

**BETWEEN TEACHING, SERVING AT THE ALTAR AND WORKING IN
DIPLOMACY.
PETRU IONESCU (1867-1938),
A LESS WELL-KNOWN PERSONALITY FROM BANAT.**

Abstract: Petru Ionescu was an important personality from Banat, who lived and carried out his activity at the end of the 19th century and during the first half of the 20th century. He was born in the village of Iaz in Caraș-Severin County and acquired outstanding intellectual training in the German-speaking academic and cultural milieu, studying at Eisenach, Jena, Geneva and Chernivtsi. On 24 January 1896, Petru Ionescu obtained his PhD in Theology from the university in the capital of Bukovina. Initially, Ionescu worked as a professor at the Theological Institute in Caransebeș. Subsequently, he had three unsuccessful attempts to become an archpriest. Between the two World Wars, he devoted himself to serving the interests of the Romanian state, by becoming a member of the Romanian government and a diplomat.

Keywords: Petru Ionescu, Banat, priesthood, government, diplomacy.

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Preliminaries: Origin, studies and early career. Petru Ionescu (1867-1938) was an important personality born in Highland Banat, who lived and was active at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. The life of this personality unfolded between teaching, following his priestly vocation and serving his country in diplomacy. He was born at Iaz (Caraș-Severin County) and his father was a priest. Petru Ionescu passed the maturity examination at the Gymnasium in Debrecen (1887). His initial decision was to continue his studies not in theology, but in pedagogy and philosophy in the German-speaking cultural milieu. Thus, in 1888-1889, he attended courses of pedagogy and philosophy at the Universities of Eisenach, Jena and Geneva.² In the end, he chose to study theology at the University of Chernivtsi,³ arriving in the capital of Bukovina in 1889. That same year he became a member of the *Junimea* Romanian Students' Society and was elected first secretary and member in the literary committee for the societary year 1889-1890.⁴ In the next

¹ PhD in History, teacher at the Technical College of Turda; e-mail: neagurazvan10@yahoo.com.

² Szögi László, *Magyarországi Diákok Németországi Egyetemeken és főiskolákon 1789-1919*, Budapest, 2001, p. 359, no. 7005.

³ Szögi László, *Studenti români din Transilvania la universitățile din Europa în secolele XVI-XX*, Târgu Mureș, Editura Universității "Petru Maior", p. 166, no. 1330 and p. 171, no. 1383 and p. 201, no. 1641; Mészáros Andor, Szögi László, Varga Júlia, *Magyarországi diákok a Habsburg Birodalom kisebb egyetemein és akadémiáin 1789-1919*, Budapest, 2014, p. 468, no. 6913; Szabó Miklós, Simon Zsolt, Szögi László, *Erdélyiek Külföldi Egyetemjárása 1849-1919 Között*, I kötet, Marosvásárhely, Mentor Kiadó, 2014, p. 433, no. 38.

⁴ *Foaia Diecezană*, year IV, Caransebeș, 5 November (17 November) 1889, no. 44, p. 8; *Telegraful Român*, no. 119, Sibiu, 2/14 November 1889, year XXXVII, p. 480.

academic year, 1890-1891, the young scholar from Banat was elected president of *Junimea*,⁵ on 2 November 1890. From this point of view, he was one of the most remarkable Romanian students at the University of Chernivtsi, recognized as such by the student community of the Romanians in the capital of Bukovina. Obtaining brilliant results, Petru Ionescu was granted a PhD in Theology from the Bukovinean university, on 24 January 1896.⁶

Ionescu combined his teaching career with his clerical duties. Thus, from 1893 to 1906, although he had not completed his studies at Chernivtsi, he worked as a professor at the Theological Institute in Caransebeș (the pedagogical section). He was active in the *Ioan Popasu Reading Society* of the Theology and Pedagogy students in Caransebeș,⁷ whose president he was three times (1895-1896; 1903-1904; 1904-1905).⁸ From an administrative point of view, he was a member of the Diocesan Synod of Caransebeș and of the National Congress of the Metropolitanate of Transylvania.

Returning to the clerical aspects, we should note that on 6 November 1899, he passed the examination for qualification as a priest before the commission designated by the Diocesan Consistory of Caransebeș.⁹ However, he was not immediately ordained to the priesthood. In 1900, he received consecration as a deacon from the Bishop of Caransebeș, Nicolae Popea.¹⁰ Our sources indicate that he remained a deacon at least until 1902, and that in this capacity he conducted a rich activity, on several levels. Thus, in 1901 he was cashier of the Ioan Popasu Relief Fund.¹¹ In the autumn of 1901, he participated in the general meeting of the Association of Greek-Oriental Romanian Teachers from Caransebeș, held in Făget, and served as a deacon.¹² Ionescu participated in various church events, such as the consecration of the church in Rugi (today in Caraș-Severin County) on 14/27 October 1901.¹³ Also as a deacon, Petru Ionescu participated, on 29 June 1902, in the village of Herendești (today in Timiș County), in the centennial jubilee of the church in that village.¹⁴ For

⁵ *Foaia Diecezană*, year V, Caransebeș, 4 November (16 November) 1890, no. 44, p. 7; *Telegraful Român*, no. 118, Sibiu, 10/22 November 1890, year XXXVIII, p. 471; Eugenia Glodariu, *Asociațiile culturale ale tineretului studios român din Monarhia Habsburgică 1860-1918*, Cluj-Napoca, 1998, p. 70.

⁶ *Biserica și Școala*, year XX, Arad, 14/26 January 1896, no. 2, p. 15; *Telegraful Român*, no. 5, Sibiu, 16/28 January 1896, year XLIV, p. 18; Vasile Baltag, *Die Doktorschule für theologie bei der Universität aus Czernowitz (1877-1918)* in *Codrul Cosminului*, XX, 2014, no. 2, p. 338.

⁷ *Foaia Diecezană*, year X, Caransebeș, 23 April (5 May) 1895, no. 17, p. 8.

⁸ *Idem*, year X, Caransebeș, 8/20 October 1895, no. 41, p. 6; *Idem*, year XVIII, Caransebeș, 19 October 1903, no. 42, p. 7; *Idem*, year XIX, Caransebeș, 10 October 1904, no. 41, p. 5.

⁹ *Biserica și Școala*, year XXIV, Arad, 12/25 March 1900, no. 11, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Idem*, year XXIV, Arad, 5/18 November 1900, no. 45, p. 400.

¹¹ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XVI, Caransebeș, 21 January 1901, no. 3, p. 6.

¹² *Idem*, year XVI, Caransebeș, 7 October 1901, no. 40, p. 4.

¹³ Gabriela Hajdu, *Implicarea Bisericii Ortodoxe Române în susținerea bisericilor și mănăstirilor din comitatul Severin la începutul secolului XX* în *Altarul Banatului*, no. 10-12, October-December 2014, p. 135.

¹⁴ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XVII, Caransebeș, 14 July 1902, no. 28, p. 5.

his pastoral, pedagogical and literary merits, in 1902, Petru Ionescu was awarded the red girdle by the Bishop of Caransebeș, Nicolae Popea.¹⁵

The disappointments of his clerical career. The ecclesiastical career of Petru Ionescu recorded 3 unsuccessful attempts to become a protopresbyter/archpriest. Thus, on 30 December 1899, in the protopresbyterial synod of Belinț (today in Timiș County), elections were held for the appointment of a new archpriest, and Petru Ionescu submitted his candidacy. He obtained the majority of the votes, 51, compared to his opponent, Gherasim Sârb, who won just 13 votes. The two were presented to the Diocesan Consistory of Caransebeș, which had the final say. The consistory preferred Gherasim Sârb, the decisive argument in his favour being the fact that he was already ordained as a priest, unlike Ionescu, but also the fact that he came highly recommended, according to the newspaper *Biserica și Școala*, by the Bishop of Caransebeș, Nicolae Popea.¹⁶ In 1901, he ran again for the post of Archpriest of Vrșac, his opponents being Petru Barbu (a graduate of theology from Chernivtsi) and David Terfăloagă. The results of the ballot at the protopresbyterial synod of Vrșac meant that Petru Ionescu was the winner (45 votes), while his competitors had obtained much fewer votes (Petru Barbu 8 votes and David Terfăloagă 7 votes). However, the decision of the Diocesan Consistory of Caransebeș was, once again, not favourable to him, because the high ecclesiastical body appointed David Terfăloagă, a parish priest from Reșița, as Archpriest of Vrșac.¹⁷ In 1904, Petru Ionescu tried once again to become Archpriest of Vrșac, but suffered a further setback, being defeated in the elections by his opponent, Traian Oprea. In the protopresbyterial synod held on 20 September / 3 October 1904, Ionescu accumulated 20 votes, and Oprea 28.¹⁸

The reorientation towards a secular career. After unsuccessful attempts to become an archpriest, Petru Ionescu distanced himself from the clerical world, focusing on a secular career and obtaining remarkable results. At first, he was involved in political life, more precisely, in the election campaign of 1906, when he participated in an assembly held in Sacu for supporting the candidate of the Romanian National Party for the Hungarian Parliament, Ștefan Petroviciu, who was running for the electoral circle Zorlențu Mare.¹⁹

In 1907, Petru Ionescu was appointed to a position in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Instruction in Budapest, and before long, he went up in the hierarchy, becoming ministerial secretary, with effect as of 1 January

¹⁵ *Idem*, year XVII, Caransebeș, 16 June 1902, no. 24, p. 5; *Telegraful Român*, no. 68, Sibiu, 20 June (3 July) 1902, year L, p. 274.

¹⁶ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XVII, Caransebeș, 14 July 1902, no. 28, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Telegraful Român*, no. 134, Sibiu, 1/14 December 1901, year XLIX, p. 545; Vasile Petrica, *Institutul Teologic Diecezan Ortodox Român din Caransebeș (1865-1927). Contribuții istorice*, Caransebeș, Editura Episcopiei Caransebeșului, 2005, pp. 154-155.

¹⁸ *Telegraful Român*, no. 104, Sibiu, 28 September (11 October) 1904, year LII, p. 418.

¹⁹ Ioan Tomole, *Românii din Banat în luptele național-electurale de la începutul secolului al XX-lea*, Baia Mare, Editura Gutinul, 2000, p. 85.

1909.²⁰ In the Hungarian executive, Petru Ionescu distinguished himself through an outstanding activity, and in 1913 he was advanced by Emperor Franz Joseph to the position of departmental councillor in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Instruction in Budapest.²¹

In clerical terms, on 11 April 1911 Ionescu was consecrated as a priest by the Bishop of Caransebeș, Miron Cristea.²²

Although he acquired access to a significant governmental position, Ionescu remained close to his town of Caransebeș, as well as to the education system. Thus, in the spring of 1909 he donated 5 Kroner to the Society of Music Chanting in Caransebeș.²³ As ministerial secretary in 1914, together with consistorial assessor Matei Voileanu, Petru Ionescu chaired the maturity exam at the Romanian Orthodox Gymnasium in Brașov, one of the most important mid-tier Romanian educational institutions in Transylvania.²⁴ He found himself in an identical situation in 1915.²⁵ In the same quality, but together with consistorial assessor George Proca, Ionescu chaired (as the representative of the Hungarian government) the pedagogical qualification examination at the Andreian Seminar in Sibiu, held on 12-20 June 1914.²⁶ He chaired that examination once again, in 1915 (16-19 June).²⁷

During World War I, Ionescu kept his post in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Instruction in Budapest and, at the same time, he enjoyed a high prestige within the Romanian community. Thus, in 1916 he was elected deputy in the National Church Congress held in Sibiu, representing the circle of Oravița.²⁸ At the end of May that same year, he represented the institution at the pedagogical qualification examination from the Andreian Seminar in Sibiu, with consistorial assessor George Proca, the envoy of the Archdiocesan Consistory.²⁹

Ionescu was present in Oradea (16/29 October 1916), where the ordination and installation of Bishop Vasile Mangra took place.³⁰ In 1917, Ionescu was decorated by the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Carol I with the Order of the Iron Crown, class III.³¹ In the same year, Petru Ionescu was mentioned as leader of the editorial committee of the publication *Revista Preoților*, which began to be republished in Timișoara, on 1 November 1917.³² In the year of the Great Union, on

²⁰ *Telegraful Român*, no. 18, Sibiu, 17 February (2 March) 1907, year LV, p. 75; *Idem*, no. 122, Sibiu, 8/21 November 1907, year LV, p. 499; *Idem*, no. 140-141, Sibiu, 23 December 1908 (5 January 1909), year LVI, p. 581.

²¹ *Idem*, year LXI, Sibiu, 16/29 July 1913, no. 74, p. 303.

²² *Idem*, year LIX, Sibiu, 14/27 April 1911, no. 40, p. 179.

²³ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XXIV, Caransebeș, 12 April 1909, no. 15, p. 6.

²⁴ *Idem*, year XXIX, Caransebeș, 4 May (17 May) 1914, no. 18, p. 6; *Telegraful Român*, year LXII, Sibiu, 14/27 June 1914, no. 61, p. 251.

²⁵ *Telegraful Român*, year LXIII, Sibiu, 30 April (13 April) 1915, no. 46, p. 185.

²⁶ *Idem*, year LXII, Sibiu, 24 June (7 July) 1914, no. 65, p. 267.

²⁷ *Idem*, year LXIII, Sibiu, 11/24 June 1915, no. 61, p. 245.

²⁸ *Idem*, year LXIV, Sibiu, 29 March (11 April) 1916, no. 34, p. 135.

²⁹ *Idem*, year LXIV, Sibiu, 14/27 May 1916, no. 50, p. 203.

³⁰ *Biserica și Școala*, year XL, Arad, 6/19 November 1916, no. 44-45, p. 319.

³¹ *Telegraful Român*, year LXV, Sibiu, 29 April (12 May) 1917, no. 31, p. 125.

³² *Idem*, year LXV, Sibiu, 28 October (10 November) 1917, no. 89, p. 357.

19 June, Petru Ionescu represented again the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Instruction from Budapest at the maturity examination held at the Gymnasium in Braşov.³³ Unfortunately, in the current stage of research, we do not know the role he played or whether Petru Ionescu had any role in the events that led to the accomplishment of the Great Union.

Petru Ionescu's activity during the interwar period. After 1918, Petru Ionescu carried out his activity in Greater Romania, being an employee of the Romanian government. In 1920, he was mentioned as a subdirector of the education system for foreign religious denominations.³⁴ In 1923, King Ferdinand I presented him with the Medal "Reward for Labour in Support of the Church," class I – a clear sign that Ionescu had placed his work in the service of the Romanian State and the Orthodox Church.³⁵

That year, Petru Ionescu joined the diplomacy services and was appointed technical advisor to the Romanian legation in Belgrade (1923-1937), being entrusted with the mission of continuing the talks with the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, regarding the signing of the Romanian-Yugoslav School Convention.³⁶ In November 1923, the Romanian-Yugoslav talks started in Timişoara. The Romanian side was represented by Petru Ionescu, Cornel Corneanu and Petru Gârboviceanu, while the Serbian side was represented by Jovan Radonić (university professor) and Kosta Hadži (a lawyer from Novi Sad).³⁷ The talks did not lead to the signing of the convention. A new round of negotiations between the two sides took place in Timişoara on 24 February 1927.³⁸

Ionescu represented the Romanian Government on various occasions. Thus, he was the delegate of the Minister of Religious Denominations, Alexandru Lapedatu, at the funeral of the Bishop of Arad, Ioan Ignatie Papp (25 January 1925).³⁹

Petru Ionescu had a genuine ecumenical vision. In early 1925, he was elected to the Romanian National Committee of the *Universal Alliance for the Brotherhood of Peoples through the Church*, along with two other former students from Chernivtsi, the priest Gheorghe Ciuhandu and the archimandrite Andrei Magieru.⁴⁰

The peak of Petru Ionescu's career coincided with the 1930s. On 10 March 1933, together with Moise Ienciu, Silviu Dragomir, Cornel Corneanu (all of them graduates of theology in Chernivtsi) and others, Petru Ionescu signed, in Belgrade,

³³ *Idem*, year LXVI, Sibiu, 14/27 June 1918, no. 63, p. 251.

³⁴ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XXXV, Caransebeş, 16 August (29 August) 1920, no. 34, p. 5.

³⁵ *Idem*, year XXXVIII, Caransebeş, 26 February (11 March) 1923, no. 9, p. 8.

³⁶ Gligor Popi, *Românii din Banatul iugoslav între cele două războaie (1918-1941)*, Timişoara, Editura de Vest, 1996, pp. 137-138.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 137.

³⁸ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XLII, Caransebeş, 13 February 1927, no. 7, p. 7.

³⁹ *Biserica și Școala*, year XLIX, Arad, 1 February 1925, no. 5, p. 2; *Telegraful Român*, year LXXIII, Sibiu, 28 January 1925, no. 8, p. 3.

⁴⁰ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XL, Caransebeş, 8 February 1925, no. 6, p. 5; *Telegraful Român*, year LXXIII, Sibiu, 18 February 1925, no. 13, p. 2.

the Romanian-Yugoslav School Convention,⁴¹ which aimed to regulate the educational situation of the Romanians from Yugoslav Banat and of the Serbs from Romania. After the signing of this document, Ionescu remained in Belgrade with the mission of implementing this bilateral agreement. In 1935, Ionescu noted in a document that the provisions of the convention were not applied to the letter in Yugoslav Banat. Thus, Ionescu said that although Romanian teachers had been assigned to various primary schools, these were not recognized as independent Romanian schools and that the directors were Serbs.⁴² Very soon, because of the poor application of the Convention in the Serbian Banat, Petru Ionescu entered into a strong conflict with the deputy representing the Romanians in the Parliament in Belgrade, Alexandru Butoarcă, who was also chairman of the Romanian Central Committee in Yugoslavia. Ionescu was accused of involvement in the internal politics of the Romanians in the Serbian Banat, of insult, backbiting and discord.⁴³ The Romanian MP made great efforts for removing Ionescu from the Romanian delegation to Belgrade. On the other hand, in 1936, Petru Ionescu obtained a notable success: the opening, next to the preparandia (teacher-training school) and the high school in Vršac, of a section in Romanian. Moreover, as a result of his endeavours, a boarding school for boys was set up.⁴⁴ Ionescu became a person of interest to the Serbian authorities, in the context in which the reports sent by the prime-praetors from Petrovgrad, Pančevo, Alibunar, Kovin Vršac and Bela Crkva in 1936 indicated an intensification of the national activity of the Romanians in the Serbian Banat. According to the Serbian officials, this action was coordinated by Petru Ionescu.⁴⁵ Being attacked both by the Romanian intellectuals in the Serbian Banat and by the local authorities, Petru Ionescu was removed from the position of technical advisor to the Romanian legation in Belgrade in 1937.⁴⁶ In the period in which he worked at the Romanian embassy, Petru Ionescu handled the payment to the Romanian students in Yugoslav Banat of the scholarships they had been granted by the government in Bucharest.⁴⁷ In our opinion, the activity of Petru Ionescu at the Romanian legation in Belgrade was outstanding and he always served the interests of the Romanians in Yugoslavia. He fell victim to the conflict for power and influence in the community of the Romanians from the Serbian Banat.

Petru Ionescu also carried out cultural projects. From very early on, much like many of the theology graduates from Chernivtsi, he was a member of the ASTRA Association. Thus, on 9-11 September 1900, he participated in the General Assembly from Băile Herculane, where he served as a member of the commission for the study of the draft regulation for the establishment of the scientific and literary sections.⁴⁸

⁴¹ Gligor Popi, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 153.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, pp. 121, 123, 155.

⁴⁴ *Foaia Diecezană*, year LI, Caransebeș, 23 August 1936, no. 34, pp. 2-3.

⁴⁵ Gligor Popi, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 170.

⁴⁸ *Telegraful Român*, no. 101, Sibiu, 9/22 September 1900, year XLVIII, p. 416; Liviu Groza, *Caransebeșul și Marea Unire*, Lugoj, Editura Dacia Europa Nova, 2003, p. 33.

Like other personalities of that time, Petru Ionescu also had a career in banking. Even before World War I, he was attested as a member in the management of the *Sebeșana Deposit House* from Caransebeș (1905).⁴⁹ It is possible that his involvement with this institution dated from before the above-mentioned year. He kept his position in that banking institution during the interwar period, when he was a member of the board of directors.⁵⁰

After the end of his diplomatic mission in Belgrade, Petru Ionescu returned to Romania. Towards the end of his life he suffered from diabetes, a sickness that caused his demise, in Bucharest, on 17 February 1938. According to his last will and testament, he was brought to and buried in Lugoj (20 February 1938).⁵¹ He had been married to Letitia Tempea, daughter of the priest-teacher Iosif Tempea from Lugoj.⁵²

Final considerations. Petru Ionescu was one of the important personalities of Banat on the cusp between the 19th and the 20th centuries. He had a thorough academic training, acquired in the German-speaking cultural environment (Eisenach, Jena, Geneva, and Chernivtsi). Although initially he wanted an ecclesiastical career, his attempts to become an archpriest failed, which is why he reoriented himself towards a secular career. At first, he was a clerk in the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Instruction in Budapest. During the interwar period, he became a member of the Romanian Government, as well as an illustrious diplomat.

⁴⁹ *Foaia Diecezană*, year XX, Caransebeș, 20 February 1905, no. 8, p. 6.

⁵⁰ *Idem*, year XXXVII, Caransebeș, 6 March (19 March) 1922, no. 10, p. 9.

⁵¹ *Idem*, year LIII, Caransebeș, 27 February 1938, no. 9, p. 8; *Telegraful Român*, year LXXXVI, Sibiu, 27 February 1938, no. 9, p. 4.

⁵² *Foaia Diecezană*, year X, Caransebeș, 29 October (10 November) 1895, no. 44, p. 7.