

THE ROMANIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH BETWEEN THE ALLIANCE FOR THE UNION OF ROMANIANS AND THE PUTINIST TEMPTATION: ULTRANATIONALIST PROPAGANDA AMONG ORTHODOX CLERGYMEN AND THE RUSSIAN WAR AGAINST UKRAINE

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Abstract. The present essay details the intricate relationship between the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy and the conflict in Ukraine on various levels (philanthropic, social, ecclesiological, political). While most of the Orthodox bishops in Romania continue to voice their concern about the war, few condemn the complicity of the Russian Orthodox Church in endorsing the military involvement of Russia in Ukraine. Another factor that contributed to the moral anaesthesia of the Orthodox bishops has to do with the silent political preference for the pro-Russian, ultranationalist Alliance of the Union of Romanians party (AUR). While the Romanian Patriarchate condemned vehemently the political instrumentalization of Orthodoxy, against the official position of the hierarchy, a part of the regular and monastic clergy still nurtures admiration for Vladimir Putin, seen as the main benefactor of the Orthodox Church worldwide and his pro-Christian policies.

Keywords: War in Ukraine, Romanian Orthodox Church, war theology, philanthropy, the Alliance for the Union of Romanians, Russian Orthodox Church, autocephaly.

The public statements of Archbishop Teodosie (Petrescu) of Constanța at the local radio in support of President Putin depicted the Russian leader as the most important Orthodox donor for the Holy Places of the Orthodox world.²

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² “ÎPS Teodosie, osanale pentru Putin: «M-am minunat câte jertfe au făcut Putin și Medvedev, și noi îi judecăm ca pe niște răufăcatori»”, *Digi24* (9.02.2022), <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/ips-teodosie-osanale-pentru-putin-m-am-minunat-cate-jertfe-au-facut-putin-si-medvedev-si-noi-ii-judecam-ca-pe-niste-raufacatori-1831149> (accessed 15.01.2023). For the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate’s reaction, see Andreea PAVEL, “BOR, reacție după ce ÎPS Teodosie l-a laudat pe Vladimir Putin: ”Nu reprezintă poziția



Archbishop Teodosie's remarks sparked uproar among the Romanian public. For the Orthodox archbishop, it was not the first time he sided with the Russian Orthodoxy or openly supported important representatives of the Putin regime to expand their influence among Romanian Orthodox clergymen. A few years back, the press reported about the whereabouts of Aleksandr Dughin in Romania, the main ideologue of Eurasianism, as guest of Archbishop Teodosie in his private nunnery in Dorna Arini.³

The present contribution aims to provide some tentative answers to several poignant questions regarding the affinities of the Orthodox clergy with the Russian Orthodoxy and the pro-Orthodox policies of the Russian state. The main argument relates to the clandestine nature of these sympathies, not because of fear of reprimand from the church hierarchy, but rather from the state and its authorities. As a form of covert fundamentalist Orthodoxy inspired by the political and cultural practices of interwar fascism and national Communism, the ultranationalist, pro-Russian minority inside Romanian Orthodoxy gains traction among some part of Orthodox clergymen especially in Eastern Romania.⁴ As a form of religious “underground within”, the ultranationalist leanings and the anti-Ukrainian feelings of the Romanian Orthodox clergymen constitute a fundamentalist sub-culture inside the Romanian Orthodox Church.⁵ What was the top-down reaction of the Romanian Patriarchate to the war in Ukraine? How did Orthodox priests still favor Putin and Russia over Ukraine despite the

Bisericii, vorbește în nume strict personal/ Obișnuiește să se exprime atipic inclusiv pe teme extra-bisericești”, *G4Media* (9.02.2022), <https://www.g4media.ro/bor-reactie-dupa-ce-ips-teodosie-l-a-laudat-pe-vladimir-putin-nu-reprezinta-pozitia-bisericii-vorbeste-in-nume-strict-personal-obisnuieste-sa-se-exprime-atipic-inclusiv-pe-teme-extra-bise.html> (accessed 15.01.2023).

³ Albert PĂTRU, “Patriarhul Daniel i-a luat lui Teodosie mănăstirea cu hotel și SPA de fițe de la Dorna Arini”, *Jurnalul de Constanța* (16.01.2021), <https://jurnaluldeconstanta.ro/2021/01/16/patriarhul-daniel-i-a-luat-lui-teodosie-manastirea-cu-hotel-si-spa-de-fite-de-la-dorna-arini/> (accessed on 15.01.2023).

⁴ Ionuț BILIUȚĂ, “Constructing Fascist Hagiographies: The Genealogy of the Prison Saints Movement in Contemporary Romania,” *Contemporary European History* 31.3 (2022) 435–455; Monica GRIGORE-DOVLETE, *À la recherche de miracles: Pèlerines, religion vécue et la Roumanie postcommuniste*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2020.

⁵ Anca ȘINCAN and Ionuț BILIUȚĂ, “Introduction,” *Review of Ecumenical Studies* 14.2 (2022) 193–197.

obvious anti-Russian feelings of the Orthodox clergy? What were the main vectors of Russian influence in Romanian society in general and inside the Orthodox Church in particular?

The Romanian Patriarchate and Its Attitude Towards Russia and the War in Ukraine

Confronted with a wave of criticism for their passivity during the pandemic, when several bishops openly criticized the state or the vaccination process or, in private, the restraint shown by Patriarch Daniel to the unpopular confinement rules imposed by the state, which interfered with the normal schedule of divine offices, the Patriarchate found in the exercise of war-time philanthropy the much-needed respite. Practiced from the bottom to the top of the institution, charitable actions fended off the criticisms from within or outside the church. The humanitarian initiatives of priests and associations on behalf of the Ukrainian refugees swept through the church at all levels. By setting in motion its proverbial system of collecting donations from the state institutions, private entrepreneurs, and the everyday parishioners, the Romanian Orthodox Church allowed itself a moment of respite after being criticized vehemently for building mostly out of public funds the Cathedral for the Salvation of the Nation and mismanagement of public money.⁶

While most of the private donors and the priests who joined hands with volunteers were genuine in their desire to alleviate the sufferings of Ukrainian refugees, through its media channels the hierarchy instrumentalized and channeled the collective wave of solidarity with the Ukrainian refugees as a reassuring blank check, meant to silence the opposition from the civil society that unmasked its moral and pecuniary corruption.⁷ Except but a few hierarchs (Bishop Ignatie of

⁶ Giuseppe TATEO, *Under the Sign of the Cross: The People's Salvation Cathedral and the Church Building Industry in Postsocialist Romania* (Space and Place 18), New York: Berghahn Books, 2020, 117–143.

⁷ Sorin IONIȚE, Ajutoare de aproape 24 milioane de lei din partea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române pentru victimele războiului din Ucraina, *Basilica* (21.03.2022), <https://basilica.ro/ajutoare-de-aproape-24-milioane-de-lei-din-partea-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane-pentru-victimele-razboiului-din-ucraina/>; Ștefana TOTORCEA, Comunicat: Biserica a oferit ajutor umanitar de peste 5 milioane euro de la declanșarea războiului în Ucraina, *Basilica* (30.03.2022), <https://basilica.ro/comunicat-biserica-a-oferit-ajutor-umanitar-de-peste-5-milioane-euro-de-la-declansarea-razboiului-in-ucraina/>; Iulian Dumitrașcu, 6 milioane euro, valoarea

Huși, Archbishop Calinic) who personally took the lead in assisting the refugees with basic commodities, visited them at the border to provide them spiritual assistance and comfort, or sheltered them in their monasteries, the leadership of the Orthodox Church headed by Patriarch Daniel Ciobotea preferred the comfort of their residential palaces rather than facing the cold at the border, and urged their clergy and flocks to collect money, foodstuff, or cloathing for Ukrainian refugees.⁸

As in other circumstances where the hierarchs felt undecided which course of action to pursue, the bishops headed by Patriarch Daniel practiced initially ambiguity towards the reality of war and the presence of Ukrainian refugees, the policy of empty words in condemning the Russian aggression in Ukraine and the complicity of the Russian Patriarchate with the Kremlin regime, and voiced a feeble and hesitant compassion towards the refugees.⁹ Through their appeals in sermons and pastoral letters, the hierarchs attempted to control and stir

sprijinului material oferit până acum de Biserică pentru victimele războiului, *Basilica* (4.04.2022), <https://basilica.ro/6-milioane-euro-valoarea-sprrijinului-material-oferit-pana-acum-de-biserica-pentru-victimele-razboiului/>; Ștefana TOTORCEA, Comunicat: Ajutorul oferit de Biserică refugiaților a ajuns la 6,5 milioane euro. Bilanțul perioadei 1-14 aprilie (21.04.2022), <https://basilica.ro/comunicat-ajutorul-oferit-de-biserica-refugiatilor-a-ajuns-la-6-milioane-si-jumatate-euro-bilantul-perioadei-1-14-aprilie/>; Sorin IONIȚE, Ajutorul oferit de Biserică pentru victimele războiului din Ucraina a depășit 7 milioane de euro: Comunicat, *Basilica* (25.05.2022), <https://basilica.ro/ajutorul-oferit-de-biserica-pentru-victimele-razboiului-din-ucraina-a-depasit-7-milioane-de-euro-comunicat/>; Iulian DUMITRAȘCU, Ajutorul oferit de Biserică pentru refugiați a ajuns la 7,6 milioane euro. Bilanț 16 mai – 1 iulie, *Basilica* (06.07.2022), <https://basilica.ro/ajutorul-oferit-de-biserica-pentru-refugiati-a-ajuns-la-76-milioane-euro-bilant-16-mai-1-iulie/>.

⁸ Arhiepiscopul Sucevei și Rădăuților, ÎPS Calinic, a fost alături de refugiații din Ucraina care trec prin vama Siret Publicat (26.02.2022), <https://www.ziarelive.ro/stiri/arhiepiscopul-sucevei-si-radautilor-ips-calinic-a-fost-alaturi-de-refugiati-din-ucraina-care-trec-prin-vama-siret.html>; Iulian Dumitrașcu, Ajutorul umanitar actual al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române pentru victimele războiului din Ucraina, *Basilica* (14.03.2022), <https://basilica.ro/ajutorul-umanitar-actual-al-bisericii-ortodoxe-romane-pentru-victimele-razboiului-din-ucraina/> (accessed 23.01.2023).

⁹ “Pastorală Patriarhului Daniel de Sfintele Paști 2022”, <https://basilica.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Pastorală-Paști-2022-a-Patriarhului-Daniel.pdf>; IPS Teofan, Mitropolitul Moldovei și Bucovinei: „Nașterea lui Hristos – pământul devenit Cer” (Scrisoare pastorală, 2022), <https://doxologia.ro/ips-teofan-mitropolitul-moldovei-bucovinei-nasterea-lui-hristos-pamantul-devenit-cer-scrisoare> (accessed 23.01.2023).

collective philanthropy in their interest, to demonstrate before state authorities and the secular critics that national Orthodoxy proved its relevance at the social level.¹⁰ Furthermore, the bishops were at the forefront of these initiatives and their communion with the Orthodox sister-church of Ukraine had to be shown through humanitarian aid to those in need.

The 2022 Easter Pastoral Letters of the Romanian Patriarchate spoke about the need to pray for peace and encouraged the extension of charity toward Ukrainian refugees to an unforeseeable future.¹¹ Veiled condemnations of the war were made by many of the bishops. Except for Patriarch Daniel, who condemned adamantly the Russian aggression against Ukraine, and Bishop Ignatie of Huși who also voiced criticism regarding the nefarious role of the Russian Orthodox Church that departed from its role in consolidating Christ's love among its believers, no other bishop dared to criticize the support of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to the war in Ukraine and the atrocities committed by the Russian occupying forces against the civilian population.¹² Nevertheless, in the pastoral letters and the decisions of the Holy Synod in Bucharest there was no mention of an official acknowledgement of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine, nor a condemnation of the Russian military aggression and the complicity of the Moscow Patriarchate in perpetrating war against their Ukrainian Orthodox brethren.

¹⁰ Daniela MICUȚARIU, „Uniți pentru pace”, platformă lansată de Arhiepiscopia Sucevei și Rădăuților, pentru ajutorarea refugiaților din Ucraina, *Monitorul de Suceava* (30.03.2022) <https://www.monitorulsv.ro/Ultima-ora-local/2022-03-30/Uniti-pentru-pace-platforma-lansata-de-Arhipiscopia-Sucevei-si-Radautilor-pentru-ajutorarea-refugiatilor-din-Ucraina>; Alexandru BOBOC, IPS Nifon a vorbit în Comisia Europeană despre modul în care Biserica a ajutat milioane de refugiați ucraineni (28.01.2023), <https://basilica.ro/ips-nifon-a-vorbit-in-comisia-europeana-despre-modul-in-care-biserica-a-ajutat-milioane-de-refugiati-ucraineni/> (accessed 23.01.2023).

¹¹ Pastorală Patriarhului Daniel de Sfintele Paști 2022, <https://basilica.ro/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Pastorală-Paști-2022-a-Patriarhului-Daniel.pdf> (accessed 23.01.2023).

¹² Simona VOICU, “Episcopul Hușilor: «Patriarhul Kirill al Rusiei are îndatorirea morală să îi amintească liderului pravoslavnic de la Kremlin că Ortodoxia este întotdeauna de partea iubirii, nu a războiului»”, *Libertatea* (24.02.2022), <https://www.libertatea.ro/stiri/episcopul-husilor-patriarhul-kirill-al-rusiei-are-indatorirea-morala-sa-ii-aminteasca-liderului-pravoslavnic-de-la-kremlin-ca-ortodoxia-este-intotdeauna-de-partea-iubirii-nu-a-razboiului-3997724> (accessed 23.01.2023).

This dishonorable silence has multiple explanations. On the one hand, the Romanian Orthodox Church still lacks a war theology or a set of clear-cut rules how its clergy and Orthodox communities must behave during a regional conflict in a neighboring state such as Ukraine.¹³ Except for common prayers and special litanies introduced in the liturgical offices and public messages urging believers to alleviate the sufferings of the Ukrainian refugees, the Orthodox bishops seemed to be completely overwhelmed by the scale of the conflict and its ecclesiological implications for the Orthodox Church in its entirety.

While the response at the grassroots level of the Orthodox communities focused mainly in providing Ukrainian refugees with shelter and necessities, the hierarchy grappled with the issue of acknowledging the Orthodox Church of Ukraine's autocephaly from Moscow Patriarchate or issuing a public statement condemning the Russian Orthodox Church for its participation and backing of the Putin-regime in the war against Ukraine. The restraint displayed by the hierarchy towards the Russian Church stems from the long history of ecclesiastical diplomacy based on ambiguity and abstaining from taking sides, even in the ecumenical movement, professed by the Romanian Church since the days of the communist regime. In their dialogues with other Orthodox Churches and secular institutions such as the Romanian state or the European Union, the diplomats of the Romanian Orthodoxy boasted with the financial help provided by the parishes and monasteries rather than a condemnation of the Russian Patriarch and his Synod for their role in endorsing the war.

The Orthodox Clergy and their Behavior during the War: Philanthropy and Social Mobilization towards the Ukrainian Refugees Arriving to Romania

Another explanation for the fact that the hierarchy with Patriarch Daniel at its head took over the control of the public message about the war and the humanitarian aid towards Ukrainian refugees had to do with the state of mind of the Orthodox priests regarding Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church in

¹³ For a traditional account of a Byzantine/Orthodox war theology, see Alexander K. KYROU and Elizabeth H. PRODROMOU, "Debates on Just War, Holy War and Peace: Orthodox Christian Thought and Byzantine Imperial Attitudes Towards War", in *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, edited by Perry T. HAMALIS and Valerie A. KARRAS, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017, 215–251.

particular. The fall of communism in Romania in 1989 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1992 led to a gradual warming up of the Orthodox clergy's relations with Russian Orthodoxy.¹⁴ Despite the canonical war over the jurisdiction of Bessarabia, where up to the present day there are two parallel hierarchies (one dependent on Bucharest, another dependent on Moscow), many Orthodox believers, priests, monks, and even bishops undertook pilgrimages to the holy places and monasteries in Russia.¹⁵

Furthermore, theological dialogue sparked a wave of translations of Russian theologians, contemporary or ancient spiritual fathers, and Russian intellectuals in the official and independent publishing houses, an initiative that ensured the dissemination of a fictional and idealized account of Russian Orthodoxy that had nothing to do with reality. Through the lens of the Russian theologians of the Paris or American diasporas and the Western theologians enamored with Russian Orthodoxy, along the ultra-traditionalist and conservative Greek spiritual fathers (elders) Russian theology and the Russian Orthodox Church appeared for Romanian theologians and clergymen as a model to live up to both regarding the institutional relationship with the state and theological endeavors.¹⁶

Another bone of contention shared with the Russian Orthodox Church has to do with the European trajectory Romania embraced in the late 2000s. The 2007 admission of Romania to the European Union, although hailed initially by the hierarchs of the Orthodox Church as a national step forward toward the West, failed to garner support among the regular priests, the monks, and the ultranationalists. Nor did it strengthen the pro-Western sentiments of the Romanian clergymen.¹⁷ On

¹⁴ Gavril FLORA and Georgina SZILAGYI, "Church, Identity, Politics: Ecclesiastical Functions and Expectations Towards Churches in Post-1989 Romania", in *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Tradition Faces the 21st Century*, edited by Victor ROUDOMETOF, Alexander AGADJANIAN and Jerry PANKHURST, Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2005, 144–160; Lucian LEUȘTEAN, "The Orthodox Churches Beyond the Iron Curtain," in *Eastern Christianity and the Cold War, 1945-91*, edited by Lucian LEUȘTEAN, London: Routledge, 2010, 314–322.

¹⁵ *Adevărul despre Mitropolia Basarabiei*, Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1993; Lavinia STAN and Lucian TURCESCU, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 54–56.

¹⁶ Kristina STOECKL, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights*, London: Routledge, 2014, 10.

¹⁷ Adrian VELICU, *The Orthodox Church and National Identity in Post-Communist Romania*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2020.

the contrary it brewed resentment towards the Western values and foment dissent among Orthodox fundamentalist members of the clergy towards their bishops. One Romanian spiritual father even said that joining the European Union means the demise of the Romanian nation and the Orthodox Church.¹⁸

Confused by the rapid change and modernization of Romanian society associated with the increasing secularization of the public sphere and the gradual exclusion of religion from state business, dissatisfied with the hierarchy, the regular clergy looked for new guiding lights that confirmed their anti-Western dystopian views and presented the West as a place of apocalyptic atheism. Whether through the cultivation of the most radical anti-Western figures of the Athonite tradition or the recurrence of apparently functioning Russian *symphonia* between Church and state, the priests felt confirmed in their displeasure with the European Union, the secularization of the state, and the wave of increasing dissatisfaction with the meddling of the church in public finances.¹⁹

A further issue that confirmed some Romanian Orthodox priests in their anti-Western feelings had to do with the aggressive “ecumenism” propagated by the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy and perceived as treason of the Patristic legacy of the Orthodox Church. Revamping apocryphal texts from the Church Fathers and contemporary Orthodox theologians (Dumitru Stăniloae, Justin Popovič, Russian theologians of the Parisian exile), these priests condemned Christian dialogue and looked for confirmation at the anti-ecumenical position of the Russian Church.²⁰ On the same page, the 2016 Council of Crete rekindled the ecumenical debate with some priests reading into the withdrawal of the Russian Church from the

¹⁸ Vasilios N. MAKRIDES, “Orthodox Anti-Westernism Today: A Hindrance to European Integration?” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 9.3 (2009) 209–224.

¹⁹ Julia Anna LIS, *Antiwestliche Diskurse in der serbischen und griechischen Orthodoxie: Zur Konstruktion des «Westens» bei Nikolaj Velimirovič, Justin Popovič, Christos Yannaras und John S. Romanides*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2019; Bogdan LUBARDIĆ, “Revolt Against the Modern World”: Theology and the Political in the Thought of Justin Popovič”, in *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity: Common Challenges - Divergent Positions*, edited by Kristina STOECKL, Ingeborg GABRIEL and Aristotle PAPANIKOLAOU, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 207–220.

²⁰ Cyril Hovorun, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018, 77–80; Regina ELSNER, *The Russian Orthodox Church and Modernity: A Historical and Theological Investigation into Eastern Christianity between Unity and Plurality* (New York: ibidem Press, 2022), 243–250.

council a sign of Orthodox normalcy and opposition to the “heretical” dogma of ecumenism.²¹

Furthermore, through channels within the church, the Moscow Patriarchate fueled the discontent present in the Orthodox Church and sponsored the translation of brochures, manifestos, and leaflets against the promulgation of the decisions of the Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete.²² Unknowingly, the Russian Orthodoxy enlarged the gap that separates the traditionalist anti-ecumenists and the modernizers in the Romanian Orthodox Church, siding with the former.

Another important issue that contacts with Russian Orthodoxy helped with was the importance of nationalism for the Orthodox clergy.²³ While the hierarchy maintained a moderate claim to the fact that religion had a pivotal role within the state in legitimizing the state’s authority as deriving from God, some of the priests and the monks revived – sometimes unconsciously – the interwar fascist ideas of the Iron Guard that exhorted the interchangeable relation between nationalism/national specificity and Orthodoxy.²⁴ Moving to the wrong side of history, despite their visceral anti-Slavic feelings some of the most important and relevant spiritual fathers of Romanian Orthodoxy and their followers used the Russian example as a card to counter the need to accept the European ideal of unity in diversity, the importance of multiculturalism, or the protection of minorities of any kind. Paradoxically, the illiberal Russian Orthodoxy and its privileged status within the Russian state, its fortune, and direct access to the political factor developed into the model of state-church relations yearned for Orthodox nationalists in Romania. The “seduction of unreason” led to the glorification of strong men such as Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán as true leaders that opposed the wave of anti-

²¹ Hieromonk Lavrentie CARP, *Ortodoxia rănită sinodal. O critică a deciziilor luate în Creta*, Oradea: Astradom, 2019, 98–99.

²² Archimandrite Iustin Pârvu, *Biserica și noile erezii*, Petru Vodă: Petru Vodă Monastery, 2016; *Un an de luptă împotriva ecumenismului după “sinodul” din Creta. Carte document*, Bucharest: Glasul strămoșesc, 2017.

²³ Vasilios N. MAKRIDES, “Orthodox Christianity, Change, Innovation: Contradiction in Terms?” in *Innovation in the Orthodox Christian Tradition? The Question of Change in Greek Orthodox Thought and Practice*, edited by Trine STAUNING WILLERT, Lina MOLOKOTOS-LIEDERMAN, Abingdon: Ashgate, 2012, 19–53; HOVORUN, *Political Orthodoxies*, 165.

²⁴ Corneliu SIMUȚ, “Ideological Attempts to Build a Sustainable Program of Ecodominical Decommunization in Post-1989 Romania by Promoting the Notion of National Identity,” *Expository Times* 130.4 (2018) 146–147.

Christian destruction brought by Western decayed and depraved culture in Eastern Europe.²⁵ Ultrationalism associated with illiberalism constituted for a part of the Romanian Orthodoxy a spiritual bulwark against atheism and irreligiosity.²⁶

Subjects of cognitive dissonance, the exponents of this trail of thought helped and commiserated with Ukrainian refugees at the same time as hailing Putin as the savior of Orthodox civilization. Furthermore, once the conflict commenced, Orthodox nationalists uncovered the abuses suffered by the Romanian population in Bukovina and Southern Bessarabia, the restrictions imposed by the Ukrainian government on the teaching of Romanian in schools, and the denationalization policies implemented by the local and central Ukrainian authorities against the Romanian minority and the Romanian Orthodox priests in particular.²⁷ A reputed professor of Orthodox Dogmatic confided that “we Romanians are stupid: we helped the Ukrainians now in times of war while they do everything, they can turn our brothers away from their Romanian identity.” Rediscovered nationalism in Orthodox style led astray several priests and clergymen who thought that Ukrainian refugees should be left to their fates, and Romania should keep itself neutral from the conflict.

A Clerical Party?

Orthodox ultrationalists found a political outlet in the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR). Supported by the regular and monastic clergy, in the 2020 general elections held on 6 December 2020, the party won 9.2% of the general vote, a surprise to all the commentators of the Romanian public life. Headed by Claudiu Târziu and George Simion, the ideology of the political movement combines

²⁵ Anja HENNIG, “Political Genderphobia in Germany: How Opposition to Gender-sensitive Education Reforms Unites Political and Religious Right-wing Actors”, in *Illiberal Politics and Religion in Europe and Beyond: Concepts, Actors, and Identity Narratives*, edited by Anja HENNIG and Mirjam WEIBERG-SALZMANN, Frankfurt-am-Main: Campus Verlag, 2021, 379–406 (402).

²⁶ STAN and TURCESCU, *Religion and Politics in Post-Communist Romania*, 180; VELICU, *The Orthodox Church and National Identity in Post-Communist Romania*, 27.

²⁷ Claudia POPOVICI, ÎPS Teodosie, despre cum sunt tratați preoții români din Ucraina: “I-am primit cu atâta căldură și primim o asemenea palmă? Este de neacceptat!” <https://www.antena3.ro/actualitate/ips-teodosie-despre-cum-sunt-tratati-preotii-romani-din-ucraina-663648.html> (accessed 23.01.2023).

xenophobia, fascist ultranationalist, the cult of the saints of the Communist prisons, economic autarchy, anti-EU policies, discrimination against minorities, pro-life and pro-Orthodox views.²⁸

From the beginning, the press unmasked the link between the conservative and ultranationalist party and Russia's interests in Romania. Some journalists even implied that Russia had some of the leaders on pay. As a parliamentary party, AUR embarked on a large-scale electoral quest to seduce the representatives of the Orthodox clergy. Bishops were approached and asked to take part in the AUR's meetings. Priests received by mail invitations to join the party and attend events. Furthermore, the party did little to hide its interwar sympathies with the fascist Legionary movement and the Orthodox priests who belong to it.²⁹ Since the war started in Ukraine, the leaders of the party expressed restraint and asked for Romania to remain neutral in the conflict, contrary to the policies implemented already by the Romanian state. A delegation of four members of the Romanian Parliament headed by senator Diana Ivanovici-Șoșoacă (ex-AUR) visited the Russian embassy in Bucharest to voice their displeasure towards Romania's hardline policy towards Russia and their sympathy towards President Putin's brutal policies.³⁰ However on 4 February 2022 the spokesperson of the Romanian Patriarchate, Vasile Bănescu, delivered the press an official statement that condemned the ideology of ultranationalism as allegedly quintessentially associated with Orthodoxy and the uncritical association between Orthodox values

²⁸ For Orthodox fundamentalism, see Anastasia V. MITROFANOVNA, "Orthodox Fundamentalism: Intersection of Modernity, Postmodernity, and Tradition," in *Orthodox Paradoxes: Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy*, edited by Katya TOLSTAYA, Leiden: Brill, 2014, 93–106. For AUR's religious undertones, see Claudiu TĂRZIU, *Rostul generației noastre. O perspectivă conservatoare asupra României postcomuniste*, Bucharest: Rost, 2019; ID., *Cei 13 care m-au salvat*, Bucharest: Rost, 2018. See also Radu CINPOEȘ, "The Christian Orthodox Church and Illiberal Politics in Romania," in *Illiberal Politics and Religion in Europe and Beyond: Concepts, Actors, and Identity Narratives*, edited by Anja HENNIG and Mirjam WEIBERG-SALZMANN, Frankfurt-am-Main: Campus Verlag, 2021, 407–433.

²⁹ Sergiu GHERGHINA, Sergiu MIȘCOIU, "Faith in a New Party: The Involvement of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the 2020 Election Campaign," *Politics, Religion & Ideology* 23.2 (2022) 226–242.

³⁰ <https://republica.ro/soșoaca-si-inca-trei-parlamentari-s-au-dus-la-ambasada-rusiei-sa-negocieze-pacea-de-la-bucuresti-si-neutralitatea> (accessed 23.01.2023).

and nationalism.³¹ In a second message on his Instagram account, Bănescu went even further and described Patriarch Kirill of Moscow as “man of the Antichrist, who mimics the faith in God and nationalism.”³²

The clear message voiced by the Romanian Patriarchate through the voice of Vasile Bănescu failed to convince the Orthodox clergy to distance itself from the ultranationalist and xenophobic values promoted by the Romanian (neo-)fascist party in its ranks. The pro-Russian agitation carried by AUR echoed in the milieu of the Romanian Orthodox Church. Perceived by some priests as a clerical party or as a political organization defending Orthodoxy in front of the dissolving tendencies and ideas stemming from the West, some priests and monks considered the war a farce, as something that did not exist, and asked for Romania to remain neutral in the conflict. An interesting paradox occurred: while the interwar and post-Communist nationalist intelligentsia nurtured deep-seated anti-Russian feelings, during the war in Ukraine, they stood in support of Russia instead of Ukraine because of the delicate situation of the Romanian minority there, deprived of the right to pursue school in their language,

Conclusions

1. The solidarity of Orthodox Romanians with their Ukrainian brothers remains up to this day from the bottom-up. The bishops only instrumentalized the efforts of their priests and Orthodox communities to gain respite from the public and press criticism.

2. There is a critical mass of Orthodox priests, monks, ordinary believers, ONGs, monasteries even bishops who consider the help provided by the Romanian state and the Orthodox Church a mistake. They dislike, fear, and, at the same time, stand with Russia rather than Ukraine.

3. Except for a handful of cases, the Romanian Orthodox hierarchy practices ambiguity towards the status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church and the masses of refugees crossing Romanian borders. At the same time, while the bishops opened

³¹ “Biserica Ortodoxă, critici la adresa AUR: Amestecarea nătângă a religiei cu politica a făcut deja prea multe victime în istorie”, <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-25347339-biserica-ortodoxa-critici-adresa-aur-amestecarea-natanga-religiei-politica-facut-deja-prea-multe-victime-istorie.htm> (accessed 23.01.2023).

³² <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/patriarh-daniel-mesaj-refugiati-ucraina/31741809.html> (accessed 23.01.2023).

monasteries and social institutions to shelter and feed the displaced, they have also kept silent about the barbaric war in Ukraine waged by the Russian troops and failed to condemn in strong words the complicity of the Russian Patriarchate to such horrendous crimes.

4. The presence of the Russian-backed party in Romania that gains traction among Orthodox believers and clergymen alike should be perceived as a form of lingering ecclesiastical anti-Western and quasi-fascist ideas, with unforeseen consequences in the future both for the Orthodox Church and the conflict in Ukraine.

5. There is a great need for canonical and theological clarity in Romanian Orthodoxy regarding the status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church(es). While the Romanian Patriarchate continues to procrastinate and send appeals for peace to deaf ears, the Orthodox Church in Ukraine struggles with its ambiguous status, with its autocephaly still unrecognized by other Orthodox Churches except the Patriarchal See of Constantinople and a few other Churches (the Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Church of Greece, and the Church of Cyprus).³³

The massive solidarity displayed by the Orthodox clergy and the many donations for Ukrainian refugees should not deter the observer from noticing the questionable fashion in which Romanian Orthodox embrace the other. While Orthodox Ukrainians were welcomed, Muslim refugees remain up to the present day unwanted.

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³³ Cyril HOVORUN, “The Cause of Ukrainian Autocephaly”, in *Religion During the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict*, edited by Elizabeth CLARK and Dmytro VOVK, London: Routledge, 2019, 180–192.

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