

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM:
A GUARANTEE OF POLITICAL EQUILIBRIUM?
One Territory - Many Denominations, or the Diversity of Spiritual
Models in 16Th Century Transylvania

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Abstract: At the beginning of the 16th century, the Transylvanian Principality had been an Catholic land within the Hungarian Kingdom, led by an elite consisting of three Estates, that of the nobles, later called the Hungarian nation, of the Saxons and of the Szeklers. However, the common population numbered a majority of Orthodox Romanians, without any administrative or political representatives and with restricted rights. The Reformation's advent in Transylvania showed a broad causality, harbouring theological, moral, ethical reasons but was also pushed by political and stragic considerents. The reformatory process chrystalized in several confessions from which 3 became main stream and gained legal recognition: Lutheranism, Calvinism and Unitarianism. In the space of 3 decades (1540-1570) the denominations gained legal status and joined Catholicism as official religions. The new denominations and their variables found it relatively easy to emerge out of the Reformation theological pool and, with the exception of Sabbatarians, gained legal status and coexisted. This system became later known as "the Transylvanian system of tolerance" and represented the foundation of the Principality's constitutionalism (in a broader sense). Even if remarkable, the Transylvanian tolerance didn't cover all the religious and social layers and even if fueled by the Reformation and humanism, didn't reach the discrimination and the social iniquitousness experienced by the Romanians.

Keywords: Transylvanian system of tolerance, reformation, confessional discrimination, humanism

1. Transylvanian Reformation: context, development, specificity

At the beginning of the 16th century, the religious setting of the Transylvanian Principality had already experienced existential transformations: during the Middle Ages, the province had brought together a dualist spirituality, differentiated but not necessarily divided by the Eastern and Western Christianity. For the last 3 centuries, the Transylvanian population had consisted largely of Romanians, Hungarians, Szeklers and Saxons. The Romanians were the only ethnic group abiding by the Eastern, Byzantine Orthodox rite, while the other 3 ethnic populations observed the Western, Roman Catholic rite.

During the 13th and 14th century, the Romanians had been recognized as an Estate and had participated in the administration of the province. A testimony to this fact was that the periodical Transylvanian Diets, – which were held apart from the Hungarian ones –, brought together 4 Estates, Romanians having had their status as an Estate recognized. However, beginning with the 14th century and a new dynasty on the Hungarian throne, – the Angevins –, the status quo began to change: the Catholicism became the state religion on the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom, and the king embarked on a massive campaign of catholic proselytism, meant to bring about “unity of faith” to the non-Catholic or non-Christian populations within the Kingdom or in the vicinity of the borders.¹

In Transylvania, starting with 1366, this situation translated into prohibition of affiliation to nobility for non-Catholic individuals, the written membership deed to the Catholic Church being requested by the king. In the space of several decades, the Romanian Estate ceased to exist as a political entity, and in 1437 they were excluded as a community from exercising legislating prerogatives.²

The removal of Romanians from the collegiate administration was done out of a religious reasoning and not an ethnic one: the Catholic model was dominant, but not only that, the religious expansionist politic of the Hungarian king could not tolerate political players of Orthodox religion

1 Serban Papacostea, *Geneza statului in Evul Mediu romanesc: Studii critice*, revised edition, (Bucharest, ed. Dacia, 1999), pp. 81-102.

2 Serban Papacostea, *Geneza Statului...*, pp. 81-102.

considering that the Orthodox were the main target of the Catholic missionary efforts. The Catholic model was the dominant one and all hierarchic design was set up accordingly. Ioan Aurel Pop characterizes this era as one of denominational discrimination, where non-Catholics were collectively called “pagans”, “heretics” and “schismatics”.³

On the other hand, the Romanian majority of the commoner population had been hierarchically subordinated to the Metropolitan Church of Tourkia up to the 12th century; they had had their own churches, different traditions, calendars and rites and saw the Catholic Church solely as an politic instrument, an enemy focused on the distruction of Orthodoxy.⁴

Transylvania changed its political status during the first half of the 16th century when it ceased to exist as a Hungarian province and became a autonomous principality. The political transformations triggered also religious ones: thus the religious landscape became more and more complex as a direct consequence of the Protestant Reformation: the Catholic denomination was pushed to the outskirts of the political and religious relevance in the Principality, even if, at first, it kept its official status, and the Romanians remained Ortodox with an unrecognized confession, ethnic affiliation or political status.

The civil war that folowed the Battle of Mohach, between John I Zapolya, the Transylvanian prince, and Ferdinand the Habsburg also facilitated the spreading and acceptance of the Reformation: John I Zapolya and his aristocratic supporters militated for an independent province but Ferdinand was perceived as an intolerant Catholic.

On its side, the Ottoman Porte favoured the Reformation out of a simple political reasoning: destroying the Catholic Church’s influence meant undermining the Habsburgs and their ability to meddle into Transylvanian and Ottoman affairs.

This desideratum also matched a theological dimmension of Islam: the rejection of iconodule tradtions and affirmation of a strictly monotheist and iconoclastic faith. Thus, the Reformation’s causality was

3 Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Religiones and Nationes in Transylvania during the 16th Century: Between Acceptance and Exclusion* in *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideoloies*, (vol 12, issue34, Spring 2013), p. 215.

4 Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Religiones and Nationes...*, pp.215 – 218.

a broad one, harbouring theological, moral, ethical reasons but was also pushed by political and stragic considerents.

A majority of Transylvanian elites, those who supported prince John I Zapolya, as well as most of the common population, were prone to embracing the new concept which, at first, was perceived as a comeback to the roots of the apostolic church. In time, the movement changed to an religious alternative characterized by faith renewal, humanistic principles and confessional diversity.⁵

In the presented context, the arrival of the Reformation was seen as a natural consequence and was welcomed by the population. Its course to legal and confessional fulfillment was swift and mostly, peacefull. The Estates, the prince and the broad population interlinked the advent of the Reformation with the birth of the Principality and paired this components with an accepting and religiously benevolent Ottoman suzerainty. The birth of the Reformation was in the very beginning a German event which became very quickly a theological, political and administrative storm of European size.⁶ Martin Luther started the movement with the publication of the Ninety - Five Theses in 1517, and historians name the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 – concluding the Thirty Years' War–, as the ending of the reformatory revolutionary movement.

The Saxons of Southern Transylvania were the first ones to accept the Reformation. For a long time, they had been harsh critics of the Catholic abuses. Through their geographical location and the economic relevance, the Saxons had come in contact with other Christian denominations or other religions - Islam, Judaism-, and had in time developed ca pragmatic ritical thinking. They could compare and draw their own conclusions. Also they had had a long standing tradition of administrative autonomy which they sought to apply also in their religious life.⁷ Kronstadt (Brasov) was the first Transylvanian Reformation center, and that through the work and success of the erudite humanists and pastors Johannes Honterus and later Valentin Wagner.

5 Bela Vigh, *Disputele sinodale lutherano-calvino-unitariene în Transilvania secolului al – XVI-lea*, (PhD diss, Lucian Blaga University Sibiu, 2009), p. 39.

6 Bela Vigh, *Disputele Sinodale...*, pp. 39-45.

7 Ioan-A. Pop, *Cultural Diffusion and Religious Reformation in Sixteenth -Century Transylvania*, (Lewinston, Ceredigion, Wales, The Edwin Mellen Press, Ltd, 2014), pp. 34-36.

After 1556, the center of the Reformation moved to Klausenburg (Cluj) which had already turned into a Protestant town. Its leading humanist and theological personalities were Kaspar Helth and Francis David under whose cultural, religious and academic leadership, Klausenburg became a hub of cultural emanation and a think tank of new, revolutionary ideas.⁸

But, the Transylvanian society found out soon that the triumph of Reformation meant the loss of theological and denominational unity. The Reformation in the Principality expressed itself confessionally in 3 denominations: Lutheranism, Calvinism and Unitarianism. In the beginning, the limits between them were barely perceptible, with none of them established as official confessions, but were perceived as currents of theological thinking, ideas worthy of debates, controversy and new interpretations. The willingness to adapt, to change, to embrace the new interpretations was seen as progressive.⁹

That's why, it was also not unusual that a person consecutively belonged to more than one denomination: one of the best known example is that of the prince John I Zapolya who was, in chronological order, Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist and Unitarian. Confessional delimitations should have brought also confessional isolation but in Transylvania, in the beginning, the complex process of confessional births that sometime overlapped, led to a interdenominational friendship which was unique: scholars, theologians, aristocrats changed denominations but kept the relationships with former fellow parishioners, alive.¹⁰

The Reformed denominations were not born at the same time and don't have an official birthdate. They didn't appear in Transylvania fully formed but went through a assiduous process of growth and maturation.

As such, one can asses that Calvinism detached from Lutheranism, Unitarianism from Calvinism and Sabbatarianism from Unitarianism. Nevertheless, even if the was a chronological coordinate, many ideas of the mentioned denominations circulated simultaneously and were

8 Edit Szegedi, *Confessionalization in History of Transylvania*, ed. Pop, I.A, Năgler, T, Magyari, A. (Cluj-Napoca, Romanian Academy, 2009), p. 234.

9 Ioan - Aurel Pop, *Cultural Diffusion...*, p. 42.

10 Edit Szegedi, *Confessionalization...*, pp. 251-253.

subject to disputes and controversies. There were temporary dominances followed by retreats, episodic hegemony, impetuses and recoils.¹¹

During the 16th and 17th centuries, the Orthodox and the Catholics were equally affected by the advent and establishment of the Reformation: the former because they kept on being excluded from power and denied access to the country's administration being *de facto* and *de iure*, second-class citizens and the Catholics because even if still holding the legal status of a recognized religion, they experienced strong discrimination and abuse.

So, it can be argued that during the 16th and 17th centuries, Transylvania found itself in a turmoil of ideas and concepts, some new, coming from west and being fueled by the arrival of humanism and Reformation.¹² These ideas landed in to a context very unique from a geographical, cultural and political point of view.

The Transylvanian Reformation had not so much to fight against the Catholic establishment but more against itself, through its competing denominations concurring for confessional hegemony.

2. The system of tolerance - base of Transylvania's constitutionalism

During the 16th and 17th century, Transylvania provided an example of religious, cultural, ethnic and political syncretism. During this time, the political Estates gradually gained ethnic awareness and engaged in a process of transformation that would result in the formation of modern nations. Parallel to that, the original Churches – the Catholic and the Orthodox Church, were joined by new denominations – Lutheran, Calvinist, Unitarian, Sabbatarian¹³, and later Greek Catholic.

As described, starting with the second half of the 16th century, the religious and administrative system of the Transylvanian Principality was anchored in a pairing of 3 Estates – Hungarian, Saxon and Szekler–, and 4 legal confessions – Lutheran, Calvinist, Unitarian and Catholic-. This confessional and politic pluralism may appear astonishing, more

11 Ioan - Aurel Pop, *Cultural Diffusion...*, pp.42 - 50.

12 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Istoria filosofiei, de la începuturi până la Renaștere*, Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2005, pp.350, 399-417.

13 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, *Sabatarieni în contextul vieții transilvane (sec. XVI-XX)*, Vol. I., Editura Risoprint, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, pp.431-645.

so if compared with the characteristics of the previous centuries when religion was very often reinforced through oppression, repercussions and death. However, the Transylvanian “way” did not rule out conflict, rivalry, uncertainty or confusion, but in general had as dominant, the idea of tolerance. By 1556 the Catholic Church had collapsed with its bishoprics secularized, its clergy persecuted and banned and its properties sized, so the Reformation had no obstacles in its way. And, generally speaking, the reformatory process took place in a peaceful way, compared to other places in Europe where armed conflicts devastated regions and populations.

The new denominations and their variables found it relatively easy to emerge out of the Reformation theological pool and, with the exception of Sabbatarians, gained legal status and coexisted.

This system became later known as “the Transylvanian system of tolerance” and represented the foundation of the Principality’s constitutionalism, in a broader sense. The most significant legal action which defined the whole system, was the body of decisions made by the

Transylvania’s legislator was called the Diet and was in session in different cities at different times; during the 1543 session which took place in Klausenburg (Cluj), the principle of religious freedom was firstly mentioned. For the following 25 years, until the Diet of Turda in 1568, this principle was developed and gained complexity and mandatory juridical relevance; its skyrocketing evolution represents an European novum and it is in itself a formidable phenomenon.¹⁴

Diet of Torda in 1568 which proclaimed that every community had the right to independently decide to which confession to adhere. Of

14 Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, “The principle of religious freedom in terms of the Transylvanian Legislative Assemblies decisions from the XVI Century”, In *European Journal of Science and Theology*, October 2013, Vol.9, No.5, Ecozone Publishing House, Iași, pp.-11 21; Idem, “Die ersten Gesetze zur Religionsfreiheit: Siebenbürgen 1543-1568”, In *Gewissen und Freiheit. Die Geschichte der Religionsfreiheit und der Respekt vor der unterschiedlichkeit*, Bern, Schweiz, 2014, pp. 100-114; Idem, “For the first time in the world, in the principality of Transylvania Europe: The Adoption of the Principle of Religious Freedom and its Evolution”, In *Conscience and Liberty. Worldwide Human Rights & Religious Liberty. History of liberty and respect for differences*, Liviu Oleanu (ed.), Special Edition, volume II, Bern, Switzerland, 2014, pp. 160-173; Idem, “Pentru prima dată în lume, în principatul Transilvaniei, Europa: Adoptarea principiului libertății religioase și evoluția lui în 25 de ani (1543-1568)”, In *Istoria libertății și respectul pentru diferențe / Asociația Internațională pentru Apărarea Libertății Religioase “Conștiință și Libertate”*, Liviu Olteanu (ed.), Cristina Sava (trad.), Panrelimon, Editura Viață și Sănătate, 2016, pp.160-173; Idem, *Sabatarienii în contextul vieții transilvane (sec. XVI-XX)*, Vol. I., Editura Risoprint, Cluj-Napoca, 2014, pp.216-300.

course, there were cases where the will of the people was trumped by the will of the local nobility or even of the Transylvanian prince, but even so, the pure existence of such a concept anchored in the law is to be assessed as a unique achievement of modern enlightenment:

“His majesty, our Lord, in what manner he – together with his realm – legislated in the matter of religion at the previous Diets, in the same matter now, in this Diet, reaffirms that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearing is by the word of God.”
— *Edict of Torda*¹⁵

In the Edict of Torda there was no acknowledgement of the individual religious freedom but the idea of the community's right to choose and consequently exercise its chosen confession through the free election of the congregation's pastor is clearly described.¹⁶ The edict did not cover the Orthodox Romanians, the Jews or the Muslims. Nevertheless, it was an extraordinary novum in legislation by the standards of 16th-century and from a historiographic perspective, it still continues to have European relevance.

The Edict of Torda was the first law to officially sanction the existence of a radical Christian community in a European state and it was followed by a series of religious debates between the representatives of Lutheranism/Calvinism and Unitarianism.¹⁷ The prince John Sigismund

15 Stuart J Ritchie, *Children of the Same God: The Historical Relationship Between Unitarianism, Judaism, and Islam*, (Boston, Skinner House Books, 2014), p.22.

16 Miklos Molnár, *A Concise History of Hungary*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.85.

17 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History*, (New, York, Viking Adult, 2003), pp. 33 - 56.

was biased towards the Unitarianism preachers, but on October 25th. 1569 he stated that religion could always be freely discussed in his realm.¹⁸

As triumphant as the presence of such a concept could be, if analysed in detail, the historical account painted a more nuanced picture: it was true that the Reformation brought forth the ideas of freedom of conscience, it stimulated the intellectual and religious curiosity and encouraged the Bible study. It also advocated tolerance and pluralism as a necessary tool in disseminating the new ideas and teachings. But, as soon as the new theologies became establishment, persecution appeared and the values once preached were seen as weakness. They considered tolerance for different-minded as a sin, and their existence as a reminder of failed evangelization.¹⁹

So, tolerance was limited, relative and uneven represented. Also, there were 2 avenues where its absence was very persistent: external, toward other religions, but also internal, within the Protestantism but toward another confession, or even another (a newer) theological interpretation within the same.

There was a certain and explicit exclusivism present, an absolution of a certain theological interpretation that gained the status of absolute truth, and total condemnation for dissidents. As it was a religious controversy, the other part reciprocated.

One could affirm that this freedom within the 3 Estates and 4 denominations was of a very exclusive nature, was a privilege and not a right, and didn't apply to every denomination in Transylvania: the list of the excluded containing the Catholics, the Romanian Orthodox also the Jews, the Armenians and the Roma, with their specific religions.²⁰

The Catholicism and Orthodoxy experienced profound persecution: in a time when there was still confusion about the doctrinal set up of the new Protestant Churches, there was however, consensus regarding the position towards the ancient faiths: during 2 Diets from 1566, the representatives of the Estates stipulated that the Catholics and Orthodox who didn't renounced their beliefs should leave the country,

18 Istvan Keul, *Early Modern Religious Communities in East-Central Europe: Ethnic Diversity, Denominational Plurality, and Corporative Politics in the Principality of Transylvania (1526-1691)*, (Leiden, Brill, 2009), 87 - 90.

19 Ioan - Aurel Pop, *Cultural Diffusion...*, 69 - 70.

20 Edit Szegedi, *Confessionalization...*, p.244.

that in a context in which the Catholic Church was one of the recognized denominations and should have had the same status as the other 3.²¹

Nevertheless, the Catholic aristocracy which had ruled Transylvania prior to the Reformation continued to do so afterwards as well, only now, as a Protestant aristocracy. The way this type of tolerance was coined represented the Transylvanian way of adapting and surviving in a new and different religious context.²²

Also specific to the Transylvania Reformation and its operating system were the dynamic disputes between the Protestant denominations, engaged in a fierce competition for expansion supremacy. Even if there was no real fight with the old order of Catholicism, this internal turmoil destabilized the country and added a share of difficulties in establishing a new, modern religious equilibrium.²³

Chronologically, the temporary hegemony of the Transylvanian confessions changed from a Lutheran upper hand to the Calvinist supremacy, then the Unitarian trend and the circle completed with the return to the Lutheranism... all these changes were politically motivated and depended on the confession and the governing priorities of the respective prince. The momentary influence of one of the Estates or of certain members of the Estates were also decisive.

After 1691, the increasing Habsburg dominance brought the resurrection of the Catholic hegemony and a new era began for the Protestant denominations. The Catholic Church started an aggressive missionary effort in order to regain the masses and parishioners who had been lost during the Reformation. These efforts were reinforced by the central administration with the support of the Habsburg Empress, Maria Theresia.

3. *Inter hos sunt dispersi per totam provinciam Valachi*

This phrase was written by the humanist Catholic Bishop Demeter Napragyi in his work *Monumenta Regni Transylvaniae* and dates from 1602. Its translation would be “*among them, Romanians are to be found*

21 Ioan - Aurel Pop, *Cultural Diffusion...*, 56.

22 Edit Szegedi, *Confessionalization...*, pp.248 - 250.

23 *Ibidem*, p.251.

all over the country".²⁴ When considering the Transylvanian tolerance, the situation of the Romanians represents the perfect example of its specificity and limitations.

The prevailing opinion about the ethnic group of the Romanians had a dual quality: on one side, they were perceived as inferior, unworthy of attention, lazy and drawn to unlawful deeds. On the other side there was the fear that if the Romanians would ever reach the status of a privileged Estate, they would tip the scale of influence dues to their large numbers among the common population.²⁵ The Diet of Torda in 1566 adopted severe decisions against the non-Protestant confessions, referring to the Orthodox as *Wallachians*:

"As to religion, it has been unanimously decided that - just like before - each Christian should pursue the religious belief, according to the previous articles, that the Annunciation should not be stopped by any nation, that the respect and praise of God should not be disturbed; on the contrary, idolatry and blasphemy should be removed and stopped. Therefore, it has been decided lately that all such idolatries be removed from this country, from all nations, and the word of God should be freely preached, mostly among the Romanians, whose shepherds have blindly led the poor community to perdition. To those (Romanians and their priests) who refuse to bow before the truth, His Highness orders to have a debate on the Bible and, by these means, they will get to know the truth; and they who will still refuse to bow before the so explained truth, be them bishops, priests or monks, shall be banished. And they who remain have to obey bishop George, the superintendent, and the priests chosen by him; and those who disobey shall be punished for their lack of faith".²⁶

This decision gave the Romanians 2 options: either they would renounce their faith and convert, or they were banished. The latter was very unrealistic also from 2 perspectives: the Romanians inhabited vast rural areas and were very numerous so an exodus en masse would have been impossible to execute; but more important was the Romanians'

24 Vigh, *Disputele*, p.162.

25 *Ibidem*, pp. 163 - 169.

26 *Ibidem*, pp. 119 - 120.

economic relevance as labor force: the country's economy was mostly agrarian, so harvesting forces were important for its success.

So, the Estates concentrated on the evangelization: they wanted to convert the Romanians to Protestantism, mostly to Calvinism but, this conversion would not have meant their political or administrative elevation; even with new religious measures, the trend toward discrimination and partiality continued.²⁷

The project to evangelize the Romanians failed and the causality is simple: firstly, the level of mistrust in Romanians vis-a-vis any form of administrative or religious officialdom had been very high for the last centuries and this new endeavor didn't build any bridges of trust. Thus, the premises weren't auspicious at all, but even if the opposite had been the case there was another reason that made the success impossible: the Reformation had been carved as a response to the Catholic theological and administrative problems, so it represented an alternative to Catholic particularities; when preached to the Romanians, the reformatory percepts had no resonance because they had no correlation to the Orthodox percepts. The concepts of renunciation of the papal primacy, the renunciation of the priestly celibate, the abolishment of the luxury of the clergy, rejection of indulgences made no sense to the Orthodox commoners. They had no notion of papacy, their priests had always married, their clergy and churches were spartan, and they didn't know what indulgences meant. Not even the new reformatory concept of sola scriptura -the independent and individual study of the Bible - bore any fruits: the main reason of this non-adherence was the very low degree of education among the population and Orthodox clergy alike. One should also mention that the Orthodox mass was held in Slavonic, the liturgical language, which was totally different from the vernacular language and which, very often, wasn't known not even by the priests. So, the Romanians worshipped in a language they didn't understand, and the priests officiated mass in a language which, more often than not, they didn't understand either.

So, it is understandable that to the Romanians, the biblical dogma, of which they vaguely knew, wasn't by far as important as the rites and traditions, the icons, the prayers, the cult of the saints and of the dead,

27 Ioan - Aurel Pop, *Cultural Diffusion...*, p.57.

and the pre-Christian ceremonies. This complex of Christian and pagan precepts had a very strong hold on the Romanian esprit and it was considered law. Its renunciation was seen as loss of individual but also communal identity, and was associated with destruction and doom.

Also, the Protestants saw the impossibility of having any philological or theological debates with the Romanians due to the high level of illiteracy thus there was no avenue to introduce the new teachings even if they were presented in Romanian and were accompanied by Romanian Protestant religious literature.

The lower Romanian nobility was more receptive than the common population, but they had already converted to Catholicism centuries ago in order to preserve their status and estates, so the conversion was easy but negligible in numbers.

It should be observed, that even if the ethnic group of Romanians wasn't recognized as an ethnic political entity but it was referred to as a nation in the ethnic sense. During the last half of the 16th century and then into the 17th century, the Romanians are referred to as a nation by humanist authors like Giovanandrea Gromo or Nicolaus Olachus.

However, other chroniclers detained themselves from using the term nation in a Romanian context when writing their chronicles, as for example, the Croato-Hungarian humanist Antonius Verancius who wrote that Transylvania

“is inhabited by three nations, Szeklers, Hungarians, Saxons; still, I would also include the Romanians, who are easily equal in number but have no liberties, no nobility, no rights of their own, with the exception of a small number who live in the district of Hateg, where Decebalus is believed to have had his capita, and who were ennobled during the reign of John Hunyadi, a native of those parts, because they relentlessly fought against the Turks. The others are all villans, serfs of the Hungarians with no lands of their own, found everywhere in the country and seldom living in open spaces, more often than not preferring to dwell in the woods; with their cattle, they live a miserable life.”²⁸

28 Maria Holban, *Calatori straini despre Tarile Romane*, II, (Bucharest, Ed. Enciclopedica, 1968), pp. 410 - 411.

Starting with the second part of the 16th century, the religious discrimination found its fulfillment in the legal decisions made by the Diets but also by the central executive: nevertheless, during a time span of about 8 decades, the historiography counts 3 major attempts to remedy the situation of the Romanian population. The causality was a pragmatic one most of the time, and sought to ensure the political and social equilibrium in the Principality:

The first effort was made by the Catholic princes Stephen and Christopher Bathory, beginning with the year 1571. Their own Catholic faith encouraged them to stand up to the Protestant hegemony and support the Counterreformation. They recognized some traditional rights of the Orthodox clergy and their affiliation with the Wallachian and Moldovan Orthodoxy. These deeds were not fueled by sympathy for the Romanians or outrage at the discrimination they faced, but more a plan to destabilize the Protestantism.

The second attempt, a most important one, was made by the short reign of the Wallachian Prince Michael the Brave who between 1599 and 1601 was in charge of the Transylvania's fate on behalf of the Habsburg emperor Rudolf II. Michael the Brave proceeded immediately to correct some of the problems; among his achievements are the following: the public offices could be held by Romanians, the Estates were forced to grant some fundamental rights to the Romanian clergy and rural communities, the Romanian language was granted the status of an official language and he asked the Habsburg emperor to include Orthodoxy among the official Transylvanian religions. The Romanian prince's endeavors should be seen as acts of correction and attempts to right what he saw as profound wrongs but his reign was short and after his death the Estates cancelled all Prince Michael's reforms.²⁹

The third effort took place before the Habsburg invasion, toward the end of Gabriel Bethlen's reign. The Transylvanian prince secured the advice of Cyril Lucaris, the Ecumenic Patriarch of Constantinople in the matter of the Romanians' conversion to Calvinism: Bethlen wanted a break through in the stuck evangelization attempts of the Romanians. The Patriarch explained him the reluctance of the Romanians to embrace

29 Ioan - Aurel Pop, *Michael the Brave and Transylvania in History of Transylvania*, eds. Pop, I.A, Năgler, T., Magyari, A., (Cluj-Napoca, Romanian Academy, 2009), pp. 93 - 96.

the new denomination as having both an emotional component and a political one, with roots in a shared ethnic origin. The Romanians felt a strong bond with the Moldavians and Wallachians and the religion was the link to unite them. This bond translated also into a protectory by the Wallachian and Moldavian rulers who would have felt affronted by a forced conversion of the Romanians in Transylvania.

In this situation of chronic oppression, it can be argued that the religious consciousness of the Transylvanian Romanians was constantly nurtured by contacts with the wider Orthodox community in the neighboring Wallachia and Moldova where their priests studied and were ordained and where the rulers and the nobles offered generous gifts.³⁰ The Romanians also turned farther to the East, to Russia, and the Orthodox headquarters there, which enjoyed a great authority among the Transylvanian Orthodox community. They made pilgrimages to Moscow and other Russian holy places and felt they belonged to the Eastern Christian Community.³¹

In conclusion, the diverse efforts to change the situation of the Romanians during the 16th and 17th centuries, failed: the Romanians didn't become Calvinist and the Protestant evangelization never took roots. Also the attempts to elevate their political and social failed and they remained second-class citizens. The Transylvanian tolerance didn't cover all the religious and social layers and even if fueled by the Reformation and humanism, didn't reach the discrimination and the social iniquitousness experienced by the Romanians.

For some periods of time, the Orthodoxy and the Catholicism experienced the same persecution by the Protestant hegemony in terms of free practice of religion, hierarchy, access to the cities, access to schools or appropriation of assets. The only - and major - difference is that during this time, the Catholic confession was, *de iure*, a recognized religion, equal in rights with the Protestant confessions, so the persecution was,

30 Mircea Pacurariu, *Legaturile Bisericii Ortodoxe din Transylvania cu Tara Romaneasca si Moldova in secolele XVII-XVIII*, (PhD diss., Sibiu University, Sibiu, 1968), pp. 123, 129, 135, 141-143.

31 Silviu Dragomir, *Contributii privitoare la relatiile Bisericii romanesti cu Rusia in veacul XVII*, in *Analele Academiei Romane, Memoriile sectiunii istorice*, (Bucuresti, Ed. Academiei Romane, 1912), pp.1075-1079.

even according to the contemporary legislation, illegal. The Orthodoxy was only tolerated and had no legal support.

The conquest of Transylvania by the Habsburg Empire at the end of the 17th century and the imposition of the Habsburg rule created a new political and social framework within the dominant Estates, and the situation changed through the *de facto* reinstatement of the Catholicism. Thus, the Orthodoxy remained as the only religion outside the legality and for the next 2 centuries the Romanians kept being dependent on the will of others.

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