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Mission and/or conversion: strategies of Byzantine diplomacy

Abstract

The religious element has always represented, inevitably, a feature of Byzantine diplomacy, offering it the instruments necessary for a fruitful dialogue with the pagan peoples in Eastern Europe. As one could notice, the classical policies of Constantinople involved different strategies, as well as exorbitant expenses, which did not always ensure long-term peace. On the other hand, religion operated at an abstract level, and in the medieval mentality, celebrating rituals such as baptism or marriage to a Byzantine Porphyrogenita established a stronger connection than the one constituted through peace treaties.

Although one cannot assert a decisive opinion concerning the spread of eastern Christianity, whether it was a purpose of the external Byzantine politics or just a means of obtaining peace, one thing is certain: preaching the Gospel represented a diplomatic practice with an immense power of persuasion.

These successes of the mission



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patronized by the Patriarchate of Constantinople, especially in the IXth and Xth centuries show us that in this direction, the Byzantines were one step ahead of the Western world.

Keywords

mission, conversion, diplomacy, Slavs, barbarians

1 Introduction

If one takes into account the fact that the Byzantine Empire considered itself to the end of its existence the follower, not only *de iure*, but also *de facto* of the Roman Empire, we will not be surprised by the resemblance of the institutions, of the practices used along the years. Moreover, this continuity will give rise to general principles in international laws, which will perpetuate even in the modern epoch. In Antiquity and in the Middle Ages, Byzantium represented in diplomacy a chain link, one that knew how to adapt, to model traditions, to transpose them into concrete requirements of the time.

The geographic location of Constantinople made the capital of the Byzantine Empire a place of interest for the barbarians in Asia and in the West. The migratory peoples in these regions were impressed by the resplendence and luxury of the Imperial Court, and Constantinople, in its quality of heir of ancient Rome, rejected in principle any contact to *Barbaria*. Being a chosen and faithful people, the Byzantines considered themselves invested with a special right to rule other people.

Being a strong centralized state, in which the emperor represented the top of the social pyramid, being invested by divinity in this high position, all the diplomatic endeavors emanated from him. In their relations to foreigners, the emperors always kept in sight the divine origin of the juridical

foundation of their power, which was above all people and all states. Not having equals on earth, they considered all the chiefs of state as being subordinate to their power in a certain way. What must be mentioned is that there is, however, a certain malleability, manifested in treating differently the chiefs of state. In the official conception, only the sovereign of Byzantium had the right to the title of *basileus*, he was the only one who gave reliable laws for the whole world¹. This conception, this doctrine persisted until the end of the existence of the empire, but the practice had to suffer concessions, a certain malleability. This engendered the idea of establishing a hierarchy in the protocol adopted towards different peoples.

An honorable place was occupied by Persia, with which the Byzantine Empire had multiple connections, sometimes good, other times bad, since the beginning of its existence, when Constantine the Great (306-337) was obliged to bear in mind the existence of the Sassanid state. The sovereigns of the dynasty established in Partia in the third century sought to re-establish the former power of Persia, in the time of the dynasty of the Aquemenides (559-330) and changed the name of the state to the kingdom of New Persia. Here they adopted the customs and the procedure specific to Oriental states, taken over not only by Byzantium, but also by the empire later, in general².

The two states – Byzantine and Persian – considered themselves the only civilized ones against the barbarian peoples, and their solidarity was materialized in common measures taken in order to protect the passes in the Caucasus

¹ Louis Bréhier, *Le monde byzantin*, t. II: *Les institutions de l'empire byzantin*, (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1970), p. 230.

² V. P. Potemkin et alii, *Istoria diplomației*, vol. I, second edition, revised and completed, Romanian editor: Petre Constantinescu-Iași, (Bucharest: Științifică Publishing House, 1962), p. 75.

Mountains against the invasion of the Turanian peoples towards Asia minor (the treaties of 532 and 562)³.

The formulas for addressing also reflected the cordial relations between the two sovereigns. They treated each other as brothers, and the king of Persia was called *basileus* by the Byzantine emperor, in a time when this term was not yet in use. The king of Persia called the Roman emperor *Caesar*, and for himself he used the title *Şah-in-şah (basileus basileion)*⁴.

After the tense period in the relations between the two states, characteristic to the end of the reign of Constantine the Great (306-337), there followed one of collaboration until the time of emperor Phocas (602-610). During the time of Justinian I (527-565) two *eternal peace* treaties were signed (in 532 and 562). The leaders of the two states announced each other their enthronement through embassies and intervened for the protection of the members of their dynasties. Emperor Arcadius (395-408) named the Persian king Yazdegerd I (399-420) custodian of his son, Theodosius II (408-450), and the shah Kavadh I (488-531) was ready to determine Justin I to adopt his son, the future king Chosroes I (531-579).

In 590, Chosroes II (590-628) was dethroned by his subjects, but a year later, Emperor Maurice (582-602) helped him re-occupy his throne. After Maurice was also banished by Phocas, this ended definitively the good relations between the two states, causing a long war to start. It started as a revenge of Maurice, so that in 604, Chosroes II invaded the Empire. Until 610 he occupied almost all the cities in superior Mesopotamia⁵. The Persian disappeared from history when Islamism triumphed in the first half of the VIIth century. The destruction

³ Louis Bréhier, *Le monde byzantin*, t. II, p. 230.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 517.

⁵ Alain Ducellier, Michel Kaplan, *Byzance. IV-e – XV-e siècles*, (Paris: Éditions Hachette, 2003), p. 22; Paul Lemerle, *Istoria Bizanţului*, translated by Nicolae-Şerban Tanaşoca, (Bucharest: Teora Publishing House, 1998), p. 74.

of their state was largely caused by the victorious war of Emperor Heraclius I (610-641)⁶. The Arab Emirates developed later on its ruins.

2 Byzantium and the Slavic peoples

In the IXth and Xth centuries, Byzantine missions obtained a series of triumphs, succeeding in converting several peoples to Christianity. Among these there is the great Slavic mass, converted to Christianity in the second half of the IXth century.

The huge mass of the Slavic population that invaded since the end of the VIth century Central and Eastern Europe, as well as the Balkan Peninsula, caused major demographic and political changes, through the disappearance of political structures and the limitation of the borders of the Byzantine Empire, but also modified radically the Christian configuration of these areas, which had been partly Christianized by the Church.

The settlement of the Slavic population in the east, center and south-east of Europe, represented a great challenge in the second half of the first millennium for the whole Christian world, but especially for Byzantium. An existential challenge. The future of the empire, its very survival depended on finding certain solutions of cohabitation with the Slavic population, organized later in new states such as Great Moravia, Bulgaria, the Kievan Russia, Serbia or Poland.

Turning them into allies or *foederati* of the Empire or their assimilation, if possible, and in this context, bringing this population to the Christian faith was a prime preoccupation of the Byzantine world⁷. Thus, according to certain historians, one

⁶ Alain Ducellier, Michel Kaplan, *Byzance. IV-e - XV-e siècles*, p. 22.

⁷ Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, translated by Claudia Dimitriu, afterword by Nicolae-Șerban Tanașoca, (Bucharest: Corint Publishing House, 2002), p. 303.

can refer to a Byzantine political and missionary project for the Slavic world, elaborated and carefully supervised by the Constantinopolitan Court. In the perspective of these historians, the exceptional work of brothers Constantine-Cyril (826-869) and Methodius (815-885) in the Slavic world is part of the so-called *Slavic project* or *Slavic matter*. Especially in the IXth century, but also in the following ones, there took place a genuine evangelization of Europe, Slavic and Germanic nations, as well as the Hungarians, being converted to the Christian faith. Thus, Christian preaching went much beyond the former borders of the Roman Empire in the time of Constantine⁸.

In virtue of the Byzantine political conception of harmony between *divine matters* and *human matters* and of the *symphonia* between the two powers left by God on Earth to people, the political and the religious one, the imperial power and the Church, it was obligatory and necessary for them to cooperate in the field of Christian mission as well. Byzantine emperors, following the model of Constantine the Great, who called himself “equal to the Apostles”, had, according to the Byzantine political ideology, to support and spread Christian faith through political, social and legislative actions, as well as through the support offered to the missionary and philanthropic activity of the Church.

For any citizen of the state it was obvious that the sources of the power in their country were the Church and the universal sovereignty of the emperor⁹. In this belief-conception that Byzantines had, which represented the ideological basis and the moral justification of Byzantium’s internal and external politics, one can identify a triple origin and influence: that of Rome, that

⁸ Warren Treadgold, *O istorie a statului și societății bizantine*, vol. I (284-1025), translated by Mihai-Eugen Avădanei, editors: Victor Spinei and Bogdan-Petru Maleon, preface by Victor Spinei, (Iași: Institutul European Publishing House, 2004), p. 493.

⁹ Cristian Ștefan, *Misiunea creștină în Apus și Răsărit (secolele V-X)*, (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană Publishing House, 2002), pp. 194-195.

of Hellenism and that of Christianity. The idea that their Empire represented the civilized world was borrowed from the Romans, whose exclusive heirs Byzantines considered themselves, that is why they proudly called themselves *romei* (*rhomaioi*). This belief was so strongly rooted that it was accepted even by the most obvious enemies of Byzantium. This implacable political belief-conception, which they abode by, was the source of the imperialist plans of tsar Simeon I the Great of Bulgaria (893-927), who called himself “emperor of the Bulgarians and of the Romans”, and later, tsar Stefan Uroš IV Dušan of Serbia (1308-1355), who called himself “emperor of Serbia and Romania”. For the Byzantines they were just some usurpers of the true title that only the emperor in Constantinople had.

“What audacity to call the universal emperor, the one and only Nikephoros, the great one, Augustus: «emperor of the Romans» ! O, heavens ! O, earth ! O, sea ! What can we do to these villains and malefactors !”¹⁰ was the exclamation full of awe and revolt of the Byzantines upon hearing the papal legates read the letter sent to emperor Nikephoros II Phocas (963-969), in 968. In this respect, all that existed outside this Byzantine *oikoumene* was doubtful, dangerous, coming from a disordered world, without God, a world of darkness and of disbelief, the world of barbarians. This attitude of the Byzantines towards these insignificant peoples, came from the Hellenistic milieu and confirmed and strengthened the political Byzantine theory.

As the Christian emperor of Romans was supposed to bring the whole world in the Christian Byzantine *oikoumene*, the very existence of these barbarians was an outrageous transgression

¹⁰ Liutprand, *Relatio de Legatione Constantinopolitana*, LVII, pp. 200-201, in Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, note 1, p. 299.

of his sovereignty. Through his quality of heir of ancient Rome, the Empire rejected any contact with *Barbaria*¹¹.

Foreign nations, migratory peoples, that is, the barbarians, were impressed by the resplendence and the luxury of the imperial Court and by the power of the *rhomaioi*. It was considered that they were permanently full of jealousy and when this “obscure world” of the barbarians attacked the Byzantine *oikoumene*, this act was considered as a revolt or attempt to revolt against the government by right¹². In Antiquity, the Greeks attributed the name *barbarians* to the nations that spoke foreign languages, which they did not understand, and whose way of thinking and style of life were incompatible to the Greek ones.

Later, this term also referred to the ones living outside the Greek culture community. This is the significance the Byzantines took over for the term *barbarian*. What differentiated the *rhomaioi* from the barbarians was not, first of all the language or the ethnicity, although many times the Byzantines despised the other languages, considering them rudimentary and blunt, but the same faith and the allegiance to the same unique emperor. As the political imperialism went along with religious imperialism and they supported each other, the term *barbarian* equalled the term *pagan*. The pagan that accepted the Orthodox Christian faith implicitly accepted allegiance to the Emperor, therefore theoretically he stopped being a barbarian.

The third element which lay at the foundation of the Byzantine *oikoumene* came from the Judean-Christian tradition. The Byzantines believed that “any government is from God” and that it is part of God’s universal plan, being closely connected to the history of man’s salvation. The *rhomaioi* were the ones that

¹¹ Francis Dvornik, *Les Slaves, Byzance et Rome au IX^e siècle*, (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1926), p. 61.

¹² Emanoil Băbuș, *Introducecere în Istoria Bisericească Universală*, (Bucharest: Sophia Publishing House, 2003), p. 229.

were called through Constantine the Great to serve Christ and spread Christ's teachings to the peoples of the world. Thus, *pax romana* became the same as *pax christiana* and the external politics of the Empire became closely connected to the missionary activity of the Church¹³. The alliance between the Church and the State, outside the borders, often led to the fact that the *barbarians* identified the political interests of the Empire with the destiny of Christianity.

In many situations, the non-Christian leaders persecuted Christians, not only out of fanaticism, but also because they suspected them of being the emperor's agents. This was one of the causes which made Christianity penetrate so little among the Muslim peoples coming from the East. This strong alliance between the State and the Church, which meant combining the missionary work with the external political purposes of the Empire, was sometimes an obstacle because some peoples were very impregnate with their own religious traditions and for fear of losing them, they refused the Byzantine protectorate, and others were too attached to their independence and that is why they were repugnant to receiving Christian faith¹⁴.

These basic principles we mentioned, the three elements which lay at the foundation of the Byzantine political theory had to be applied in external politics and they consisted in: protecting the borders of the Empire by nipping in the bud the attacks of the barbarians and by extending as much as possible the political and cultural influence of Byzantium, creating some clientelar states, whose loyalty could be guaranteed only accepting Christian faith and the emperor's sovereignty¹⁵.

¹³ Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, p. 301.

¹⁴ Cristian Ștefan, *Misiunea creștină în Apus și Răsărit (secolele V-X)*, p. 196.

¹⁵ Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, p. 301.

For two hundred years, approximately between 650 and 850, the missionary work of Byzantium suffered an inevitable downfall because of the continuous fight against the Arabs who had invaded the possessions in the north and south of the Empire, because of the invasion and occupation of almost all the Balkan Peninsula by the Avaro-Slavs, as well as because of the iconoclast controversy. All these obliged the Empire to use all its energies in a life-and-death fight with its enemies and this drained the spiritual resources of the Church because of the iconoclast persecution, blocking and burdening the external politics of Byzantium.

The IXth century was the century of the revival of the Byzantine universalism, which was the ideal of the emperors in Constantinople, that of re-establishing the Byzantine authority in the East. The Arabs no longer threatened Constantinople, also because it became stronger in the Balkan provinces, where it succeeded in overcoming the disorder caused by the settlement of the Slav population in its territory and also in re-establishing its supremacy¹⁶. In the IXth and Xth centuries they obtained great achievements, among these the conversion of the largest part of the Slavs.

The Slavs appeared rather early in the life of the Byzantine Empire. If until the end of the VIth century they could not be rejected, starting with the VIIth century, they passed the *limes* of the Danube and invaded the Byzantine provinces, as we showed earlier. Until the IXth century, when they converted, they had already come in contact with Christian religion through the Greek-Roman population left in the Byzantine enclaves not conquered in the Balkans: Thessaloniki, Athens, Patras, Ragusa, Split, Zadar¹⁷.

¹⁶ Hélène Ahrweiler, *Ideologia politică a Imperiului Bizantin*, translated by Cristina Jinga, afterword by Nicolae-Șerban Tanașoca, (Bucharest: Corint Publishing House, 2002), pp. 36-37.

¹⁷ Kenneth M. Setton, *The Bulgars in the Balkans and the Occupation of Corinth in the Seventh Century*, *Speculum*, vol. 25 (1950), no. 4, (510).

Part of the Slavic tribes in the Balkans knew Christianity even before the IXth century, but conversions were sporadic and at the beginning, the spread of Christianity was not connected to Baptism¹⁸. Baptism was considered the climax of the missionary process, being followed by a series of measures which regarded ecclesiastical organization.

According to the conception of the epoch, the model of Constantine the Great was taken over by most of the converted sovereigns. The conversion of the sovereign also meant the conversion of his subjects¹⁹. A state was allowed to enter the hierarchy of Christian states only if the prince, and together with him all his subjects, embraced Christianity.

The process of conversion of the Slavs was rather slow, being completed by brothers Constantine-Cyril and Methodius²⁰. For a long time, the Slavs were regarded as some mere barbarian invaders which the imperial administration had to deal with by chasing them away and punishing them.

However, when they were settled, creating small political formations, and later they created real Slavic states or states which became Slavs – such as Bulgaria or Russia, to a certain extent – they became a subject of external politics and of Byzantine diplomacy and had to be brought into the cultural and spiritual sphere of the Byzantine Empire.

¹⁸ Francis Dvornik, *Slavii în istoria și civilizația europeană*, translated by Diana Stanciu, (Bucharest: All Educational Publishing House, 2001), p. 630.

¹⁹ Alain Ducellier, *Byzance et le monde orthodoxe*, (Paris: Éditions Armand Collin, 1986), pp. 229-233.

²⁰ Emanoil Băbuș, *Introducere în Istoria Bisericească Universală*, p. 231.

3 Religious conversion as practice of the Byzantine diplomacy

First of all, mentioned must be made of the fact that the use of the term *diplomacy*, defining the entire set of practices used by Byzantines in order to negotiate their position in relation to other powers, is anachronic, since the word appeared later, in the work of the Benedictine monk Jean Mabillon, “*De re diplomatica*” (1681), which describes the methods of examination of documents with the purpose of establishing their origin, meaning and authenticity. Later, the *diplomacy* of Mabillon acquired the present definition, which covers all the forms of communication between states, especially through ambassadors sent to foreign capitals, an aspect which involves the existence of an office of external affairs, meant to receive and react to the reports sent by ambassadors²¹.

Numerous myths were formed on the subject of Byzantine diplomacy, a few epithets insinuating in its description: cunning, perfidious and lost in a labyrinth of conspiracies. For each of these characteristics there are, nevertheless, reasons anchored in the historical truth²². At the same time, attributes such as efficiency, sagacity and ingenuity were also frequently used by the historians who studied Byzantine diplomacy²³.

An invention came from the Italian renaissance space, where the small states in the peninsula had representatives in every Italian political centre. The diplomacy practiced in this area responded to the needs of some insecure states, whose enemies were at short distances, being necessary to have information

²¹ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, (Cambridge, Mass., London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 95.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Alexander Kazhdan, The Notion of Byzantine Diplomacy, in Jonathan Shepard, Simon Franklin (Eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy*, (Aldershot: Variorum Reprints, 1992), p. 7.

regarding any change of attitude²⁴. The circumstances of the Byzantine Empire were different, as its allies and enemies were not very close to Byzantium, which had to negotiate with powers situated at large distances, whose language or customs they did not share²⁵.

The role of diplomacy was essential for the Byzantine Empire, as it successfully completed the military activity. With the support of diplomats, Byzantines were able to cause disputes among the leaders of the enemy armies, they postponed negotiations until the enemy troops ran out of food or were decimated by illnesses, or they convinced their rivals of imminent attacks of certain allies of the Empire.

Undoubtedly, these and other diplomatic practices constituted an arsenal of non-military weaponry, constantly available to the imperial governing, helping Byzantium to reject numerous dangers that threatened its existence²⁶. However, most of the times, diplomacy represented the main weapon of the Empire as concerns its external politics. The distinctive feature of Byzantine strategy from the beginning of the Empire until its fall, was the accentuation of the art of persuasion in relation to foreign powers. Offering gifts or tributes was an ancient practice, preferred to expensive wars.

The fact that the Byzantine Empire preferred gold to the sword in order to ensure its peace, is one of the false distinctions historians made in comparison to the Roman Empire. The documents showed the contrary, this practice underlining a continuity between the Roman Empire and Byzantium, the Romans preferring, even from the glorious period of Augustus, in the first century, until Marcus Aurelius, in the IInd century, to buy their enemies rather than fight against them, if the situation

²⁴ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 95.

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 96.

²⁶ John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, (London: UCL Press, 1999), p. 64.

permitted such a solution²⁷. The emphasis that Byzantine writers and governors laid on the efficient and intelligent use of diplomacy did not result only from the Byzantine culture influenced by the Christian dogma which refuted the bloodshed, but also because of an insurmountable dependence of the military apparatus on the diplomatic means²⁸.

Just like many other institutions of the Byzantine power, diplomacy was extremely centralized, led from the capital and practiced by imperial officers, who received high titles, valuable rewards and various privileges in exchange for their services²⁹. The privileges of the Byzantine diplomats were due to the high-risk missions they had to fulfill. Navigation on the Mediterranean Sea and the journeys in the territories that did not have borders with the empire were full of obstacles.

As logics dictated that the best alliances were the ones with the rivals of the enemy neighbours, the messengers of Constantinople were received with hostility in these territories. Moreover, in the territories which were not well-governed (failed states, in modern terms), the messengers and their escort sometimes had to reject tribes of a ferocious barbarity³⁰. The Byzantine diplomats were chosen on the basis of the reputation regarding religiosity, their past did not have to be tainted by any accusation of committing a crime, they had to show intelligence and civic spirit, manifested through the acceptance of the possibility of risking their life for the state. Despite all these, the missions were accepted voluntarily, not as a result of coercion, the messengers going preliminarily through a period of testing and learning³¹.

²⁷ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, pp. 111-112.

²⁸ John F. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565-1204*, pp. 38-39.

²⁹ Alexander Kazhdan, *The Notion of Byzantine Diplomacy*, in *Ibid*, p. 9.

³⁰ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 101.

³¹ *Ibid*.

The religious aspect of the Byzantine diplomacy was highlighted by numerous researchers of this issue, insisting on the role of the Church in diplomacy, acting as an instrument of imperial power. Nevertheless, one cannot state a firm opinion concerning the spread of Christianity from Constantinople, that is, whether this was a purpose of the Byzantine external politics or just a means of obtaining peace³². One thing is certain: preaching the Gospel represented a diplomatic practice with an immense power of persuasion³³.

Ready at any moment to support the expansionist effort of the state, which ensured the growth of its jurisdiction, the Church led a missionary work among the peoples in the Balkans, at the Black Sea and even in Central Europe.

Patriarch Photius (858-867, 877-886) took pride in this missionary effort in the *encyclical* addressed to the other patriarchs (867), and pope Nicholas I (858-867) made sure that the evangelization of peoples had the anticipated results; in his epistles to the clerics in Chersones and Alanya he mentioned the attitude the Church had to adopt towards the peoples insufficiently christianized. An interesting fact is that the remarks of Photius were not free from the touch of political preoccupations, but they were even subject to the interests of the state – political and diplomatic interests that the Church served through its missionary work. The Christianization of the Bulgarians and later of Russians represented the great success of this politics which had allowed Byzantium to expand, along the years, its spiritual, artistic and political influence on the Slavic world, on a territory which exceeded greatly the borders of the Empire³⁴.

The conversion of the Bulgarians did not occur suddenly, but during a longer period of time, being facilitated by the frequent contacts of the Bulgarians to Christianity. In the Balkan

³² Alexander Kazhdan, *The Notion of Byzantine Diplomacy*, in *Ibid*, p. 8.

³³ Edward N. Luwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 113.

³⁴ Hélène Ahrweiler, *Ideologia politică a Imperiului Bizantin*, p. 43.

Peninsula, the Bulgarians were in a state of isolation, and their leader, tsar Boris I (852-889) was aware of the importance of adopting the Christian ideas, but he did not have the necessary trust to bind his destiny to the patriarch of Constantinople. Consequently, the first negotiations towards Christianization were attempted in the West.

In this respect, in 862 Boris entered into a treaty with the king of the Franks, Louis II the German (855-875). In the following year, the pope was announced about the plans of tsar Boris I, but the plans of the Bulgarian leader were changed by the outbreak of a famine which determined the Bulgarians to enter the Byzantine territory in order to appease the acute internal crisis. Their actions brought about reprisals from the Empire, under the form of both terrestrial and sea attacks, the Bulgarian being unable to make a stand against them. Emperor Michael III (842-867) and the influential *caesar* Bardas († 866) had followed the attempts of tsar Boris I of adhering to Christianity through the West, so that peace was offered in exchange for the Christianization through the patriarch of Constantinople³⁵.

Tsar Boris I accepted the proposal, not having another option at hand. All the sources about the conversion of Bulgarians tend to highlight the miracle of the divine intervention, the role of famine, the exceptional diplomatic qualities of the emperor and of Boris' entourage, but no source mentions the existence of Byzantine missionaries. Perhaps Boris would not have accepted Christianity through Constantinople if there had not been exceptional circumstances.

It is certain that the Byzantine action was not premeditated, fact acknowledged by patriarch Photius, that referred to the

³⁵ Nicolae Bănescu, *Istoria Imperiului Bizantin*, vol. II: *610 d. Hr.-1081 d. Hr.*, editor Tudor Teoteoi, (Bucharest: Anastasia Publishing House, 2003), pp. 248-249.

Christianization of the Bulgarians as “improbable”³⁶. Another significant fact is that many Byzantine authors, writing in the following century, affirmed that when they became Christians, the Bulgarians acknowledged the sovereignty of the Byzantine emperor. This was mentioned by pope Nicholas I in a letter addressed to Hincmar, archbishop of Reims. This claim is in concordance with a basic dogma in the political Byzantine philosophy, according to which a people, after having accepted the Christian faith of the Empire, became subject to the Emperor’s authority, the latter being considered the only legitimate sovereign of the Christian world³⁷.

A sign of this subordination was the spiritual relation that connected the leader of the newly converted people to the person of the emperor, and the degree of this relationship, which varied from people to people, defined the exact rank occupied by that people in the Christian community led by the emperor. The situation of Bulgaria was expressed symbolically by the rank conferred to tsar Boris I at his baptism, when the godfather was the emperor himself. Baptized Michael, Boris became the spiritual son of the emperor³⁸.

The fact that the Bulgarians received baptism through the Greek clergy contributed to the increase of the authority and influence of the Byzantine Empire in the Balkan Peninsula. Tsar Boris I wished to preserve the right to guide the spiritual life of the Bulgarians and also feared that his kingdom might become politically dependent on Byzantium, which determined him to appeal again to Pope Nicholas, asking him to send Latin priests in Bulgaria³⁹. Boris sought rather to obtain political benefits,

³⁶ Sergey A. Ivanov, Religious Missions, in Jonathan Shepard (Ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire (c. 500-1492)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 318.

³⁷ Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, p. 101.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ A. A. Vasiliev, *Istoria Imperiului Bizantin*, translation and notes by Ionuț-Alexandru Tudorie, Vasile-Adrian Carabă, Sebastian-Laurențiu

being aware of the advantage he could get from a confrontation between Rome and Constantinople, the leader of the Bulgarians thus continuing to vacillate between the two poles of spiritual power. This Roman-Byzantine rivalry for Bulgarian Christianity was at the origin of what was called the *Photian schism*.

In these conditions, the local synod in Constantinople (879-880), acknowledging the legitimacy of Photius, claimed, however, the dependency of Bulgaria on Rome, but the Bulgarians remained Orthodox⁴⁰. Much more important from the point of view of Byzantine diplomacy is the fact that the event of the conversion of Boris pacified the relations between his kingdom and Byzantium. Eventually, his sons reached Constantinople, where they were educated, assimilating imperial ideology. Simeon (893-927), the second son of Boris I ascended the Bulgarian throne and entered a conflict with Byzantium, seeking to conquer Constantinople and founded a Roman-Bulgarian empire, but his offensive failed at the walls of Constantinople. His death in 927 was followed by approximately sixty years of peace⁴¹.

This event demonstrates the efficiency of using the religious element in the diplomatic relations of the empire. The Bulgarians certainly did not have an immediate spiritual revolution, the proof being the reaction that the governing elite had against the decision of Boris, militating for the restoration of paganism⁴². Nevertheless, the direct benefits for the

Nazâru, introductory study by Ionuț-Alexandru Tudorie, (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2010), p. 292.

⁴⁰ Alain Ducellier, *Bizantinii, istorie și cultură*, translated by Simona Nicolae, (Bucharest: Teora Publishing House, 1997), p. 61.

⁴¹ Michel Kaplan, *Bizanț*, translated from French by Ion Doru Brana, (Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, s. a.), p. 28.

⁴² Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, p. 101. This refers to a general revolt, instigated by the old Bulgarian clans, the aim being that of assassinating Boris and returning to the old beliefs. The revolt was about to succeed, but Boris

Byzantine State and the Church appeared immediately, both of these extending their influence in the Balkans. Eventually, the Christianization of the Bulgarian people went downwards, from the top to the basis, and the Church was organized by the clerics in Byzantium and despite the fact that Bulgaria continued to be independent, it remained definitively in the sphere of influence of the Byzantine Empire, the conversion of the Bulgarians representing one of the most important political and cultural achievements of Byzantium⁴³.

Due to the superb churches, affecting liturgies, melodious choirs, to the well-formulated doctrine and the educated clergy, the Byzantine Church presented as an attractive opportunity for conversion. For the Byzantine missionaries that spread the holy word far from Constantinople, the political aspect of their mission was not important, their goal being the salvation of the pagan souls, but subsidiarily, there also occurred a recruitment of possible allies⁴⁴. This was the case of the Russians.

After the conversion, the collaboration or even the alliance with Byzantium was much more easily accepted. Even when there were disputes with the emperor, the authority of the patriarch was more difficult to ignore, although patriarchs were appointed by the emperor. A suggestive example comes from the period when Byzantium had remained a city-state, but the Russians accepted without opposition the guidance of famous patriarchs, such as Philotheus Kokkinos (1364-1376)⁴⁵.

The Russians' attraction to the Orthodox faith occurred very slowly, just as in the case of Bulgarians and it was the result of some events which needed a diplomatic intervention from the Byzantines. Since the expedition of prince Oleg (879-912)

managed to form a group of loyal partisans and ended the revolt in a violent way.

⁴³ Timothy E. Gregory, *O istorie a Bizanțului*, translated by Simona Dumitru, (Iași: Polirom Publishing House, 2013), p. 216.

⁴⁴ Edward N. Lutwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, p. 113.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

against Constantinople, in 907, an event too little mentioned in medieval sources, the relations between Byzantium and the Russian provinces, either hostile or friendly, multiplied considerably. Starting with the Xth century, the Byzantine armies included important troops of Russian mercenaries.

However, in the time of the reign of Roman I Lekapenos (920-944), in 941 and 944, Constantinople was again attacked, prince Igor returning to Kiev only after a peace treaty was signed. Only in the time of Basil II the Macedonian (976-1025) was an efficient solution found for the problems of the Empire with Russia⁴⁶.

Before 989, except the period when Olga led Kiev, after she had become a Christian (957-969), the Russian princes considered themselves totally independent in every way, and Byzantines did not have claims to any jurisdiction, ideal or real, over pagan Russia. The conversion of Olga and the fact that she acknowledged the universal sovereignty of the emperor made Russia become member of the Christian community, but after her death the elites in Kiev adopted paganism again, accompanied by an anti-Byzantine politics⁴⁷.

The solution of Christianizing the Russians came in a context of crisis for the Empire. In the Balkans, a revolt broke out against Byzantine power, led by the four sons of the governor of the province of Macedonia, the prince Nikola, called *Kometopouloi*. The youngest, Samuel (987-1014) seized power and was the initiator of a period of progress of Bulgaria, considering himself the direct descendant of the state created by tsar Simeon almost one hundred and fifty years earlier. A year before he took over the power, Samuel managed to extend the territory to the south, conquering in 985/986 Larissa and occupying the greatest part of Thessalia. Emperor Basil II counter-attacked,

⁴⁶ Paul Lemerle, *Istoria Bizanțului*, translated by Nicolae Șerban-Tanașoca, (Bucharest: Teora Publishing House, 1998).

⁴⁷ Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, p. 223.

but his troops were defeated at the Gate of Trajan. In the context of this failure, Byzantine aristocracy revolted, as it had done when young Basil II declared himself able to govern by himself. Bardas Skleros (976-979) returned from exile and tried to obtain the control of the imperial power, but he encountered the opposition of Bardas Phocas (987-989), who became the main aspirant for the title of emperor⁴⁸.

This is the situation which determined Basil I to appeal to the great Russian prince Vladimir I Sviastolovich (978-1015), who sent an army made up of 6.000 soldiers, probably Vikings, who fought under the command of the emperor, defeating Bardas Phocas. Bardas Skleros revolted again, but was, in turn, defeated. In 989, after numerous incidents with Byzantine aristocracy, Basil II became the absolute ruler of the Empire⁴⁹. As a reward for his support, he offered Vladimir I the hand of his sister, Ana. This was an extraordinary offer, since no pagan ruler and rather few Christian ones had ever married a Byzantine princess⁵⁰.

The condition for accomplishing this act was that Vladimir I and his people should accept baptism from Constantinople. From a diplomatic point of view, the decision of Basil II represented a great compromise, as Ana was a *Porphyrogenita* and the act showed his great appreciation of the alliance with the Russians, whereas for Vladimir I, the gesture had an equally positive connotation, the latter being convinced that the future of his country depended on the alliance with the Byzantines⁵¹. Through marriage, he became the son-in-law of the emperor, and through baptism, on which occasion he received the name Basil, he became, just like Boris, more than a hundred years earlier, the spiritual son of the emperor. The position of the

⁴⁸ Timothy E. Gregory, *O istorie a Bizanțului*, p. 243.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Warren Treadgold, *O istorie a statului și societății bizantine*, vol. I (284-1025), p. 524.

⁵¹ Timothy E. Gregory, *O istorie a Bizanțului*, p. 243.

great prince Vladimir I in the hierarchy of the Christian rulers was similar to that of Peter of Bulgaria, in 927, but with a certain precedence due to his marriage to Ana, a *Porphyrogenita*. Dimitri Obolensky, the British historian of Russian origin, believes that there is no doubt that Russia was granted, after 989, a high rank in the community of the states in Eastern Europe. Although in a high position, Russia was still subordinated to the Byzantine Empire, and, although the great prince Vladimir I and his followers in the Middle Ages were completely independent in the matters of internal politics, it acknowledged the basileus as the ruler of the Christian Orthodox community, having by divine right a meta-political jurisdiction over Russia⁵².

Through the conversion of the great prince Vladimir I to Christianity ended a stage in the Russian-Byzantine relations, which had been dominated by mutual distrust, the Russians representing an important danger for the security of the Empire's borders. The conversion did not represent a definitive separation from this past, but it allowed the relations between the two entities to coagulate on a solid basis, facilitating the dialogue between the two powers. The conversions of the Bulgarians and Russians enlarged the Christian eastern area, offering the Empire a central position in this space, avoiding a difficult isolation in a part of the world populated by Muslims, pagans and heretics. The Byzantines created in this space an Orthodox *Byzantine Commonwealth*, comprising a few States and autocephalous Churches, enlarging the cultural sphere of Byzantium.

Although the missionaries of Constantinople did not consider that their actions had a diplomatic character, being guided rather by a strong faith and by the example of the First Apostles, they represented an important bridge of

⁵² Dimitri Obolensky, *Un Commonwealth medieval: Bizanțul. Europa de Răsărit, 500-1453*, pp. 223-224.

communication between the imperial power and the pagan populations.

4 Conclusions

We remark that the religious element constituted a characteristic of Byzantine diplomacy, offering it the necessary instruments for establishing a fruitful dialogue with the pagan peoples in the east of Europe. As one could notice, the classical policy of Constantinopolitan diplomacy involved different strategies, as well as exorbitant expenses, which did not always ensure a long-lasting peace. On the other hand, religion operated at an abstract level, and in the context of the medieval mentalities, celebrating rituals such as baptism or marriage to a *Porphyrogenita* established a stronger connection than the one established through peace treaties.

These achievements of the missions patronized by the Patriarchate in Constantinople, especially in the IXth and Xth centuries, show us that in this direction, the Byzantines were one step ahead of the people in the West, be they Romans or Bavarians. The dispute between Rome and Constantinople over the ecclesiastic hegemony over the Slavic peoples turned indirectly brothers Constantine-Cyril and Methodius, together with disciples of theirs into victims. Instead of being supported, they were persecuted, an important role being played by the political interest.

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