

A Pope Coming from the East: John Paul II on the Situation of the Catholic Church in Romania (1978-1989)

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Rezumat: Instituționalizarea regimului comunist în Europa Central-Răsăriteană a generat, între altele, un val sistematic de persecuții, coerciție și cenzură împotriva diferitelor denominații religioase, bisericele Greco-Catolică și Romano-Catolică numărându-se printre principalele victime ale terorii comuniste. Recursul la coerciție și unele concesii, mai cu seamă începând cu anii 1960, a permis denominațiilor religioase să găsească anumite modalități de supraviețuire în confruntarea cu regimurile ideocratice. Dialogul angajat de Sfântul Scaun cu unele regimuri comuniste – în contextul destinderii internaționale - a avut rezultate contradictorii, România comunistă numărându-se între țările în care beneficiile dialogului pentru comunitățile catolice de ambele rituri au fost minore.

Cuvinte cheie: Comunism, represiune, Biserica Catolică, România, destindere internațională, minorități religioase, Sfântul Scaun, Ostpolitik, Papa Ioan Paul al-II-lea

Abstract: As was the case with the entire East-Central European region, the instatement of Communism in Romania brought an unprecedented wave of persecution, coercion, censorship of various religious denominations, with the Greek-Catholic and Roman Catholic churches counting themselves among the main victims of the abusive force unleashed by the newly installed regime. Weathering the storm of the brutal repression that characterized the early Communist years, the resilient religious minorities would find ways to resist the harsh persecutions directed against them, while at the same time attempting to take advantage of the limited opportunities brought by the internal evolution of the regime, as well as by the international developments of their time. On the background of a consistently strenuous relation between political authorities and minority religious communities,

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the election of John Paul II as Pope became an influential moment for the course of both Catholic rites in Romania, as they followed their way through the meandering final years of Romanian Communism.

Keywords: Communism, repression, Catholic Church, Romania, détente, religious minorities, Holy See, Ostpolitik, Pope John Paul II

The domination of the Soviet Union over East-Central Europe (ECR) after 1945 imposed a certain degree of uniformity to the religious policies in the area, especially in the Stalinist phase, even though, as several studies have argued, the ethnic and confessional diversity of the region, the political, cultural and national specificities, the relations between national and religious identities, the variations among distinct societies in terms of their level of modernization, their respective social disparities etc., had all determined Communist regimes to gradually adopt distinctive strategies in order to reach their intended goals.¹

Catholicism counted itself among the most resilient opponents of the Communist regimes and naturally became the victim of continuous repressive policies, which came in various shapes. For instance, all Communist states sought, under different pretexts, to disrupt the connections between local churches and Rome, to cut all ties with the Holy See and to expel its diplomats, to seize the properties of the Churches, to suppress and censor the subsisting Catholic publications, to nationalize confessional teaching as well as the charitable institutions belonging to the Churches, to forbid religious education in schools etc. Furthermore, religious organizations created by clergymen or laymen willing to collaborate with the Communist regimes were encouraged, and the creation of “national” Catholic Churches was also pursued, a goal accompanied by the suppression of Greek-Catholic Churches.²

The foundation of these aggressive policies concerning religious institutions and organizations was twofold: on the one hand, there was Marxist-Leninist ideology, and its later permutations in the “national Communist” phase; on the other hand, there was the fact that, by their mere

¹ Miklós Tomka, “Coping with Persecutions: Religious Change in Communism and in Post-Communist Reconstruction in Central Europe”, *International Sociology* 13 (June 1998): p. 231; Ovidiu Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec previzibil. România și Sfântul Scaun în epoca pontificatului lui Paul al VI-lea (1963-1978)*, București: Ed. Curtea Veche, 2004, p. 36.

² Ioan-Marius Bucur, *Din istoria Bisericii Greco-Catolice Române (1918-1983)*, Cluj-Napoca: Accent, 2003, p. 138; Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, pp. 36-37.

existence, Churches offered an alternative value system to the official Marxist-Leninism. Moreover, Churches represented, to extents that differed from one country to another, the only autonomous legal organizations in Communist states.³

In Romania, a country with an Orthodox majority, Catholicism comprised the largest religious minority at the time of the Communist instatement, counting approximately three million faithful. As a result of specific historical circumstances, the Catholic Church in Romania was an ecclesiastical organization embodying three rites: Latin, Greek-Catholic and Armenian. As far as the ethnicity of its adherents was concerned, they belonged to the Romanian majority, particularly the Greek-Catholics, as well as part of the Roman-Catholics in the extra-Carpathian historical provinces, but also to the ethnic minorities, such as Hungarians (most of them Roman-Catholics and to a lesser degree Greek-Catholics), Germans (Roman Catholics), and Ruthenians (Greek-Catholics). The largest segments of Catholics among national minorities, as well as most of the Romanian Greek-Catholics, were living in the intra-Carpathian provinces of Transylvania and Banat.⁴

The antireligious policies were inaugurated throughout 1948, in the general context of the institutionalization of the new regime. The Communist leaders in Bucharest proceeded, as did their East European counterparts, to nominate the Vatican as one of the foremost adversaries of the regime. In the following months, on the background of the discretionary relationship of the Communist state with the Churches in Romania, the measures directed against the Catholic Church were adopted with alacrity. In July 1948, the Concordat that had been signed in 1927 and ratified in 1929 was unilaterally denounced. A few weeks later, two laws directly affecting the status of the Churches were adopted: the first one was the law for education reform, which stated and applied the principle of state monopoly on education, as well as the separation of Church and education, while also providing the legal basis for the abrogation of confessional teaching and the confiscation of Church property; the second one, concerning the “general regime of religion”, contained provisions which had a severe impact on the Catholic Church in Romania. As various authors have noticed, the laws were far from expressing a genuine separation of Church and State, instead reflecting the

³ Steven Saxonberg, *The Fall. A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary and Poland*, London and New York: Routledge, 2003, p. 213.

⁴ I.-M. Bucur, *Din istoria Bisericii Greco-Catolice Române*, pp. 49-50, 60-61.

State's eagerness to exercise an excessive and severe control over the Church.⁵ Among others, this law offered the Communist government the opportunity to drastically decrease the number of dioceses belonging to the Orthodox Church and the Roman-Catholic Church alike. As far as the Greek-Catholics were concerned, the government had another plan, which was put into practice in the autumn of the same year, involving the suppression of its legal existence through a so-called return of the priests and the faithful to the Orthodox Church. The act of "religious unification", as it was referred to in state documents, imposed by way of violence and abuse, was legally sanctioned on the 1 December 1948.⁶ The bishops, who were arrested at the end of October, were detained in different prisons, based on the administrative orders issued by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Numerous theologians, professors and priests shared this fate, while many other clerics were the victims of judicial show trials. Outlawed by Communist authorities, harassed by the infamous Securitate (the Romanian Communist secret service) and by the Ministry of Cults (reorganized as the Department of Cults in 1957), the Greek-Catholic Church managed to survive these years of harsh persecution.⁷ The loyalty that the bishops and a significant part of the clergy and the faithful showed towards Rome, publicly affirmed between 1955 and 1956 in the context of a superficial and short lasting de-Stalinization process and in the form of an ample petition movement echoing beyond the Iron Curtain, became grounds for severe punishment later on, with the applied sanctions following the repressive path familiar to the Bucharest regime.⁸ In turn, the Roman Catholic Church confronted its own wave of persecution. Since its last two bishops who remained free refused to elaborate, as the new legislation required them to, a new statute of the Roman Catholic Church, more favorable to the interests of the regime, the two were eventually arrested in June 1949. However, the

⁵ Cristian Vasile, *Între Vatican și Kremlin. Biserica Greco-Catolică în timpul regimului comunist*, București: Curtea Veche, 2003, p. 190; Bucur, *Din istoria Bisericii Greco-Catolice Române*, pp. 196-201.

⁶ C. Vasile, *Între Vatican și Kremlin*, pp. 192-202; I.-M. Bucur, *Din istoria Bisericii Greco-Catolice Române*, pp. 202-220.

⁷ C. Vasile, *Între Vatican și Kremlin*, pp. 212-226.

⁸ Ovidiu Bozgan, "Mișcarea petiționară greco-catolică din 1956", în *Studii de istoria Bisericii*, ed. Ovidiu Bozgan, București: Editura Universității din București, 2000, pp. 168-178; Ioan-Marius Bucur, *Culpa de a fi greco-catolic. Procesul episcopului Alexandru Rusu (1957)*, Cluj-Napoca: Argonaut and MEGA, 2015, pp. V-XLII.

expectation of the authorities that these arrests would decrease the resistance of the Church, which was faced with the prospect of its transformation into a compliant institution, were, in part, proven wrong. The appointment by the bishops of substitute ordinaries allowed the Church to withstand the increasing pressure of Communist power, which sought to create a Roman Catholic Church that was obedient to the regime.⁹ The offensive against the Roman Catholic Church was also pursued in other fields: its social, medical and charitable institutions were confiscated, and fifteen religious orders and congregations were outlawed, while the members of others were politically persecuted, on the grounds of supporting Catholic resistance against the government's policies of subordination and control.¹⁰ Furthermore, the Catholic press was banned, and religious literature became scarce as a result of the strict control the Department of Cults held over its circulation. The reduction of the number of students allowed to attend the only theological institute recognized by the Communist government, as well as the massive arrests of priests at the end of the 1940s and throughout the 1950s, deprived numerous parishes of pastoral care.¹¹ An additional issue was that of jurisdiction since, based on the law of 1948, the government only acknowledged two out of the five dioceses that existed up to that point, namely the archdiocese of Bucharest and the diocese of Alba Iulia, in Transylvania. Moreover, following the successive arrests of several substitute ordinaries, the regime attempted to impose, through force and blackmail, the appointment in administrative positions of more obedient clerics, who were either regarded with great suspicion or contested by priests throughout the country, without being recognized by the Vatican either.¹²

Although by the end of the 1950s Catholic communities in Romania were in a rather precarious situation, several internal and international events that took place in the course of the 1960s fueled hopes towards the improvement of their situation. At the beginning of the 1960s, the emergence of the national-communist ideology brought on significant internal shifts. The Communist leaders in Bucharest took advantage of the anti-Soviet stance of the Romanian people in order to attract popular support in their strife against

⁹ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eşec*, pp. 40-43, 51.

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 77-78.

¹¹ Ibidem, pp. 79-82.

¹² Ibidem, pp. 38-55. For the situation of the Bucharest archdiocese, see Marius Oanță, "Situația canonică din arhidieceza romano-catolică de București (1948-1964)", în *Studii de istorie ecleziastică*, ed. Marius Oanță Craiova: Editura Siteh, 2018, pp. 233-248.

Moscow.¹³ The new approach initiated by some leaders of the “old guard” was continued by Nicolae Ceaușescu. Claiming autonomy from Moscow, Ceaușescu encouraged, throughout the first years of his regime, economic policies meant to improve the standard of living, a certain degree of pluralism in the internal debates within the Communist Party, as well as a limited and short lived liberalization of the cultural sphere. Although his reforms never attained the scale of those implemented in other socialist countries of East-Central Europe, Ceaușescu nonetheless managed to create a favorable image of himself in the West, namely that of a reformer whose actions were inconvenient for Moscow. For instance, his speech following the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia substantially increased his popularity in the country as well as his international notoriety, as he came to be perceived as an approachable figure by Western governments.¹⁴

The new regime also made minor concessions towards the legally recognized Churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, merely tolerated under Communist rule since it was lacking a statute acknowledged by the government, as pertaining to the 1948 law. For example, in the case of Márton Áron, the only Roman Catholic bishop also recognized by the Holy See, the communist authorities had his house arrest lifted and allowed him to travel to Rome.¹⁵ A small number of theologians were granted permission to study in Rome, after being thoroughly checked by the Securitate.¹⁶ Beginning with the 1970s, Western charitable organizations, including the Catholic ones, were permitted to send material and financial aid to churches in Romania, albeit under the strict supervision of the Department of Cults and the specialized structures of the Securitate.¹⁷ The reception of the representatives of the legally recognized cults in Romania organized by Ceaușescu on the 29 February 1968 was meant to reinforce his positive image both internally and internationally. As stated above, the concessions were rather limited, the Greek-Catholic case

¹³ Dennis Deletant, *Teroarea comunistă în România. Gheorghiu-Dej și statul polițienesc, 1948-1965*, Iași: Ed. Polirom, 2001, p. 218.

¹⁴ Cristina Petrescu, *From Robin Hood to Don Quixote. Resistance and Dissent in Communist Romania*, București: Editura Enciclopedică, 2013, pp. 68-69.

¹⁵ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, p. 188.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 82.

¹⁷ The activity of Catholic organizations supporting the Catholic communities in Eastern Europe was also surveilled by the Securitate. One of the many available examples can be found in Arhiva Consiliului Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității, (ACNSAS), Fond Documentar, 69/2, pp. 162-169.

being the most relevant in this regard. As opposed to Czechoslovakia, where the Dubček regime allowed the reinstatement of the Greek-Catholic Church, Ceaușescu never considered the recognition of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church. However, Greek Catholic priests holding church service at their homes stopped being arrested, as they had been in the 1950s, and Greek-Catholic bishops clandestinely consecrated were not imprisoned or sent to Orthodox monasteries anymore for pleading the cause of their church. However, administrative investigations, warnings, house searches and the dismantling of active groups who asked for the reconsideration of the Greek-Catholic church status would continue until the fall of the Communist regime.¹⁸

Another telling example of the limited nature of the concessions made by the Ceaușescu regime on matters of religious freedom can be identified in the dialogue between Romania and the Holy See, which took place, with several interruptions, between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s. As it is well known, the dialogue initiated by the Holy See with the Communist regimes of East-Central Europe, also known as the “Vatican *Ostpolitik*”, launched by Pope John XXIII and intensified by Pope Paul VI, set as one of its main goals the normalization of the situation of local Catholic Churches which were, without exception, the victims of repressive policies meant to transform them into instruments controlled by the Communist regimes and to diminish the spiritual, cultural and social importance of religion. As the authorities in Bucharest eventually abandoned their project of creating a “national” Roman Catholic Church, they gradually turned to a position perceived by the Roman Curia as a “limited *détente*”.¹⁹ It was in this context that Monsignor A. Casaroli engaged in informal talks with diplomats from the Romanian embassy in Rome. The issues that were approached referred to the situation of the Catholic communities, the possibility of filling the vacancies of the Roman Catholic bishoprics and the prospect of resuming diplomatic relations. Communist leaders in Bucharest initially adopted a cautious stance, based on the analyses and evaluations of the Department of Cults. One of the arguments against this prudent, if not outright suspicious stance, was a matter of prejudice, widely shared by all Communist governments, concerning the supranational nature of the Holy See, with a potential agreement being regarded as a

¹⁸ C. Vasile, *Între Vatican și Kremlin*, pp. 275-276.

¹⁹ Achile Silvestrini, “La Santa Sede nella Ostpolitik e nella OSCE”, in *Politica internazionale della Santa Sede, 1965-1990*, ed. Giovanni Barberini, Perugia: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 1983, p. 50.

“violation of national sovereignty”. Nevertheless, one year later, probably under the influence of the fact that other Communist countries were also negotiating with the Vatican, the leadership in Bucharest accepted the initiation of “unofficial and confidential contacts” between the ambassador of socialist Romania in Rome and the Vatican.²⁰ Although the talks did not register any significant progress, following Monsignor Casaroli’s suggestion the Romanian Prime Minister and the Minister of Foreign Affairs were granted, during an official visit in Rome, a private audience to Pope Paul VI, on 24 January 1968. In their brief encounter, the Prime Minister insisted on the issue of the people’s unity based on Communist rule, while also noticing that the two churches, Orthodox and Greek-Catholic, had previously been a matter of dispute, definitively settled in 1948.²¹ At the end of the same year, the first visit to Bucharest of a representative of the Holy See in nearly four decades took place. The envoy of the Vatican, Monsignor Giovanni Cheli, was also received by Patriarch Justinian. Their meeting was uncontroversial, as the litigious subject of the Greek-Catholic Church was not explicitly tackled, although the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church stated that his church would not admit any divisions, “neither on political, nor on religious grounds”, being “close to the rulers of the country on this matter”.²² The delegates were not allowed to meet the clandestinely consecrated Greek Catholic bishops, but they were allowed to visit the Greek-Catholic bishop Iuliu Hossu, the only survivor among the bishops of 1948. The dialogue between Monsignor Chelli and the representatives of the Department of Cults continued on the occasion of further visits in 1969 and 1970, yet the differences between the two parts persisted, as reflected in the divergent strategies pursued by the Vatican and the Communist government. While the priority of the Bucharest regime was to elaborate a statute of the Roman Catholic Church according to the law of 1948, the first concern of the Vatican was the matter of the religious hierarchy and the dioceses disbanded by the government.²³ These discrepancies led to the postponement of a substantial dialogue between the two sides. Before contacts were resumed, Ceaușescu was granted an audience by Pope Paul VI on 26 May 1973. The disagreement between the two became clear as soon as the Pope brought the issue of the Catholic Church into discussion. For Ceaușescu, the matter of the

²⁰ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, pp. 246-247, 249.

²¹ C. Vasile, *Între Vatican și Kremlin*, p. 263; Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, p. 262.

²² O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, p. 203.

²³ *Ibidem*, pp. 266-272.

Greek-Catholic Church was “irrevocably closed forever”. Nonetheless, he was favorable to providing a statute based solution to the problem of the Roman Catholic Church. The subject of bilateral relations was not mentioned.²⁴ Finally, negotiations began in January 1975, but it soon became obvious that the two sides were still divergent. While the priorities on the agenda of the Holy See diplomats were related to the naming of an archbishop in Bucharest, the number of dioceses and the naming of bishops, the religious activities and the matter of religious orders and congregations, for the Department of Cults the main concern was elaborating a statute of the Roman Catholic Church. The following rounds of negotiation, carried in October 1976 and July 1977, did not prove more fruitful.²⁵ Although, according to the evaluation of the Department of Cults prior to the final talks, Monsignor Luigi Poggi had expressed optimism about the dialogue with the Romanian state in the aftermath of the Final Act of Helsinki, at the end of the talks Monsignor Poggi disappointedly noted that “we might say that we have wasted our time from 1975 until today”.²⁶ Nevertheless, the Holy See chose not to abandon the talks, and in January 1978 it sent a statute project to Bucharest, which had been previously discussed with the ordinaries within the country. However, after being analyzed by the Department of Cults, the project was rejected in April, yet the Department agreed with the continuation of the talks based on a new one.²⁷ Given the circumstances in the Vatican in the fall of the same year, the delegation’s return with a new project was postponed.

As it is well known, 1978 was “the year of the three popes”. After the death of Pope Paul VI, the head of the Catholic Church elected by the College of Cardinals was Albino Luciani, who took the name of John Paul I, and whose election brought great hope. His unexpected death was a shocking event for the cardinals, who were once again summoned to find a successor. Certainly, the choice of cardinal Karol Wojtyła was a great surprise, yet he was not an unknown figure to the cardinals, nor to the Catholic hierarchy and the dignitaries of the Roman Curia. In fact, he had also received a few votes in the previous election.²⁸ The reaction of the world press was focused, as expected, on the novelty of electing a non-Italian pope. At the same time,

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 282-283.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, pp. 292-318.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 319.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, pp. 321-326.

²⁸ George Weigel, *Martor al speranței: Biografia Papei Ioan Paul al II-lea, 1920-1950*, Târgu Lăpuș: Editura Galaxia Gutenberg, 2007, pp. 301-306.

several commentators observed that the election of a Polish Pope could have unexpected consequences for the development of the Cold War. Among the Communist leadership in Moscow, as well as in several East-Central European socialist countries, the election of Pope John Paul II was perceived as alarming. In the first evaluations requested by the Kremlin, he was described as being of a right wing orientation and having antisocialist convictions, and it was anticipated that his criticism of Communist countries on matters of human rights would be harsh. Furthermore, it was expected that he would not hesitate to defy both the legitimacy of the Communist regimes and the Soviet hegemony in ECE.²⁹ As far as the Romanian Communist regime is concerned, the research on the matter has not identified any particular reaction of the authorities in Bucharest after Pope John Paul II was elected. However, the reports of the Securitate indicated that the active Catholic milieus were expressing their hope that a Pope coming from a Communist country would revitalize the activity of the Catholic Church and would adopt a stronger stance in the dialogues initiated with socialist countries.³⁰

In July 1979, Monsignors Poggi and Bukovsky, the delegates of the Holy See in negotiations with Romania, handed in the text of the new project of the statute of the Roman Catholic Church and asked for Ceaușescu to receive a personal message on behalf of Pope Wojtyła. In the first part of his letter, John Paul II expressed hope that the new project would contribute to providing a solution to the “serious problems” of the Catholic Church of Latin rite in Romania. Further on, he mentioned the existence of the Greek-Catholic Church, its historical merits for the spiritual and cultural progress of the Romanian people, the circumstances in which it was suppressed in 1948 by violation of the legal provisions pertaining to religious freedom, and the fact that Romanian citizens did not enjoy their rights as stipulated in the Constitution of 1965, as well as in the international pacts and treaties ratified by the Romanian state. Conclusively, the Pope expressed his faith that the problem of the Greek-Catholic Church would find “a suitable solution, in short time”.³¹ Ceaușescu’s reply was unequivocal: the matter of the Greek-Catholic Church had been closed forever in 1948, and any further talk on that issue would only jeopardize „the collaboration between churches,

²⁹ Felix Corley, “Soviet Reactions to the Election of Pope John Paul II”, *Religion, State and Society*, 22 (1/1994): p. 41.

³⁰ ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, 6928, pp. 189-189v, 196.

³¹ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, pp. 433-436.

based on mutual trust and respect".³² Denying the Greek-Catholic problem did not mean that the Communist authorities were unaware of its existence. In the 1970s, in accordance with the directives it received from the head of state, the Securitate continued to carry a wide range of actions against Greek-Catholic communities. The particular targets were the bishops and priests who were actively manifesting, such as those who wrote memoirs to the authorities, for their Church to regain legal status.³³ The Securitate reports registered the fact that, in the post-Helsinki period, as well as after the election of Pope John Paul II, bishops and clerics became more active, and were joined by some intellectuals. Furthermore, on the general background of increasing dissatisfaction with the abandonment of limited liberalization in favor of a neo-Stalinist regime with nationalist overtones, as well as that of noticeable discontent regarding the poor economic performances of the regime and their major social effects, a series of initiatives and groups claiming the observation of the legal commitments assumed by the Romanian state through the ratification of the Helsinki Accords started to appear.³⁴ The Ceaușescu regime replied by extending the attributions of the Securitate and by initiating a massive internal and international propaganda campaign meant to hide the realities within the country.³⁵ Some of the actions undertaken by the Securitate abroad, sometimes in collaboration with the Department of Cults, endeavors that were also related to the Vatican, sought to improve the image and promote the interests of the Communist rule. In that regard, agents recruited from the Catholic clergy of both rites were being used. For example, in the group comprising both priests and faithful that went to Rome as participants to the beatification ceremony of the Capuchin monk Jeremiah of Wallachia, which took place on 30 October

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 436-438.

³³ For the reaction of the Securitate to the memoirs received by the Communist rule from the consecrated Greek-Catholic bishops after 1948, see ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, 69/14, p. 35; 69/28, pp. 6-18, 43.

³⁴ For instance, The Committee for the Salvation of the Romanian Greek-Catholic Church, which, beginning on 12 August 1977, disseminated several „appeals” in favor of the legal recognition of the Greek-Catholic Church; ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, 69/6, pp. 44-47; pp. 87, 92-95; 69/28, pp. 132, 176-177, 189, 231-234.

³⁵ For example, “The Program of Measures for the Prevention and Countering of Hostile Activity Carried Out against Our Country under Religious Cover”, drawn by the Department of State Security on 16 May 1981, sent to the Directions and County Inspectorates of the Securitate. The document was published in Marius Oprea, *Banalitatea răului. O istorie a Securității în documente 1949-1989*, Iași: Ed. Polirom, 2002, pp. 459-467.

1983, eight Roman Catholic priests and three Greek-Catholic priests were informers for the Securitate.³⁶ In other cases, the publication in the Western Catholic press of articles favorable to the Communist regime in Bucharest, written by priests, was also encouraged.³⁷

On this background, the negotiations between Romania and the Vatican reached a deadlock, since the Romanian authorities did not communicate to the Holy See any reply to the project of July 1979, although at the end of December 1980 a version of a counter-project had been finalized.³⁸ Nonetheless, the authorities did not intend to suspend their dialogue with the Holy See, being aware of the political opportunities and image costs involved.³⁹ When he returned to Bucharest in June 1981, Monsignor Poggi presented the Pope's response to Ceaușescu's message concerning a possible collaboration on the occasion of the Security and Cooperation Conference in Madrid. The Holy See was willing to cooperate with Romania as long as the regime was willing to regulate the status of the Roman-Catholic Church.⁴⁰ The discrepancies between Ceaușescu's international ambitions and his internal policies became increasingly evident, as the latter turned more restrictive on matters of human rights in general and religious freedom in particular, and the constraints on national minorities were now more obvious both to the Vatican and to the Western states. Western criticisms of the Communist regime in Bucharest, coming from governments and international organizations alike, including religious groups that were advocating for the observation of human rights, were interpreted in Bucharest as an offensive directed at socialist countries in general and Romania in particular. In a documentary material elaborated by the Securitate in 1983, whose language resembled the early Cold War rhetoric, it was stated that, on the background of an intensifying world crisis, "religious ideologies" were allied with subversive, anticommunist forces, and multiple centers and organizations, including several of a religious nature, were being reactivated, in order to pursue specific purposes: amplifying anticommunist propaganda, instigating to claims for a "so-called freedom of consciousness", or misinforming public opinion on the "so-called restriction of religious

³⁶ ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, 69/31, pp. 15-15v.

³⁷ For example, the article published by the Roman Catholic priest V. P., in the West German Catholic publication *Das Heilige Land*, December 1987, in ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, 69/31, pp. 21-24.

³⁸ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, p. 334.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 335.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 336.

freedom".⁴¹ Among the mentioned organizations, "Caritas" was described as an information agency meant to reactivate the Roman Catholic Church and restore the former Greek-Catholic Church. Furthermore, the Vatican was accused of intensifying its anti-Romanian activities by "inciting, in different ways, the Catholic believers to engage in actions of a harmful nature for the politics of the state".⁴² The aggressive language found in many documents, reports and analyses elaborated by the structures of the party-state reflect the anxiety of the Communist leaders in Bucharest, shared by their Eastern European counterparts, that the emphasis John Paul II placed on observing fundamental human rights, particularly religious freedom, human dignity or the freedom of association, turned the Church into a bulwark of legitimate values, in clear opposition to the party state.⁴³

An event which took place in Rome at the beginning of 1982 offered a pretext for the Communist authorities to temporarily suspend the negotiations with the Holy See. On 6 January 1982, the consecration of the Greek-Catholic cleric Traian Crișan as archbishop took place, and he was concomitantly appointed as the secretary of the Congregation for the cause of saints. The declarations pronounced on this occasion by Pope John Paul II, supporting the freedom of the Greek-Catholic Church, determined the bitter reaction of the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church who, a few days later, addressed a telegram to the Pope in which it described his declarations as a "prohibited intervention into the internal affairs of the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) as well those of Romania, and independent and sovereign country".⁴⁴ Later on, Patriarch Justin of the ROC also sent a letter to the Pope, in which he reiterated the ideas expressed in the telegram of the Holy See. The telegram sent to Pope John Paul II was also published in a central daily newspaper, indicating that the conflict became public. The reaction of the ROC was organized at the initiative and with the support of the Communist authorities, who used this episode in order to prolong the discussions on the matter of the statute of the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁵

⁴¹ The Ministry of Internal Affairs/The Department of State Security, *Aspecte din activitatea ostilă desfășurată de elemente autohtone incitate de emisari ai unor centre și organizații religioase reacționare din străinătate. Măsuri întreprinse de organele de Securitate pentru prevenirea și contracararea acțiunilor dușmănoase desfășurate sub acoperirea religiei*, Serviciul Editorial și Cinematografic, 1983, p. 3. The publication is marked "top secret".

⁴² Ibidem, pp. 5-6.

⁴³ S. Saxonberg, *The Fall*, p. 214.

⁴⁴ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eșec*, p. 110.

⁴⁵ Ibidem, p. 111.

However, several Securitate reports registered positive reactions brought by the declarations of the Pope in Greek-Catholic milieus, as well hopes regarding the relegalization of the Church following the intervention of the Vatican. In that regard, some bishops and priests were attempting to revitalize the Greek-Catholic clergy, seeking to convince young people to study theology in order for them to be secretly ordained.⁴⁶

Two years later, when, following consultations between diplomats of the Vatican and the Romanian authorities, it was agreed that Ioan Robu would be appointed as head of the Roman-catholic archdiocese of Bucharest and his investment as bishop would take place in Rome, expectations regarding the prospect of resuming the negotiation of the statute of the Roman Catholic Church reemerged.⁴⁷ In the course of the discussions between the Romanian officials and John Paul II, as well as other dignitaries of the Roman Curia, which were carried in Rome on the occasion of the investment, as well as in the talks with the Holy See delegation that later took place when the bishop was installed in Bucharest, the importance of the continuation of bilateral dialogue was highlighted, as was the need to regulate the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Romania through the statute. Moreover, during a meeting with a Romanian official, the Holy See Secretary of State, cardinal Casaroli, assessed that the Greek-Catholic issue, which he did not consider an “inexistent problem”, should not be prolonged *sine die*, nor make any dialogue impossible.⁴⁸ However, the Communist government in Bucharest kept utilizing the matter of the Greek-Catholic Church as a pretext to delay the negotiations that had been suspended in 1985. The Romanian Communist leaders, affected, as one Romanian historian has put it, by the international conspiracy syndrome, were not willing to make any concessions to the local church, nor did they want to continue the dialogue with the Holy See, probably realizing the tremendous discrepancy between their internal and international goals and the determination of Pope John Paul II to defend the rights of the Catholic Church and, in a more general sense, the rights of the people living beyond the Iron Curtain.⁴⁹

At the beginning of 1989, an incident occurred, the significance of which has not been clarified up to the present day. While on his way to India, where he had been invited by the head of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the country, the delegation of the Romanian Orthodox Church, led by Patriarch Teoctist, made a

⁴⁶ ACNSAS, Fond Documentar, 69/31, pp. 28-29.

⁴⁷ O. Bozgan, *Cronica unui eşec*, p. 340.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, pp. 342-343.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 346.

brief stop in Rome, on 4 January, where it was expected by a delegation of the Holy See. According to instructions received from Bucharest, at first, Romanian diplomats in Italy opposed a meeting between the Patriarch of the ROC and John Paul II, which was supposed to take place the second day. After strenuous consultations with the authorities back home, the visit was approved by the Communist leadership. The second day, the delegation of Romanian hierarchs was received by John Paul II with great warmth. On this occasion, John Paul II had a private talk with Patriarch Teoctist, about which nothing is known. Information and photographs of the ecumenical meeting between the Pope and the ROC delegation were published in *Osservatore Romano* and *Corriere della Serra*.⁵⁰ Ten years later, the two protagonists of the aforementioned episode would meet again, in a deeply transformed Romania. On this occasion, hundreds of thousands of Romanians, regardless of religion, flooded the streets of Bucharest to hear and see the one who, from the moment of his election, embodied the hopes of numerous Eastern Europeans who lived throughout the 1980s – Pope John Paul II. Asked by a journalist about the role John Paul II played in the fall of the Communist regimes, the former National Security Advisor of President Carter, Z. Brzeziński, affirmed: “The dominant mood up until that point was the inevitability of the existing system. After his first visit in Poland, in June 1979, the dominant mood became that of the non-inevitability of the system. I believe this was a fundamental transformation”.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ <https://ioncoja.ro/4-ianuarie-1989-patriarhul-teoctist-in-vizita-la-papa-ioan-paul-ii/>, accessed on 10 June 2023.

⁵¹ Edward Stourton, “John Paul II: the Man and His Ideas”, in *The Legacy of John Paul II*, eds. Michael A. Hayes, Gerald O’Collins, New York: Burns&Oates, 2008, p. 30.

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