From Bottom to the Top and Back

On How to Build a Church in Communist Romania

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In 1987 the Italian journalist Francesco Strazzari journeyed throughout Eastern Europe investigating the life of the Christian church in its encounters with the communist state. In Romania, Strazzari managed briefly to interview Orthodox Patriarch Teoctist and Bishop Nicoale Mihăiţă, the Church's specialist in ecumenism and chief liaison between the Church and the state's Ministry for Religious Denominations. Strazzari raised questions about religious life in Romania, particularly the demolition of church buildings in Bucharest in the process of urban redevelopment.[1] The answer he received was designed for an international audience increasingly concerned about the status of religious life in Romania. According to Bishop Mihăiţă, "Urbanization always implied sacrifices. This happened even in Paris when they made the large boulevards. This has happened in Bucharest in the interwar period when a first attempt to modernize the city was made."[2]

Church demolitions, destruction of villages, random and forced urbanization and industrialization—this is what the international audience knew about Romania in the 1980s. The West saw the communist government's behavior toward religious groups as particularly repressive, taking into account the dissolution of the Greek Catholic Church, maltreatment[3] of Neo-Protestant groups,[4] and constraints and control over the Orthodox and traditional Protestant churches. These were the characteristics of religious life in Romania: imprisonments of priests and believers, the destruction of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox monastic life, and control over the religious schooling and the appointment of hierarchs and clergy. But this somber image of the relationship between the state and religious denominations in Romania was misleading, for the relationship was multi-faceted and changed with time.

Throughout the communist period, religious life continued. Places of worship were built, though not at the same rate as during the interwar period; the training of priests continued; and several theologians of the period were educated in institutes abroad (Oxford, Geneva, Athens, Regensburg). Furthermore, continuing the tradition of the interwar period, the state's building of national ideology during the 1960s took into consideration religious motifs and the pantheon of Romanian saints, and figures of Romanian church history made their way into the national canon. These gray areas in which the state allowed religion to function were disregarded in the Western anti-communist campaign, or were branded as evidence of the Orthodox Church's cooption.

This paper examines one of these gray areas by looking at the ways in which the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the communist regime was negotiated at a central level and renegotiated at the local level. In investigating the distinctions between these two levels of church-state relations, I am primarily interested in the distinct applications of central policy at the local level. In my research, I focus both on the Church as an institution and the local church as a community of believers.[5]

In the late 1970s and 1980s, at the same time that the state administration was razing churches in Bucharest in the process of urban redevelopment,[6] the Romanian Orthodox Church opened over 250 construction sites in the newly created Alba Iulia bishopric. New churches were built and damaged ones refurbished; parish houses and deanery offices were constructed; and major works were carried out at the Grand Cathedral in Tîrgu-Mureş and the seat of the bishopric. The bishopric of Alba Iulia, by far, saw the most frantic construction activity in the Romanian Orthodox Church at the time (see Table 8.1).

My research is structured on two questions: Why was this church-building activity possible, and how was it done? I have selected the Mureş deanery from the Alba Iulia bishopric as my case study. Within the Mureş deanery, I will focus on Cerghizel, a small village of 150 families (658 inhabitants), where, between 1977 and 1982, villagers built a new church next to an old wooden church dating from 1832. I selected this case study for both theoretical and methodological reasons. The successful construction of the church at Cerghizel lends itself to inquiry: How was this building possible? Did pressure from the community on local officials bring about a change in state policy? Was


U.S.S.R.
Hungary
TRANSYLVANIA
U.S.S.R.
Cerghizel
Tirgu Mures
Bishopric of Alba Iulia
Alba Iulia
Sibiu
Romania
Yugoslavia
Bucharest
Black Sea
Bulgaria
Communist-Era
Romania
Seat of Orthodox bishop
Seat of Orthodox archbishop
Seat of Mures county admin.

Table 8.1. Construction of Churches in Tîrgu-Mures Deanery (1975–1989)[7]

1. Church Historical Monuments

		Costs
Restoration on the same spot	5	284,800 *lei**
Moved	5 (3 finished, 2 in project)	296,000 *lei*
Repairs	4 (3 finished, 1 in project)	497,600 *lei***

* A median salary was approximately 1000 *lei.*
** One of the repaired churches was in Tîrgu-Mureş.

2. Churches—non-historical monuments

		Costs
Rebuilt on the same spot	1	314,000 *lei*
Built on another place	4 (3 finished, 1 in project)	2,273,856 *lei*
Repairs	17	1,272,944 *lei*
Painted	11 (9 finished, 2 in process)	2,603,684 *lei****

*** One of the churches in the process of being painted was the Orthodox Cathedral in Tîrgu-Mureş.

it the result of local negotiation? Or was the construction of the church in this small village a tangible result of the alignment of the interests of higher authorities in the Church and state?

On Religious Life in Romania: An Overview

The church-state relationship in communist Romania was modeled after the practices of the Soviet Union. The same principles governed the relationship between the state and religious denominations in both cases; the same institutional structure administered the denominations, and the same ideology structured the relationship. Yet the situations of religious denominations in Romania and the Soviet Union had different outcomes. The survival of religious denominations in Romania

has been explained in terms of various deficiencies: the Communist Party in Romania was not strong, there was not a charismatic communist elite capable of implementing a ban on religious institutions, and the atheist dogma of the Party was unable to replace the religious worldview. Governed by this relatively weak party-state and unpopular ideology, the population—traditional, conservative, rural, and still centered on the church—prevented the new regime from banishing religious denominations.[8] In contrast, other scholars explain the Romanian Orthodox Church's survival in terms of its tradition of submission to state authority, which justified its compromise with the communist government.[9]

I argue that the specific problems of the Romanian case came from applying the Stalinist model of church-state relations in a context where the Communist Party had only just begun to establish control over society. At the time of the 1943 compromise between the Soviet state and the Russian Orthodox Church, the communists were well established and the Church in Russia was nearly broken. In Romania, however, the newly established communist regime sought to establish this model of church-state relations at the same time as it was seeking to impose its control over a still-religious population. Thus, the party-state, insufficiently established as a dominant force in Romania, was forced to compromise.[10]

In this paradox lay the explanation for the situation of religious denominations in Romania. The initial two-way compromise regulated the relationship throughout the communist period, with various periods of harsher policy regarding religious denominations following Soviet directives or due to internal events that were followed by periods with more relaxed attitudes towards religious institutions.[11] The relationship between the state and institutional religion was far from straightforward. Religious liberties were not worth the paper they were written on, thousands of priests were sent to prison for their beliefs,[12] and denominations were persecuted and even banned. Yet at the same time, the majority of religious denominations (those legally recognized by the state) reached a compromise with the communist government, allowing them to maintain a status quo in the number of adherents, limit the demolition of churches, and temper state interference in religious practice. Religious life, though severely hampered, continued to function in Romania.

In the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the number of priests and churches remained constant throughout the period. Initial state assaults against the Church indeed brought a slight decline in number of clerical personnel. But already by 1948, at the time of the first round of negotiations between the newly elected patriarch and the communist administration, the number of priests was around 11,000, and the number of church buildings slightly higher. Both numbers reflected the addition of priests and buildings in the aftermath of the Orthodox Church's union with the Greek Catholic Church. During the entire communist period the numbers of Orthodox priests and church properties slowly, but consistently, increased. Given that state regulations stipulated that the number of priests correspond to the number of believers,[13] the constant number of priests throughout the communist period reflects a constant number of church members. This formula was also applied to other legally recognized Christian denominations in the Romanian communist state: the Roman Catholic Church, the Hungarian Reformed and German Lutheran churches, and the various "Neo-Protestant" churches (the state's term for those denominations that did not emerge directly from the Reformation, such as Baptists, Pentecostals, Evangelicals, and Seventh Day Adventists). Most strikingly, between 1947 and 1989, these Neo-Protestant denominations tripled their numbers of believers and prayer houses,[14] a trend that both the state and the traditional churches attributed to their proselytizing activities. But the success of the Neo-Protestant churches and the stable numbers of the Orthodox Church indicate that the state was unsuccessful in its own proselytizing activities, the selling of its atheist doctrine. Faced with tis lack of success, the state resorted to legitimatizing its rule by compromising with the institutional churches.

The Legislation

In theory, one could build a church in Romania—according to the legislation. But this required understanding and navigating the mechanism of state approval. Until 1958 any community that wanted to build a church or prayer house had to secure endorsement from the local and regional councils that issued construction licenses. As a result, negotiations for authorization were conducted with people in one's own com-

munity. Village mayors and Party secretaries, if not members of the community of believers themselves, always had family members in the church whom the priest or councilmen could approach with a request for a new building. Sometimes in these personal exchanges, only the verbal authorization of the local authority sufficed for the construction process to begin.[15] This informal, decentralized process allowed for many church-building projects to go forward. By the late 1950s, the number of new religious buildings began worrying the authorities. The new constructions by the Neo-Protestant denominations, which had become legal in Romania just after World War II, disturbed many of the conservative officials in the communist administration. But even more troubling to them were projects of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which was rebuilding the churches destroyed in the war. A 1959 report of the Ministry for Religious Denominations indicated the need for government action to counter the frenzy of construction:

> After World War II some religious denominations—especially the Romanian Orthodox Church—have tried to intensify religious life through a campaign of construction, reconstruction, and repair of churches. And the Neo-Protestant churches have shown special inclination to buying property for building prayer houses.... Against these tendencies the Ministry for Religious Denominations, following the political directives of the Party, sought to prevent this campaign.[16]

Already in 1953 the Ministry for Religious Denominations mandated that, in their documents for construction projects, religious communities had to have the authorization of the Ministry, thus centralizing the decision-making process.[17] This proved to be an unsuccessful initiative, for the Ministry was confronted with "an assault" of requests, submitted documents, and priests or believers coming for audiences. Consequently, the Ministry delegated its field cadres to take over the authorization of construction works. This decision created yet another barrier to communities seeking to build new churches or prayer houses.

The local cadre, or *împuternicit*,[18] of the Ministry for Religious Denominations was required to investigate each request for a new church building. The official was responsible for contacting local authorities to inquire about the necessity of the new building, instructing the community of believers on when to address their request to their hierarch,

and directing the hierarch on when to present the request to the Ministry for Religious Denominations in Bucharest. The local official also prepared a file on each case and offered his own suggestions, on which the Ministry would ultimately base its decisions. In 1956 a change in the law required that the Ministry's cadre also inform the local first secretary of the Communist Party of each request and present the cases they had. By 1958 all requests had to be directed to the Ministry for Religious Denominations.[19] The final decision was no longer taken by the local authorities but by the Ministry, making it more difficult, at least in theory, for any community to build a church or a prayer house. According to the statistical data collected by the Ministry, this did not terminate the church-building process (see Table 8.2). But this legislative initiative did give the Ministry direct control over the process and made it part of the negotiation process with the religious denominations. As a result, the system of bribes and bargaining became more complicated, as it now included local Ministry officials and Ministry inspectors from Bucharest as well. The change also moved the process from the local to the central arena. Whereas negotiations had been carried out only between a local priest or community and the local authority, after the changes in the law, negotiations for the building of a church were also conducted between hierarchs and Ministry personnel.

Table 8.2, Requests for Church-Building Projects Submitted to the Ministry for Religious Denominations (1954–1960)[20]

No.	Year	Requests	Solutions		
			Favorable	Negative	In process
1.	1954	125	62	15	48
2.	1955	173	93	32	48
3.	1956	182	65	32	85
4.	1957	161	21	82	58
5.	1958	63	12	39	12
6.	1959	239	89	49	101
7.	1960	131	66	52	13
	Total	1,074	408	301	365

The Practice: The Why, the Who, and the How

To explain why construction projects received Ministry permission, two levels of state and church decision-making must be examined: the central and the local. The policies of both the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Romanian communist state were a result of central needs and local input, and the enforcement of these policies was localized and adapted to the needs of particular communities. To complicate things, Church policy was dependent on the demands and allowances of political authorities, and the state's solutions to national problems took the Church into consideration. The belief that the church-building process was partly due to pressure from below is verified by looking at the four sides involved in the process: the central authorities, the local authorities, the Church hierarchy, and the local religious community.

The Central Authorities

The 1958 law gave religious denominations permission to manage their religious buildings and to build churches, prayer houses, and parish houses. Religious denominations had varying interpretations of what the "ownership" of religious buildings entailed. For the Roman Catholic Church, the ownership rested on the Church's hierarchical administration. In the Romanian Orthodox Church, the ownership belonged to the community of believers, similar to the traditional Protestant and Neo-Protestant denominations. Thus, for the state, the problem of ownership was a difficult issue to discern, which led to further difficulty in devising a cohesive practice towards the construction process.

Ownership and local and central interests in the development of church property were not always easy to disentangle, and the various facets created problems for the local authorities. The state favored requests and projects coming from local communities. Conversely, they also responded to requests from a church hierarchy, because these offered the central authorities grounds for negotiation. For instance, authorization to construct a Catholic church was given as a reward for the good behavior of the priest or hierarch requesting the permit. This general tendency was common in the Ministry's dealings with all the

religious denominations. The constructions were often the state's way to reward or punish the clergy. This was also the reason why the local *împuternicit* included, with an application forwarded to the Ministry, a characterization of the priest. But this practice of rewarding clergy with approval of construction requests also had a broader aim, as the government sought to solidify its authority in troublesome regions. Ministry documents show that more constructions were approved and a larger number of churches were built in areas that posed problems to the regime or in areas where the state administration had a direct interest.

In Mureş deanery, two things likely influenced the state's authorization of construction projects: the integration of Greek Catholics into the Orthodox Church and the nationalities problem. The forceful dissolution of the Greek Catholic Church orchestrated by the state and the integration of the Greek Catholic believers into the Orthodox Church in 1948 created a number of problems for the communist administration.[21] The incapacity of the Romanian Orthodox Church to absorb the massive number of believers, to deal with recalcitrant priests, and to convince the Greek Catholic hierarchy to join the Orthodox episcopate necessitated the communist authorities' involvement in the process. In turn, this involvement inclined the central and local authorities to give more leverage to the Romanian Orthodox Church's attempts at integrating Greek Catholic believers.

At the same time that the state was involved in the integration of Romanian Greek Catholics into the Orthodox Church, it was also pursuing policies that promoted the Romanian population over the Hungarians, Germans, and other nationalities. Not one interviewee gave a positive answer to the question of whether church construction was a vanguard for the nationalization process in Transylvania. Still, it was clear that the state relaxed its policy with regard to the Romanian Orthodox Church activities in Transylvania as part of a relaxed policy towards ethnic Romanians. David Gheorghe, *împuternicit* of the Mureş region in late 1980s, recalled a meeting in Cluj-Napoca with all the department directors: "One of the directors, Munteanu, stood up and spoke about a recrudescence of the constructions of churches. I replied, 'We can see you are not Transylvanian. The Roman Catholic Church[22] or the Germans have churches in town and in the center of the villages. The Romanian peasant is on top of the hill with his church.'"[23] Gheorghe laughed, and added, "Everybody applauded then."[24]

David Gheorghe was the first Romanian *împuternicit* of the Mureş region. Like Traian Hărşan, first secretary of the Communist Party in Mureş, he was part of a slowly increasing ethnic Romanian administration in counties previously dominated by Hungarians. Gradually, a Romanian-dominated administrative elite was formed in Transylvania, the result of a nationalization process that the Communist Party started in the late 1950s. Another aspect of this nationalist initiative was an increase of the Romanian population in areas of Transylvania with a Hungarian majority. When asked about the increase of Orthodox construction sites in the newly created Alba Iulia Bishopric in the 1980s, Burchard Arpad, the chief architect of the Mureş County during that period, replied, "The Romanian population was growing. The Orthodox believers, mostly situated in the villages, started to slowly penetrate the towns. The other religious denominations had a sufficient number of buildings, so there was no need for more buildings. In these cases they received authorizations for repairs." But when asked whether this process was related to a nationalist policy, Arpad said that it was a local process; all the authorizations were given locally and met with local political support.[25]

The church-building process, though not likely an intentional part of the state's nationalization policy, did come about as a result of this policy. The Romanian Orthodox Church was not the only denomination that received state approval for projects. Authorizations were issued by local authorities for Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Neo-Protestant denominations. However, apart from the Neo-Protestant denominations that constructed new prayer houses, the other denominations received authorizations only for repair, rebuilding, and renovation, not for construction. As Burchard Arpad said, these denominations already had a sufficient number of religious buildings.

The *Împuternicit*

The *împuternicit* was the man in charge of religious life in his region, and as such, played a complex role. Record holder for all the religious denominations in the region, the *împuternicit* had to supervise the activity of the religious communities. He mediated the church-state relationship, intervening not only in the problems between the state au-

thorities and the religious denominations, but also between denominations and even in the internal problems of a denomination. He was the first, and sometimes the last, state authority with whom priests had contact. He presided over the clergy. Based on his reports, a priest could be sanctioned, which could result in anything from imprisonment to deprivation of salary. Using his estimates and the statistical data he collected, the Ministry for Religious Denominations designed its policy towards institutional religion.

By law, the local *împuternicit* was the state representative whose authorization mattered most in the process of building a church. The amended law of 1958 gave the *împuternicit* important prerogatives, including on-site verification and reporting to the Ministry. In theory, the *împuternicit*'s report was the main factor deciding whether or not a community would receive final authorization from the Ministry. Each report had to contain data on:

- whether the religious unit had another religious building in the village and what the condition of this other building was;
- the distance to the nearest prayer house/church of the same religious denomination;
- whether the religious needs of the community were cared for and how that was done;
- the number of believers who had petitioned for the new building;
- how the local authorities felt about the believers' attitude towards the regime;
- the financial means of the believers to begin construction on the new church (building space, materials, funds, workers, and so on);
- references from local authorities about the priests and believers who led the construction project; and
- the authorization of the local authorities.[26]

By the 1980s the clergy and Church hierarchy realized the importance of these local officials. Before building a church, the first person whose consent had to be secured was the *împuternicit*. I asked David Gheorghe, retired *împuternicit* for Religious Denominations in the Mureş region in the 1980s, about his own motives for authorizing a project. He recalled the financial considerations were key to his decision: "I had a discussion with the mayor. I was looking if they had money, if he

needed the money for something other than building the church. All the construction projects in rural areas were done with the financial means of the village, regardless of whether it was the church or the house of culture. I asked about their other projects. If they had to build a house of culture or a school, I postponed my decision for the church until all the other projects were completed."[27] According to Gheorghe, the *împuternicit* himself decided if he wanted to support a project or not. This placed great importance on personal connections between the priest and the *împuternicit*, or between the hierarch and the local official. Because he had veto power over any major project a religious community undertook, including building of places of worship, the *împuternicit* typically engaged in negotiations with clergy members. Still, the community played an important role. In three interviews with the former *împuternicit*, he mentioned only cases that had positive solutions or amusing circumstances. Nevertheless, the process of applying for authorization and the negotiation that ensued were not always successful and certainly not easy.

There were times when the Ministry delegate refused to authorize projects. In the interview, David Gheorghe discussed a village that proceeded with the building of a church even though he had denied authorization. The new church's foundation had been laid around the old one. When he was notified, Gheorghe went to the village and asked the locals to stop the construction, yet they continued to build. He recalled the episode: "That year, the first of May was a Saturday, and everybody was celebrating it. During that Saturday and Sunday, the villagers raised most of the church from the foundation up. On Monday the priest came to me. He was scared. I immediately saw the problems this situation could create. I coached the priest to act shocked and tell the county first secretary that he had no idea of what the villagers wanted and that he could not stop them. The Party's first secretary laughed and told the priest, 'That's what we deserve; we went for picnics and drinks while these people worked.'"[28]

In most of these interviews, the former *împuternicit* painted his role in bright colors. In Gheorghe's retelling, he took center stage in all of the construction projects in the area where he worked. To verify his allegations, I have corroborated his stories with other interviewees, especially clergy and hierarchs in his area. The way in which the clergy, be they Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant, still remember

Gheorghe two decades after his retirement, along with the number of authorizations he gave, suggest that the febrile construction undertaken by the religious communities in the Mureş region was the result of personal negotiations between the former official and the local priests and ministers. In their interviews, both David Gheorghe and architect Burchard Arpad argued that these local solutions were the norm. The particular cases that I researched were resolved via negotiations at the local level and seldom with the involvement of the central administration.

The Church Hierarchy

According to Romanian Orthodox Church policy in 1970s and 1980s, Transylvania was targeted as part of a process that documents call "completing the union." The discourse of the Romanian Orthodox Church in the years immediately preceding the union with the Greek Catholics made no reference to a possible difference in identity between the communities belonging to the two churches. In fact, one of the arguments for unification was the common identity of their believers. Supported by an official discourse that linked Orthodoxy with Romanianness, the Transylvanian hierarchs of the Romanian Orthodox Church neglected the problem of confessional identity when preparing the integration of Greek Catholics into the "mother" Church. They maintained that the differences between the two churches were negligible and focused the unification efforts on convincing Greek Catholic priests to join the Orthodox Church. But in the mid-1950s, the unification process had a major setback. A large number of Greek Catholic priests who had turned Orthodox in 1948 left the priesthood and took their parishioners with them. Some communities even resisted the unification with violence. Consequently, the Ministry for Religious Denominations began to intervene directly. Still, neither state administration nor Orthodox Church hierarchy considered a policy to integrate the Greek Catholic communities; instead, they restricted their activities only to the former Greek Catholic clergy.

By the 1960s and 1970s, the Orthodox Church admitted that its integration of the Greek Catholics had failed and redirected its activity toward the community, first through discourse but followed soon after

by more practical measures.[29] In 1969 the hierarchical administration of the Romanian Orthodox Church created a policy designed to encourage the missionary work of the Church against the Neo-Protestant denominations and the schismatic old Orthodox groups. This document explained the methods that the Church was considering to integrate the still reticent (former) Greek Catholic believers:

To eliminate the problems that still exist in integrating the former Greek Catholics

into the mother church, we will take the following measures:

1. Clarification regarding the churches that still preserve unorthodox effigies;
2. Clarification regarding the preservation of unorthodox rituals with decisions for their elimination;
3. List of priorities regarding painting the churches according to the orthodox needs—using qualified painters;
4. Supplying the churches with the right priestly clothing, books and ritual objects;
5. Completing the clerical personnel with proper elements [*elemente apte*] able to consistently promote the practices and the orthodox specific ritual;
6. The personnel moves—appointments, transfers—will be arranged with necessary care permanently following the completion of the unification. [30]

Although the Romanian Orthodox Church was an otherwise centralized institution during the communist period, the Metropolitan See and bishoprics in Transylvania had greater autonomy in carrying out these measures for integrating Greek Catholic believers. Special training schools were later designed for the clergy to take up parishes in Transylvania. Due to the composite religious and ethnic makeup of the region, as opposed to the more homogenous regions in the rest of the country, state authorities had closer encounters with local religious communities and local and regional religious leaders. Direct negotiations between the Church hierarchy and local authorities were frequent, and solutions to problems were localized.

The same was true of the Alba Iulia bishopric in the late 1970s and 1980s. Though Alba Iulia was a newly created administrative unit

of the Romanian Orthodox Church, it was established on an important historical site of the Church and the Romanian population of Transylvania. Alba Iulia had been the See for the Orthodox Archbishopric in 1600 and had also hosted the Grand National Assembly that decided on the union of Transylvania with the old Romanian kingdom in 1918. Thus the new bishopric had spiritual and historical importance for the Romanian population of Transylvania.

In 1975 Alba Iulia became a bishopric administering Alba, Mureş, and Harghita counties. Almost immediately, the new bishop, Emilian Birdaş, designed a project for the "renewal of religious life in Romanian Orthodox communities." The program was needed to confront several problems in the new bishopric: the proselytic activity of the Neo-Protestant denominations and the Roman Catholic Church, the integration of former Greek Catholic believers, and the numerous vacancies of the Orthodox parishes caused by poverty in an area dominated by a Hungarian majority. Bishop Birdaş's measures to address these issues included replacing old priests with new, younger ones who were well educated in the missionary activity of the Church, increasing the number of episcopal visits, and fully supporting construction activity. The bishop designed a financing plan that would support the construction projects in the bishopric. He also placed emphasis on publicity and advertised success stories throughout the bishopric, using diligent clergy as role models. These priests were rewarded; they moved up the hierarchical ladder and received better parishes and financial gains. Some were transferred to other parishes and other projects according to the needs of the bishopric.

Birdaş maintained excellent relations with the communist authorities. Even today, rumors of his collaboration with the communists roam around the Archbishopric of Alba Iulia. There are no archival materials available to support this claim, and none of the bishop's former councilors was willing to talk about the bishop's—or, for that matter, their own—relationship with the authorities. Suffice it to say that Bishop Emilian Birdaş was the only hierarch in the Romanian Orthodox Church who had to leave his post upon the request of clergy in his bishopric after the end of communist rule.[31] Nevertheless, the results of his administration were impressive. In 1989 there were 206 construction sites throughout the bishopric. The financial effort totaled around 15 million *lei*, with works ranging from mortuary houses to new

churches. Almost completely disconnected from the central administration of the Church, the bishopric of Alba Iulia functioned as an autonomous administration and looked for local solutions to local problems and needs.

The Local Community: Cerghizel

What the villagers of Cerghizel remember of their adventures in raising a new church can be viewed as a representative case of how the mechanism for the construction of religious buildings worked in communist Romania. In the early 1970s the small village was moved from the valley of the Mureş River to a hilly area because of flooding. One hundred and fifty families moved, taking with them their old wooden church but not their priest. The former Greek Catholic priest who, together with the entire parish, had joined the Orthodox Church in 1948, had died of old age and was replaced by a recent graduate of the Sibiu Theological Institute, Father Ioan Tutecean.

The gradual replacement of former Greek Catholic priests in Transylvania with well-educated clergy was part of the Church's larger project of "completing the union." This project involved varied activities, from repainting churches with Byzantine iconography and changing the liturgical books to moving priests from former Greek Catholic parishes to established Orthodox parishes, sometimes across the country. Missionary work, involving well-trained clergy willing to accept the differences between Greek Catholics and Orthodox and at the same time complete the break with the past, was the principal means by which the Orthodox Church attempted to integrate the remaining Greek Catholic communities. Intelligent and astute students were selected, especially from the Theological Institute in Sibiu,[32] to enter the hard missionary work in former Greek Catholic parishes. The central state administration approved of this project and supported the various attempts of the Romanian Orthodox Church to integrate former Greek Catholics. However, the new Orthodox priests sometimes encountered cold receptions from their parishioners and had to find ways to win local communities' trust. The Orthodox Church's policymakers, in following the broad policy of completing the union, allowed these priests to pursue local solutions to specific problems. Cerghizel was one case

where the priest, newly appointed by the Church hierarchy, joined a local community of former Greek Catholics in a common project: the building of a new church.

Father Tutecean has fond memories of the villagers.[33] There was no parish house when he arrived, so the young priest rented a house from the villagers for a year. They then contributed 100,000 *lei* for him to purchase his own house. It is not clear, however, why the villagers decided to build a new church. Today, the old wooden church still stands in the middle of the village next to the larger, stone church building. In an interview, the priest offered few reasons, the most important among them being that a bigger church was needed because the wooden one was too small to fit the congregation. Whatever the reason, the construction of the church became the work of the entire village: families contributed financially; hosted construction workers in their homes; and provided food for workers, for visiting hierarchs, and for religious festivities that marked phases of the building and consecration. For one such event, the villagers had to prepare food for 200 guests, among whom were the bishop, numerous priests, regional and local authorities, and the Cerghizel church councilmen. The project put tremendous financial pressure on the villagers. The total cost of the construction, according to the bishopric's estimates, was to be around 750,000 *lei*.[34] However, Father Tutecean remembered the final cost as being around 1,000,000 *lei*. The difference can be found in "protocol expenses." The priest was hesitant to state the obvious: part of the money went for various gifts offered as bribes.

The late 1970s and 1980s were years of severe economic restrictions in the Romanian communist state. Most of the villagers in Cerghizel were peasants working in state agricultural production enterprises, but some also held jobs in the factories of Tîrgu-Mureş. Living conditions at the time—marked by food rations, electricity cuts,[35] gas coupons and rations, and driving restrictions—taught people to bend rules. Everyday life was a constant search for goods, and ordinary people queued for almost everything, including materials for building a church. Negotiations took place for obtaining construction materials, and officials received bribes for gas coupons, cement, and wire, as well as other authorizations for the project. Money was not the only currency for finalizing the construction works. People gave their time and labor, as well as animals to be sacrificed for the celebration feasts.[36]

For instance, Father Tutecean described the impressive example of an old woman who gave the church 20,000 *lei* from her knitting work. She was mentioned on the wall of the church for her donation, and the bishop mentioned her in the religious service that celebrated the completed structure.

The first church councilman, Gligor Cojoc, was one of the key actors in the process of building the church. Together with the priest, he persuaded the regional authorities to authorize the building project. In Cerghizel's case, obtaining the permit took a long time. Father Tutecean recalled that the regional *împuternicit* (David Gheorghe's predecessor) asked why a new church was necessary, since the village already had one.[37] Expecting the regional representative of the Ministry of Religious Denominations to refuse the request, the priest decided to go straight to the higher authority, the Communist Party secretary for Mureş County. Tutecean explained, "We went every week, me and one of the church councilmen. I think he got tired of us and gave us the permit."

Several times in his interview, Father Tutecean mentioned Traian Hărşan, the first secretary of the Communist Party in Mureş County. Hărşan came to most of the celebrations connected with the construction, and according to the priest and the church council members, he played a major role in the whole process. David Gheorghe and Buchard Arpad, the county's chief architect, also mentioned Hărşan's role. His approval of Cerghizel's petition can be seen as a result of the government's nationalization policies in the region. Whereas the *împuternicit* who first denied the request for the church building was Hungarian, Hărşan was Romanian. He was among the first high-ranking Romanians in the Mureş County administration.

It seems that Hărşan's influence kept other state officials from intervening on a number of issues regarding construction of the church in Cerghizel. Since the project involved large sums of money, there were several contracts and numerous legal problems. Yet, according to Father Tutecean, the only state official to inquire about the progress of the five-year project was a police captain who mistakenly thought they had no authorization and came to investigate the situation. Instead, it was the bishopric of Alba Julia that devoted special attention to Cerghizel. Bishop Emilian Birdaş paid thirty visits to Cerghizel. A strong personality, he was always in command of the details of the

works in progress in his large and difficult bishopric. Father Tutecean's wife remembers:

> Sometimes, on his way back from Reghin to Alba Iulia, he would wake us up in the middle of the night to show him the status of the works.... When we finished the church, he asked me and my husband to swap parishes with a priest in Maramureş. That priest and his wife came to Cerghizel and we went to his parish. He wanted us to tell them how we built the church. It was winter, snow up to the knees. We went with our car up to a point and then we took a bus. The last part of the trip we went on foot. No one paid for the gas. That priest came to Cerghizel and spent a few days there. The bishop wanted to show him what a small village did on its own.[38]

Advertised as a success story by the bishop, Cerghizel was also an incentive for the nearby village, which started construction work on its parish house soon after. Father Tutecean was granted an honorary distinction for his work. In 1988, after serving in Cerghizel, he became one of the five Orthodox priests given parishes in Tîrgu-Mureş. Father Tutecean and his wife now live in a suburb of the town, where they have reconstructed the parish house.

From the interviews and available documents, we can clarify how the church-building process developed and what made this process possible. In answering the question of why communities such as Cerghizel were allowed to build churches, it must be remembered that the villagers had formerly been Greek Catholic. After 1948, the villagers became part of the Orthodox Church but kept their Greek Catholic priest, church building, iconography, and traditions, such as the use of the Latin variants for some ritual phrases.[39] Throughout Romania, the Orthodox Church took various measures in their attempts to integrate Greek Catholic believers. This was also state policy: the Ministry for Religious Denominations was directly involved in the integration process, as the communist state was the artisan of the two churches' unification. The Ministry endorsed the Orthodox Church's policies and intervened in the process by arresting reticent Greek Catholic hierarchs, priests, and believers who opposed the union. In the case of Cerghizel, the construction of the new church, three decades after the unification, can be considered a final step in the integration of the formerly

Greek Catholic villagers. Moreover, while the dissolution of the Greek Catholic Church and the integration of its adherents into the Orthodox Church were marked by coercive measures, the history of this one village's church building suggests that, in some instances, the assimilation of Greek Catholics was successful. The reception and impact of an energetic new priest and the involvement of the entire village in the construction of the new church can be seen as evidence of a new—Orthodox—community. As Father Tutecean acknowledged, at the very end of his interview, he viewed the villagers' enthusiasm for the construction project as a sign that they saw themselves as Orthodox. [40] Indeed, none of the villagers rejoined the Greek Catholic Church after its revival in 1989.

Another factor in the successful building of a church in Cerghizel, and elsewhere in Romania, was the erosion of the communist system, especially at the local level. Members of the local religious community immediately perceived the "malfunctions" in the system and exploited these in the negotiation process with the local state administration. The Cerghizel villagers and their priest directed their request for a new church building directly to the regional Party authority (a Romanian), bypassing the local official of the Ministry for Religious Denominations (at that time, a Hungarian). Recognizing that in Transylvania in the 1970s and 1980s, a new, Romanian administration had arisen next to the Hungarian one, communities understood that negotiations could be redefined and made less complicated by direct appeals to ethnic Romanians in the local administration. For the villagers of Cerghizel, awareness of this malfunction in the system brought success, as it did for the Bishopric of Alba Iulia in general.

Lastly, one of the elements of the church-building process that became apparent during interviews was that the construction of a new church building belonged first and foremost to the community. In Cerghizel this was a project undertaken by a young cleric who needed something to put him in touch with his congregation. It was a local project with local solutions, built with the resources of the community. The community's motives cannot be measured fully according to the policies of state and church, and the results cannot be measured in statistics. Instead, a more appropriate measure is the community's sense of ownership over the structures they built—a church and parish house.

Conclusion

What did it take to build a church in 1980s Romania? A community of believers needed an energetic priest—charismatic, practical, with good managerial sense. And the community itself had to be united, with enough economic and spiritual resources to undertake such a long-term commitment. Added to these was a supportive hierarchical body (both the dean and the bishop) with excellent relationships with the state authorities. An open-minded mayor, a supportive regional *împuternicit* of the Ministry for Religious Denominations, and an approachable Communist Party secretary were also important. But their support was ensured only if they judged that neither the community nor the priest would create potential problems for the regime. If a community fulfilled all these conditions, then, in theory, it was able to build a church.

Yet, in practice, this formula did not always function. The state only favored applications that fitted into its larger policy. For instance, it was easier for a Roman Catholic priest collaborating with the regime to receive authorization than it was for the minister of a traditional Protestant congregation who was also collaborating with the regime. The Department for Religious Denominations needed to win over Roman Catholics opposed the regime, whereas traditional Protestants caused few or no problems for the state. And, of course, it was easier for a Greek Catholic-turned-Orthodox community to receive authorization than it was for an established Orthodox community.

On the one hand, the process of church building required the religious denominations to internalize the rules and regulations of the communist state, to work within a system of legal checks on their activities. On the other hand, the Romanian state, weak and in constant need of self-legitimization, tried at the same time to play one actor against the other, controlling them for its own use and incorporating them into its policies. Theoretically, state authority was almost all-encompassing, but in practice it was eroded by the corruption of the system itself and by constant bargaining and negotiations. By being aware of these two sides of the communist state, its pretensions to power and its corrosion, communities of believers were able to navigate their way around the regime's restrictions—be they legal, administrative, or financial—and sustain religious life in Romania.

Notes

1 The answer was strikingly similar—in some parts even identical—to the one given by Bishop Nicolae Mihăiţă (Nifon Ploeşteanul), currently archbishop of Târgovişte, one of the most important advisors to the current Patriarch Teoctist, in an interview for France Press in 1988.

2 Nifon Ploeşteanul, "Biserica şi sistematizarea oraşelor," in *Biserica Românească* 13, no. 47 (January–March 1988): 30; and Francesco Strazzaru, *Tra Bosforo e Danubio chiese in fermento. Sulle orme di Cirillo e Metodio e della perestrojka* (Milan: Edizione Paoline, 1988), 34.

3 Especially after the Helsinki Accords in 1975, an increasing number of complaints about violations of human rights reached the West from Romania, many of them regarding Neo-Protestant believers and pastors.

4 I use the terminology by which these denominations were and still are known in Romania.

5 I would like to thank His Excellency Andrei, Archbishop of Alba Iulia, for his affability and willingness in helping with this research project. Additionally, I want to extend my thanks to the administrative councilor of Alba Iulia Archbishopric, Father Remus Onisor, for taking the time to review the archival materials with me and to locate the files that refer to the economic sector of the Bishopric administration. I express my gratitude to the archivist Elena Gheaja and Gheorghe Avram from the technical service of the Archbishopric for locating various files that were not processed in the archives but that proved central to my research.

6 According to the Report of the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, where the demolition of churches in Bucharest received special attention, the activity of the party-state started in 1977 with the destruction of the Enei Church in Bucharest. In the 1980s this activity was systematic and had behind it a clear policy that was not specifically anti-religious, but rather stemmed from power positions in negotiations between the party-state and the central hierarchy of the Orthodox Church. See Cristian Vasile, Anca Şincan, Dorin Dobrincu, "Regimul comunist si cultele religioase," in *Raportul Final al Comisiei prezidentiale pentru analiza dictaturii comuniste din Romania* (Bucharest: 2006), 467.

7 Source: Episcopia Ortodoxă Română Alba Iulia, *Dare de seamă generală. Secţia Economică* (General report. Economic Service); Nearhivat (not processed in the archives), received from archivist Elena Gheaja and Gheorghe Avram from the technical service of the Archbishopric, Arhivele Arhiepiscopiei Ortodoxe Române, Alba Iulia, Romania.

8 See the arguments made by Stelian Tanase regarding the communist elite implementing the communist regime in Romania in *Elite si societate. Guvernarea Gheorghiu Dej 1948–1965* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1998).

9 Olivier Gillet, *Religion et Nationalisme. L'Ideologie de L'Eglise Orthodoxe Roumaine sous le Regime Communiste* (Brussels: Editions de l'Universite de Bruxelles, 1997).

10 I have made this argument earlier in Anca Şincan, "Romania, The Exceptional Case? Mechanisms of State Control over Religious Denominations in the Late 1940s and Early 1950s," in *New Perspectives in the Sovietization and Modernization of Central and Eastern Europe, 1945–1968*, eds. Balazs Apor, Peter Apor, and Arfon Rees (Washington, DC: New Academia Publishers, 2008), 201–213.

11 Similar trends in the relationship between communist states and religious denominations/religion in East Central Europe can be noted. The routinization of the relationship, the turn towards a specific national path of various state communisms, and various internal events all trigger changes in the relationship. See Pedro Ramet, *Cross and Commissar: The Politics of Religion in Eastern Europe and the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1987.

12 It is difficult to assess the percentage of priests imprisoned because they confessed a particular religious belief. Many were imprisoned because of their allegiance to the interwar fascist movement (the Iron Guard).

13 Article 44 of the Status of the Romanian Orthodox Church approved by the Romanian state stated that the ratio should be one priest to a minimum of 400 believers in the rural parishes and one to a minimum of 500 in the urban parishes. See Departamentul Culte, Directia Studii, Referate, note aduse cu privire la consistorii disciplinare protopopesti in cadrul Bisericii Ortodoxe Romane, probleme de salarizare, Ianuarie 1953–iulie 1953, file 85, vol. 3, 1953, 1, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentru Culte, Bucharest.

14 While in the late 1940s and early 1950s the number of Neo-Protestant believers for the four legally recognized Neo-Protestant churches was less than 50,000, the first census after 1989 put the number of Neo-Protestant believers in the hundreds of thousands.

15 David Gheorghe, interview by Anca Şincan, file recorder, Tîrgu-Mureş, February 15, 2006.

16 Departamentul Culte, Directia Studii, *Construcţii de biserici*, file 102, vol. 1, 1959, 99, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentru Culte, Bucharest.

17 Ibid. 83.

18 A comprehensive translation of the word *împuternicit* cannot be expressed in English using common state administration nomenclature. The word has similar connotations in Russian, where it was adopted in the Ministry for Religious Denomination nomenclature. The word literally means "one who is given power." The function was that of an inspector. For a lack of a better English substitute, I will use the word in the original language in the article.

19 Departamentul Culte, Directia Studii, *Construcţii de biserici* (Construction of churches, evaluation) dosar 102, volum 1, 1959, 85.

20 Source: Departamentul Culte, Directia Studii, *Construcţii de biserici* (Construction of Churches, Evaluation) dosar 102, volume 1, 1954, 94, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentru Culte, Bucharest, Romania.

21 A pertinent look at the unification of the Greek Catholic Church with the Romanian Orthodox Church can be found in Cristian Vasile, *Între Vatican şi Kremlin, Biserica Greco-Catolică în timpul regimului comunist* (Bucharest: Curtea Veche, 2003). A good summary of his findings is in Cristian Vasile, "The Suppression of the Romanian Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church," *East European Quarterly* (September 22, 2002).

The Greek Catholic Church in Transylvania has a rich history. It was created by the unification of a part of the Orthodox Church in Transylvania with the Roman Catholic Church. Its creation served the political purposes of the Austrian monarchy, as it was a counter to the Protestant majority of the Hungarians in Transylvania at the end of the seventeenth century. The Church eventually included a large part of the Romanian population in Transylvania. The Church was an important factor in the unification of the country in 1918 and was recognized in the interwar period, alongside the Orthodox Church, as a "national" church. The 1948 act of dissolution aimed at severing ties between the Romanian population and the Vatican, clarifying the religious makeup of the population, and suppressing opposition.

22 By referring to the Roman Catholics, he implied the Hungarian community.

23 In Transylvania during the eighteenth to late nineteenth centuries, Romanian Orthodox churches were made of wood and placed outside the center of the rural community and *extra muros* in the urban communities.

24 David Gheorghe, interview by Anca Şincan, file recorder, Tîrgu-Mureş, January 31, 2006.

25 Burhardt Arpad, interview by Anca Şincan, file recorder, Tîrgu-Mureş, January 30, 2006.

26 Departamentul Culte, Directia Studii, *Construcţii de biserici*, dosar 102, volum 1, 1954, 84, Arhivele Secretariatului de Stat pentru Culte, Bucuresti.

27 David Gheorghe, interview by Anca Şincan, file recorder, Tîrgu-Mureş, February 15, 2006.

28 David Gheorghe, interview by Anca Şincan, file recorder, Tîrgu-Mureş, January 31, 2006.

29 This is the period of petitionary activity by Greek Catholics who requested that the communist government allow the existence of the Greek Catholic Church. See Vasile, "Suppression of the Romanian Greek Catholic (Uniate) Church."

30 Excerpt of Summary of the Holy Synod Meetings in 1977, the work meeting of December 10, 1977. "Minutes of the Synodal Commission Presided by His Excellency Archbishop Metropolitan Nicolae of Banat Regarding Measures on Preventing Neo-Protestant Proselyte Activities, Bringing

back to the Church the Old Orthodox Schismatic Believers, Completing the Church Union in Transylvania and Banat," Fond Sinod, Sumarul Sedintelor de Sinod din 1977, 146–147, Archiva Secretariatului Patriarhiei Romane.

31 Bishop Emilian Birdaş was replaced by Andrei Andreicuţ, his administrative vicar, in 1990. After a few months Birdaş was appointed Bishop Vicar of Caransebeş, a lower position in the hierarchy. He died two years later.

32 A special seminary (a secondary school to train priests) was opened in Tirgoviste in the mid-1960s for training devoted to the particular characteristics of former Greek Catholic parishes. Although the school was supposed to provide clergy to the poorer rural parishes of Transylvania, graduates were used less in former Greek Catholic parishes. Instead, the Church hierarcy preferred that university-educated priests lead these parishes. These educated priests came from the Sibiu Theological Institute in Transylvania, which stressed subjects like church history, canon law, homiletics, and liturgics—issues that were particularly difficult after the unification with the Greek Catholic Church.

33 Ioan Tutecean, interview by Anca Şincan, Mureşeni, Mureş, May 14, 2006.

34 Episcopia Ortodoxă Română Alba Iulia, *Dare de seamă. Secţia Economică* (Annual report. Economic Service); File no. 4786, December 5, 1976, Arhivele Arhiepiscopiei Ortodoxe Române, Alba Iulia.

35 Most of the country had electricity in the household for merely two hours a day.

36 Ioan Tutecean, interview by Anca Şincan, Mureşeni, Mureş, May 14, 2006.

37 Ibid.

38 Maria Tutecean, interview by Anca Şincan, Mureşeni, Mureş, May 14, 2006.

39 The use of "Spirit" versus "Duh" and "Îndură-Te Spre Noi" versus "Miluieşte-ne" are considered the two most obvious differences in Greek Catholic and Orthodox religious services. This is obviously a gross overstatement.

40 Ioan Tutecean, interview by Anca Şincan, Mureşeni, Mureş, May 14, 2006.