Islamophobia in Romania

A short sketch

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Islamophobia in Romania is a certain perception of Muslims that can be expressed as hate against them. The physical and rhetorical manifestations of Islamophobia are directed towards individuals of Islamic religion, towards religious properties, goods, institutions and facilities.

Islamophobia in Romania is directed towards the idea of Islam and Muslims which are coming from outside of the country, against external influences of Islam (transnational) and towards a part of the Muslim community, associated with these influences. To understand the local form of Islamophobia it is very important to perceive first the demographic and historical structure of the Muslim community in Romania.

The community counts 64,337 Muslims, most of them Turks and Tatars (almost 48,000), demographically concentrated in the Dobrogea region, located in the south-eastern part of Romania. The presence of Turks and Tartars in the region is a demographic legacy of the Ottoman period, between the 15th and 19th centuries, when Dobrogea was under Ottoman administration. The rest of the community is scattered in the major regional urban centres of Romania, in the capital Bucharest (around 10,000), in Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca and Iași.

Thus, one can distinguish between *native Muslims*, the Turks and the Tatars and the *new Muslims* those who came to Romania during the communist regime, acquired Romanian citizenship and are the second generation; Muslims who migrated from different Islamic countries after 1990, for economic, educational purposes, for political reasons, but who in time acquired Romanian citizenship. Of course, along these are also migrants and refugees who do not have citizenship and who are not recorded by the official census.

Regarding the native Muslims there is a total lack of islamophobia. The reason for it is that they are citizens of the Romanian state for generations. After Dobrogea became part of Romania, after the Berlin Congress of 1878, they became a religious minority within a Christian nation-state. Their status as an officially recognized religion dates back to 1928, by Law no. 54/1928 on the general Status of religious faiths. During the communist period, Islam was among the few religions legally recognized, according to the law on the general regime of cults in 1948, being granted in 1949 a particular functioning status. Therefore, one can see a historical, traditional relationship of mutual recognition, between the Romanian state and the leadership of the Muslim Cult (a prerogative/privilege held by the historical Muslim community in Dobrogea). The Muftiate is the only religious authority recognized by law in Romania and it must be mentioned that the form of Sunni Hanafi Islam in Dobrogea, specific to most Muslim communities in the former Ottoman territories in the Balkans, is the form supported by the Mufti of the Muslim Cult, as local, moderate, adapted to local specificities. It is a position stated in several public statements of the Muftiate.

The secular form of Islam, the historical relationship, the mutual recognition with the state authorities, and the rejection by the Muftiate of any fundamentalist forms of Islam after 1990, attracted the reputation of being a loyal community to the Romanian state. Also Dobrogea is a multicultural region, in which 18 minorities live together. Muslims are part of the local ethnic diversity and the local population considers them as part of this regional particularism. Therefore, in Dobrogea there are no Islamophobic attitudes.

At the same time, for the general public opinion in Romania the Muslims in Dobrogea are a reminiscence of the Ottoman period, without much relevance, a small community in comparison to other ethnic minorities such as Hungarians (over one million) or Roma (over 500,000). Therefore the native Muslims do not occupy a well-defined place in the Romanian mentality.

Islamophobia is a recently imported phenomenon, and also a latent one. International news and developments facilitated a growing trend in this sense. The main vector *in importing* this phenomenon was the press, by reproducing internally the images and the news from international media. The two main topics presented as a threat were the terrorist attacks and the refugees problem. The phenomenon was imported recently and gradually, after the attacks of New York, September 11, 2001, Madrid of March 11, 2004, London of July 7, 2005, in parallel with the critique of multiculturalism, with the securitization and stigmatization of the migration problem. The takeover of these sort of news by the Romanian media was also due to the need for sensational. Although the historical community in the Dobrogea region represents the majority of the Muslim community, the media does not consider its problems relevant enough to cover them, preferring to report extensively during the last years the European debate on the so-called refugee crisis, the terrorist attacks in European countries, underlining the dangers posed by Muslim immigrants.

Another feature of islamophobia in Romania is a sort of *latency,* with roots in the anti-Ottoman, anti-Muslim imaginary induced to pupils from early the education years (gymnasium level and continuing in high school). The first information about Islam that any young Romanian student, comes in contact with is provided by the history textbooks, which during communism and also after 1990 were dominated by a biased, ethnocentric approach. The Ottoman Muslims are presented as a constant threat to the independence of the Danubian Principates and as a permanent threat for the Christian character of the Romanian state and Europe.

Nationalism, the idea of ​​a homogeneous nation state, the exceptionalism in history, the stigmatization of the *Other* for the internal shortcomings, the xenophobia existing at the level of the Romanian collective mentality, manifested most visibly and most often in relation to the Roma minority (Romania's second largest minority) are the causes of islamophobia. Xenophobia gradually took under the influence of images and information provided by the media and in the context of the government decision in 2015 to build a mosque in Bucharest in collaboration with the Turkish state, so under certain stimuli, the form of hatred towards Muslims. Therefore, it is clear that a sort of islamophobia exists latently, people manifesting it only in contexts when the Muslims or the Islamic religion are perceived as a real, close danger.