

REFLECTION OF THE DEATH OF METROPOLITAN VLADIMIR DE REPTA IN THE CONTEMPORARY PRESS

Arnold-Nicholas-Louis PESCARU

pescarunicolae1@gmail.com

Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

Abstract: *The study presents an analysis of the evocation of the life and activity of Vladimir de Repta, upon his death. The most significant articles in the press published in Cernăuți, Iași and Bucharest, in April-May 1926, are identified. The press from April-May 1926, published in Bucharest, Iași and Cernăuți, gives the death of Vladimir de Repta the dimension of a major event, of national importance, which is also proven by the national funerals with which he was buried. It is the sensitive moment of the evocation of the life of Vladimir de Repta, of his ascension to the metropolitan throne. Historians, professors, politicians, theologians, journalists problematize the way in which Metropolitan Vladimir administered the problems of the Orthodox Church in Bukovina and its relations with the Habsburg Monarchy. They admire or critically evaluate the solutions, reactions and responses that the Metropolitan gave to the repeated attempts of the Ruthenian Orthodox to take over the leadership of the Orthodox Church in Bukovina, between 1902-1914. They talk less, but they mention the Metropolitan's ties with the Jewish community in Chernivtsi, which he directly protected during the war. Most authors highlight the fact that Metropolitan Vladimir managed to smooth out the conflicts and pacify, in religious and internet terms, the world of Chernivtsi and the Bukovina space at the beginning of the 20th century, affirming an exemplary religious, but also socio-political attitude.*

Keywords: *Bukovina, Metropolitan Vladimir de Repta, Chernivtsi/Cernăuți.*

Introduction

Metropolitan Vladimir de Repta was born on December 25, 1841, into a Romanian family in historical Bukovina, under Austrian administration from 1775, as part of the Austrian Empire and then of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, until 1918. He dedicated his youth to study and then to work as a professor of theology and researcher at the University of Chernivtsi. His solitary life, spent mostly between the library and the chair, although involved in many cultural and social activities, changed in 1885, when he made an apparently surprising decision, but in deep agreement with his inner man: entering monasticism. This

decision would propel him from the position of highly respected intellectual to the ecclesiastical and political elite of Bukovina, becoming one of its most important and influential leaders at the beginning of the 20th century. Ordained a monk at the age of 44, he became, in 1898, after 13 years, Bishop of Rădăuți. And in 1902 Emperor Franz-Josef named him Archbishop of Cernăuți and Metropolitan of Bukovina and Dalmatia.

The dignity of metropolitan brought him high political positions in the Austrian state and then in the Romanian one: deputy in the Diet of Austrian Bukovina and in the Imperial Chamber in Vienna, senator in the first Romanian parliament after the Great Union (1919-1920). The death of Vladimir de Repta, at the age of 85, on April 24, 1926, in Cernăuți, occurred shortly after he retired in 1924 from the position of Metropolitan of the Orthodox Church of Bukovina, which he led even after the Union of Bukovina with the Kingdom of Romania, on November 28, 1918. Vladimir de Repta's resignation gave rise to much emotion, rekindled in the Romanian press by his death itself.

Some voices in the political sphere, but also in the cultural press of the time, claimed that Metropolitan Vladimir had been forced to resign and that this unwanted departure had hastened his end. It was stated in the press of the time that Metropolitan Vladimir disturbed the political circles in Bucharest, who did not accept the autonomy of Bukovina, its special status within the Kingdom of Romania, which de Repta defended without concessions, as a representative of the Bukovinians. Officially, however, the reason for the resignation was the poor health of the metropolitan and his advanced age.

The press from April – May 1926, published in Bucharest, Iași and Cernăuți, gave the death of Vladimir de Repta the dimension of a major event, of national importance, which was also proven by the national funerals with which he was buried. It is the sensitive moment of evocation of the life of Vladimir de Repta, of his ascension to the metropolitan throne. Historians, professors, politicians, theologians, journalists question the way in which Metropolitan Vladimir managed the problems of the Orthodox Church in Bukovina and its relations with the Habsburg Monarchy. They admire or critically evaluate the solutions, reactions and answers that the Metropolitan gave to the repeated attempts of the Ruthenian Orthodox to take over the leadership of the Orthodox Church in Bukovina, between 1902-1914. I speak less, but I recall the Metropolitan's ties with the Jewish community of Chernivtsi, which he directly protected during the war. Most authors highlight the fact that Metropolitan Vladimir managed to smooth out the conflicts and pacify, in religious and internet terms, the world of Chernivtsi and the Bukovina space at the beginning of the 20th century, affirming an exemplary religious, but also socio-political attitude.

Presentation

The Romanian press of 1926 projected the biography of Vladimir de Repta from a heroic perspective. This assumption of Metropolitan Vladimir as a national hero is remarkable, both by those who supported and followed him during his life, and by the Romanian radical circles that often viewed him critically. The dissatisfaction with Vladimir de Repta, expressed more or less veiledly or more forcefully in the press dedicated to his death, was caused either by the Metropolitan's Christian concern for the Orthodox Ukrainians or for the Bukovina Jews (between 1902-1918), or by the firmness with which he supported in the Kingdom of Romania, between 1919-1924, the interests of all Bukovinians, their need for autonomy and especially their right to administer the assets of the Orthodox Church of Bukovina, held in the Church Fund. In a current reading, however, these contemporary

dissatisfactions of the Metropolitan further heroize him, because, obviously, they legitimize, through the voice of his critics and opponents, his perfect morality, his love for Bukovina, his real love for his neighbor – beyond ethnicity or religious confession, but also his extraordinary political vision, which relied on social integration, on dialogue and negotiation, not on exclusion and conflict. Therefore, Romanian society, through its political leaders and opinion leaders, both in Bucharest, Iași, and in Cernăuți, unanimously appreciates in Metropolitan Vladimir his high moral character, his sincere openness towards all ethnic and confessional communities in Bukovina, associated with a rare determination in defending the Orthodox Church, the rights of Romanians in Bukovina, but also the religious and social freedom of other ethnic groups in Bukovina.

However, as was absolutely predictable, there are different nuances in the Romanian press of 1926 in the appreciation of the activity of Metropolitan Vladimir, depending mainly on the political orientation of the author and the ideology of the newspaper where articles about de Repta's death appear. One of the most interesting articles belongs to Romulus Căndeă – historian, professor and theologian, collaborator of the liberal newspaper *Glasul Bucovinei* [*The Voice of Bucovina*], which appeared in Chernivtsi since 1918 (subtitled *Propaganda organ of the union of Romanians everywhere*). It is worth noting that Romulus Căndeă was rector of the University of Chernivtsi in 1926. On April 27, 1926, he published a eulogistic text dedicated to the Metropolitan, where, however, he directly dissociates himself from Vladimir de Repta's capacity to serve all religious confessions and all ethnic groups in Bukovina.

Romulus Căndeă first summarizes a characterization that has become almost legendary, as a dominant image in the collective memory of Vladimir de Repta: “a gentle, gentle man, of a meditative nature, meticulous in his scientific research”. All those who wrote about Metropolitan Vladimir, upon his death in 1926, reveal to the reader his kindness and gentleness, which he maintained even in the most dramatic moments of his life. Then, Căndeă makes a laudatory reference to his career as a university professor, which began in 1873, at the age of 32, with a course on the New Testament, at the Theological Institute of Cernăuți, later transformed into the Faculty of Theology, which de Repta would lead four times as dean, becoming in 1883 also rector of the Imperial and Royal Franz-Josef University:

“For more than two decades, Vladimir de Repta preached Christian truths from the height of his university chair, substantiated them psychologically, verified them in relation to the comparative study of religions, and was a good advisor and living example to his students...”

Romulus Căndeă helps us to become aware today of the erudition of theologian Vladimir de Repta, his talent for valorizing Christian teaching in its very encounter with modern thought. The historian Căndeă draws our attention especially to the fact that Professor Vladimir de Repta is one of the first European researchers to make the junction between psychology and religion and who participated in the birth of the comparative study of religions. Romulus Căndeă's tone changes, however, in the second part of the article, where he evaluates Vladimir de Repta as a metropolitan. He begins by emphasizing that de Repta supported religious education, expanded charitable activities aimed at helping the poor, charitable works, caring for guardians, organizing and paying the clergy, and repairing churches. But then he directly says that, in his opinion, in the unique historical

circumstances in which Bukovina was caught before and during the First World War, the Bukovinians would have needed a radical leader, not the gentleness and forgiving kindness, the deeply Christian diplomacy of Metropolitan Vladimir:

“The consciousness of duty, the sincerity of faith, the meticulousness of work and above all the gentleness of the soul were the inseparable weapons of the Metropolitan. But, in troubled and turbulent times, when believers ethnically distinct from our ancestors, supported with refined diplomacy by all the governments in Vienna, launched stormy assaults against our ancestral church, our much-tried metropolis would have needed an archpastor who would turn the crutch into the fearsome sword of justice and flash it over the heads of the rebels. Metropolitan Repta did not have this combative nature. He lacked the stormy momentum of Athanasius the Great; he had only the naive gentleness of Gregory of Nyssa.”

The critical perspective of the liberal nationalist Romulus Cârdea on the Metropolitan is generated by the fact that he refused to strike at the Orthodox Ukrainians eager to take over the hierarchical power in the Orthodox Church of Bukovina, during the movements and political confrontations between the Romanian national movement in Bukovina and the Ukrainian ultranationalists, in the years before the war (1902-1914).

But, as Romulus Cârdea himself acknowledges, Metropolitan Vladimir defended all the rights of Romanians in the Orthodox Church of Bukovina and did not give in to the political pressures exerted by the Ukrainian Orthodox, often through the Austrian government. At the same time, however, he remained equidistant and conciliatory with all the Bukovinian Orthodox. He assumed with great wisdom the role of archpastor of all Bukovinian Orthodox Christians, regardless of ethnicity, and rejected any act of revenge against the Ukrainian nationalists, always seeking peace, mediation, understanding:

“...on the occasion of the great meetings of protest and of claiming the rights of a holy past, from 1902, 1904, 1905, 1906 and 1912 Metropolitan Vladimir was the shepherd who grieved that the flock was being torn apart.” The rector of the University of Chernivtsi, Romulus Cârdea, without hesitation recognizes Metropolitan Vladimir's exceptional merits, although he remains in critical wonder at the wisdom and diplomacy of Vladimir de Repta: “Faithful to our national past, [Vladimir de Repta] sacredly preserved [...] in quiet remembrance, the historical character of our church, without looking at the gleam of the swords that were directed towards us.”

At the end of the article, Romulus Cârdea abruptly combines sincere admiration for the heroic model that Metropolitan Vladimir embodied, with the inability to understand and accept the Metropolitan's equidistance, but especially the power to forgive his enemies:

“Good and forgiving, like a true Christian priest, he cried in the hours of pain and forgave everyone, at a time when the Romanian faithful were struggling to snatch victory...”

If Romulus Cârdea omits the fact that the politician Iancu Flondor allied himself in November 1918 precisely with Metropolitan Vladimir, in order to fulfill the dream of the Bukovinian Romanians – the union with the Kingdom of Romania –, most historians and journalists who write articles on his death do not forget the concrete and absolutely memorable merit that Vladimir de Repta has in achieving the union. Due to the respect and

moral credibility that Vladimir de Repta had won in front of the Bukovinian Jews, Germans, Poles, but also Ukrainians, he was the only Bukovinian leader who was then able to obtain the rapid support of the German community and the Jewish community, of the Poles, so that the Romanians would have the majority in the Bukovina Diet necessary to adopt the effective act of unification of Bukovina with the country, on November 28, 1918.

Therefore, his wisdom and moral consistency, his openness and the political risks to which he was constantly exposed, as we have seen, his concern for all Bukovinians, not just Romanians, had a profound historical importance in November 1918. If Iancu Flondor was the craftsman of the union, Metropolitan Vladimir was the guarantor of the union, the conscience on which the representatives of the Bukovinian Germans, Jews and Poles relied and to which they gave their trust when they agreed to the union of Bukovina with the Kingdom of Romania. This is how the fate of Bukovina was decided at the end of the First World War. Therefore, Romulus Cândea's rejection of Metropolitan Vladimir's power to forgive and dialogue with the Ukrainian nationalist party within the Orthodox Church of Bukovina has the opposite effect than the one the author intended, in the consciousness of the current reader, transforming from a critical echo into a revelation of the profound moral responsibility of the Metropolitan and his Christian thinking.

In contrast, on the same day, April 27, 1926, the conservative daily newspaper *Opinia*/ [*Opinion*] from Iași emphasized Vladimir de Repta's patriotism:

“On Saturday, Metropolitan Vladimir de Repta passed away in Cernăuți. Bukovina loses one of its most significant leaders, and the country loses another symbol of moral strength and enlightened patriotism [...] As pastor of the Church of Bukovina, Vladimir de Repta always boldly defended the rights of Romanians.”

The text in the *Opinion* then shifts attention to the relations between Metropolitan Vladimir de Repta and the Austrian administration, before and during the war:

“The Austrian government, in order to hinder Romanian national development within the Orthodox Church, sought to introduce the Ruthenians and give them leadership. Metropolitan de Repta, however, resisted, also attracting the hatred of the Austrians who dismissed him from office a few weeks before the collapse of the monarchy.”

The conservative newspaper from Iași finally shows that Iancu Flondor, as a minister, reinstated Vladimir de Repta in 1918, the Metropolitan of Bukovina also becoming the first president of the Romanian Parliament after the First World War, as the oldest in age.

All the qualities that make Vladimir de Repta a moral and religious model were tested during the First World War, when Bukovina, led by Chernivtsi, became a space of direct confrontation between the Tsarist Russian army and the Austrian imperial army. Therefore, most of the articles from 1926 refer to the exceptional behavior of Metropolitan Vladimir during the war, in all the dramatic periods that Chernivtsi, together with all of Bukovina, went through: the Russian occupation; the Austrian military administration; the moment of the Union with the Kingdom of Romania at the end of the war, in November 1918.

In the newspaper *Îndreptarea*/ [*Straightening*], for example, under the title *The disappearance of a great character*, an article signed by Dr. Mihai Montanu was published on May 1, 1926, detailing Metropolitan Vladimir's struggle with the Austrian government, before and during the war. The author of the article begins by calling Vladimir de Repta “a

great prelate, who led the destinies of the Bukovina church with rare prestige for over two decades”, in order to present him as a model of social behavior for all Bukovinians:

“He knew no distinctions between confessions, considering all the inhabitants of the Bukovina territory as sons of one and the same nation. [...] This quality attracted unanimous sympathy for him and all Bukovinians had only words of praise and admiration for him.”

Unlike Romulus Căndeă, the author of this article sees in Vladimir de Repta the “necessary person” that the Romanian church needed in the “fierce struggle with the Austrian government”, which wanted to “get hold of the riches of the Church Fund”, often using the Orthodox Ruthenians (Ukrainians):

“Aware of his mission entrusted to him by the Romanian nation, he did not hesitate for a moment, putting the interests of the nation above political intrigues.”

The text in the newspaper *Îndreptarea* corrects Romulus Căndeă’s subjective interpretations of the way in which Metropolitan Vladimir managed the confrontations with the Austrian government, between 1902-1914. First of all, the author of the article provides concrete data. Probably the most difficult struggle of Metropolitan Vladimir with the Austrian administration was related to the appointment of the vacant position of vicar bishop of the metropolitanate. The Austrian government forced the appointment of a Ruthenian (Ukrainian) vicar, in order to control the Church Fund through him. But Vladimir de Repta categorically opposed it, appointing a Romanian vicar. The quick death of the Romanian vicar, however, leads to another outcome. Against the will and opposition of Metropolitan Repta, a Ruthenian was appointed to the vacant position, everyone knowing that the administrator of the metropolitanate was also the predestined successor of the incumbent metropolitan. The outbreak of war changed the course of events orchestrated by the Austrian government:

“The occupation of Bukovina by the Russian armies in August 1914 found Metropolitan Vladimir at his post [while the Austrian administration withdrew], for he did not understand how to separate himself from his faithful in such difficult times. He tried his best to alleviate the pains and wounds of the war by intervening wherever the need demanded. His charitable works brought much good to the entire population, which considered him its savior. But precisely in this attitude, which brilliantly characterizes the great qualities of this apostle of the nation, the enemies of national integrity found a reason to hurl filthy slanders at his so pure and innocent person, bringing monstrous accusations of having made a pact with the enemy.”

During the Russian occupation of Chernivtsi, when the Austrian army retreated, Metropolitan Vladimir negotiated directly with Russian officers, in order to protect the entire population, not just the Orthodox Romanians. There is no evidence that he swore an oath of allegiance to Tsar Nicholas II, but, at the ultimatum of the Russian military commanders, in order to defend Chernivtsi from reprisals, he signed the order for Tsar Nicholas to be appointed to Orthodox religious services. This decision led to his dismissal from the position of metropolitan, imposed by the Austrian government shortly after the Austrian army recaptured Chernivtsi in 1918. In an article published in *Adevărul* [*The Truth*] on April 22, 1915, in the midst of the war, Emilian Slușanschi showed the humiliations to

which Metropolitan Vladimir was subjected by the Austrian government, although he had defended the population of Chernivtsi with great courage, regardless of ethnicity and religious confession, against the Russian military administration. The Metropolitan, very ill, was then forced to leave Chernivtsi:

“The injustices committed by the Austrian rule against this gentle man, too gentle for the executioners of that rule, revolted the souls of all...”

However, the dismissal of Metropolitan Vladimir displeased the vast majority of Bukovinians. The author of the text in *Îndreptarea*, Mihai Montanu, explains:

“...the Austrian government dismissed [Vladimir de Repta] in the disapproval of public opinion, which appreciated the immense services that Metropolitan Repta had brought to the country.”

After the final withdrawal of the Austrian army, Vladimir de Repta was reinstated as metropolitan. The historic moment of the Union of Bukovina with the Kingdom of Romania followed, in which, as we have shown, Vladimir de Repta played a decisive role:

“The Metropolitan was given to see the national unity, for which he had been a fervent fighter his entire life, being realized on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.”

These few sequences from the press dedicated to the death of Metropolitan Vladimir de Repta are relevant to the content of all the texts published in 1926. The other articles, to which I did not refer directly, but rather summarily, discuss the biography of Vladimir de Repta from similar perspectives.

Conclusions

Vladimir de Repta is included in the family of those very rare leaders in history, whom their descendants have nothing to reproach, as demonstrated by all the press dedicated to his death, even when they would like to critically analyze his biography. Being subject today to our judgment, even in the harshest interpretation of his decisions, Metropolitan Vladimir clearly reveals his unbroken Christian humanity, religious discernment, political wisdom, kindness and gentleness, and sacrificial nature.

Therefore, I would like to show that Vladimir de Repta, before deciding to enter monasticism, built his personality and character through his passion for knowledge and study, then through tireless work with students. He thus prepared himself for his future mission. No one expected, led by Emperor Franz Josef, who appointed him to the position of metropolitan, that a Romanian intellectual with a very good knowledge of German culture, educated in Vienna, Bonn, Munich, Zurich, doctor of philosophy, Orthodox monk, would prove to be the touchstone of the Austrian government in Bukovina, which could not be overcome, despite his proverbial gentleness.

In his speech in German, dated October 4, 1883, when he was 42 years old (two years before becoming a monk), delivered at the Royal Franz-Josef University in Cernăuți on the occasion of his appointment as rector, Vladimir de Repta expresses a personal theological and philosophical vision, through which he proves both a profound understanding of modernity and its social content, and especially the assumption of

Christianity as truth and knowledge, where modern man should remain indifferent to the evolution of what Vladimir de Repta calls “cultural forms”:

“...the numerous and great inventions have produced in a short time unsuspected changes in the life of human society and have set, so to speak, everything in motion, and on the other hand there is the prejudice that theology tends to limit the progressive development of humanity, that religious customs and traditions are nothing more than chains imposed on humanity to slow down its natural development [...] Not that I imagine that I can change the course of the world, eliminate such prejudices or solve the problem definitively.”

The speech reveals the clarity of thought of the future metropolitan, the strength of his convictions, but also the meticulous critical examination of his contemporary culture. These moral and intellectual qualities will provide the energy that Metropolitan Vladimir will need to avoid falling into the political and military traps of World War I, to remain steadfast in his position, from which he made no compromises, while at the same time defending all Bukovina, all Chernivtsi, regardless of their religion or ethnicity. In a deliberately secular language, in accordance with the culture of the students he addresses, Vladimir de Repta makes his confession of faith:

“...you will discover that man’s religious activity contributes significantly to his spiritual development; you will see in man’s religious searches only the search for truth by the spirit in continuous development; and in the errors committed — the milestones on the path of this search. You will be convinced that the Christian religion is not the enemy of progress, but, in the highest sense of the word, the religion of progress, that it has contributed enormously to the level of culture reached by the European peoples and that it works ceaselessly for the development of culture.”

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