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The State of the Nation, the State of the Church: Romanian Ecclesiastical Infrastructures around 1900 in Dualist Hungary

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Abstract

In composite states, where confessional and ethnical fault lines often overlapped to create complex mosaics of national and religious affiliation, ecclesiastical structures almost always played several different but essential roles, beside ensuring the pastoral care of their communities of worship. In Dualist Hungary, the various ethnic groups that comprised this political conglomerate adhered to a broad palette of denominations, each with its own structures and administration.

These ecclesiastical infrastructures had developed both organically, and, in certain cases, as the result of consistent and considerable missionary activity. In an exceptionally diverse confessional landscape such as that of Transylvania, from 1867 an integral part of Dualist Hungary, an a territory where most denominations had been accepted or at least tolerated since the late sixteenth century, many Churches began to function as vehicles for national aspirations, instruments of social, charitable, and often political mobilisation.

Especially at the grassroots level of the parish, where religious authority came into direct contact with nationally focused and often politically endowed communities, it was crucial that ecclesiastical infrastructures function to the best of their ability. Parishes and parish clergy, local teachers of confessional schools, and any other ecclesiastical or lay subordinates needed to coordinate their efforts, function as a whole, and fulfil the demands of their superiors and the needs of those they shepherded and taught. This was not always an easy task, as a result of manifold factors.

Especially during the late nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth, with the onset of the Hungarian state's concerted efforts to modernize itself, fields that had traditionally fallen under the authority of the Churches, such as confessional education or marriage, began to

enter the gaze of the state. Competing national struggles for political recognition were also nearing their peak, an omen of what was to come following the Great War. It was essential within this context that the nationalities' Churches, and their ecclesiastical infrastructures operate optimally and concertedly.

This paper proposes therefore to examine concrete structures that constituted the Greek Catholic Church in Dualist Hungary, one of the most significant institutions from the perspective of both the state and that of its flock, the Romanian nation in Hungary. Given the manifold tasks that ecclesiastical staff had to fulfil, it is warranted to enquire into the precise boundaries, layers, and efficiency of the ecclesiastical infrastructures of the Greek Catholic Church. This examination – based on the schematisms published by the Church around 1900 for its major dioceses, celebrating some two centuries of existence – will focus on the state of the Church's economic, administrative and, more importantly, human resources, in an effort to quantitatively and qualitatively assess how prepared it was to serve the purposes of nationally focused struggles.

I. Introduction

“The priests have sold the entire flock, the Romanian language, school, and church... to the Hungarian governing party”! Thus lamented an article published in the Gazette of Transylvania, one of the two main Romanian daily newspapers in Hungary, following the parliamentary elections of 1905. Why would a Romanian reader have regarded the priests as the safekeepers of all these – language, community, and school -, able to sell them at will? Why did the Romanian middle clergy in Transylvania wield this type of power, and was it ultimately to their benefit?

While the extra-ecclesiastical or extra-pastoral roles played by the clergy in composite states are already a commonplace in historical literature, particular to East-Central and South-East Europe, this group's involvement in the political or civil fields deserves further attention for several reasons.

First, while the clergy's role as part of the 'national' intelligentsia and the fabric of 'national' civil society in the Habsburg Monarchy has been highlighted (Cohen 2007), they are not generally viewed as a professional group. Clerical 'vocation' is assumed to be above mere 'professional callings', thus making it impossible for the clergy, and especially the middle clergy operating on parish level, to be regarded as doing their job, fulfilling the demands of a profession. This puts them at a disadvantage compared to other groups, who were traditionally part of the emerging intelligentsia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: lawyers, journalists, educators, etc.

This also leads to the second gap in the analysis of the clergy as self-standing historical actor: for most of modernity, and certainly after the mid-nineteenth century, clergymen in composite states in East-Central or South-Eastern Europe were in many respects state employees.

This was the case in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Monarchy as well as in Hungary (Dăncilă-Ineoan, Eppel, Iudean 2019; Boyer 1974).¹

As a corollary of these two notions, and the much-discussed political involvement of the clergy as part of the whirlwind of national movements in the area, it is warranted to ask the following: how did the responsibilities of the clergy as an employee of a de-nationalising state such as early twentieth-century dualist Hungary mesh with the demands voiced by those with whom they shared the informal ‘shepherding’ of the national flock (i.e. the leaders of the national movements)? In what contexts were these responsibilities and demands likely to clash? Finally, how did the make-up and embeddedness of ecclesiastical infrastructures into state administrative frameworks influence this ambivalent relationship?

The present paper will follow these three guiding threads, and seek to recapture the entanglements between nation, clergy, and state in the Greek Catholic archdiocese of Transylvania, the most important ecclesiastical unit of one of the two Romanian Churches in dualist Hungary. We will do so by examining the thorniest of historical contexts, prone to eliciting especially visible clashes between national duty, faith, and professional allegiance, namely the elections for a seat in the Budapest Parliament, with a special focus on the 1905 and 1906 elections. Moreover, we will shed brief light on the overlap between the ecclesiastical infrastructure of the archdiocese and the system of the counties, which obtained in dualist Hungary at the time, and what this overlap meant in practice for the parish clergy. Finally, we will attempt to ascertain whether explicit national political mobilisation, often expected of the middle clergy, was not perhaps a too great requirement for a professional group that depended almost entirely on the benevolence of the state?

II. Priests in parliamentary elections

The Romanian political landscape in dualist Hungary was relatively fragmented. From 1881 to 1905, the Romanian national movement in Transylvania (though not in the Banat) adhered strictly to a passivist attitude: by boycotting elections the political leaders of the Romanians and the Romanian voters boycotted the state construct that had been established with the 1867 compromise. From 1887, passivism extended to Eastern Hungary and the Banat, two areas which had been activist in orientation, i.e. managing to elect Romanian national candidates in the Budapest parliament, and fulfilling their tasks as citizens of the state.

However, a third direction (or a second one, depending on how you count them) of a more moderate orientation also existed: it also had clear goals of national improvement, thought it went about matters differently than the political branch of the national movement, preferring to target the level of the local community (constituency) rather than the betterment of the entire nation. This other direction saw in the Budapest governments a potential collaborator and acknowledged that the political status quo was unlikely to ever revert to its pre-1867 version.

¹ Whether the clergy of all denominations received equal treatment as part of the state apparatus is however a different matter altogether.

The government, in turn, relied on the idea that Romanians would prefer to vote for fellow Romanians, even when supported by the ruling Hungarian party. It therefore supported Romanian candidates, or mercenaries as the national press called them, in some of the counties and constituencies where there was a majority of Romanian voters. That does not of course mean that the government supported only Romanian candidates where most of the voters shared this ethnicity. Similarly, Szeklers, Jews, or Saxons candidates gained the government’s backing and ran on the lists of the ruling parties where they were regarded as having better odds of winning the electoral fight. The main object of exchange was this: while Romanian deputies, once elected, would support the government on broad issues, the latter would acquiesce to various concessions in favour of the deputies’ Romanian constituencies at local level.



Map 1. Counties of dualist Hungary around 1900 – in green the counties that overlapped with the Greek Catholic archdiocese of Alba Iulia and Făgăraș. (Wikicommons)

How did the Romanian parish priests fit into this fraught political landscape?

The governments in Budapest had two possible levers in order to ensure the victory of their candidates: either they used the force of the local administration, and various coercive measures, or they chose the path of least resistance, and sought to persuade the local intelligentsia by various

means that it was in their best interest to support the governmental candidate. The competing national movements throughout Hungary however could only employ the second, persuasive mechanism. The role played by parish priests and local teachers – who were in a similar position – at the level of the constituency was instrumental, as they were the most apt to mobilize the voters, swaying them in a particular direction. Priests and teachers, the core of the local intelligentsia, were those with whom the communities were in immediate contact, and in whom the Romanians put their trust.

Romanian priests placed themselves on both sides of the national banner. Many were heavily involved with supporting the Romanian candidates of the national movement, an involvement which of course transcended the boundaries of Transylvania and the Romanian Banat. The involvement of the local intelligentsia was moreover not restricted to supporting whichever national candidate the centre of the national movement in Sibiu deemed worthy: for instance, in the electoral constituency of Žitište/Bega-Szent-György, nowadays located in Vojvodina, the leadership of the national movement in Sibiu named as candidate for the 1905 elections a certain V. Petroviciu, who would lose against the governmental candidate. One of the Romanian gazettes in Hungary, *The Tribune/Tribuna*, would lament the fact that the local intelligentsia, foremost of which the local clergy, were not consulted when the candidate was selected: they were those who knew best where and with whom the community's loyalties lay, and could have proposed a suitable individual. What is more, the local clergy was disparaged in other national gazettes following the failed elections, one of them even 'being insulted on the day of the elections, though he would have perhaps went to help [the candidate] who knew not where his duty lay, when all personal interests needed to be left aside for the benefit of common and national interests.' Therefore, local clergy supported the governmental candidate, who promised to establish a communal school in the locality, an endeavour funded with 40 000 Crowns.²

When the clergy's preferred candidate was selected to run, parish priests would regularly accompany him on electoral tours, giving effusive speeches to the local voters, and praising the candidate. In the constituency of Sîn-Miclăușul-Mare, inhabited by Romanians, Germans, Serbians, Bulgarians, and Hungarians, before the partial elections of 1906

'The meeting was opened by Mr. Terențiu Oprean, priest, who with a strong voice and an admirable diction made explicit the gathering's purpose in four languages. We do not want to receive a candidate imposed from above, he said, but only one who is well liked by the people, knows its sorrows and needs. Given that our constituency uses several languages, it is necessary to support a nationalist candidate.'³

In other situations, priests involved in elections as supporters of the national candidates had to face the potential wrath of the Hungarian administrative system: in the 1906 electoral campaign in the constituency of Cehul Silvaniei, 'leading priests received threatening letters, urging them to bring burial caskets' should they dare to accompany the Romanian national

² *Tribuna*, Arad, Issue 31/IX, 16th-1st of March 1905, 'Electorale', 3-4.

³ *Tribuna*, Arad, Issue 70/X, 13th-26th of April 1906, 'Electorale', 2.

candidate on the day of election.⁴ In Timișoara, the authorities used both coercive and persuasive measures: a company of soldiers and 40 gendarmes were dispatched to every constituency on the day of the vote, and priests were warned that they would be prosecuted if they cursed those Romanian voters who expressed their preference for the Hungarian-supported candidates.⁵

On the other hand, the option of ecclesiastical un-involvement in elections was quite displeasing to the Romanian national movement: the same Gazette of Transylvania reported prior to the elections of 1906 that the Romanian bishop of Arad issued a circular in which he warned the parish clergy and the confessional school teachers in the local deaneries to refrain from involving themselves in the electoral struggle. The order ‘provoked resentment among the patriotic and clergy and teachers’, although it also noted that those who supported Hungarian candidates would face disciplinary inquiries.⁶

However, most often, priests’ involvement in elections was featured in the national press when it went against the ‘national grain’. The ‘political transubstantiation’ of clergymen who went over to the side of the governmental candidates was strongly condemned in the papers, and earned special rubrics, where those who ‘sold out’ the nation were denounced as traitors to the national cause. The press explicitly advised both the priests to behave appropriately, or face the consequences, and their flocks to turn them out should they not conform:

‘We therefore wait steadfast, that in these days of grave battle for the Romanian people, the Romanian priests will place themselves in the leadership of the people in favour of the national candidates. Those who would hesitate, or do otherwise we will count among the traitors to the people, and we will enlighten the latter, to turn in disgust from those wolves clothed in priestly vestments, to turn them out of their homes, to turn them out of their churches even, because our forefathers’ altars cannot be defiled by the prayers of turncoats and sellers of their own kind. Our church must remain Romanian, or it will crumble. Our priests are not allowed to serve as sinful instruments in the hands of the Romanian people’s mortal enemies. If they still persevere, then we will cast them out as we would the devil.’⁷

This violent rhetoric was not singular, but rather employed often when those who were regarded as safeguarding one of the main tenets of Romanian identity – its faith – dared to step out of line and betray the cause. The frequency with which ecclesiastical turncoats were condemned by name in the press is a testament to the essential role they played as intermediaries between the national movement and the local rural milieu, and to the hard burden of the duty to the nation they had been assigned by the national movement.

One telling example in this sense occurred during the 1905 electoral campaign in the county of Făgăraș, in the constituency of Arpașul de Jos. In a not-uncommon occurrence, two Romanian candidates went against each other in the elections: one was a national candidate, a certain Octavian Vasu, who was awarded 393 votes, and the second was the governmental Nicolae Șerban, who won the parliamentary seat with 446 votes. The victory of the government over the

⁴ Gazeta Transilvaniei, Brașov, Issue 88/LXIX, 22nd of April-5th of May 1906, 4.

⁵ Gazeta Transilvaniei, Brașov, Issue 83/LXIX, 15th -28th of April 1906, 2.

⁶ Gazeta Transilvaniei, Brașov, Issue 85/LXIX, 18th April-1st May 1906, 1.

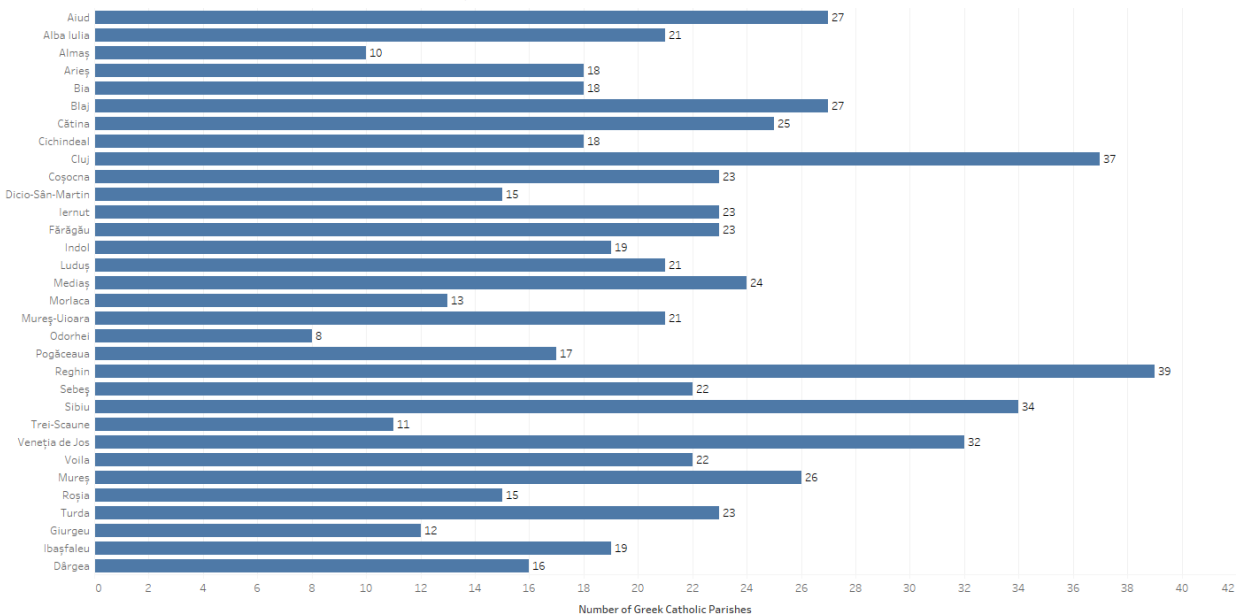
⁷ Tribuna, Arad, Issue 6/IX, 11th-24th of January, ‘To the Romanian priesthood’, 2.

nation was largely caused by ‘the wretchedness of a great many of the priests and teachers’, as the great majority of these lent their support to the governmental candidate.⁸

III. The temporal-ecclesiastical overlap and its pressures

Why did Romanian priests risk the wrath of their brethren and turn their coat so often? One potential answer to this inquiry lies in the overlap between the state and the ecclesiastical administration, and the dependence of the latter on the former.

Distribution of Parishes per Deanery, Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Diocese 1900



Sum of Number of Records for each Edeanery Id.

Figure 1. The Distribution of Mater Parishes per Deanery, Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Greek Catholic Archdiocese, 1900.

The Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Greek Catholic Archdiocese was arguably the best placed and organized ecclesiastical unit in Transylvania. It was the home of the national movement’s headquarters in the deanery of Sibiu and housed one of the few higher confessionals schools in Transylvania, located in Blaj. It was not a border-diocese, like that of Gherla or Oradea, and therefore, in respect to internal organisation, it was the closest among the Greek Catholic dioceses to the Orthodox rite (Gherla and Oradea had adopted a somewhat more ‘Latinizing’ stance). It comprised 32 deaneries, some smaller, such as Odorhei, in the Szekler lands, or in areas such as Brașov, where the Orthodox presence had a long-standing tradition, and where the establishment of the former Border Guard Regiments by the Habsburg Empire was not pervasive and therefore

⁸ Tribuna, Arad, Issue 11/IX, 18th-31st of January 1905, 3.

the introduction of Greek Catholicism was less visible. Other deaneries, such as Cluj, were much larger and consequently more important, and tied into the presence of Catholic schools, such as those which had been established by the Jesuits.

Still, the reality at grassroots level was somewhat different if we consider the issues faced by Romanian Greek Catholic priests from a joint administrative perspective.

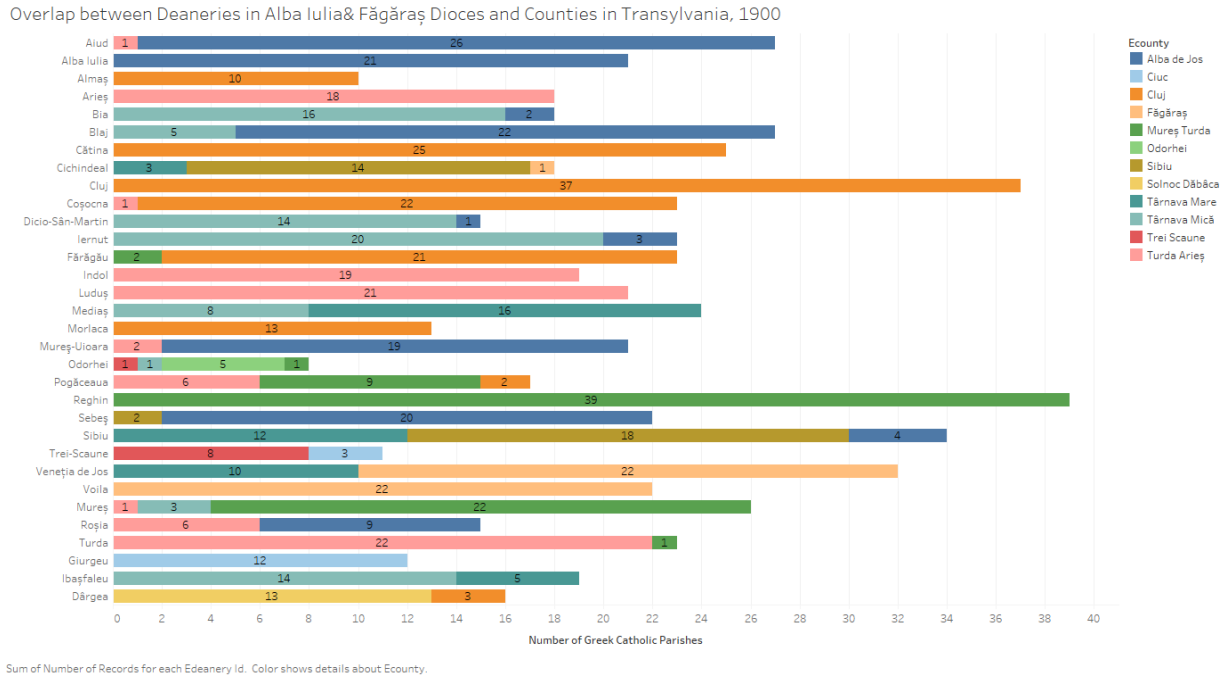
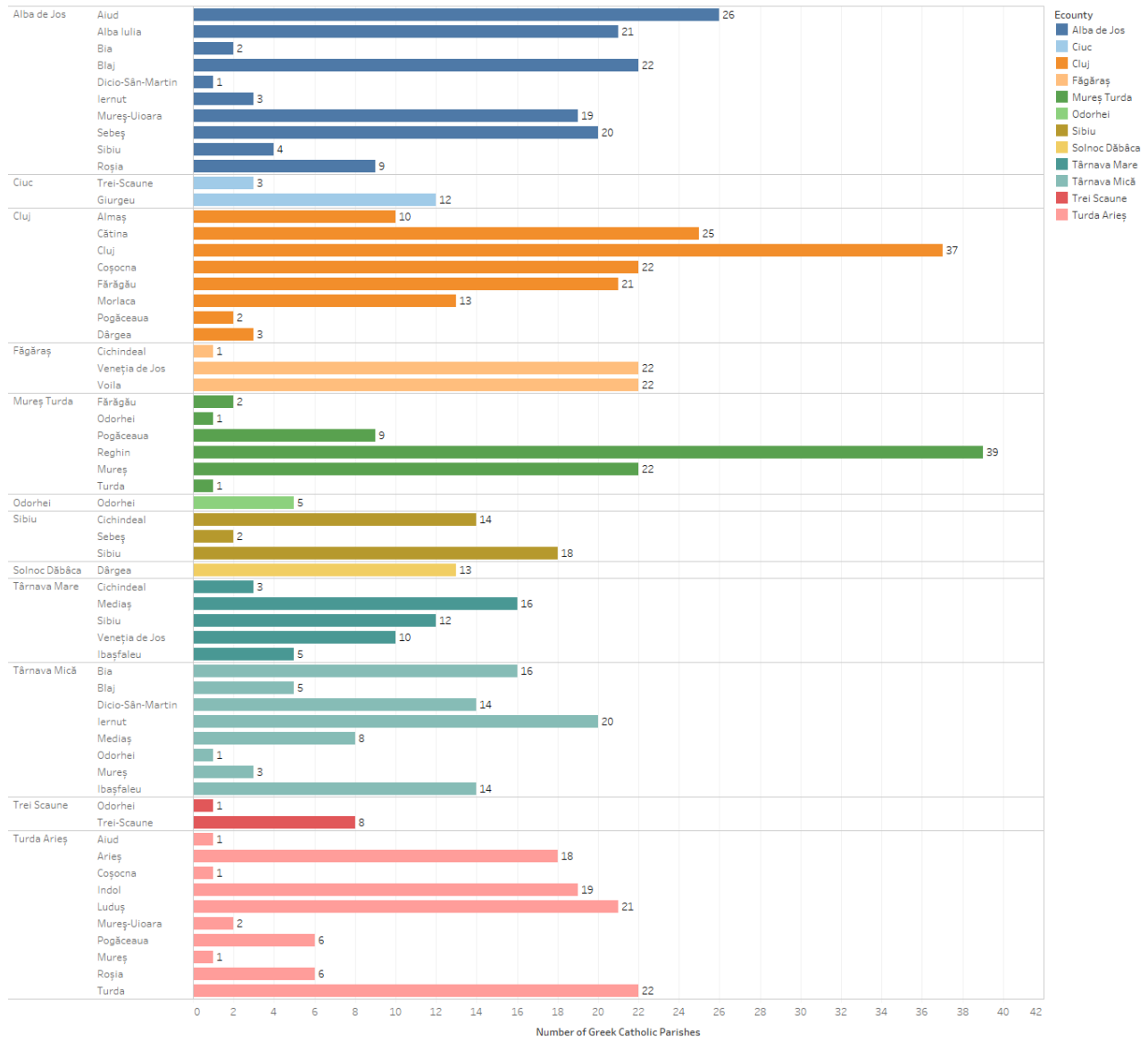


Figure 2. Overlap between Deaneries in Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Greek Catholic Archdiocese and the Counties in Transylvania, 1900.

As can be seen in Figure 2, many deaneries were split between different counties, which meant that the same archpriest had to contend with different political and administrative realities in each county. At the same time, large counties such as Cluj or Mureș-Turda engulfed several deaneries, which had different implications for the leadership of the ecclesiastical units in question, whose position could be made more difficult by county administration unfavourable to the Romanian national goals.

The same complex overlap reveals itself differently, and perhaps more clearly in the third figure. The state authorities heading each county administration could exert pressure in many different deaneries at the same time, which meant that several local archpriests as well as the parish priests in their charge were likely to be affected by punitive measures and pressures exerted at county level. Given that many Lord Lieutenants, who headed the counties, cultivated very close ties to the governments in Budapest, it was expected that they would show important support to the governmental candidates for a seat in Parliament. Consequently, they would seek to ensure that the potential counter-candidates from national parties would be lacking in national support.

Distribution of Parishes per County and Deanery, Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Diocese 1900



Sum of Number of Records for each Edeanery Id broken down by Ecounty. Color shows details about Ecounty.

Figure 3. Distribution of Parishes per County and Deanery, Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Greek Catholic Archdiocese, 1900

We are however warranted in asking what levers the county authorities and the Budapest governments had over the Romanian Churches. Beside various violent coercive measures, imprisonment, and such tactics, the administration wielded a greater weapon, namely money. The Hungarian state, as the Habsburg administration before it, had been one of the greatest sources of income for the clergy, regardless of confession. Though state-subsidized aids were not always regularly paid, or directed towards those most in need, they nevertheless represented a significant portion of ecclesiastical income. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a new bill of law would be passed in the Budapest Parliament, which would provide a supplementary income to parish priests regardless of confession – the so-called *congrua bill* (Dăncilă-Ineoan, Eppel, Iudean 2019). The sums provided were awarded to individual priests, and not to parishes, and depended on the individual in question's educational level and qualifications. Expectedly, it would spark ardent debates not only in the House of Magnates, among the heads of the major confessions in Hungary, but also within the national press. Money was the instrument wielded most efficiently by the state in its quest to alienate the clergy from the national interests of their flocks, according to the press.

One article published in *The People's Tribune* in 1900 accurately diagnosed the issue:

,It seems that the government inquired into our fates, and provided in the law a minimal and maximal wage, which we will in the future have to take into consideration... In all great and vital matters, men are generally very cautious and circumspect. This is how our government acted when introducing civil marriage with all its annexes; it showed however great strategic thought in regulating the subsidy of the clergy. It took the pulse of the priesthood by releasing these state subsidies, which were a trap, an illusion for us, or better said, an apple of discord. Through this aid our spiritual strength was tested. [...] If, after a few years of implementation, the non-Hungarian priests prove themselves worthy agents of Magyarization, the state can decree them to be clerks, and [...] secularize everything the churches and convents own nowadays.'⁹

Though perhaps somewhat far-fetched in its forecast of what would come, should Romanian priests come to be paid directly by the government, bypassing the higher ecclesiastical authorities all-together, the danger presented by allegiance to a non-Romanian, denationalising state, as a direct employer, was not entirely a remote possibility. The *congrua*, as opposed to previous financial subsidies from the state, which were allotted to the dioceses and deaneries, and from there were allotted to priests in need in supplements, would go directly to the parish level. One of the Orthodox bishops in the House of Magnates summarized the issue very well in one of his parliamentary addresses: 'While the government offers a small financial allowance with one hand, with the other hand it claims for itself the right of great interferences in the autonomy of the confessions.'(Dăncilă-Ineoan, Eppel, Iudean 2019, 137). Likewise, Greek Catholic high clergymen in the Upper House of the Parliament noted that even the subsidies previously provided, since 1863, had been offered directly by the Minister of Instruction and Cults 'only to those he

⁹ Tribuna Poporului, Arad, Issue 55/IV, 21st March – 3rd of April 1900, 2.

wanted to, and to those to whom it did not want, it did not offer anything.’ (Dăncilă-Ineoan, Eppel, Iudean 2019, 139).

How thorny the matter of subsidies was in reality can be gleaned from the actual situation of congrual incomes for the parishes situated in the Archdiocese, depicted in Figure 4.

Distribution of Congrual Incomes per Deanery, Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Greek Catholic Archdiocese, 1900

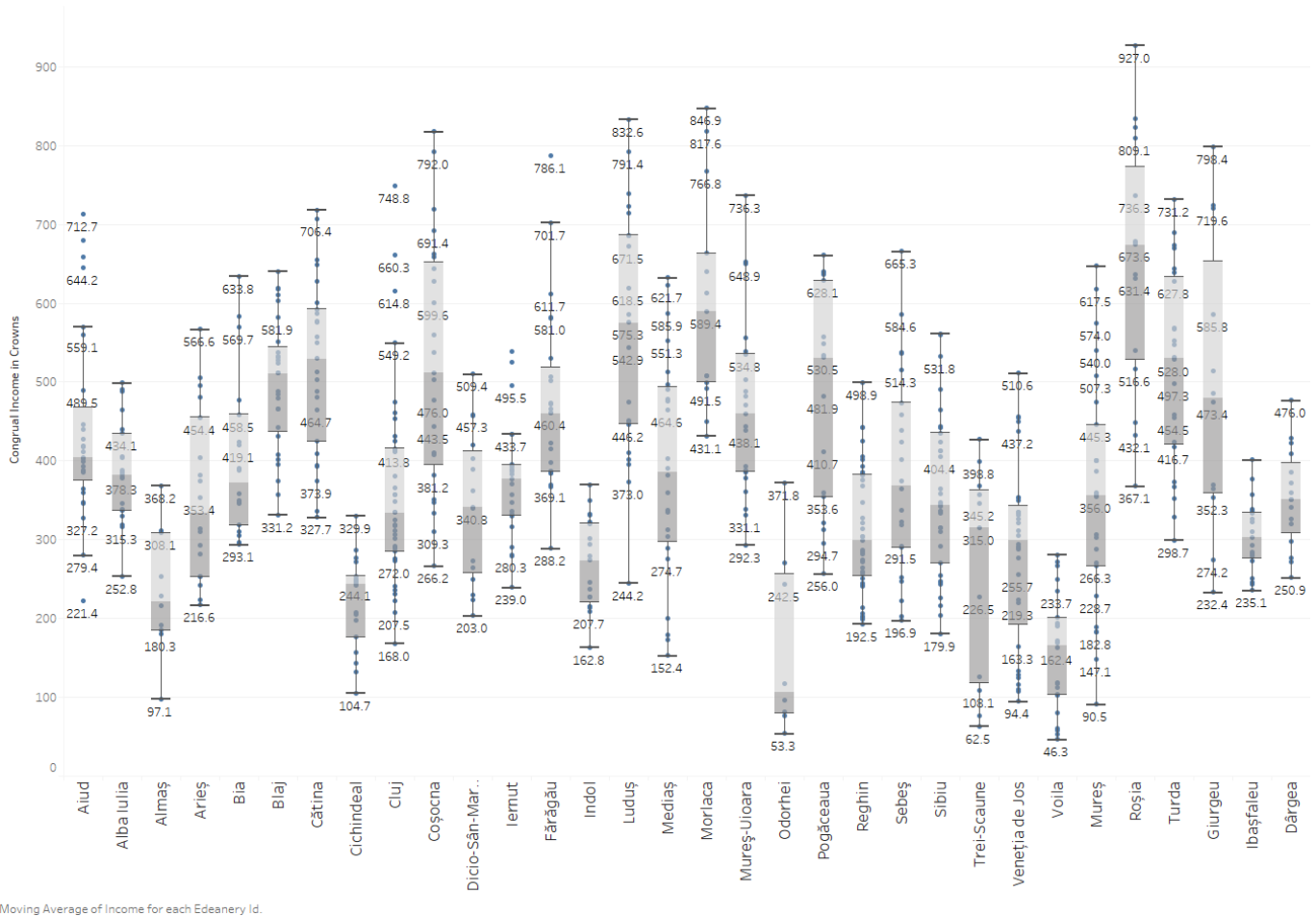
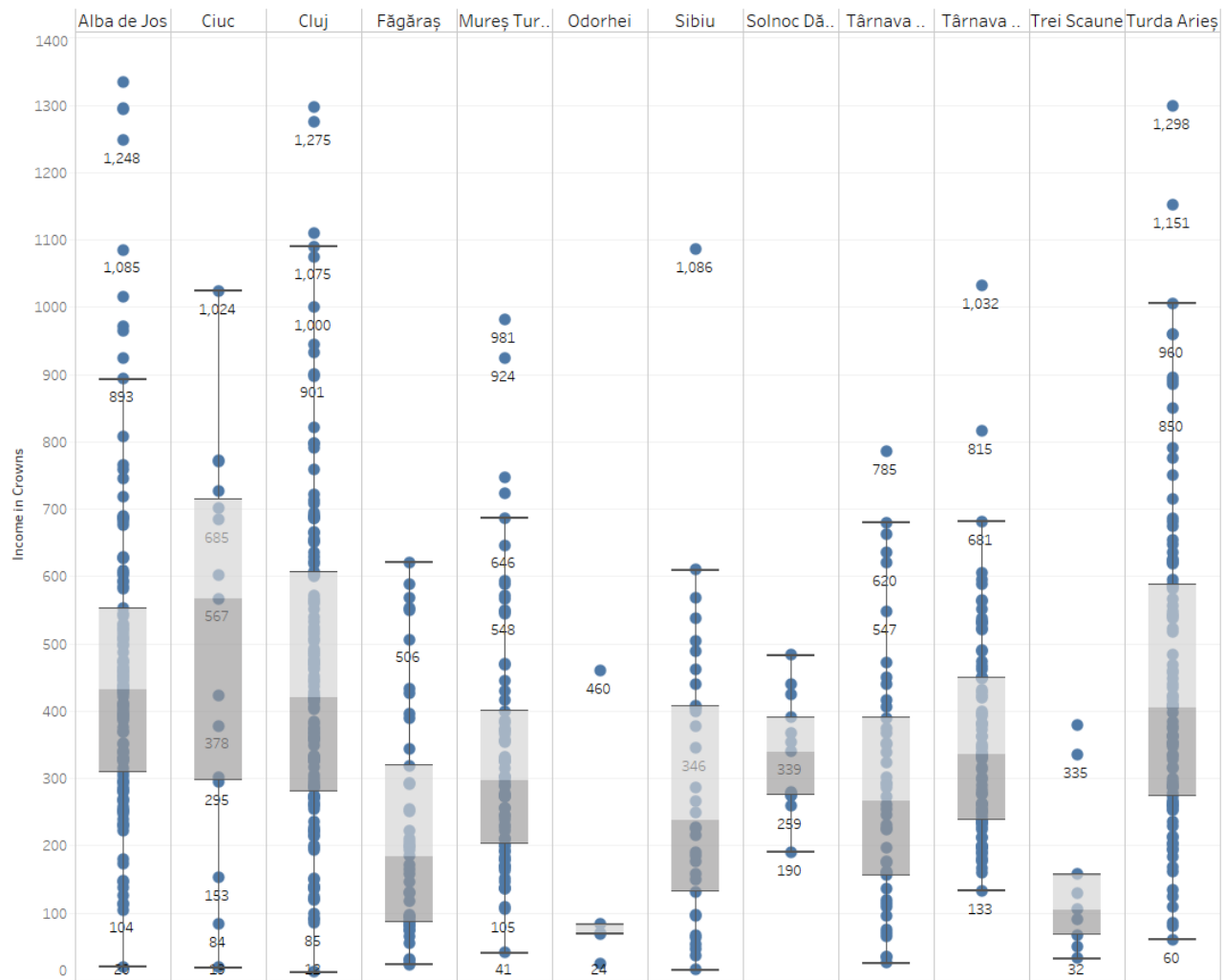


Figure 4. Distribution of Congrual Incomes per Deanery, Alba-Iulia & Făgăraș Greek Catholic Archdiocese, 1900

As can be seen, most deaneries received on average between 300 and 400 Crowns per parish priest, depending on the number of parishes. Some deaneries appeared to have received, on average, higher subsidies. Very small deaneries, such as Odorhei, were comparably less well endowed, with an average congrua per parish/priest of less than 100 Crowns. Very high averages, ranging between 500 and 700 Crowns were also recorded in several deaneries, such as Roșia, Luduș, Coșocna, and, expectedly, Blaj. In Blaj one could expect not only the highest average subsidy, but also some of the highest subsidies, as those who held parishes in this deanery would

have almost without fail been educated at the Seminary in Blaj. However, the distribution of the subsidies was not entirely the same, as it reflected the great variety in the training of parish clergymen, and the great disparities between individual parishes. Blaj was, in this respect as well, quite unitary in terms of its human resources: congrual incomes ranged between 331 and 639 Crowns, with an average of 496 Crowns. Most parish priests received between 544 Crowns and 436 Crowns. By comparison, the deanery of Mureş housed parish priests with varying qualifications, who received between 90 and 646 Crowns. On average, congrual income amounted to 356 Crowns.

Congrual incomes per Transylvanian Counties around 1900



Income for each Ecounty Id broken down by Ecounty.

Figure 5. Distribution of congrual income per Transylvanian Counties around 1900

The situation becomes yet again much clearer when the overlap between the ecclesiastical infrastructure and the administrative framework is taken into consideration. The very few parishes located on the Szekler lands, in Odorhei, or Trei Scaune (Háromszék), where both priestly education and Greek Catholic presence were low, with very few exceptions, had an average income

of only 149 Crowns, with an even lower median of 105 Crowns. By comparison, the towns which gathered several priests within the same parish could boast with incomes of over 1200 Crowns. Still, it should be taken into consideration that while congrua was reported in the Church Schematisms per parish, in those parishes where several full priests served at the same time, it was divided between them, despite the fact that it was allotted at individual and not at parish level. Significant disparities in terms of congrual income were noticeable within the counties of Alba de Jos, Cluj, and Turda Arieş, suggesting that stark inequalities in terms of individual parish priests' training and qualifications were also present.

To put the question of the congrua subsidy into a broader context, it is useful to glance beyond Transleithania, and into the Austrian part of the Dual Monarchy, where the congrua system had been in use for the Catholic Church since the rule of Joseph II. Towards the 1880s, the system was changed to account for an individual clergyman's geographical location and cost of living, according to the parish's distance from Vienna: those who lived in the capital were allotted some 1800 Gulden, a sum which dropped to 800 Gulden for the rest of Lower Austria. While perhaps these high sums were enough to make ends meet for qualified pastors, their assistants (deacons, etc.) only received a subsidy ranging between 400 and 200 Gulden. Even in the 1880s, this subsidy, even taken together with other benefices a particular parish community might provide, was wholly insufficient to provide for a standard of living that might have placed the clergymen into the 'historical box' we usually situate them, namely that of the elite or intelligentsia (Boyer 1974, 339-340).

IV. Conclusions

How then could around a half of the Romanian Greek Catholic clergy in most of the counties encompassing the deaneries of the Archdiocese live on less than 400 Crowns a year some twenty years later? Even if we grant that the wage disparities between the Austrian and the Hungarian sides of the Monarchy, or even between Transylvania and Hungary proper, were still significant at the time, it is difficult to think of a clergyman earning some 100 Crowns a year, likely little educated beyond the Gymnasium, as a historical actor possessed of enough agency to withstand pressures exerted by the local administration and to uphold the national cause in the face of destitution.

Unlike other members of the national intelligentsia, such as lawyers, journalists, or even members of the banking sector, the clergy at grassroots level, like the teachers employed in the parish confessional schools, had a much more difficult time in explicitly asserting their anti-governmental political position during the tumultuous elections. Though selected parish priests regularly appeared as donors on the lists of various national-charitable and cultural organisations, those who had the financial means to act for the nation in crucial moments such as elections were few and far between. While not aiming to overstate the importance of state subsidies or that of the financial side of political activism, we think it is high time to look beyond the fulfilment of duty towards the national cause or its betrayal, to the potential sources of such attitudes.

What is more, what we now view as two separate spheres - ecclesiastical administration and state administration - , easily delimited by historiographic discourse, or related in an anecdotal manner, with reference to the cooperation between high ranking politicians and clergymen, were in fact the two faces of the same issue for the individual clergyman living in nineteenth and early twentieth century Transylvania.

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