

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ISSUES OF THE TURKISH AND TATAR COMMUNITIES IN ROMANIA

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, as with other ethnic minority groups (Gârlean, 2011) in Romania, studies on Turkish and Tatar communities in Northern Dobruja have focused almost exclusively on the historical and ethnographic aspects; the interest of academics has targeted mostly facts (origins, traditions, personal and collective habits, religious beliefs) and - to some extent - the evolution of the relationships developed between the Turks, the Tatars and the surrounding ethnic groups (Romanian, Bulgarian, Greek, German, Roma, Armenian, Hebrew etc.)¹

The dynamics of their economic life is still a subject of little interest. Consequently, this paper aims to provide a few guidelines, on the premises that, although the post-revolutionary period² brought about progress in terms of recovery and rediscovery of cultural identity, the same period was marked by economic involution. The sociocultural repercussions of these changes recoil seemingly on the appearance, spirit and mentality of the communities. The attitude of their members towards certain categories of social actors, perceived as responsible for the regression, confirms this hypothesis.

This phenomenon is common among ethnic communities in Romania. Freedom acquired by the collapse of the communist regime in Romania also meant the opening of borders and the permanent or temporary emigration of a number³ of members of these groups to their countries of origin. Some of those who remained faced foremost economic difficulties that, undoubtedly, affected their cultural identity. As a result, the clear line drawn between life before and after the communist era becomes obvious even in oral communication. Certain feelings of nostalgia break through the discourse, in relation to security concerning living conditions, in spite of all the restrictions of the totalitarian regime.

Methods and Techniques

In the following, the paper focuses on the socioeconomic transformations in recent decades, in respect to the Turkish and Tatar communities in southeastern Romania. As it has already been mentioned, bibliographic resources are scarce: our analysis makes use of national and local press reports, reports on the standard of living, as well as documents concerning local development strategies⁴. This study represents the exploratory stage of a larger project dedicated to these two ethnicities, which aims to investigate their cultural heritage and the dynamics of their social identity.

Discussion and Results

In Romania, Turkish and Tatar minorities are concentrated in Dobruja, especially in the county of Constanța. Dobruja was the first area in the country to report the completion of the collectivisation process⁵. Like many people in rural areas, Turkish and Tatar villagers were engaged in the activities of the collective farms, agricultural cooperatives and state agricultural enterprises. The fall of Ceausescu's regime saw a considerable increase in the number of retired farmers (From an occupational point of view, just like the Romanian, Bulgarian, Lipovan and German minorities in Dobruja, the Turks and Tatars have always been tied to the traditional economic system, being involved in agriculture and livestock raising) (Șopu, 2011, 100-101), whose current resources cover only minimum living conditions. The lack of employment opportunities forces newer generations to seek jobs in urban centres or in the Republic of Turkey (Such testimonies have been recorded, for example, in the village of Fântâna Mare – former name Bașpunar, Turkish: Bașpınar – providing evidence relating to the experience of villagers who worked in construction in the early 90s) (Chirițoiu, 2009, 98), in spite of all the difficulties posed by the adaptation process. The main sources of income for those who reside in rural areas are: pensions (mostly farmers), unemployment benefits and compensations for child support. Other income sources are the result of occasional work activities performed within the community (in construction, agriculture etc.) on the informal labour market. Lack of a steady income (or an insufficient one) leads to the widespread practice, common among villages, of buying basic and other goods on trust (Chirițoiu, 2009, 98), increasing the personal debt rate. It is self-explanatory that the figures to which these resources translate ensure only basic living conditions. In terms of discourse, the elderly - always comparing the totalitarian economic system to the modern

day one - complain mostly because of the lack of opportunities for their children and grandchildren, left with no better option than to undertake subsistence agriculture in an overwhelming majority.

The village of Independența accommodates the largest Muslim community in Northern Dobruja⁶, a community that views itself as poor (Chirițoiu, 2009, 99) and whose sense of poverty has been assumed not only at individual but also at collective level, the most obvious signs of poverty being the lack of running water and of a sewage system. The locals believe political interests have obstructed all attempts made by the local authorities to improve the current situation. The choice of words or phrases used to describe the modest resources available, confirm the situation even from the non-locals' point of view. 'The Turks in Bașpunar managed to preserve their traditions and culture, but their living standards are very low, most of them being on the edge of survival. Most houses, built in oriental style and fenced with river stones, are over a century old, so that the walls give the impression that they are ready to collapse at any moment. Entering Bașpunar is like going back in time to the nineteenth century and waiting for the ruins to turn back into rich households [...]. The people are poor but have not lost hope, confident that better times will come.' (Fântâna Mare – satul etnicilor turci. Bașpunar, muzeul în aer liber).

A decade ago, in the village of Amzacea, the word poverty was used to describe the situation its residents had to face following the drought that affected wheat and rapeseed production (Populația din Amzacea este muritoare de foame), agriculture being the main source of income of its residents. In 2006, the number of people benefiting from Law 416/2001⁷ was of 345, out of which 50 were Turk-Tatars (statistics from the same year account for a population of 326 Turkish ethnics (Primăria Amzacea – Strategia de dezvoltare economico-socială locală a comunei Amzacea, 2007, 44; 36). For 2007-2013, the Municipal Council of Amzacea proposes increasing the employment rate by creating new employment opportunities in the service sector. In the village of Amzacea, new jobs can be created with the implementation of projects concerning the rehabilitation of the agricultural sector, but also for the development of small and medium enterprises, as well as the services industry. The increase in human resources is estimate at 60% of the total active population. (Primăria Amzacea – Strategia de dezvoltare economico-socială locală a comunei Amzacea, 2007, 37). However, rehabilitation remains only an ideal, as the development strategy submitted by the Council does not include an action plan nor a time frame to achieve these objectives. In other words, the local administration proved incapable of

finding solutions to the major social issues the community it represents is facing.

Community poverty, defined by Professor Dumitru Sandu as a high probability of low consumption of public or private goods at community level (Sandu, 2005, 187) – must be understood in relation to certain contexts. It relies on self-perception, on a regional and national reality, but it is also obvious in the eyes of an outsider, especially if s/he comes from urban areas. The presence or absence of indicators of well-being, such as infrastructure elements (paved roads, sewage system, communication networks, power systems, etc.) (Martinescu, 2008), are the main aspects to be taken into consideration. It is just as important to understand how the community itself relates to what outsiders identify as ‘poverty’ (Chirițoiu, 2009, 96) ⁸, as well as the level of comprehension of various actors that make up the community.

Some view Northern Dobruja as a poor region. According to a report submitted almost a decade ago (Pop, 2004, 12), a distinction must be made between the number of individuals and the number of communities affected by poverty; there is a considerable number of counties in which, although the weight of extreme poverty in rural population is not great, the number of poor villages is. Such is the case of the counties of Neamț, Tulcea, Galați, Suceava, Vâlcea, Brăila, Hunedoara, Constanța, Alba, Mehedinți and Caraș Severin. According to the census data from 2011, the counties of Constanța, Tulcea, Brăila and Galați have the highest concentration of Turkish and Tatar population in Romania. However, earlier this year, APIA⁹ Constanța announced the start of a programme through which farmers in disadvantaged areas will receive financial support, depending on the size of the land owned (Antohe, 2013). Out of the 37 cities that will benefit from this programme, 19 include ethnic Turks and Tatars (Adamclisi, Agigea, Constanța, Crucea, Deleni, Dobromir, Grădina, Hârșova, Lipnița, Lumina, Medgidia, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Mircea Vodă, Năvodari, Ovidiu, Peștera, Săcele, Corbu, Histria) (Antohe, 2013).

Beyond any assessments performed by various institutions (barometers) and/or organisations, the first visual contact with a settlement appears to be decisive in labelling its residents. The appearance of communities inhabited by Turks and Tatars does not differ much from other rural settlements in the area. However, one specific marker is the relatively high number of houses preserved from generation to generation: ‘The houses didn’t look new, some built of adobe, with only a few recently painted’ (Chirițoiu, 2009, 96), ‘More than 250 families have preserved and are still living in the old houses, built by past generations a century or two

ago, the same culture, same garments, same habits, same concepts' (Pop, 2004, 10) ¹⁰, 'most houses are very old, built in archaic Turkish style, made of adobe.' (Ionescu, 2012). These examples not only emphasise the modest status of the households (owners), but also the fact that we are dealing with quite insular micro-communities that, through various means, managed to preserve their material and spiritual heritage. Of course, this also raises the issue of up-to-dateness and access to modern society. A review of the history of these communities points out not only to their diminishing numbers¹¹, but also to the loss of a certain privileged status derived from the religious affiliation to Islam (Felezeu & Cupcea, 2013, 84) (the Ottoman law did not recognise such terms as ethnicity or nationality).

Poverty is not only widespread, but also extreme, making it even harder for disadvantaged groups such as the unemployed, pensioners or children to fight it. The lack of resources affects daily life and, consequently, nutrition and health¹². 'After December 1989, many Turks and Tatars in Medgidia¹³, for example, simply did not have anything to put on their tables, following the insolvency of the large plants IMUM¹⁴ and Cimentul (where the personnel was reduced to only a few hundred workers, leaving many people unemployed and without any prospects for the following 10 to 12 years). The Tatar population here lives in extreme poverty. Occupational diseases and poverty bring them down, one by one, at young ages of 45 to 55. Life expectancy, even during the Ceaușescu regime, was around 70 years.' ('Tătarii crimeeni de pretutindeni, împreună pe «Drumul Unirii»'). Social support is expected from minority organisations (as well), to open a cafeteria for Tatar and Turkish orphans, children from poor families, but also for adults (unemployed, elderly, people who receive no support) ('Tătarii crimeeni de pretutindeni, împreună pe «Drumul Unirii»'). Aid is expected to build a centre where community members with no income could benefit from free health care services. Moreover, the U.D.T.R. (Turkish Democratic Union of Romania) and UDTTMR (Democratic Union of the Muslim – Turkish Tatars in Romania) are investing in human resources, by supporting young people from the community studying in Constanța, but with no financial means to support themselves ('UDTTMR a discutat cu medicii etniei despre problemele cu care se confruntă').

Some of the local authorities have already brought into the open their intentions to start the fight against poverty, if only from a programmatic standpoint. At Bașpinar, 'poverty has engulfed the entire village. Approximately 400 people live a bitter life in the village of Fântâna Mare.' (Martinescu, 2008). In a settlement with no running water

or sewage system, and a transportation system based on horse and carriage, the only option is to capitalise the ethnocultural heritage of the community, by turning it into a tourist attraction. The Mayor - who consider the locals to be 'very poor' ('Un sat locuit de turci va fi transformat în muzeu') – wanted, some years ago, to create an open-air museum, a lifeline for the people in the community, out of which 60% (Ionescu, 2012) are pensioners; the investment would have been incurred not by the local council but the TIAD (Turkish Businessmen Association of Romania). The project idea brought about certain expectations and hope for salvation for the locals, that would be rewarded with all that is representative of the community. 'Let them come, just like the mayor promised, and repair the houses. We'll do whatever they want. I understand tourists will come after that. We're happy to receive them. We'll make baklava, börek and Turkish coffee in sand for them. Everything we know.' ('Un sat locuit de turci va fi transformat în muzeu). Restoring the exact atmosphere of a traditional oriental village (which involves preserving traditional architecture and restoring it where modern windows and other building materials were applied) would provide a new income source for the residents, by hosting tourists and serving them traditional Turkish and Tatar dishes. However, the obstacles are (still) too great to overcome. The missing infrastructure and bureaucracy have brought things to a halt. In addition, the future hosts lack even the minimum training in dealing with tourists. The Turkish and Tatar villages of Northern Dobruja are not myths: for those unfamiliar with the history and culture of the region they are both exotic and memorial but, before they can be turned into ethno-tourism projects, a certain broadening of horizons is required. Capitalisation of traditional, material and spiritual heritage seems, in this case, easily achievable because of its extensive and profound preservation. The process of 'authentication' (Chirițoiu, 2009, 117, note 16), as seen by the local authorities, might give rise to certain issues within the community, as the changes incurred would seemingly affect intercommunity relations.

Low living standards are the main reasons for depopulation of the Turkish and Tatar communities, blending perfectly with the general situation in Romanian. As with other minorities, the main migration targets for the members of these communities are the local urban areas and their country of origin. 'Almost all young people in Bașpunar leave the village. Nowadays, 60% of residents are pensioners, and young people aged 20-30 are a rare sight. "They leave in search of greener pastures". According to villagers, both sad and proud of the current situation, "some remain in the country, in Constanța, others go to Turkey or Germany".'

(Negru, 2012). Permanent emigration of those who constitute the labour force, leaves the villages with a population segment made up mostly of elderly and unemployed (or out of work for those of working age). With the death of the elderly and the migration of young people (no longer willing to return to the village), changes in regional and ethnic composition become inevitable, with households and/or land being transferred to new owners. 'In recent years, more and more people working in Constanța started buying land in Valu lui Traian¹⁵, Cumpăna and Lazu, commuting almost every day.' (Paliu, 2010).

In this overall gloomy picture, the private initiative becomes the only positive element. However, such attempts are scarce (at least in rural areas), compared to the number of those who make up the two ethnicities. One such example concerns the Tatar community in Cobadin, where a shop and a bar were opened thanks to the efforts of two members of the ethnic group (Simionescu, 2009). Seviran Molamet and Nelifer Iusein started their own business, without any particular expertise and supported only from family members, thus opening the way to the city for their children, which villagers have invested as the place where one can accomplish him/herself and live an easier, more comfortable life. The success stories of these women are all the more interesting given they are also mothers and housewives, and the fact that their partners kept their own jobs. Seviran Molamet's shop provides not only goods from Turkey, Hungary or Bulgaria, but the family business (registered in 1998) also managed to provide a job for another woman in the village (Simionescu, 2009). There are several private individuals in the village engaged in trade activities or the services sector: a number of 12 people (out of 51) being of Turkish and Tatar ethnicity¹⁶. Another example is the practice of traditional crafts - even if numbers are limited to only a few individual initiatives per settlement -, such as belt making and ironworking in Cobadin and Bașpinar, with end products bought even by members of other ethnic groups. (Constantin, 2010, as quoted Constantin, 2012, 95)¹⁷.

At another level, practical knowledge is acquired either through trade activities with Turkish businessmen, in the case of those who have set up a business, or training programmes, attended by leaders of organisations representing the Turkish and Tatar ethnics. For example, in the spring of 2006, the Secretary General¹⁸ of UDTR, Sureia Șachir, attended the seminar 'Program de inițiere antreprenorială [Introduction to entrepreneurship]', organised by the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey, in Ankara¹⁹, event that brought together leaders from various countries with significant Turkish Muslim communities. Knowledge can also be acquired through scholarships in economics and

management, among other fields, made available by the Turkish Republic for the Turkish and Tatar youth of Romania²⁰.

Conclusions and Proposals

An initial conclusion of the study concerns the conceptualisation and perception of the term poverty: a state that can only be understood in relation to a certain background, by taking into account the perspectives of both those experiencing and observing it. The concept is strongly related to others, such as: marginalized people, people at risk of social exclusion, vulnerable groups. One definition of social exclusion refers to '[...] those situations which infer single or multiple social deprivation, such as: lack of employment opportunities, lack of or inadequate housing, lack of access to water supplies, heating or electricity, no access to education or health services.' ("Raport de cercetare privind economia socială în România din perspectivă europeană comparată", 2011, 55). Indeed, the communities that make the target of this study are facing limited access to economic and communication resources, issues related to poor infrastructure, resulting in its members being (highly) unlikely to find stable jobs. However, it is safe to say vulnerability here best describes the individual, rather than the groups as a whole. The Turkish and Tatar communities often make mention of the lack of jobs available in villages or surrounding areas, as well as the remoteness of the settlements from urban centres. Sometimes, insufficient resources make it impossible (or unprofitable) to commute; other times, adapting to city life can prove an issue. (Chirițoiu, 2009, 98). For the youth, decently paid jobs are to be found in Turkey, although this also involves performing heavy work (or accepting low-skill jobs, compared to the level of education), leaving behind broken families and making unaccountable sacrifices with long term effects. Selling property (agricultural land) became one of the main income sources for many villagers following the reinstatement process (Chirițoiu, 2009, 96)²¹; however, at this stage, no data is available concerning the destination of the returns (whether used to cover household needs or re-invested, and, in case of the latter, to what purpose). In other situations, when owners did not have the resources and/or machinery to work the land, they chose to join landowners associations, to obtain a quantity of raw or finite products, rather than sell the land. Nevertheless, these issues are common for all Romanian rural areas. Therefore, no particular connection can be identified between ethnicity and poverty; there are, however, cases in which society associates membership to an ethnic group to (extremely) modest resources - such as with Roma ethnics. Statistical data used in this

study confirms the lack of social support, the low standards of living, with farming on small parcels around the household and informal work as the main income generating activities, as common to all local rural areas. However, considering the present study represents only the initial stage of the research, analysis of perceptions of non-local communities cannot provide a comprehensive view until the opinions of people directly involved have been recorded as well, information which will be obtained by making use of certain instruments, such as the semi-structured interview.

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Notes

¹ For an in-depth view of these inter-ethnic relations, see the work of Gârlan, Mictat. (2011). *Metodologia cercetării etnopsihologice*. Iași: Lumen.

² The fall of communism in Romania took place in December 1989.

³ The number varies from one ethnic group to another, the most common examples being those of the Swabians in Banat, the Saxons in Transylvania or the Czechs in the Danube Gorge.

⁴ No documentation is available on the official websites of municipalities which include Turkish and Tatar communities (the present study focuses on rural areas). Another issue concerns the visibility of these minorities in dedicated online sections ("History", "Population"), no mention of their presence and/or number being made.

⁵ Following the Soviet model, under the communist reform private landholding was restricted, forcing farmers to join cooperatives and work together the land which now became state property.

⁶ According to statistics for 2011 provided by the Romanian Institute for Research on National Minorities (hereinafter ISPMN), in the village of Independența (historical name: Bayramdede), out of a total of 3,033 residents, 2,359 were Romanian, 397 Turks and 270 Tatars. The latter are concentrated in the village of Başpınar.

⁷ The law regarding the minimum guaranteed income, in the form of a monthly social insurance awarded based on certain criteria.

⁸ 'If we were to relate our observations to the common living standards in the countryside, we could say that the village, as it appeared before us for the first time, was not really developed in terms of housing nor of water supplies or a sewage system, as we learned later on. But we quickly overcame the shallow feeling of "poverty" and discovered that the concept is much more dependent on context than we had originally believed, only to find that, in reality, the needs of the residents are thus limited so as not to exceed their production abilities.' (Chirițoiu, 2009, 96).

⁹ The Agriculture Payments and Intervention Agency.

¹⁰ 'Out of 38 settlements named Văleni, one is inhabited only by Turks'. The commune of Dobromir, to which the village of Văleni belongs, is listed among the most deprived development regions, with a poverty rate of -1.05 and a development index, of 76 (Pop, 2004, 10).

¹¹ In 1879, a population of nearly 135,000 Turks was recorded in Dobruja; in 1910, their number had fallen to around 40,000 (Gârlan, 2011, 202). At present, according to the 2002 census, in Romania there are 32,596 people of Turkish ethnicity.

¹² In a final report on the medical and social reasons that explain the high mortality rate in children under 5 years, conducted a decade ago, Turkish and Tatar ethnics where part of the segment of population under investigation. According to the report, Roma, Turkish and Tatar ethnic mothers were over-represented, while Hungarian ethnic mothers were under-represented. The findings relate only to the groups investigated and cannot be generalised to the entire ethnic groups to which the mothers surveyed belong (Stativă, 2005).

¹³ Unemployment is not the only issue Turkish and Tatar minorities in urban area must face. In 2006, in Constanța county, 200 Turkish families, living in nationalised houses, were in danger of losing their homes ("Avem mare nevoie de un centru cultural turc în România - interviu cu Iusein Ibram, președintele Uniunii Democratice Turce").

¹⁴ The Metallurgy & Machinery Plant Medgidia (IMUM), once the largest manufacturer of agricultural machinery in the country. In 2004, it was purchased by an investor from the Republic of Turkey and one from Romania. – 'IMUM Medgidia: Salarii neplătite și secții întregi vândute la fier vechi'.

¹⁵ The village of Valu lui Traian comprises a significant Muslim community; the census in 2011 recorded - according to data from ISPMN -

a number of 1,189 Tatars and 191 Turks (9,815 people declared themselves Romanian).

¹⁶ Information available on the official website of the Cobadin Village Hall, last updated on September 27, 2012 – see <http://primaria-cobadin.ro/?p=398>, accessed July 1, 2013. On April 14, 2013, the village recorded a total population of 10,244 people, of which 1,781 Turkish-Tatar ethnics – according to <http://primaria-cobadin.ro/?p=375>, accessed July 1, 2013.

¹⁷ The same source (94) mentions carpentry as a common practice among the Tatars from the village of Independența.

¹⁸ Secretary General in 2004-2006, according to <http://www.udtr.ro/index.php?l=ro&m=2>, accessed 19 June, 2013.

¹⁹ <http://www.ispmn.gov.ro/node/minoritatea-turc-2006>, accessed 19 June, 2013.

²⁰ <http://www.ispmn.gov.ro/node/minoritatea-turc-2005>, accessed 19 June, 2013; <http://www.ispmn.gov.ro/node/minoritatea-turc-2006>, accessed 19 June, 2013.

²¹ After the adoption of Land Law No. 18/1991, the land under the property of production co-operatives (CAP - set up during the communist regime) was regained by its former owners (or heir).

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