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Pulpits, Ballots and Party Cards: Religion and Elections in Romania

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Introduction: Political Changes since 1989

The literature on elections in Romania has grown exponentially since citizens won the right to elect and be elected to public office following the collapse of the communist regime, but to date no study has dealt systematically with the impact of religious actors and symbols on electoral campaigns, although elections and party politics have best illustrated the politicians' readiness to take advantage of the church-state relationship, and the churches' eagerness to reassert their role and shape Romanian democracy according to their vision (Shafir, 1997; Popescu, 1997, 2003; Pop-Elecheș, 2001; De Neve, 2001; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2001; Roper, 2003).

In the aftermath of the December 1989 regime change, Romania moved quickly to adopt permissive legislation encouraging political parties to compete in elections for the right to form the government. Parties needed only 251 members to register, and as a result some 200 formations spanning the entire political spectrum were set up in a matter of months. Polls were organised in 1990, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004 (local elections in June, parliamentary and presidential elections concomitantly in November). In local elections, citizens chose mayors directly, and local and county councillors indirectly. A mixed proportional representation system with party lists and deputy seats set aside for designated minority groups was adopted for electing the 140 members of the upper senate and the 345 members of the lower chamber of deputies. The president is elected directly from among candidates who gather at least 100,000 support signatures. A runoff between the two candidates who won the highest share of the national vote was organised in every electoral year but 1990 because no candidate won a majority of the vote in the first round.

In 1990 Ion Iliescu, one-time collaborator with the communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu, became Romanian president. He renewed his mandate in 1992, but lost four years later to geology professor Emil Constantinescu, whose candidature was supported by the Democratic Convention (*Convenția Democrată*), a coalition including the Christian Democrat Peasant Party (*Partidul Național Țărănesc Creștin-Democrat*) and the Liberal Party (*Partidul Național Liberal*) as main partners. After representing the Social Democrats in the senate for four years, in 2000 Iliescu made a spectacular comeback, winning the presidency in the second round and defeating the country's staunchest nationalist, the leader of the Greater Romania

Party (*Partidul România Mare*) Corneliu Vadim Tudor. In 1990 the National Salvation Front (*Frontul Șalvării Naționale*), representing the revolutionary anti-Ceaușescu forces, won parliamentary representation and appointed Petre Roman as premier, but a year later, under pressure from disgruntled Jiu Valley miners, Roman was replaced by technocrat Teodor Stolojan. Two years later the Front—by then renamed the Social Democrat Party (*Partidul Social Democrat*)—won a plurality of seats in parliament and appointed Nicolae Vacaroiu as premier, but in 1996 political power reverted to the Democratic Convention. Plagued by internal dissension, the Convention appointed three cabinets in four years, was unable to fulfil its electoral promises and became entangled in scandals of corruption and nepotism. With little support from within and without the Convention, Constantinescu abandoned politics, leaving the Convention without a presidential candidate just months before the poll. In 2000, the Social Democrat Party (the Front's new incarnation) won the parliamentary vote, and Adrian Năstase formed the government. Four years later, Năstase lost the presidency to the leader of the Democratic Party (*Partidul Democrat*) Traian Băsescu.

Religion and Politics in Romania

The interplay between religion, on the one hand, and elections and party politics, on the other, is best illustrated by several interrelated areas reflecting the continuous negotiation between religious and political actors in search of a balance acceptable to both sides. These areas are: 1) the direct involvement of priests and prelates in politics as members of parties and as electoral candidates running for local and/or central governmental office; 2) the support religious leaders and clergy give electoral candidates in exchange for promises to support legislation favourable to the church; and 3) the electoral candidates' use of religious symbols to win additional votes.¹

In Romania there are substantive differences between religious denominations in terms of what they can offer to and demand from the political class. In the last 15 years the Orthodox Church, claiming the allegiance of some 86 per cent of the population, has proved to be a force to be reckoned with and an indispensable ally for any presidential candidate and political party seeking the support of a large electoral segment. By contrast, evangelical Protestant groups and new religious movements lack the numbers that would make them attractive to politicians and parties, and seldom play a role in electoral campaigns. Most Roman Catholic and Reformed faithful are drawn from among the Transylvanian German and Hungarian minorities, each represented politically by a democratic federation of political parties. While ethnic political formations enjoy the support of the churches representing their respective ethnic group, a host of political parties compete for the support of the Orthodox Church and its predominantly Romanian faithful. This makes for a different dynamic in the relationship between religious and political leaders, and explains the vocal and prominent role the Orthodox Church has tended to assume in electoral campaigns compared to other religious denominations.

The political involvement of religious leaders is not a novelty to Romania. In pre-communist times, the clergy were actively involved in elections, advising parishioners to vote for candidates, blessing electoral banners, and praising their favourite parties from the pulpit. For a brief period, Patriarch Miron Cristea was a member of the regency that ruled the country on behalf of child King Michael, after King Carol II nonchalantly gave up the throne to marry divorcee Elena Lupescu. The 1923 Constitution—one of the most liberal in Europe at the time—recognised Orthodox and

Greek Catholic church leaders (including the Orthodox patriarch, metropolitans and bishops, and the Greek Catholic cardinal for Romania, archbishops and bishops) as *de jure* senators. In the interwar period, many Orthodox priests joined the fascist Iron Guard and Legion of Archangel Michael, paramilitary organisations opposing Soviet communism and extolling Orthodoxy as the cornerstone of Romanian identity. In the 1946 elections priests actively campaigned against the communist forces (Şandru, 1998). Communist authorities sought to build a society where religion had virtually no place, and launched a sustained campaign against religious organisations. Monasteries were dismantled, thousands of religious leaders were imprisoned, beaten and murdered in communist detention centres, the Greek Catholic Church was banned and its property transferred to the Orthodox Church. While authorities did not enlist clergy support to ensure a good voter turnout or a result favourable to communist candidates, since elections had predetermined outcomes, they did forge a tacit understanding with the dominant Orthodox Church, which accepted political submission to an openly atheistic regime by amending its doctrine. As communism matured, the Orthodox Church became ever more subservient to the Ceauşescu regime, with Patriarch Teoctist joining the leadership of the Socialist Democratic Front (*Frontul Democraţiei Socialiste*), an organisation controlled by the Communist Party, and never publicly opposing the demolition of Bucharest churches (Stan and Turcescu, 2000).

Clergy Political Involvement

After 1989, the leaders of the Orthodox Church advised clergymen to refrain from participating in politics, joining parties, running for public office and influencing their parishioners' political options. At a January 1990 meeting, the Synod banned priests from engaging 'in any form of political partisanship', including party membership, allowed bishops to sanction politically active priests and monks, and obliged priests holding public office to cease their priestly activity for the duration of the political mandate. This latter provision forbade priests to collect a salary from the church while receiving wages for performing public duties. But at a time when the Orthodox leadership was vehemently opposed for its collaboration with the communist regime and the Synod was divided between reformers and conservatives, most priests and monks disregarded the recommendation. The Synod's decision no.1066 of 1996 reiterated that 'according to the canon law, bishops, priests, deacons and the spiritual fathers of all faithful will abstain from running in elections to become deputies or senators. Priests and monks are called to fulfil their spiritual mission, incompatible with a systematic party engagement' (*Evenimentul zilei*, 13 February 2004). The decision banned clergy from becoming active party members, but left the door open to political involvement by permitting priests to run in elections as independent candidates. In February 2000, at the beginning of another electoral year, the Synod reminded priests that they could run in local but not general elections and only as independent candidates, if they secured the approval of their superiors; and that, in light of canonical laws on political neutrality, Orthodox clergy should abstain from openly supporting parties and candidates. Because of its vague formulation and lack of sanctions, the Synod's decision was treated as a mere recommendation. Bishops failed to sanction politically active priests, and allowed priests holding public office to organise masses, perform religious services like marriage and baptism, speak from the pulpit, and hear confession. By design or accident, the decision offered priests the possibility of contributing to politics in the hope of obtaining tangible advantages for

the Orthodox Church or their parish, while showing society, the political class and other religious denominations that the Orthodox Church as an institution opted for political neutrality.

Political neutrality was the Orthodox Church's official policy during subsequent elections, but clergymen did not live up to that commitment. Scores of Orthodox clergy joined or supported political parties. In the early 1990s Metropolitan Nestor Vornicescu of Oltenia, Bishop Calinic Argatu of Argeş and Archimandrite Simeon Tatu of the Plumbuita monastery were among sympathisers of the Salvation Front and its subsequent incarnations. Known for his steadfast support for Ceauşescu, Vornicescu even agreed to be included on the Front's electoral lists, only to withdraw his candidacy at the last minute because of public protests over his decision. Less intimidated by public resentment, Tatu represented the same party as a senator from May 1990 until his death in 1998. Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu of Banat joined the pro-democratic Civic Alliance in December 1990, but never ran for political office. Father Ioan Roman represented the Christian Democrats in Parliament in the 1996–2000 period. An active participant in the June 1990 antigovernmental demonstration on Bucharest University Square, father Simion Mehedintu joined the Christian Democrat Alliance (*Alianța Creștin Democrată*), a radical splinter group of the Christian Democrat Peasant Party, ten years later. Though not all Orthodox Church leaders became party members, most were rather open about their political loyalties. Archbishop Pimen of Suceava more than once admitted to his monarchist preferences, and Vornicescu and Metropolitan Antonie Plămădeală of Transylvania voiced their support for the nationalist Greater Romania Party.

After 2000 an ever-growing number of Orthodox priests entered politics. Ilie Sarbu became minister of agriculture, and Ioan Aurel Rus renewed his mandate and continued to represent the Greater Romania Party in the senate. The 2000 local elections allowed an unprecedented number of priests to become mayors and deputy mayors, local and county councillors with party support. Gheorghe Radu and Gheorghe Supeală represented the Social Democrats in the Bucharest district councils, Ion Varan became a Democrat Party councillor in Caraş Severin county, and Viorel Mitru was a Greater Romania Party town councillor for Roman. In Cluj county, Titus Popovici joined the Greater Romania Party and Ioan Roman the Liberal Party, while Costan Morar became a county councillor for the Party for Romanian National Unity (*Partidul Unității Naționale a Românilor*) before switching sides to the Social Democrats. Teofil Bradea was elected mayor in Bihor county, while Dumitru Nistor, Gheorghe Bărănescu and Petre Popa became mayors of villages in Argeş county. Accurate statistics are unavailable, but observers believe dozens of priests have held public office at all levels and have been committed to party ideology more than to Christian dogma. In late 2002 a Social Democrat priest refused to bless the new headquarters of the Suceava Christian Democrat Peasant Party organisation. The refusal was seemingly determined not by the proposal's novelty, since Romanian priests customarily bless buildings, cars and even animals, but by the fact that in 1997 a Timișoara Christian Democrat priest painted former President Iliescu as Satan in his church (*Cotidianul*, 15 April 2003, *Evenimentul zilei*, 3 June 2004, *Ziarul de azi*, 15 May 2003; *Jurnalul național*, 30 December 2002).

Orthodox priests were not the only ones to receive party cards, serve as electoral candidates and be elected/nominated to public office. Greek Catholic priests Ioan Botiza and Matei Boila became Christian Democrat Party members, and Boila

represented that party in the senate from 1992 to early 2000, when he defected to the Christian Democrat Alliance. The Social Democrat deputy Vasile Suciuc was a leader in *Oastea Domnului* (an Orthodox revivalist movement), and admitted that his parliamentary adviser Ion Pop was a Baptist minister. A prominent Greater Romania Party leader was evangelical minister Ioan Mică, former honorary president of the Democratic Union of Magyars in Romania (*Uniunea Democrată a Maghiarilor din România*) László Tőkés was the Reformed bishop of Piatra Craiului, while Reformed priest Sogor Csaba represented the Democratic Party in the senate.

In the early 1990s the Synod turned a blind eye to priests becoming party members and running in elections, but by the end of the decade it became clear that the cases of politically involved clergy threatened to become the rule. The first attempt to reformulate the church's position on clergy political involvement occurred in April 1998, when Archbishop Bartolomeu Anania of Cluj announced plans to ask the Synod to reverse its position and allow Orthodox clergy to get involved in politics and be elected to state office on party lists. Anania maintained that political neutrality exposed the Orthodox Church to vicious and unfair attacks from mass media and other denominations that did not observe this principle, and that in any case the Synod's recommendation of political neutrality had been disregarded by Transylvanian priests, who took sides during electoral campaigns and ran for parliament without the blessing of their superiors. Thus, Anania maintained, the policy revision would merely keep up with reality. The proposal was supported by Metropolitan Daniel Ciobotea of Moldova and the popular University of Bucharest theology professor Constantin Galeriu, who declared that the church should openly promote luminaries known as 'the nation's conscience' to parliament. Deputy Archbishop Gherasim Pruteanu of Suceava also said the church must enter politics for the country to preserve its Orthodox tradition, and mentioned that political involvement did not necessarily mean that priests would join political parties but rather warn parties that some of their legislative proposals 'ran counter to our Christian Orthodox traditions'. Pruteanu pledged to 'support Anania's proposal because church and state were never truly separated. Wherever the ruler was, there the patriarch was, too!' (*Ziarul de Iași*, 17 and 23 April 1998).

While warmly embraced in Orthodox circles, the proposal was criticised by politicians and the mass media, which saw it as a serious impediment to the separation of church and state and democratisation. The press campaign against the proposal was so sustained that the Synod even refused to consider it seriously on the grounds that it was not the right moment to discuss the Orthodox Church's political involvement. Quite unexpectedly, Anania's proposal forced the Roman Catholic Church to take a stand on clergy political involvement, although there were no reported cases of politically involved Roman Catholic priests. A declaration presenting the position of the Roman and the Greek Catholic Churches stressed those churches' commitment to political neutrality, added that they would 'respect the citizen's right of opinion' (indirectly suggesting that their clergy would refrain from endorsing specific parties or candidates), and reminded that the Second Vatican Council forbade Roman Catholic clergy and leaders to engage in politics (*Ziarul de Iași*, 29 April and 1 July 1998).

While the Synod rejected the proposal, some of its members quietly embraced its spirit. Bishop Calinic Argatu of Argeș decided to allow, even encourage, priests to secure eligible positions on party lists in the 2000 local elections. In an unprecedented move, the bishop personally sent letters to political parties asking for eligible positions

on party lists for local priests. When his letters became known to the public, Calinic told the press that

it is absolutely necessary for the priest to be first among citizens in his preoccupation for the spiritual and material problems of ordinary people. That is why we need priests as village and town councillors, mayors and deputy mayors. We also need priests in culture, social work, parliament and even government, as ministers ... Since the Romanian Orthodox Church accounts for 86 per cent of the country's population, [Orthodox] clergy should represent it in all state leadership structures.

Wary of the bishop's extraordinary sway on local affairs, and his tremendous popular appeal, the Social Democrats nominated Frs Iulian Chiriță, Cristian Ichim and Nicolae Mărgăritescu to local councils (*Evenimentul zilei*, 28 April 2000).

After the 2000 local poll, Anania came out strongly in favour of political neutrality, and announced that the Synod planned to discuss the increasingly numerous cases of politically active priests and propose sanctions for those who endorsed parties and candidates in their sermons. Anania warned that this time the Synod was ready to hand out sanctions that could take the form of wage reductions or delays in promotion. It is unclear why Anania had a change of heart. Apparently, his support for sanctions against politically active clergy was a response to the fact that two priests of the Mănăștur eparchy in Cluj openly endorsed Gheorghe Funar's bid to renew his mayoral mandate against Anania's warning not to do so. The mayor of Cluj-Napoca from 1992 to 2004, Funar was known for his chauvinistic and anti-Hungarian stance, and for painting the city rubbish bins, benches and signposts with the Romanian tricolor flag. Anania found unexpected support from Calinic. When the Socialist Party (*Partidul Socialist*) announced that in Argeș seven priests were among its members and it planned to make Calinic a 'serious offer' to convince him to join the party, Calinic retorted that 'a clergy member should not climb down from the silence of the Holy Altar into the noisiness of politics', and warned priests that if they wished to join parties they would have to do so without his blessing, and if they already were party members they should 'rush to give up politics; otherwise they will be suspended'. Jokingly, Calinic advised parties to take up 'a confessor to whom party leaders and members tell their sins from time to time' (*Ziarul de azi*, 16 November 2002).

Opposition to clergy political involvement mounted in early 2003, after the Greater Romania Party leader Damian Brudașcu boasted that three Cluj priests had joined the party. Hours later, fathers Adrian Mitrea, Cristian Berințan and Constantin Neagu resigned from the party under pressure from Anania, while the press revealed that the priests were not new party members. Mirea had joined the party in 1998 because it had helped him to build his village church. In 2000, Berințan became a village councillor with Christian Democrat help, and a deputy mayor soon afterwards. Unhappy at having to give up his party card under pressure, Berințan bluntly told the press that 'only mad people can believe that priests are not politically engaged. All of them are. We live in a democratic state, and nobody can limit my political options.' In response, Anania reiterated that priests cannot be included on party lists or become party members, but can run in elections as independent candidates (*Ziua*, 28 January 2003).

Opinions were divided with respect to enrolment of clergymen in political parties. Greater Romania Party senator Ioan Aurel Rus, the parish priest of Nepos village (Bistrița-Năsăud county), described his situation as follows: 'During my legislative mandate I am suspended, that is, I am not remunerated as a priest. But each weekend

I say mass, listen to confessions and take care of all other parish problems.' He saw his two positions as compatible, and stressed that 'as a Romanian citizen, I have the right to occupy public office, and as a priest I have never made politics in my church, never urged people to vote for [my] party' But patriarchate spokesman Constantin Stoica said that priests like Rus

ignore not only the Synod's decision, but also church canons . . . Of course, all of us have personal political opinions, but priests should not display them because this would divide the flock. The priest's only politics should be the Bible. A priest can make politics, as any other citizen, but then he must give up his activity within the church, stop saying mass and listening to confession, and refer to himself not as 'Father X' but as 'Mr X'. (*Cotidianul*, 15 April 2003)

Romanian journalists believed that by becoming party members, priests 'give up the independence stipulated by [church] canons. They continue their religious activity and, even if not preaching from the pulpit the ideology of their respective parties, their party membership can influence parishioners' (*Cotidianul*, 15 April 2003). *Evenimentul zilei* noted that:

every four years, just before elections, the Synod must review the priests' political engagement, a delicate problem since priests are 'opinion leaders' and the church is among the most trusted institutions. If divulging their political preferences or dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to politics, priests can lead the flock 'astray' towards one party or another . . . Without declaring it openly, each party has a secret strategy of attracting the clergy [because] each one would like the church to become its turf . . . Political engagement endangers [the religious principle of] 'penitence'. A Greater Romania Party bishop with two Social Democrat and two Liberal deputies, who oversees the activity of ten Democrat, two Christian Democrat, three Humanist and four Union for Romania's Rebirth priests does not have the same authority, cannot give the signal for unity. (*Evenimentul zilei*, 2 February 2004)²

As new elections were due in 2004, the Orthodox Church divided among those favouring political neutrality and those supporting political involvement of the clergy. In January 2003 Anania announced that the Synod would hear the cases of the three Cluj priests who joined the Greater Romania Party and of Archbishop Teodosie of Tomis, known for his close ties to the ruling Social Democrats. Anania also announced that all Cluj priests who were party members or held public office were under investigation. According to the press, in the Cluj-Napoca council eight priests represented the Social Democrats, one the Liberals, and four the Democratic Party. Parties unanimously pleaded for priests to be allowed to take part in political and party life. Funar hoped that priests could continue to act as politicians and represent their communities in governmental structures, and Brudaşcu pleaded with the Synod to permit the three priests to return to the Greater Romania Party. Brudaşcu criticised the priests for being unaware of the interdiction on engaging in politics, but said that the bishops should clearly state the prohibition and identify the canons banning priests from politics. Politicians joined forces with politically active priests to argue that party membership should be the personal choice of each Orthodox priest, and to note that other denominations did not embrace political neutrality. The Cluj

campaign manager of the Democratic Union of Magyars announced that party lists were open to priests who agreed to participate in internal elections. Since its foundation in the early 1990s, the Union had allocated 15 per cent of its leadership positions to youth representatives, and another 15 per cent to civil society and clergy. The Reformed Church did not embrace political neutrality. Greek Catholic priests were allowed to occupy public office with the permission of their superiors (*Informația*, 1 and 13 February 2004; *România liberă*, 29 January 2004; *Ziarul de Iași*, 31 January 2004; *Evenimentul zilei*, 2 February 2004). The Romanian Constitution allows churches to decide whether priests can enter politics.

Reflecting the mood of the Orthodox leaders, the archpriest of the Moldovan county of Botosani asked local priests not to engage in politics or run in local elections because, as he explained, the message of a party member targets a limited segment of the community, whereas the priest must talk to the entire flock. In response, Social Democrat Octav Cosmâncă, leader of the strongest political formation in Moldova, argued that priests should be allowed to engage in politics, since only the Constitution and parliament could limit an individual's political right to be elected to public office. Cosmâncă's position was echoed by premier Năstase, who said that as local and county councillors priests bring a measure of morality to the political process and the way community problems are addressed. These political declarations were denounced by the opposition Liberals, who criticised the Social Democrats for their attempt to transform the Orthodox Church into their electoral tool (*România liberă*, 4 February 2004; *Evenimentul zilei*, 11 February 2004).

In February 2004 the Synod upheld its decisions of January 1990, September 1992, February 1996 and February 2000 forbidding Orthodox clergy to engage in politics, join political parties, participate in electoral campaigns, run in elections, become members of parliament and local and county councils, mayors or deputy mayors, and be nominated to positions in the local and central state administrative structures. The Synod's decision no. 410 of 12 February 2004 asked priests to abstain from becoming politically active, even as independent candidates, and pleaded with political parties not to accept clergy as members and not to use clergy and places of worship for political purposes. On behalf of the Patriarchate Stoica announced that 'the church is politically neutral, but not indifferent to the life of the *polis*. Its position remains the same: the only politics that priests should make is the Bible' and warned that Orthodox priests had ten days to choose between politics and priesthood. He insisted that giving up the priesthood for short-term political gain was an irreversible act, with the priest being defrocked in perpetuity. That position was supported by Anania, who warned that 'up to now the Synod made recommendations, but it can also give orders, if recommendations are disregarded', noted that priests could no longer suspend their religious activity for a four-year period to assume public office, and said that cases of politically active priests would be heard and settled by ecclesiastical courts. No exceptions were to be made. Even mayor-priests had to make a choice, though they had been democratically elected and their mandate was about to expire in a matter of months when new elections were scheduled. According to Anania, the church did not know the number of priests who became politicians, because they entered politics without informing their bishops. Journalists announced that of Romania's 15,000 Orthodox priests, fewer than 100 held administrative positions and only a handful were active politically (*Evenimentul zilei*, 10 February 2004).

Months after the Synod meeting, unnamed sources revealed that the Synod was presented with an alternative proposal allowing priests to enter politics as independent candidates. Supported by Teodosie and two 'older hierarchs, extremely obedient to

political rulers both during and after communism', this initiative was rejected in favour of Anania's proposal because Teodosie's close ties to the Social Democrats were seen as detrimental to the church. Though it reportedly 'scandalised' politician-priests, the Synod's ban was hailed by civil society and journalists as a step forward in the effort to end Social Democrat attempts to enrol the clergy politically. The press saw the decision to defrock politician-priests as unprecedented and reflective of the fact that the church had consolidated its position – not only did it remain the country's most trusted institution, but it also found the courage to adopt a critical stance toward the state and the parties that vied to control it (*Evenimentul zilei*, 13 February 2004; *Curierul național*, 13 February 2004).

It took considerable determination to enforce the ban, and to convince politician-priests that it was definitive and irrevocable. Two weeks after the Synod adopted the proposal and four days after the deadline, the archbishopric of Cluj announced that only one priest – Greater Romania Party senator Rus – had renounced the priesthood, while 87 priests from Cluj and Bistrița counties had given up politics. Of the 60 Cluj priests who renounced politics, 32 represented the Social Democrats, one the Liberals and three the Democratic Party. In Argeș, one of the three Social Democrat mayor-priests announced that he would choose politics over the church because 'I served the church for 35 years, now it is time to serve the community.' The Băilculești mayor, nicknamed *Părintele Furtună* ('Father Storm'), pledged to ignore the Synod's call, run in the 2004 local elections and, if needed, 'start a new revolution because I cannot choose between being a mayor and a priest, since the two go well together. If I have to give up the mayor's office, I will start another revolution [within the Orthodox Church]!' Priests Aristarh Cojocaru and Aurel Goraș, representing the Social Democrats and the Liberals on Suceava town council, gave up politics. Teodosie announced that nine Constanța priests were ready to renounce their local councillor mandates, but said nothing about his own situation. The ban led to significant changes on electoral party lists, as most politician-priests chose religion over politics. In Tulcea county, the Social Democrats had to replace several priests who had secured eligible positions on party lists with new candidates. The press alleged that the priests had been included on lists following an informal agreement between Archbishop Teodosie and local party leaders (*Informația*, 13, 15 February and 11 March 2004; *România liberă*, 14 February 2004).

During the 2004 local elections, efforts to separate church from politics were not entirely fruitful. The ban took politician-priests by surprise, and many made contradictory declarations within a matter of days. In Brașov and Galați no priest engaged in politics, but this was not the case in other counties. The Social Democrat mayor of Ștefanesti (Argeș county), Dumitru Nistor, sought to renew his mandate, but lost to the Liberal candidate. Petrica Florea of Costești (Iași county) competed for the mayoral position with Liberal support, declaring that 'a priest cannot be indifferent to what happens in his parish. For 18 years I struggled to help people here as much as possible. As a local councillor, I could have done much more' (*România liberă*, 2 June 2004). While Calinic ignored the ban and gave Nistor his blessing, the Metropolitanate of Moldova ecclesiastical tribunal announced it would punish Florea if he did not give up politics, since that was not the first time he had disobeyed his superiors. After losing the race to the Social Democrat contender, Florea defended himself by saying that he had the constitutional right to elect and be elected to office, and hoped the Metropolitanate would be lenient: that instead of defrocking him it would temporarily suspend him from his priestly duties. Even when renouncing party membership and public positions, priests found new methods to support their political preferences. On 16 May Social Democrat leaders travelled to Satu Mare to participate in the Sunday

mass. Taking advantage of the occasion, their candidate for the mayor's office 'with the priest's blessing, addressed the faithful, presenting the main objectives of his electoral platform and promising to solve rapidly the problems related to the [legal ownership of] the land surrounding the church'. The candidate was allowed to speak from the pulpit, a move the media saw as a case of religious manipulation for political reasons (*Evenimentul zilei*, 14 May 2004; *Ziua*, 19 June 2004; *Cotidianul*, 18 May 2004).

The Synod's support for the political neutrality of the clergy was criticised by the ruling Social Democrats, their partner in government, the Humanist Party (*Partidul Umanist*), and the main opposition party, the Greater Romania Party. Cosmâncă labelled the ban 'a mistake', his party colleague Nicolae Mischie called it 'abnormal', and Greater Romania Party leader Petru Calian deemed it 'discriminatory'. For Cosmâncă the ban was a mistake 'because the Orthodox Church has two obligations. First, the presence of priests on local councils guarantees that church problems are solved directly by local communities. Second, as shepherd of his flock, the priest must see how citizens' administrative problems are addressed inside and outside the church.' Cosmâncă qualified his earlier statements, arguing that 'I did not say that priests should make politics, only that they should be part of local government. This means that they should be included on party lists as independent candidates.' 'As other churches do this [allow priests to enter politics]', Cosmâncă could not understand 'why the Orthodox Church would act differently'. Talking to the Chamber of Deputies, Orthodox priest and Humanist Party deputy Pavel Cherescu deemed the ban unconstitutional, since 'only parliament can restrict citizens' fundamental rights and liberties by adopting an organic law. Because of the Synod's decision, Romania runs the risk of becoming Europe's Afghanistan and transforming its clergy into a minority deprived of constitutional rights.' For Cherescu and priests wishing to give up neither politics nor priesthood the ban revealed the church's propensity 'towards a religious fundamentalism that could divide church leaders' (*Informația*, 25 February 2004).

By contrast, the democratic opposition supported the ban. The outside-parliament Civic Alliance saluted the Synod's 'extremely clear' decision, which would lead to 'an increase in the church's trust capital, and contribute to the needed moral rebirth of the Romanian people'. Radically changing their position, the Liberals also supported the 'correct' decision which 'confirms the political neutrality and the moral and spiritual standing of the Orthodox Church and its clergy', called on other religious denominations to adopt similar bans, and criticised the Cluj Social Democrats for asking the Synod to reverse its decision. To preempt expectations that once again the Synod would tacitly allow clergy to engage actively in politics, Anania insisted that the ban was irrevocable, definitive and unanimously adopted, and that therefore 'not even the patriarch [chair of the 51-member Synod] can reverse it'. The Social Democrat national leaders announced that the initiative of the Cluj party branch was a unique gesture they did not support (*Informația*, 18 February 2004; *România liberă*, 16 February 2004; *Evenimentul zilei*, 14 February 2004).

Opposition against the ban on the clergy's political involvement came not only from outside, but also from inside the church, as more and more prelates began either to challenge it openly or to (mis)interpret it in ways that suited them. While initially few dared to question Anania or the Synod, later on some leaders announced that priests with public offices could fulfil their mandates but would have to give up politics definitively after the 2004 elections. Others noted that the ban specified no deadline for priests to opt between religion and politics. Stoica suggested that 'the ten-day deadline was Anania's personal interpretation', argued that 'it is pointless to deprive localities of their mayor or local councillor for the next two months [until new elections were

organised]', and insisted that the ban referred to priests seeking to renew their political mandate. 'There are several hundreds priests attracted to politics. They cannot run again, but if their bishops approve, they can fulfil their current mandates. In that case, they cannot participate in the electoral campaign, and cannot run again in the upcoming elections.' Calinic embraced this position when he asked priests in his eparchy to give up party membership to avoid being defrocked, but allowed mayor-priests to fulfil their mandates (*Ziua*, 24 February 2004; *Informația*, 26 February 2004).

By far the most vocal and adamant opposition to the ban was mounted by Rus, the Greater Romania Party senator and the only priest in the archbishopric of Cluj to choose politics over priesthood. On 2 March the archbishopric ecclesiastical tribunal controlled by Anania defrocked Rus. The senator asked the senatorial judicial committee if parliamentary immunity protected him from sanctions imposed by the church, since the Synod's ban applied to future political mandates, not to his own case. Rus claimed that he had informed Anania of his plans to run for political office, but did not specify whether Anania had given his approval. In its response, the committee noted that, according to the Constitution, there was no incompatibility between priesthood and political office, and promised to ask Patriarch Teoctist for details on Rus's case. Rus appealed against the ecclesiastical tribunal decision, but on 20 April the tribunal upheld the decision. A bitter Rus claimed that his defrocking was the result of Anania's personal vendetta, but that for electoral reasons he chose not to sue the Synod or Anania for the damage they had inflicted on his public image in an electoral year. According to Rus, 'former servants of the communist regime like Plămădeală and Teoctist now have the courage to hold accountable a true patriot [like myself]. The Constitution stipulates my rights, not the Synod.' The senator criticised the Orthodox prelates for driving around in 'luxurious cars, when Jesus rode a donkey', and encouraged his Greater Romania Party to open its electoral lists with his name (*Evenimentul zilei*, 5 March and 26 April 2004; *Curierul național*, 7 April 2004).

Writer Liviu Ioan Stoiciu pondered over the reasons why the Orthodox Church had adopted such a firm position in favour of political neutrality only months before new local elections were scheduled. According to Stoiciu

the [Orthodox] Church's moral credibility was challenged by its own leaders. All of a sudden, priests who became senators or deputies on the electoral lists of various parties refused to obey the church, and even dared to give orders to their superiors (the bishops and the metropolitans). The authority of the clerical hierarchy was challenged.

To explain why Anania asked priests to give up public offices obtained through free and fair elections, Stoiciu argued that Teodosie, whom Anania named among clergy in a problematic situation, was the key to the speedy ban of priests from politics.

Teodosie likes power and with the help of the [ruling] Social Democratic Party dreams of becoming the first metropolitan of Tomis and Dobrogea [a position that does not yet exist] and then the patriarch. He wants the church to discontinue following the tradition of nominating the metropolitan of Moldova as the patriarch, and he is fighting a life and death struggle to become a metropolitan ...

since the patriarch is chosen from among metropolitans. For Stoiciu, the commitment to political neutrality stemmed from the power struggle within the Synod between the

supporters of the young, ambitious Teodosie, who relied on Social Democrat support to advance his ecclesiastical career, and his opponents led by Anania, who wanted the established tradition to be observed and to have Metropolitan Ciobotea of Moldova enthroned patriarch after Teoctist's death. Stoiciu believed that 'the decision to ban priests from politics is not enough to stop Teodosie's ascendance' (*Cotidianul*, 4 March 2004).

The Roman Catholic Church was the second religious denomination in Romania to adopt a policy of political neutrality, banning clergy from politics. In doing so, the Catholic leaders invoked the Roman Catholic canon 285.3, which reads that 'clergy are forbidden from assuming public office that implies participation in state decision making', and canon 383.1 of the Greek Catholic Church Code, as well as paragraph 33 of the *Directory on Ministry and Priestly Life* of the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy (1994), which states that

The priest, as servant of the universal Church, cannot tie himself to any historical contingency, and therefore must be above any political party. He cannot take an active role in political parties or labour unions, unless, according to the judgement of the ecclesiastical authority, the rights of the Church and the defence of common good require it. In fact, even if these are good things in themselves, they are nevertheless foreign to the clerical state since they can constitute a grave danger of division in the ecclesial communion . . . The reduction of [the priest's] mission to temporal tasks, of a purely social or political nature, is foreign to his ministry, and does not constitute a triumph but rather a grave loss to the Church's evangelical fruitfulness. (Vatican, 1994; *România liberă*, 19 February 2004)

Roman and Greek Catholic priests were asked to give up political involvement as soon as possible, and a number of politician-priests throughout the country made the choice. In Salaj county all Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests gave up politics, including priests representing the Social Democrats and the Liberals. In Cluj Social Democrats had to remove the names of 32 priests who were all party members included on electoral lists, in Bistrița-Năsăud 12 priests gave up party cards and council positions, and in Constanța seven councillor-priests renounced their party membership, while Fr Gheorghe Stoica chose politics over priesthood. The five or six Reformed clergymen who were Democratic Union of Magyars members refused to turn in their party cards or give up their public office (*Evenimentul zilei*, 20 February 2004; *Ziua*, 23 February 2004; *Cuget liber*, 23 February 2004).

Use of Religious Symbols by Politicians

During the first 15 years of democratisation the dependence of Romanian political parties on religious actors and symbols became stronger and increasingly accepted. Whereas in the first postcommunist elections only a handful of political parties made systematic efforts to woo the country's main religious denominations, primarily because only few parties understood that religion successfully filled the ideological void left behind by the collapse of the dictatorial communist regime, by 2004 all parties without exception claimed a special relationship with the churches, tailored their political platforms to the needs of targeted religious communities, and encouraged their candidates to use religious symbols and perform religious deeds that would make them popular with the electorate. The Romanian Orthodox Church

was uniquely positioned both to receive requests from political parties and electoral candidates and to promise much-desired support. The church as an institution avoided taking the side of specific parties, a move that would commit it to grant support even when party policy was disadvantageous and return it to the position of servant to politicians reminiscent of communist times. Rather it preferred to allow bishops and priests to choose between competing politicians and forge ties to those from whom the clergy hoped to gain the most. As a result, at any given time there were some Orthodox bishops working closely with the government and others with the opposition, with bishops often advocating different political positions in the Synod.

In electoral campaigns candidates of various political persuasions wooed the Orthodox Church in an attempt to gain the votes of the country's sizeable Orthodox community. Although it played a role in the 1990 and 1992 campaigns, it was only in 1996 that religion moved to the forefront of electoral debates, compelling all contenders to define their position vis-à-vis the Orthodox Church and Christianity. The 1996 presidential candidates were careful to include visits to Orthodox churches in their electoral itineraries, to show up for religious services on major Orthodox feast days, and to be photographed surrounded by Orthodox icons, calendars and symbols. Some made substantial donations for church enlargement and reconstruction, others godfathered orphans and witnessed marriages in widely publicised ceremonies, and one candidate chose 'He Who Votes for Me, Votes for God!' as his electoral slogan. The highlight of the presidential race was the televised debate in which the Christian Democrat Constantinescu surprised the incumbent Iliescu, a self-declared atheist, by asking him whether he believed in God. In the end Constantinescu won and, in a token of gratitude, became the first postcommunist Romanian president to take his solemn oath, hand on the Bible, in the presence of the Orthodox patriarch. Since then, the patriarch has opened each legislative session by encouraging senators and deputies to fulfil the mandate the electorate entrusted them with.

Candidates for the 1996 general elections also sought the support of the Orthodox Church. A written request by Transylvanian Social Democrat leaders pleading with the Synod to urge believers to vote for Social Democrat candidates caused much discussion. The letter reminded the church that 'the Social Democrat government was the first in Romania's history to grant priests bonuses', and claimed that Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic priests actively encouraged believers to vote for the major opposition coalition, the Democratic Convention, although this contention was not supported by the evidence at hand. Religion maintained its saliency in 1998, when contenders for the Bucharest mayor's office went on record as attending Orthodox religious services, giving alms, and receiving the unusual honour of being invited inside the altar sanctuary. By the year 2000 the Romanians had accepted the electoral cooperation between parties and the Orthodox Church, decried as one of the inevitable evils of a distorted political life. Just before the second round of the presidential elections organised that year, prominent Orthodox leaders—including Patriarch Teoctist—urged the electorate to vote for a candidate 'who has proven to be balanced, and not for an extremist' such that 'Romania would place itself among European nations'. Bishop Vicențiu Ploieșteanul called for an end to political extremism and expressed dissatisfaction that in the first round young people supported a 'crazy' candidate. Though no names were specified, the 'balanced' candidate was Iliescu, while the 'crazy extremist' was Corneliu Vadim Tudor. In the first round, Tudor mustered greater support from an electorate dissatisfied with both Iliescu's centre-left regime of 1990–96 and Constantinescu's centre-right regime of

1996–2000 (Radio România, 10 October 1996; *Evenimentul zilei*, 15 October 1998 and 7 December 2000).

Months before the local poll of 2000, laypeople and clergy representing the archbishoprics of Bucharest, Maramureş, Cluj, Alba Iulia, Harghita and Covasna approached the Synod with an unusual request. Addressed to ‘all clergy from Romania and abroad and all Romania’s well-wishers’, and authored by Emil Hossu, the parish priest of Boiul Mare village (Maramureş county), the open *Letter for the Soul* read that

we witness the most serious political crisis Romania has faced in the last decade, when all sorts of politicians asked the clergy to support this or that party’s bid to form the government. We are neither upset nor pleased, but we resent the yoke that burdens our confused country ... We responsibly ask the Holy Synod to reflect on the election of a church leader able to pull the country out of chaos. We know that [running for the presidency] will be a great sacrifice for the selected bishop, a crucifixion, but we need a doctor ... During these crucial times, the future Romanian president must be a Romanian Orthodox Church leader. Following his crucifixion [on the political altar], he will be hurt, attacked, smeared, accused, but we firmly believe that the clergy realises that sending a bishop into ‘the lion’s cage’ is essential for a church that has always stood by its people.

After revealing that this was not the first plea of its kind to reach the Orthodox leadership, the Synod rejected the proposal and reiterated the church’s commitment to political neutrality, reassuring the public that it continued ‘to be sensitive to the problems of our society’ (*Evenimentul zilei*, 25 February 2000). Indeed, in the 2000 general elections no Orthodox church leader entered the presidential race.

The symbiotic relationship between politicians and the Orthodox Church was manifest during but also between elections, each time the government sought to consolidate its popular support and gain approval for policy proposals. An example of politicians transforming a religious celebration into a propaganda tool was the mass on the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary on 15 August 2002 at the Nicula monastery, when the Social Democrats distributed free small paper icons of Mary specifying the party as the donor. The move prompted *Adevarul* to write a critical article under the title ‘Fecioara Maria, agent electoral pesedist’ (‘The Virgin Mary, the Social Democrats’ electoral agent’). Upset that nobody had sought his approval, the head of the monastery criticised the icon distribution, adding that ‘desecrating icons by turning them into party tools shows us that political propaganda was pushed too far’. Instead of apologising, the Social Democrats argued that the believers had to know that the icons were paid for by the party. The following year the party again distributed the controversial icons and obliged the faithful gathered at the monastery to listen to a political message from premier Năstase read aloud by the minister of the interior, Ioan Rus. Anania criticised the politicisation of the religious celebration and the Social Democrat initiative as ‘a gesture of impiety and political amateurism’, but Năstase denied that his party sought to gain electoral support through the church, noted that his message ‘reflected the state’s support to the church’, and assured Anania that the government was committed to support financially the completion of all (church) constructions in his diocese (*România liberă*, 19 August 2003; *Adevarul*, 16 August 2002; *Telegraful de Constanța*, 16 August 2002).

At around the same time, the Orthodox Church blessed a new church in Talpa village (Botoşani county), 'an edifice of [minister of public administration] Octav Cosmâncă and the government', in a celebration attended by Social Democrat luminaries, including the speaker of the Chamber of Deputies, four ministers and dozens of senators, deputies, prefects and county council presidents. The blessing was conducted jointly by Metropolitan Daniel of Moldova and Metropolitan Petru of Basarabia. The next day Cosmâncă lost his ministerial portfolio, prompting journalists to write ironically that God had finally heard his prayers and to suggest that the minister had used a combination of public funds and funds derived through corrupt methods to fund the construction of the large church. Liberal leader Dan Morega built a church in Padeş village (Gorj county), and ordered a painting on the church wall representing him according to Byzantine iconography, though his saintly posture contrasted with his public image as a corrupt businessman and politician. Morega was not the first Romanian politician to build a church, but others preferred to immortalise their financial contribution in a small inscription mentioning their name, not a full-scale portrait. The Social Democrat Party also got into the business of building churches. In 2003 it announced plans to construct a new church in Dumbrăveşti village (Prahova county), and a year later helped build a monastery in Crucea village (Constanţa county) (*Evenimentul zilei*, 16 June 2003; *Ziarul de Iaşi*, 20 August 2003; *Replica*, 26 October 2004).

Today, most politicians dream of building churches that will mark their contribution to the welfare of the Romanian people and the prosperity of their natal villages. While politicians in other countries are busy setting up student scholarship funds, building public libraries, and founding non-profit organisations promoting community interests, politicians in Romania prefer to erect churches, in the belief that their stone and brick structures will stand the passage of time better. They also seem to have a fascination with Byzantine paintings covering the church interior walls, which present them as worthy maintainers of Romanian values, on a par with revered historical figures such as Ştefan the Great, Mihai the Brave and Mircea the Elder. Romania is the Eastern European country with the highest number of Orthodox churches relative to its total population.

God and the Ballot in 2004

Until 2004 the balance between the churches and the political class seemed inclined in favour of the latter. Generally, the politicians decided when exactly to enter negotiations with the churches, which churches to approach, which promises to make, and to what degree and when to meet their promises. Time and again religious leaders felt betrayed and deceived by politicians who, once in office, conveniently forgot to honour their pledges or insisted that more urgent problems had to be addressed before any matters of importance for religious denominations. It was only in 2004 that the Orthodox Church tried to redress the balance of power, and make its relationship with the political class more equitable, by insisting that a number of its key demands be honoured before general elections were organised that year.

As the local poll approached, reports about politicians seeking support from priests and bishops and clergy taking sides in the electoral campaign became more numerous. With Teodosie's approval, priests distributed pamphlets detailing the accomplishments of Social Democrat Tulcea mayor Constantin Mocanu. In Stefăneşti village (Argeş county), Liberal candidate Mihai Bărbuceanu complained that Social Democrat mayor Nistor joined party street demonstrations and meetings dressed in

priestly robes, and thus ‘uses religion and church for electoral purposes’. In Petroșani, Fr Octavian Pătrașcu encouraged voters to support the Social Democrats, ‘the only party in Romania to believe in God’, endorsed – in priestly robes – the party’s mayoral candidate, and was quoted as saying ‘Pray and work! This is the Golden Rule of our Christian faith and tradition, which [Social Democrat candidate] Dr Benor Voicescu observes in his daily life and activity. This is why we support him, and wish him success in the race and in his work for the community.’ People visiting the social canteen organised by Pătrașcu’s parish were told that the Social Democrats had paid for the food, which had in fact been covered by foreign donations. The Liberal Party complained to the Synod that ‘through his explicit political activity, Fr Pătrașcu disregarded the Synod’s ban on clergy political involvement’, but the priest argued that he was helping the Social Democrat campaign as an ordinary citizen, not a church representative (*România liberă*, 14 January 2004; *Evenimentul zilei*, 14 and 25 May 2004).

The press reported many similar examples. In Runcu Salvei village (Bistrița county), Ilie Furcea interrupted mass to invite Social Democrat leaders to present the candidate for the mayor’s office. Parishioners sent a protest letter to Anania, but the priest was never punished. In Gătaia village (Timiș county), the Social Democrat mayoral candidate Iosif Sargan was allowed to speak from the pulpit of a Reformed church, and gave a hefty donation to the local Reformed and Orthodox parishes for the clergy to support his candidacy publicly. Again, parishioners protested and petitioned the police and the courts, but nothing was done. The Social Democrat Party targeted evangelical churches in Cluj-Napoca, tailoring its electoral message to suit each church (Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal). Electoral fliers distributed in the Adventist church included the Social Democrat slogan ‘Together for Cluj-Napoca’, a verse from Jeremiah (‘seek the good of the community because its happiness is yours’), and photos of Social Democrat mayoral candidate Ioan Rus, candidate for county council and Baptist minister Victor Faragan, and candidate for municipal council and Baptist believer Ioan Pop. Bishop Epifanie Norocel of Buzau was photographed next to controversial Social Democrat leader Marian Opreșan, and told the faithful that Satan was ‘right-wing’ and that ‘the Liberals were sent by the devil to do his bidding’, but that ‘they will be punished, either in this life or in the afterlife’. The opposition also wooed the church, but instances of collusion were fewer. Zimnicea councillor Fr Filip Bureanu, a long-term sympathiser of the Democratic Convention, turned his yearly pilgrimages to Moldovan monasteries into electoral propaganda for the opposition Liberal Party (*Evenimentul zilei*, 2 and 3 June 2004; *Cotidianul*, 23 October 2003; *Curentul*, 11 August 2003).

In the local elections of that year, the Orthodox Church contributed in no small part to the Social Democrats’ coming second in terms of number of county councillor mandates, and to their losing to the opposition Justice and Truth Alliance (*Alianța pentru Dreptate și Adevăr*) by just a narrow margin (32.6 per cent to 33.8 per cent). The church expected to be rewarded for all its efforts soon after the local poll, with the government meeting a number of important demands like returning property (land and assets) that had once belonged to the archbishopric of Suceava and launching the construction of the Cathedral for National Salvation in Bucharest, two controversial projects which civil society and local government had opposed on mostly practical grounds. Facing the government’s refusal to meet its demands, the church changed its tone and started to criticise president Iliescu and premier Năstase, as though to show the two that the Social Democrats could not afford to lose its valuable support in the months preceding the general elections.

While Social Democrat leaders were busy distributing gifts, food and money at Eastertime, Anania warned that high levels of political corruption could endanger Romania's integration process into the European Union (*Curierul național*, 7 April 2004). Some weeks later, during the lavish 500-year celebrations of the death of Moldovan king Ștefan the Great, recognised as Saint Ștefan the Great by the Romanian Orthodox Church, Archbishop Pimen of Suceava criticised the Social Democrat leaders gathered at Putna monastery. Iliescu and Năstase attended the celebrations under the protection of 500 police officers brought in from neighbouring counties. Pimen scolded the Social Democrat youth organisation for politicising the effort to bring Ștefan's icon to the monastery, in the process marginalising the initiator, the Association of Christian Orthodox Students of Romania (*Asociația Studenților Creștini Ortodocși din România*), and admonished them for committing

a condemnable act at a time when our Christian roots are threatened throughout Europe, when morality is forgotten, when men live beneath the level of animals, when few statesmen believe in God. We see these double-faced politicians entering the church only during electoral campaign or at major events. While we cannot judge them, we should pray to God to enlighten them! (*România liberă*, 1 July 2004)

Pimen further criticised the 'excessive' security measures adopted at Putna, which allowed only press representatives and politicians to enter the monastery and obliged the faithful to wait outside the monastery walls:

Ștefan the Great was saddened to see that the faithful were brutally stopped from entering the church, and were treated as terrorists and thieves at the order of the country's leaders, [who only] sought electoral capital, as religious and patriotic sentiment is foreign to them. They are remnants of the Communist Party ... Only God knows how they were elected to rule our country! God sought to make us wiser, to show us where the dishonesty and unfaithfulness with which they surround themselves can lead. They are elected, but this does not justify their undignified behaviour.

He characterised the country's leaders harshly, declaring that: 'President Iliescu is a true believer in the communist doctrine and does not support the idea of private property, while Năstase is a very proud man.' Pimen added that 'Ceaușescu said clearly "I am an atheist" and did not interfere, but [Iliescu and Năstase] say "we are with the church" when in fact they are against the church and the people' (*România liberă*, 12 July 2004). Metropolitan Daniel of Moldova distanced himself, arguing that 'organisational deficiencies cannot be attributed to President Iliescu and Premier Năstase', and state secretary for religious affairs Laurențiu Tănase said that Pimen's statement 'risked unnecessarily poisoning church-state relations' (*România liberă*, 17 July 2004; *Ziua*, 14 July 2004). The press believed that Pimen's stand signalled a change in the church's position toward state and government. Writer Dan Ciachir argued that 'we are witnessing a change of attitude on the part of the church from servility to independence. Anania and Pimen are the first to discuss with the state as equals, they are the root of renewed church-state relations' since Pimen's position reflected the position of many other church leaders whom the state treated arrogantly. For Ciachir, 'Pimen told our rulers some hard truths that nobody else dared to in the history of modern Romania', and in this 'we witness signs of the church's

emancipation', though the church continued to be subordinated to the state through the share of the national budget it received. Theologian Vincentiu Cernea believed that in 1990 the church missed the chance to redefine its relationship to the state, and that therefore in 2004 it 'faces an identity crisis, it is hesitant and does not know how to act in a free society'; but he was pessimistic with regard to the church's chance of becoming independent from the state and the ruling party (*Evenimentul zilei*, 15 July 2004).³

As the general election drew closer and the Orthodox leaders grew more critical, Social Democrats made extra efforts to bridge the divide. In September the government sponsored an international congress on Romanian spirituality organised under the aegis of the Archbishopric of Alba Iulia, and reminded the Patriarchate that 1554 churches were renovated and the construction of 1050 others was launched during the 2000–04 period (*Ziua*, 13 November 2004). Some weeks later the government proposed (and parliament endorsed) the building of the monumental Cathedral for National Salvation in Carol Park, close to the Bucharest commercial district and the patriarchal see. The project met the opposition of civil society groups and the Bucharest general mayor Traian Băsescu, representing the opposition Democratic Party. The government promised to return vast stretches of Moldovan forest that had once belonged to the Archbishopric of Suceava, a gesture of goodwill toward its most adamant critic, Pimen. This has yet to happen, but after receiving the news Pimen declared that by agreeing to the restitution Năstase 'entered the select circle of founders and protectors of historical churches and monasteries', apparently forgetting his earlier references to Năstase's arrogance and corruption (*Ziua*, 30 October 2004; *Curierul național*, 1 November 2004). Once its two main demands were met, the Orthodox Church again lent support to the Social Democrats.

For their part, parliamentary candidates turned celebrations of Saint Paraschiva's Day (14 October) into a public relations success. Local public servants and the wives of Social Democrat leaders prepared 60,000 cabbage rolls to distribute to the poor together with 200,000 litres of wine and beer. The Orthodox Church arranged for a fragment of the Holy Cross to be brought from Greece, while the mayor's office entertained pilgrims with choral songs, parachute stunts and fireworks, and offered them hot tea during the unusually cold night. Arriving in Iași at the last moment, premier Năstase took the opportunity to renew his electoral promises of better social protection for the elderly (*România liberă*, 15 October 2004). Both the Orthodox Church and the Social Democrats draw most of their support from the backward province of Moldova, whose capital is Iași.

In the presidential elections Năstase competed against Băsescu, representing the Justice and Truth Alliance, Corneliu Vadim Tudor, representing the Greater Romania Party, and nine other minor candidates. At first, Băsescu burned bridges with the church when he voiced support for homosexual marriages and the legalisation of prostitution. On 28 October the Patriarchate condemned Băsescu's position, while the press, the opposition and Anania criticised the church for taking a position against a presidential candidate during the electoral campaign. Social Democrat Cosmâncă took the occasion to argue that

Băsescu is Satan, not a genuine Christian. His position toward homosexual marriages is the position of the Antichrist, not of a normal Christian fearful of God. He is Christian only in his troubled mind. Adrian Năstase is a good Christian, a man who really helped the church as lots of churches were built in the last four years. (*România liberă*, 2 November 2004)

In the end, Băsescu claimed that he neither supported nor opposed the legalisation of prostitution and homosexuality, attended mass, offered donations and pledged to return additional property to the Archbishopric of Suceava (*Adevărul*, 27 October 2004; *Ziua*, 25 October 2004). Hours before the poll, Băsescu visited a Bucharest church, participated in the mass, made the sign of the cross, mumbled the Our Father, and was blessed and sprinkled with holy water by the priest (*Evenimentul zilei*, 27 November 2004). The visit was the divine sign he looked for, helping him to win the presidency in the runoff.

Among presidential candidates, Tudor was the keenest on employing religious symbols. Tudor centred his entire electoral campaign on Christianity, wore white clothes similar to the patriarch's, symbolising purity, honesty and correctness, and insisted during each visit, debate, demonstration and declaration that he would be 'the first Christian president in Romania's history'. A photograph depicting him together with Patriarch Teoctist and Pope John Paul II was published in newspapers with wide circulation several times during the campaign. In a letter to the Central Electoral Bureau, the Patriarchate complained of Tudor's use of Christian and religious symbols and his failure to seek the patriarch's consent before using the photograph as an electoral tool. The Greater Romania Party remarked that the photograph had been taken during the pope's visit to Romania, had been published before and had therefore already been in the public domain at the beginning of the electoral campaign (*Ziua*, 23 November 2004). It is difficult to estimate how many more votes Tudor gained by employing religious symbols. He won only 13 per cent of the national vote, and was unable to enter the presidential runoff.

Conclusion

In the last 15 years many more priests have become politically involved and many more politicians have employed religious symbols to gain electoral support. Whereas in the early 1990s politicians were generally controlling the process of marrying religion and politics for electoral gain, recently religious actors have become more assertive, threatening to withdraw support if political parties fail to meet key demands. The strategy has apparently worked, and has allowed the Orthodox Church to obtain restitution of some of its property and launch construction of the gigantic Cathedral for National Salvation, two projects which civil society bitterly opposed. The involvement of religion in electoral politics clearly benefits the Orthodox Church more than other religious denominations, further solidifying that church's ascendancy over religious affairs in the country. While beneficial for the resurrection of religious activity following 45 years of communist rule, the interplay between religion and electoral politics could eventually prove detrimental to democratisation if the umbilical cord that ties the Romanian political class to the powerful Orthodox Church is not cut.

Notes

- 1 A related area refers to the 1990 and 1999 bids of the Romanian Orthodox Church to have its leaders, Holy Synod members, appointed as *de jure* life senators. Politicians turned down the proposal, wary that the 27 Synod members would be a strong parliamentary caucus with great impact on the electorate for decades to come (Orthodox leaders never retire). In 2002 the tiny Humanist Party unsuccessfully sought support for constitutional changes that would appoint only the patriarch a life senator (*Evenimentul zilei*, 3 April 1999; *Curierul zilei*, 10 June 2002).

- 2 Journalists further claimed that the anticorruption bill (Law no. 161 of 19 April 2003) deemed the positions of priest and mayor incompatible, and obliged individuals to choose between them, but the law does not specify the compatibility or incompatibility of public officials who are also priests, and politician priests declared that they would wait for the Synod to ask them to renounce their political posts (*Ziarul de azi*, 15 May 2003).
- 3 In a personal interview with Lucian Turcescu on 12 June 2004 in Timișoara, Metropolitan Nicolae Corneanu of Banat also argued that ‘the Byzantine concept of symphonia is no longer applicable today; the church should speak of, and practice, collaboration with the state instead’.

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