

COEXISTENCE IN THE ROMANIAN SPACE. MINORITIES IN DOBRUJA

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Abstract. This article highlights how multicultural communities in Romania have managed to coexist harmoniously over the years. Many regions have undertaken actions aimed at bringing together the minorities living there, among which Dobruja represents a successful project. Ethnic diversity has not prevented the creation of relationships of friendship, tolerance and respect between families in the region, but has contributed to the consolidation of a united community.

Keywords: *Minorities; Dobruja; Communities; Traditions; Ethnicity*

There are communities in Romania where the people have managed to recognize their rights and duties, to respect each other, in most cases becoming attached to each other and helping each other, in the end they have managed to live in harmony and peace. These communities, most often multiethnic, have left a profound legacy to today's inhabitants. How the minorities from these communities have come to find the ideal way of living together is the question that this article will try to answer.

The concept of "minority" is closely linked to national identity, national minorities being perceived as communities that, although living on the territory of other states, consider themselves, due to the fact that they represent cultural and communication units, to be part of the nation. Therefore, in the analysis of the concept of "minority", it is important to clarify the meaning of the concept of "nation". In some meanings, the nation is perceived as an entity whose component is a series of individuals who claim certain common, representative characteristics, characteristics that identify them as members of a nation. Moreover, individuals who think, feel and act within a nation may belong to a church, economic or social class or a political party. At the same time, nations are considered to be the bearers of people's beliefs, devotions and solidarities. In this context, the theory is emerging that a category of people, occupants of a territory or speakers

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of a language, can be considered a nation only when the members of that category manage to reach a mutual recognition of their common rights and duties, being aware of their belonging to the same community¹.

The Romanian lands were a space of immigration until the end of the 19th century, particularly for Germans and Jews. In the 20th century, the main impact on the ethnocultural structure of Romania was the change of historical borders at the end of the World Wars. After 1918, the incorporation of Transylvania and Bessarabia led to a strong increase in ethnic diversity, so that minorities made up about 29% of the entire population: 17% Hungarians, 4.4% Germans, 3.2% Jews, 1.7% Romani people and 2.9% Russians. During the interwar period, a campaign of Romanianisation of the territories newly under the jurisdiction of the Romanian statute was carried out, but the legislation recognized the historical minorities educational and cultural rights². Cultural diversity acquired an image created by modernity and became a topic of global interest in 1919, when the protection of national minorities was included among the objectives of the Paris Peace Conference³.

During World War II, the eastern territories of Romania were occupied by the Soviet Union, and together with the Holocaust and emigration, they led to the reduction of the multiethnic diversity in our country. After the War, the German and Jewish communities continued to leave the country. The situation of national minorities was regulated in 1945 by The Statute of Nationalities, but ethnocultural policy was affected starting with the 1960s by the national assimilationism of communism, the target of assimilation being especially the Hungarian community. After 1989, the reduction of the main historical minorities continued, with a significant decrease in the number of Hungarians and Germans. In contrast, the number of Romani people increased, from approximately 400,000 to over 600,000 people. Throughout this period, the rights of national minorities have been strengthened through provisions such as ex officio parliamentary representation or the use of the mother tongue in those local administrations where minorities exceed 20%. Romania has signed and/or ratified all international instruments regarding minority rights.

After the 1989 Revolution, numerous cultural projects were attempted to contribute to the consolidation of an atmosphere of good understanding and harmony in Romanian society. Ensuring cultural peace in an open society requires that all community cultures be recognized, but the policy of this recognition should be reciprocal. However, the cultural differentiation of communities pushes the relations between them towards conflict, and at that moment consensus appears to be necessary, which becomes a stabilizing factor⁴. Although the entry

¹ Enache Tusa, *Extremismul politic în societățile multiculturale* (Political extremism in multicultural societies), in *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations*, Vol. XXI, No. 3/2024, <https://journalrspr.wixsite.com/journal/arhiva>

² Mihaela Miroiu, *Ideologii politice actuale* (Current political ideologies), Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2012, p. 288.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 268.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 284.

of foreigners into Romania was possible after 1989, the number of immigrants remained small. Members of newly arrived ethnic minorities were protected from discrimination, but they did not have access to the special rights granted to the 19 national minorities recognized after 2000 in Romania.

In Moldova, Muntenia and Transylvania, there have been multicultural integration processes, often materialized in successful projects, but the success of these projects is due to the Balkan mentality of Romanians, to the way in which the inhabitants of each region show solidarity and manage to coexist peacefully.

The Romanian researcher Enache Tușa analyzed the concept of minority in parallel with his attempt to clarify the concept of nation, and his efforts resulted in the publication in 2024 of an author's volume, in addition to the numerous scientific articles he has signed. Enache Tușa is a scientific researcher from the Institute for Political Science and International Relations "Ion I.C. Brătianu" of the Romanian Academy, a doctoral lecturer at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences from "Ovidius" University of Constanța. Last year he published the volume "Romanian Colonizations in Dobruja. A Successful Project of Social Modernization", the work of over a decade of research which analyzes the social and economic transformations of Dobruja. The book highlights Dobruja as a successful example of modernization⁵.

The Danube represented the border between two empires, marking the symbolic passage between East and West, with the river playing the role of symbolic threshold between the lower river stream and the upper river stream⁶. The area at the mouths of the Danube, like most of the places where the main navigable watercourses flow, was an area of strategic interest for all neighboring states. Over the years, Turkey and Russia controlled the mouths of the Danube, but Austria also controlled the central basin of the Danube. Dobruja was under direct Turkish occupation, a program from the 15th century, as were Bulgaria, Serbia and Albania. The Turkish occupation regime determined the coexistence of the population in this area, namely Romanians, Turco-Tatars, Bulgarians as well as other nationalities. Romanians were not the majority in the area, but in the following centuries, especially in the 18th and 19th centuries, populations came from other Romanian provinces, which caused their number to increase. An important part that was added to the population of Dobruja were the Transylvanian shepherds with their sheep.

For a long time, the area was a place of discontinuities, in which periods of population and depopulation of villages followed each other rapidly. It was not until 1774 that the first breach in the Turkish monopoly on Romanian trade occurred, and from that moment on, Wallachia's foreign trade through Dobruja intensified. In 1829, the Danube ports were recovered, after which the most important objective was to regain Dobruja from the Turks⁷.

⁵ Enache Tușa, *Colonizările românești în Dobrogea, un proiect reușit de modernizare social* (Romanian Colonizations in Dobruja. A Successful Project of Social Modernization), Bucharest, Eikon Publishing House, 2024.

⁶ Constantin Ardeleanu, *O croaziera de la Viena la Constantinopol* (A cruise from Vienna to Constantinople), Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2021, p. 271.

⁷ Ioan-Aurel Pop, *Istoria ilustrată a românilor pentru tineri* (Illustrated History of the Romanians for young people), Bucharest, Litera Publishing House, 2018, p. 154.

Dobruja was returned to Romania in 1878, as a result of which colonization was encouraged in the area, which contributed to a great cultural diversity. Until 1877, the colonization of the region had taken place spontaneously, on the old hearths of the villages, and after the return, the process took an organized form. The government supported the colonization of the Dobruja area by making various lands and financial aid available to minorities. The Turko-Tatar populations present in the Brăila and Galați areas contributed to the development of the region. Leaders such as Mihail Kogălniceanu and Ion I. C. Brătianu modernized the Dobruja region, through numerous infrastructures, education and health projects. In 1882, Mihail Kogălniceanu gave a speech in Parliament, in which he emphasized the need to Romanize the minority populations in Dobruja, the only difference that could remain and which he considered natural being the religious one. The construction of the Cernavodă bridge can be mentioned as a project that demonstrated the success of this effort at coexistence. The main obstacle to control this area was the small number of Romanian inhabitants. There was and still is an ethnic mosaic in the Dobruja area, there are “very few areas where villages were inhabited by only two ethnic groups, unlike localities where there were six or eight ethnic groups”⁸.

After the returned of Dobruja and the appearance in the area of Romanians from all Romanian territories, especially from the Sibiu and Brașov areas, the Romanian specificity was strengthened, but the life of the minorities in the area continued normally. “We, the Dobrujeans, do not view the relations between Turks, Tatars and Romanians as an “interethnic model”, but as something normal. A normal that constitutes an example not only for other territories of Romania, but for the whole world.” says the author of an article about Dobruja. “The life of the Dobrujeans of so many and different nationalities continues the same, in understanding and respect”⁹. That is, in times of normality¹⁰. In 1880, the law for the organization of Dobruja mentioned, in article 5, that the inhabitants of this region enjoy all civil rights and that there will be no distinction of origin and religion¹¹.

Now, Romanians represent the majority ethnic group in Dobruja, but they live together with Greeks, Armenians, Turks, Tatars, Lipoveans, Gagauz, Hungarians, Germans, Bulgarians, Jews and Romani people. Each of them preserves their language, customs and religion, managing to form a true ethnic mosaic, which gives this area a unique identity.

The Greeks have a long history in the region, so they have left their mark on the economic and cultural life of the region. In localities with Greek communities, Romanian and Greek families live in harmony and collaborate in organizing

⁸ Enache Tușa, *Imaginar politic și identități collective în Dobrogea (Political imaginary and collective identities in Dobruja)*, Bucharest, Institute for Political Science and International Relations, 2011, p. 254.

⁹ Lavinia Dumitrașcu, “Români și musulmani în Dobrogea” (Romanians and Muslims in Dobruja), published in December 12th 2017, in *Ziua de Constanța (Constanța's Day)*, <https://www.ziuacentanta.ro/stiri/invitatii/romani-si-musulmani-in-dobrogea-646365.html>

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ Ioan-Aurel Pop, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

cultural festivals or share their culinary customs, especially the preparation of fish in the Greek style, which is a common tradition often found in the coastal region and highly appreciated by both locals and the numerous tourists who come to the area specifically to enjoy these dishes.

There are numerous examples in literature that tell the story of how Romanian families live alongside minorities and become closer to them over time, ending up becoming part of the extended family. The story of Margareta Sterian (1897-1992), an artist, designer and poet, who was born and spent her childhood in Buzău, tells us a story of coexistence between Romanians and Greeks: "We were both young when Sofia first came to my house; she told me how her family arrived in our country, how they left Greece riding donkeys"¹².

The Turkish communities in Dobruja live in normality and harmony with the Romanian ones, enjoying the freedom to celebrate their religion, a freedom guaranteed by law¹³. In 1910, as a sign of homage to the Muslim community in the area, King Carol I of Romania (1839-1914) took the initiative to build a mosque in the city of Constanța. The construction, completed in 1913, initially called the Carol I Mosque, is known as the Great Mosque of Constanța. The mosque is located near Ovidiu Square, an area where there are the Synagogue, several churches: Armenian, Greek, Catholic, and the Christian Orthodox Cathedral, all of which form the confessional octagon of the old city center.

Jean Bart's story about Penelope, a beautiful Turkish woman who lives at the mouth of the Danube, is found in the novel *Europolis*: "While below, in the café and in the oleander garden, people were swarming like a beehive, above, on the balcony overlooking the quay, Penelope, Stamatî's wife, was receiving visitors, – Sunday guests"¹⁴. The young woman had arrived in Romania when she was 16 years old, where she lived with her husband, Stamatî. They were part of the community, their café was always full of people, they had many acquaintances among the locals and were appreciated by everyone. But homesickness made her sigh: "And Penelope would fall into reverie, hearing the longing voice of the muezzins calling the faithful to prayer, she would smell the aroma of the pines that were weeping, embalming with resin the air purified by the salty breezes from the sea"¹⁵. Then the young woman could not help herself, and tears easily overwhelmed her: "And the nostalgia of the past made her weep bitterly for the lost paradise of the Bosphorus"¹⁶.

Romanian and Turkish-Tatar families in Dobruja often collaborate to organize local events, such as culinary festivals or fairs or music and dance festivals. On the occasion of these events, families from the respective communities can share recipes and customs specific to Muslim holidays. The organization of events of this kind is usually supported by the County Hall. The Festival of Turkish-Tatar

¹² Margareta Sterian, *Castelul de apă* (The Water Castle), Bucharest, RBA Media Publishing House, 2023, p. 31.

¹³ Ioan-Aurel Pop, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

¹⁴ Jean Bart, *Europolis*, Bucharest, Gramar publishing House, 2015, p. 25.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

Folk Dress, Dance and Song, organized by the Democratic Union of Turkish-Muslim Tatars of Romania (UDTTMR), has been organized for more than twenty years. The event takes place every year, in September, at the House of Culture of the Trade Unions in Constanța and brings together ensembles of the UDTMR, along with representatives of the Armenian, Turkish, Greek or Lipovan Russian communities living in Constanța County. Each multicultural show organized year after year manages to highlight the good coexistence between these ethnic communities living in the Dobruja area¹⁷.

Armenians came to Dobruja, like the Greeks, since the 19th century, settling in the large cities in the area, in Constanța or Tulcea, mainly influencing the economic and social life of the area through the commercial activities they carried out. The Armenian language was an important element of the community's national identity, with time a dialect was formed in which Romanian, Turko-Tatar words entered. The Armenian Church is recognized by the Romanian state, representing the center around which the Armenian community operates. The poet, prose writer and translator Anais Nersesian (b. 1938), provides details about Sadoveanu with the two sons of "the Armenian Serpega", Ioan Vodă cel Cumplit and Nicoară Potcoavă, about Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu, with her lord Kilian, the jealous Armenian hatter, or about Anton Holban with the character Hacik from *Ioana*¹⁸.

The Lipovean community, which consists of Old Orthodox Russians, represents an important ethnic group in Dobruja, being the third largest in this region, after the ethnic groups formed by Turks and Tatars. The Lipovean Russians, an ethnic group of Slavic origin, are descendants of the Starovers, followers of the Old Orthodox faith in Russia, who left their homeland in the 17th-18th centuries following the schism in the Official Russian Church, as a tragic consequence of the cult reform initiated by Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich Romanov (father of Peter the Great) and Patriarch Nikon of Russia (1652-1658). The cult reform, begun in 1954, aimed to modify the church ritual and was adopted in 1667. Those who did not submit to the new canons were considered heretics. In Dobruja, which was part of the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the 18th century, the Don Cossacks from the army of the ataman Ignat Nekrasov also settled, who organized the social life of the Cossacks with rules contained in the "Covenant of Ignat", the Cossacks being called Nekrasovites. From them, the name of the Razelm – Razin Lake in Dobruja has been preserved to this day, named in memory of the leader of the Cossack uprising in the 17th century, Stepan Razin¹⁹.

The Lipoveans have preserved their old traditions and customs, which have become a tourist attraction. The folk ensembles are very successful with the public, through their participation in national and international festivals. Their houses are attractive for many tourists visiting Dobruja. The houses are simple,

¹⁷ Festivalul Portului, Dansului și Cântecului Popular Turco – Tătar (Festival of Turkish-Tatar Folklore, Dance and Music), published on September 4th 2017, in News on uniuneatatara.ro website <https://uniuneatatara.ro/blog/category/stiri>.

¹⁸ Anais Nersesian, *Armenian Characters from Romanian Literature*, Bucharest, Ararat Publishing House, 2008.

¹⁹ Lipovean Russian community from Romania, <https://www.crlr.ro/ro/scurt-istoric/>.

with whitewashed walls and door and window frames painted blue. Many old traditional houses have been restored. In some localities, the specific Lipovean costume is also preserved, a particularity of this costume being the special cap that women wear under the headscarf with which they cover their hair. Among the Lipovean customs that have been preserved to this day, the best known is Maslenitsa, Cheese and Milk Week or Lăsata Secului, which represents the week before the start of the Easter fast. During that period, traditional dishes are prepared, such as cheese pies, called *piroști*, and cheese pancakes, *blini*. On the day of the End of the Century, in some localities, groups of Lipoveni can be seen walking through the streets singing cheerful songs²⁰. The Lipoveans communities have become noted and loved by the locals through these manifestations of respect for their traditions.

The Gagauz community, one of the oldest communities in the area, comes from southern Moldova, representing a Christian people who speak the Turkish language²¹. They are distinguished by their wooden houses, traditional music and dances, as well as their food with Turkish influences. The Gagauz have preserved their specific language and traditions, constituting an ethnic group with a distinct identity in the area, it was found in Dobruja in the last century. The data made available through the population censuses carried out in 1930 showed that 1000 Gagauz lived in Dobruja. Many of them were assimilated by the Romanians in the area, so that, after 2000, less than 50 Gagauz persons were registered. The few representatives of this ethnic group who remained in Dobruja were in Vama Veche, a village founded by the Gagauz in 1811, under the name of Șerpăria²².

In the southeast of the Carpathians regions, in the Danube area or in Moldova, there are other examples of attempts at multiculturalist policy, some of which were successful, others not.

An unsuccessful project is the Flower Bridge, which is the name of the actions that took place on the Prut River in 1990, when Romanian residents were allowed to cross the border, for the first time since World War II, without a passport. Symbolically, flowers were launched from both banks onto the Prut. The second Flower Bridge was built a year later, when Moldovans were able to cross the border into Romania without checking their documents. The outbreak of the Dniester War, which broke out in 1992, maintained an uncertain situation in the Republic of Moldova. The project was not successful due to the lack of leaders who wanted the union, and because a large part of the Moldovan population no longer wanted the union with Romania²³.

²⁰ *Idem*, <https://www.crlr.ro/ro/obiceiuri/>.

²¹ Anatolie Bajora, *Cine sunt găgăuzii și unde s-au format ei? (Who are the Gagauz and where did they originate?)*, Institute of Encyclopedic Studies of the Academy of Studies of Moldova, https://ibn.idsi.md/sites/default/files/imag_file/60-63_14.pdf.

²² “Povestea găgăuzilor din Dobrogea” (*The Story of Gagauz people from Dobruja*), published at June 4, 2014 on website *Povestile Marii Negre* (*Black Sea Stories*), <https://povestilemariinegre.ro/povestea-gagauzilor-din-dobrogea/>.

²³ Petru Grozavu, De ce primul “Pod de Flori” a rămas un proiect nerealizat până la capăt? “Nu au existat lideri care să își fi dorit înfăptuirea Unirii” (*Why did the first “Flower Bridge” remain an unfinished project? “There were no leaders who wanted the Union to be realized”*), March, 6, 2020, in ZdGust, <https://www.zdg.md/importanta/de-ce-primul-pod-de-flori-a-ramas-un-proiect-nerealizat-pana-la-capat-nu-au-existat-lideri-care-sa isi fi dorit infaptuirea unirii/>.

In the regions northwest of the Carpathians, successful cultural projects were Sibiu – European Capital of Culture 2007 and Timișoara 2023, or TM2023, 2023 being the year in which the “capital” of Banat became the European Capital of Culture. The title of European Capital of Culture is a convention of the European Parliament, a symbolic city is designated annually, with the aim of bringing European citizens closer together precisely by highlighting the diversities of cultures in the space in which they live, as well as by raising awareness of the common history and common values.

A year before Sibiu obtaining the title of European Capital of Culture, in February 2006, the documentary film “Sibiu/Hermannstadt – city of culture, city of cultures” was released, a project made by director Dumitru Budrala, with the sponsorship of the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs. The documentary presented the historical complexity of the city and emphasized the multiculturalism that is characteristic of this city²⁴. Sibiu is a city founded by the Saxons during the time of the Hungarian King Géza I, who reigned between 1141 and 1161. Called the Hermannstadt at the time, Sibiu adopted regulations that excluded other ethnic communities from the point of view of religion, regulations maintained and strengthened by the Transylvanian princes in the following centuries. Romanians, merchants coming from the Balkans, Hungarians, as well as other ethnic groups, received the right to live in the city only in 1781, by the edict of Emperor Joseph II. Through this edict, all members of the Venetian ethnic groups had the right to buy houses and land in the city, but they did not benefit from political and administrative rights. Orthodox and Greek Catholic churches were built in the city, and the multiethnic population needed more than a century to obtain the recognition of the rights they needed to be able to live in harmony²⁵. The success of the Sibiu, cultural capital project was due to the fact that the emphasis was placed on the multiethnic specificity and the historical and cultural values of the city were highlighted, so there is good coexistence between the Romanian community and the other local minority communities.

In 2023, Timișoara became the European Capital of Culture, being the second city in Romania to receive this title. Since 1990, the celebration of Timișoara has been present in the public debate, as a model of multiculturalism in Romania. The multicultural, but also intercultural nature of the city has been appreciated as the source of the anti-totalitarian attitude that transformed it into the symbolic city of the 1989 Revolution. The label of “the ethnic cocktail of the Habsburg Empire” has been transformed into a tourist brand with reference to the multilingualism present in this region. Since 1992, an Intercultural Institute has been established in Timișoara, which has promoted intercultural strategies, materialized through projects of intercultural education, intercultural relations and democratic citizenship²⁶. In 2016, Timișoara was designated the European Capital of Culture,

²⁴ Florin Gâdea, “Sibiu – capitala culturala europeana 2007 – un test pentru Romania” (Sibiu – European Capital of Culture 2007 – a test for Romania) February, 21 2006, in *România liberă*, <https://romania-libera.ro/special/sibiu-capitala-culturala-europeana-2007-un-test-pentru-romania-53837/>.

²⁵ Eugen Străuțiu, “Originile Sibiului multietnic”, 10 September 2019, in *Dialogica, Revistă de studii culturale și literatură*, <https://dialogica.asm.md/originile-sibiului-multietnic/>.

²⁶ Mihaela Miroiu, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

but the project was only launched in 2023. The city's minorities, Germans, Hungarians, Serbs, Jews and Roma, participated in various activities and brought the necessary color to the city's multiculturalism to the program. The Days of German Culture, the Days of Hungarian Culture, the Days of Serbian Culture, the Day of Yiddish Language and Theater were organized, as well as the exhibition German Painters of Banat and the Conference "Racism and Romani Studies". Countless tourists from home and abroad came to the city, as well as official figures, such as the President of Germany, officials from the European Parliament, ministers, ambassadors and diplomats. The multicultural spirit of Timișoara was strengthened, and international cooperation was intensified.

Among the cultural projects in Romania, Dobruja represents a successful project, an example of interconnection and coexistence in the presence of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. The relationships that have been created between Romanian and minority families are based on feelings of friendship, tolerance and respect, thus contributing to the consolidation of a united community. This ethnic diversity, rarely found in Europe, enriches daily life in Dobruja, making this region a unique place, where it can be said that the past and the present have merged into a story of common history. The communities in Dobruja have demonstrated that they have managed to live in harmony, without having to give up their own identities and traditions. It is precisely these differences in language, religion and customs that determine the people of Dobruja, regardless of their ethnicity, to feel united, to value and respect their traditions and to love the special region in which they live.

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