

The Romanian Greek-Catholic Episcopate and the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy at the End of the First World War

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Launched in the last years of the 1848-1849 revolution, the political-ecclesiastical project of Hungarian “Catholic Autonomy” was explicitly proposed in the letter sent by baron Jozsef Eötvös to archbishop primate Janos Simor in 1867¹. While the first attempts at a systematic elaboration go back to the beginnings of the Austro-Hungarian dualism, the project was under discussion one last time during the final years of the Habsburg monarchy. The Catholic autonomy had been established in order to help administrate the foundations of the church, the religious education system and its institutions, to democratise the Hungarian Catholic Church by enabling its laymen with the power to take decisions along with its clergymen, and to be involved in the appointing of bishops, to support a separation *à l’amiable* between the Church and the increasingly intruding state. It became a major political and ecclesiastical issue in Transleithania in the years 1868-1871 and 1897-1902, but gradually lost its importance afterwards and it was launched once again when the Austrian-Hungarian political regime was living its last days.

The Catholic autonomy should include both Latin and Eastern Rite Catholic Churches from Hungary, which was perceived by the Romanian Greek-Catholics as an infringement on the full autonomy and canonical independence of their church guaranteed when they entered into dogmatic union with the Church of Rome and recognized after that through civil legislation and a series of decisions of the Holy See. Even if this attitude was not entirely the same throughout the Romanian Greek-Catholic territories, it was meant to keep the Hungarian Roman Catholic Church at a distance. Instead, the Romanian Greek-Catholics developed a discourse of their own focused on the need to preserve and affirm their ecclesiastical autonomy. Though less researched by Romanian historiography², the attitude of the Romanian Greek-

¹ Gabriel Adriányi, *Lo stato ungherese ed il Vaticano (1848-1918)*, in *Mille anni di cristianesimo in Ungheria* (ed. by Pál Cséfalvay and Maria Antonietta de Angelis), Budapest, 2001, p. 114.

² From Romanian bibliography on the subject see: Mircea Păcurariu, *Politica statului dualist față de biserica românească din Transilvania în perioada dualismului (1867-1918)*, Sibiu, 1986, p. 101-106; Nicolae Bocșan, *Imagina bisericii romano-catolice la românii greco-catolici (Congresul autonomiei bisericii catolice din Ungaria)*, “Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai. Historia”, 41 (1996), 1-2, p. 49-68; Ioana Mihaela Bonda, *Sfântul Scaun și autonomia Bisericii greco-catolice în relațiile presei românești din Transilvania (1871-1900)*, “Arhiva Someșană”, III series, I (2002), p. 215-223; Nicolae Bocșan and Ion Cârja, *Il metropolita Victor Mihályi de Apșa e i rapporti tra la*

Catholic Church towards the Catholic Autonomy in Hungary is an extremely interesting subject, pertaining to the relations between the Romanians and the Hungarians in the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries.

Towards the end of the First World War, the Catholic Autonomy became an issue of debate again, as those years registered an intensification of the efforts, contacts and correspondence of the involved parts, reaching its climax on December 21, 1917 when Albert Apponyi, the minister of Cults in Budapest, presented The Catholic Autonomy Bill in the Hungarian Parliament. However, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, the following, year postponed the actual organization of the Catholic Autonomy.

The Romanian Greek-Catholic Church formally expressed its point of view on the Catholic Autonomy at the Conference of the Romanian episcopate held on August 22, 1917 in Blaj. Metropolitan Victor Mihályi sent a letter to Apponyi, summarising his opinions which had already been expressed by the Romanian Greek-Catholics several times and made observations on the bill. In his letter, Mihályi combatted those stipulations regarding the inclusion of the metropolitan province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș into the general structures of the Catholic Autonomy in Hungary. In the last paragraph, the Romanian bishops proposed that another bill will be presented to the parliament which would allow the establishment of “an autonomous organism especially created for the ecclesiastical province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș in order to regulate our relations with the state and the Catholic Autonomy”³. We sense here the presence of the core theme of the Romanian discourse regarding the Hungarian project of autonomy formulated in the first years of the dualism, when the issue was debated for the first time: the need to preserve unaltered the autonomy of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church and the dialogue of this church with the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy as equal partners. This dialogue was meant to solve the problems of common interest for the two Catholic rites.

On the same date, August 22, 1917, the secretary of state of Pope Benedict XV wrote to the nuncio in Vienna about the project of the Catholic Autonomy stating that, according to the Roman Pontiff, the introduction of any innovation concerning

Chiesa Greco-Cattolica romana di Transilvania e l' "Autonomia Cattolica" ungherese, in *I Romeni e la Santa Sede. Miscellanea di studi di storia ecclesiastica* (ed. by Ion Cârja), Bucharest-Rome, 2004, p. 162-188; Ion Cârja, *Românii între Unirea cu Roma și "Autonomia Catolică" din Ungaria. Un memorial al lui Augustin Bunea din anul 1906*, “Arhiva Someșană”, III series, II (2003), p. 217-230; Idem, *Aspecte privind relațiile Bisericii Române Unite cu Autonomia Catolică maghiară la sfârșitul secolului XIX și începutul secolului XX*, “Arhiva Someșană”, series III, III (2004), p. 227-238; Idem, *Il vescovato greco-cattolico romeno e l'autonomia cattolica d'Ungheria alla fine del XIX secolo. Contributi documentari*, “Ephemeris Dacoromana. Annuario dell'Accademia di Romania”, n. s., XII (2004), II, p. 95-119; Idem, *Biserică și societate în Transilvania în perioada păstoririi lui Ioan Vancea (1869-1892)*, Cluj-Napoca, 2007, pp. 171-222.

³ Archivio Segreto Vaticano, *Sacra Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari* [hereafter, AAEESS], Austria-Ungheria, anno 1917-1918, pos. 1237, fasc. 501, p. 48v-49v.

the autonomy of the Transylvanian Roman-Catholic diocese, as well as that of the Romanian Greek-Catholic province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș, was prohibited⁴. The project of the Catholic Autonomy became more and more known in the following months, as reflected in the correspondence of the parties involved: the Pope's Secretariate of State, the Apostolic Nunciature in Vienna, the Ministry of Cults in Budapest, and last but not least, the Romanian Greek-Catholic episcopate. Thus, on September 19, 1917, the archbishop primate, Janos Csernoch, wrote to the Holy See about the issue of autonomy, the letter being sent to Rome by the nuncio in Vienna, Valfrè di Bonzo, along with his report from September 23, 1917. In his report the nuncio touched upon different aspects of the Autonomy bill, however without mentioning its impact on the Romanian Church United with Rome⁵. In a letter from September 29, 1917 (delivered to Rome by the nuncio again) the archbishop primate did the same thing⁶. After the conference of the Catholic episcopate from Hungary, held on October 7-8, 1917, where Mihályi's August 22 letter to Apponyi was read, the Hungarian Minister of Cults sent to the pope a long *pro memoria*, which was one of the most important documents of the movement for autonomy in 1917. The document was meant to dispel the worries of the Holy See concerning any possible negative effects of the autonomy project on the Catholic Church from Hungary.

The *pro memoria* is divided into four parts: the first one presents the concept of the Catholic Autonomy, analysing the instructions of the Holy See concerning the autonomy organization, the second emphasizes the necessity to obtain a certain influence on the appointing of bishops, the third refers to the necessity to include the Romanian Greek-Catholic province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș in the structures of the Catholic Autonomy from Hungary, and the last part contains observations pertaining to the reform of Hungarian church possessions. This document⁷ will be mentioned subsequently in the debates on the issue of autonomy in the following years (1917-1918). Thus, it will be mentioned by the archbishop primate in his letter to the pope, from December 8, 1917⁸, as well as in the report sent to Vatican by the nuncio Valfrè di Bonzo on December 21⁹.

Shifting from the ecclesiastical to the political factor, Apponyi's *pro memoria* presents the Hungarian opinion on the autonomy of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, concluding that the autonomy must be closely controlled, by including it in the Hungarian autonomy, for reasons that have to do with state safety. Apponyi argues against leaving the Romanian Greek-Catholic province out of the Hungarian Autonomy, considering that its Catholic character will thus be diminished, and risking to be even closer to the Orthodox Church. Separating the Romanians

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 32v.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 33r-38r.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 39v-42r.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 50r-56v.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 60r-68v.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 57r-59v.

from the general autonomy they will be unable to benefit from the material advantages that the Hungarian Catholic Church offers. The Hungarian Minister states further that the Romanian Greek-Catholics must be kept within the structures of the Catholic Autonomy from Hungary, whatever the cost. Thus, the political authorities could keep an eye on them more easily: "Incorporating the Romanian Greek-Catholics, the Catholic Church could watch over them as members of the same family, which would be in accordance with the interest of the political authorities". This represents the core of the Hungarian view on the relations between the Romanian Greek-Catholics and the Catholic autonomy.

The need to watch the Romanian Greek-Catholics closely is even more important, Apponyi continues in his *pro memoria*, if we think that they are in the proximity of a kingdom whose people is of the same extraction. This vicinity has already allowed circulation of some dangerous ideas among the Romanian Greek-Catholics ever since the war started¹⁰. Thus, we may easily notice that while the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy was meant to strengthen a Church faced with the state's policy of secularization, it did at the same time serve the interests of the state in its effort to control the Romanian minority more tightly.

The Romanian Greek-Catholic episcopate held a new conference in Blaj on December 5, 1917, presided by metropolitan Mihályi. The bishops adopted a *pro memoria* and addressed it to Emperor Franz Joseph¹¹. As we have already seen, in spite of the war going on in Europe, the Catholic Autonomy issue was raised for the last time just before the dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy.

On December 21, 1917 the minister of Cults, Apponyi, presented in the Hungarian Parliament the Catholic Autonomy Draft Bill where it was stipulated that the Catholic Church of Hungary may possess (while respecting the laws of the state) cult edifices, schools and other educational institutes and found new ones only if it has previously received the king's approval. Furthermore it had the possibility to organize its autonomy with the support of an adequate structure that would comprise both members of the clergy and laymen overseen by the king as supreme patron. Since the Roman Catholic Church from Transylvania already had its own autonomous structure, it was not to be incorporated into the newly founded organization. According to the bill, the new organization should administer the money allocated by the government for Catholic schools as well. The project makes no explicit reference to the metropolitan province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș, but nevertheless it states that the inclusion or exclusion of Eastern Rite Catholics into or from the structures of autonomy will be decided on, not through civil legislation but by the newly founded organism of the Catholic Autonomy. Summing up these aspects, nuncio Valfrè di Bonzo states in his letter to Gaspari, the cardinal secretary

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 52v-53v.

¹¹ *Idem*, pos. 1237-1238, fasc. 502, p. 9r.

of state, that despite the silence of the bill regarding the Romanian Greek-Catholics, “it appears the Romanians will be incorporated into the Catholic autonomy”¹².

The next step was the general conference of the Catholic episcopate of Hungary held on January 9-11 in Budapest. However, no important amendments to the project were made by the bishops. The Romanian Greek-Catholic bishops did not take part in this conference. They received its resolutions on February 10, 1918. Some of the newspapers of that time speculated this and argued that the absence of the Romanian hierarchs was due to the maneuvers of the Viennese nuncio, who allegedly wanted to help them fight against the would-be autonomy. Moreover, the alleged gesture of the nuncio was called “an awkward meddling” into the Hungarian internal affairs. This assumption was combated in an article which appeared in the newspaper ‘*Fremdenblatt*’. This article quoted a statement made by archbishop primate Csernoch who had told the editor of the newspaper ‘*Az est*’ that the absence of the Romanian hierarchs had nothing to do with the Catholic autonomy and was rather due to a feast in the Greek-Catholic calendar, which required their presence in the dioceses. The Viennese nuncio did not have any influence on the Romanian bishops’ conduct towards the conference¹³. In fact, the Romanian bishops gave a similar explanation as concerns their failure to participate in the conference in a memorial sent to Pope Benedict XV on February 20, 1918¹⁴.

Another article about the same issue appeared in the newspaper ‘*Pester Loyd*’ with the title “No answer and yet an answer”. The writer of the article tried to obtain an interview with the nuncio about the conference from January 9-11. The nuncio refused, stating that given his position he could not, on principle, allow himself to be open to the press. This statement was twisted and distorted by the author of the article and the nuncio was thus reported to have said that the issue of autonomy was too sensitive to be spoken openly about¹⁵. In his report to the secretary of state Gaspari from January 15, 1918, Valfrè di Bonzo clarifies his opinion about the speculation that had appeared in the press¹⁶. In his reply, cardinal Gaspari conveys the opinion of the Roman pontiff to the nuncio: given the inconveniences which may result, the ecclesiastical province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș should not be incorporated into the Catholic Autonomy of Hungary¹⁷.

The Romanian discourse regarding the organization of the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy found its expression in an extensive *pro memoria* addressed to Pope Benedict XV by the Romanian hierarchs on February 20, 1918. This document was one of the last of this kind issued by the Romanian bishops before the

¹² Idem, pos. 1237, fasc. 501, p. 3r-4r.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 76r.

¹⁴ Idem, pos. 1237-1238, fasc. 502, p. 6r-22r.

¹⁵ Idem, pos. 1237, fasc. 501, p. 76v-77r.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 72r-74r.

¹⁷ Idem, pos. 1237-1238, fasc. 502, p. 2r-3v.

dissolution of the Habsburg monarchy. It synthesizes and re-affirms the Romanian view on the Catholic Autonomy as expressed in 1868.

The memorial entitled *La Provincia ecclesiastica rumena di Alba-Giulia e Fogaras e l'Autonomia cattolica di Ungheria. PROMEMORIA presentata dall'Episcopato della medesima provincia a Sua Santità il Pontefice Romano PAPA BENEDETTO XV*¹⁸ dated Oradea, February 20, 1918 and signed by Demetri Radu, bishop of Oradea, Valeriu Traian Frențiu, bishop of Lugoj, Iuliu Hossu, bishop of Gherla, and Vasile Suci, vicar of the metropolitan diocese, was accompanied by a letter which briefly expressed the necessity of a Romanian point of view. At the beginning of their letter, the Romanian bishops stated that the draft bill presented by minister Apponyi at the end of the previous year was a violation of the canonical independence of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church bringing about unrest and bitterness among the people and the clergy and determined the Romanian hierarchs appeal to the pope through the attached *pro memoria*. At the end of their letter, the bishops mention briefly the provincial councils from 1872, 1882 and 1900, which formed the basis of the constitutional organization of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church and of its autonomy¹⁹.

The *pro memoria* opens with an introduction which outlines the context of the Romanians' relations with the Catholic Autonomy of Hungary, describing the Catholic Autonomy Draft Bill presented by Apponyi on December 21, 1917, and approved by the Conference of the Hungarian episcopate held on January 9-11, 1918, and the letter sent by metropolitan Mihályi on August 22, 1917 to the participants at the conference of the Hungarian episcopate held on November 7-8, same year. Since the Minister of Cults, knowing the opinion of the Romanian hierarchs, and despite the concessions conferred them at the conference held on June 26, ignored their request to present the parliament with a draft bill, especially created for the autonomy of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, and then argued (in a letter to the pope) for the necessity to incorporate the metropolitan province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș into the general autonomy, the Romanian hierarchs proposed to clarify their attitude towards the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy through this *pro memoria*.

The authors define the autonomy of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church: "According to the canon law, our ecclesiastical province is a well-structured entity, independent from any ecclesiastical authority excepting the Holy See"²⁰, leaving aside the dogmatic aspects of the project of Catholic Autonomy and declaring that they do not know the arguments of Apponyi's *pro memoria* in November 1917. The document continues to reaffirm the autonomy and the rights of the Romanian Church United with Rome, which had already been expressed several times to the emperor

¹⁸ *Provincia ecleziastică română de Alba-Iulia și Făgăraș și autonomia catolică din Ungaria. Promemoria prezentată de episcopatul aceleiași provincii către Sanctitatea Sa Pontiful Roman Papa Benedict al XV-lea*, in *ibidem*, p. 6r-22r.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 4r-5r.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 9r.

after the episcopal conference held on December 5, 1917 in Blaj, as in the *pro memoria*. The *pro memoria* points out briefly the fundamental arguments of the Romanian discourse about the autonomy: the resolutions of the Council of Florence concerning the union of Eastern Christians with the Church of Rome, confirmed in the case of the Romanian Church by the Union in 1700, the accomplishment of full canonical independence of the Romanian Church United with Rome through the Papal bull *Ecclesiam Christi* in 1853, the canonical legislation adopted on the occasion of the three provincial synods from 1872, 1882 and 1900, sanctioned by the Holy See (some passages from the synodal decrees expressing clearly the autonomy of the church are reproduced in the *pro memoria*). The ecclesiastical legislation was doubled by the civil legislation, continues the document, citing paragraph no 14 from the Law XLIII/1868, which extended the rights to religious freedom in Transylvania and Hungary to the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church as well. The ecclesiastical province of Alba-Iulia and Făgăraș is consequently a distinct individuality, recognized as such by canon law, as well as by public civil law, acknowledging only one superior authority, that is the Holy See²¹.

Given these facts, the *pro memoria* continues, the ecclesiastical province of the Romanian Greek-Catholics cannot be subordinated to any metropolis or ecclesiastical corporation from Hungary. Nevertheless, according to the Hungarian project, the Romanian church appears as subordinated to the future Catholic Autonomy, even if the latter may not exercise a proper jurisdiction. This is outrageous and unpardonable, the authors state further. The Catholic unity of the two churches, of Latin and Eastern rite, does not annihilate their individuality and rights. The authors of the *pro memoria* defend the autonomy of their church intelligently making reference to an age characterized, they say, by the spreading of the democratic spirit. To include them in the structures of the Catholic Autonomy would be against this spirit which, after all, allowed the creation of the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy. The Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, they argue, wishes to remain in its traditional canonical regime (two thousand years old) like other Catholic churches.

Moreover, the ecclesiastical province of the Romanian Greek-Catholics has had ever since its foundation a fundamental missionary component and has been able to fortify and spread Catholicism among Romanians and it expects help and support from its coreligionaries of Latin rite. At this point, the authors stress the idea that full ecclesiastical independence is necessary for the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church in order to be able to attract the Orthodox Romanians to the Union with Rome. Last but not least, the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church is called to set an example for the Eastern Christianity as an ecclesiastical community which has kept its Eastern identity within the Catholic church. Therefore, its independence must be respected by all Catholics, especially by their coreligionaries of Latin rite from Hungary. However, the defense of their own rights and the request to have their own congress

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 8r-15r.

and a distinct autonomy does not mean separatism within the Romanians' relations with their Roman Catholic coreligionaries or lack of Christian charity or sense of belonging to the Catholic Church within the Hungarian kingdom²².

The *pro memoria* of the Romanian episcopate dated February 20, 1918 supports and promotes, as we have seen, the ideas and arguments previously expressed on this issue (the Catholic Autonomy of Hungary)²³. Nevertheless, it is outstanding because it shows sensible canonical and juridical thinking and pragmatic spirit in combining the historical character of argumentation with the necessity to be anchored in the spirit and the imperatives of the present.

The exchange of letters between nuncio Valfrè di Bonzo and cardinal Pietro Gaspari, the pope's secretary of state, from January 15, February 12 and April 14, 1918²⁴ adopt a more neutral tone in comparison with the Romanian or Hungarian discourse, as they distance themselves from the national component of the project of Hungarian Catholic Autonomy. In his letter from April 14, 1918 the nuncio states that people in Hungary appears to be more interested in the election reform bill now and does not pay so much attention to the issue of Catholic autonomy anymore. Even more, Valfrè di Bonzo expresses his doubts whether the autonomy bill will be discussed in the Parliament until the end of the year. Indeed, the project will never be under discussion again, as the end of the First World War put an end to the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy as well.

The Hungarian Catholic autonomy was nevertheless a bold project that attempted to reconcile the organization of the church with the spirit of modernity. From the ecclesiastical point of view the autonomy represented an institutional innovation rejected by the Holy See due to the risk involved (the diminishing of episcopal power). From the point of view of the Romanian-Hungarian relations, however, it was a national project that supported the Hungarian policy towards the Romanian minority. For the Romanian Greek-Catholics to preserve the autonomy of their church was to keep their national identity. The refutation of the opinions and principles of the Hungarian Catholic Autonomy gave the Romanian Church United with Rome the opportunity to develop its own discourse, one of the most complex expressions of the identity of the Romanian Greek-Catholicism in the modern age.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 15r-22r.

²³ See: *The Reflections* of Bishop Demetriu Radu from 15 octombrie 1899 (published in *I Romeni e la Santa Sede. Miscellanea di studi di storia ecclesiastica* (ed. by I. Cârja), Bucarest-Rome, 2004, p. 170-181) or Augustin Bunea's project from 1906 (see I. Cârja, *Românii între Unirea cu Roma* cit.).

²⁴ AAEESS, Austria-Ungheria, anno 1917-1918, pos. 1237, fasc. 501, p. 8r-10r, for the other two letters see above, notes 16, 17.