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NARGIZA ARJEVANIDZE  
VOLODYMYR ARTIUKH  
MARIANA BODNARUK  
KATERYNA BURKUSH  
MUSTAFA YAKUP DIKTAŞ  
ANDREI EMILCIUC  
OKSANA ERMOLAEVA  
DUMITRU LISNIC  
NIKA LOLADZE

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Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

This collection contains the papers of the Fellows from the *Pontica Magna* and the *Gerda Henkel* Fellowship Programs. Both are aimed at researchers from Eastern Europe: the first focuses primarily on the Black Sea region, the second on the countries of the former Soviet Union.

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New Europe College

Str. Plantelor 21

023971 Bucharest

Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro

Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



## MUSTAFA YAKUP DİKTAŞ

Born in 1985, in Turkey

Ph.D., Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales, Paris (2018)

Thesis: *St. George: A Shared Saint in the Mediterranean? Historical and Anthropological Approach to Pilgrimage (Turkey and Lebanon)*

*Pontica Magna* Program Fellow, New Europe College, Bucharest (2020-2021)

Postdoctoral researcher, Hebrew University of Jerusalem (2019–2020)

Attended academic conferences and workshops in Lebanon, Israel, Germany, France, Tunisia, Greece, Bosnia

Articles published and conferences given on pilgrimages, saints and shared sacred shrines in the Middle East

Book:

*Saint George: A Shared Saint in the Mediterranean?*, Éditions universitaires européennes (2018)



# LINE OF MIRACLE OR CONTAMINATION? SFÂNTA PARASCHEVA AS A CONTESTED PILGRIMAGE AMID COVID-19 PANDEMIC 2020

## Abstract

Examining the largest pilgrimage in contemporary Romania, this article expands our knowledge of Christian pilgrimage in post-communist Eastern Europe. Ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in 2020 produces a thick description and analysis of the pilgrimage to Sfânta (Saint) Parascheva, Romania's most important female saint in the Orthodox tradition, held annually in the country's second city, Iași. The unexpected COVID-19 outbreak of 2020 produced a major shift in the pilgrimage. The article also shows how far-right groups, which, through public protest, sought to win mind-space and political legitimacy, exploited COVID-19 public health regulations imposed on the pilgrims. While the basic, well-regulated elements of the pilgrimage remained the same, these unexpected social actors introduced a new chaotic intensity with their contradictory narratives of protest. At Sfânta Parascheva in 2020, religious, nationalist and secular standpoints could be observed, turning the pilgrimage into a polysemic site of competing discourses.

**Keywords:** pilgrimage, Saint Parascheva, COVID-19, Iași, Romania.

## Introduction

There is a wealth of academic research on the pilgrimage traditions of Christian Europe, covering a range of substantive areas and adopting varying disciplinary approaches. Much work has been done of course on the history of pilgrimages, on hagiography and theology and the development of routes to sites of veneration as well as on changes in the pilgrimages themselves. At another level, there is a growing body of socio-anthropological work on pilgrimages and their place in broader belief systems, urban sites and landscape. However, despite the abundance

of research on pilgrimage in the Christian world, there are few studies examining pilgrimage in Eastern Europe – at least in the English-language literature. As a researcher interested in the phenomenon of pilgrimage globally, I was struck by this lacuna, particularly as I was aware both that pilgrimage had undergone a revival in Romania since the 1990s, and that there was a lack of anthropological research on this shift in the wider Balkan region. This was the starting point for my research on the annual autumn pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva in north-east Romania, a project which took an unexpected new direction under the unusual conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. It is clear now that the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage, the largest in Romania, is like many other major pilgrimages inextricably caught in a nexus of new sanitary measures and shifts in political and social discourses and material realities. It is these changes which I seek to recount and analyze in the present paper. As the pandemic develops (and ultimately fades), practices and discourses will certainly continue to shift.

In terms of religious revival, Romania would seem to be exceptional in Eastern Europe (Stahl, 2013). In the first decade of the post-Communist transition, the country of which 85% of the population are in one way or another part of the Orthodox faith saw a significant revival of its religious traditions. After the fall of the Communist regime, restrictions imposed on religious practice were lifted, new religious movements arose and new monasteries were built and old ones restored. Historic pilgrimages regained the place they had once occupied in Romanian life. In recent years, the Patriarchate of the Romanian Orthodox Church has developed pilgrimage centers, improving logistics and general facilities in a country where the religious-minded had been used to organizing things in their own way. Going on pilgrimages has become an important part of religious practice again. Furthermore, private commercial travel agencies are constantly increasing the number of religious destinations on offer. In Bucharest, the Romanian Patriarchate established its own pilgrimage agency, Basilica Travel, in 2007 (Bogan et al, 2019; Ibanescu et al, 2018; Mădălina-Cristiana Giușcă et al, 2018).

It would seem then that Romania with its pilgrimage revival is a special case in the European Union (Bănică, 2014; Stahl, 2013). While in other East European nations the process of secularization gained increased momentum after the fall of Communism, in Romania, “as a response to the increasing insecurity of a changing society”, the predominantly orthodox population turned towards the “supernatural for help and support” (Stahl,

2013). At another level, the relationship between State and Church became one of strong inter-dependence: the State helps and supports the Church in its projects, and in exchange, the clergy support the State's policies. For the researcher interested in religious beliefs and practices, this leads to reflection as to how Church practices and discourse as a whole may be taken to reflect society with its complex mechanisms and dynamics, with its fears and responses to changes, which have produced feelings of insecurity among the population. Some researchers have developed the concept of "coping religion" (Stringer, 2011), practiced in countries where people consider organised religion, faith and related practices as a means of dealing with the difficulties of everyday life. Pilgrimage therefore makes a good object of study in order to try to observe something of the mechanisms at work and the issues at stake in a time of social change.

### ***Method and data collection***

Based on ethnographic and archival work, this article started with a view to examining pilgrimage to one of Romania's most important female saints, Sfânta Parascheva, the object of one of the biggest pilgrimages in the country and probably in Eastern Europe. For this specific context of devotion, I aimed to develop an understanding of the interface between pilgrims and the various authorities along with places and practices involved, by using interpretative frames including imagined community, narrative, performance and ritual. Based on the premise that pilgrimage is a cultural construct which emerges from a specific social world, this piece also has a strong diachronic dimension. Not only does it capture the nature of the cult of Sfânta Parascheva as it stood in late 2020, but through interviews and analysis of audio-visual, press and social-media coverage, it also examines how the pilgrimage has shifted in focus and scale in recent years. Chance would have it that the last phase of my research coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak, an event which added a completely unexpected dimension to the project and, in the end, enriched my work considerably. This factor, plus the rarity of academic work on pilgrimage in Romania, means that I hope to make an interesting contribution to the culturally charged topic of travel motivated by faith – in a time of national and global crisis.

The article is divided into two main parts. First, I provide an overview of the pre- COVID-19 pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva, performed every year on the 14<sup>th</sup> October in Iași, a town located close to Romania's border

with Moldova. Secondly, thanks to fieldwork, I explore the pilgrimage as it took place in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting and analyzing points of tension and even open conflict against the backdrop of the multiple discourses and interests present.

Since 2017, I have come to know Iași and Sfânta Parascheva well. I participated in the pilgrimage for four consecutive years (2017, 2018, 2019, 2020), trying to establish a 'cultural intimacy'<sup>1</sup> with other pilgrims, all the better to observe and render both their experience and mine. Through this immersive approach, I hoped to be able to capture the multiple aspects of a phenomenon, which had been little studied, at least with an anthropological eye. The challenge was to 'translate' the pilgrimage into research, acknowledging and dealing with the numerous difficulties which any researcher of my type would have. I now have a certain experience of pilgrimage research, having worked on the annual shared pilgrimages to the shrines of Saint George (Aya Yorgi) on Büyükada (Istanbul) and Mar Jirjis at Sarba (Jouineh, Lebanon) for my doctorate and subsequently on the equally mixed pilgrimage to Saint George in Lod/Lydd (Israel/Palestine).

At Iași in 2020, I talked to pilgrims, clergy, protesters, local people and souvenir sellers. Such conversations were possible thanks to my skills in Romanian. I recorded their answers to my questions whenever possible. Essentially, my approach was to put open-ended questions to eventual informants, probing wherever necessary (and if possible) to obtain data which often emerged to be useful for my research. Informal conversational interviews were typical of my 'ongoing' participant observation fieldwork. Over the years, I have also worked hard to capture the feast day of Sfânta Parascheva through photography and filming. In addition, alongside television and print-media reports, social websites have provided valuable data; I have searched for information on websites, before, during and after the feast days to gain a sense of how the phenomenon was covered. The material accumulated enabled me to develop an overview of the discourse circulated via different media. However, during the 2020 pilgrimage, COVID-19 had a profound impact on ethnographic fieldwork as a whole, obliging researchers to be less ambitious regarding their data collection. Long-planned visits to the field and face-to-face interviews suddenly became uncertain. As was the case for many other researchers, with the use of masks and face-shields, hand sanitizer and tissues, fieldwork became possible, if a little stressful. With appropriate physical distancing,



I managed to attend the main events of the pilgrimage and conduct a good number of interviews.

## **1. The Pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva: Background and Key Elements**

The annual pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva is one of the largest in Romania and one of the most important in Eastern Europe. Structured by the Romanian Orthodox Church (and certainly not chaotic before the pandemic), this event involves a broad range of practices. Every 14<sup>th</sup> October, thousands of Orthodox Romanians participate, coming from villages and towns from all parts of the country and even from the Romanian diaspora. Pilgrims travel to Iași using different means of transport, both individual and collective. Apart from the official tour operators, there are numerous independent religious-tourist guides organizing transport by specially hired minibuses. This type of pilgrimage is called *pelerinaj cu autocar* ('coach pilgrimage') in tourist jargon and the Romanian mass media (Banica, 2016). In 2019, approximately one hundred and fifty coaches were estimated to have brought pilgrims to Iași.<sup>2</sup> Some municipalities provide free transport for their residents.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the CFR Călători, the Romanian national railway company ensures the rail transport between the main cities of the country and Iași, adding supplementary wagons during the pilgrimage.<sup>4</sup> Hotels and pensions are the most convenient accommodation (*cazare*) in the city for those with means, although the Iași Archdiocese also provides free but limited places to stay in the dormitories of parish churches. I also met quite a few pilgrims who were housed by relatives or friends resident in Iași. Less fortunate pilgrims with no accommodation spend their time on pilgrimage outside, in the vicinity of Sfânta Parascheva, waiting and participating in prayer. In general, they eat food brought from home and drink tea offered by the church, sleeping wrapped in blankets also brought from home (see figure 3). Thousands of other devotees of the saint just come to Iași for the feast day, standing in line for hours before they reach the relics and return home.

The whole pilgrimage lasts for three to four days. The schedule of events is generally published towards the end of September. A few days before the feast day, the relics of Sfânta Parascheva are brought out and displayed in front of the Cathedral under a special baldachin, beautifully decorated

with flowers (see figure 14). For three days and nights, the pilgrims line up to reach the relics and show their devotion before them. On the evening of 14<sup>th</sup> October, the feast ends with an impressive procession or *alay* called *Calea Sfinților* or *Saints' Way*. In this procession, the relics of Sfânta Parascheva are taken out and carried on the shoulders of over a hundred priests and soldiers. Several thousand believers follow the procession with candles in their hands, walking for an hour and a half through the streets of Iași before the relics are returned to their place under the canopy (see figures 4 and 5).

### **1.1. The Saint herself: Sfânta Parascheva of Romania and the cult of her relics (Moaștele)**

The name Paraskevi, from the Greek Παρασκευή, literally '(day of) preparation' (Friday, for the sabbath), is used officially for three women saints recognized by the Orthodox Church, as they were all born on a Friday, the day of Christ's passion and hence one of the holiest days in Christianity. The earliest is the great martyr Saint Paraskevi of Rome (feast day 26<sup>th</sup> July), who was put to the sword during the reign of the Emperor Antoninus (second century C.E.). The second was Paraskevi of Ikonium (28<sup>th</sup> October), anchorite and missionary, who was decapitated under Diocletian (third to fourth centuries C.E.). The third was Paraskevi of Epivates (14<sup>th</sup> October), who was born and died in Epivates (now Selimpaşa on the shores of the Sea of Marmara, west of Istanbul) in the eleventh century. This article examines the contemporary cult of this third Paraskevi, also known as Sfânta Parascheva by Romanians, Sveta Petka by speakers of Slavic languages in the Balkan region, and Shën e Premtja or Veneranda by Albanians (Elsie, 2000). Though she died young, Sfânta Parascheva's popularity is due to her life of travel as well as to the dynamic dissemination of her relics and the varied ways in which she is venerated (see figure 2). According to her hagiographies, Sfânta Parascheva was born into a wealthy, pious family from Epivates. She left her family to follow a path of asceticism, migrating eventually to Jerusalem. Sfânta Parascheva can definitely be considered a 'migrant saint' as both she and her relics travelled or have been moved continuously. She first escaped from Epivates to Constantinople on a pilgrimage. After spending time in Chalcedon and Heracleia Pontica, she went to Jerusalem, subsequently settling in the desert near Jordan to live an ascetic life. Eventually, she returned to her hometown where she died. Subsequently, her uncorrupted

body was discovered. Her relics were taken from Epivates to Tarnovo in modern Bulgaria, sometime between 1204 and 1230. When Tarnovo was invaded by Ottoman forces in July 1393, the relics were again moved, to Vidin, and then to Belgrade. There they stayed until 1521 when the Ottoman army took that city, too. From Belgrade, they were brought to Constantinople, where they remained until 1641 (Stefanova, 2017). In the mid-seventeenth century, the relics were taken to Iași from Constantinople by the Moldovan ruler Vasile Lupu and were placed in the Three Hierarchs' Church before being moved to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași in 1889 to be displayed in full sight for the believers that they might honour her and pray before her (Vasiliu, 2008).

After two centuries of local veneration, on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1950, the Holy Synod, the highest canonical authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church, took some unprecedented decisions. The cult of six saints,<sup>5</sup> including Sfânta Parascheva, was 'generalised' (expanded) to the entire Romanian church. Previously canonized by other Orthodox churches or patriarchates, these six saints had each been the object of great veneration in their specific region, as their relics had been in the country for several centuries (BOR, 1950 cited in Stahl, 2014). These were the first formal canonizations undertaken by Biserica Ortodoxă Română (BOR or Romanian Orthodox Church) in over four centuries and the first ever by the autonomous Romanian Orthodox Church. Given the difficult political circumstances, these actions showed that the church was resolved to continue to carry out its canonical duties under the atheist regime.

Romanian national saints are "saints whose cult arose on the territory of a national, autocephalous Church", either before or after it acquired its autonomy. The saints venerated by Romanians as their own had become Romanians by assimilation, so their ethnic origins are considered irrelevant and are certainly not the object of discussion. According to Orthodox tradition, canonization does not consist in the creation of a cult, but rather in the formal recognition of a cult that is already established. This is why the process is also called "canonization by popular devotion" (*canonizare prin evlavie populară*). This means that ecclesiastical officials only acknowledge figures already venerated by the people, recognizing them as saints and officializing their cult by solemn proclamation. Thus, pre-existing popular devotion is a crucial pre-condition with a view to canonization, and the spread of popular devotion is crucial for the 'generalization' of the cult. Consequently, both acts (canonization and generalization) actually certify the existence of faith. This canonization

also gave Sfânta Parascheva a territorial label. She began to be referred to as Sfânta Parascheva de la Iași (Saint Parascheva from Iași) (Stan, 1968).

The generalization of the cult of Saint Parascheva in 1950 and its proclamation in 1955 were highly significant events for the Church, which was under much pressure from the new Communist régime. According to some rumors, in the years 1950-1954 the Communist Party wanted to see the relics of Sfânta Parascheva buried in order to remove any physical focus of devotion for the believers who came to worship daily. However, the measure was never carried out.<sup>6</sup>

In the archives of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, there are chronologically classified files entitled “Feast of the Pious Parascheva”. These files deserve attention because they bring a better understanding of the atmosphere of church life during the Communist era, containing as they do data about the ceremonies and the feast days organized by the church. While there is no significant information for the years 1956-1964 regarding the feast of Sfânta Parascheva, the files for the period from 1965 to 1989 give detailed information about preparations, logistics and the duties of those involved in organizing the feast day. Despite certain restrictions, apart from the public processions the feast day celebrations always took place. Regardless of the tight State control, the Orthodox Church was not always a “victim” under the rule of the Romanian Communist Party. According to the testimony of the priests, during the Communist period even major figures in the Communist Party visited Sfânta Parascheva, seeking solace and requesting help with their unsurmountable health problems (Vicovan, 2011). After the December Revolution of 1989, the feast day of Sfânta Parascheva turned from being a celebration of local and regional importance into a national and even international event. Iași became even more of a pilgrimage centre. The procession of the Saint’s relics through the city’s streets, a forbidden ritual under the Communist régime, was revived. Another element, the practice of ‘inviting’ another important saint to the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva, was incorporated into the programme of celebrations. This invitation, referred to as *Sfinți Prieteni* (Saint Friends) consolidates the reputation of Sfânta Parascheva with the import and display of other famous sacred relics brought by major official representatives of foreign orthodox churches. This invented tradition first started in 1992, when a fragment of the wood of the Holy Cross was brought from the Xiropotamu Monastery in Greece. Further saints’ relics were brought to Iași for veneration alongside those of Sfânta Parascheva, including those of Saint Andrew (1996), Saint George (2000),

Saint Nactarios (2006), Saint Thecla (2017), Saint Ecaterina (2018) and Saint Spiridon (2019).

The current Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church Daniel has contributed significantly to the popularization and the development of the pilgrimage's reputation. In 1999, when he was the archbishop of Moldova and Bukovina, Daniel announced that Iași would be one of the five international pilgrimage cities of the year 2000 and one of the spiritual centers of the world included in the Pilgrimage 2000 project, along with Thessaloniki (Greece), Trondheim (Norway), Glastonbury (the UK) and Prague (Czech Republic).<sup>7</sup>

In his article "De ce o iubesc românii pe Sfânta Parascheva?"<sup>8</sup> ("Why do Romanians love Saint Parascheva?"), the Archimandrite Mihail Daniliuc gives us insights into the importance of Sfânta Parascheva in the religious and the historical geography of Romania. He points out the place of her in Romanian patriotism, explaining the nationalization (Romanization) process of their female saint. According to Daniliuc, throughout history, Sfânta Parascheva has protected the Romanians, comforting them in their sufferings and giving them hope of redemption. She inspired the clergy to introduce the Romanian language into the liturgy, through religious books, thereby strengthening national feeling. Along with the other female saints referred to as 'the housewives of God' (*casnice ale lui Dumnezeu*), she took the prayers of the Transylvanians to God to heal their deep and bleeding wounds, giving them the strength to endure countless crucifixions with everlasting hope in the Resurrection. Seeing the harsh occupation of Bessarabia and Bukovina, Sfânta Parascheva was said to have filled the people's souls with the courage to persevere with/in their desire to return to the motherland. Daniliuc also adds that Sfânta Parascheva experienced both the tears of joy of the Romanians who celebrated the Union of the Danubian Principalities on January 24, 1859, as well as the pain of the endless wounds caused by the War of Integration. From within the walls of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, she was to bless the great event of 1918<sup>9</sup> and heal the wounds left by the Second World War. During Romania's near fifty years of atheist totalitarianism, Sfânta Parascheva, "planted in the souls of the Romanians not only faith in redemption, but also in the long perseverance of enduring so many crucifixions. After so many significant historical moments spent with the Romanian people, Saint Parascheva became Romanian" (as noted earlier, she was of Greek origin).

That is why Romanians love her so much, not only Moldovans, but also Muntenians, Transylvanians, Banatians or Oltenians. That is why, every year, for over three centuries, they have come together around the shrine with her holy relics, as in a choir of faith, love and unity. The pilgrimage from Iași is not only for everyone's personal needs, but it also represents the expression of national unity.

In the Orthodox tradition, relics are defined as “the imperishable bodies of God’s saints, the remains of their bodies or their bones, through which God has shown and continues to show His almightiness” (Mircea 1986, 847). Relics (*moaște*) are held to accomplish miracles, and thus to help people in need. They are a proof of God’s continuous work through his saints. Through relics, the saints continue to help those in need long after their death, continuing the work of their lifetimes. In fact, relics even multiply good works, as they are moveable. Some authors write of a process of “sacred contagion”,<sup>10</sup> the belief that spiritual properties within an object, place, or person may be passed to another object, place, or person, usually by direct contact or physical proximity (Durkheim, 2001). Touching establishes physical contact, which is present in many ritual gestures. People want to connect with the sacred and the touch is considered a sign of meeting (Barna, 2007). In Romania, sick people have said that they feel a sudden heat in the afflicted part of the body while being in physical contact with a saint’s relics (Stahl, 2013). People also bring objects to touch the saint’s body. It is believed that such objects become imbued with the aura of the saint and that hence ill people will be cured touching them. In this way, people experience separation from the real world, a sensation that is heightened even more during the actual pilgrimage. It is in this separation between the real and the sacred world, in this ‘liminality’, a dangerous place that the human being, cut off very briefly from the profane, may experience purity, the devotion given through the contact with the sacred (Turner and Turner, 1978; Cailliois, 1959). Touching the saint’s relics has become a usual practice, an essential part of the pilgrimage to “our saint”, a cult which has flourished so impressively since the fall of communism in Romania (see figures 10, 11 and 12).

The bones of Sfânta Parascheva are dressed in specially designed vestments that are changed to honor and beautify the saint five times a year, as follows: 1. An evening before the pilgrimage in October; 2. After the pilgrimage when the clothes are changed primarily because they get dirty; 3. At Christmas the Saint receives a new garment; 4. at the beginning

of Lent (vestments of a darker shade, to emphasize the meaning of Lent), and finally 5. On the eve of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ the garment is replaced again with a white one (which remains in place until after Pentecost). After the saint has been clothed in the new garments, she is placed in a coffin for veneration by the faithful after a long-established ceremony, attended by only a few of the minister priests of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, has been performed. During this special evening ritual, the church is closed to outsiders. It takes place in the evening, after the end of the worship in the Cathedral, generally after 10 p.m. To return to the clothes, made of a special material or embroidered velvet, they are cut in the shape of a cross, 2.50 metres long and one metre wide, the length of the arms being 1.50 metres. On the saint's head a beautiful crown is placed, actually covering the neck and face. This holds the garment in place (Vicovan, 2011 p. 240-248).

### **1.2. The line of waiting (Rând)**

Pilgrims to Sfânta Parascheva generally queue for hours before they reach the relics. Such queues may be several kilometres in length. The line in which people stand while waiting to 'encounter' the saint can be said to be the defining feature of the contemporary pilgrimage. According to Bănică (2014), the queue is a way in which profane time is annihilated and replaced, not with sacred time, but with 'resource' time, required for the construction of pilgrim identity. It is impressive how, regardless of the weather conditions, whether rain, wind or cold, the pilgrims find the strength to bear so many hours of waiting before they are able to touch the relics. What gives people such strength? Is it belief in miracles, is it their desire to honour the saint or just the need to be a part of such a massive and silent group of believers? Waiting in line (*rând*) in order to receive graces from the relics of Sfânta Parascheva can be considered a religious-public performance, a clear example of how religious practices can be manifested in the public sphere and urban environments. Such a kilometres-long line also reflects a very clear desire to render faith (*credință*) visible in public. During the pilgrimage, certain urban spaces in Iași, secular the rest of the year, become multi-layered spaces for religious acts through their temporary but 'legitimated' appropriation. Together with the gendarmes, the Municipality of Iași adapts streets in the city to accommodate the long queues of pilgrims. Hundreds of iron barriers are placed temporarily along the edges of the pavements by the gendarmerie to

define a route for pilgrims heading for the reliquary-canopy in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral (see figures 6 to 9). This “sacred waiting” is by no means static. It is a ritual parade, a strong performance of community. It is a means to display pilgrims’ unity of purpose on a public stage. The routes along which the pilgrims are channeled are full of commercial activity. Dozens of souvenir stalls spring up along the route, selling a wide variety of religious objects and providing the pilgrims with “sanctified shopping”, helping them to pass the time they must spend waiting.

### **1.3. Ritual food**

The offering of food in and around the *rând* (queue) is one of the aspects that I consider most important in the mechanisms of the pilgrimage. Of course, food (*hrana*) is a major component of many religious rituals and some of them, especially in Romania, are related to the cult of the dead. In such contexts, the physical substance of food takes on meanings beyond the merely nutritional, becoming a mode of interaction with the spiritual or transcendent. Food offerings (*pomana*) are dedicated to the souls of those who are no longer with us, the living, and by drawing down God’s mercy, the practice of offering is held to absolve some of the sins the absent deceased may have committed during his or her lifetime. Many Romanians believe that warm steaming food mediates better between the two worlds of the living and the dead. Warm soup, boiled rice, fish, chicken, *cozonac* (a sort of Romanian *brioche* which can be served warm or cold) and *sarmale* a sort of savory cabbage-leaf wrapped roll, usually filled with minced meat) are among the most prominent food offerings. A traditional dish emblematic of Romania, *sarmale* is eaten on special occasions: celebrations, religious and popular holidays, and on receiving guests. (The word *sarmale* derives from the Turkish *sarmak*, ‘to fold’ or ‘to wrap’). Therefore, this practice of distributing food along the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage queue is a sign of consideration and honour towards both saint and participants. People are clearly happy to cook and offer *sarmale* to pilgrims. Both charitable individuals and the Municipality also give *sarmale* as an act of charity. The line of waiting thus stands outside ordinary time, providing a fulfilling experience for pilgrims and other participants, both those who give and those who receive. Sharing the same food obviously creates a certain level of unity and togetherness (see figure 13).



#### ***1.4. Gender: The feminine (in)visibility at pilgrimage***

As is the case at many other pilgrimages worldwide, women are far more present than men. Sfânta Parascheva is no exception to this pattern (see figures 10,11). Academics writing on this gendered aspect of pilgrimage have noted that women are far more likely to be devotees of religious shrines than men though the saint they visit is likely to be a man. (Dubisch, 1995). However, in Europe, Mary and other female saints are three times more often the primary subjects of devotion than male saints (Gemzöe, 2009). Today, women are the main devotees of the cult of Mary and the saints; they are far more likely than men to make pilgrimages to sacred sites such as the shrine of Our Lady of Fátima in Portugal. Women also make more vows to Mary and the saints than men do (Yel, 2005). Feminist scholars like Fatima Mernissi (1977) have argued pilgrimage can reinforce dominant gender patterns by upholding ideals of femininity, providing opportunities for women to improve their power position and to change gender inequalities. Moreover, as child-bearers, mothers and caregivers, women are the first to deal with the suffering caused by illnesses. Healing is therefore a central theme in women's religious practice and has been seen as an integral part of their domestic duties in both male and female-dominated religions. For this reason, women are more likely to go on pilgrimages, especially to thaumaturgical saints to beg for healing for their beloved ones (Sered 1996:103). In contrast with male-dominated religions, women's religious experience tends to relate to motherhood and to physical and social vulnerability (Diktaş, 2018). Not only does the religious experience of women differ from that of men, but women's devotional practices are also different (Bowie, 2000).

Gender stereotypes and demarcations are highly evident in the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva. While the saint herself is a woman and the pilgrims are overwhelmingly women too, it is notable that the site officials, the priests who lead the devotions and the clerical and secular decision makers are all men. Power and authority are under the strict control of men. There are no nuns in the management council, and they do not act as ritual/religious leaders or as senior administrators. One can observe women working at the shrine but generally in the role of 'motherly caregivers': women decorate the baldachin with colorful flowers and women cleaners ensure the toilet facilities are spotless. The volunteers who provide food, tea and water to the pilgrims and the candle sellers are all women. And it is nuns who clean the glass surface of the coffin, as shown in figure 1.

The written accounts of the miracles worked by Sfânta Parascheva are a central element of her cult. Frequent worshipers and pilgrims may put their testimonies in a wooden box in the Metropolitan Cathedral. Over the years, the Diocese of Iași has assembled the most noteworthy ones. Drawing on these accounts, the protosinghel Valerian Radu put together a three-volume work entitled *Binefacerile Sfantei Cuvioase Parascheva: Mărturii ale închinătorilor* (*The Benefits/Good Deeds of the Pious Saint Parascheva: Worshipers' Testimonies*), published in 2017. Rather than use the term *miracol* in the title, Radu preferred the term 'benefits'/good deeds (*binefacerile*) to designate the works wrought by the saint. While reinforcing popular piety, this rich compilation of miracle stories produced by the church authorities also promotes the shrine. The wonders done by Parascheva are diverse, numerous, impressive and never ending. For this reason, in the *Akathist*<sup>11</sup> (or hymn sung standing) to Sfânta Parascheva, she is usually referred to as *multfolositoare* ('most useful, bountiful one'). Each *ichos*<sup>12</sup> ends with the words: *Bucura-te Sfânta Parascheva, multfolositoare* ('Rejoice Saint Parascheva, very/most useful one'). The "benefits" which worshippers have received from her range from improved health to complete recovery from an illness and from finding a good job to a cure for infertility. The miracles documented are reported to have occurred as a result of the pilgrims' touching of the actual relics. The fact that great majority of miracles involved some kind of contact with or proximity to the saint's relics highlights their importance in the development of the saint's cult and their role as the focal point of pilgrimage. My study of the miracle accounts in the third volume of *Binefacerile* revealed that beneficiaries were overwhelmingly female. Of 424 miracle receivers, 337 were women and 87 were men.

### **1.5. Consumption and vernacular practices**

Pilgrimages and pilgrims also provide a rich area for the study of symbolic, spiritual and material consumption. Unsurprisingly given its scale, the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva brings major economic benefits to the residents of Iași with commercial activity intensifying during the pilgrimage season. Hotels are fully booked and restaurants packed. Shops are crowded. Every year, during pilgrimage time, a special fair for the retail of religious items is set up near the Cathedral, in a small square nearby as well as in the streets behind the cathedral where the pilgrims queue. According to a news report from 2019,<sup>13</sup> during the pilgrimage, the

200,000 or so pilgrims who came to show their devotion to Holy Pious Parascheva spent over 1.5 million euros in the city. In Iași, hotels, pensions, and guesthouses, in total, have 2,700 beds and almost all of them fully occupied during the three days of the pilgrimage. Iași Municipality also generates revenue from the rental of public space in central areas to small vendors for their stalls. In 2019, 155 traders rented 3,200 square metres for six days. The minimum rental fee of 30 lei per square metre produced a total sum of around 100,000 lei for the city. The news report provided a rough estimate of the overall income generated by the pilgrimage, as follows. If 200,000 pilgrims each spent 30 lei on *pomelnice* – charity, candles, icons, food – the income produced was 6,000,000 lei; visitor accommodation, with some 2,250 beds occupied (90% of 2500) at 150 lei / bed-night x 3 nights generated 1,012,500 lei; stall 'rent was significant too, with 156 traders renting 3,200 m<sup>2</sup> at 30 lei / m<sup>2</sup> generating a not inconsiderable 96,000 lei. Taken together, accommodation, the rental of retail space and money given by the pilgrims as *pomelnice* and food exceeded 7 million lei, i.e. over 1,500,000 euros [but not all this went to the city: the money for *pomelnice*, e.g., would have gone to the church].

Pilgrimages are sites where exploration of the relationship between religion, spirituality and consumption can be undertaken. The experiential character of pilgrimage creates the demand for objects and images embodying a memory of the emotions and sensations produced by the physical and symbolic activities connected to the visit to the sacred site (Pinto, 2007: 110). *Ex-votos* (votive offerings) or souvenirs may be considered to come within the category of "sacred consumption". Close to the Metropolitan Cathedral is an alley specializing in the retail of objects related to our pilgrimage (see figure 15). After standing for so many hours in the line, pilgrims are keen to purchase souvenirs of various kinds, which will eventually serve to remind them of their powerful encounter with the saint. They have a 'memorial' function (Freedberg, 1989). Votive offerings at Sfânta Parascheva take two main forms: (a) *ex-votos* consisting of actions or material things that are vowed to the saint for her intercession with the divine, in return for a hoped-for miracle, i.e. *pomelnice* and financial donations; (b) *ex-votos* offered in thanksgiving for prayers already answered. This again includes financial donations to the Church, as well as flowers.

### 1.5.1. Flowers

The Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage is enhanced by the presence of flowers in huge quantities, used to express thanks for miraculous cures or rescues and generally accompanied by a promise or vow. Pilgrims take different kinds of flowers to the shrine to offer them to Sfânta Parascheva and sometimes leave them in the church. However, they may also touch the relics – or at least the case containing them – with flowers and take them home. This unusual use of flowers, a fragile expression of beauty, has a dramatic, rhapsodic quality, reinforcing the pilgrims' public display of devotion. Aromatic basil (*busuioc*) and chrysanthemums are the most widely used flowers, the former providing an olfactory reminder of the pilgrimage (see figure 37). Flowers are also considered as gifts to be placed in the saint's vicinity. Obtaining a more or less permanent place in the sacred space, they extend and reinforce the relationship formed between devotees and saint. Obviously, the flower market is at its most active during the pilgrimage. In fact, the relatively small city of Iași has fifteen active florists. During the feast day, tens of flower vendors can be seen in the streets. In 2020, people unable to participate in the pilgrimage also brought flowers to the saint, some sending them via online florist services. These flowers were received by the pilgrimage volunteers and taken inside the church. On the first day of the pilgrimage, the floor of the cathedral was covered with thousands of flowers, the overall effect being rather like a traditional Moldovan carpet, characterized by strong and colourful floral designs. Thousands more bouquets were left at the main entrance to the cathedral (see figures 36 to 39). Such floral offerings have an ambiguous nature. While charged with a religious, moral, or emotional value on the one hand, at the same time they come to be a kind of leftover of the pilgrimage, making them a form of 'sacred' waste. Before they wilt, most cut flowers are given to pilgrims as a gift after their encounter with the saint. The rest, fully wilted, are put in waste bins designated for the 'clean' garbage along with the remains of candles, candle oil and paper towels.

### 1.5.2. Gypsy-Roma

Gypsy-Roma (*tigani*) are an important component of Romanian society and Sfânta Parascheva receives a considerable number of Roma pilgrims from different parts of the country each year. Female Christian saints have a significant place in the religious worldview of Gypsy-Roma people in Europe. Gypsy-Roma in Greece for example, collectively, pay

votive visits to the church of Virgin Mary on the Feast of Assumption every 15<sup>th</sup> August on the Island of Tinos (Haland, 2012). Moreover, the internationally famous pilgrimage to Saint Sara in Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in France receives huge numbers of Roma pilgrims on 24<sup>th</sup> May (Badon, 2008, Petersen, 2014). At Sfânta Parascheva, Gypsy-Roma are quite visible, and notably the women with their distinctive clothing. For the great occasion, Roma women wear colourful, often sparkly clothes with many accessories including big gold earrings and necklaces. From the limited information that I obtained from Roma pilgrims, the pilgrimage has also a social function: they take advantage of it for seeing Roma from elsewhere in Romania, undertaking business transactions and making marriage arrangements for their children (see figure 16, 18).

Roma pilgrims have created rituals of their own within the specific tradition that has developed around Sfânta Parascheva. Although I did not personally observe it in the pilgrimages in which I participated between 2017 and 2020, Romanian anthropologist Mirel /Bănică (2014) describes one particular, vernacular religious practice performed by the Roma referred to as a *face haram*. Bringing carpets to the coffin of Sfânta Parascheva on her feast day, they touch the relics with the carpets, subsequently donating them to the cathedral or churches and monasteries, an offering based on the belief that a bountiful and prosperous year will ensue because of this *haram* gesture. Though I have observed Roma carrying large framed icons with which to touch the relics, I have yet to see a Roma doing a carpet *haram*.

Dubisch (1995) points out how each pilgrimage site often has its own particular tradition, formed both by the history of the site and specific pilgrimage practices that have developed in relation to it. However, an essential feature of pilgrimage sites is the breadth of individual variation within the bounds of each tradition. As Dubisch writes, "... pilgrimage is an individual act, initiated, orchestrated and carried out by the pilgrims themselves," and "... it is this voluntary and 'creative' dimension of pilgrimage that gives it its particular form and power ..." (Dubisch 1995). Similarly, Victor Turner links some pilgrimage practices to both play and art, seeing them as characterized by creativity and enjoyment (Turner 1982, 55-59).

Roma pilgrims leave their mark on the pilgrimage line by turning, creatively, a stretch of possibly ancient or mediaeval wall into a picturesque votive corner. In the last one hundred metres of the queue, due to the topography of Iași, the route becomes steep and somewhat

difficult. On the right side of the slope, just before the turn towards the cathedral, the low stretch of wall in question, overhung by trees and shrubs, has been used by Roma pilgrims as a votive site. By lighting candles and placing them in the crannies and crevices of the masonry, they create a place of devotion. Candle smoke blackens the stones; melted wax has encrusted others, running over to make tiny stalactite formations. This informal site of devotion has a clear importance to Sfânta Parascheva's Roma visitors. By using a liturgical object – the candle – so central to the Christian tradition, they add their own particular place of meaning to the pilgrimage. To an outside observer, the rough stone masonry has the air of some sooty pagan altar. For those who know Jerusalem, it might be said to evoke the Wailing Wall (see figures 17 and 18).

## **2. Saint Parascheva, the “De-Covidizer”<sup>14</sup>**

The coronavirus labelled COVID-19 was first detected in Wuhan, Hubei, China, in December 2019. On 11<sup>th</sup> March, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the disease a pandemic. The abrupt appearance of COVID-19 disease in humans in late December 2019, and its rapid global spread caught health authorities worldwide by surprise; global and national public health systems were not prepared to deal with the pandemic at all. Apart from generic prevention and control issues along with lockdown measures to limit the virus' spread, mass gatherings, including sporting and religious events came under scrutiny as potential sites for intensified contamination. COVID-19 has caused significant disruptions in the world's social, economic, political and religious life, of which pilgrimages are a part, for several reasons. During the first weeks, when the extent of the infection and its dangerousness were still not completely clear, high levels of infection occurred during certain pilgrimages. For example, in Iran, during the first days of March 2020, pilgrims in the Shiite holy city of Qom gathered in the sanctuaries and, showing their reverence for the saints buried there, kissed and licked the doors of the sanctuaries and the walls of the tombs, following an ancient custom.<sup>15</sup> During the days after the pilgrimage, Qom became one of the cities most severely affected by the epidemic, and Iran one of the countries with the highest levels of infection. In Italy, health authorities reported that the first five contagions recorded in Trentino in early March were related to a pilgrimage, since those infected had all travelled by bus to Assisi, together with a friar later

identified as the patient zero of the region.<sup>16</sup> Starting in late February 2020, growing numbers of international and national religious gatherings were cancelled, temporarily suspended or postponed. Many major religious pilgrimages were cancelled or saw the numbers of permitted attendees reduced in an effort to stop the virus' spread. Among the pilgrimages concerned were the Hajj,<sup>17</sup> a pillar of Islam for Muslims the world over; the Hindu pilgrimage to the sanctuary of Amarnath Yatra<sup>18</sup> high in the mountains of Kashmir, and pilgrimages to Lourdes in France.

The virus arrival in Romania was confirmed on 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020,<sup>19</sup> when the first case in Gorj County was confirmed. As a response to the COVID-19 outbreak, the Romanian authorities took several preventive measures, including a 14-day institutionalized quarantine for people travelling from affected regions in Italy (21<sup>st</sup> February), the ban of public gatherings and school closures (8–13 March), a 30-day state of emergency (from 16<sup>th</sup> March), national confinement (24<sup>th</sup> March) and a 30-day state of emergency extension (14<sup>th</sup> April).<sup>20</sup> In addition to school closures, the suspension of visa issues and a restriction on public gatherings, all religious services were banned.<sup>21</sup>

The state of emergency ended on 15<sup>th</sup> May 2020. After consultation with the Romanian Government, the Romanian Patriarchate released guidelines for the re-opening of the country's Orthodox places of worship. The faithful wishing to enter a church had to respect social distancing rules with a minimum distance of two metres between individuals being prescribed; they had to wait for their turn for prayer or confession in a single line. Protective masks were obligatory for all participants in services, except for the priests and choir members. The Romanian Patriarchate also recommended that the elderly, people with major health problems, and those from high-risk groups not attend services. People in these categories were advised to go to church before or after services.

Sfânta Parascheva is the patron saint of the region of Moldova (*Ocrotitoarea Moldovei*). In an unprecedented measure in recent decades, during the worst days of the pandemic, on 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 the relics of Sfânta Parascheva were taken on a "pilgrimage" for several hours to the main towns of the region, including Piatra Neamţ, Târgu Neamţ, Paşcani, Botoşani and Hârlău, in the belief that her healing presence and prayers would help people fight the coronavirus. The coffin with the holy relics was placed on a car adorned with flowers. Metropolitan Bishop Teofan, and Archimandrite Marian Timofte accompanied the vehicle. In addition to the aforementioned towns, the route included several monasteries and

parish churches. The trip was made without any stops for the veneration of the holy relics, without any form of gathering and without official services. Along the way, prayers were recited from the car for those infected with the new coronavirus, for the medical staff, for those who maintain public order, as well as for all Christians in need. The holy relics were greeted with church bells and then the relics passed briefly through the courtyards or in front of emergency hospitals and other medical units including those of Piatra Neamț County Emergency Clinical Hospital, the Sfântul Dimitrie City Hospital – Târgu Neamț, the Pașcani Municipal Emergency Hospital and the “Sfântul Spiridon” County Emergency Clinical Hospital in Iași (see figure 13).

On his return to the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași, Metropolitan Teofan declared that:

the Christian has two weapons in any situation, but especially in difficult situations. The first weapon is the human weapon. In our context, a three-edged sword: social distancing, hygiene and proper medical treatment. But the Christian also has another weapon, the divine weapon: Holy Mass, confession, divine Communion, the veneration of holy relics ... because the church is also a spiritual hospital. And the procession or, rather, the progress with the relics of Our Lady of Parascheva in Moldova today is testimony of this spiritual hospital to which we should turn all the time, but especially in difficult times like this.

The saint's progress through the countryside was remarkable because it was only the third time in history that she had left Iași. In almost 379 years, since the relics were brought to Iași by the Voivode Vasile Lupu (Lord of Moldova between 1634 and 1653), the coffin had left Iași only twice. In 1944, during the Second World War, the coffin with the holy relics was hidden in the south of the country in the Mănăstirea Samurcășești. Three years later, in the summer of 1947, the faithful asked the Metropolitan Church to bring out the relics of Sfânta Parascheva and take them in procession through the sun-scorched villages severely affected by the war.

### ***2.1. Ambiguities, politics, and contestations at Sfânta Parascheva Pilgrimage***

The key scholars in pilgrimage studies, Victor and Edith Turner suggest that the pilgrimage experience creates a sense of *communitas*, an idealized



state produced by the dissolving of social structures and boundaries and the formation of spontaneous and egalitarian interpersonal relations. By experiencing normative *communitas* pilgrims are separated from their usual social structure to become part of a liminal state in which they may experience different transformations. At the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage, this experience was frequently evoked in many of the testimonies I heard from pilgrims. Through sharing the same food (*sarmale*) and waiting for hours in the same line (*rând*), a certain level of *communitas* emerges. Alongside their fellow pilgrims, individuals can temporarily transcend the hierarchical social roles that often serve to divide them in their everyday lives, irrespective of their usual social position, political or economic status or class affiliation. Despite social differences, all look the same during the pilgrimage.

Turner's theory has been applied by academics working in a number of countries, including certain Asian nation-states (Thailand, Nepal, Sri Lanka and parts of India including parts of the north) as well as Morocco and Peru. None of these studies confirms the Turnerian hypothesis. Leveling *communitas* is not always present, and in some cases, pilgrimage is a highly individualistic practice (Morinis 1992). Thus, the Turnerian approach has been criticized by some scholars from two angles: firstly, because pilgrimage is not an isolated process, and secondly, because pilgrims' usual social roles are not always equalized through *communitas*. To return to the first point, pilgrimage is a social, cultural and political phenomenon, dynamic and very much part of the world. Thus, it cannot be analyzed as a solitary process with universal characteristics to be described according to a three-stage formula (pre-liminal, liminal and post-liminal). As Morinis (1992: 9) puts it, "Pilgrimage is too varied in content to be analyzed as if there were a single, recurrent, common, manifest factor". To turn to the second line of critique, *communitas* does not always equalize the status or roles of pilgrims. Furthermore, it does not necessarily produce bonds among them. Coleman and Elsner (1995) note that *communitas* is only an ideal, and that social division and conflict is an aspect of many pilgrimages, too.

Eade and Sallnow (2000), the main critics of Turner's paradigm, posit an alternative theory of pilgrimage, considering it as a realm of competing discourses. They propose a new paradigm that presents pilgrimage as a human activity with contested knowledge firmly present within any retelling of its undertaking. This knowledge might come from different groups: pilgrims, clerics, or heretics, and range from traditional

to innovative practices (2000: 53). The place, the sacred center, the shrine, builds up its 'religious capital' through the meaning and ideas projected onto the shrine by many social actors, including officials and clerics, pilgrims, and locals. Their meaning and ideas are shaped by their political and religious, national and regional, ethnic and class background. The shrine can be seen as a "religious void, a ritual space capable of accommodating diverse meanings and the capacity to absorb and reflect a multiplicity of religious discourses and able to offer a variety of clients what each of them desires" (Eade and Sallnow 2000: 15). Finally, they argue that Christian pilgrimage, far from producing unity among different social groups, was actually based on, and constructed through, acts of contestation (ibid: 5). On a different note, Simon Coleman rejects the classic binary between *communitas* and contestation in pilgrimage studies. He writes that "Neither *communitas* nor contestation should themselves become fetishized in order to produce neatly symmetrical anthropological theory, made up of views that appear to constitute a simple binary opposition" (Coleman, 2002: 355).

In the light of my research at Sfânta Parascheva during the COVID-19 outbreak of 2020, I would concur with Coleman's view. His position offers a way to go beyond the classic theoretical tension, although a form of *communitas* does emerge there, notably with respect to the practices of queuing and sharing food. Yet during this pilgrimage, from my observations I became aware of contestation, protracted debates and conflict. Once deemed an 'organized' pilgrimage managed under the strict ecclesiastical authority of the Romanian Orthodox Church, Sfânta Parascheva in 2020 had turned into a somewhat chaotic pilgrimage, a site at which multiple conflicting discourses from the religious, nationalist and secular realms found expression.

In late September of 2020, it was announced by the Archdiocese of Iași that, given the epidemiological context and the COVID-19 prevention rules, believers would have one week to pray at the Saint's relics (instead of the usual three days, as in previous years).<sup>22</sup> Sfânta Parascheva's relics would be taken out of the Metropolitan Cathedral and placed in the building's courtyard on 8<sup>th</sup> October, remaining there until 15<sup>th</sup> October. *Calea /Sfinților* or Saints' Way, the religious procession during which the reliquary with the relics of St. Parascheva is carried by priests through the streets of Iași, was reformatted for 2020 in order to avoid large crowds gathering along the route. The relics were to be carried by car through the city's most important streets so that people could also watch the

procession from their windows and balconies. Volunteers at the entrance to the line of waiting would provide masks for the pilgrims. Along the pilgrims' route, there would be automatic dispensers with hand sanitizer. After the *închinarea* (encounter with the saint/bowing in front of the saint), each worshiper would receive a packet containing an icon, an akathist of Sfânta Parascheva and a small bottle of *aghiasma* (holy water), prepared according to strict hygiene rules. Neither inside the Metropolitan Cathedral, nor in the courtyard would it be possible to stay overnight, thus ensuring that people did not gather informally. Pilgrims were asked to make sure that they had a place to stay because for this year the Patriarchate would not be able to offer accommodation to those coming from different parts of the country. On 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020 (the actual feast day of Sfânta Parascheva), the service of Holy Mass was given from a podium located on the Boulevard Ștefan Cel Mare (Stephen the Great), near the Metropolitan Cathedral. The area would be arranged for those who wanted to participate in the service, with only a small number of people permitted to enter the specially reserved space, thereby maintaining conditions for physical distancing as recommended by the State authorities. It was also specified that for 2020 no other holy relics would be brought from abroad unlike previous years (For 2020, a Sfânt Prieten had been scheduled and in 2019 the relics of Saint Spiridon had 'visited' from Greece). Through this detailed declaration, the Archdiocese of Iași sought to demonstrate that the church would comply with State regulations.

However, unexpectedly, on 5<sup>th</sup> October, Romania's National Committee for Emergency Situations (CNSU) decided to limit the attendance at religious events and celebrations in the light of the growing number of COVID-19 cases. According to this decision, henceforth only local residents would be allowed to attend religious events held in Romania. The decision thus banned any long trips to holy places to attend religious events. The CNSU took this decision just several days before the start of the biggest pilgrimage in Romania, as noted, one which in a normal year brings tens of thousands of Orthodox Christians to Iași to venerate the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. However, it was unclear how the authorities would be able to implement this measure, given that there were no restrictions on free movement in place in Romania at that time. It was declared that the ban was going to run from 8<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> October. During this period, coaches with pilgrims would not be allowed into the city because, according to State secretary Raed Arafat, there would be major risks of infection not only during participation in the pilgrimage but also during coach rides to Iași and back home. Immediately

after this surprising decision, Marius Dangă, a councilor/member of the Council in Iași Prefecture, stated that the authorities were planning to monitor access to the city during the pilgrimage period, thereby showing his support for the national decision.

Reacting to the decision, the Orthodox Church called on the authorities to present “unambiguous evidence” about how some places or institutions were respecting the rules or not, implying that churches were complying with sanitary rules entirely, and that there was no need for new restrictions. The Romanian Orthodox Church (BOR), through the Patriarch Daniel, expressed deep displeasure about what it referred to as these “excessively restrictive measures”, saying that they did not have a sound legal basis, adding that the ban on the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva was disproportionate and discriminatory. He added that the decision had been taken without prior consultation with the Romanian Orthodox Church. Patriarch Daniel stated that the decisions should have been justified in a transparent, reasoned manner. He urged co-responsibility and cooperation between the Church and the Romanian State and asked the secular authorities to reconsider the decision.<sup>23</sup>

The director of Romania FoRB (Freedom of Religion or Belief), Cătălin Raiu also expressed criticism. He claimed that the government had restricted pilgrimages in an unpredictable and non-consensual way between March 2020 and November 2020, without proposing appropriate legislation to the parliament. He asserted that these restrictions should be chronologically formulated, clear and concise, accessible to all as well as non-discriminatory in intent and application. Furthermore, Raiu implied that there was “no real need for the restrictions” despite the pandemic, considering the limitations as being both discriminatory and counter to the principle of the State’s neutrality. He said that the government had paid disproportionate attention to religious life by adding additional rules in the case of Sfânta Parascheva. FoRB Romania’s director said that the character of any State intervention in religious matters should be undertaken in a manner similar to its interventions in non-religious social life, remarking that:

... according to the same principle, if the police intervene in liturgical space because they have reasonable suspicions about the rules of physical distance, the wearing of masks, etc., they must operate with like measures in other private meetings of similar size and dynamics. Common sense tells us that the virus does not prefer religious spaces to secular ones (Raiu, 2020).

On 9<sup>th</sup> October, largish crowds unhappy with the new rules imposed by the authorities on the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva began to protest with prayers and hymns in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral in Iași. Carrying candles, icons as well as A4 sheets of paper on which were written declarations that religious freedom was guaranteed by the country's constitution, these people expressed their dissatisfaction that though they had come to the city on the pilgrimage, they were not even going to be allowed to see the coffin containing the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. Non-residents of Iași were not allowed to enter the courtyard of the Metropolitan Cathedral. Gendarmes were located at the entrances of the cathedral to check people's residence cards (see figures 25 and 26). The representatives of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova and Bukovina announced that they had nothing to do with this "spontaneous demonstration", asking those involved to remain calm and to avoid creating arguments with the police.

The Archdiocese of Iași considered the restrictions on the feast of Sfânta Parascheva as discriminatory, violating a number of legal provisions. The spokesperson for the Archdiocese said that it was one of the saddest periods in the history of Moldova and asked the authorities to reconsider the decision as it was hard to understand and accept.

Look at all the international standards. What is happening now is the biggest abuse since the 1990s on freedom of conscience ... it is not fair to discriminate against people on the basis of religion.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast, an influential secular figure, the political commentator Cristian Tudor Popescu, took a more farsighted view and called for "political courage" for the complete ban of the pilgrimage. He regarded the Patriarch Daniel's request that the government "reconsider" the restrictions as a "strategic attempt" to balance between "customers" (believers) and the State, referring to it as a *Godporatie*, a portmanteau word combining *God* and *Corporatie*, (corporation). He noted that the Romanian Orthodox Church has always managed, rather hypocritically, in his opinion, to maintain good relations with the State without losing its "customers".<sup>25</sup>

On 9<sup>th</sup> October, amid all these conflicts, the mayor of Iași, Mihai Chirica, announced rather surprisingly that he was infected with coronavirus, having just tested positive.<sup>26</sup> He requested from those who were dissatisfied with the cancellation of the pilgrimage to be rational and to follow the rules. The Iași Emergency Situations Inspectorate sent an extreme alert message via Ro-Alert to the population of Iași.<sup>27</sup> The

Ro-Alert is a system that sends *cell broadcast* messages to GSM users to warn the population in emergencies where the lives and health of citizens are endangered. Situations under which such alerts are sent out include extreme weather events, the threat of floods and terrorist attacks. Since 2017, this alert tool has been used in Romania by the Ministry of the Interior via the General Inspectorate for Emergency Situations.

The Archbishop of Moldova and Bucovina Teofan, spoke out, criticizing the measures taken by the authorities. He stressed that for “a true Christian believer” attending a pilgrimage is an act of faith increasing the believer’s resilience to disease:

There have been invasions, wars, plagues of all kinds, totalitarian regimes. The holy relics of Sfânta Parascheva have always been a source of relief, healing and strength, and people were allowed to approach them. Today, they have come to be considered a source of contamination ... this violates many legal provisions and international principles that protect freedom of religious expression.<sup>28</sup>

However, despite the Orthodox Church’s reassurance that sanitary measures during Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage would be fully respected, the secular authorities were worried that the thousands of people traveling to Iași might not respect social distancing and related rules at a time when Romania was seeing a rise in new coronavirus cases. Moreover, Iași was among the new COVID-19 hotspots in Romania, with 178 new cases per 100,000 inhabitants in the 14 days preceding the pilgrimage.<sup>29</sup> It was clear that hundreds of people touching or kissing the case with the holy relics would be a factor in spreading the virus, a scenario that the Church representatives admitted they could not control.

Amid such political tensions, an icon of a weeping Sfânta Parascheva began to circulate on social media over that week, especially in ultra-Orthodox circles. Several thousand users shared this picture of a mournful Parascheva with the tears rolling down her cheeks. It was claimed that the icon was from the Metropolitan Church of Iași. Even though the post went viral for a week and moved thousands of believers, the church refuted the existence of such an icon. Subsequently, it was revealed that the icon was from a monastery in Târgoviște and the image three years old. It had clearly been re-posted to manipulate the controversial pilgrimage week (see figure 22). Such weeping icons are a phenomenon in Orthodox Christianity that goes back to Byzantine times. Religious sites in the Orthodox world are

home to numerous weeping icons, with the “weeping persons” on the icons including the Mother of God, Christ, saints and monks. The particular time at which a given icon wept can also be of great significance. The monastery of Nicula in Cluj is home to the renowned icon of the Virgin Mary the Miracle Worker (*Maica Domnului Făcătoare de Minuni*). This icon is said to have wept between 15<sup>th</sup> February and 12<sup>th</sup> March 1669 during the persecutions against Orthodox Romanians by Catholics. It was remarkable how people were so quick to associate the restrictions on the Sfânta Parascheva with foreign occupation and resistance.

### **2.1.A. Closer look at the protestors**

Prior to arriving in Iași on 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020, I had already been following the broadcasts on pilgrimage on Romanian television as well as monitoring the protests and the statements /issued by both secular and clerical authorities on social media. However, I was curious about the background of the protestors, as there was little information about them. Were those demonstrations really spontaneous? The protests were starting every evening around 5pm and such public demonstrations continued on 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> October, with around thirty people booing and arguing with the riot police officers, accusing the gendarmes of preventing them from entering the church. I decided to try to find out who or which groups or institutions were behind the protests. After a short observation of one of the protests, it appeared to me that these people knew each other from elsewhere. Their level of familiarity was more than just a spontaneous expression of solidarity. The protestors I observed had an intra-group kind of acquaintance. Most had heavy backpacks which suggested clearly that they had been prepared and fully equipped in advance for this protest. They made intermittent appearances in ‘the protest zone’ (my term), circulating in the vicinity of the Metropolitan Church, discussing issues with serious, even grim faces (see figure 23). They resembled each other. The women were modestly dressed, some in Romanian blouses. Practically no member of this group was wearing hygiene-masks. There were male clerics among them, waving flags and carrying icons. They looked like a group of Right-wing conservative-minded individuals. One young man carrying a file filled with A4 papers was distributing flyers to passersby. I approached him and he gave me a paper which turned out to be the manifesto of a recently founded political party, the AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians). He was collecting signatures so that in the upcoming

December 2020 elections the AUR would be included in the ballot. My ultimate impression was that while at first sight the anti-restriction protests seemed spontaneous, there was nevertheless some sort of well-organised network operating behind the scenes. It could well be that at one level the demonstrators were representatives of an organized, financed campaign seeking to undermine pilgrimage restrictions and, at another, were attempting to gain mind-space for the birth of a political party.

According to the Alliance for the Union of Romanians (AUR),<sup>30</sup> the Orban government was systematically and illegally discriminating against Christians, especially those of the Orthodox faith. Under the pretext of combating the coronavirus, the very latest in a series of abusive government measures was the prohibition of access by the faithful from outside the Municipality of Iași to the courtyard of the Metropolitan Cathedral and hence to the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. The AUR declared that it saw no basis for such a measure; on the contrary, they claimed that it was illegal, discriminatory and also represented an abuse of authority. According to article 29 of the Romanian Constitution, the freedom of religious belief is guaranteed by the Romanian State. This freedom also consists in public manifestations of faith and participation in religious services in places of worship. Through the prohibition of public access in the Metropolitan Cathedral, the government was deemed to be misusing its constitutionally defined powers.

In fact, the Alliance for the Unity of Romanians (AUR) is an extremist,<sup>31</sup> right-wing political party, founded in Romania on 1 December 2019 (the Great Union Day of Romania) under the leadership of George Simion. Central to the AUR's credo is Article 1, item 1 of the Romanian Constitution, that "Romania is a national, sovereign, independent, unitary and indivisible state". The party also claims that certain contemporary political actors have not respected this article, failing to uphold the sovereignty of Romania. Likewise, in reference to the territorial amputations which Romania was subject to after the Second World War, the AUR demands the annexation of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina to Romania's national territory. In the party's view, in the ideal Romanian state there would be no place for national minorities or migrants, a point emphasized with reference to Article 3, item 4 of the current Constitution, which specifies that "No foreign populations may settle or colonize the territory of the Romanian state" (see figure 33).

The doctrine of the AUR is based on four pillars, namely faith, liberty, family and the motherland. The party places strong emphasis on the



Christian faith, and on the moral vision inspired by that faith. *Nihil sine Deo* ("Nothing without God") is the party's motto, underscoring the principles guiding its political action. For the AUR, Christianity has been persecuted in Romania in recent decades. The party is also opposed to the denigration of the clergy and of religious symbols as well as any maligning of the faithful who dare to assume their Christian commitment publicly. Party members believe that Romania is still a strongly Christian nation, and want to maintain this situation. However, arguably the Church is now under growing pressure from left-wing forces of a Neo Marxist ideological bent seeking to implement a secularist agenda. In contrast, the AUR supports the traditional family and hence is opposed to homosexual marriage, euthanasia and medically assisted suicide, publicly funded trans-sexual surgery, and what it considers to be other "innovations" of Freudian-Marxist inspiration. Finally, party members are proud of being Romanian nationalists, considering that patriotic loyalty and the love of one's land are entirely natural feelings. Having experienced a "ruthless dictatorship", they are anti-communist, going so far as to say that they have developed specifically anti-totalitarian antibodies.

The AUR's extremist discourse relies heavily on conspiracy theories. (In many places, conspirationist positions generated much material thanks to the uncertainty associated with the corona crisis). The AUR's members argued that the COVID death rate was being exaggerated to pave the way for a large-scale vaccination programme. They also objected very forcefully to the use of masks. The protestors from AUR chanted conspirationist slogans against compulsory mask-wearing (*Jos masca! covid nu există!*, "Masks down! Covid does not exist!"). Some party members even denied the existence of coronavirus, going so far as to say that the wearing of anti-Covid protective masks had an "unknown" negative impact and that it constituted a tyrannous threat to personal liberties. The compulsory wearing of masks was dubbed a form of "medical dictatorship". Similar conspiracies are visible in the AUR's social media circles. One of the protestors whom I wanted to interview agreed to talk to me only on condition that I took off my mask. In fact, by summer 2020 masks had become an extremely heated point of contention in many areas of the world, with Romania being no exception. In September 2020, there were protests with the participation of several dozen people against the obligation to wear masks in provincial cities including Cluj, Timisoara or Oradea.<sup>32</sup> Despite the growing scientific consensus that masks had an important role to play in limiting the spread of the coronavirus, this

simple but extremely important public health measure remained intensely politicized.

A recent report from the Council of the European Union in May, 2020 notes attempts by right-wing extremists to exploit the pandemic to promote extremist ideologies and their political objectives.<sup>33</sup> This report also warned that right-wing extremists were taking advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to stigmatize minority groups and spread disinformation, noting that there was a risk that the pandemic could provide an easily accessible “weapon” which could be used to incite “their supporters to spread the virus deliberately among their enemies”. In addition, by playing on people’s health fears in such ways, the far right may be seen to be hoping to get its views widely accepted and make those of the political mainstream seem inadequate when it comes to explaining or resolving the crisis (Crawford,2020)

## ***2.2. Vrem la Cuvioasa! Ne furați sfinții! (“We want the Saint! You steal our Saints!!”)***

The initial position of the church in 2020 was that the relics would not be brought out from the church. However, when it was seen how many people had come up to the main entrance of the Cathedral, they decided that the epidemiological risk would be lower in the open air and decided to place the coffin outside. After the procession around the Metropolitan Cathedral, the casket with the relics of Sfânta Parascheva was placed under /a canopy specially set up in the metropolitan courtyard for worship, at 6.30 am on the feast day (14<sup>th</sup> October). The service, which began at 9.30 am, was conducted by a council of priests from a special podium set up on the Boulevard of Stephen the Great (Ștefan cel Mare). In front of the podium, chairs were placed at the required distance of two metres for the 50 guests of the Metropolitan Church of Moldova: representatives of local authorities, as well as figures from the worlds/fields of medicine, culture and education. For another 500 people, seats were placed on the Stephen the Great pedestrian road, also respecting the distancing requirements. There were two large screens on the Boulevard of Stephen the Great - one facing Union Square, the other facing the Palace of Culture. Holy Mass could also be watched from Unirii Square, where 250 seats, video screens and sound systems were located for those unable to enter the perimeter of the cathedral. This Holy Mass was broadcast live by Trinitas TV (see figures 34 and 35).

Early in the morning, the gendarmes began to check the pilgrims' papers again, blocking access to those who could not prove that they lived in Iași. Between 20 and 30 protestors started to gather behind the checkpoints. They were carrying A4-size pieces of paper with slogans, as described earlier. Several of them started to quarrel with the gendarmes, using the same legalistic arguments, showing them the handbook of the Romanian Constitution as evidence that such a residential ban was illegal (see figure 33). A man in his 50s took out his cellphone and, putting it on loud-speaker mode, dialed the number of the call centre of a courthouse and wanted everybody around, and especially the security forces, to listen to him talking. He complained about the ban at the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage. The person at the other end of the line was trying to explain the legitimacy of the interdiction. The man then hung up and started to yell at the gendarmes, saying that their job was to protect the "Romanian nation against its enemies, not vice versa". He was claiming that this decision was taken by a group of people who are not ethnically Romanian and Orthodox and who showed no respect for Romanian cultural and religious values. He was referring of course to Klaus Iohannis (the country's president), Ludovic Orban (the Prime Minister) and Raed Arafat (the head of the Department of Emergencies).

A young man in this late 20s from the AUR initiative who had come from Alexandria (a city in southern Romania) was very eager to "clarify" for me, a non-Romanian researcher, what exactly they were protesting about. His tone of voice was full of frustration and unsuppressed grudges:

Klaus Iohannis, our so-called president is not of Romanian descent. He is ethnically German. He is not Orthodox. He is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. We do not know what he believes in ... Our figurehead president Orban has Hungarian origins. An enemy of the Romanian people. Finally, there is this Raed Arafat. A Syrian Arab. He is not even Muslim. It is rumored that he is practicing Bahaism. That is modern Romania now. Non-Orthodox people decide on behalf of the Orthodox believers ... I am prepared for everything. If necessary, we are going to use force. I mean we will resist the gendarmes and enter the cathedral by force. After all, Sfânta Parascheva is our saint. Not theirs. "

A woman in her 40s from the southeastern city of Constanța (on the Black Sea coast), who had overheard our conversation had some conspiracy laden, xenophobic, anti-Semitic and partly Islamo-phobic comments to add to the young man's "clarifications":

They are all puppets (marionettes): Iohannis and Orban. *Arahat*<sup>34</sup> on the other hand. I hate him most. He is Arab and he is sentenced to death in his country of origin. He ran away from the shit (*rahat*) of his country in the 1980s. We as Romanians provided shelter for him. We gave him education and food. Now he is supposed to be my slave. I am not his slave. But who knows? He might be a MOSSAD spy. After all, Jews created this virus”.

Holy Mass started. Standing behind the gendarmerie’s barricades, the protestors were silent for a while, seemingly respecting the holy liturgy. Approximately an hour later, the crowd became restless again. A pleasant feeling of excitement and joy could be read on people’s faces. It seemed clear that an important figure was joining them as they craned their necks to try to see that person. A woman appeared with a number of people around her. Everyone applauded her as she entered the small crowd of demonstrators. I was curious to know who she might be, and in Romanian I asked the nearest person. She might have noticed my foreign accent and she answered in a hostile tone. “Nu contează cine este ea. Ea a venit aici din București pentru dreptul nostru. Cine ești tu? Ești Român?” (“It is not important who she is. She has come here from Bucharest for our rights. Who are you? Are you Romanian?”). Another woman who noticed my curiosity intervened and said “Ea este o doamnă avocată care vorbește la televizor. Știe multe despre constituție. Avem voie să intrăm la Catedrală” (“She is a lawyer who talks on TV. She knows a lot about the constitution. We have the right to enter the Cathedral”). People greeted and embraced her with love and admiration. She looked like a charismatic savior holding the key to salvation. She turned out to be Diana Șoșoacă, a lawyer from the Bucharest Bar Association. Madam Șoșoacă was a woman in her 40s, tall, strongly built, with light skin and blonde hair, wearing a Romanian folk dress: traditional blouse, skirt and headscarf. Furthermore, she had wrapped herself in a Romanian flag. She wore no make-up and looked like a real *fată din popor* (countryside girl). Her appearance, combined with the context she was in, reminded me of that goddess-like figure who is the focus of Eugène Delacroix’s painting *Liberty leading the People*. Or perhaps a better reference would be Constantin Daniel Rosenthal’s *România Revoluționară* (“Revolutionary Romania”), a portrait of Maria Rosetti, militant for the Romanian national cause. In this painting from the 1850s, Rosetti, dressed in folk-costume and bearing the national flag, personifies the emerging Romanian nation. Using the same visual repertoire (blouse, headscarf and flag), Șoșoacă seemed an affectionate,

nurturing and motherly figure for the protestors, who were clearly in need of such symbolically powerful support. On the other hand, with her stern voice and aggressive tone, she looked set to challenge and even intimidate any representative of the authorities who had taken the decision to restrict the pilgrimage (see figure 20, 21).

Around ten protestors gathered round Şoşoacă, quarrelling with the gendarmes and somehow managing to enter the courtyard of the cathedral. However, the gendarmes did not allow them to join the pilgrims' queue (*coadă*). Having witnessed, at a distance, this apparently "victorious" entry, some of the local pilgrims who had the "right" to be in the line, applauded the protesters, showing their support. By refusing to wear facemasks in the courtyard, the protestors were clearly violating pilgrimage anti-COVID regulations (see figure 24). Some clergymen, together with the gendarmes, intervened and conducted the protestors out of the yard, saying that it was not correct to behave in that way during the Divine Liturgy. Later on the same day, Father Constantin Sturzu, spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Iaşi, stated that it was forbidden even in Christian Law to disturb prayers, and a true believer should by no means disturb Divine Liturgy. He said that while he understood the accumulated grief and pain of the protestors, these feelings could have been expressed differently.

The Archbishop Teofan announced from the podium where the liturgy was celebrated that it would not be possible to give communion to those attending the service. This proved to be the final straw. The protestors began to shout quite violently and booed. They started chanting provocative slogans: "Vrem la Cuvioasa!" ("We want the Pious"), "Ruşine!" ("Shame!") "Respectaţi Consituţia!" ("Respect the Constitution!") "Discriminaţ/re" ("Discrimination!") "Ne Furaţi Sfinţii" ("You steal our saints"), "Nu suntem Musulmani, suntem Creştini Ortodocşi" ("We are not Muslim, we are Orthodox Christians") and so on. I heard a man in a smart black suit exclaiming that he was ready to die for his faith (*credinţă*) just as Constantin Brâncoveanu<sup>35</sup> had died (see figure 30, 31, 32).

The gendarmes tried to calm the protestors down so that the service could continue in peace. However, as soon as the service was over, all the protestors forced the barricades and entered the zone designated for Iaşi locals. Şoşoacă appeared again among the crowd with her followers carrying Romanian flags. People started to gather around, expecting her to make a declaration or at least say something. In the manner of a practiced politician, she addressed the crowd:

...after three days of negotiation with the Archdiocese of Iași, they finally promised that the relics of Sfânta Parascheva would be taken out to be placed under the baldachin. I obtained this thing. I thank the Metropolitan of Iași from my heart because finally they have understood that they have to take the relics outside. Now, everybody, including the gendarmes realize that there is nothing standing in our way. There is not a decision to forbid public movement. There is no such a rule. And there is no ban on believing in God (Dumnezeu) ... Nobody in this world can forbid your prayers. Nobody can impose regulations about where you pray, /in which religion you believe in, on which days you pray... Now... Go, let's line up, ignore provocation. There are many provokers here. Today you saw what happened. Stop yourself. Because we are Orthodox Christians. We fight for our rights. .... The archbishop has promised us that everybody will be able to pray.

An angry mob of forty people, including several priests and led by Șoșoacă, started to march towards the Ștefan Cel Mare Boulevard. I joined them immediately, and we took the first right into the nearest street, which opens onto the rear exit of the cathedral, so that we could enter the line. We reached an alley where the gendarmes had sealed off the entrance with barricades. Șoșoacă told the officer that they had permission to join the line, but the officer was not convinced. This angry crowd might have intimidated him, as he swiftly took up his radio to call his superior to verify. However, in that moment, all of a sudden, Șoșoacă started to push the barriers over and we all entered like a flock that she was herding. A male gendarme pretended to stop us but he did not resist. On the contrary, I saw a strange happiness in his eyes. Running ahead, some protestors resentfully overturned the barriers defining the queue, all the while chanting slogans. As their aim was to reach the relics as quickly as possible, they jumped the line of people already waiting. In the crowd, I saw a woman punching one of the protestors. All by herself, she was standing up to the mob yelling: "Ce tipuri de Creștini sunteți?" ("What kind of Christians are you?") as they were unfairly getting ahead of those who had been waiting. Nevertheless, the protestors managed to cut into the line. Further on, however, the volunteers maintaining order closed the gate opening onto the Cathedral's courtyard. I withdrew from the crowd, all the better to observe from a distance. The mob had become even fiercer and was gathering in front of the gate. After a while, security gave in, opening the doors and letting everyone enter.

Following these vehement protests after the holy mass, between 12 and 6 pm, the restrictions were lifted temporarily. Their non-application constituted a failure to respect of the decisions of the National and County Committees for Emergency Situations. Now everybody could enter the cathedral regardless of his or her place of residence. The Minister for Internal Affairs, Marcel Vela, declared that the lifting of the ban was an “operational decision, in order to save a situation that could have degenerated”. The decision was taken in reaction to very real tensions, which might otherwise have had very serious consequences for those involved in the pilgrimage and possibly led to violence between pilgrims and security forces. Such violence might have affected the image of the country in both the national and international media. “So there was guilt or liability. It was an operational decision that complied with the law”.<sup>36</sup> Secretary of State Dr. Raed Arafat, on the other hand, stated bitterly that he did not know who had taken such a decision and called for all State and religious institutions to join with “them” in the observance of these rules and the provisions issued by CNSU or government.<sup>37</sup>

The spokesperson for the Archdiocese of Iași, Father Sturzu said that it was a rather difficult situation. In order to reduce tensions, they had allowed access to all those who had forced the entry. However, he asserted that those people who had forced their way in had come to Iași not so much for the pilgrimage, but with the intent to provoke and to incite others to disobedience. He condemned the attitude of those who caused this “scandal” during the service and pointed out that this was not the right attitude for a believer, but it was like “a black dot on a white sheet”, overshadowing the feast day. The church also refuted the statements of Șoșoacă that she negotiated with the church’s representatives. In fact, Father Sturzu said to me that “We have absolutely nothing to do with such negotiations. We saw what was going on. The coffin was not removed under anyone’s pressure or negotiation with anyone, but at the decision of the Metropolitan Church”.

Given this infringement of the CNSU anti-COVID rules, a secular civic group named RESET<sup>38</sup> filed a complaint against the organizers of the pilgrimage, targeting the Archdiocese of Iași, the Prefecture, the City Hall and the gendarmerie. The complaints concerned the failure to have the rules maintained and abuse of office during the pilgrimage. RESET wanted to know why the gendarmes had reversed the decision, given that it had been announced that access would be limited to Iași residents. They considered that the authorities were neither transparent nor coherent

in their decisions, and had failed to impose and maintain restrictions in these “delicate” times of pandemic.<sup>39</sup>

The authorities seemed to respond to the situation with a “seesaw approach”, as in the evening, after 6 pm, restrictions were reintroduced, with the gendarmes starting to monitor the pilgrims once more, refusing access to those who could not prove that they lived in Iași. Though not as fierce or crowded as previous day, relatively small group protests occurred on the final day of the pilgrimage (October 15) lasting until midnight, just in front of the cathedral.

As an event in the public sphere, pilgrimages can function as a stage for political campaigns or demonstrations. In earlier ethnographic fieldwork I have come across similar such demonstrations. For example, in 2015, during the feast day of Saint George on Büyükada, an island off Istanbul in the Sea of Marmara, I saw several political party candidates on the eve of parliamentary elections taking advantage of the presence of a large crowd of pilgrims to publicize their campaigns (Diktaş, 2018). Likewise, in November 2019 in Lod (Israel), on the feast day of Saint George, dozens of Christian Arabs protested against the Patriarch Theophilus III, the head of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land, accusing him of selling Church land to Israeli private-sector investors (Diktaş, 2020). In this respect, Romanian pilgrimages do not seem to differ from the pilgrimage centers that I have observed before. Also working on Romania, Mihaela Simona Apostol (2011) notes that politicians often participate in pilgrimages in the hope of reinforcing their credibility and winning public support during election campaigns. During the presidential election campaigns of 1999, Ion Iliescu (President of Romania from 1989 to 1996, and subsequently from 2000 until his retirement in 2004), accompanied by the then-president Emil Constantinescu, attended the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva with several of his supporters, who even went so far as to chant slogans like “*Iliescu-president!*” after Holy Mass. In the same year (1999), again during the feast of Sfânta Parascheva, a group of nuns from Vladimirești Monastery (Galați) was reported to have protested against the then-Patriarch Teoctist Arăpașu, accusing him of collaboration with Securitate because he had served his first years as patriarch under the Romanian Communist regime.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, /Cătălin Dumitrescu tells us how in 2004, Social Democrat (PSD) parliamentary candidates and their wives turned the pilgrimage of Sfânta Parascheva into a public relations success by distributing 60,000 cabbage rolls to the poor, together with 200,000 litres of wine and beer. In 2007, on the eve of the elections, PNL



(Partidul Național Liberal) leaders and the entire PSD staff in Iași, and also the president Traian Băsescu, were among the pilgrims (Cincu, 2007).

In 2020, Sfânta Parascheva provided a memorable platform for Diana Șoșoacă's rising stardom. After the scandalous "upheaval" she helped to create during the pilgrimage, she gained a particular fame among AUR members, becoming something of a political celebrity in social media. Thanks to the combination of COVID pandemic and the pilgrimage, she had achieved a political goal. The way she provided moral support for pilgrims who had allegedly been discriminated against, along with her self-assured stance and the aggressive tone of her statements helped to exacerbate the tensions at the 2020 pilgrimage, raising her visibility among the country's various right-wing groups. She did not explicitly declare her affiliation with the AUR during the protests and pretended to be an "ordinary believer", there only to combat the strictly secular authorities. The clear nexus between her and the party was revealed after the pilgrimage was over. A Facebook page titled "Susțin Diana Iovanovici-Șoșoacă - Senator de Iași" appeared on 20 October 2020. In a very short time, the page gained 13,000 followers openly endorsing her candidature as the AUR's candidate for senator for Iași. Finally, the AUR achieved an unexpected success in the Romanian parliamentary elections of 6 December 2020. Just a year after the party's creation in December 2019, the party entered the Parliament having won roughly 9 percent of the total votes for both houses. Diana Șoșoacă was elected senator for Iași. Tudor Popescu, a well-known secular political commentator, remarked that "AUR este partidul moaștelor" ("The AUR is the party of the relics") implying that it had benefited greatly from the controversies about restrictions on pilgrimage during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to Sfânta Parascheva, Șoșoacă and other leading AURist figures had made appearances with plenty of media coverage at other restricted pilgrimages, including those of Sfântul Dimitrie cel Nou in Bucharest (27 October 2020) and Sfântul Andrei in Constanța (30 November 2020).

However, it must be stressed that the vast majority of potential pilgrims and Iași residents neither questioned or protested against the ban. Hundreds of believers complied with the authorities' decisions. Non-residents of Iași who could not reach the relics brought flowers for the saint, a discreet sign marking their veneration. They gave the flowers, together with the *pomelnice* list, to the volunteer wardens to be taken inside the church. These volunteers stayed at the entrance of the cathedral

for the whole duration of the pilgrimage. Their duty was to receive the “unpermitted” pilgrims’ votive offerings: donations and flowers. Pilgrims put their *pomelnice* list together with the sum donated in an envelope and handed it over to a volunteer warden. While I was observing this exchange, I met an elegantly dressed woman in her late thirties carrying a bunch of beautiful flowers (see figure 38). Though working in Iași, she was living in a village outside the Metropolitan zone and thus was not eligible to enter the cathedral. Very calmly, she remarked to me that:

It does not mean that if I do not go to St. Parascheva this year, I give up faith in God. Pilgrimage, although desirable and an extraordinary form of faith, is not a dogma, not in Orthodoxy. Giving up the pilgrimage does not mean that I love Sfânta Parascheva less or that the Saint no longer loves us, on the contrary. Sometimes, if you no longer have access to the one you love, this love may increase. I understand the restrictions and respect them.

The narratives that I collected were multiple and in different forms. One of my respondents (not a pilgrim) in Iași, who defined himself as a “modest believer”, was against massive religious gatherings, and he did not hide his frustration with the pilgrims and pilgrimage in general.

I completely agree with these restrictions, the main cause of what is happening to us now is ignorance, not the restrictions that everyone complains about. It has been repeated again and again: mask, social distance, disinfection. They do not listen. You get the impression that it is a mass of manipulated people, a herd of cattle! This is not a simple flu. Each of these people is a blind killer. These pilgrims are guilty of killing people. Blind criminals! (*criminali orbi!*) Because they do not want to be open-minded (*minte deschisă*), they do not want to listen to common sense rules. They say that they want liberty but their religious liberty means my death. Even Jesus would not agree with this event in this critical period.

### ***2.3.Touching the relics: contagion or grace?***

Orthodox Christianity involves all five senses. People listen to prayers, hymns and the ringing of bells. Frescos and icons and fine vestments catch the eye. Incense, basil, or the fragrance of relics appeal to the sense of smell. Furthermore, people taste the communion wine, the ceremonial bread, the wheat cake for the dead (*colivă*) or holy water. Touch establishes the intimacy of physical contact through many ritual gestures as well as

the touching and kissing of icons and relics. All this connects worshippers to the sacred through the human sensorium. In other words, “touch is the sign of meeting in religion” (Barna 2007:12). Touch is also associated with miraculous healing in Christianity, a belief originating in the numerous Gospel stories of Jesus healing people by touching.

At Sfânta Parascheva, as in other church rituals of the Orthodox church, pilgrims touch the glass-covered icons and relics with their bare hands, their cheeks and foreheads; they kiss and embrace them. This is the received way to show respect and love to the saint. Pilgrims also bring various items, including shawls, handkerchiefs, necklaces, rings, wallets, cotton pieces, flowers, basil and clothes with which to touch the relics. This “sacred contagion” is believed to imbue the objects with both general, protective powers and the power to cure sickness. Embodied in these objects, the grace of the relics is extended in space and time. These vernacular practices, neither preached nor encouraged by the church, are rather silently tolerated. However, occasionally, the pilgrims are kindly warned by senior priests not to exaggerate and step outside the “right path” and enter a “magic, superstition and fetish zone”.<sup>41</sup>

Though COVID-19 spreads primarily through close contact with an infected person, one may get the virus by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching his or her/one’s own mouth, nose, or eyes.<sup>42</sup> For these reasons, some sensory rituals of Orthodox Christianity were questioned as public health measures were put into place in European countries, including Romania. There was much discussion as to whether the Eucharist (*Sfânta Împărtășanie*) should continue to be given with a single spoon (*Linguriță*). In addition, tactile practices such as embracing other worshippers at church services in a sign of peace, kissing crosses and icons and relics were also topics of often heated debate.<sup>43</sup>

The core element and the main ritual of the pilgrimage is venerating the relics (*să se închine moaștelor*) by touching (*atingere*) and kissing (*sărutare*). The authorities of the pilgrimage took a series of unprecedented hygiene measures. Masks were obligatory in both the queue and the cathedral. There were automatic dispensers of sanitizing gel every ten metres along the line. Regarding the actual touching of the relics – or rather the glass-topped coffin – the authorities’ position was less apparent. No direct statement was ever made by State authorities that the coffin with the relics might constitute a source of contagion. Attention was focused on any crowding that might occur during the pilgrimage and on the potential infringement of the physical distancing. The clerical authorities, on the

other hand, insisted that there was no way to tell pilgrims not to touch the relics. As “holy, relics cannot harm anyone”.

Sfânta Parascheva is not contagious... there is no wickedness, disease under her power. On the contrary. Sfânta Parascheva's relics are the source of healing and comfort. Not only today, yesterday, but for two millennia.<sup>44</sup>

One of the gendarmes whom I talked to made a witty comment on the religious authorities' statements regarding the risk of contagion:

They are right. The saint is not infectious, but we have not yet become saints, we have not reached this measure of holiness, so we do infect.

On the other had, the “legal” pilgrims, locals of Iași, did not show any signs of rebellion. Volunteers distributed masks to the pilgrims, starting with the end of the line. They had no hesitation in asking those who were failing to respect the rules on social distance to comply (see figures 27 to 29). Writing from a personal point of view, the most exciting part was to observe the moment of encounter with the saint's relics. None of the pilgrims showed any hesitation in touching, kissing or embracing the relics. The kisses were real as their lips and faces touched the surface of the coffin. They showed no sign of fear or abstention. After this veneration (*închinare*), the priest present anointed the pilgrims' wrists and foreheads, marking them with the sign of the cross. After every four or five pilgrims had performed their acts of veneration, a nun cleaned the glass cover of the coffin with a sanitizing substance.

## Conclusion

Pilgrimages are far from being monolithic occasions and they are certainly not all similar in character. They differ in terms of structure, setting and goals. In reaction to the earlier Turnerian characterizations of pilgrimage as a universal paradigm englobing *liminality*, *communitas*, and *transformation*, Eade and Shallnow (1991: 5) present pilgrimage as a capacious arena capable of accommodating many competing religious and secular discourses. As several anthropologists have pointed out, and as I hope to have shown in the present article on Sfânta Parascheva, rather than simply embodying core values, pilgrimages may come to

be an arena for contested meanings and popular protest. The Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage, as it took place in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, can be seen as a realm of conflicting discourses of a multi-vocal, ambiguous character. Although it was deemed a structured and non-chaotic pilgrimage which had been running for years under the competent management of the ecclesiastical authorities, this situation was shaken in 2020: the physical sites of the pilgrimage and the main rituals stayed the same, the pilgrimage itself and the shrine turned into a place saturated with the conflicting polysemic narratives of different actors.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the pilgrimage honouring Sfânta Parascheva can be seen at three levels. Firstly, the decisions taken in an attempt to manage the pandemic had a major impact on the scale of the pilgrimage and made it necessary to address certain broad logistical questions. Secondly, the measures taken to combat the pandemic created tensions in the relationship between the Romanian Orthodox Church and the State which, broadly speaking, had been friendly and consensual since the end of the Communist régime. Finally, the pilgrimage, somewhat unexpectedly, became a site used by the far-right, historically an important force in Romanian politics, in its ongoing attempts to win the attention of the general public.

To begin with the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on general material and logistical questions, these were multifaceted. The traditional spectacular *Calea Sfinților* (Saints' Way) procession was cancelled in 2020. The Gypsy-Roma pilgrims were not as visible as they had been in previous years due to the mobility restrictions. No candles were lit on the wall used by the Roma pilgrims to practice their vernacular rituals (see figure 19).<sup>45</sup> The souvenir market was severely hit and donations dropped sharply, too. In 2020, the authorities gave a figure of a mere 25,200 pilgrims managing to pass in front of the saint's relics. (In 2019, the number of pilgrims had been around 200,000). In 2020, the pilgrims gave around 3 million lei as *pomelnice* (donations), a figure almost five times lower than that of 2019. Shared warm food, *sarmale* and wine, were also missing from the 2020 pilgrimage due to the hygiene regulations, hence dissolving the *communitas* of the event in the Turnerian sense of the term. The distribution of packed biscuits and bananas to the pilgrims was a very poor substitute. So while the pilgrimage was still held in 2020, essentially for local residents, it lacked its usual collective fervour and warmth.

Against this backdrop of a great annual event much reduced in tone and in quantitative terms, the pilgrimage, considered to belong to all

Romanian Orthodox believers, also generated conflict in public space and the media. Questions of access to the relics became unstable. Conflicts flared. In its attempt to manage the pandemic, the State “unexpectedly” and “abruptly” claimed authentic ownership and legitimate power over the practice of pilgrimage, taking decisions to exclude people from it in the name of rational public health measures. This seemingly “sole sovereignty” of the State over the pilgrimage led to unprecedented tension between the Romanian Orthodox Church (the BOR) and the State (current government). For the first time in thirty years, the Church was to use the term “discrimination” to designate the way it had been treated.

The very unusual nature of the situation in October 2020 comes into focus when we recall that since 1989, Church-State relations in Romania have been based essentially on a spirit of partnership. Given that 85% of Romania’s population belongs to the Orthodox Church, it is unsurprising that the discourse of Romanian identity essentially equates Romanian-ness with membership of that church. It has a highly privileged place in the life of the nation and can be a considerable source of strength and legitimacy for political actors. Having played an important role since the revolution of 1989, the Church is basically considered as an equal partner of the State (Dale-Harris, 2012; Stan and Turcescu 2007: 121). In the country’s religious marketplace, the Orthodox Church occupies a quasi-monopolistic position which the Romanian State maintains in a number of ways. From central government funds, the Church receives subsidies to cover priests’ salaries and the costs of the construction and renovation of church buildings. In institutional terms, the established Church and State structures are intertwined as well. The State Secretariat for Religious Denominations, for example, is virtually the representative of the Orthodox Church in the state apparatus with most official positions being occupied by Orthodox clergy. The situation in Romania does not, therefore, provide much evidence to support the imminent secularization thesis, one lens through which State-religion relations in Romania have been considered by certain recent writers (Stan and Turcescu 2007, Romocea 2011 and Spina 2016).

To return to the case of the pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva, the symbiotic relationship between State and Church can be illustrated by the following examples of events in 2020. By lifting the restriction for six hours on the feast day, the liberal government (PNL) led by Prime Minister Ludovic Orban seemed to have compromised on some points of discord, attempting to balance the needs of the conflicting parties. While

the compromise seemed to have produced a discreet agreement for a short time, it did not resolve problems underlying the organizational and emotional conflict associated with the disagreement over access to the Sfânta Parascheva's relics. As a result, further mutual dissatisfaction was expressed by actors from both Church and the State. Later in the month of October, a further pilgrimage was banned, that of Saint Dimitrie in Bucharest (27<sup>th</sup> October 2020), with potential pilgrims from other towns being forbidden to attend. The Romanian Orthodox Church Patriarchate criticized the government for this measure in harsh terms, with the Patriarch Daniel suggesting that "divine punishment" would ensue for those politicians who had banned pilgrimage. In a public statement, he resorted to quoting the words of Saint Paul ("God does not allow himself to be mocked!" "He is patient but he is also just" and "He sometimes uses bitter medicine to bring people back to the right path").<sup>46</sup>

As already mentioned, Sfânta Parascheva is Romania's most prominent national saint. During the COVID-19 pandemic, on the occasion of her pilgrimage in late 2020, the volatile politics of Romanian far-right groups and nationalist parties emerged in public space. As we have described earlier, one particular party, the AUR, exploited a situation in which poorly communicated decisions regarding the management of the pilgrimage had created some degree of discontent. They conducted what was essentially a pre-election communications campaign. However, these protests were misrepresented in both national and local media, being simplistically linked to the theme "grief among the pious pilgrims". The news coverage failed to explain the meaning and context of protest adequately, leading the audience to perceive these people as simply "furious pilgrims" or "discriminated" believers who had been pushed together under the pressure of the COVID-19 restrictions. Even the seemingly secular media underestimated the role of far-right actors on this unexpected politico-religious stage.

According to Cristina Ariza (2020) far-right groups in the USA and Europe are exploiting the COVID-19 crisis to further their aims. Alongside other actors, they are actively seeking to discredit the effectiveness of the response by the public-health authorities in order to promote their ideological objectives. This is manifest in different ways: through public disinformation, the spread of conspiratorial thinking, with theories and campaigns targeting different ethnic or minority groups as enemies and lastly, in some instances, through targeted physical attacks. Certain of the COVID-19-related conspiracy theories are based on the belief that the virus

does not exist and is a hoax to impose a totalitarian state. Misinformation campaigns place blame for the pandemic and its consequences on the traditional targets of the far-right, including small ethnic groups and confessional minorities like Muslims, Jews and others. Since the beginning of the pandemic there has been a sharp rise in anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic incidents, in different local contexts and in different guises.

The findings of Ariza (2020) are similar to accounts given in the interviews I conducted in the field. Widening the frame, I would suggest that my analysis may show that the conspiracy stories circulated in the messages of far-right groups at the Sfânta Parascheva pilgrimage echo those circulated by more mainstream far-right movements in Europe. The AUR promoted its memorable, often crude and generally weak narratives in the hope of expanding its network of supporters during the pilgrimage. Their key claim was that COVID-19 did not exist. The AUR also went so far as to attack other ethnic groups present in Romania by demonizing the country's ethnically German president Klaus Iohannis, the Prime Minister Orban whose father is said to be Hungarian, and the secretary of State of Syria-Palestinian origin, Raed Arafat. Their discourse constructs an argument blaming the liberal government (PNL) for failing to contain the pandemic because it comprised figures of various "non-Romanian" ethnic backgrounds. AUR members portrayed themselves as the "real patriots" telling the "truth" about the pandemic while at the same time promoting xenophobic sentiment by incorporating "enemy" rhetoric into their messaging. Although their discourse has an anti-authoritarian component, including slogans such as "Jos dictatura" ("Down with dictatorship"), "Libertate" and "Constituție", the party is actually rooted in authoritarianism. In fact, weaving as it does multiple strands of conspiratorial thinking, the party is clearly opposed to any form of State control of far-right groups.

To summarize my findings with respect to this third area in which COVID-19 had an impact on Sfânta Parascheva's feast days, like any socially constructed event, a pilgrimage can be a site of contest over its practices and meanings. Moreover, such contests can be blatantly political. In 2020, it was clearly the opportunities offered by the tensions created by COVID-19 pandemic which enabled certain political groups to exploit the pilgrimage for new ends. These groups /which emerged in conflict at Sfânta Parascheva in 2020 were operating at different scales, local and national, and from different political standpoints – religious fundamentalist, ethno-nationalist and secularist. During my research, I gathered material which,



when studied, clearly showed me that the meanings attributed to a saint like Sfânta Parascheva and her pilgrimage are not fixed but rather fluid, open to multiple interpretations and significations. Such meanings are ever open to change. Moreover, the power relations and conflicts which emerged in 2020 are much more complex than theorization focused on a classic sacred/secular dichotomy would suggest. ore work on the changes in process around Sfânta Parascheva at this crucial moment needs to be done. In conclusion, I note, however, that the vast majority of pilgrims to the Metropolitan Cathedral were spectators of the conflicts. As I was there to continue my long-term research project on the saint, I was more attuned to any exceptional developments like the protests which, in the bigger picture, may be taken as quite minor. Whether a saint present for hundreds of years in Iași – and perhaps others like her in the Balkans – will unwittingly continue to provide platforms for contemporary political trends remains to be seen.

## APPENDIX



Figure 1. An Orthodox nun wearing a mask for protection against the COVID-19 infection sprays disinfectant and wipes the glass cover of the casings said to contain holy remains of Saint Parascheva, Iași, Romania. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.



Figure 2. Icon of Sfanta Parascheva.  
Photo by the author, 20.11.2020.



Figure 3. Pilgrims staying overnight in the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.



Figure 4. Saints' Way (Calea Sfinților). Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 5. Saints' Way (Calea Sfinților). Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 6. Pilgrims in a dense but orderly queue, waiting to visit the Saint.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.





Figure 7. Pilgrims in the line. Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 8. Pilgrims queuing to see the Saint.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 9. Pilgrims in the line. Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 10. Women pilgrims touching the relics of Sfânta Parascheva. On the right, a priest supervises, ensuring that the flow of pilgrims is maintained.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 11. Pilgrims touching the relics of Sfânta Parascheva.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.



Figure 12. Pilgrims kissing the relics of Sfânta Parascheva.  
Photo by Oana Nechifor, 14.10.2019.





Figure 13. Plates of sarmale are distributed to pilgrims by volunteers.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2018.



Figure 14. Baldachin. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.





Figure 15. A souvenir stall. Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.



Figure 16. Gypsy-Roma Pilgrims at Sfantă Parascheva.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2017.



Figure 17. A Gypsy-Roma couple lighting votive candles to place in the niches of an old stone wall on the pilgrims route to the cathedral.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2019.





Figure 18 . A carpet of candles created by Gypsy-Roma pilgrims.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2019.



Figure 19. The section of a historic stone wall which the Gypsy-Roma faithful transform into a 'wall of light' with their candles during the pilgrimage.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 20. Diana Șoșoacă

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=4957620334256080&set=a.157820360902792>



Figure 21. Diana Șoșoacă with her supporters.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 22. Weeping icon of Sfânta Parascheva.

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=3620013078038428&set=pb.100000893133776.-2207520000..&type=3>

("This information circulates on the internet. It is not true, we do not have such an icon in the Metropolitan Cathedral or in the chapel. Maybe it is from somewhere else.")



Figure 23. An AURist pilgrim from the city of Focșani contemplates the cathedral he is not allowed to enter. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.





Figure 24. AURists under the leadership of Șoșoacă intruding the pilgrims' line.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.

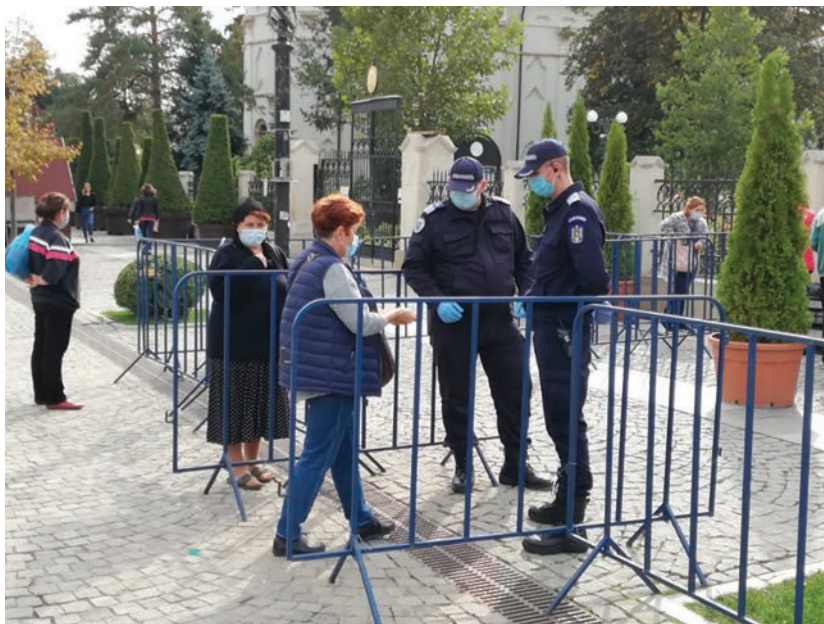


Figure 25. Gendarme checking the residence cards of the pilgrims.  
Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.





Figure 26. The entrance to the Cathedral of Iași. A gendarme checks pilgrims' residence cards. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020. Placard: "We urge you to comply: Wear masks, clean hands frequently, keep a distance of 1.5 metres".



Figure 27. Pilgrims with masks in the line. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.



Figure 28. Pilgrims in the line, under the surveillance of medical assistants from Red Cross. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 29. Pilgrims in the line respecting physical distancing. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 30. Far-Right (AUR) protestors in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020. ("Jos Dictatura" – "Down with the Dictatorship")



Figure 31. "You steal our Saints?! You steal our liberty!!"  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.





Figure 32. Far-Right protestors in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași. The slogan reads "Down with the Dictatorship!".  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 33. A woman protestor rebukes a ganderme, holding a copy of the Romanian Constitution. The book is upside-down.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 34. Holy Mass with physical distancing designated for a limited number of people from Iași . Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 35. People from Iași, watching the Holy Mass on the giant screens installed for the 2020 pilgrimage in Uniri Square. Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 36. Pots of chrysanthemums inside the cathedral, sent by the faithful unable to participate in the pilgrimage. Photo by the author, 13.10.2020.





Figure 37. A woman pilgrim from Iași, taking a bunch of flowering busuioc (basil) to Sfânta Prascheva with which to touch the relics.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.



Figure 38. A female pilgrim with flowers in her hand.  
Photo by the author, 14.10.2020.





Figure 39. Massed flowers outside the Metropolitan Cathedral of Iași during the 2020 pilgrimage to Sfânta Parascheva, sent by the faithful unable to participate.  
Photo by the author, 15.10.2020.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cultural intimacy by means of breaking the codes of a culture (Herzfeld, M, 2005).
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/peste-140-de-autocare-cele-mai-multe-din-voluntari-au-ajuns-la-iasi-la-pelerinajul-sfintei-parascheva-1199779>
- <sup>3</sup> <https://inroman.ro/2017/10/01/transport-gratuit-pentru-pelerinii-la-Sfanta-parascheva-30568/>
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.cfrcalatori.ro/comunicate/cu-trenurile-cfr-calatori-in-pelerinaj-de-Sfanta-parascheva-3/>
- <sup>5</sup> Parascheva of Iași, Ioan the New of Suceava, Filofteia of Curtea de Argeș, Dimitrie the New of Bessarabia, Grigore of Decapolis and Nicodim the Holy of Tismana
- <sup>6</sup> According to a recent popular legend, the Communist authorities hired a couple of peasants to bury the relics. When they began to dig, the sky, which until then had been clear and sunny, started to be filled with big black clouds. A strong wind blew up, with rain and hailstones as big as pigeon's eggs falling, all accompanied by thunder and lightning. Terrified, people ran towards the Metropolitan Cathedral to pray to Sfânta Parascheva to intercede with God, so as not to ruin them. They called the priests and rang the bells. They prayed until late and finally the storm stopped and the Communists renounced their mission
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/iasi/sf-parascheva-l-a-adus-la-iasi-si-pe-viitorul-presedinte-al-romaniei-ni1280>
- <sup>8</sup> <https://doxologia.ro/de-ce-o-iubesc-romanii-pe-sfanta-parascheva>
- <sup>9</sup> On 1 December 1918, the Romanian National Assembly proclaimed the union of Transylvania and other territories with Romania
- <sup>10</sup> "The sacred is the source, the profane is the receiver, this is the only path, although in Christianity is to be found everywhere in the profane, due to the omnipresence of God. This 'contamination' with the sacred is a confirmation of God's power which will be enforced in wonders and miraculous healings which happen after physical contact with the sacred". Durkheim, Emile, 2001. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.229
- <sup>11</sup> An Akathist (Greek: Ἀκάθιστος Ὕμνος, "unseated hymn") is a type of hymn usually recited by Eastern Orthodox or Eastern Catholic Christians, dedicated to a saint, holy event, or one of the persons of the Holy Trinity.
- <sup>12</sup> The Greek word ἰχος (ichos), referring traditionally to one of the eight modes of the monophonic chant in the Orthodox Church.
- <sup>13</sup> <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/pelerinajul-sfintei-parascheva-la-final-cati-bani-aun-cheltuit-pelerinii.html>

- 14 To “de-covidize” is a neologism coined by a celebrity priest, one Father Constantin Necula. “Sfânta Parascheva «de-covidează» neputința de a ne iubi unii pe alții”.
- 15 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200302-pilgrims-in-irans-holy-cities-lick-shrines-to-defeat-coronavirus/>
- 16 <https://www.altoadige.it/cronaca/coronavirus-trentino-in-isolamento-43-pellegrini-e-15-operatori-sanitari-1.2280336>
- 17 <https://www.dw.com/en/saudi-arabia-hajj-cancellation-spells-frustration-and-empty-pockets/a-54064035>
- 18 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/travel-news/amarnath-yatra-cancelled-in-light-of-covid-19-pandemic/as77104455.cms>
- 19 <https://stirioficiala.ro/informatii>
- 20 Romanian Government. 2020 Măsuri. (Internet) (cited 19 october 2020). See <https://gov.ro/ro/masuri>
- 21 <https://www.garda.com/crisis24/news-alerts/327776/romania-municipality-of-suceava-placed-under-quarantine-march-30-update-4>
- 22 <https://doxologia.ro/video-comunicat-de-presa-sarbatoarea-sfintei-cuvioase-parascheva-iasi-2020>
- 23 <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhia-cere-ridicarea-masurii-excesive-de-interzicere-a-pelerinajului-de-la-iasi-1381990>
- 24 <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24343258-mitropolia-moldovei-despre-interzicerea-pelerinajului-iasi-intampla-acum-este-cel-mai-mare-abuz-din-90-incoace-asupra-libertatii-constiinta.htm>
- 25 <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/ctp-despre-cererea-patriarhului-de-a-se-renunta-la-interdictia-privind-pelerinajul-la-moaste-asa-e-la-godporatie-depinzi-de-clienti-1382101>
- 26 <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/politica/mihai-chirica-infectat-cu-coronavirus-cum-se-simte-primarul-municipiului-iasi-1381924>
- 27 Attention! In Iași County, the new coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is spreading a great speed. RESPECT the sanitary measures so as not to endanger your life, or the lives of those around you. In Iași county, it is compulsory to wear a mask in closed and open public spaces. Wear the MASK correctly, covering your nose and mouth. Keep a DISTANCE and avoid congestion. Maintain HAND HYGIENE and DISINFECT YOURSELF after touching objects, avoid contact with shared surfaces. WARN those close to you to follow the rules strictly!”, It is shown in the message signed by ISU Iași.
- 28 <https://www.agerpres.ro/culte/2020/10/08/mitropolitul-teofan-moldova-traieste-una-dintre-cele-mai-triste-perioade-din-istoria-sa--587652>
- 29 <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/coronavirus-4-octombrie-situatia-pe-judete-numarul-cazurilor-noi-a-crescut-in-bucuresti-inca-un-judet-in-care-situatia-este-la-fel-de-grava-lista-completa-19610379>
- 30 [https://www.partidulaur.ro/program\\_aur](https://www.partidulaur.ro/program_aur)

- 31 Extreme right has its roots from Iron Guard Garda de Fier an interwar period Romanian fascist organization that constituted a major social and political force between 1930 and 1941. In 1927 Corneliu Zelea Codreanu founded the Legion of the Archangel Michael (Legiunea Arhanghelului Mihail), which later became known as the Legion or Legionary Movement; it was committed to the “Christian and racial” renovation of Romania and fed on anti-Semitism and mystical nationalism. Currently there are five extreme right parties in Romania: The Greater Romania Party, The New Generation Party – Christian Democratic (PNG-CD); The Party “Everything for the Country” (TPȚ) the New Right (ND) Movement and the Nationalist Party (Cinpoș, 2012)
- 32 <https://stirileprotv.ro/stiri/actualitate/protest-anti-masca-in-scoli-la-cluj-napoca-vrem-sa-respiram-nu-sa-ne-mascam.html>
- 33 <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2020/jun/eu-council-ctc-terrorism-and-corona-note-7838-20.pdf>
- 34 Arahāt. This made-up word used by the woman in the crowd is a pun on the surname of Raed ARAFAT. She mixes it up with the similar-sounding Romanian word “RAHAT” (a vulgar word for excrement) by replacing the ‘r’ with an ‘h’. This rather vicious pun was produced in a poor attempt at humour.
- 35 Constantin Brâncoveanu (1654 –1714) Prince of Wallachia. He was deposed on account of his negotiations with anti-Ottoman forces in the Ottoman-Russian War of 1710, being subsequently beheaded together with his four sons by the Ottomans. He was declared a martyr and then canonized by Romanian Orthodox church under the name of Sfinții Mucenici Brâncoveni în 1992.
- 36 <https://www.agerpres.ro/social/2020/10/15/vela-ridicarea-restrictiilor-la-pelerinajul-de-la-iasi-o-decizie-operativa-pentru-a-salva-o-situatie-care-putea-degenera--591858>
- 37 <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24352533-restrictii-ridicate-pelerinajul-iasi-oamenilor-fost-permis-accesul-moastele-sfintei-parascheva-fara-buletin-reactia-lui-raed-arafat.htm>
- 38 According to their self-description on their official Facebook page: The Reset Platform Association (Reset) is a civic movement that has become an Association (though founded in Iași), open to all Romanian citizens who believe in freedom, integrity, competence, solidarity, responsibility and transparency. Reset aims to create and develop projects that promote and facilitate open and participatory governance, anti-corruption and community building projects. <https://www.facebook.com/ResetIasi>
- 39 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_8nD6VrXOoc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_8nD6VrXOoc)
- 40 <https://www.ziaruldeiasi.ro/iasi/sf-parascheva-l-a-adus-la-iasi-si-pe-viitorul-presedinte-al-romaniei~ni128o>

- 41 Interview with Father Marian Timofte [https://doxologia.ro/video-cum-se-va-](https://doxologia.ro/video-cum-se-va-desfasura-anul-acesta-pelerinajul-la-sarbatoarea-sfintei-cuvioase-parascheva)  
42 [desfasura-anul-acesta-pelerinajul-la-sarbatoarea-sfintei-cuvioase-parascheva](https://doxologia.ro/video-cum-se-va-desfasura-anul-acesta-pelerinajul-la-sarbatoarea-sfintei-cuvioase-parascheva)  
43 [https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/covid-19/information/](https://www.who.int/westernpacific/emergencies/covid-19/information/transmission-protective-measures)  
44 [transmission-protective-measures](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/sfatul-bor-de-a-nu-saruta-icoanele-a-ajuns-la-bbc-1268011)  
45 [https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/sfatul-bor-de-a-nu-saruta-icoanele-a-](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/sfatul-bor-de-a-nu-saruta-icoanele-a-ajuns-la-bbc-1268011)  
46 [ajuns-la-bbc-1268011](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm)  
47 [https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm)  
48 [parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm)  
49 [moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm](https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-esential-24331325-pelerinajul-iasi-Sfanta-parascheva-pandemie-mitropolia-moldovei-nu-interzice-atingerea-raclei-moastele-nu-fac-rau-sfintenia-nu-este-contagioasa.htm)  
50 To date, there are no reliable figures for the Roma population in Romania as  
51 many Gypsy-Roma refuse to register their ethnic identity in official censuses  
52 for fear of discrimination. However, for the city of Iași the Roma population  
53 is estimated at around 1,376 according to a report published by the Iași  
54 Municipality.  
55 [https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-regimul-a-cazut-1391554)  
56 [lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-regimul-a-cazut-1391554)  
57 [regimul-a-cazut-1391554](https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/patriarhul-daniel-dumnezeu-nu-se-lasa-batjocorit-cand-comunistii-au-interzis-inchinarea-la-sfintele-moaste-regimul-a-cazut-1391554)

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