodox were expected to acknowledge the main points of Catholic dogma, but they could continue to preserve and profess their particular Byzantine rite.²⁷ By February 1734, when the Catholic president and the councillors in Craiova first boasted its early achievements in the shape of the abbots of the convents in Segarcea and Titireci who had made the Catholic profession of faith, the strategy appears to have been discreetly underway for some time.²⁸ A decade later, in 1745, the nobility diploma granted by Empress Maria Theresa also credited Nikola Stanislavich with the conversion of three abbots during his ministering in Oltenia, adding to the former list the superiors of the convents of Strehaia and Jitianu.²⁹ They had been joined sometime before June 1736 by the administrator of the hermitage of Stănești. In the report directed to the cardinals of Propaganda Fide on the occasion, the bishop of Nikopol laid out the project of consolidating the spiritual conquests already made by means of transferring Basilian monks from the abbeys in southern Italy to the monasteries of Segarcea and Strehaia, and the subordinate hermitage of Stănești, who were to replace the fickle local monks and serve as a direct model to the population. He also expressed his desire to make a new trip to Vienna in order to confer with the emperor on the steps he thought necessary for the return of all Orthodox in Oltenia to full communion with Rome, implying his ideas had matured into a complex design.³⁰ The Ottomans' triumphant campaign over the following years meant, however, that all that he ever intended in this direction hopelessly went up in smoke.

The sudden failure together with the scattered information that has made it all the more obscure to historical research should not deceive us with regard to the real weight of these episodes. Four of the twenty-six large monasteries in existence in Oltenia, which equals 15% of the first-grade religious institutes of the province, according to the Habsburg administration's classification,³¹ had in fact been

²⁶ Zenovie Pâclișanu, *Istoria Bisericii Române Unite*, part I (1697–1751), *Perspective* 17, 65–68 (1994–1995), p. 1–388, here p. 315–318.

²⁷ Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence*. Cambridge 1959; Vittorio Peri, “La lettura del Concilio di Firenze nella prospettiva unionistica romana”, in: Idem, *Da Oriente e da Occidente. Le Chiese cristiane dall'Impero Romano all'Europa moderna*. Roma–Padova 2002, p. 375–396.

²⁸ Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 3, p. 43.

²⁹ Fermendžin (ed.), *Acta Bulgariae*, p. 382.

³⁰ APF, *Acta*, vol. 106, fol. 243v–245v.

³¹ Papacostea, *Oltenia*, p. 291, footnote 2.

penetrated by the teachings of church union. Unfortunately, we are left with only conjectures as to why these four abbots among all others were induced to take up Catholicism. No clear pattern emerges when comparing the endowments, location or tradition of the said monasteries. Strehăia, the only princely establishment among the four, traced its origins to some unknown founder in the fourteenth century. By the sixteenth century it had passed under the patronage of the Craiovescu clan, the boyar family which dominated the internal political life of Wallachia around 1500. A century later it came under the care of Matei Basarab, ruler of Wallachia from 1632 to 1654, who financed its restoration and enlargement, thus becoming its second founder.³² Located in the westernmost of the five counties of Oltenia, the monastery possessed only a modest estate, comprising of five entire or fragmentary villages.³³ Segarcea, south of the provincial capital, Craiova, dated from the sixteenth century and had previously been dedicated to the Patriarchate of Alexandria. Despite the lesser status, its annual revenue was substantial, for it owned thirteen villages in part or in total.³⁴ The hermitage of Stănești, near Drăgășani, had an even richer history, as it was built in the fifteenth century and had later benefited from the support of the Buzescu boyars. Its subordination came as a consequence of it being dedicated to the same patron, the patriarchs of Alexandria opting for a centralized control over their Wallachian possessions.³⁵ Located on the outskirts of Craiova, Jitianu had originally been established by some local boyars during the sixteenth century, before enjoying the support of Bălașa, wife to prince Constantin Șerban, who rebuilt it in mid-seventeenth century. It later came under the patronage of the Obedeanu boyars and was dedicated to the monastery of St. Paul on the Mount Athos, together with the thirteen villages it possessed in full or in part.³⁶ Titireci, on the other hand, while being a similar boyar foundation of the sixteenth century, in proximity of Râmnic, kept its autonomy throughout the era, but the lack of a powerful benefactor meant that it only claimed possession over four villages.³⁷

³² Ion Donat, "Fundațiunile religioase ale Olteniei. Partea I-a: Mănăstiri și schituri", *Arhivele Olteniei* 15, 86–88 (1936), p. 262–346, here p. 330. For a different chronology, see Radu Crețeanu, "Precizări cronologice privind ansamblul mănăstiresc Strehăia", *Mitropolia Olteniei* 26, 7–8 (1974), p. 644–649.

³³ Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 255–256 and document 10.

³⁴ Donat, "Fundațiunile religioase", p. 325–326; Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 257–259. Toma G. Bulat, "O mănăstire doljeană închinată Patriarhiei de Alexandria: Segarcea", *Mitropolia Olteniei* 21, 7–8 (1969), p. 551–569.

³⁵ Donat, "Fundațiunile religioase", p. 328–329; Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 259. Dan Pleșia, "Contribuții la istoricul mănăstirii Stănești și al ctitorilor ei", *Mitropolia Olteniei* 17, 5–6 (1965), p. 407–417.

³⁶ Donat, "Fundațiunile religioase", p. 312; Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 260–262. Petronel Zahariuc, "Date noi despre ctitorii mănăstirii Jitianu (județul Dolj) și un document de danie pentru mănăstirea Sfântul Pavel de la Muntele Athos", in: Laurențiu Rădvan (ed.), *Orașul din spațiul românesc între Orient și Occident: Tranziția de la medievalitate la modernitate*. Iași, 2007, p. 11–26.

³⁷ Donat, "Fundațiunile religioase", p. 334; Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 267–268. Tit Simedrea, "Mănăstirea Titireci", *Glasul Bisericii* 22, 5–6 (1963), p. 468–501.

The surviving evidence does not point to higher levels of pressure exerted from the provincial Catholic administration in order to push the heads of these monasteries in particular to switch confessional sides. On the contrary, in the case of Strehaia monastery, for which data has been more thoroughly catalogued, the officials in Oltenia constantly protected its patrimony and awarded it favourable verdicts in court against plaintiffs claiming the right of possession to some of its lands.³⁸ The only obvious element that might suggest otherwise is the militant attitude adopted by some in the context of the reforms considered by the Habsburgs to curb the autonomy and fiscal benefices of the Church, but so did a majority of the abbots at the time,³⁹ who in no way have ended in the Catholic camp at the end of their protests. In the face of the many distinct features of these monasteries and of the loose character of the shared experiences, all institutional motivations fade by comparison to the biography of the abbots, which I reckon provide a better account for their propensity for religious change.

In February 1734, when the Catholic councillors in the administration first mentioned the encouraging developments in Oltenia and petitioned General Wallis for the appointment of a new pro-Catholic abbot to Segarcea, ecclesiastical union with Rome had already made its way into the monastery for some time. Petroniu, the former abbot who had recently passed away, had previously made a Catholic profession of faith that stirred outrage in the clerical environments when it became public knowledge in 1724. In August of that year General Königsegg, the then supreme director of the province, informed Vienna of the disciplinary action launched against Petroniu by the Orthodox bishop of Râmnic and of the latter's request that all those who would accept church union be immediately removed from the monasteries.⁴⁰ No further evidence serves to disclose who were those preventively targeted by such drastic measures, but the phrase proves that the Orthodox hierarchy had come to regard the matter seriously and that other defections were seen as likely. Abbot Petroniu has been linked with his namesake who had been active in the Banat only a few years earlier, from where he would have passed in the neighbouring province following the failed attempt to receive the crosier, despite him professing the union.⁴¹ The evidence in support of this identification remains weak, but it would nevertheless provide a suitable explanation as to why his conversion was never mentioned in any of the papers produced by the authorities of Oltenia before 1724. Since Catholic penetration among the Orthodox population of southern Hungary and the Banat was already under way in the mid-1710s, Petroniu's Catholicism could have been an import rather than the result of local missionary efforts. Either way, confronted with the accusations of his superior in Râmnic, the abbot of Segarcea formally denounced

³⁸ Anca Elena Pororo, *Documentele mănăstirii Strehaia (1499–1859)*. Craiova, 2011, documents 138–139, 141, 144, 148, 150, 153–160.

³⁹ Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 81–106.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158; Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 1, p. 633.

⁴¹ Ștefan Pop, *La trecutul diecezei Caransebeșului*. Caransebeș, 1932, p. 35–39.

religious union to salvage his position at the head of the monastery, as General Wallis recalled ten years later.⁴² To his death he remained a faithful collaborator of the bishops of Râmnic, as evidenced by his correspondence and the repeated instances when he signed the collective petitions against the reform policy of the Habsburgs.⁴³ At the same time, to the eyes of the Catholic administration, both civil and ecclesiastical, Petroniu continued to be firmly associated with religious union, even if for obvious reasons his allegiance had for the time being to remain covered in secret. The Catholic councillors writing in 1734 offered him as an undisputed model of successful conversion, all the more so since he endured with great stoicism the many persecutions he was subjected to by his adversaries.⁴⁴ Whether he dissimulated his true convictions to avoid retaliation from the dominant Orthodox hierarchy or simulated the prescribed religiosity to keep the favours of the Catholic political elites is for the moment impossible to ascertain with any degree of confidence.

Petroniu's designated successor, Ilarion, makes for a less ambiguous portrait. He had served as deputy to the abbot and, as the latter grew ill, was convinced to make the Catholic profession of faith in the Franciscan cloister of Craiova in November 1733.⁴⁵ The fact that this conversion was arrived at under the influence of Petroniu and the official character of the ceremony would indeed imply that the abbot of Segarcea fully embraced Catholicism in his final years and also hints at his endeavour to make proselytes. However, it could be that faith played only a limited part in the decision and that social motivations were instead the driving force, for Ilarion professed religious union under the distinct clause that he was to assume the leadership of the monastery from the failing abbot.⁴⁶

A hiatus of two years separates these events from the first mentioning of the conversion of the administrator of the hermitage of Stănești. The special relationship linking it to Segarcea means that it is plausible to imagine that the anonymous monk at the head of the hermitage had been introduced to religious union through the influence of his monastic superior, although no precise elements can be provided. Since he is only indicated in Bishop Stanislavich's memorial of 1736, it is likely that his passage to Catholicism had happened sometime between 1734 and the date of the later letter. In 1737 he was removed from office by the new abbot of Segarcea, inducing the civil administration to protest the violation of its rights to supervise and approve the ecclesiastical appointments.⁴⁷ The documents say nothing about the reasons for this decision, but it looks strikingly similar to the warning issued thirteen years earlier by the bishop of Râmnic

⁴² Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 3, p. 47.

⁴³ Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 39, 94–96

⁴⁴ Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 3, p. 43.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: “er wegen seiner Gebrechlichkeit sub spe futurae successionis ihme substituirt werden möchte”.

⁴⁷ Papacostea, *Oltenia*, p. 292, footnote 4.

concerning the removal of suspected Catholics from the ranks of the local regular clergy.

A somewhat parallel ending affected the abbot in the monastery of Strehaia once news about his conversion came into the open. His name, Partenie, was first mentioned a decade earlier, in 1724, when the documents recorded a transaction involving Gypsy slaves who had been exchanged between Strehaia and the neighbouring monastery of Crasna.⁴⁸ Not unlike others, Partenie was also implicated in the protests orchestrated by the bishop of Râmnic against the administrative reforms of the Habsburgs, as he subscribed the large petition drafted and submitted to the emperor in 1731.⁴⁹ For no apparent reason, he suddenly resigned his leadership in the first part of 1734, and by 15 June a new abbot was appointed in the person of Dionisie Bălăcescu.⁵⁰ While aided by family ties going back at least one generation, this promotion was most probably determined by Dionisie's membership to the unwavering monastic community of Hurez, to which he was to return less than a year later to take command of the monastery of origin.⁵¹ The time had been enough to re-establish Strehaia in the Orthodox camp and, despite Bishop Stanislavich's claims in 1736, no other "unionist" name emerges from the records after the odd removal of Partenie.

Lastly, the only other monastery for which information subsists is Titireci, at whose helm stood one Ioan Ursaky. The new dedicatory inscription placed after the church restoration in 1729 already mentions his role in the process, suggesting an earlier leadership.⁵² Interestingly enough, a homonymous monk had been abbot of the monastery of Căluui some years before, but in December 1723 General Königsegg asked Vienna for the approval of a sentence to depose and defrock him for an unnamed guilt.⁵³ Whether this incident prompted his coming toward Catholicism in order to escape punishment cannot be ascertained for the moment. To the Roman Catholic councillors in the provincial administration he was a fresh convert in February 1734, so it is plausible that religious change occurred at a later stage in his life.⁵⁴ While we don't have any accurate instruments to measure his commitment, it is nevertheless telling that Ioan Ursaky was the only one among the above mentioned abbots for which there is no evidence of a hastened replacement from the side of the Orthodox hierarchy, a possible sign of a fluid and pragmatic religious identification through which he salvaged himself.

⁴⁸ Pororo, *Documentele mănăstirii*, doc. 136.

⁴⁹ Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 94.

⁵⁰ Nicolae Iorga, *Studii și documente*, vol. 14: *Hârtii din arhiva mănăstirii Hurezului*. București, 1907, p. 51–52: "resignante qui eidem antea prefuit igumeno, in vacantiam devenisset".

⁵¹ On his later career, see R. Ilie, "Dionisie I Iliev și Dionisie II Bălăcescu stareți ai mănăstirii Hurezului", *Glasul Bisericii* 14, 1–2 (1955), p. 59–71. The Bălăcescu clan's dealings with the monastery are documented in Pororo, *Documentele mănăstirii*, docs. 90, 140, 142, 154.

⁵² Donat, "Fundațiunile religioase", p. 334.

⁵³ Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 154.

⁵⁴ Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 3, p. 43.

Other than him, there is a certain pattern which seems to emerge as a reaction to the Latin competitor. The Uniate abbot of Segarcea was threatened with disciplinary action before he denounced the Catholic profession of faith. In Strehaia the same conflict was resolved through the (forced) retirement of the pro-Catholic abbot and the nomination of a reliable Orthodox in his place. Where no such compromise could be reached, as in the case of Stănești, the bishop of Râmnic had even risked an open clash with the provincial administration, by removing the convert abbot and replacing him with a man of his choice. In keeping true to the statements of their predecessors in the 1720s, the meaning conveyed through all these gestures was that the Orthodox hierarchy in Oltenia would never allow for religious union to become settled in any of the monasteries under the authority of the see of Râmnic. This staunchness presumably also translated into the lack of enthusiasm with which the laymen received the calls to conversion. In a society for which the Orthodox versus Catholic dispute amounted not only to a religious, but also to a political divide, especially in the face of the changes the Habsburgs had introduced after 1726, there was only a single individual who dared to take this step. The boyar Ioan Bengescu, a less well-to-do relative of the influential councillor Staico Bengescu who worked for the imperial administration in Craiova, is known to have converted to Catholicism. After only a short while he too returned to Orthodoxy, disappointed by the social prospects and perhaps pressured from the ranks of his own family.⁵⁵ And, although rumours about the pro-Catholic feelings of the bishops of Râmnic surfaced from time to time, with Inochentie the main target of accusations, these rather point to internal tensions and the defensive attitude of Orthodox faithful, which made every gesture subject to interpretation, than to a real threat of conversion.⁵⁶

In this context, the optimistic narratives of the members of the religious orders, be they Jesuits or Piarists, who, in the usual fashion, overemphasized the number of those changing religion, should not be given much credit.⁵⁷ While surprising, the absence from the general picture of the traditional holders of missionary powers, the Observant Franciscans, has its own reasons. As they became entrenched in a bitter argument with Bishop Nikola Stanislavich, their former fellow, over the rights to administer the parishes, they no longer supported any of his plans.⁵⁸ The cooling relations only added to the natural moderation of the Franciscans, accustomed for centuries to only cater for the few Catholics in Wallachia and not endanger their position and properties by trying to win converts among the Orthodox population.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 463.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Radu Tempea, *Istoria sfintei besereci a Șcheilor Brașovului*, ed. O. Șchiau, L. Bot. București 1969, p. 140–144, 147.

⁵⁷ Nikolaus Nilles (ed.), *Symbolae ad illustrandam historiam Ecclesiae Orientalis in terris coronae S. Stephani*. Innsbruck, 1885, vol. 1, p. 446–447; Józsa-Józsa, *Piariștii și românii*, p. 55, footnote 31.

⁵⁸ Nedici, “In-between Empires”, p. 479–482.

After all, throughout the period, the top levels of the Habsburg administration in Oltenia had been reluctant to lend their support to the proselytizing activity of the Catholic missionaries. The Jesuits, who had been initially present in the suite of the imperial regiments as they entered the province and had expressed hopes of a swift establishment there, were in the end unable to secure a position for themselves after 1718. Their overtly militant attitude played against them and not even the excellent educational prospects that made the Society a favourite of the emperor during the talks for the opening of the schools in Craiova in 1729 could obtain them the coveted place. Tellingly, their rivals and winners in this competition, the Piarists, had enjoyed the backing of General Franz Anton von Wallis, the then supreme director of the provincial administration, who leaned toward the latter's equally relevant schooling methods, but likely also their softer approach in matters of religious propaganda.⁵⁹ It is not hard to see why the military was opposed to any inconsiderate attempt to impose Catholicism in the mostly Orthodox land. To them, Oltenia was primarily a border province in the first line of defence against the Ottomans and had consequently to be governed with a feel for maintaining the social order that ensured the regular payment of taxes that fed the army. Anything that jeopardized this end – pushing for conversions among the majority of the population was certainly to lead to conflict and induce an opposition movement – had to be suspended until more peaceful times would allow it.

On the other hand, civil authorities both at the centre and the periphery have been much more receptive to the projects aimed at transforming the religious landscape of Lesser Wallachia. As elsewhere in the Monarchy, Catholicism was chiefly valued for its integrative potential, in order to enhance the fidelity of the local estates and contribute to the formation of a uniform elite.⁶⁰ Thus, from a political standpoint, long-term objectives took precedence over the short-term concerns. At the court in Vienna, the department responsible for elaborating policies for the newly acquired lands voiced its concerns in January 1736 with regard to the large prerogatives that the Serbian metropolitan enjoyed in Oltenia. Curtailing his attributes, starting right from diminishing the role he was called to play in the consecration of the new bishop of Râmnic, would help the Catholic cause and ensure protection for those who had started embracing union with Rome. Its members even went as far as to request the problem to be put on the agenda of the ministerial conference, elevating it to the highest possible level, in order to take it away from the hands of the military.⁶¹

The dispute was quickly afterwards mirrored in the province, in the antagonism that opposed the views of the Catholic councillors in Craiova to the

⁵⁹ *Documente Hurmuzaki*, vol. 6, p. 460.

⁶⁰ Robert J.W. Evans, *The Making of the Habsburg Monarchy 1550–1700: An Interpretation*. Oxford 1979.

⁶¹ Johann Heinrich Schwicker, "Die Vereinigung der Serbischen Metropolen von Belgrad und Carlowitz im Jahre 1731", *Archiv für österreichische Geschichte* 62 (1881), p. 305–449, here p. 422–423.

attitude of the commanding general in Sibiu. As they requested the support of the latter for the appointment of Ilarion to the position of abbot of the monastery of Segarcea, the civil officials offered a full range of arguments in favour of the Uniate monk. They strongly defended the opinion that being Catholic did not make their candidate incompatible with taking the leadership of an Orthodox monastery, since Ilarion had kept his Byzantine rite. And, although they recognized that the imperial diploma of 1719 pledged to preserve the full rights of the Orthodox Church, they insisted that such commitment could not be maintained against the interests of the Catholic religion.⁶² Their struggle was to no avail, for General Wallis firmly stood by what had become the formal position of the army, replying that he saw no possibility to intervene over the head of the Orthodox bishop in this election.⁶³ Albeit his words disclosed a certain mistrust in the real feelings of those converts which were being advertised by the civil councillors as success stories of church union with Rome, labelling them as “mamelukes”,⁶⁴ the general knowingly ignored the extended powers that were vested in him to avoid any conflict with the bishop of Râmnic. In fact, the reforms pursued in 1731–1732 had modified the nomination procedures, by placing the election of the abbots under the supervision of two special delegates, one representing the bishop, the other the provincial administration, and requesting that each new abbot be confirmed by the political authorities.⁶⁵ While future events would prove that such measures were not enough to restrict the control the bishops of Râmnic exercised over the monasteries, it is nevertheless symptomatic for the diverging attitudes of Habsburg government that the commanding general refrained from any intervention, rather than run the risk of alienating the Orthodox clergy.

Early modern states sought the cooperation of the Church for reasons of control and discipline over their subjects. The expansion of the Habsburg Monarchy toward the Balkans in the decades at the turn of the eighteenth century compelled its leaders to a set of pragmatic choices. Confessional absolutism that had long been used as a political instrument in the hereditary lands was scarcely employed in those newly conquered territories that lacked a strong Catholic tradition. Oltenia, which came under Habsburg rule in 1718, was no exception, as new arrangements were negotiated with the local elites which included warranties for the Orthodox Church. As such, only individual attempts were made to change the confessional balance in a top to bottom approach, as evidenced by the plans drafted by the bishop of Nikopol, Nikola Stanislavich, for the spread of religious union with Rome in the 1730s. To explain their failure one must take into account more than one factor. Firstly, even though the sources make categorical assessments difficult, it may be inferred that some of the converts had been won to

⁶² Giurescu (ed.), *Material*, vol. 3, p. 42–43.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 46–47.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶⁵ Dobrescu, *Istoria bisericii*, p. 86–102.

Catholicism by social promise rather than theological reasoning, which made their attachment problematic. Secondly, the dominant position held by the bishops of Râmnic allowed them to oppose and revert any gains made by church union in the monasteries of Lesser Wallachia by simply replacing the monks under suspicion. Thirdly, the disagreements between civil and military authorities with regard to the strategies for governing the province and the role of religion meant that missionary efforts had not been given a consistent political backing. The whole episode therefore is indicative of the difficulties the Monarchy had in determining the means to pursue the integration of Oltenia and, at the same time, of the impact the overlapping authorities had on the religious choice of individuals.

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