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Dobrujan Islam and the Construction of European Identity: Between Shared Heritage and Political Otherness

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the role of the historic Muslim communities in the Dobruja region in the process of constructing contemporary European identity. The analysis begins by examining the tension between the European discourse on pluralism and public representations that often associate Islam with an otherness external to Europe. The research aims to demonstrate that the Muslim presence in the Danube region is not solely the result of recent migrations, but rather constitutes a historical and cultural component of the European space, consolidated over the centuries. The methodology of this study employs an interdisciplinary approach, combining a historical perspective with a socio-political analysis of the concepts of European identity, multiculturalism, cultural boundaries and collective memory. It examines the Muslim community in Dobrogea, focusing on the Dobrogean model of inter-ethnic and inter-religious coexistence between Romanians and Turks. It also examines contemporary efforts to highlight Muslim heritage and the role of institutional actors in preserving and promoting it through cultural and heritage projects supported by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). TİKA has developed partnerships with universities and research institutions in Romania, and regularly conducts social assistance campaigns, particularly in vulnerable communities. Through such an analysis, the symbolism of these actions becomes apparent; they often constitute a form of social adaptation and engagement and, not least, serve to strengthen bilateral relations. The central argument of this paper is that the historical experience of Muslim communities in Dobruja offers a relevant example for understanding European identity as an inclusive and pluralistic process, shaped by the interaction of diverse cultural traditions. In this context, the case of Dobruja highlights the fact that the current difficulties in European integration do not stem from the presence of Islam in Europe, but rather

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from the persistence of certain representations that exclude Europe's own historical Muslim components from its collective memory.

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JEL Classification: according Z12, Z13

1. Introduction

In recent decades, the issue of European identity has become one of the most hotly debated topics in the academic literature. Although the European space is frequently associated with the Christian tradition and the development of Western civilisation, historical reality tells a different story. It should therefore be borne in mind that, over the centuries, Europe has been a space of contact between civilisations, of cultural exchange and of coexistence amongst diverse religious communities. In this sense, the presence of historic Muslim communities in south-eastern Europe predates contemporary migration by a long way and forms part of Europe's historical heritage. However, given current events and everyday public discourse, one might think that in certain situations a form of historical amnesia has developed and that Islam is predominantly associated with recent migration. This can lead to the development of behaviours and attitudes that marginalise the historical contribution of these communities to European heritage.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. European Identity: Theoretical Approaches

European identity is an issue which, in my view, must first be approached from a conceptual perspective in order to gain a better understanding of the terms involved. We shall therefore begin with Jürgen Habermas, who argues that European identity is not based on ethnicity or a shared culture, but on democratic political values.

In Habermas's view, "The democratic process derives its legitimising power from two components: the equal political participation of citizens and the deliberative form of opinion- and will-formation." (Habermas, 2001, p. 16). In other words, European identity is based on democratic beliefs, and for citizens to acquire this European identity, they must necessarily be loyal to democratic principles. Consequently, the European Union was able to come into being because all the states that created and developed this union are states in which democracy has been and

remains in power. Furthermore, Habermas positions the European Union as something more than a political and economic union; he sees it as “an original political form, situated between a confederation and a federation” (Habermas, 1992, p. 5).

European identity is not based solely on democratic principles; it is also based on a series of elements specific to cultural and religious identity. In this regard, Anthony D. Smith sets out very simply the importance of collective memory and identity: “Without memory, no identity; without identity, no nation” (Smith, 1991). Consequently, were certain elements specific to cultural and religious identity to be entirely absent, the creation of a European Union and a European identity would have been a very difficult, if not impossible, task. However, the concept of a “European nation” does not denote the existence of a nation in the classical sense, based on a common ethnic origin, language or culture. In this case, we are speaking merely of certain similarities that have led to the creation of a unified whole which we now call the European Union.

Focusing strictly on cultural and religious identity, a number of important points can be highlighted. The Member States of the European Union are predominantly Christian, even though other religious minorities also exist within these states. Furthermore, these states share, to a greater or lesser extent, certain myths, symbols and even a shared historical memory.

Finally, the sociologist Ulrich Beck also discusses the issue of European identity through the paradigm of cosmopolitanism. In Beck’s theory, the European Union must be understood through “the cosmopolitan vision” (Beck, 2006) and the notion that “Europe is not a state but a political project” (Beck & Grande, 2007). In other words, Europe is a political project that transcends the boundaries of the nation-state, requiring effective cooperation between citizens and states. For such cooperation to take place, cultural diversity had to be tolerated and accepted. In this sense, cooperation takes place where it can coexist alongside tolerance. In this context, tolerance must be understood as a relationship based on mutual respect and moral justification. Rainer Forst defines tolerance as “Tolerance is a normatively dependent concept.” (Forst, 2013).

In the present paper, Islam must be discussed in relation to this European identity. In the case of Islam, discussions have often centred on “Christian Europe” versus “pluralistic Europe”, Islam as political otherness, and similar themes. This

perspective has frequently been criticised, and academic theories can provide concrete explanations as to why, at least at a theoretical level.

Firstly, Samuel P. Huntington argues that Europe's identity has historically been built upon its Christian heritage and Western civilisation: "Christianity is the central defining characteristic of Western civilisation." (Huntington, 1996). This view is historically accurate, but over time various debates have arisen on this issue. For example, the Republic of Turkey's desire to move towards Westernisation and accession to the European Union is highly relevant. However, certain religious incompatibilities and other incompatibilities have led to a rift along this path.

Furthermore, theorists have emerged who challenge the notion that Islam is incompatible with the values of European identity. Tariq Ramadan has clearly and repeatedly rejected the belief that Islamic/Muslim identity is incompatible with European identity. He believes that Islam can take the form of an "independent Western Islam" (Ramadan, 2004), a form of Islam that is somewhat aligned with Western requirements and perfectly adapted to the European context. This idea is based largely on the concepts of cultural integrity and diversity, and yet one question remains: does the European Union possess such tolerance? At present, the answer has been slow to emerge because there are clearly a great many ethnic, cultural and religious minorities within the European Union.

2.2. The Danube Region and the Ottoman Legacy

The Danube region is a space of civilisational contact steeped in a rich Ottoman heritage. The Danube is one of the most important geographical and historical axes of the European continent, linking Central Europe to the Balkan Peninsula and the Black Sea. Over the centuries, the river has been more of than a mere waterway, serving as a space for interaction between different peoples, religions and political systems.

In this regard, the historian Fernand Braudel emphasises that large geographical areas must be understood as zones of exchange and interdependence, and that "civilisations are not built in isolation" (Braudel, 1995, p. 14). In other words, the Danube and the Dobruja region can be interpreted as a corridor of economic and cultural contacts that has contributed to the development of Europe. Furthermore, in the Balkan Peninsula, the Danube served both as a military boundary and as a space for cultural exchange. Following the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into south-eastern Europe, the river became one of the main points of contact between the

Christian and Islamic worlds. Consequently, Romania and many other regions that are now part of Europe were traversed by Muslim merchants, diplomats and craftsmen, amongst others. This facilitated the exchange of mutual influences in the fields of architecture, administration and economic life.

Traian Stoianovich describes the Balkans as a region characterised by constant interaction between civilisations, arguing that ‘the Balkans constituted a bridge rather than a barrier between East and West’ (Stoianovich, 1994, p. 8). This observation can easily be applied to the Danube and the Dobruja region, which facilitated the development of commercial, cultural and religious relations. In other words, the history of the Danube demonstrates its dual nature. On the one hand, the river represented a natural and strategic frontier between major political entities, such as the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire and so on. Control over the Danube was a key objective for all the great powers, owing to its military and economic value.

The Ottoman legacy in the Danubian states can be analysed through two complementary dimensions: institutional influences and cultural influences. From an institutional perspective, fiscal administration, territorial organisation and many other mechanisms of governance were influenced by Ottoman rule even after their withdrawal from the region. From a cultural perspective, contacts between Christian and Muslim populations facilitated the exchange of culinary traditions, vocabulary, architectural styles and commercial practices. That said, the Ottoman legacy in the Danube region cannot be understood solely through the prism of military confrontations because it is a far broader and more ambiguous phenomenon. The Danube has, over time, fostered economic cooperation, cultural exchanges and the coexistence of diverse communities. Thus, we might conclude that the Ottoman legacy contributed to the formation of a multicultural region that is still visible today, and that “the Ottoman legacy survived the empire itself” (İnalçık, 1973, p. 224).

2.3. The Formation of Muslim Communities in Dobruja

When discussing the Ottoman legacy in the region, it is essential to examine the formation of Muslim communities in Dobruja. Dobruja is home to one of Romania’s oldest regions, characterised by ethnic and religious diversity. The geographical location of this region has, since the Middle Ages, favoured the settlement of populations originating from Anatolia. Some time later, following Dobruja’s integration into the Ottoman Empire, the province became an important centre of

Ottoman administration and colonisation. In this regard, Kemal Karpat argues that ‘the Ottoman frontier was an area of settlement and demographic transformation’ (Karpat, 2002, p. 21), which goes some way towards explaining how the Dobruja region was transformed into a multicultural area.

Even today, there are communities of Turks, Tatars, Lipovans, Greeks and Armenians in Dobruja. The Turkish community is the oldest and largest Muslim population settled in Dobruja. The Turkish community has contributed to the administrative organisation of the province and to the economic development of towns such as Constanța, Babadag, Medgidia, Măcin and many other towns in the area. The influence of the Turkish community is reflected in various areas, such as the region’s cultural heritage, cuisine, architecture and traditions and, last but not least, it has led to alterations and changes in the vocabulary of the Romanian language. The Ottoman authorities supported and facilitated the migration of numerous Tatar families to the Dobruja region with the aim of strengthening the Muslim population there. Kemal Karpat points out that “the Crimean Tatars constituted one of the largest groups of Muslim refugees in the Ottoman Empire” (Karpat, 1985, p. 67) consequently, we can argue that the Tatars of Dobruja played an important role in consolidating the Muslim population in the region.

Over time, the Dobruja region has also been home to other Muslim groups besides the Tatars and Turks. Other Muslim communities and groups found in Dobruja include those comprising Circassians, Arabs, Albanians and Bosniaks. Although the Circassian, Arab, Albanian and Bosnian groups accounted for a smaller proportion of the population than the Turks and Tatars, they too contributed to the ethnic and cultural diversity of Dobruja. Nevertheless, today, the Turks and Tatars represent the main historical Muslim communities in Romania. The contribution of these communities to Dobruja’s cultural heritage is recognised at both national and European level.

That being said, we might conclude that the Dobruja region is nothing less than a model of tolerance, integration and coexistence. Dobruja is one of the most complex multicultural regions in south-eastern Europe. Throughout history, this region has been characterised by the presence and interaction of several ethnic and religious communities. The coexistence of Romanians, Turks, Tatars, Lipovans, Greeks, Armenians and other ethnic groups has not merely been a demographic juxtaposition, but a continuous process of social and cultural interaction. The ethnic and religious diversity of Dobruja led to the development of complex forms of interaction between the communities that inhabited this region. The distinctive

character of Dobruja was shaped by the existence of mechanisms of mutual adaptation, through which communities preserved their own identities whilst participating in a shared economic and social life.

2.4. Inter-Ethnic Relations and Social Integration

The distinctive character of Dobrogea was shaped by the existence of mechanisms of mutual adaptation, through which communities preserved their own identities. All ethnic communities managed to participate simultaneously in shared economic and social life, and Victor Căpitanu highlights the province's multicultural character, stating that "Dobruja has always been a space of ethnic and cultural interplay" (Căpitanu, 1998, p. 15). This distinctive feature has enabled the formation of a society in which religious and ethnic differences have coexisted alongside forms of constant, day-to-day collaboration.

A very important element of the Dobrujan model of coexistence is religious tolerance. In this case, tolerance did not entail the disappearance of differences between communities, but rather the acceptance of the existence of multiple identities within the same social space and the embracing of these differences. Thus, mosques, Orthodox churches, Lipovan churches and places of worship belonging to the Greek or Armenian communities coexisted within the same urban landscape, with each community having the freedom to participate openly in religious life. Alongside religious tolerance, there were also cultural exchanges.

Cultural exchanges between the communities of Dobruja were manifested through language, cuisine, architecture, traditions and customs. Daily contact between the populations led to mutual influences and the emergence of a shared heritage. Today's Dobrujan culture is the result of these historical interactions, in which each group has contributed to the regional identity. All these cultural exchanges have been sustained thanks to existing cultural organisations.

Cultural organisations have played an important role in representing ethnic communities and promoting intercultural dialogue. Turkish, Tatar, Greek, Armenian and Lipovan associations have actively contributed to the preservation of traditions through cultural, religious and educational activities. The Turkish community, for example, has several key representatives among such organisations: TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute.

The Turkish Cooperation and Co-ordination Agency (TİKA) plays an important role in promoting cultural diplomacy, combining heritage preservation, academic cooperation, humanitarian aid and local development initiatives. Through its activities in Romania, particularly in Dobrogea, TİKA contributes to strengthening cultural dialogue, preserving the historical heritage of Muslim communities and developing bilateral relations between Romania and Turkey. Over the years, TİKA has collaborated with educational and research institutions in Romania, sponsored international conferences, actively participated in humanitarian activities and much more. Furthermore, the Yunus Emre Institute organises various cultural activities such as educational workshops and Turkish language courses, and regularly holds art openings and exhibitions with the aim of promoting Turkish culture.

Furthermore, alongside cultural organisations, history continues to play an important role. On this occasion, it is worth noting that history and religious elements have created a harmonious blend that has stood the test of time. There are a number of mosques that hold special symbolic significance. For example: the Carol I Mosque, the Hunchiar Mosque, the Babadag Mosque – also known as the Ali-Gazi Pasha Mosque – the Azizye Mosque, the Mahmud Yazîcî Mosque, and the list goes on.

The Carol I Mosque is a major symbol of Dobruja's Islamic heritage. This mosque is also known as the Royal Mosque. It bears the name of King Carol I as a mark of the boundless recognition accorded to the Muslim community of Dobruja. In other words, the symbolic significance of this mosque is immeasurable. The Hunchiar Mosque played an important role as a place of worship, but its significance lies in the fact that it had become a popular community centre. The Hunchiar Mosque has actively contributed to the preservation of the local Muslim identity.

Although the Dobruja region is of great importance to Romania, we must not forget that the true value of this region extends beyond its borders. Dobruja is not only important to Romania, but also to European cultural memory. This is due to the extent of Dobrogea's Muslim heritage. The points discussed above demonstrate the multicultural character of South-Eastern Europe and the importance of dialogue between civilisations. Consequently, Dobruja's Muslim heritage represents not only the memory of a religious community, but also an integral part of European heritage that transcends the boundaries of time and reflects centuries of cohesion between peoples and cultures.

3. Research

3.1. Research Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature, utilising the content analysis method. Content analysis was chosen because it facilitates the investigation of how European identity and historical Muslim minorities are represented in official documents and specialist literature. This method allows for the systematic examination of documents and the identification of themes, concepts and patterns relevant to the research question. The main research hypothesis is: “Historical Muslim minorities contribute to the definition of a pluralistic European identity through their participation in social and cultural life, as European identity is not based on ethnic or religious homogeneity.”

Historical Muslim minorities contribute to the definition of a pluralist European identity through their participation in social and cultural life. European identity is not based on ethnic or religious homogeneity.

The main aim of the research is to analyse how historical muslim minorities contribute to defining a pluralistic European identity, with reference to the democratic values, cultural pluralism and protection of minority rights promoted within the European sphere.

3.2. Content Analysis

The analysis was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, relevant documents were selected on the basis of the research objectives. In the second stage, the content was thematically coded by identifying recurring concepts and grouping them into categories of analysis. Thus, the following categories of analysis were used to organise the data: European identity, pluralism and historical muslim minorities.

3.3. Results of the Content Analysis

Category 1 – European identity

Through a detailed analysis of European Union documents, we observed that European identity is defined primarily in terms of shared values rather than ethnic, religious or linguistic criteria. The concepts that appear most frequently are human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights.

These values are presented as the foundation of membership of the European community.

Category 2 – Pluralism

Through an analysis of documents – this time from the Council of Europe and the European Union – I have observed that pluralism is presented as a fundamental principle of European democracy. Both religious and cultural diversity are not treated as obstacles to social cohesion. On the contrary, they appear to be a defining characteristic of the European area, and emphasis is placed on respecting cultural differences and combating discrimination.

Category 3 – Historical Muslim minorities

Finally, we analysed numerous studies devoted to historical Muslim communities. These studies indicate that historical Muslim communities represent a traditional component of European heritage and cannot be associated exclusively with the phenomenon of contemporary migration. In the case of Dobruja, the Turkish and Tatar communities participate in public life and carry out their religious activities within the institutional framework of the Romanian state.

3.4. Interpretation of the Results

In light of the points outlined above, it can be argued that by comparing institutional documents with case studies, a correspondence has been identified between the European Union's normative discourse and the reality of the historical Muslim communities analysed. In most cases, elements supporting the coexistence of religious identity and membership of the European community were systematically identified. Furthermore, the results highlight the fact that European identity is constructed predominantly around common political and legal values that foster tolerance and inclusion.

In other words, based on the content analysis carried out, the research hypothesis is *confirmed*.

4. Conclusions

This paper has succeeded in briefly addressing the issue of European identity in the context of Islamic communities in the Dobruja region. It has demonstrated that Islam

has existed in the Danube region for centuries and forms part of Europe's heritage. Islam has become part of the region's historical reality and represents an integral component of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, regardless of how one views the matter, history presents concrete facts, and these cannot be denied, especially when empirical evidence exists. The Dobruja region is a place brimming with such empirical evidence, imbued with powerful symbolism. Based on our analysis, we can state that the Dobruja region has succeeded in becoming a place that has hosted, and continues to host, diverse communities, and that this region is an example of tolerance and integration.

Finally, it can be concluded that this paper supports the idea that recognising the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in the region contributes to the consolidation of a European identity capable of embracing its historical complexity and diversity. I would like to point out that this article is a brief discussion intended to pave the way for my own more extensive research in the near future.

5. Future Work

In the future, I aim to integrate the research conducted on this topic for the current article into my doctoral thesis. Additionally, I want to go much deeper into the subject, to be able to discuss certain aspects in much greater depth, and to conduct a much broader research. Due to the short time and certain limitations, both objective and subjective, I believe that the article did not manage to capture all the necessary nuances. Therefore, I consider it necessary to revisit the subject and take a much deeper approach in the future.

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