

## THE ROLE OF THE TURKISH-TATAR COMMUNITY IN DOBRUJA IN ROMANIAN-TURKISH CULTURAL RELATIONS (1990-2023)

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**Abstract:** This study analyses the importance of the Turkish-Tatar community in Dobruja in Turkish-Romanian bilateral relations from the 90's up to the present moment. It is often referred to as a bridge between these two countries, hence this paper aims to prove this point by presenting its cores, values and contribution to bilateral relations in the past three decades.

By explaining Türkiye's foreign policy in the Balkans and with the countries of the former Ottoman territory, the study underlines the importance given by Türkiye to this community in Dobruja. Thus, the visits of Turkish presidents or prime ministers to Romania over the years have solidified the collaboration between the two countries, and at the same time have given this community the opportunity to be in contact with what they consider to be their "motherland", through language, religion and history. In this manner, the contacts made on a cultural level between the two countries reveal this community's importance in Turkish-Romanian relations. Türkiye's support in the field of education or for the renovation of historical monuments of the common heritage through governmental organizations such as Diyanet, the „Yunus Emre" Cultural Institute and TİKA, is touched upon in this study.

**Keywords:** Romania; Türkiye; bilateral relations; cultural relations; foreign policy; Turks; Tatars; Dobruja

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### 1. Who are the Turks and Tatars of Dobruja?

The Turkish-Tatar community in Romania is one of the main factors favouring close relations between Türkiye and Romania. The Turks and Tatars mainly live in Dobruja, a region bordered by the Danube and the Black Sea, part of the territory of both Romania and Bulgaria. Due to its complex history and strategic location, it can be perceived as a meeting point of various ethnicities, religions and cultures. It has historically served as a bridge between Türkiye and Romania, facilitating cultural exchange and political dialogue. The

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presence of the Turks and Tatars in Dobruja dates back to the 13th century and has played a significant role in shaping regional relations.

First of all, the history of Turkic peoples in Dobruja can be traced to the 5th century, with various groups including the Huns (ca. 408), Avars (534, 587), Bulgars (679), Pechenegs (440/1048), Uzes (456/1064), and Cumans (484/1091) passing through or settling in the region.<sup>1</sup> The Tatars established their presence in the 13th century under the Golden Horde state. A significant development occurred in 1263 when Selgiukid Turks, the predecessors of the Ottoman Turks, led by Sarı Saltuk Dede, settled in Babadag. Saltuk played a crucial role in spreading Islam and Turkish culture in the region.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the complex history of Turks in Dobruja can be divided into three main periods: pre-Ottoman, during the Ottoman Empire, and the period of integration into the Romanian nation-state (from 1878 to the present).<sup>3</sup>

After the Russo-Turkish war (1877-1878) and the Treaty of Berlin<sup>4</sup>, Dobruja became part of a now independent Romania, and the Turkish-Tatar community living there initially enjoyed significant rights and freedoms. In 1879, there were 271 villages with 134,662 Muslims, forming a majority.<sup>5</sup> The community had access to religious institutions. There were two religious courts, over 300 mosques, 100 imams, and the state was responsible with the salaries of two muftis.<sup>6</sup> Most of the Turks and Tatars were based in Constanța, and the majority of the Tatars who arrived during the Crimean War (1853-1856) settled in Medgidia and Mangalia.<sup>7</sup>

However, the population began declining due to emigration. By 1913, only 20,092 Turks and 21,350 Tatars remained in the region.<sup>8</sup> A further decrease was documented in 1930, attributed largely to mass emigration caused by various factors, including Bulgarian terrorist activities against Turkish populations, decreasing rural property ownership through agrarian reform, high taxes and the attraction of the newly established Republic of Türkiye (1923), perceived by the community as the “mother country”.<sup>9</sup> Many chose to settle in various cities in Türkiye such as Çanakkale, Tekirdağ, Edirne, Ankara, Eskişehir

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<sup>1</sup> Metin Omer, *Emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor din România în Turcia între cele două Războaie Mondiale* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2020), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Omer, *Emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor*, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Mehmet Ali Ekrem, *Din istoria turcilor dobrogeni* (București: Editura Kriterion, 1994), 211.

<sup>4</sup> “Romania”, Strasbourg-Europe, accessed August 15, 2024, <https://www.strasbourg-europe.eu/romania/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ekrem, *Istoria turcilor*, 103.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Alexandru Arbore, *Din Etnografia Dobrogei* (București: Tipografia Curții Regale F. GOBL FII., 1920), 25.

<sup>8</sup> Arbore, *Etnografia Dobrogei*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ekrem, *Istoria turcilor*, 127.

or Kırklareli.<sup>10</sup> In the inter-war period, after the signing of a convention between Romania and Türkiye, around 115.000 Turks and Tatars emigrated from Romania to Türkiye.<sup>11</sup>

The communist period (post-World War II) brought significant challenges to the principles and practices of the Turkish-Tatar community in Dobruja. The role of Islam in their lives was diminished through atheist propaganda. During this period of time the communists aimed to limit Türkiye's influence and activity among the Turko-Tatar community living in Romania.<sup>12</sup> To this end, the state had imported textbooks and literature books from the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in Kazan, USSR. This indirectly meant opposition to the official language of a capitalist state (Türkiye)<sup>13</sup>, but had little impact on promoting Tatar culture. By the 1960s, all schools that offered education in Turkish and Tatar were closed as part of the communist government's goal to reshape Romanian society into a new socialist model.<sup>14</sup> The closure of key educational institutions, such as the Muslim Seminary in Medgidia, together with the arrests of many members of the association, further weakened native language education in the community.<sup>15</sup> Diminishing Türkiye's influence also meant a decrease in public religious practices. Muslims in Dobruja were reluctant to openly practice their faith, not for personal reasons, but to avoid possible consequences from the authorities. For example, during the first decades of Dej's communist regime, most of those arrested by the authorities were imams, regarded as having nationalist or anti-Soviet leanings, those suspected of having any kind of tie with the Turkish state, and those who helped and housed the Crimeans.<sup>16</sup> For the community, this political regime meant the promotion and passage of Turkish and Tatar identities inside a closed circle, the family, duty which they accomplished in the end.

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<sup>10</sup> Ekrem, *Istoria turcilor*, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Omer, *Emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor*, 137.

<sup>12</sup> Metin Omer, "Turcii și Tătarii din România în relațiile româno-turce (1923-2023)", in *Secolul Armoniei: relații româno-turce 1923-2023*, ed. Silvana Rachieru (Iași: Editura Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2023), 141.

<sup>13</sup> Adriana Cupcea, "Religion and Ethnicity: Muslim Turkish and Tatar Identity in Dobruja (Romania) throughout the 20th Century", *Marmara University Journal of Political Science* 6, no. 2 (2018): 120.

<sup>14</sup> Raymon-Donald Horchos, "Modeling Religious Coexistence: The Turkish and Tatar Muslim Communities in Romania's Dobruja", *DIALOGO* 10, no. 2 (2024): 180, <https://journals.indexcopernicus.com/api/file/viewByFileId/1991069>, accessed August 10, 2024.

<sup>15</sup> Adriana Cupcea, "Construcția identitară la comunitățile turcă și tătară din Dobrogea," *Working papers in Romanian minority studies*, no. 49 (2013): 11, <https://www.ispmn.gov.ro/uploads/WP49-11-10.pdf>, accessed March 10, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Cupcea, "Construcția identitară", 10.

Yaman Başkut was the Ambassador of the Republic of Türkiye to Romania during the '90s, right at a time when a switch to democracy was taking place on a political and societal level in Romania. According to his memoirs, the Turkish-Tatar community in Dobruja is central to Romanian-Turkish relations. Early in his role, meaning right after the fall of communism, he visited the community, emphasizing three priorities: training Turkish language teachers, bringing imams from Türkiye, and restoring Ottoman mosques.<sup>17</sup> At that time, in 1992, there were 24.295 Turks and 24.011 Tatars living in Constanța, while Tulcea was inhabited by 3.390 Turks and 174 Tatars.<sup>18</sup>

The past three decades have shown a decrease in the number of Turks and Tatars, motivated by migration not only to Türkiye but also various European countries. Still, according to the last census in 2021, the largest minorities in Dobruja are the Turks and Tatars. In Constanța County, there are currently 16.121 Turks and 16.918 Tatars, living mainly in Constanța, Mangalia and Medgidia.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, 993 Turks and 106 Tatars appear to be living in Tulcea County.<sup>20</sup> This area is marked by a larger Turkish population, compared to that of Tatars, concentrated in Babadag, Isaccea and Macin, due to the historical influence of the Ottoman Empire, which established an earlier Turkish population in the region. Judging by the official numbers registered throughout time, there is still a significant number of Turks and Tatars living in Dobruja, regardless of migration tendencies. Adding to this, nowadays Tatars and Turks have spread to other big cities such as Bucharest, the capital, for better economic and career opportunities and education.

## **2. The role of the Turkish-Tatar community in the official meetings of Romanian and Turkish officials after the 1990's**

After president Ceaușescu was removed from power in 1989, structural changes took place in the political system and the country began a process of democratization. As a result of the new political orientation, the main objective of Romanian foreign policy was to join Euro-Atlantic organizations. That was the beginning of a new chapter for both Romanians and the minorities in Romania. The country's new constitution, adopted in 1991 following the fall of the communist regime, granted all citizens the right to equality, regardless of

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<sup>17</sup> Metin Omer, "Diplomație, istorie, afaceri și turism: România post-comunistă în memorii și note de călătorie turcești", in *În Căutarea celuiilalt. Diplomație, război, memorie*, ed. Mioara Anton, Georgiana Țăranu (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2024), 472.

<sup>18</sup> Recensământ România "Rezultate definitive: Caracteristici etno-culturale demografice", accessed October 1, 2024, <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rezultate-rpl-2021/rezultate-definitive-caracteristici-etno-culturale-demografice/>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, language, gender or political opinion. The new Constitution also includes the right of minorities to be represented in Parliament.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, national minorities had the possibility to form unions and associations, with material and logistical support from the Romanian Government. Therefore, The Turkish Muslim Democratic Union of Romania (*Uniunea Democrată Turcă Musulmană*), which included both Turks and Tatars, was founded on December 29, 1989, in Constanța. Misunderstandings between the Turks and Tatars led to the disintegration of this union in 1990, with the Turkish Democratic Union of Romania (UDTR) and the Democratic Union of Turkish-Muslim Tatars in Romania (UDTTMR) taking separate forms. In 1990, the UDTTMR's deputy was Tasin Gemil and the representative of the Turkish minority was Amet Hoge.<sup>22</sup> In 1994, the two groups united under the name of the Federation of Turks and Tatars in Romania (*Federația Turcilor și Tătarilor din România*), which turned out to be unsuccessful.

The Turkish Democratic Union of Romania is an apolitical organization recognized by the Romanian government, aiming to protect and promote the cultural and linguistic identity of ethnic Turks.<sup>23</sup> It hosts annual Muslim holiday events, cultural activities, and Turkish language competitions, and features a traditional dance troupe, *Delikanlılar*, along with a youth commission.

In the same manner, the Democratic Union of Turkish-Muslim Tatars is an ethno-confessional organization representing Romanian citizens of Turkish-Muslim Tatar nationality. Its mission focuses on preserving and expressing the rights and identities of the Tatar minority across various aspects, including culture and religion.<sup>24</sup> It has several branches in Dobruja, organizing cultural events, teaching the Tatar language to children, and celebrating national and religious holidays.

Despite their traditionalism and tendency to form enclaves due to shared Islamic practices and cultural heritage, the Turks and Tatars of Dobruja have proved a strong ability to adapt to social changes. They have achieved significant social inclusion, political participation, and frequent interactions with other groups, reflecting a positive embrace of diversity within their community.

In the 1990-2005 period, the Turkish community showed a switch towards the Turkish world, but it coexisted with the values of the country of

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<sup>21</sup>“Constituția României din 21 noiembrie 1991”, SRI.RO, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://www.sri.ro/assets/files/legislatie/constitutia.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Cupcea, “Construcția identitară”, 14.

<sup>23</sup> Prezentarea UDTR”, Uniunea Democrată Turcă din România, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://www.rdtb.ro/prezentare>.

<sup>24</sup> “Despre noi”, Uniunea Democrată a Tătarilor Turco-Musulmani din România, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://uniuneatatara.ro/despre-noi>.

residence. This trend was maintained until 2005, when Romania's objective to become a member of the European Union was confirmed by the signing of the accession agreement by the Romanian Government. During this period, contacts with the Republic of Türkiye were very close and frequent. Turkish President Turgut Özal visited Romania in July 1991, invited by his counterpart Ion Iliescu. During the visit, the Turkish delegation supported the desire for cooperation with the Romanian partners, with whom they signed the *Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation*. Also, on the second day of his visit, President Özal met with representatives of the Turkish minority in Romania, through whom he was able to get informed about the situation of the community. The most important thing to come out of this visit is Ankara's satisfaction with the Romanian state's regulations on the status of minorities.<sup>25</sup>

Also, during the visit of the ninth Turkish President, Süleyman Demirel, to Romania, in March 1994, meetings were held with deputies Fevziye Ruşit and Tahsin Gemil, discussing the state of the Turkish minority. President Demirel suggested the inauguration of cultural centres in Constanța and Istanbul. His schedule included a visit to Medgidia, town with a large Turkish and Tatar population, where he was greeted with Turkish flags and attended the Friday religious service (tr. Cuma Namazı).<sup>26</sup> In addition to the fact that there were no problems whatsoever in Romanian-Turkish relations, the President's decision to visit the Turkish minority once again demonstrated the interest shown by the Turkish state, and, in the same way, the suggestion to open cultural centres in both Constanța and Istanbul shows the Turkish state's desire to institutionalize the Turkish culture in countries where there is a Turkish population.

In 1998, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yılmaz visited Romania and also held talks with representatives of the Turkish community, to whom he conveyed the following message: "[..]. *we have compatriots living all around us, in all neighbouring countries. But I think that among all these countries, the ones who are in the best situation are our compatriots in Romania. We also meet with compatriots from other countries whenever we visit them. They have more problems than you do. They have problems waiting to be solved. We are trying to fully eliminate your past problems, taking advantage of the opportunities that have arisen after 1989, after this change in Romanian governance. Our expectation from you is to represent a bridge between Türkiye and Romania. To be good citizens of Romania, to be loyal citizens. To preserve your mother tongue, your religion, your love for Türkiye and your relationship with it. [...]*." <sup>27</sup> The words of the Turkish Prime Minister emphasize once again the position of the Turkish minority in

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<sup>25</sup> Kader Özlem, *Türkiye'nin Balkan Türkleri Politikası (1991-2014)* (Bursa: Dora Yayıncılık, 2016), 330.

<sup>26</sup> Özlem, *Balkan Türkleri*, 332.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 336.

the relations between the two countries, namely that of a bridge of connection. The Turkish state's interest in its compatriots in Romania, and the main objective of protecting the Turkish language, the Islamic religion, and the traditions is also emphasized.

Also in 1998, in Bucharest, the bust of the first Turkish president, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was placed in the square which bears the same name. The inauguration was attended by both the Romanian and Turkish presidents. During this visit, Demirel also visited the Cemetery of Turkish Heroes in Bucharest. In Constanța, President Demirel was greeted with joy by members of the Turkish community. He opened the Ali Paşa Mosque in Babadag, which had been restored by the Turkish Ministry of Culture. During talks with the residents, he asked them to live in peace and solidarity.<sup>28</sup>

Relations between the two countries have remained positive under the rule of the AK Party in Türkiye since 2003. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Romania in 2004 was also based on meetings with representatives of the Turkish community, followed by the visit to Bucharest of the Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer, in July 2004.

Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Constanța in October 2007 also carries an important significance in the consciousness of the Turkish-Tatar community. Attending an event organized by members of the community, he advised young people to defend their values and not to forget their origins and identity, urging parents to take care of their children. In the context of protecting identity, he advised young people "not to assimilate" through mixed marriages.<sup>29</sup>

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan also visited Romania as President of the Republic of Türkiye in April 2015, accompanied by First Lady Emine Erdoğan. Among the various activities they took part in was a visit to the "Yunus Emre" Turkish Cultural Centre in Bucharest. Emine Erdoğan met with representatives of the Turkish-Turkish community in Romania and she was also informed about the courses at the institute and future projects. She expressed her satisfaction with the work of the institute and the desire of the Turks in Romania to learn their mother tongue.<sup>30</sup>

### 3. Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans

The frequency of high-level meetings between Romania and Türkiye in the immediate post-Cold War period can be explained by new approaches in Turkish foreign policy. After the end of the Cold War with the collapse of the Soviet Union, former President and Prime Minister Turgut Özal wanted to

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<sup>28</sup> Özlem, *Balkan Türkleri*, 338.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 334.

<sup>30</sup> "Erdoğan Romanya'da", *Anayurt*, April 3, 2015, 14.

pursue a more active policy with the countries of the former Ottoman territory. Like all prime ministers who followed an Islamist tradition, he too sought to establish his influence in the former Ottoman geography. Abroad, this perspective was considered an imperialist policy, and at home - an anti-national state policy. It was viewed with suspicion as an attempt to indirectly restore the Ottoman Empire.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the close approach to the Muslim communities in the Balkans started during his terms as president and prime minister (1983 - 1993), and reached its peak after the AKP came to power in 2002.<sup>32</sup> When the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power after the 2002 elections, Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of the main architects of AKP foreign policy, focused on developing an active policy towards the former Ottoman territories in his book entitled *Strategic Depth* (tr. *Stratejik Derinlik*). According to Davutoğlu, Türkiye's geopolitical position should be used to gradually increase the country's influence from a regional to a global level, emphasizing the importance of contacts with neighbouring countries and former Ottoman territories, promoting the creation of closer economic, cultural and political ties. Therefore, according to the doctrine, Türkiye should pursue a proactive policy in line with its history and geographical depth. To achieve this goal, Türkiye should make use of the soft power potential created by its historical and cultural ties with all regions, its democratic institutional structure, and its growing market economy.<sup>33</sup> Finally, Ahmet Davutoğlu presents the basic strategy of Turkish foreign policy for the 21st century as strengthening long-term political, economic, and cultural relations in the immediate neighbourhood.<sup>34</sup>

The most profound manifestation of the "strategic depth" doctrine in the Balkans has been Türkiye's emphasis on cultural diplomacy and the revival of historical ties. Türkiye has actively promoted cultural exchanges, educational programs and the preservation of common heritage. In order to strengthen these ties, a number of institutions have been opened in Romania with the aim of keeping the existing Turkish element alive, as well as expanding and developing it. Diyanet, the "Yunus Emre" Cultural Institute and TİKA strive to maintain and strengthen the cultural, religious and educational ties between Türkiye and Romania, supporting both the local Turkish and Tatar communities and the bilateral relations between the two countries.

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<sup>31</sup> Haydar Çakmak, "Turgut Özal'ın Dış Politika Felsefesi", in *Türk Dış Politikası*, ed. Haydar Çakmak (Ankara: Barış Platin Kitap LTD. ŞTİ, 2008), 744.

<sup>32</sup> Adriana Cupcea, "Turkey's Kin State Policy in the Balkans: The Muslim Community from Dobruja", *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 7, no. 1 (2020): 56.

<sup>33</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (Istanbul: Küre Yayınları, 2001), 119.

<sup>34</sup> Yasin Avcı, "Türk Dış Politikasının Stratejik Derinlik Revizyonunda Balkanlar", *BEU Akademik İZDÜŞÜM* 2, no. 2, (2013): 107.

### 3.1. Diyanet

Being the best representation of multiculturalism, Dobruja has a rich Ottoman heritage, with numerous mosques, madrasas and other historical monuments dating back to that era. However, many of these buildings have deteriorated over time, prompting the Turkish government to undertake restoration projects. These were carried out through the Diyanet, an organization founded in 1924 in Türkiye. Its roles include educating the public about Islam, managing religious personnel and supervising places of worship. The Diyanet monitors and protects religious activities in the Balkans, usually through embassy advisers.<sup>35</sup> Diyanet's work in Romania started between 2000 and 2001, in Dobruja, with the appointment of a religious affairs attaché at the Consulate General of Türkiye in Constanța. Given the significance and essential role of mosques in the Turkish-Islamic cultural heritage, one of the initial efforts focused on their restoration and protection. Therefore, in 2006, a cooperation agreement was signed between the Diyanet and the Muftiate of the Muslim Cult in Romania. One of the main provisions of this agreement involved financial support for the restoration of Muslim places of worship. Since the 1990s, Türkiye has undertaken the restoration of numerous historic mosques in Dobruja, including Gazi Ali Paşa in Babadag, Esmahan Sultan in Mangalia, Hunkiar in Constanța, Abdulmecid in Medgidia and the Abdulaziz Mosque in Tulcea. In later stages, Türkiye responded to local and Muftiate demand by building new mosques, such as the one in Călărași in 2015, and contributed financially to others in Medgidia and Constanța. Essential items, such as carpets and the Holy Quran, have also been donated to mosques in Dobruja. In addition, Türkiye sent imams to these mosques for 4 to 5-year terms, especially during the month of Ramadan. At the same time, the graves of notable religious figures such as Sarı Saltuk and Koyun Baba of Babadag, Ishak Baba of Isaccea and Muslim cemeteries have been either restored, rehabilitated or closed for protection.<sup>36</sup>

### 3.2. The "Yunus Emre" Cultural Institute

The "Yunus Emre" Cultural Institute, operating under the aegis of the Yunus Emre Foundation since 2009, carries out its activities to promote Türkiye, the Turkish language, literature, history, culture and art, as well as to strengthen the ties of friendship between Türkiye and other countries through

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<sup>35</sup> Adriana Cupcea, "The Turkish Diyanet and its Activities in the Muslim Community in Dobruja (Romania)", in *Religious Education. Wiener Beiträge zur Islamforschung*, ed. Ednan Aslan, Margaret Rausch (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2018), 294.

<sup>36</sup> Ali Bozçalışkan, "An Analysis Of Turkey's Support To The Turkish-Tatar Minority In Romanian Dobruja After 1989 Revolution", *The Journal of International Civilization Studies* 3, no. 2 (2018): 17.

more than 80 cultural centres established in over 60 countries.<sup>37</sup> In Romania, two centres were opened in Bucharest and Constanța in 2011. Prior to the opening of the two cultural centres, the Ambassador of the Republic of Türkiye in Bucharest between 2011-2014, Ömür Şölendil, stated in an interview with Hakses magazine that „[...] *The "Yunus Emre" Cultural Centre will not only teach language courses, but also traditions, and the students will be able to recite poetry, listen to music and read literature. In other words, there will be cultural activities. [...] In Türkiye, the Yunus Emre Foundation has Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu as its honorary President, but the President, Prime Minister and Minister of Culture are directly in charge of the work of these cultural centres. [...] I consider the "Yunus Emre" Cultural Centre to be one of the most important projects of our country in Romania. These courses can be attended not only by ethnic Turks, but also by Romanian citizens. The doors are open to everyone.*”<sup>38</sup>

In Romania, more than 6,700 people have attended Turkish language courses at the institute, and around 1,200 civil servants currently have access to Turkish language courses through a project set up in 2020.<sup>39</sup> Attendance at these Turkish language courses indicates that 55% of the students are Turks and Tatars, 37% Romanians and 8% of other nationalities.<sup>40</sup> Among the reasons for joining the courses are a desire to improve their language skills, particularly among Turkish and Tatar ethnic groups, and an admiration for Turkish culture and history, emphasized by travel, films and television programs. In addition, there are also certain professional interests which direct learners towards studying Turkish. The opening of such a centre in Romania is a symbol of the strong bilateral relations and the growing interest in Turkish culture among the Romanian population.

The institute’s goal is to elevate Turkish to the status of a *lingua franca* while promoting the Turkish culture. To achieve this, the institute offers Turkish language proficiency tests (*Türkçe Yeterlilik Sınavı*) as part of efforts to standardize language assessment and strengthen Turkish as a common language in regions with Turkish communities.<sup>41</sup> In addition to promoting Turkish language and culture, the establishment of these institutes, in particular the one in Constanța, reflects the emphasis on the Ottoman heritage in the Balkans in contemporary Turkish foreign policy.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “Başkanın Mesajı”, Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, accessed March 16, 2024, <https://bukres.yee.org.tr/tr/kurumsal/baskanin-mesaji>.

<sup>38</sup> Sorina Asan, *Comunitatea turcă din România în viziunea diplomaților străini* (Constanța: Ex Ponto, 2019), 22-23.

<sup>39</sup> “Institutul Yunus Emre vă invită să descoperiți lumea turcă”, *Agerpres.ro*, October 29, 2021, <https://agerpres.ro/ots/2021/10/29/institutul-yunus-emre-va-invita-sa-descoperiti-lumea-turca--645333>, accessed March 16, 2024.

<sup>40</sup> Cupcea, “Kin State Policy”, 64.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

### 3.3. TIKA

While the religious sector is overseen and coordinated by the Diyanet, TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) also makes an important contribution to the community. TIKA was established in 1992 as a development and assistance agency operating under the auspices of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Initially, the agency focused exclusively on the newly independent states of Central Asia, following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Over time, however, TIKA has aligned its activities with Türkiye's foreign policy objectives, expanding its presence in regions such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. In 1999, it was placed under the coordination of the Turkish Prime Minister. TIKA has been an important tool of Turkish foreign policy since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) took power in 2002.<sup>43</sup> It does not have a religious profile, its work does not overlap with that of the Diyanet, but both institutions share a common goal, that of preserving Turkish cultural heritage.<sup>44</sup> TIKA aims to establish sustainable projects between Türkiye and its neighbouring countries and partners, focusing on collaborative initiatives to respond to local needs.<sup>45</sup>

TIKA began its activities in Romania before officially opening a branch, partnering with local Turkish and Tatar ethnic and religious groups, including the two unions, Turkish and Tatar, and the Muftiate. Since opening its Bucharest headquarters in 2015, TIKA has completed over 100 projects. A key future initiative, in collaboration with the Muftiate, focuses on preserving Ottoman cultural heritage by restoring several historic mosques in Dobruja, such as the Azizie Mosque in Isaccea, the mosque in Tulcea, the Hunkiar Mosque in Constanța, and also the Carol Mosque, built in 1910 to serve Constanța's Muslim community.<sup>46</sup>

### 3.4. The involvement of TIKA, Diyanet and the Yunus Emre Cultural Institute in education

Support and help from the Turkish state also exists in the field of education, where Diyanet, the "Yunus Emre" Cultural Institute and TIKA are very active. Türkiye's first initiative with regard to the Muslim community in Dobruja was taken in the field of education by reopening the historic

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<sup>43</sup> Güner Özkan, Turgut Demirtepe, "Transformation of a Development Aid Agency: TIKA in Changing Domestic and International Setting", *Turkish Studies* 13, no. 4 (2012): 650.

<sup>44</sup> Cupcea, "Kin State Policy", 59.

<sup>45</sup> "TIKA, promotor al prosperității în regiune", *Agerpres*, October 29, 2024, <https://www.agerpres.ro/ots/2020/10/29/tika-promotor-al-prosperitatii-in-regiune--642437>, accessed March 17, 2024.

<sup>46</sup> Cupcea, "Kin State Policy", 60.

educational institution in Medgidia<sup>47</sup>, and as a result, in April 1996 the two presidents, Süleyman Demirel and Ion Iliescu, attended the inauguration of the "*Kemal Atatürk*" Muslim Theological and Pedagogical High School. It is currently the only institution in Romania that trains future imams, having its origins in the 'Gazi Ali Pasha' medrese founded in 1610 in Babadag. After experiencing several interruptions, including relocation and closure during the communist era, in 1995 it was relocated under a protocol with Türkiye and was renamed the "*Kemal Atatürk*" National College in 2001, reflecting the support of the Turkish state.<sup>48</sup> According to Article 6 of the agreement, Türkiye has to cover students' accommodation, meals, clothing, and school supplies, as well as provide textbooks for Turkish language and religion. Romanian authorities must handle the school's maintenance and staff salaries. Article 9 specifies that Türkiye is responsible for providing the school's furnishings and teaching materials.<sup>49</sup> The school offers teaching in both Romanian and Turkish, with a headmaster elected from the community and a deputy headmaster appointed from Türkiye. This achievement underlines the attention and sensitivity shown by Türkiye to the wishes and needs of the Turkish-Tatar minority in Romania, and the presence of President Ion Iliescu at the inauguration of the College proves once again the positive atmosphere surrounding Romanian-Turkish relations. Turkish President Demirel said at the event that "*the attitude of the Bucharest administration towards minorities represents their rapprochement towards human rights*" and that "*this inauguration is not only an expression of respect for the right of minorities to education, but also a sign of Turkish-Romanian friendship*". Demirel also stated that "*the Turkish minority in Romania is the best treated minority in the Balkans*".<sup>50</sup>

According to an agreement concluded in 2006 with the Muslim Muftiate in Romania, the Turkish Presidency for Religious Affairs covers food costs for theology students and provides monthly scholarships, along with additional support for teaching staff. Some graduates also receive scholarships for further studies in Türkiye.<sup>51</sup> Füsün Aramaz, who was Consul General of the Republic of Türkiye in Constanța between 2010-2013, emphasized the importance of the role of the "*Kemal Atatürk*" National College in Medgidia for the Muslim community in Dobruja during an interview with Hakses magazine in 2010: "*We want the Turkish ethnic groups in Romania to have a happy and prosperous life, to preserve our common values and traditions, because we attach importance to the education of young*

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<sup>47</sup> Bozçalışkan, "An Analysis", 11.

<sup>48</sup> "Istoric", Colegiul Național „Kemal Atatürk” Medgidia, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://colegiulataturk.ro/istoric/>.

<sup>49</sup> Bozçalışkan, "An Analysis", 13.

<sup>50</sup> Özlem, *Balkan Türkleri*, 334.

<sup>51</sup> Bozçalışkan, "An Analysis", 13.

*people and to the preservation of their own culture. In this context, the "Kemal Atatürk" National College, established on the basis of the protocol signed in 1995, is important because it offers young people the opportunity to attend primary, secondary and high school courses in Turkish and Romanian."*<sup>52</sup>

TIKA's involvement in the education sector in Romania is part of Türkiye's broader cultural diplomacy strategy. TIKAs initial grants in Romania, particularly in the Dobruja region, primarily supported the Turkish and Tatar communities by promoting Turkish-language education. Key initiatives have included the provision of school supplies and books to the "*Mehmet Akif Ersoy*" Turkish Language Lectorate at the "Ovidius" University in October 2015, and the launch of the "*A Turkish Class in Every School*" project, which provided special Turkish classes to schools in Constanța, Mangalia and Medgidia. In addition, TIKAs also modernized the "*Zübeyde Hanım*" bilingual kindergarten in Constanța and another one in Medgidia. These efforts align with TIKAs commitment to preserving the Turkish language among Romania's significant Turkish-speaking population.<sup>53</sup> "*Education and culture have always been a priority for TIKAs, so we wanted our first investments in Romania to be in these areas. We have chosen to start our work in Romania by contributing to education in the Dobruja area and we are glad that in the span of a few months we have been able to contribute to the improvement of education for children at various levels of education*", expressed TIKAs Director of the Balkans and Eastern Europe Department, Dr. Mahmut Çevik.<sup>54</sup> Also, on November 16, 2017, TIKAs rehabilitated and fully equipped three study spaces at the "Ovidius" University of Constanța: the "*Cabit Arif*" Library, the Romanian-Turkish Mathematical Research Laboratory "*Grigore Moisil*" and the Department of Turkish and Tatar History.<sup>55</sup>

Today, in order to support the efforts of the Turkish-Tatar community in Romania to keep their mother tongue and culture alive, as well as to study it academically, there are various institutions that teach Turkish. First of all, the "*Zübeyde Hanım*" Romanian-Turkish Bilingual Kindergarten in Constanța serves the Turkish and Tatar communities in the region. Named after the mother of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of modern Türkiye, this kindergarten plays

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<sup>52</sup> Asan, *Comunitatea turcă*, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Cupcea, "Kin State Policy", 61.

<sup>54</sup> Alexandra Rândunică, "TIKAs investește în educație! Lectorat de limbă turcă la „Ovidius“, săli de clasă renovate în județul Constanța", *Info Sud-Est*, October 27, 2015, <https://www.info-sud-est.ro/tika-investeste-in-educatie-lectorat-de-limba-turca-la-ovidius-sali-de-clasa-renovate-in-judetul-constanta/>, accessed March 17, 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Cristian Andrei Leonte, "Universitatea „Ovidius“ a inaugurat trei spații de studiu reabilite de către Agenția de Cooperare și Coordonare Turcă (TIKAs)", *Info Sud-Est*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.info-sud-est.ro/universitatea-ovidius-inaugurat-trei-spatii-de-studiu-reabilite-de-catre-agentia-de-cooperare-si-coordonare-turca-tika/>, accessed March 17, 2024.

an important role in the cultural and educational life of these communities. It focuses on bilingual education, offering children early education in both Turkish and Romanian. Right across the Zübeyde Hanım kindergarten is the "B.P. Haşdeu" No. 12 Secondary School, which offers students the opportunity to study the Turkish mother tongue.<sup>56</sup> Based on my personal experience, these educational establishments are an ideal opportunity to educate and bring up children in an environment in which they can develop harmoniously, combining their two defining cultures, Turkish and Romanian.

Moreover, through the "My Choice is Turkish" project initiated by the "Yunus Emre" Cultural Centre in Bucharest, the Turkish language has started to be taught as an optional subject in several schools in Romania this year.<sup>57</sup> The project aims to bring the two countries and cultures closer through education. At the moment, Turkish language courses are taking place in 6 schools in Bucharest and protocols are to be signed with 3 more. These are: "Dante Alighieri" High School, No. 103 Secondary School, "Titu Maiorescu" Secondary School, "Adrian Păunescu" Secondary School, "Sfântul Andrei" Secondary School and "Uruguay" Secondary School. A total of 422 students are currently learning Turkish thanks to the *My Choice is Turkish* project, from the preparatory to the 12th grade. During the first course, held by the Ambassador of the Republic of Türkiye in Bucharest, Özgür Kıvanç Altan, he stated that "[...] *The "My Choice is Turkish" project is an extremely well-prepared program in this respect. During the course I held, I had the opportunity to see how eager the students of the "Dante Alighieri" High School are to learn Turkish. Türkiye and Romania are countries very close to each other. We are building bridges based on these close relations that come from our common history. The "Yunus Emre" Institute, in the spirit of its name, establishes these friendly relations between the two countries.*"<sup>58</sup>

At the higher education level, the Department of Turkish of the "Ovidius" University of Constanța, established in 1990, offers students a comprehensive program focusing on Turkish language, literature, culture and history. In addition to language teaching, the study program covers various aspects of Turkish literature, covering different periods and literary genres, from Ottoman works to contemporary Turkish literature. Within the Faculty of

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<sup>56</sup> "Despre noi", Școala nr. 12, B.P. Haşdeu, accessed March 17, 2024, <https://www.scoala12bphasdeu.ro/istoric/>.

<sup>57</sup> Tuğba Altun, "YEE'nin projesiyle Türkçe, Romanya'da seçmeli ders oldu", *Anadolu Agency*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/gundem/yeenin-projesiyle-turkce-romanyada-secmeli-ders-oldu/3150051>, accessed May 28, 2024.

<sup>58</sup> Maria Zărnescu, "Limba turcă a devenit curs opțional în România prin Proiectul "Opțiunea mea este Limba Turcă", implementat de Institutul Yunus Emre", *Kanal D*, February 28, 2024, <https://www.stirilekanald.ro/limba-turca-a-devenit-curs-optional-in-romania-prin-proiectul-optiunea-mea-este-limba-turca-implementat-de-institutul-yunus-emre-20387916/amp>, accessed May 28, 2024.

Letters of the "Ovidius" University, there is the possibility to study Turkish as a secondary language, accompanied by Romanian or English as a main language. This department often collaborates with institutions such as TIKA and the "Yunus Emre" Cultural Institute, and is in close contact with the Consulate General of the Republic of Türkiye in Constanța.

There is also the option to study Turkish as an A (main) language at the Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures of the University of Bucharest. The Department of Turkish Language and Literature was established in 1957 and was one of the first oriental language departments at the University of Bucharest.<sup>59</sup> Important names of Romanian Turkish studies have worked in this department, such as Prof. Dr. Vladimir Drimba, internationally recognized scholar, corresponding member of *Türk Dil Kurumu*, or Seitabla Muratcea, the first professor at its establishment.<sup>60</sup>

Romanian undergraduate students also have the opportunity to study in Türkiye through a scholarship program funded by the Turkish government, *Türkiye Bursları*. It is considered the most comprehensive scholarship program in the world, offering monthly scholarships, tuition fee coverage, health insurance, accommodation, Turkish language courses, plane tickets and free academic and cultural programs. In this way, *Türkiye Bursları* offers international students educational opportunities and scholarships to the most prestigious universities in Türkiye.<sup>61</sup>

#### **4. Romania's humanitarian response to the February 6, 2023 Earthquake in Türkiye**

Key treaties signed between Romania and Türkiye, like the 1991 *Treaty on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation* and the 2011 *Strategic Partnership Declaration*, have ensured mutual cooperation and support in various sectors.

On February 6, 2023, a devastating 7.8 magnitude earthquake hit southern Türkiye and Syria, causing over 55,000 deaths and destroying 680,000 homes.<sup>62</sup> Romania was one of the first countries to respond, sending a 60-member search-and-rescue team with equipment and trained dogs to Türkiye's

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<sup>59</sup> "Secția de Limba și Literatură Turcă", Facultatea de Limbi Străine, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://ils.unibuc.ro/2009/sectia-de-limba-si-literatura-turca/>.

<sup>60</sup> "Secția de Limba și Literatură Turcă", Facultatea de Limbi Străine.

<sup>61</sup> "About Us", Türkiye Bursları, accessed March 20, 2024, <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/hakkimizda>.

<sup>62</sup> Andrew Wilks, "A look at events surrounding the devastating earthquake that hit Turkey and Syria a year ago," *AP News*, February 6, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/earthquake-turkey-syria-february-2023-62dba95d0608a3a587ddd2fe5ec39541>.

Hatay province.<sup>63</sup> A second team of 57 personnel followed.<sup>64</sup> In addition to the government's efforts, Romanian citizens actively participated in relief efforts. The Turkish Embassy in Romania and TIAD launched a fundraising campaign, with donation centres in Constanța, Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca, showcasing widespread solidarity and support for the earthquake victims.

Romania played a key role in helping Türkiye recover from the February 6th earthquakes. The government mobilized rescue teams quickly, while citizens and the members of the Turkish-Tatar community in Dobruja, alongside the Turkish Embassy, the Democratic Turkish Union of Romania and the Muftiate, provided crucial support. Romania's rapid response highlighted its strong commitment to Türkiye, saving lives and reinforcing the long-lasting friendship between the two nations.

### Conclusions

The Turkish culture is widespread in the region that once belonged to the Ottoman Empire - Dobruja. This Turkish element, consisting of language, religion and traditions, has stood the test of time thanks to the efforts of the Turkish-Tatar community living in Romania to preserve its identity. At the same time, these efforts were supported by the Turkish state, around which both the Turks and the Tatars have always gravitated, due to their common core - their belonging to the Turkish world.<sup>65</sup> Also, by granting this minority group a recognized legal status and protecting its rights, Romania is proving its commitment to inclusion and respect for the diverse ethnic identities within its borders. For Türkiye, the preservation of Turkish culture and identity among this community is of great importance. By providing educational opportunities, cultural resources and other forms of support, Türkiye aims to foster a sense of belonging and connection with the Turkish nation among the Dobrujan Turks and Tatars. Thus, there is a reciprocal relationship which today maintains the Turkish-Tatar community as the bridge of solid and lasting friendship between Romania and Turkey. Official visits, meetings with representatives of the Turkish-Tatar community, the right of minorities to be represented in Parliament, the teaching of the Turkish language in institutes, schools, colleges and universities, the restoration of historical monuments and places of worship,

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<sup>63</sup> Maria Dinu, "Ce a transmis Ambasada Turciei la București după ce România a trimis salvatori", *Adevarul*, February 7, 2023, <https://adevarul.ro/politica/ce-a-transmis-ambasada-turciei-la-bucuresti-dupa-2240310.html>.

<sup>64</sup> "A doua echipă de salvare trimisă de România în Turcia. Nicolae Ciucă: „Am fost prima țară care a ajuns în zona afectată de cutremur”, *EuroNews*, February 8, 2023, <https://www.euronews.ro/articole/noi-ajutoare-pentru-turcia-si-siria-bode-ajutorul-roman-catre-republica-turcia-s>.

<sup>65</sup> Cupcea, "Construcția identitară", 13.

efforts to promote cultural and Islamic traditions- all of these keep the identity of the Turks and Tatars of Dobruja alive to this day.