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THE ROMANIAN CONFESSIONAL SCHOOL IN BANAT: NAVIGATING LEGISLATION AND CULTURAL DISSEMINATION IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Abstract: The Orthodox Church in the Austro-Hungarian Empire played a crucial role in the spiritual, cultural, and national development of the Romanian people. Under the leadership of Saint Andrei Șaguna and through the Statute he established, diocesan centers facilitated the creation of confessional schools. These schools served as a significant mass education system for Romanians in Transylvania. However, in its cultural initiatives, the Church encountered educational legislation that failed to consider the realities of Romanian rural life at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, the legislation did not recognize the confessional uniqueness of Romanian communities. Despite the Church's efforts to modernize the educational system, numerous restrictive laws were enacted, undermining Romanian education at all levels.

Keywords: Confessional school, Banat, Education, Culture, Spirituality

1. Introduction

In the Banat region, confessional education played a crucial role in preserving traditions, nurturing the Romanian language, and fostering national culture. The confessional schools provided the younger generation not only with academic education but also with the fundamental values of Romanian spirituality (Tîrcovnicu, 1970: 17). In Banat and Transylvania, the alliance between Church and School was seen by the Romanian population as a cornerstone of national culture (Munteanu, 2008a: 185). Schools served as institutions that ensured the continuity of national consciousness and, despite the various restrictions they faced, promoted national interests (Munteanu, 1987: 60–63). At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, church schools had to endure rigorous regulations imposed by state legislation. Hungarian governmental circles made numerous attempts to diminish the quality of Romanian education in historical Banat, to limit its development, and to restrict the autonomy of the Romanian Orthodox Church in supporting education within the confessional framework.

The cultural activities of confessional schools in Banat during the first two decades of the 20th century can be studied using classical historical research methods. These methods include induction, deduction, analogical reasoning, and other procedures aimed at uncovering historical truths. The primary goal of this research, however, is to highlight how the Romanian language, culture, and identity were promoted through schools supported by the Church, and to explore the Orthodox Church's role in enhancing school infrastructure. Thus, the present article aims to help in obtaining a better understanding of the period from 1900 to 1920. We will examine how the activities of confessional schools influenced societal development during this time.

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2. The School Network of the Orthodox Church in Banat: An Historical Overview

At the onset of the 20th century, the Orthodox Church from Banat played a pivotal role in overseeing confessional schools in localities with predominantly Romanian populations (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2010: 110). The Church's involvement included the management of two significant theological and pedagogical institutes located in Caransebeș and Arad. Notably, the institution in Arad primarily educated students from the regions north of the Mureș River, while the number of candidates from Banat remained limited (Vesa, 2013: 500–515).

Within the context of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the number of state-supported schools offering Romanian-language education was markedly scarce. Consequently, the provision of Romanian education emerged as a matter of considerable significance for the Church, leading to the designation of these institutions as "confessional schools." It is thus evident that the Orthodox Church was not only responsible for imparting religious education but also served as a custodian of Romanian spirituality and culture. The Romanian bishoprics within the empire established the primary educational cycle through their own infrastructure, laying the groundwork for advanced education (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2011a: 149). The administration of these schools fell to the parishes, which were charged with ensuring their effective operation (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2011a: 149). Following the completion of primary education, students could advance to secondary education, culminating in institutions with university status. At the tertiary level, the Church's involvement was primarily confined to theological institutes aimed at training future clergy and pedagogical institutes that prepared teachers for the confessional schools. The organizational and pedagogical aspects of education within these confessional schools were systematically managed and coordinated by diocesan centers, with active promotion by individual parishes. The foundational regulations governing the structure of educational institutions were derived from the State for the Organization of the Orthodox Church, the Șagunian Statute, and the legislative measures adopted by the Hungarian Diet in 1868 (Munteanu, 2008b: 65). As time progressed and educational legislation evolved, the Church vigorously advocated for the preservation of the confessional nature of education, exerting substantial efforts in this regard, particularly during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period was marked by the Hungarian government's attempts to curtail the educational activities of various religious denominations, underscoring the Orthodox Church's enduring commitment to safeguard and promote Romanian cultural and educational values (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2011a: 150).

Hungarian statistics indicate that in 1900, there were 154 Romanian Orthodox confessional schools in Timiș County and 195 schools in Caraș-Severin County (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2010: 111). In Torontal County, only 6 Church schools existed in 1905 (Munteanu, 2008b: 201). The Diocese of Caransebeș oversaw 226 schools during the 1900-1901 school year (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-g, n.d.-h), which increased to 241 in 1908 (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-l), but then decreased to 229 by 1913 (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-i). The decline in the number of confessional schools can be attributed to legislation mandating high teacher salaries, as well as to the infrastructure and resources that parishes could not afford. From the data provided, it is evident that the Diocese of Caransebeș administered 68.3% of the confessional schools in Banat (Munteanu, 2008b: 213), while the remaining schools were under the jurisdiction of the Diocese of Arad.

3. Confessional Education under the Impact of School Legislation at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries

The late 19th century marked a significant shift in the legislative framework governing education in Hungary, particularly affecting confessional schools within the Romanian communities in Banat. The Hungarian state authorities, empowered by a series of legislative provisions, increasingly diversified and intensified their means of exerting control over educational institutions. Chronic issues such as

delayed payment of teachers' salaries, low student attendance, insufficient teaching materials, substandard school facilities, and neglect of Hungarian-language instruction created a systemic strain on Romanian confessional education. These conditions often served as pretexts for the dissolution of confessional schools, which were subsequently replaced by state institutions that offered instruction exclusively in Hungarian.

In 1893, the Hungarian Diet enacted a law to regulate teachers' salaries in elementary schools funded by political and confessional communities (Brusanowski, 2010: 321–324). This legislative measure, passed on August 13, 1893, and published on September 10, 1893 (1893: 3–5), encapsulated significant political objectives underlying the imposition of educational legislation. While the law ostensibly aimed to ensure appropriate living conditions for teachers in communal and confessional schools, the stipulations outlined for implementing this objective unveiled interests that diverged markedly from the welfare of the teaching staff. The salaries mandated by the law exceeded the financial capabilities of most parishes, with additional obligations imposed on these communities to provide teachers with housing and arable land for cultivation (1893: 3). Moreover, the law included a provision allowing parishes unable to meet teachers' salary requirements to seek assistance from the state. However, the potential outcome of such requests was alarming for the confessional education system; the Ministry of Public Instruction retained the authority to establish a state school conducting instruction solely in Hungarian, should "important state interests" (1893: 5) necessitate such an action. The introduction of this bill into parliamentary debate prompted considerable unrest among the leadership of the Banat Orthodox Church, educators, and the Romanian populace of the region. There was a pervasive sentiment that this legislative move represented a deliberate effort to curtail the education of children and youth in the Orthodox and Romanian cultural contexts, driven by underlying motives aimed at the denationalization of the Romanian population. This sociopolitical landscape highlights the critical intersection of education, national identity, and legislative authority during a transformative period in Hungary's history.

After 1900, there were increasing efforts to undermine the education of young people in confessional schools through school legislation. The most significant laws regarding the demands placed on the Church were the Education Laws of 1907, commonly referred to as the Apponyi Laws. These laws were promoted by Count Albert Apponyi, who served as the Minister of Religion and Public Instruction at the time (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2011b: 17). They were initially drafted in 1904 by the previous Minister, Albert Berzeviczy, but were not voted on at the time for political reasons (Mândruț, 1978: 444). Both Metropolitan Ioan Mețianu and Metropolitan Victor Mihail of Blaj opposed Berzeviczy's initiative. Accompanied by bishops Ioan Papp of Arad and Nicolea Popea of Caransebeș, they petitioned Prime Minister Istvan Tisza on May 26, 1906, urging him to reject the proposal. Additionally, Archpriest Andrei Ghidiu of Caransebeș and Archimandrite Filaret Musta drafted a memorandum on behalf of the Orthodox Church (1904: 327–331), which was submitted to the Ministry of Religion and Education on July 19, 1904. This document largely reiterated the ideas from a 1893 memorandum (*Protocolul Sinodului Eparhial al Diecesei Greco-Ortodoxe Române a Caransebeșului*, 1905: 63). Romanian cultural associations also organized protests in several localities throughout Banat.

Law 26, voted on March 19, 1907, was titled "On the Improvement of Teachers' Salaries in State-Supported Schools" and focused exclusively on state communal schools, having no impact on confessional education. In contrast, Law 27, voted on April 26, 1907, titled "On the Legal Relations of Schools Not Supported by the State and on the Competencies of Communal and Confessional Teachers," represented a significant attack on the autonomy of both the Church and confessional schools (Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2011b: 81).

Law 27 of 1907, which addressed confessional education, comprised six chapters and thirty-eight articles, instituting provisions that adversely affected church-supported education until the conclusion of World War I (Munteanu, 2008b: 84). The law designated teachers as civil servants,

thereby regulating their status in accordance with state legislation. It mandated significant increases in teachers' salaries, which were to be supplemented by contributions from parishes. Furthermore, it required that students be educated in a spirit of patriotism towards the Hungarian homeland, with Hungarian language instruction deemed compulsory. Schools seeking state aid exceeding 200 crowns were stripped of their autonomy, as the appointment of teachers necessitated ministerial approval (Brusanowski, 2010: 372). Under these stipulations, state inspectors were authorized to oversee and regulate school operations (Munteanu, 2008b: 83–87; Rotariu-Dumitrescu, 2011b: 81–87).

This legal framework was further refined by Law 16 of 1913, titled "On the Regulation of Teachers' Salaries in Communal and Confessional Elementary Schools." This law introduced a novel remuneration model for teachers, linking salaries to factors such as seniority and the quality of education delivered. Additionally, it included provisions for teacher housing, thereby addressing their living conditions (Munteanu, 2008b: 87–89).

Subsequently, Law 46 of 1908, known as "On the Free Education of Elementary Schools," prohibited religious denominations and communities from levying the 5% school tax, thereby eliminating a critical revenue stream essential to schools' financial sustainability (Brusanowski, 2010: 375, 368–380). This measure effectively deprived religious institutions of a vital source of funding necessary for the operation of educational facilities. Moreover, the legislation stipulated that the medium of instruction in secondary schools—educational programs catering to adults and focused on reinforcing primary school materials—was to be exclusively Hungarian, with Hungarian textbooks used exclusively. Consequently, this compelled religious institutions to focus their educational efforts on primary education, relegating the management and oversight of secondary education to the political communes (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-j).

All these laws aligned with the European evolution of education and aimed to modernize schools. However, beneath the pretense of modernism, there were political objectives aimed at Hungarianizing populations directly under the government's influence in Budapest (Mândruț, 1978: 446). Consequently, the school legislative process gradually shifted its emphasis to assimilation through denationalization and the imposition of Hungarian (Munteanu, 2008b: 89). This shift led to persistent opposition from the Church and the Banat society against the state authorities in Budapest and any attempts that conflicted with the legitimate aspirations of the nationalities in Banat, particularly the Romanians (Munteanu, 2007: 411).

The consequences of the Apponyi Laws, which also impacted confessional schools in Transylvania and Banat, were numerous (Brusanowski, 2010: 359–361). The most significant was the increase in the number of state schools, which rose from 21 in 1905 to 71 in 1910 (Tîrcovnicu, 1970: 165). Between 1900 and 1914, the Romanian population, which constituted the majority in historical Banat, lost 99 schools that offered education in their mother tongue. This decline was primarily due to continuous pressure from the authorities to transfer schools under state control and the inability of some smaller or poorer communities to meet the financial and material demands imposed by the Apponyi Laws (Munteanu, 2007: 422). Across the entire Sibiu metropolitan area, a total of 320 schools closed (Bocșan & Leu, 2009: 61), with 287 of these closures occurring between 1907 and 1911 (Brusanowski, 2010: 384). Despite this, the confessional schools in Banat, particularly those teaching in Romanian, largely continued their activity by making significant sacrifices to meet the legal requirements (Alic, 2013: 166).

4. The Role of the Banat Confessional School in the Promotion of Romanian Culture

The Orthodox Church in the Banat region has historically viewed the confessional school as an essential vehicle for fulfilling its dual mission of sacramental and catechetical engagement. This approach reflects a broader commitment to Romanian education, rooted in the Church's spiritual

objectives, which aim to foster communion among believers based on principles of both individuality and ethnic cohesion. This religious-national paradigm was particularly pronounced in Banat and Transylvania, regions that endured foreign political dominion for several centuries. Under these political constraints, the Orthodox Church assumed a pivotal role, guiding not only the spiritual lives of its constituents but also shaping their national identity and cultural destiny. As such, the Church emerged as the primary institution championing the education of the Romanian people, diligently preserving and transmitting the traditions and values intrinsic to Romanian culture (Munteanu, 2008b: 11–64; Radu & Onciulescu, 1976: 78–328). Historiographical analysis acknowledges the Church's substantial contributions to the history of Romania in Banat, recognizing it as a catalyst for societal modernization and a promoter of national consciousness (Munteanu, 2007:. 411).

Influential figures, including the bishops of Arad and Caransebeș, argued that confessional education was the sole viable means of fostering Romanian education and national vitality. The Church's leadership understood that an effective religious education, targeting children and youth through its schools and underpinned by a robust Romanian cultural framework, was essential for securing the future of the Romanian nation in both Banat and Transylvania. The defense of these educational institutions was particularly critical in light of the Hungarian government's persistent efforts to diminish Romanian educational opportunities within the empire. These efforts aimed to curtail the development and autonomy of the Romanian Orthodox Church in its right to advocate for and sustain confessional schooling. As noted by the editors of the Timișoara newspaper "Dreptatea" in 1896, the overarching goal of successive Hungarian administrations post-1867 was to "destroy the Romanian's progress in civilization" (1896: 1). This assertion underscores the contextual challenges faced by the Romanian community. It highlights the indispensable role of the confessional school in preserving cultural integrity and advancing education amid external pressures.

The bishoprics that served the Romanians in Banat exemplified firmness and dignity in their dealings with Hungarian administrative authorities. They consistently adopted a responsible stance in defending the cultural and national interests of their believers. Teachers were encouraged to explain to villagers in areas where the schools were supported with difficulty that preserving Romanian culture and spirit required sacrifices. They were advised not to be tempted by the promise of free education in state schools, as they would ultimately bear the expenses regardless. The priests also played a significant role in the educational process (Munteanu, 1981: 322).

Parish priests served not only as school directors but also taught religion classes, taking on the title of priest catechists. The textbooks used for religious instruction were primarily published in Arad or Caransebeș. Notably, books edited by Dr. Petru Barbu, such as "History of the New Testament," "History of the Old Testament," and "Church History," (Episcopia Dacia Felix, 1911b) were recommended by the diocesan Consistories.

The role of priests in teaching religion in state schools presented a complex scenario, particularly given the state's exclusive administration of these institutions. Legal stipulations mandated that all subjects be instructed in the state's official language, leading to conflicts between the priests and the school authorities. A notable incident involved Ioan Velovan, a priest from Ruscberg, who reported to the Consistory of Caransebeș on January 13, 1910, that he had received a notification from the state senate stating that his remuneration would be withheld if he failed to teach religion in Hungarian. Velovan firmly insisted that he could only instruct students in their native language, Romanian. Consequently, the school inspector from Lugoj suspended his pay. The Consistory of Caransebeș supported his stance, recognizing the priest's commitment to the Church's principles (Episcopia Dacia Felix, 1911a). A parallel situation arose with catechist Sofronie Nedici, who faced similar repercussions for teaching religion in Romanian at the schools in Biserica Albă (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-f: 22). Archpriest Trifon Miclea of Panciova brought to the attention of the

diocesan Consistory of Caransebeș yet another case, submitting a report on July 25, 1910, about priest Nicolae Popovici of Alibunar. Popovici was directed by the regional school subinspector in Panciova to teach religion in the "language of the state" (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-b). In response, Bishop Miron Cristea, just enthroned in Caransebeș, advised Popovici to assert that religious education could be conducted only in Romanian, the language of the Church (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-b).

Furthermore, priest George Neda from Oravița faced scrutiny from state school officials for not conducting catechism classes in Hungarian (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-b). To challenge what he perceived as abuses by local authorities, Miron Cristea sought the intervention of Metropolitan Ioan Mețianu, requesting the reissuance of the Metropolitan Consistory's declaration. This document reaffirmed that the teaching of religion is an exclusive and autonomous right of the Church, grounded in its divine mission, and that the use of the Church's ritual language in catechetical instruction is legally enshrined and protected by the laws of the Church and the state (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-c). These incidents underscore the tensions between state policy and the ecclesiastical right to religious instruction, highlighting the challenges clergy face in navigating these conflicting demands.

Without taking into account the opinion of the Church, the Ministry of Public Instruction in Budapest, by the Ministerial resolution of June 16, 1910, the state aid (parochial endowment) was withdrawn from priest Ioan Popovici from Reșița Montană because he did not catechize the students from the state schools in Reșița in the Hungarian language (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-a). However, the aid will be fully resumed if the situation is remedied. The same measure was taken against priest Romul Ancuța, parish priest in Văliug, who submitted a document to the Consistory in Caransebeș protesting against the withdrawal of the parish endowment. He stated that the Ministry's resolution is illegal because it "shortens the priestly income, which has nothing to do with catechization" (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-d). The priest claims that his catechist's allowance was withdrawn as early as December 1908, because he was accused of opposing the spirit of the school laws and the Government's orders (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-d).

To solve these problems, the Bishop of Caransebeș, Miron Cristea, went to Budapest, to the Minister of Religion, Count Zichy, who received him in audience on June 27, 1910 (1910: 5). He explained to the Minister the views of the entire Romanian episcopate on the Apponyi laws, which were causing widespread dissatisfaction within the Romanian Church. The Minister promised that he would not enforce the Apponyi order, namely that religion would not be taught solely in Hungarian in state schools. At the same time, bishop Miron Cristea also spoke with other Ministry officials. The answer he gave to the Ministry in the two cases was firm, showing that he could not punish the priests because they had done nothing wrong. In Banat, religion can only be taught in Romanian. Following these discussions, Miron Cristea wrote to Archimandrite Filaret Musta that "I left the Ministry with the conviction that inferior officials are still working in the spirit of the old Government, have hostile views towards us and want to scare us, so that we will simply obey" (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-e).

The teaching of religion in non-denominational schools has been a subject of significant deliberation within the Romanian Church, particularly as articulated in the decisions of the Metropolitan Consistory. A notable directive was issued during a plenary session held in Sibiu on August 20/September 2, 1914, which unequivocally stated that the authority to determine the language of catechesis and religious instruction for students affiliated with the Romanian Church rests solely with the Church itself. This directive emphasized that catechesis and religious education within any educational institution under the Church's jurisdiction must be conducted exclusively in the Church's ritual language (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-m). This policy was reinforced in a subsequent meeting of the Metropolitan Consistory led by Metropolitan Vasile Mangra, on March 23/April 5, 1917, in Oradea Mare (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-k).

In this context, a notable controversy emerged in Oravița in 1915 concerning the catechization of two students—Alexandru Marinovici, identified as Serbian, and Eugen Brebenarc, who identified as German. The priest responsible for religious instruction, Cornel Ştefan, raised concerns regarding his obligation to teach these students in Hungarian, seeking guidance from the Consistory (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-i). In response, the Caransebeș Consistory explicitly prohibited the instruction of the Orthodox religion in Hungarian. The Consistory directed the priest to refer the Serbian student to a Serbian priest for appropriate catechesis. In the case of Eugen Brebenarc, it was advised that he be instructed in Romanian, as his father was Romanian and he possessed a satisfactory knowledge of the language. This incident underscores the complexities surrounding ethnic identity, language, and religion within the education system of the time, reflecting broader socio-political dynamics in the region (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-h).

At the gymnasium in Oravița, on November 7, 1916, Priest Cornel Ştefan formally petitioned the Consistory of Caransebeș to engage with the Government regarding a pressing concern: the administration of the communal gymnasium in Oravița was refusing to allow Romanian students, despite their numerical majority, to observe religious holidays. This decision significantly impeded the students' catechetical development and their overall formation as Christians (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-p). Similarly, Archpriest Traian Oprea expressed parallel grievances, advocating on May 9, 1918, that a request be submitted to the Ministry. He proposed that students enrolled in civil schools be permitted to attend religious services on all major holidays, rather than being limited solely to the five designated observances: Baptism, Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and the feast of the Church's patron saint (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-o).

In the context of the Great War, which began in 1915, Romanian communities increasingly expressed dissatisfaction, especially given their participation in a conflict perceived as distant from their national interests. In response, legislative amendments were introduced regarding the display of state insignia on the premises of confessional schools. A ministerial order permitted the tricolor flag to be displayed during religious holidays significant to Romanians, alongside the acceptance of Romanian folk costumes, which were to be worn tied at the waist with a tricolor belt. These provisions appeared to be an attempt to quell resistance among Romanians to the idea of actively engaging on the front lines. Instead, the Government sought to encourage a robust participation in the war effort, emphasizing the patriotic duty of its citizens. The official documentation accentuated the importance of collective identity: "By recognizing the common danger, the contrasts disappeared. All citizens of the state united in their feelings and in their will to defend the throne and the homeland. Each individual sacrificed their life and resources for the country's defense, demonstrating a readiness to contribute not merely through rhetoric but through immortal deeds. [...] The external manifestations of their ethnic identity, such as the display of colors and historical insignia, do not diminish their patriotism" (Protopopiatul Ortodox Român Jebel-Buziaș, n.d.). This statement underscores the intertwined relationship between national identity and the rallying of citizenry in times of conflict.

The Order, while fundamentally propagandistic, produced immediate, tangible benefits. Consequently, the Romanian Bishops' Councils decreed that "on the buildings of the Romanian Orthodox schools within the diocese, the flag should be displayed on festive occasions, alongside the national flag of the country, and particularly during all events mandated for the national flag's display" (Protopopiatul Ortodox Român Jebel-Buziaș, n.d.). In response, the diocesan centers promptly disseminated a circular directive to their respective territories, stipulating the following guidelines:

> 1. The national flag is to be flown on the edifices of Romanian Orthodox schools during festive occasions, positioned alongside the national flag, and especially on all occasions that require the flag of the country to be displayed.

> 2. The Romanian tricolor—comprising red, yellow, and blue—must be affixed in such a manner that the colors are arranged vertically on the flagpole, with a cross adorning its apex, in accordance with the traditions of the Church (Episcopia Caransebeșului, n.d.-q).

It is crucial to acknowledge that attempts to undermine the Church's involvement in education and the teaching of Romanian inadvertently fostered a stronger sense of national identity among the public. The collaboration of hierarchs, archpriests, priests, and educators, alongside the leaders of the Banat communities, played a pivotal role in preserving the Romanian language and culture. Their collective efforts laid the foundational groundwork for the national unity that was ultimately realized in Alba Iulia.

5. Conclusions

The actions taken by bishops and priests to support schools represent genuine efforts to uphold confessional education. They reflect the Church's commitment to preserving these schools. Key factors in this endeavor included providing resources to schools, training teachers, ensuring comprehensive education for students, and actively engaging communities to support teaching activities. These efforts established the confessional schools in Banat as symbols of cultural and national identity during challenging times. Despite various obstacles, these schools persisted due to substantial material sacrifices and the commitment of local church communities.

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