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The Old Rite Orthodox Community at the Lower Danube, between Tradition, Modernity, and Globalization

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Abstract: *Written history has recorded communities unique in their origin and structural mode of survival. One such community is that of the Old Russian believers, Staroveri, spread across the globe for religious reasons, like many other faiths, and still retaining their identity. What is the state of preservation of this identity, how long will it survive over time, and in what geographical area - these are all general questions. These questions, when put into concrete terms in Romania, are the object of investigation and meditation for what we imagine the old believers to be. However, we must be realistic and note that beyond the conservative spirit of the founding fathers of the community, there is a spirit of the times that erodes the principles of the founders. We will try to highlight some of the coordinates that have marked the evolution of a theocratic community in the two historical paradigms known to human society, at the crossroads of which we now find ourselves: the ethnocratic one, exhausted, with the prospect of dissolution, and the technocratic one, in full swing and in the process of establishing a new way of life. We are looking at the national community paradigm and the globalization paradigm.*

Keywords: *Christianity; reform; schism; tradition; modernity; globalization.*

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1. Introduction

The Russians received Christianity in 988 from Byzantium. The assistance of the Eastern Empire ceased following the Ottoman conquest (1453), an event interpreted as divine punishment for the act of union with Rome. Emancipation from the Patriarchate of Constantinople through the elevation of the Metropolitan of Moscow to the rank of Patriarchate (1589) strengthened the ideological claim of *Moscow - the Third Rome*, the only witness of true Christianity. The Russian Church evolved by itself under the aura of this superiority.

The first half of the 17th century was marked in Europe by a bloody and destructive religious conflict known as the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Following the reform begun by Luther (1517), which once again divided European Christianity along confessional lines, the war ended with the Peace of Westphalia, which imposed the principle of religious tolerance throughout Europe and opened the way for European peoples to develop into nation-states. Luther's doubts about papal authority, and in the following century the secularised generalization of the systematic and radical doubting for a new beginning in knowledge, as imagined by Descartes, one of the founding fathers of modernity, constitute the renewing breath of reconstruction that has swept away the hopes of a world destroyed by religious war.

The echo of these events and this breath will not stop at Russia's borders. And, as in all cases, everything that tries to take root on the uncharted steppe soil takes on exaggerated dimensions. Such was the case with the religious reform of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (1645-1676) and Patriarch Nikon (1652-1658), who, educated in the spirit of European culture, authorized the innovations demanded by a group of "covetous devotees of godliness" who sought to raise the moral level of the people, correct the church books and harmonize the rituals with those of Greek tradition. Changes were slow in coming and it was not until 1652 that they were vigorously enforced by the new patriarch - uneducated, authoritarian, and violent. The reforms touched on aspects of ritual (such as the sign of the cross), the codification of books of worship, and questions of church architecture. Surrounded by foreign "scholars", such as a certain Arsenius the Greek (a dubious man, trained in a Jesuit school, who switched to Mohammedanism and then returned to Orthodoxy), Nikon imposed numerous renovations that affected the old customs and traditions at random and by violent means against those who opposed him. The popular reaction was to reject these changes. As a result, within the Russian Church,

there was a schism between the Old Believers (*Staroveri*, the old faith) and the Nikonians, the followers of the new faith. The official church will call those who rejected the reforms *Raskolniki* (schismatics). In fact, they remained in the old faith, did not commit schism, and did not betray the act of Christianisation of the Kievan kingship of Vladimir of Kyiv in 988. In his arrogance, Nikon also sought to undermine the authority of the Tsar, thus coming into conflict with the political power, which led to the patriarch's retirement from office (1658). The Synod, meeting in 1666, condemned him definitively, but confirmed all his reforms, anathematizing those who refused to accept them.

A part of the clergy and the people will resist these reforms, which would cancel - by accepting them - the justice and the chance of salvation of all the generations of believers from 988 to 1666. This simple argument alone is sufficient to avoid getting into the heart of the theological debate. The consequence of this event is the birth of a *sui generis* Protestantism in Russian Orthodoxy: not one that takes a stand against the deviations of a church that departs from the primordial Gospel message, as in the case of Lutheranism, but a Protestantism that takes a stand against the chaotic and borrowed renovations of the very head of the church whose right faith it was supposed to guarantee. In this leader, according to popular perception, the Antichrist is making his appearance. The next Antichrist, who will secularize society and strike at the heart of the Church, abolishing the Patriarchate, will be Peter the Great. Since then, the secular state will continually persecute the Catholics, whose reaction will take the form of martyrdom, rebellion, and exile.

The Old Believers and Exile

The phenomenon of retreat to the fringe regions, of emigration across borders as these margins are conquered and incorporated into the empire, makes a clear picture of the directions in which the *Staroveri* spread difficult to follow. In any case, until the Bolshevik revolution, they populate the Volga and Urals, Siberia (after the revolution we find them moving to Manchuria and China), the Baltic States, East Prussia, Poland, Ukraine, Bulgaria, Serbia, Turkey, Canada, the USA, and Australia. Official pre-revolution statistics indicate 10 million *Raskolniki* living in the empire, a figure that does not cover the reality. There is no figure for the diaspora.

In addition to the divergent directions of the area of spread, with the passing of time, the old believers are differentiated by the inevitable fact of the disappearance of the clergy. Some of them felt that they could not receive Nikonian priests and, having run out of priests, formed themselves

into the non-priesthood orientation. They had to do without some of the Holy Sacraments. The most radical of them - the *Netovisti* (from Russian. *net* = no) - appeared on the Middle Volga; their teaching is summed up in such radical ideas as the Antichrist has become lord of the world, grace has ascended to heaven, the Church no longer exists, the Holy Sacraments have been destroyed. Other communities sought to adopt priests of the New Rite Church, continuing the tradition of the clergy, and preserving sacramental traditions. It is the orientation currently the most widespread across the globe.

The *Staroveri* phenomenon in Romania

Beyond the dispute of historians dedicated to the knowledge of the *Staroveri* phenomenon on Romanian territory, who argue that their presence here in the first half of the 18th century is certain (there are also hypotheses regarding their presence towards the end of the 17th century), what we must notice is that we find here both priesthood and non-priesthood orientations. The interesting case of the priesthood orientation is that it will succeed in re-establishing the canonical and apostolic hierarchy in 1846. The place chosen, and long sought, was to be beyond the borders of the Tsarist Empire, in the monastery of the old faithful in the village of Fântâna Albă, on the territory of Bucovina, then under Habsburg rule. The hierarch who agreed to switch to the Old Rite faith would be the former Bosnian Metropolitan of Sarajevo, Ambrose. Anticipating the reaction of the Tsarist authorities, who would not accept an autonomous Church for the Old Rite Orthodox faithful, Ambrosius, after his installation, ordained successors, bishops, priests, and deacons, for Bukovina and the surrounding countries. Towards the end of 1847, Nicholas I would promptly intervene and pressure the Viennese government to suspend Ambrose. However, his successor, Metropolitan Kirill, will continue ordaining bishops for Russia and other corners of the world. The clerical hierarchy could not be destroyed. Only the occupation of Bukovina in 1940, after the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, led to the relocation of the seat of this hierarchy to the Lower Danube, in Braila, where it remains today, as the world centre of the Russian Old Rite faithful.

Another particular aspect of the *Staroveri* phenomenon on Romanian territory is the name by which the communities here are known: *lipoveni* (Lipovans). The earliest hypothesis is that this name comes from the name of a leader, Filip, who lived in the 17th century. A Philippian is a follower of this teacher, just as a Lutheran is one who follows the teachings of Luther. The hypotheses do not stop there, and no matter how hard we try to weigh them, none can acquire a high degree of credibility. What is most important,

however, is the fact that this is how they are known and called by the Romanian-host community; that this name is perceived as pejorative by both sides, that the Lipovans themselves do not identify themselves with this name, but rather with that of *Staroveri*, just as everywhere else they do not identify themselves with the name *Raskolniki*.

In the present intervention, our interest stops on this group of Staroveri that today is part of the territory of the Romanian state. A strong area of their concentration is found at the Lower Danube. At the same time, we find them throughout the territory of Moldavia (beyond the river Prut as well), both in rural and urban areas.

The issue we raise is: To what extent will a traditional religious community be able to resist in the face of modernity based on a capitalist economy and an urban way of life, on an education provided not only by the family and the church, but also by state institutions; to what extent will it be able to preserve the traditions that define it, living in a national environment that is foreign to its own, living in a communist regime that postulates atheism as a state ideology, or in a consumer society that sucks people in by the force of globalization, tempting them with the abundance of a consumerist lifestyle, with televised images of a secular paradise, with an unlimited possibility of communication and information on the internet that relativizes the axiological choices that have been established and experienced over time.

The history of Old Rite Orthodox Christianity is significant and unique, perhaps, within the religious manifestations of humanity, from the perspective that a stress test of man's relationship with God is "experienced" in this community and is not mediated by any interest that is related to secular pragmatism. Not for the sake of enlarging the mass of believers or turning the church into a political instrument, not for ethical benefit, not for financial success, nor for the exercise of authority by any religious leader, the Old Rite communities have sought to confess what they have received as their natural and organic inheritance. After 1666, these Christians felt that their social boundary between the sacred and the profane world was being assaulted and threatened, and opted to preserve this boundary, even at the risk of disregarding the territorial boundaries of the profane world.

In 1871, Bishop Melchisedec Stefanescu, who gave an exhaustive report on the Christian *Staroveri* in Romania, began his book as follows: "Ignorance, which has reigned for many centuries in Russia, not only in the lower classes but also in the nobility and in the Russian clergy, has gradually formed certain doctrines and ideas foreign to the doctrine and practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. To these doctrines, - though they did not touch upon capital, dogmatic, or moral points but upon the outward practice

of worship, - ignorance gave great significance, and seconded also by other historical circumstances, through them were produced in Russia frightful religious events, and ending in a monstrous schism, which has no parallel in the history of the Orthodox peoples, and which still exists with all obstinacy, after a lapse of more than 200 years." (Melchizedek, 1871, p. 5)

This assessment of the bishop-lecturer marked by the ideas of the Enlightenment and modernity is remarkable in its appreciation of the endurance over time (200 years) of the *Staroveri* phenomenon. Enlightenment words such as *ignorance*, *frightening religious events*, and *stubbornness,* have no relevance within the *Staroveri* phenomenon, but only to an observer alien to the spirit of religious life of the Old Rite communities, unable to fathom the nature of specific religious living.

Between 1871 and 2023 a shorter period of time elapsed than that analysed by the above-mentioned bishop. Will the Lipovan community - as the *Staroveri* are called in Romania - resist with the same *stubbornness*? The answer is far from positive, which will have to be explained by the way in which changes have occurred in the perception of the boundary between the sacred and profane world, in the modification of customs and traditions, and in the manifestation of the religious feeling of life.

In Romania, the process of modernization of social life will be constant after the unification of the Principalities (1859), but it will reach the Lipovan community to a small extent, at least until the end of the First World War. This is due to the autarkic way of life, dependent on occupations and trades that ensure independence and isolation from the outside world. Lipovans are fishermen, farmers, beekeepers, and herdsmen. Even in the inter-war period, in the urban environment, their autarky will be very little affected, life revolving around the Church, folk songs and acquired customs, fishing, and gardening.

The communist regime, without being intolerant of the religiousness of the *Staroveri*, will strike at their autarkic way of life and their established traditionalism. Widespread education will attract children to Romanian schools, industrialization will break the *Staroveri* from their traditional trades, and even women will be drawn into the wage sector. Soon the Lipovans were making a name for themselves in the construction industry, as diggers and masons on the country's building sites. They advance as foremen, engineers, teachers, and professors, and become world-renowned artists and athletes. While mixed marriages outside the community had previously been religiously condemned, they are now being tolerated. Learning - the *bright lights of the sciences* - modern trades and the new pace of work are destroying traditional customs and culture at an accelerating rate.

The post-1989 generation is irreparably shaken by the effects of globalization. The older generation is returning - especially in rural areas - to a self-sufficient way of life, while the young people who are caught up in industrial activities or trained for the trades remain unemployed.

Observing how minorities have evolved in this period of modernity, Lucian Boia firmly points out: 'Two decisive factors have completed the erosion of minority communities: industrialization and urbanization, on the one hand, and emigration, on the other'. (Boia, 2015, p. 110) For the *Staroveri*, hit hard in their linguistic and cultural tradition, the second emigration (unless after World War II Stalin managed to lure some of them to the Soviet homeland) would occur after the opening of the borders to Western Europe.

They migrate to the West, this time not for religious but for economic and financial reasons. Their children often remain in the care of their grandparents, as their families' interest is in school education to ensure a better future in an uncertain labour market. What are the consequences of this second migration on the religious sentiment that has preserved these communities for centuries?

Recent studies show that after 1989 a religious revival is taking place everywhere in the world. Religion is becoming a form of identity in a world caught up in the whirlwind of multiculturalism. That is why communities founded on religious criteria are becoming stronger and more successful in social, economic, and political life. The Lipovans in Romania have successfully preserved their identity through religion in modern times. However, modernism - in its last period - seriously affected them in preserving their language, customs, and way of life. Globalization, on the other hand, affects the very structure of resistance of the Romanian *Staroveri*.

The liturgical experience has diminished in intensity; the people attend religious services less fervently than before. Since only a few, the elderly, attend religious services regularly, some priests have decided, for example, to combine the evening with the midnight service. Children are rare participants in these services, the internet and internet games are more "vital" to the meaning of the new life, just as the English language at school, according to parents, is more important than Russian for personal development and professional success. Young people are absorbed in the entertainment of the new mass culture, TV channels, and leisure consumption. In the tradition of the old believers, the notion of free time was non-existent, the whole time was ritually consecrated. In today's perception, however, this sense of time has disappeared, time has been freed from the sacred and has become 'spare'. These observations and analyses

concern the general line, the common mentality of the modern-day Lipovans, as we have observed in the Lower Danube area.

Conclusions

In conclusion, we can consider that modernity, which gave birth to the nation-state and the concept of citizenship, led to integration under these broad symbols of the majority cultural community. Even respecting the neutral position, the state has failed to maintain this non-committal attitude. "The practices and values of the public domain are in fact imposed on particular collectives, whose customs and values are marginalized and folklorized before being eliminated. The official language in fact excludes other languages, first reduced to their familiar role, then forgotten. National holidays are the holidays of the majority. The values of the public sphere are imposed on all public institutions." (Schnapper & Bachelier, 2001, p. 156). European integration, as a form of the globalization process, represents a much more radical challenge not only to cultural communities within nation-states but even to nations.

The power of technology, through its globalizing force, dislocates and dissolves communities, erodes nations, and destroys local traditions and values. Lucian Boia also writes: "What was an advantage for individuals [emigration] has turned out to be a misfortune for communities: they have dismembered, sometimes to the point of extinction, the effect being that of genocide (individuals have not died, but ethnic groups have disappeared)" (Boia, 2015, p. 112).

Sociologists have found that elements of spiritual culture are more resilient over time than those of material culture. It is a finding that can bring optimism, beyond all the gloomy observations I have described in this article, and which can mobilize the energies of the *Staroveri* in the spirit of perpetuating their theocratic ideal in a tolerant and multicultural European Union.

In this game of globalization, there are no formulae or rules for survival, but it is certain that religion, in its pure form of confession of belief, is the only factor that can save an identity with a deep historical tradition.

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