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Modeling Religious Coexistence: The Turkish and Tatar Muslim Communities in Romania's Dobruja



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ABSTRACT

The peaceful coexistence of different religions is crucial today, especially with the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and the Levant and the arrival of new refugees and immigrants with diverse faith traditions. In Romania, while immigrants may face challenges integrating into the predominantly Romanian Orthodox religious majority, the Dobrogean Model of Religious Pluralism is a pattern of inter-religious coexistence with the potential to clarify the critical factors needed to facilitate peaceful pluralism among religious groups. Utilizing Rogers Brubaker's triadic-nexus configuration of national minorities, nationalizing states, and external national homelands alongside various qualitative methods, this paper will investigate the historical and institutional elements for promoting peaceful coexistence, particularly with an eye toward the Islamic minority in the Dobruja region. The study will also examine the crucial role of state and affiliated institutions in promoting tolerance and coexistence by protecting freedom of religion. Romania's location at the crossroads of the East and West and the Dobruja region's reputation as a model of religious pluralism makes it an excellent case study for identifying critical factors for the peaceful coexistence of religions in contemporary societies.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This article, “Modeling Religious Coexistence,” describes and explains the nature and endurance of the identity of Turkish and Tatar Islamic communities in Northern Dobruja,¹ emphasizing how the maintenance of this ethno-religious identity has been critical to the dynamic of religious pluralism in the region. This dynamic, the Dobrogean (Dobruja) Model of Religious Pluralism, describes a pattern of interreligious coexistence formed by centuries of traditions, customs, and mores and still exists today [18], [27]. There has never been a recorded instance of inter-religious conflict in Dobruja, Romania, despite the presence of at least 18 different religious groups and denominations among the 34 ethnic groups living in the area [27, 64], [48, 165].

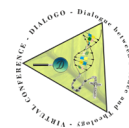
However, with the emergence of the newly democratically consolidating Romanian state in 1989 after the death of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the simultaneous fall of the Communist regime, both new and old communities were thrust into an unfamiliar socio-political space, where, perhaps for the first time, they were guaranteed certain constitutional protections [6], [31]. As such, a research question is brought forth: how and why, outside of cultural inertia, has this dynamic of religious pluralism continued to operate amid a new political regime and the arrival, return, and resurgence of familiar and unfamiliar religious groups?

To answer this research question and explain this dynamic, I utilize Rogers Brubaker’s triadic nexus framework of national minority, nationalizing state,

¹ While the region referred to is specifically Northern Dobruja, Romania, with the Southern part belonging to Bulgaria, the article will refer to it as “Dobruja” for shorthand.

and external homeland to document the actions and interactions between the Turkish and Tatar minority, the Romanian state, and the external homeland of Turkey for the Turkish and Tatar minority. This article will examine how the triadic nexus acts in the three fields of politics, religion, and education and describe how they were and are subsequently critical to maintaining the ethno-religious-cultural identity of the Turkish and Tatar identity and the Dobrogean Model of Religious Pluralism, particularly concerning the continued absence of ethnic tensions and radical Islam as seen in parts of Western Europe. Considering the distinct, cultural, and religious traditions of the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities, especially that of the Hanafi School endorsed by the Ottoman Empire, it is crucial to understand how the maintenance of just such an identity has played an essential part in the model of religious pluralism that Dobruja is so well known for across the world.

Importantly, I refer to pluralism as the social arrangements favorable to a high or increased level of plurality or diversity [54, 195-7]. This term differs from plurality, which “describes the status or degree of religious heterogeneity within a society” [54, 195-7]. As [50] discusses regarding contemporary pluralism, it is essential to note that the Communist period in Romania did not permit the social, legal, or political environment for the type of religious pluralism spoken of today, even if elements of a structured religious pluralism existed the inter-war period in the Kingdom of Romania [31]. Also, drawing inspiration from the work of [1], it can be postulated that religious pluralism is not limited to religious autonomy but encompasses the notion of peaceful co-existence, which entails government initiatives to foster social harmony among different religious communities. As will be seen during the



various stages of Ottoman administration and the subsequent regime reconfiguration after 1989, the elements of successful religious pluralism rely on committed actions by the relevant authorities and the community members themselves.

Therefore, this article argues that the relationship between the Turkish and Tatar Islamic communities, the Romanian state, and Turkey goes beyond cultural inertia. Despite centuries of Ottoman heritage and the changes that came with post-1989 democratically consolidating dynamics, deliberate efforts were made by all three entities to maintain the Turkish and Tatar Islamic identity. This identity preservation is essential to the Dobrogean Model of Religious Pluralism, which is still considered an example of social cohesion and religious tolerance in the region.

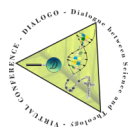
With this in mind, the study proceeds as follows. It will begin with a discussion on methodology and an overview of Brubaker's framework, outlining the three relational elements and their importance for consolidating a new nation-state in the "New Europe" formed after 1989. These parts will help set up the study to follow. Next, the study provides a historical background of the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities and highlights the critical role of the Ottoman *millet* system. The study follows this by discussing the three elements of the relational nexus - the national minority, the nationalizing state, and the external homeland - in the fields of religion, socio-politics, and education, as Brubaker's nexus highlights these (and others) as an important focus for the triadic elements. These sections will begin with historical and political context before moving onto distinct post-1989 dynamics. The study will bookend this section with a summary of the investigation, explain the nature of the nexus within the context of three components, and discuss the

potential challenges of the model of religious pluralism. The paper concludes with a restatement of its thesis and premise, a discussion of research limitations, and a highlight of further areas for potential research.

II. METHODOLOGY

This article is a qualitative case study with rich descriptive and conceptual content, multifaceted perspectives, and multidimensional theories and concepts. Moreover, with the often personal and inter-relational aspects of subjects like religious pluralism, it was essential to be descriptively rigorous, hence the use of qualitative methods. As such, the methodology utilized in this article encompasses a range of techniques, such as empirical research and document analysis, including a comprehensive bibliography that I amassed to support my investigation into the dynamic of religious pluralism in Dobruja. This study also includes qualitative research approaches such as participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Examples of participant observation include attending events such as the St. Parascheva in Iasi, the largest pilgrimage in Romania where pilgrims travel to venerate the relics of the Saint, as well as St. Dimitrus the New in Bucharest with a similar objective, and Shab e Barat, a Muslim festival focused on asking for forgiveness, Shab e Miraj, a Muslim holiday celebrating a night journey that the Prophet Mohammad took in 621 AD, and an Iftar dinner for Ramadan, among other activities.

The focus of this study is on the Islamic religious elite in Northern Dobruja, consisting of the counties of Constanța and Tulcea, and specifically those imams who are officially sanctioned and assigned by the Muftiate, the representative religious organization of the Muslim



cult² in Romania. The participants were selected in collaboration with Great Mufti Yusuf Murat and Ms. Ebit Melike, Counselor of the Muftiate, ensuring that the perspectives presented are derived from those with official ties to the Muftiate. Additionally, participants were chosen with specific preferences for where the Islamic communities constitute a larger portion of the overall population, ensuring that the presence of Christian, predominately Romanian Orthodox, and Islamic identity and personage could be felt and communicated by the Imams in the interviews. It should be noted that the number of interviews conducted reflects the time and resources allotted for research during a nine-month Fulbright scholarship.

III. BRUBAKER'S TRIADIC NEXUS

A. Description

Before discussing the historical background of the Turkish and Tatar Islamic communities in Dobruja, this article explains Rogers Brubaker's triadic nexus, articulates the reason for its usage, and subsequently applies it.

In the chapter "National minorities, Nationalizing States, and External National Homelands in the New Europe" of his 1996 book, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe*, Brubaker explores the need to understand the new or newly salient socio-political space and the mismatch between cultural and political boundaries, specifically those within the "New Europe," or those nation-states configured with new regimes, borders, and identities [7, 55]. In

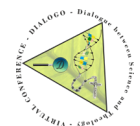
² In Romania, the word "cult" does not possess the same derisive and pejorative meaning as it may in places like the United States. The Romanian government uses the phrase "religious cult" primarily for juridical purposes. As such, referring to the Muslim community (s) as the Muslim "cult" is contextually appropriate.

Brubaker's conception, these new nation-states formed out of two phases, whose configuration ostensibly occurred in 1) Eastern Central Europe among parts of the Ottoman, Habsburg (Austro-Hungarian), and Russian Empires after the First World War, and in 2) the breakup of Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia from 1989 forward. It is from these new cultural and political boundaries that Brubaker derives his framework.

As such, Brubaker first defines a national minority as claiming membership in an ethnocultural nation different from the dominant one, demanding state recognition, and asserting collective cultural or political rights based on this nationality [7, 60]. Brubaker argues that these claims often denote a certain self-understanding along national terms, suggesting a particular confidence in the national minority's identity status and a need to be recognized along those political and cultural lines [7, 6].

Secondly, Brubaker defines a nationalizing state as one meant to become a nation-state, meaning a state that belongs to a particular nation but is not yet fully there [7, 63]. This state is inclined to address this perceived deficiency by making the necessary changes to become a proper nation-state. Often, this is done through nationalizing nationalism, which makes claims of a "core nation" defined usually by ethnocultural boundaries separate from its citizenry [7, 5]. Indeed, as Brubaker suggests, it is not uncommon to see conflicts arising regarding the treatment of the national minority not only between a nationalizing state and national minorities within its borders but also between the state and the external homeland, the last part of the triadic nexus [7, 5-6].

In simple terms, Brubaker defines an external homeland as a shared nationhood that goes beyond state boundaries and



citizenship [7, 67]. This shared nationhood implies that the state is responsible not only for its own citizens but also for ethnic co-nationals who live in other states and have different citizenships. Brubaker's definition highlights that a state's responsibility extends to a broader group of people, not just its citizens. Also, Brubaker argues that homeland nationalism arises in opposition to the aforementioned nationalizing nationalism, namely because the ambition of the nationalizing state is not purely a national matter but rather one that includes the responsibility of the external homeland to protect its co-national kin [6, 5]. It is essential to understand that Brubaker's concept of an external homeland isn't just a descriptive label. It's a dynamic relationship between groups. This means that co-national kin, whether defined by ethnicity or religion, are seen as a constructed segment under the protection of the external homeland. National minorities also claim a public connection to that homeland.

Although Brubaker's theory proposes that the three components of the triadic nexus often have a contentious relationship, as in the case of homeland nationalisms arising in direct opposition to and in dynamic interaction with nationalizing nationalisms, the Dobrogean Model of Religious Pluralism case study shows that this framework can be applied in a way that promotes peaceful coexistence. The subsequent discussion highlights the strengths of the model and how it can lead to favorable outcomes.

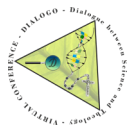
B. Application

With Brubaker's conception in mind, the framework can now be applied. As such, I take inspiration from [16], who also relies on Brubaker's conceptualization that the Turkish and Tatar Islamic minority constitutes an "accidental diaspora" that

"crystallizes suddenly following a dramatic – and often traumatic – reconfiguration of political space" even if they had lived in the region for centuries prior [8, 2]. Ref. [16] primarily refers to this "diasporization" of the Turkish and Tatar communities in the context of their status after the 1877-1878 Russo-Ottoman War. Indeed, with the Empire's defeat and the newly formed United Romanian Principalities, which included Dobruja, many Turks and Tatars migrated to the Ottoman Empire, exemplifying the national minorities' attachment to what they deemed an external homeland. Within this context, Ref. [16] and [14] also refer to the external homeland of the Ottoman Empire and, after that, the Turkish Republic following the Empire's dissolution after WWI. Ref. [16] further suggests that Turkey adopted an external homeland status because of the great migration following the loss of Turkish control in Dobruja. With that being said, however, much of the discussion in this study will focus on post-1989 activities. So, while previous studies indicate the long-term status of the external homeland, the historical and triadic-nexus section will provide more details on the particulars of this event, namely the post-1989 socio-political paradigm.

For the nationalizing state of Romania, Brubaker primarily contends with Romania and its "nationalizing" nationalism towards its 3-million-person Hungarian minority concentrated in Transylvania after WWI.³ Given the study's context, the focus of this

³ Before the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, the area of Transylvania had belonged to the Kingdom of Hungary for nearly a millennia, meaning that Hungarians and their traditions, culture, and especially religion, Roman Catholic, became a settled part of the region. Ref. [10] explains the impact and present-day perception of the Treaty of Trianon. In this post-WWI settlement, large parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were ceded to neighboring countries, including Romania. Today, the countries view the treaty quite differently, and the historical conflict is often a point of political tension between local, national, and international individuals and entities [10].



application will center on the significance of Romanian Orthodoxy in the post-1989 era. Following the revolution of 1989, Romania was in search of its own identity, distinct from its Communist history [39], and it made sense for a national identity to form around the people's ancient faith of Orthodoxy [45], [19, 156]. Religion found a new and revitalized purpose in Romania after being almost entirely excluded from the public sphere for several decades, much like other post-Communist regimes in Eastern Europe [12], [53]. Crucially, the Romanian Orthodox Church emerged as a guarantor of Romanian national identity during this challenging and uncertain time [45], [47]. However, the Church also had to navigate a newly contested landscape where new and old faiths emerged from the ashes of Communism while adapting to a new legal system and Constitution that ensured freedom of religion and religious pluralism [45], [47].

In this particular scenario, the Romanian government and the Romanian Orthodox Church faced the challenge of addressing the significant presence of Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities, who have been established in the region for a considerable period. While this is not the first instance of a political shift, the discussions ahead will delve into the dynamics that emerged after 1989. It is crucial to highlight the interplay between Romania's national identity, its unwavering adherence to the Orthodox faith, and its custodian, the Romanian Orthodox Church.

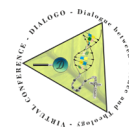
With this explanation of the framework and its application within the context of the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities, the Romanian state, and the external homeland of Turkey, the study can now discuss the communities' historical backgrounds and the legacy of the Millet system.

IV. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND LEGACY OF THE OTTOMAN MILLET SYSTEM

Although they were not the first settlers in a land that had seen Roman, Byzantine, and Bulgarian imperial rule, the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities have a long history in Dobruja. Records indicate that the Tatar communities first arrived in the Christian lands of the Balkans in 1229, led by Ebruz Ata, a brother of Batu Khan, a ruler of the Mongol Empire and founder of the Golden Horde [35]. With the successive Mongol invasions of 1241, the population grew to a much larger, permanent settlement. Following this, between 1262-1264, Byzantine Emperor Michael VIII Palaiologos tasked the spiritual leader Baba Sarı Saltuk alongside General Yzeidin Keykauz, to establish the presence of Seljuk Turks in the Babadag region, which lies in present-day Tulcea County of in the north of Dobruja [22], [35].⁴ With the arrival of Saltuk, the region saw the first notable presence of Islam, which subsequently led the Tatars and many of Dobruja to embrace Islam by the middle of the 13th century [43], [29, 11].

After that, following a series of invasions and battles launched by the Ottomans from 1387 to 1462 and involving nearly two decades of conflict with Vlad Tepeş, Prince of Wallachia, the Ottomans emerged victorious. As a result, the Principalities of Romania, including Wallachia and Moldavia, fell under the political and financial influence of the Ottomans and were not fully independent until 1878. On the other hand, Dobruja evolved to be a part of the *Sanjak* of Silistria, which ran

⁴ Indeed, even today, the city of Babadag commemorates this legendary figure with the town name meaning "Baba [Saltuk]'s Mountain," and claiming his final resting place in a Muslim mausoleum or *türbe* which has been renovated several times after its initial destruction during the Russo-Turkish Wars, including a 2007 re-inauguration by then-Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan [22], [57].

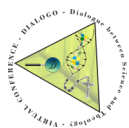


along the Black Sea, consisted of most of present-day Bulgaria, and was directly administered by the Ottoman Empire. To fully comprehend this historical context and dynamics between the Romanian Principalities and the Ottoman Empire, as well as the region of Dobruja and the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities, it is essential to consider two key factors: the special relationship between the Romanian Principalities and the Ottoman Empire, and the *millet* system.

Unlike other regions of the Balkans like those of present-day Albania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia, the Ottoman Empire treated the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia as vassal states required to pay tribute, such as *haraç*, or land taxation, and *jizya*, the Hadith-commanded Islamic tax levied on non-Muslims [29, 120]. Considered to exist under the *Dar al-'Ahd* or non-Islamic law administered region yet ostensibly under the Empire's protection, the Principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia were never officially conquered and controlled and retained much of their autonomy [12], [29]. However, Dobruja, with its proximity to the Ottoman Empire, strategic geographic location with access to the Black Sea, and prior centuries of Turk and Tatar migration and settlement, occupied a different position under *Dar al-Islam*, or the "House of Islam," where Islamic law prevailed. Specifically, the Ottoman Empire administered through the Hanafi school of Islam, which they had chosen in the 14th century as the preferred interpretation, drawing from its success under the Abbasid Caliphate [2]. This school incorporates several components, including focusing on a powerful central government, establishing a hierarchal structure for the *ulema*, or religious hierarchy, predominance of Hanafi teachings, and a significant influence on the Turkish language and culture [2].

In this religious and administrative context, the Ottoman Empire employed the *millet* system to organize the multiethnic and multireligious region of Dobruja, where, at the time, both Christians and Muslims lived. *Millets* were autonomous, faith-based communities where the religious hierarchy prevailed and could administer their educational, religious, and juridical elements [32, 3]. In the areas of the Ottoman Empire where the *millet* system was used, religious autonomy was granted to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, particularly in Dobruja, enabling them to preserve their religious identity through their respective religious hierarchies [4], [12]. As a result, Ottoman rulers governed the region by emphasizing religious collective identities and relying heavily on religious groupings to ensure peace [32], [11]. The Ottoman Empire effectively utilized pre-existing religious collectives to govern the region. This solidified those group identities and fostered a dynamic of coexistence, granting them a significant degree of autonomy.

Critical to note here is that scholars suggest that the *millet* system significantly impacted the identity of Balkan Muslims and the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities by extension. Scholar Ina Merdjanova points out that the legacy of the *millet* system can be seen in forming new states, which preserved faith-based collective identities and treated Muslim minorities as quasi-autonomous entities in new social and political contexts [32, 3-4]. Merdjanova further utilized the term "*quasi-millet*" to describe the status of Muslim minorities in the Balkan nation-states that emerged in the formerly influenced or occupied areas of the Ottoman Empire, including that of Romania [32]. Further, as argued by author Hugh Poulton, the shared sense of belonging to the Islamic religion, or the "*millet mentality*," played a crucial role



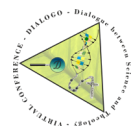
in the process of self-identity-building in post-Ottoman states and in identifying the Ottoman Empire and later Turkey as a mother state for Balkan Muslims, including self-identification [42]. Lastly, according to author Abdulaziz Sachedina, the *millet* system exemplified pre-modern religious pluralism because the Ottoman state acknowledged various religious groups in return for some authority over religious identification and the preservation of particular religious customs [4], [44]. These and other studies, such as [32], emphasize that the *millet* system had a profound impact on the identity of the Balkan Muslims, including that of the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities in Dobruja.

The revolution of 1989 reset the clock, and a new cultural and political space was formed. As such, on account of items like the *millet* system, the Islamic tradition of the Ottoman Empire, and the relationship between the current Romanian state's historical predecessors, a fusion exists where an ethnoreligious identity defines the character of the post-Ottoman historical region of Dobruja and its Turkish and Tatar communities.⁵ The cohesion within the Muslim community is supported by the institutional framework of the Muftiate, which serves as the official organizing body. As such, within the Muftiate, a single Imam is appointed through a secret ballot election from among the community's Imams to oversee and guide the activities of the Muslim community as a whole. The Muftiate serves as the official representative of the Muslim community to the Romanian government. Therefore, the Great Mufti holds a significant role in shaping relations and advocating for the needs of the community within the governmental sphere. Moreover, the

⁵ For a much more descriptive analysis of this circumstance, consult [14], which traces the fusion of ethnicity and religion in the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities over the 20th century and beyond.

establishment of the Muftiate can be understood as a manifestation of the Romanian government's endeavor to assimilate the Muslim populations into the Romanian state while concurrently acknowledging and honoring their cultural practices and heritage in the post-1878 socio-cultural space [37, 193]. Having at least four Muftiates was necessary to manage the sizable Muslim communities. However, due to the significant emigration of Turks and Tatars from the region by 1943, only one Muftiate continued to function in the city of Constanța, where it remains operational to this day [24], [37].

Today, according to the latest available census in 2011, there are 64,337 Muslims in Romania, constituting 0.34% of the population. Most come from ethnic Turk (41.81%) and Tatar (31.18%) backgrounds; about 9.76% are ethnic Romanians [31]. Most of these individuals live in the counties of Constanța and Tulcea, making up close to seventy percent of the Dobruja region, primarily due to the Ottoman heritage and linkages felt by the area. Additionally, outside of the historical community of the Turkish and Tatar Muslims, sometimes referred to as the *autochthonous*, meaning indigenous or native, as in the case of [49], there is a new and continually growing post-1990 Islamic population [3]. The term "New Muslims" refers to individuals hailing from countries closer to Romania, like Iraq and Syria, as well as distant nations like Sri Lanka. Also, whereas the *autochthonous* primarily reside in the aftermentioned counties of Constanța and Tulcea, these populations seemingly congregate in the large urban centers of Bucharest, the capital, as well as Cluj Napoca, Iași, and Timișoara [15]. As can be surmised, this diverse group of individuals encompasses a wide range of backgrounds, traditions, and values, with not all necessarily aligning seamlessly with the native Muslim community [3]. With



that being said, however, this study will not explore this circumstance in depth now but will return to it in the eighth section, wherein the strengths and potential challenges of the model are discussed.

The legacy of the Ottoman Empire resonates prominently upon traversing Northern Dobruja, as the vestiges of the erstwhile regime continue to persist. From the centuries-old Esmahan Sultan Mosque, completed in 1575 in Mangalia, to the ruins of the Enisala Fortress overlooking Razelm Lake in Tulcea County, Ottoman heritage is everywhere. One may find that in Romania, it is hard to escape it.

With the historical background firmly established, this study will now discuss the maintenance and enduring legacy of the Turkish and Tatar Islamic identity in the fields of religion, politics, and education and its relationship with the nationalizing Romanian state and the external homeland of Turkey.

V. RELIGIOUS FIELD

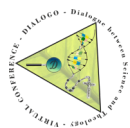
With the toppling of the old regime Communist regime governed by Jacob Mehmet in the post-1989 space, much activity began in the religious field. Indeed, there was great interest in the spiritual revitalization of Islam in the region of Dobruja after the long Communist 20th century from the Turkish state, Turkish NGOs, and Arab NGOs [41], [3]. Not only that, but the Romanian state sought to revitalize relations with its secular, democratic neighbor to the East, which had grown stagnant in the second half of the 20th century after the regime of Ceasecucu sought closer ties with Arab Muslim nations [6, 9], [16, 119].

As such, beginning in the early 1990s, the Romanian state permitted the Turkish state to take an active role in rebuilding a distinctly Ottoman-influenced Islam

with centuries of culture, tradition, and historical links with the long-standing Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities [6, 16] [16, 51]. Likewise, it made practical sense, as most Balkan Muslims adhered to the traditional school of Islam [28]. This approach primarily occurred through the institution of the Turkish President for Religious Affairs, or the *Diaynet*. Upon request, the *Diaynet* made its way to Romania in 2001, with an attaché appointed in the Turkish Consulate in Constanța. With the Romanian authority's approval of the request, Turkey, through *Diaynet*, became a more prominent stakeholder in the success of the local Balkan Muslim, Turkish, and Tatar Dobrugean communities.

Several years later, Protocol 2006, perhaps the most significant collaboration between the Muftiate, the Turkish government, and the Romanian state, was enacted. Protocol 2006 included several initiatives that were intended to revitalize the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities and their distinctly Ottoman Turkish Muslim character:

- The renovation of Muslim religious buildings and support through editing religious literature, books, and brochures.
- Training exchanges for the cult personnel from Dobruja and assistance through the dispatch of such already trained personnel from Turkey to serve in the Dobruja mosques alongside local imams
- Conducting activities in the field of informal religious education, such as organizing Qur'an reading courses for women. In Constanța, the courses organized in the Muftiate are held by a trainer appointed by the *Diyanet*.
- Participation of the religious affairs attaché in various meetings with Dobruja's representatives of different religious affiliations to develop dialogue



and cultivate a moderate and inclusive image while drawing on Dobruja's regional identity [15, 57-59]

Moreover, the Romanian government provides its support to the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities in addition to collaborating with the Turkish government. Like other religious denominations in Romania, the Muslim population receives financial and administrative support. For example, financially, the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs contributes 62 clerical salaries for one mufti, six administrative heads, 45 clerical positions (65% of base salary), and ten clerical positions (80% of base salary) [31, 156]. The primary means of support by the Romanian state is based on the distinct dialogue and cooperation between the Muftiate and local and national authorities [30, 55]. The state also supports religious pilgrimages and holidays [30, 55]. These activities greatly support the regular practice of the Muslims and emphasize the good relations that both sides seek to maintain.

Moreover, considering the amicable relations between state authorities, the Muftiate, and the Muslim community, "structural respect and cordial collaboration exist that reverberate among the communities' members" [30, 55]. This is exemplified in the relationship between the Mufti and the Romanian Orthodox Church, where mutual respect has been exhibited numerous times in the post-1989 space, particularly with the current Mufti, Yusuf Murat [30, 55]. For example, in 2013, a debate took place at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology "Justinian the Patriarch" of Bucharest, wherein representatives from various faculties of sociology, law, and the theology faculty participated alongside Yusuf Murat, who even then spoke of the beauty of the coexistence that Dobruja exemplified [5, 416.]

Concerning my interviews, I did not encounter imams who referenced issues with religious freedom violations or felt their faith was not protected. Moreover, when asked if there are additional protections that the Muslim community should seek, Imam Iusein Onder emphatically responded that he wished his community to be equal with everyone else [26]. Here, I will provide several examples that exemplify how cooperative the governments are in supporting the Islamic faith:

- In Medgidia, I spoke with Imam Iusein Onder, who commented that someone from another community or faith tradition has never come and asked for the call to prayer speakers to be removed or the volume lowered. He referenced a time when the speaker was undergoing maintenance; the town's mayor inquired why he couldn't hear the call to prayer, as he had become so accustomed to it, and subsequently asked if he could assist in its maintenance [26].

- During the conversation in Babadag, the mayor contacted Iman Usein Evren, who needed assistance returning and refurbishing a mosque speaker. This indicates the closeness and amicability between political and religious authorities [51].

Another example highlights the need to conform to the religious traditions of the area of Dobruja.

- Imam Gemil Seyhan in Tulcea described the importance of local traditions and customs in his mosque, going so far as to define its character as Dobruja Islam. However, this opinion of a "Dobruja Islam" was not shared by all [20]

After discussing arguably the most crucial field, religion, this article will move on to the socio-political field to discuss additional elements of identity maintenance and their role in reproducing the Dobrogean Model

of Religious Pluralism.

VI. SOCIO-POLITICAL FIELD

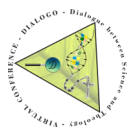
In the realm of politics, the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities, as an “accidental diaspora,” again conceptually drawing from [16], went through a tremendous change from their status in the Ottoman Empire to the newly incorporated principalities of Romania [18]. As was mentioned, this was followed by a period of nationalization (or Romanianization), as [24] puts it, where the Romanian state sought to respect the preexisting institutions of the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities while also bringing them under current Romanian law.

This period was followed by the 20th century when the policies of the Communist regime sought to homogenize or to make uniform and privatize much of public life, especially in the Turkish and Tatar communities, whose ethnoreligious identity had formed over a long period [11], [32]. Here, non-formal education became essential to identity maintenance, as the Communist regime essentially sought to privatize [14]. The institutions of family and community became paramount as day in and day out, a child’s socialization centered around learning the mother tongue in the household and practicing the Islamic faith, often in a new private way on account of the Communism regime’s intention to homogenize Romanian society [17].

However, in the newly democratic Romanian state, new “terms” of civil and political liberties existed again, with institutional and political accompanying the spiritual revitalization. The 1991 Romanian constitution affirms that Romania is the common and indivisible homeland of all its citizens, regardless of race, ethnic origin, language, religion, sex, opinion, political allegiance, wealth, or social origin

(article 4 para.2). Additionally, under Article 6, titled “The Right to Identity,” the state recognizes and guarantees the right of national minorities to preserve, develop, and express their ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious identity. While the constitution designates Romanian as the language of instruction at all levels (article 32 para.2), it also ensures in the following third paragraph that the rights of ethnic minorities to learn their mother tongue and be taught in that language are protected. Furthermore, Article 29, under the heading “Freedom of Conscience,” asserts the freedom of all religions to organize in accordance with their own statutes, under the terms defined by the law, and states that religious sects are autonomous in relation to the state and receive its support.

With these new protections, the Turk and Tatar communities were officially accepted as distinct ethnic minorities and treated on par with the other 16 national minorities [6]. Subsequently, the year 1989 saw the creation of the Ethnic Turkish Minority Union of Romania, which later adopted the name Turkish Democratic Union of Romania and the Democratic Union of Turkish-Muslim Tatars of Romania [20]. Following the 1990 split, only two organizations were granted official status by the Romanian Government and had the right to appoint one representative to the Parliament. These organizations were the UDTR and UDTTMR, and they took on the role of representative organizations for the Turkish and Tatar communities. The Romanian Government provided financial resources to these organizations to protect and develop minority communities, facilitate cultural activities, and support education. In this way, not only could the Turkish and Tatar communities build their self-understanding, but ethnic Romanians also had an opportunity to learn more about these groups through officially sanctioned



government channels. As a result, both organizations became the primary official channels for Romanian Turks and Tatars to voice their concerns to the Romanian authorities and develop greater relations with the rest of the Romanian citizenry.

Moreover, Turkey has utilized another tool in supporting the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities, again in collaboration with local and national religious and political authorities [16, 61]. Opened in 2014, through channels similar to the *Diaynet*, the Turkish State opened TIKA or the Coordination Office of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency. Initially developed in 1992 to extend the Turkish understanding of democracy and free-market capitalism in zones with familiar historical and cultural legacies [16, 59], it has had a profound presence in Dobruja for several years. In nearly a decade, TIKA has conducted almost 100 projects, with support and collaboration from local and national authorities [16, 61]. Some examples of this include:

- Renovation of city hospitality in Medgidia in 2015 at the cost of 1.5 million Euros [6, 18]
- Equipping the Department of Turkish Language, Culture and Civilisation Mehmet Akif Ersoy at the Philological Faculty of Ovidius University with school equipment and books [61, 61]

In my interviews, admiration for local and national authorities was palpably felt, as each Imam I spoke to only had good things to say about the protections the Romanian state afforded them. Interestingly, several Imams commented that although they are of Turkish or Tatar origin or the Muslim religion, they are also Romanian citizens [26].

Finally, after having discussed the previous two fields, this study will now move on to the last section, discussing

education and examining how interaction in this field in all three elements of the nexus helped maintain Turkish and Tatar Muslim identity, as well as safeguard Dobruja's model of religious pluralism.

VII. EDUCATION FIELD

A vital backdrop must be established in education before discussing the relational axis. Much like in politics and religion, Dobruja and the longstanding Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities possessed a traditional education system, another product of the Ottoman Empire, with these schools primarily operating as madrasas [37]. However, in the immediate period following Dobruja's incorporation into Greater Romania, the new Romanian administration incorporated these schools into the Romanian education system and even undertook their maintenance, including payment of teachers [24], [37]. The Muslim community also collaborated to provide funding and assets so that proper education could be provided to new students as the training of Imams, which was done out of the Muslim Graduate Seminary, the continuation of a madrasa founded in the 17th century in Babadag by an Ottoman military commander [36, 147-149].

However, throughout the Communist period, many aspects of state-supported education were shut down, including the Muslim Graduate Seminary, with many members of the association being arrested by the regime [37, 200]. By the 1960s, all schools that taught Turkish and Tatar were shut down because of the communist state's ambition to make Romanian society a new socialist image [11]. For example, in one interview with Imam Iusein Onder in Medgidia, he spoke about the fact that the regime was so very intent on reducing the visibility of Islam that when his grandparents were kids, they had to hide

their Qur'ans between the fabric of their pants so they would be able to bring it into their homes [26].

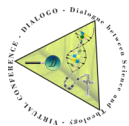
However, after 1989, the situation turned much more positive, as new civil and political rights were guaranteed and the move away from the ambition of the Communist regime to homogenize life and privatize individuals and communities [11]. With this, two important aspects need to be highlighted in education: relational support for teaching Islam, both in the context of theological study and general education, and the return of language education in Turkish and Tatar.

Firstly, the parents and ethnic organizations like the UDTTMR and UTMR petitioned for the return of the Turkish and Tatar language courses with much success [7]. In fact, with collaboration from the Turkish state and the Romanian government, Turkish and Tatar minorities could reclaim much of the historical traditions and heritage that had been less supported throughout the Communist period. Spearheaded by parallel advances in the Turkish and Tatar Unions as well as the diplomatic channels of the Turkish government, the Romanian government eventually signed off on the reopening of the Muslim Seminary, the previously mentioned historic educational institution in Medgidia, 6 through the Ministry of Education and the State Secretary for Religions [5]. By 1995, the Romanian and Turkish governments agreed on a protocol. They officially reopened the Muslim Graduate Seminary as the newly named “Kemal Atatürk National College,” specifically designating it for the Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities. In the following time, not only did three high

schools develop with the capacity to teach Turkish, but religious education became more available, with basic notions of Islam being taught with the public education system in the mother language of those being taught [29], [48]-[49, 390, 399]. The teaching of the Turkish and Tatar languages has been highlighted in reference [49] as closely intertwined with the teaching of the Islamic faith. This connection underscores the fusion of ethnicity and religion, a topic addressed explicitly by [16] and extensively studied in various research. This circumstance is aided by religious education, which has a long history in Romania [9], and the provision of Islamic education to the Turkish and Tatar communities made historical and institutional sense [49, 387-389].

The Turkish state has also supported language training and cultural education since 1989. This happened through the Yunus Emre Turkish Cultural Centers in Bucharest and Constanța. Initially established by the Turkish government in 2007 as an arm of Turkish foreign policy in Ottoman Turkish legacy spaces, the two Romanian Yunus Emre centers opened in 2011 with the same purpose. They are in two critical cultural and diplomatic cities, so the Yunus Emre centers can offer Turkish language classes to Dobruja's pre-existing Turkish and Tatar communities and develop interest in the ethnic Romanian population. In addition to language classes, the Centers offer art, music, and photography courses and develop exhibitions for Turkish films, folklore, literature, and cuisine [16]. Once again, these organizations and their sponsored activities are crucial in promoting self-awareness among Turkish and Tatar community members and fostering greater integration with the broader Romanian society. Notably, in 2012, 41% of attendees in Turkish language classes were Romanian [16]. Additionally, while

6 Medgidia occupies a profound place in Ottoman heritage as Dobruja's old central economic zone and the Abdul Mejid Mosque home, named after Sultan Abdulmejid I.



the population in Constanța predominantly comprises Turkish and Tatar individuals, the Bucharest Centre mainly enrolls Romanian students [16]. While this may stem from the proximity of these centers to different population groups, the participation of Romanians in language and culture classes reflects a genuine interest in understanding the Turkish and Tatar communities within the Romanian population.

Regarding my interviews, the Imams spoke effusively about education's critical nature on peace and tolerance. This dynamic was discussed regarding state-provided education and the education the mosques and geamias offer their congregations [25], [26]. Indeed, research supports this assertion, as [46] argues at length about the foundational nature of education on one's social identity and the positive conceiving of another's identity, focusing specifically on the region of Dobruja. In fact, [46], authors [48] and [49] support the idea that education lies at the foundation of the coexistence that Dobruja boasts. For example, speaking with Iusein Onder, an Imam in Medigida, he said, "If you don't have education, you have nothing" [26]. Extensive research conducted by scholars and the words of educators, including those of Imams, attest to education's critical role in promoting peace and pluralism. Indeed, education has been identified as a fundamental pillar for fostering social harmony and stability in diverse societies.

With all this said, after examining the three fields of religion, socio-politics, and education, this article will now discuss the nexus of the model of religious pluralism and its potential challenges.

VIII. DISCUSSION OF THE INTER-RELATIONAL NEXUS

A. Strengths of the Model

Throughout each field of politics, religion, and education, the relational interaction between the Turkish and Tatar Muslim minority, the Romanian state, and the external homeland of Turkey exemplifies a profound engagement in maintaining a particular social configuration: a pluralist and tolerant ethnoreligious identity, bound up in the legacy of Ottoman Turkish heritage. In all three fields (and indeed, in others not mentioned), each level participated in the growth and development of specific characteristics of the Turkish and Tatar ethnoreligious identity, which developed alongside the character of the Romanian state.

Sometimes, these actions were taken independently, without the engagement of the other elements, such as in the realm of non-formal education, where families and communities had to rely on their capacities to reproduce identity, as explained by the Dobrogean Model. However, at other times, the initiatives required, and indeed often received, the necessary collaboration for success, such as re-establishing the Muslim Graduate Seminary and its conversion into the now Kemal Atatürk National College. The Turkish and Tatar Muslim communities collaborated at the local and national level through their political parties, the UDTTMR, while also engaging the Turkish government through the appropriate diplomatic channels. From there, they could petition the Romanian government, which cooperated with the community and the Turkish government in financial and personnel support.

To a large degree, the interviews exemplify the degree to which pluralism is respected in Dobruja and, thus, the

strength of the Dobrogean Model. Firstly, several Imams outwardly stated that while they are a part of the Turkish or Tatar nation or the Islamic religion, they are a Romanian citizen, indicating that those conceptions of identity are not mutually exclusive. When prompted, for example, Imam Ibrahim Ergian of Valu lui Traian suggested that they anticipate only a slight possibility of conflict due to the new Muslim immigrants [25]. Moreover, Imam Gemil Seyhan of Tulcea argued the same primarily because of how new Muslim immigrants from Southeast Asia, for example, are integrated into the religious community through services in the *geamia* or mosque [20]. In other words, the more these new individuals attend, the more they will become infused with the character of Dobruja's religiously plural identity. What most Imams expressed more concern about was the disaffiliation and disinterest of youth in the Muslim religion. However, the Imams were emphatic about the success of this religious coexistence despite the youth disaffiliation.

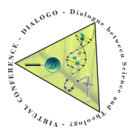
B. Potential Challenges of the Model

Although one of the strengths in promoting religious pluralism is the interdependent nature of the triadic nexus, it is also one of its challenges. As previously mentioned, the success of religious pluralism relies on the social arrangements and legal recognition provided by a secular, democratic government like that of Romania. Even more so in an age where religious institutions are noticeably weaker than they used to be, governments increasingly need to facilitate that peace, not of religious indifference or autonomy, but a genuine and fruitful pluralism where openness to dialogue is encouraged. If each entity is not actively interested in collaborating, the success of the model could depend on each branch acting independently, without regard for the

actions of the other.

Additionally, while the region of Dobruja illustrates religious diversity and tolerance, Romania has not always adhered to its eastern region's peaceful and tolerant reputation. This circumstance may mean that this pattern of religious pluralism could be isolated to a specific region, with its accompanying historical and cultural legacies, and thus without general applicability or nationwide reach.⁷ These instances might be explained by the fact that the rest of Romania, outside of the region of Transylvania, is much less religiously diverse or plural in terms of population size [27]. Indeed, although 18 different religious cults and denominations are recognized, Romania possesses a population with 86% religious affiliation with the Romanian Orthodox Church, with more religious people expressing greater pride in nationality [38], [34]. This situation may indicate that even though pluralism or social arrangements of plurality exist, they have not been adequately tested under the current government program outside of the context of Dobruja and the counties of Tulcea and Constanța. Further, with Romania's post-1989 fusion of national identity and religion and research suggesting that religious diversity

⁷ One notable example of these difficulties is the responses and ensuing demonstrations that arose from a proposal to erect a mosque in Bucharest in 2015 [40]. To summarize, after a prolonged delay lasting 14 years due to Turkey's reluctance to reciprocate an intended church/mosque construction agreement, a consensus was eventually reached between former Romanian Prime Minister Victor Ponta and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to construct a mosque in Bucharest. However, public reaction was not so amendable to this initiative, as in August 2015, protesters publicly decried the move, claiming that the initiative was indicative of an Islamic invasion. Unfortunately, the initiative was eventually abandoned after the funds dried up, but the protests likely had a profound impact on the potential success of the agenda.



is inversely correlated to cohesiveness in national identity [23], the peace and coexistence exemplified in Dobruja may follow the same logic of being unique to the region and untested in a more expansive socio-political space.

Also, specifically concerning the Muslim communities and their religious institutional structure in Romania, the ongoing push and pull between the new and old populations, namely the new Arab Muslim populations and the old Turkish and Tatar communities, presents a possible challenge to this model of religious pluralism. Although there has been an absence of radical Islam or outwardly visible religious tensions, inter-Islamic conflict on account of scriptural, organizational, or other differences appear more prevalent [59]. As mentioned previously, since the 1990s, with the arrival of many Muslims from Arab countries and South and Southeast Asia, there has been a feeling of not being represented by the Muftiate and its specific endorsement of the Hanafi school. This situation may not be helped by the fact that the Romanian state only recognizes one “Muslim cult,” with the Muftiate being their primary representative institution, which could be the Romanian state’s version of “churchification” and/or “securitization” using an already established religious structure [52].⁸ By reinforcing these institutional structures, the Romanian state knows and can nominally control them through legal and political means. In essence, they emphasize the legitimacy of this, and only this Muslim institutional structure conforms to liberal, democratic norms.

Ultimately, despite undergoing

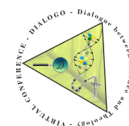
⁸ In a simple sense, to “churchify” means to “imbue with the ideas, principles, or characteristics of the Christian Church.” Still, in a more academic and institutionally minded way, it refers to a way of making religion conform to democratic standards of secularism and liberalism [52, 51-55]. In this way, to “churchify”

significant changes since 1989, including an effort to establish a national identity rooted in its ancient Orthodox faith, Romania has managed to maintain a pattern of pluralism in the Dobruja region. This highlights the importance of collaborative initiatives in this rapidly evolving socio-political landscape of Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where diverse cultures and faiths constantly interact with their home environments, communities, and national governments.

CONCLUSION

This article has delved into the remarkable endurance and maintenance of Turkish and Tatar Islamic identity in Dobruja and how it has become an integral component of the Dobrogean Model of Religious Pluralism. By analyzing the complex interplay between the national minority, the nationalizing state, and the external homeland across domains such as politics, religion, and education, Brubaker’s triadic nexus framework offers valuable insights into this phenomenon, which encourages further exploration.

This study contains certain research limitations, including time, resources, and access to specific individuals for qualitative interviews. Regarding interviews, future research would include discussions with the non-official Islamic religious elite, officials from the State Secretary for Cults, including the State Secretary themselves, and bureaucratic individuals in and around the countries of Constanța and Tulcea. Additionally, at the time of writing, this study could not interview Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) religious elite members in Dobruja, which would have granted a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between the majority Romanian Orthodox faith community and the minority Islamic communities. Further research would greatly benefit



from involving the community more and conducting interviews with individuals and groups. Additionally, it would be valuable to explore the impact of Ottoman administrative structures on other Balkan regions and compare their contributions to contemporary religious pluralism. A comprehensive comparative analysis with other diverse regions or an examination of how recent geopolitical shifts have affected the religious landscape of the area could provide valuable insights into how religious pluralism functions and potential models for its operation.

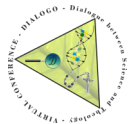
Notwithstanding, considering the time allotted and resources available, including support from and access to the Muftiate and the Great Mufti Yusuf Murat for a personal interview, this article described and explained the pattern of development of the Turkish and Tatar Muslim identity as an essential element to the centuries-old Dobrogean Model of Religious Pluralism, which, while preexisting the consolidation of the newly democratic Romanian state, was indispensable to the maintenance of peace, pluralism, and an absence of ethnic and religious tensions in the region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

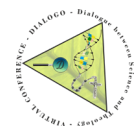
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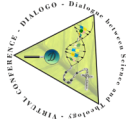
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BIOGRAPHY



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