

## **Melchizedek Stefanescu and Uniting of the Principalities**

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**Abstract:** The Union of the Principalities was a key event in Romanian history and played a significant role in the formation of the Romanian state. Melchisedec Stefanescu (1823-1892), leading figure of the age, participated actively in the front seeking the Unification of the Romanian Principalities and was one of the leading militants of the union, along with his contemporaries. His multilateral personality (scholar, priest and writer) was completed by that of a patriot. The conclusion of my article is that his role and involvement, far from being secondary, made possible the transition from tradition to modernity and progress. The research is mostly synchronous, analyzing the interaction between cultures in order to create a cultural diagnosis for the eighteenth century.

**Keywords:** union; Romania; history; modernity; personality; militant; patriot

### **1. Introduction**

The 1948 Revolution brought in the souls of Romanians hope and it made more obvious that their dream of centuries about national unity could accomplish. Although the desire to union was not shared unanimously by the upper strata of society in the Principalities and not even by the intellectual elite, there had risen countless militant for the national cause.

Among the religious personalities who fought in the unionists' camp, the prelate Stefanescu Melchisedec particularly distinguished itself. His name ranges among the notorious names of clergy who have contributed to the achievement of National Independence and Romanian Union (along with other senior hierarchs as Andrei Saguna, Sofronie Miclescu, Scriban brothers, Scarlat Varnav).

## **2. Personality**

Mihail Stefanescu (as his layman name was) was born on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1823 in the village of Garcina in Neamt County. The son of the priest Petrache and priestess Anastasia, he had many relatives who embraced monasticism: both grandparents, who were former priests, his brothers, Archimandrite Ieronim and Bishop Valerian, two sisters, Evghenia, ecclesiarch to Varatic and Suzana, abbess at Razboieni.

At the age of 7 he began his studies at the school near the village church, then, he continued his studies at Targul Piatra, and at the age of 12 years at Socola Seminary (1834), founded by Veniamin Costachi. After graduation, he arrived in the village Serbesti as a teacher, in Neamt County, and in 1842 he resumed his studies at “Veniamin Seminar”, institution reorganized under the Archimandrite Filaret Scriban.

In 1843 he was a substitute teacher at the seminary in the departments of rhetoric, pastoral, national history and geography, and December 24<sup>th</sup> he was tonsured with the name of Melchisedec. He was ordained deacon by the Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia, Meletie Istrati, and reached the position of inspector of the seminary. Following the disfavor in which Filaret Scriban fell before the Metropolitan Bishop Meletie, and as a result of the fact that Melchisedec made common cause with his mentor and protector, he was dismissed from the office of inspector and teacher at the seminary and he was sent to the monastery Neamt, period that ended only with the death of Meletie in 1848. In the same year, he left at the Theological Academy in Kiev from where he returned in 1851 with the title, MA in Theology and Letters”, but not before being ordained Hieromonk by Metropolitan Bishop Filaret of Kiev. In 1852, Bishop Sofronie Miculescu named him honorary protosinghel and in 1856, archimandrite. He went to Huși to occupy the position of rector and professor at the seminary founded here in 1851, being stated in this postion by the decree no. 843, of March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1856.

## **3. Ad-hoc Divan**

Delegated in the Ad-hoc Divan in 1857, Melchisedec had a fruitful activity, culminating with his election in 1860 (even if for a very short term), as the Minister of Cults and Instruction in Kogalniceanu’s government. He was a member of the Committee for the secularization of the monasteries, which he regretted later because secularization affected the whole church, not just wealthy monasteries. He

became Lieutenant of bishop at Husi (1860), bishop of the new established Bishopric of the Lower Danube (1865) and Bishop of Roman (1879), where he will pastor until his death (16<sup>th</sup> May 1892). Another important moment of his career was gaining the dignity of being an active member of the Romanian Academy in 1870.

Serving as teacher, seminary rector, Bishop Lieutenant and later as bishop, in a century of great national achievements, Melchisedec served not only the Church but to a very large extent, the country and its people. Far from separating the Church's activity from the socio-political realities of the time, he believed the institution to which he belonged had to be actively involved in all that was connected with the destiny of the country. The sons of the Church are, at the same time, the sons of the Country, and their shepherd should consider, in addition to their moral and spiritual guidance, to support their social aspirations, to the fulfillment of national goals.

As a delegate of the clergy in the ad-hoc Divan of 1857, he was, along with Scriban brothers, one of the most zealous defenders of the union of the Principalities, an evidence of that being his numerous stands at meetings. His political involvement aimed at the Union, at bringing a foreign prince and at neutrality.

As a professor and rector at Husi seminary, Melchisedec was the protégé of the Bishop, although their political views differed. Melchisedec was a staunch defender of the Union of the Principalities, while Meletie Istrati, influenced by his brother Nikolai Istrati was against the union. On 29<sup>th</sup> June 1856, at the occasion of the celebration of the Bishopric at Husi, Melchisedec made an uplifting speech in support of the union that he called, "Sacrifice for the union of the Principalities". Since the union opponents believed that by doing this great goal, Moldova will lose its state organization and Iasi will be a simple country town, Melchisedec demanded this sacrifice, for the removal of these ideas and feelings. That speech showed admirable qualities and special culture.

Uttered in the midst of fighting for the union of the Principalities, the speech was welcomed by the Austrian Consul in Iasi Gödel Lannoy, who did not see with good eyes the union of two Romanian countries, "as a demagogic and religious tool designed to break the indifference of the masses and to ransack popular passions" and he uttered the opinion that its true author was "the radical lawyer Kogălniceanu", which used the name of the Archimandrite in order to convince people of the need for unity. The Consul, a formidable opponent of the union, a

close associate of caimacan Teodor Bals and subsequently of N. Vogoridi, reported this speech to the Foreign Minister, Count Buol, on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1856. This work of Melchisedec, through the union sheet of Iasi was widespread throughout the country, in many copies. Even Alecsandri was instructed to go to Bucharest to ensure further dissemination of the brochures.

Of clergy scholars, Melchisedec, with Neofit Scriban had a remarkable influence in the era of unification, these two archimandrites (after the Congress in Paris stated the consultation of the national will by means of the ad hoc Divans) leading a relentless task of preparing public opinion. So as Neofit Scriban was writing in Iasi, in 1856, the brochure "The union and the separation of Romanian principalities", which had a wide echo in his contemporaries consciousness and rejected the separatist arguments, at the same time Melchisedec was presenting his mobilizing speech, "Sacrifice for the union of the Principalities". Neofit Scriban's work didn't escape unnoticed by Mihail Kogalniceanu who appreciated it as "sprung from the purest patriot's heart". Of course, as it will happen with the preaching of Melchisedec, this brochure too was the object of a special report by the Austrian consul Lannoy, which signaled its popularity and wide diffusion. The latter held to inform the Count Coronini, while taking measures to prevent the spread of the two unionist brochures over the Carpathians in Transylvania and Bukovina.

The translation of Melchisedec's brochure in French and sending a special envoy to Bucharest to ensure its spread, it appears to be part of a program developed by Kogalniceanu rather than by the Archimandrite, Kogalniceanu being an energetic Unionist Party leader and it is assumed that "he sketched the plan of the resounding sermon, which the Archimandrite gave its final form. Frequent appeal to the text of the Scripture on the one hand and to stylistic values, on the other, would indicate a collaboration of two scholars". There seems to be a single statement that assigns to Kogalniceanu the paternity of the sermon in its entirety, but the ideological and stylistic analysis of the text shows that this work is the product of a collaboration. Melchisedec's sermon manuscript is preserved, in the spelling feature of the Archimandrite, at the Academy Library, in the Kogalniceanu Archives (XI, ms. 233-241 11 f); the future bishop had given it the title, 'Sacrifice for the Moldavian-Romanian union', which Kogalniceanu changed, making additions and corrections, which proves that he went beyond his responsibility as an editor. The close collaboration between the two scholars both aiming at the same goal, that of

accomplishing the union, demonstrates that the struggle on the same side of the barricade created a durable friendship between these great patriots. The relations between Kogalniceanu and Melchisedec in the subsequent period are well known; in the Ad Hoc Assembly, the first representing the large landowners of Dorohoi and the Archimandrite, the clergy of the diocese Huși, they worked feverishly preparing the program of the reorganization of the country. Joint activities in the interest of the country will bring them even closer, Kogalniceanu itself confessing after that “from 1857 on we were as one”.

The desideratum of the union of the sister countries was proclaimed by Melchisedec almost on any occasion, having at hand, it is true, two means suitable for this purpose, the pulpit and the chair. This means that he had the great opportunity to spread unionist ideas through his sermon to the believers from all social strata, and through the spoken word from the chair, to his students and his colleagues. Thus, at Huși there was created a strong unionist trend, which also influenced the health of the Bishop Istrati Meletie, who, in the spring of 1857, fell ill and, shortly afterwards, died. That same spring, before the elections for the ad-hoc Divan, the clergy of Husi was convened to choose a representative from his ranks. Melchisedec was removed from the list because he was a monk. There was an anti-unionist candidate in the person of John Rascanu, Episcopal priest, supported by Meletie Istrati, who had not yet fallen ill. In the elections frauded by the Caimacam Vogoride, the bishop’s protégé was elected. The elections were contested and cancelled, and other elections were planned. Meanwhile, the Bishop Meletie Istrati died (July 31<sup>st</sup>).

The new elections were held by the Bishop Grenadie Tripoleos (Sendrea) which was in charge of the Bishopric’s lieutenants. Thus, on the 29<sup>th</sup> August, after the vote of the 31 clergymen and laymen, Melchisedec was elected as member of the Divan. Melchisedec thanked the voters in a speech, then, together with the clergy, he constituted a reform program that he would support in the Divan, on behalf of his voters.

The Moldavian Divan ad hoc meetings began on September 22<sup>th</sup> / October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1857, under the formal presidency of the Metropolitan Bishop and the actual presidency of the Vice President Costache Negri. Among the participants there were great patriots as: Mihail Kogalniceanu, Petre Mavrogheni, Anastasie Panu, Constantin Hurmuzachi, Dimitrie Cozadini; among the clergymen there were present: Sofronie Miclescu, Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia, Nectarie Hermeziu,

lieutenant of the bishop at Roman, Grenadie Sendrea, Lieutenant Bishop of Husi, Filaret Scriban, abbot of the Socola monastery, Calinic Miclescu, abbot of the Slatina monastery, the Archimandrite Neofit Scriban, elected by the clergymen in Iasi, the Archimandrite Melchisedec, the deputy of the clergy diocese of Husi, and Dimitrie Matcas, elected by the clergy in Roman.

The session opened with a special ceremony. The Metropolitan Bishop of Moldavia, Sofronie Miclescu, as chairman of the Divan, concluded his speech after opening service with the very suggestive words, "The Moldavian-Romanians today are all one, and they have the same origin, the same blood, a homeland, a history, one faith, one God. So have faith, ones dear to God, have faith in the homeland and the nation." It is noted that the Bishop placed the faith in homeland and nation immediately after the faith in God. Melchisedec stood out, along with the Scriban brethren and other enlightened clergymen, forming the nucleus of the movement for the unification and the achievement of the clergymen's desires.

D.A.Sturdza asserts that Melchisedec rised at the height of the priest and of the patriot. The seriousness with which he dealt with problems, his particular oratorical talent, his theological and secular culture and his strong patriotic impulse, made that henceforth, Melchisedec be consulted by great statesmen, in all religious matters that were to be addressed, and, Melchisedec's speeches in the Divan would highlight his patriotism and total adherence to the modernizing ideas of his time. He asked through his discourses, thinking to autocephaly, the independence of the Orthodox Church in the United principalities, keeping the unity of faith with the ecumenical Church of the East; however, he proposed the creation of a synodal authority in which to be also represented the parish clergy of each diocese."

The resolution in favour of the Unification (with a foreign prince, together with the other postulates: autonomy, neutrality, representative government) voted on 7<sup>th</sup> /19<sup>th</sup> October 1857, with 81 votes for and 2 votes against (Nectarie Hermeziu, lieutenant bishop of Roman and the chancellor Alecu Bals). There remained recorded the memorable words of two of the deputies, those of Ioana Roata, the deputy of the peasants who, subscribing for the union, said, "We know not how to hate, but God knows mercy", and those of the Metropolitan Bishop Sofronie Miclescu:., "Where's the flock, there's the shepherd", and Mihail Kogalniceanu, the author of the resolution, emphasized that the biggest desire, the most general, fed by all past generations, the one that is the present generation's soul, that which if

fulfilled will bring happiness to future generations, is the union of the principalities in a single state”.

On the matter of religious life, there was decided, at the meeting of 15<sup>th</sup> /27<sup>th</sup> October 1857, the freedom of religion and the establishment of a central authority (which would lead the Church). At the meeting on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1857, Melchisedec argued that the establishment of a central authority in the church, with bishops, to join the representatives of parish priests, and with autocephaly, according to which the Church should be independent, but will maintain spiritual links with other Orthodox churches cannot harm in any way the authority of the Romanian state. With the clergymen who elected him, Melchisedec made these postulates regarding the life, the position and the role that and the joints that priesthood had to fulfill.

These propositions presented at the meeting of 20<sup>th</sup> December 1857 to be discussed by the members divan, were the following: priests should be used in villages as teachers; they should take care of the religious education of children; they should be remunerated and when they become elderly or fall ill they should be retired; they ought to be exempted from certain duties to the owners; their settlement in villages should not be at the will of the owners; their judgment should be made according to appropriate canonical laws; the preparatory schools of the future clergy should be reorganized; there ought to be established a church log; the positions of deans should be occupied by worthy priests; to institute trustees from every church; places of worship ought to be built according to certain criteria and not by chance; at the election of bishops there should attend also representatives of the clergy; in seminars there ought to be received orphan children of priests; proclaim the autocephaly of the Church etc.

At the hearing on December 18, he strongly supported the allotment of peasants. The amendment on the peasant issue presented at the meeting received only three signatures: Neofit Scriban, Melchisedec and V. Malinescu. It consisted of categorical sentences, such as: removal of beatings, of all beilicuri and havalele, the fall of the landlords “we want to escape, to redeem ourselves from bondage, we want to not be owned by anyone, to be of the country and to have a country. We wish not to offend anyone's rights, and also that ours not be darken”. Melchisedec's aspiration to form an Orthodox clergy that be in decent condition both culturally and economically, emerges not only from the activity carried in the Divan, but also, from his writings, where he states that we will never have an illuminated clergy

until the improvement of its fate. He did not neglect the monastic clergy: 'through their life and their position the monks can easily dedicate to studies and contemplations, they form a special group, from which the church leaders are elected'.

After completion of the works of the ad hoc Divan, Melchisedec returned to Huși, to his teaching and to the seminary rectorship. Since it seemed to him that the idea of the union hadn't entered too deeply into the consciousness of the people, he worked actively for preaching it, taking several speeches, including those of 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> December 1858, spoken in the cathedral of Husi. The first one, delivered with the occasion of the election of the deputies among the small landowners and townfolk of Falcui.

The second lecture was held on the occasion of the election of the deputies among the large landowners of the same land, Falcui, where there was also present the Colonel Alexandru Ioan Cuza.

The Paris Convention, signed on 7<sup>th</sup> /19<sup>th</sup> August 1858, decided the future status of the Principalities from a political, social and administrative point of view, after receiving the report of the Commissioners who examined the two ad hoc Divans' resolutions. The two countries were to bear the name of the United Principalities of Moldavia and of the Romanian Country, remaining under the Ottoman suzerainty and under the collective guarantee of the great Powers. At Focsani there had to operate a Central Commission which had to prepare the legislation and a common Court of Cassation; the armies had to receive identical organization and each country had to have its own lord, elected among the second generation of citizens who meet certain conditions (age: minimum 35 years; wealth: at least three thousand ducats or golden coins in annual income, social rank: to have held public office for ten years or have been part of the Assembly). Until the election of the ruler, the caimacam holding the position had to be replaced by three caimacams designated by an Elective Assembly. It was stipulated the existence of a legislative assembly, elected based on," electoral stipulations annexed to the Convention". In Moldova, the Caimacam was favorable to the new national party by two of its members, Anastase Panu and Basil Sturdza, only the third, Stephen Catargiu being a reactionary. Thus, there were appointed in the government and the administration of the country, open minded personalities, as Vasile Alecsandri in the position of Secretary of State, Ioan A. Cantacuzino, Minister of Finance, Panait Donici, public



works minister, and as the head of the army, as a replacement for the hatman, Alexandru Ioan Cuza.

The elections in Moldova have brought in the Elective Assembly, as expected, a majority of the National Party (thirty-three members out of a total of fifty-five). The conservative minority was divided, some supporting the former ruler Mihai Sturdza, others, his son, Grigore Sturdza. The national party also was divided, some preferring Alecsandri, others Costache Negri. Uncertainty lasted until the evening of 3<sup>th</sup> /15<sup>th</sup> January, when the deputies met at Costache Rolla's house in order to agree on a single candidate. Neculai Pisotchi proposed Colonel Alexander Cuza which was accepted by all present. On the Election Day, 5<sup>th</sup> /17<sup>th</sup> January 1859, the partisans of Grigore Sturdza, whose registration was refused by the Assembly on legal grounds, voted also for Cuza, and the supporters of Mihail Sturdza did the same. Thus, Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected prince by the unanimous vote of those present, forty-eight in number, he being the one not to vote, by regulation. There followed his oath and an impressive speech of Kogalniceanu.

The election of 1859 brought Melchisedec full satisfaction. The reputation that the Archimandrite Melchisedec had acquired as a representative of the clergy in the ad-hoc Divan of Moldavia and the close ties of friendship that he had with the great men of the country, clergy and laity, made that, in due time, he be called to other higher duties.

In the first year of the reign of the first ruler of both principalities, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, there were established in Moldova, three ministries which unfortunately were cancelled prematurely. In the spring of 1860, the Prince gave Mihail Kogalniceanu the responsibility of forming the government. He thought of naming as the minister of Cults and Instructions a religious cleric and patriot which will help him with the secularization of the monasteries, on which largely depended the further development of the principalities. The cleric was found in the person of Melchisedec, fiery preacher in the pulpit and tribune of the union of the sister countries, teacher of theology and ardent patriot.

A government newspaper welcomed the appointment of Melchisedec as Minister for Religious Affairs and Public Instruction, printing words of praise about this man of the Church, with liberal and progressive principles in consonance with the changes occurring at that time in Europe.

The Ministry would handle also the issue of wealth of the monasteries, issue in which Melchisedec actively involved, something that he would later regret, not suspecting at the time that the secularization law would affect undedicated monasteries' possessions.

Unfortunately, Melchisedec's prodigious rise in public positions fuelled some envy. Melchisedec was attacked by Gr Cuza, the ruler's uncle, regarding the respect of the religious norms; he even went to affirming that the presence of a clergyman in ministry was a real misfortune for the national Church. These attacks brought, despite the insistence of the Prime Minister to resist, to the resignation of Melchisedec, on the third day after his appointment as Minister of Religious Affairs.

On the day of Melchisedec resignation from the position of minister, there appeared in the newspaper Danube Star from 7<sup>th</sup> May 1860, an article by Neofit Scriban, in which he argued that a cleric can hold public office in the state, without this being a canonical impediment. Although retired from the government, in spite of the adversity and the critics towards him, Melchisedec supported Cuza's initiatives, which he considered an imperative. Since October 1860, he worked in the committee that would bring out the secularization of the dedicated monasteries (which will be realised on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1863, by parliament's vote). Another role of Melchisedec is that of having activated throughout the reign of Cuza, in the Superior Board of instruction, compiling reports on different aspects of public education.

#### **4. Conclusions**

His patriotic work has attracted not only the envies but also the praise of the politicians of the country. All these eulogies made by prominent politicians and culture men, along with his tireless work taken in the front of the fight for the Union, in conjunction with other activities pursued by Melchisedec in different fields, recommend him as one of the great men of his time.

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