

FROM “MILLET-I HÂKIME” TO ROMANIAN CITIZENS: THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN DOBRUJA AND THE RELATION WITH THE ROMANIAN ROYAL FAMILY

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Received: January 8th, 2026

Accepted for publication: March 11th, 2026

Abstract: This article examines the transformation of the Muslim community in Dobruja from its privileged position as *millet-i hâkime* within the Ottoman imperial order to its integration as a religious minority in the Romanian nation-state between 1878 and the interwar period. Focusing on the relationship between the Muslim elites of Dobruja and the Romanian royal family, the study argues that this interaction functioned as a mechanism of mutual legitimation, combining symbolic representation with political-administrative negotiation.

Drawing on archival documents, press sources, institutional regulations, and royal memoirs, the analysis highlights two interconnected dimensions. On the symbolic level, the Romanian monarchy articulated a discourse of tolerance through royal proclamations, visits, architectural patronage, and ceremonial practices. The Royal Mosque “Carol I” in Constanța, the Hunchiar Mosque in Bucharest, and the orientalist aesthetics of royal residences at Balchik exemplified a visible incorporation of Muslim presence into the national imaginary. At the same time, representations found in the writings of Queen Marie reveal a benevolent, though asymmetrical, engagement with Muslim alterity.

On the political-administrative level, the study traces the preservation and reconfiguration of Islamic institutions—Muftiates, Qadiates, Muslim communities, and educational structures—within the Romanian legal framework. While the monarchy often symbolically endorsed the protection of Muslim religious autonomy, structural limitations persisted, particularly regarding institutional unification, stable financing, and political representation. Muslim elites responded by adopting a strategy of what can be described as “prudent loyalty”: a consistent affirmation of allegiance to the Romanian state and crown, coupled with moderated claims and limited criticism.

By contextualizing this strategy within broader Balkan patterns of post-Ottoman governance and “millet legacies”, the article shows that prudent loyalty secured short-term visibility and protection but also constrained the development of a more assertive institutional critique. The Dobrujan case thus

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offers insight into the negotiated integration of Muslim communities in Southeastern Europe and the enduring influence of imperial governance models in modern nation-states.

Keywords: Muslim minorities; Romanian monarchy; Dobruja; Turks; Tatars

Introduction

“Millet-i Hâkime” was the name used in the Ottoman Empire to designate the Muslim community, considered the “dominant nation” within the millet system. This status entailed political, legal, and social privileges, such as access to administrative and military positions, but also the role of guarantor of Islamic order. The concept of “millet” in the Ottoman Empire referred to a form of organization of religious, not ethnic, communities, each with autonomy in areas such as personal rights, education, and religious life. The millet system allowed Muslims and various Christian or Jewish groups to coexist under the protection of the state, but with specific tax obligations. Religious leaders (patriarch, haham, mufti) represented the community before the authorities, and this structure functioned as a mechanism for political stability and social control.¹ In the context of Northern Dobruja's entry into Romanian borders in 1878, the privileged position changed radically: Muslims went from being a “ruling millet” to equal citizens in a predominantly Christian state. However, the principles of the *millet* influenced Romanian policy towards Muslims: the state promised to preserve Islamic institutions (Muftiate, Qadiate, Muslim Communities), offering a framework of religious autonomy similar to that of the Ottomans, but integrated into Romanian legislation. Thus, the transition from “millet-i hâkime” to Romanian citizenship was achieved by adapting this traditional model to the context of a modern nation-state.

Some specialists on the issue of the integration of Muslim communities into the Christian states of the Balkans that broke away from the Ottoman Empire see a continuation in reverse of the millet system in the way the newly created nation states chose to treat these populations. For example, in the opinion of Simeon Evstatiev, *milletic secularism* is a Balkan-specific model of secularism that preserves structural echoes of the Ottoman millet system: it combines formal state neutrality with symbolic privileging of a “traditional religion” (e.g., Orthodoxy) while granting controlled toleration to minority faiths. This framework sustains communal differentiation within a secular nation-state, balancing integration and autonomy through implicit norms rooted in historical patterns of coexistence.² While Evstatiev bases his argument on the

¹ İlber Ortaylı, “Osmanlılarda Millet Sistemi”, in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 30 (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2005), 66–70.

² Simeon Evstatiev, “Milletic Secularism in the Balkans: Christianity, Islam, and Identity in Bulgaria”, *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 1 (2019): 87–103.

Bulgarian case, another researcher sees an influence of the millet system based on the case of Greece. Thus, Stefanos Katsikas argues that the Ottoman millet system strongly influenced Greece's treatment of Muslims after independence. Although Greece adopted European nation-building ideals, it borrowed organizational patterns from the millet framework. This meant preserving communal structures such as muftis and community councils, granting them authority over religious life, family law, and waqf property—similar to Ottoman practice. International treaties (e.g., 1881 Convention of Constantinople, 1913 Treaty of Athens) reinforced this approach by guaranteeing cultural and religious autonomy. However, Katsikas stresses that this autonomy was often undermined by nationalist policies and discrimination, revealing a hybrid system where Ottoman legacies coexisted with assimilationist pressures in a modern nation-state.³

Starting from the idea of continuity of the millet system demonstrated in the Bulgarian and Greek cases, this study examines the process of integration of the Muslim community in Dobruja into the Romanian state, beginning with the annexation of the province in 1878 and continuing until the interwar period. The analysis focuses on the relationship between this community and the Romanian royal family, highlighting both its symbolic and political-administrative dimensions. The proclamations of Prince Carol I in November 1878 formed the basis of Romanian policy towards the Muslim population, promising respect for their faith, religious institutions, and legal traditions.⁴ Given that Muslims represented the demographic majority in Dobruja at the end of the 19th century, royal gestures and legislative measures played an essential role in strengthening this community's loyalty to the Romanian state. The study examines how the royal family used architectural symbols, official visits, and cultural initiatives to construct a discourse of tolerance, as well as the impact of these actions on the institutional organization of the Muslim faith and on the mutual perception between Muslim elites and Romanian authorities.

Why was the Muslim community important? First and foremost, because of its demographics. In 1878, when Northern Dobrogea became part of the Romanian state, Muslims represented the majority in the region. At the end of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, 71,146 (31.5%) Tatars, 48,783 (21.6%) Turks, and 46,504 (21%) Romanians out of 225,692 inhabitants lived in

³ Stefanos Katsikas, "Millet Legacies in a National Environment: Political Elites and Muslim Communities in Greece (1830s–1923)", in *State-Nationalisms in the Ottoman Empire, Greece and Turkey: Orthodox and Muslims, 1830–1945*, ed. Benjamin C. Fortna, Stefanos Katsikas, Dimitris Kamouzis, and Paraskevas Konortas (London: Routledge, 2013), 47–72.

⁴ *Monitorul Oficial al României*, no. 255 (November 16/28, 1878): 7161, 7165.

Northern Dobrudja.⁵ After the Treaty of Bucharest (1913), Southern Dobruja with the counties of Durostor and Caliacra was ceded to Romania. As a result, the Turkish and Tatar populations almost doubled. Thus, in 1930, 154,772 Turks and 22,141 Tartars were counted in Romania.⁶ One should take into consideration that from 1878 to the First World War around 100.000 Muslims emigrated to the Ottoman Empire and around 115.000 Muslims emigrated to the Republic of Turkey in the interwar period.⁷

Then, due to its position in relation to the Romanian state's claims on Northern Dobruja and Southern Dobruja. For example, in 1919, during discussions on Southern Dobruja, the Central Committee of Muslim Communities in Caliacra County stated that, "The true paternal solicitude that Romania has always shown towards the Muslim population entitles us to declare that it would be a blessing for Islam if all our co-religionists in the Balkan Peninsula were under such benevolent rule as that of Romania."⁸ Furthermore, to reinforce this statement, the communiqué concluded by stating that Romanian civilization was "the sole protector of Muslims."⁹ Also in this context, in July 1919, in Constanța, in order to support Romania's claims regarding Dobruja, Muslims in Romania organized a Congress in which they expressed their desire for the entire Dobruja region to remain part of Romania.¹⁰

And most importantly, I would say that the manner in which the Muslim community formulated its demands to the Romanian authorities was significant. There was no opposition to the Romanian state's policies, and the very few criticisms that were made always contained phrases showing that, although there were some dissatisfactions, their loyalty was not in question and that they were very grateful for all the benefits they enjoyed. Instead, to achieve something, they preferred to praise the measures taken by the authorities and, in particular, the attitude of the royal family.

There was a two-level dialogue between the Muslim community and the Romanian royal family: firstly, the symbolic level, and secondly, the political level of administrative measures.

⁵ Kemal H. Karpat, *Osmanlı'dan Günümüze Etnik Yapılanma ve Göçler* (Istanbul: Timaş Yayınları, 2010), 413–414.

⁶ Sabin Manuilă, *Recensământul general al populației României din 29 decembrie 1930*, vol. 7 (Bucharest: Institutul Central de Statistică, 1938), X–XVII.

⁷ Metin Omer, *Emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor din România în Turcia între cele două Războaie Mondiale* (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2020), 104.

⁸ "Musulmanii din Dobrogea și bulgarii", *Dobrogea Jună* 13, no. 16 (March 2, 1919): 2.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Cuvântul Dobrogei / Dobrogea Sözü*, July 25, 1919, no. 2: 1.

The symbolic level: discourse, architecture, and perception

We can trace the symbolic plan of the relationship between the Romanian royal family and the Muslim community in three areas: discourse, architecture, and perception/memoirs.

The first, in chronological order, was discourse. Before the official integration of Northern Dobruja into Romania, according to the provisions of the Treaty of Berlin (1878), Prince Carol I issued a proclamation addressed to the inhabitants of the province, with a special emphasis on the Muslim community. Published on November 14, 1878, in Turkish, Greek, Bulgarian, and Romanian, the proclamation emphasized the principle of equality before the law, guaranteeing the protection of the faith, family, and property of Muslims, as well as autonomy in religious and family matters through the institution of muftis and judges (qadis) elected from among them.¹¹ On the same day, Carol I sent a message to the Romanian army, insisting on respect for the religion, customs, and rights of the Muslim population, presenting the entry into Northern Dobruja not as a conquest, but as an act of brotherhood and European civilization.¹² These statements formed the normative and symbolic foundation of Romanian policies toward the Muslim community, marking the beginning of an approach based on legal protection and recognition of cultural differences within the nation-state.

The symbolic gestures towards the Muslim population continued when the Romanian sovereign arrived in Northern Dobruja for the first time. Prince Carol I's first official visit to the region took place on October 18/30, 1879, one year after the province was integrated into Romania. The event had a pronounced symbolic character: the inhabitants, gathered along the Cernavodă–Constanța railway line, had the opportunity to see for the first time the sovereign of the state to which they belonged. Unlike his previous visit, Carol I spent several days in the province, meeting with local dignitaries and representatives of various ethnic and religious communities. For a population marked by the consequences of the Russo-Ottoman wars, the moment was perceived as exceptional, reflected in contemporary accounts that evoke the enthusiasm and respect shown towards the new sovereign. The visit included gestures with strong symbolic value: participation in services in Orthodox, Muslim, Armenian, Lipovan, Protestant, and Mosaic places of worship, meetings with local community leaders, and the inauguration of the monument dedicated to the union of Dobruja with Romania. In Medgidia, an important centre of the Turkish and Tatar population, Carol I was greeted with a prayer specially composed by the imam, to which the entire Muslim community

¹¹ *Monitorul Oficial al României*, no. 255 (November 16/28, 1878): 7161.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7165.

responded in chorus.¹³ Through these actions, the ruler sought to convey the message that, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or historical background, all inhabitants of Dobruja benefit from the protection of the Romanian state and are called upon to integrate into the new political order.

However, the most visible symbolic plan was that of architecture. In this sense, the Carol I Royal Mosque in Constanța, built between 1910 and 1913, is still perceived today as a symbol of the Romanian state's tolerance. It was built on the site of an Ottoman Mosque founded by Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II. The mosque also has symbolic significance in terms of its architectural elements and its architect. It is completely different from the other Muslim places of worship in Dobruja. It was designed by Romanian architect Victor Ștefănescu and built by Romanian engineer Gogu Constantinescu.¹⁴ While preparing the plans for the mosque, Ștefănescu went on a study visit to Istanbul, where he analysed several Islamic buildings.¹⁵

Although the Carol I Mosque in Constanța is the best known, it was not the only one built by the Romanian sovereign. In 1906, on the occasion of the Romanian National Exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of the king's reign, a mosque bearing the name of the Romanian sovereign was built in Carol Park in Bucharest.¹⁶ In 1959, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej ordered the mosque to be demolished because it was considered inappropriate next to the “Monument to the Heroes of the Struggle for the Freedom of the People and the Fatherland, for Socialism” that was to be erected on the plateau in Liberty Park (the name of Carol Park during the communist regime). The mosque was relocated near the Eroii Revoluției metro station in Bucharest, in a less visible area surrounded by several tall buildings. After 1990, it resumed its name of “Hunchiar – King Carol I” and is currently administered by the Muftiat of the Muslim Cult in Romania.¹⁷

Another symbolic gesture regarding buildings was the naming and decoration of royal palaces with specific Muslim elements. The best known are Kara Dalga (Turkish for black wave, 1924-1926) and Tenha Yuvah (Turkish for quiet nest) or Mavi Dalga (Turkish for blue wave) in Balchik. All of them have architectural and decorative elements inspired by the local population, the most visible of which is the minaret of the palace in Balchik. However, the palace in

¹³ Romulus Seișanu, *Dobrogea, Gurile Dunării și Insula Șerpilor: Schiță monografică. Studii și documente* (Bucharest: Tipografia Ziarului „Universul”, 1928), 190–191.

¹⁴ Doina Păuleanu and Virgil Coman, *Moscheea Regală “Carol I” Constanța 1910–2010* (Constanța: Ex Ponto, 2010).

¹⁵ Arhivele Ministerului Afacerilor Externe ale României (AMAE), fund Constantinopol, vol. 110, f.f.

¹⁶ Păuleanu and Coman, *Moscheea Regală „Carol I” Constanța 1910-2010*, 25.

¹⁷ Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, “Cultul Musulman”, accessed November 20, 2025, http://culte.gov.ro/?page_id=770.

Balchik has many more elements inspired by the Muslim population. Thus, the palace gardens are decorated with Islamic tombstones, and some rooms bear Turkish names.¹⁸ Regarding rooms with Turkish names, we could also mention that Peleş Palace had a Turkish salon.¹⁹

The symbolic register can best be traced in the royal family's diaries, and from this perspective, the best source is Queen Maria. If we were to compare, the notes of King Carol I are minimalist in terms of the Muslim community. In contrast, Queen Maria's notes reveal a fascination and admiration for the Muslim community and the places where it lived. Queen Maria's notes reveal a benevolent orientalism, in which exoticism coexists with empathy. On the one hand, the typology of "faces" and clothing establishes otherness in recognizable visual registers: "the bearded 'Turkish faces' are strangely similar to each other, with an unwavering indifference etched on their faces, but they are friendly"; "the Tatar girls [...] their hair, eyebrows, and nails are dyed bright red with henna." On the other hand, the queen's reaction remains open, one of affectionate curiosity: (the women) "lift their veils for a moment to look at us closely; their eyes shine with curiosity."²⁰ This tension between establishing difference and human closeness suggests a liminal discourse, at the intersection between the conventions of representing the "Orient" and an intuitive ethnography of everyday Muslim life in Dobruja and Balchik.

On a social level, Queen Maria documents the multi-ethnic coexistence specific to Dobruja: "besides Romanians, Turks, Tatars, Russians, and here and there Germans, they live peacefully side by side", and the village, "partly Romanian, partly Russian, [...] German, [...] Turkish", becomes a microcosm of religious and cultural plurality. The queen's entry into the "small rustic mosque" — and her attendance at the service "of which I understood nothing"²¹ — marks both the limit of comprehension (the linguistic/ritual barrier) and the participatory openness to another tradition. Another thematic thread concerns gender gaze and body codes in the Muslim space. Interactions with Turkish women ("a woman who is not veiled has no right to enter the holy precinct") and scenes with "Tatar women in faded shalwar" reveal the negotiation of female visibility between community norms (clothing, veil, ritual segregation) and the mobility of the royal gaze. The attention paid to clothing and gestures

¹⁸ Delia Roxana Cornea, *Reședințele regale de la Marea Neagră: Casele de vis ale reginelor României* (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2021), 192–193.

¹⁹ Castelul Peleş, "Salonul turcesc/ The Turkish Room/ Türk Salonu", accessed November 20, 2025, <https://peles.ro/ro/ghid-audio/salonul-turcesc-the-turkish-room-turk-salonu/>.

²⁰ Maria, Regina României. *Povestea vieții mele*, vol. 2 (Bucharest: Editura "Adeverul" S.A., 1935), 392–393.

²¹ Maria, Regina României. *Țara mea*. transl. N. Iorga, 3rd ed. (Sibiu: Editura Librăriei Pavel Suru București, 1919), 22–23.

(“Turkish woman in black caftan, [...] 'hand to heart, lips, forehead' in the 'Turkish greeting'”) is another feature of the queen's notes on Muslims.²²

Last but not least, the queen's notes highlight the symbolic capital of the monarchy as a means of interfaith access: “A royal name opens so many doors, and so many strict rules are broken in the joy of receiving such an unusual guest”; “They called me Sultanah, and everyone felt the need to touch me: they put their fingers on my clothes, touched my back, and an old lady even grabbed my chin. They took me from hut to hut, from courtyard to courtyard. I found myself separated from my companions, wandering in a world I had never known before”²³ — observations that show how royal authority reconfigures the ritual perimeter (visiting the mosque, approaching Muslim women), transforming community hospitality into a space for negotiation and even redefinition of identity. Consequently, Queen Maria's perception of the Turks and Tatars is not only narrative but also relational. The queen positions herself as a monarch who does not try to impose rules to be followed but accepts differences as a source of richness.

But the Muslim community was not to be outdone in terms of symbolism. If Carol I founded two mosques, the Muslim community chose to name a mosque in honor of the royal family. Thus, in 1929, the King Mihai I Mosque was established in a marginal neighborhood of Bazargic. The Muslim community took care of the expenses related to the maintenance of the mosque and its staff.²⁴

The closeness to the royal family was also expressed in literature. The national poet of the Tatars in Romania, Mehmet Niyazi, opens his volume *İthafat* (Dedications)²⁵ with a poem dedicated to Queen Elisabeta. The poem is a panegyric dedicated to Queen Elisabeta of Romania (Carmen Sylva) during her visit to Constanța in 1911. It conveys admiration for her virtues, poetic talent, and the harmony her presence brings to nature and society. The poet portrays the day of her arrival as a transformative moment for the land and its people,

²² Maria, Regina României. *Cum am ajuns la Tenha-Juvah* (Cernăuți: Institutul de Arte Grafice și Editura „Glasul Bucovinei,” 1928), 4.

²³ Maria, Regina României, *Țara mea*, 22–23.

²⁴ Arhivele Naționale ale României (ANR), fond Ministerul Cultelor și Artelor (MCA), vol. 135/1929, f. 126–128.

²⁵ Mehmet Niyazi (1877/1878–1931), a Crimean Tatar poet, educator, and activist born in Northern Dobruja, played a central role in shaping Crimean Tatar identity in the diaspora. His first poetry collection, *İthâfât* (c.1912), combines Ottoman literary forms with themes of homeland, cultural heritage, and social issues, featuring dedications to prominent figures. Beyond literature, Niyazi was a teacher, school administrator, and publisher of several magazines, contributing significantly to education and cultural continuity among Crimean Tatars. See Erol Ülgen, “Dobruçalı Şair Mehmet Niyazi ve *İthâfât* Adlı Eseri”, *Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Dergisi* 50 (2014): 137–150.

comparing the event to a spring that renews the universe [“Her türlü füyûzât ile başka bir bahar / Olmuştu kâinâta bu gün ‘adet-nisâr” (“With all kinds of blessings, a different spring adorned the universe today.”)]. The Queen is celebrated as a source of wisdom, purity, and compassion, whose presence elevates the moral and aesthetic order of the world [“İlk şû‘le-i zerrînin hurşîd-i feyz-bâr” (“The first golden rays of the sun of abundance.”); “Zulmetinde, bir şem‘a ile eyler incilâ” (“It would dispel its darkness with a single candle.”)]. The poem emphasizes themes of unity, reverence, and cultural refinement, framing the Queen as both a sovereign and a muse [“Takdîs ederim seni ey feyz-i bizevâl” (“I sanctify you, O endless source of grace.”); “Şâyeste kemâline cihân etse i‘tîlâ” (“If the world were to rise to your perfection.”)].

Two clarifications should be made here. First, the royal family's visit to Constanța took place in a special context, namely the celebrations marking the 45th anniversary of Prince Carol I's accession to the throne of Romania. Students from the Mahomedane School in Constanța also participated in the festivities welcoming the Romanian sovereigns and their entourage.²⁶ Secondly, Mehmet Niyazi was the director of the Turkish (Mahomedane) School in Constanța, a position that made him one of the leaders of the Muslim community but also implied a good relationship with the authorities. Thus, it is possible that the poem was not only a means of expressing feelings of love, but also an attempt to win the sympathy of the royal family.

But even from this perspective of symbolism on the part of the Muslim community, Queen Maria was the main link. In the Muslim community in interwar Romania, there was a belief that the queen's best friend in Balchik was an elderly woman from the community, Şefika teyze (teyze in Turkish means auntie), a Turkish woman, whom Queen Maria called “ahretim”, which in Turkish means “friend beyond death”. The queen not only spent time with Şefika Teyze in Balchik, but also invited her several times to the Royal Palace in Bucharest. In an article published in the Turkish press in Dobruja upon Queen Maria's death, Şefika Teyze's suffering was presented as representative of the entire community: “In a corner of the Turkish slum in Balchik, worse off, aged, alone, Şefika Teyze sits in her little house. In a few days, she became unrecognizable: thin, with white hair, and always sad. The day before the Queen's funeral, Şefika Teyze, like a nun in her cell, dressed in black, with a bag of purple flowers and a candle in her hands, set off under the weight of her years to the capital of the country to see for the last time the noble and lovely face of the Queen, to whom she came to pay homage and bid farewell on behalf of Balchik and its gentle and loyal Turks. The tears shed by “Ahretim” in front of the Great Departed were the combined tears of the entire Muslim

²⁶ Delia Roxana Cornea, *Reședințele regale de la Marea Neagră: Casele de vis ale reginelor României* (Târgoviște: Cetatea de Scaun, 2021), 53–55.

population of Mircea the Elder's province. Our souls will forever be in mourning. We have lost the most devoted lover of the Turkish people, with their mosques, fezes, and veils. Her sweet memory will never be erased from our hearts”.²⁷

The relationship between the Turkish community and the royal family also had spiritual dimensions. Significant in this regard is the legend that explains the tax privileges granted to the islanders (or some of them). It centres on Miskin Baba, a Bektashi dervish whose real existence is intertwined with legend. Miskin Baba most likely lived in Ada-Kaleh in the 19th century and had many followers among the islanders.²⁸ In the imagination of the islanders, Miskin Baba was not only a healer, but also a spiritual protector of the community, capable of influencing its collective destiny. This prophetic dimension is illustrated by the legend according to which, through a series of dreams transmitted to Ibrahim Ali, “the most foolish man on the island, (...) who laughs all the time and does no harm to anyone”²⁹, the dervish is said to have predicted the arrival of the “Leader of the Country” on the island and the restoration of lost tax privileges—privileges that, for decades, had been the economic foundation of the island. In the oral tradition recorded in the interwar press, these dreams were interpreted as a foreshadowing of King Carol II's visit to Ada-Kaleh in 1931. According to reports, Miskin Baba asked Ibrahim Ali to convey the message to the community that, after the restoration of his tomb and the construction of the turbe, “on the fourth day of May” the “leader of the country” would come to the island and restore their tax exemptions.³⁰ The king's visit and the granting of these facilities³¹ marked the beginning of a period of prosperity for the island, confirming, in the eyes of the locals, the miraculous power of the dervish. Also in honor of the visit, the restaurant in Ada-Kaleh was named “4 Mai”.³²

²⁷ Ismail Daut, “Şefica Teyze”, *Çardak/Ceardac* 15–16 (August 12, 1938): 3.

²⁸ Metin Omer, “Bir Romen kaynağında Adakale ve Miskin Baba: Val Cordon, ‘Adakale’de Bektaşilik (Miskin Baba – ‘Kırlı Evliya’)”, *Edeb Erkan* 8 (2025): 53–76.

²⁹ G. Lungulescu, “Întâmplările minunate din Ada-Kaleh”, *Universul*, no. 226 (August 18, 1932): 6.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ During the interwar period, Ada-Kaleh benefited from an exceptional tax regime. The islands community was exempt from taxes, and the “Muslim Society”, of which the (part of the) islanders were members, controlled the import and distribution of products such as tobacco, sugar, coffee, and spirits, without customs duties. Visitors were allowed to take considerable quantities of these products with them, which turned the island into a prosperous economic centre and a privileged space, consolidating its distinct identity and resistance to emigration. See Metin Omer, “Emigrarea din Ada Kaleh: o încercare de evadare dintr-un paradis fiscal în perioada interbelică”, *Analele Universității Ovidius - Seria Istorie*, 16 (2019): 63–73.

³² Val Cordon, “Bektaşismul în Ada-Kaleh (Miskin Baba – “Sfântul murdar”)”, *Comunicări. Seria etnografică* V (1967): 27.

As for the dream in which a dervish/saint asks for the restoration of the tomb-turbe, this was a recurring theme in the Islamic/Ottoman world. For example, Bayezid II showed particular interest in the Islamic relics in Babadag. During the 1484 campaign against Kili and Akkerman, he stopped in Babadag where, according to Evliya Çelebi's account, he discovered the tomb of Sari Saltuk following a dream in which the saint predicted Bayezid's victory and asked him to free his body from the ruins where it lay. The next day, the burial site was found, and the sultan ordered the construction of a mausoleum (turbe) in honor of Saltuk Baba. Suleiman the Magnificent also showed a particular interest in turbes, staying in Babadag for several days in 1538.³³

Political and administrative level: institutions, schools, and military service

At the political level, in terms of concrete actions, the royal family played an important role in creating a balance between political and administrative integration and respect for the institutional traditions of the Muslim community. Here, it is necessary to make a clarification. The monarchy in Romania was not absolutist, but constitutional. The powers of the Romanian sovereign were limited by laws and the will of political parties. So, when we refer to the facilities offered to Turks and Tatars or the limits on fulfilling their wishes, this does not automatically mean that they were only possible because of the will of the royal family. Nevertheless, the Romanian royal family played an important role because it was able to set a direction for policy toward the Muslim community. The symbolic gestures I referred to above were also fundamental to the adoption of concrete measures. Below, I will analyse the impact that the Romanian royal family had on the adoption of legislative measures concerning the Muslim community in three areas: institutional, educational, and military. At the end of this section, I will also attempt to show how the Muslim community positioned itself vis-à-vis the royal family to obtain a series of demands.

The most significant debate in the pre-war and interwar periods concerned the functioning of institutions specific to the Muslim community. As mentioned earlier, Prince Carol I's proclamation of 1878 guaranteed the preservation of representative Islamic institutions. The Romanian authorities sought to create a system that would combine two principles: respect for the traditions of the Muslim community and the integration of these institutions into the national legislative framework, subordinate to the central bodies of the state.

³³ Machiel Kiel, "The Turbe of Sari Saltik at Babadag-Dobruja", in *Studies on the Ottoman Architecture of the Balkans: A Legacy in Stone* (London: Variorum, 1999), 216.

In this context, the Muftiate became the main institution of the Muslim faith. Its leader, the mufti, exercised the role of head of the faith, having authority over the imams, i.e., the religious personnel. Subordinate to the Muftiate were the Muslim Communities and the Qadiates. The Muslim Communities, organized in localities with a Muslim population, administered waqf properties, maintained mosques and schools, and ensured the remuneration of teachers and imams. The Qadiates (Islamic courts) had jurisdiction in civil matters, managing legal issues such as family law and inheritance.³⁴

During the interwar period, the community's discontent revolved around the impossibility of benefiting from a constitutional right provided for in the 1923 Constitution, which granted the leaders of religions with more than 200,000 followers and the leader of the Muslim religion the status of senator by right.³⁵ The Muslim community was unable to access this privilege due to organizational fragmentation: there were four equal Muftiates (in the counties of Caliacra, Constanța, Durostor, and Tulcea), without a clear hierarchy. Attempts to develop a unified status for the Muslim faith failed.³⁶

In 1937, Victor Iamandi, Minister of Denominations and Arts, decided to create a Grand Muftiate (Baş-Muftiat), headed by Etem Curt Mola, the first and only Grand Mufti of Muslims in Romania.³⁷ He made efforts to consolidate the institution, proposing regulations for the organization of Muslim worship, but the initiative was not accepted by the other muftis, who refused to give up their prerogatives and benefits. In addition, the constitutional right to have a senator by right became impossible to obtain after the Constitution was amended in 1938, at the initiative of King Carol II, who removed the exception for the Muslims.³⁸ Under these circumstances, Muslim community leaders resorted to other strategies to gain political representation at the central level, as discussed below.

The second essential aspect in the integration of the Muslim community was education. Turkish-language schools were not closed, and a legislative framework was created to allow them to operate. In most localities with a significant Muslim population, students studied Islamic religion and Turkish in

³⁴ Metin Omer, “An Ottoman Juridical Heritage in Romania: The Role and Functioning of the Qadiates”, in *Turkish Cultural Legacy in the Balkans: From Empire to the Republic of Türkiye*, ed. Delia Roxana Cornea, Metin Omer, and Emanuel Ploeanu (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Mega, 2023), 195–208.

³⁵ Constituția României (1923), accessed November 20, 2025, https://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.http_act_text?idt=1517.

³⁶ Omer, *Emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor din România în Turcia între cele Două Războaie Mondiale*, 145–46.

³⁷ ANR, fund MCA, file 100/1938, f. 152.

³⁸ Constituția României (1938), accessed November 20, 2025, https://www.cdep.ro/pls/legis/legis_pck.http_act_text?idt=9206.

specially designed spaces near mosques and prayer rooms.³⁹ In terms of education, the representative school was the Muslim Seminary. It was opened in 1889, first in Babadag, and then moved to Medgidia in 1901. Its purpose was to train Islamic clergy and Turkish language teachers. It was conceived as a continuation of the Ottoman educational tradition, but at the same time, attempts were made to integrate it into the Romanian educational system. It was established based on a bargain. The Romanian state undertook to maintain the old Gazi Ali Pasha madrasa in Babadag in exchange for the waqf properties it owned.⁴⁰ The seminary became a symbol of integration policy and respect for the traditions of the Muslim community. For King Carol I, meeting with the seminary students was a regular part of his visits to Constanța County. Dan Alecu, son of the first Romanian director of the Muslim Seminary, Alexandru Alecu, mentions in several memoirs how Carol I referred to the school as the "Tatar Seminary" and that on several occasions he chose to break protocol in order to meet with the school's students. Also, in 1910, at the end of the school year, the seminary students organized a trip to the Prahova Valley, where they were welcomed at Peleş Castle by the Romanian sovereigns Carol and Elisabeta.⁴¹ These gestures reveal the importance Carol I attached to Muslim education as a tool for strengthening loyalty to the Romanian state.

It should be noted that until World War I, there were other madrasas, but they were supported solely by the community. The Muslim Seminary was essential to the functioning of the system in which the institutions through which the Muslim community was supposed to defend and promote its interests were the Muftiate, the Qadiate, and the Muslim Communities, as it provided the personnel to ensure their activity. But there were shortcomings. The main complaints raised by members of the Muslim community were the lack of funding for the maintenance of places of worship and educational institutions, poor salaries for religious and teaching staff, and insufficient training for clerics and teachers.⁴²

The third essential aspect of the integration of the Muslim community into Romanian administration and society was the military. Compulsory military service was one of the main causes of the emigration of Turks and Tatars from

³⁹ Müstecib Ülküsal, *Dobruca ve Türkler* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü Yayınları, 1987), 120–23.

⁴⁰ Metin Omer, "Evoluția Seminarului Musulman din Medgidia (1889–1948)", in *Seminarul Musulman din Medgidia. Documente și Memorie / The Muslim Seminary of Medgidia: Documents and Memory*, ed. Adriana Cupcea, Manuela Marin, and Metin Omer (Cluj-Napoca: Editura ISPMN, 2016), 35.

⁴¹ Dan Alecu, "Însemnări despre domnia Regelui Carol I", *Revista Memoria* 38, no. 1 (2002): 67–68.

⁴² Omer, *Emigrarea turcilor și tătarilor din România în Turcia între cele Două Războaie Mondiale*, 146.

Romania to the Ottoman Empire and, later, to the Republic of Turkey. Aware of this sensitivity, the Romanian authorities introduced special provisions in the 1880 Law on the Organization of Dobruja: Muslims were to form separate companies within the territorial army, wearing their own uniforms, paid for by the state, and keeping their fez and turban.⁴³ There was even talk of establishing mosques in military units, but this measure was never implemented. Instead, there were Muslim military confessors.⁴⁴

The Romanian state attached particular importance to the inclusion of Muslims in the Romanian army, encouraging young people to attend military schools. Although the number of those who chose this path was small, the existing examples were presented as models of integration. Among them was Ismail Sabri Bey, a lieutenant in the Royal Regiment in Bucharest and a graduate of the Romanian military school. Born in Isaccea in 1883, Sabri was appointed second lieutenant in the 4th Roşiori Regiment on July 1, 1907, advancing to the rank of officer in 1910 and captain in April 1916. After resigning from the army in August 1916, he was reinstated when Romania entered the war, participating in operations in Transylvania. In 1917, he disappeared from the front and was convicted of desertion, subsequently taking refuge in Istanbul and then Ankara, where he joined the Kemalist movement. After the proclamation of the Republic of Türkiye, Sabri settled in Istanbul, where he lived until his death in 1957.⁴⁵

Sabri Bey's relationship with the Romanian authorities in general and with the royal family in particular was a rocky one. In 1908, he criticized the decision of his fellow Muslims to emigrate in a letter sent to the *İkdam* newspaper in Istanbul, in which he pointed out that the Romanian state offered a number of facilities to the Muslim community and that there was no reason for it to emigrate.⁴⁶ Later, after he settled in Türkiye, Sabri Bey claimed he kept up a good relationship with the royal family, mentioning meeting Queen Marie during her 1930 visit to Istanbul.⁴⁷ Instead, the Turkish authorities established in 1928 that he no longer had such a good relationship with the Romanian royal family.⁴⁸

Even though the authorities in Bucharest made efforts to integrate Turks and Tatars into Romanian society, there were still several grievances. What did the Muslim community do to demand a solution to the problems it

⁴³ *Lege pentru organizarea Dobrogei* (Bucureşti: Imprimeria Statului, 1880).

⁴⁴ Remus Macovei, *Eroi musulmani în armata română* (Constanţa, 2013), 65.

⁴⁵ See Florin Ţurcanu and Enis Tulça, *Dragoste şi revoluţie: Amintirile unei românce în Turcia lui Kemal Atatürk* (Bucureşti: Editura Corint, 2016).

⁴⁶ AMAE, fund Constantinopol, vol. 110, f.f.

⁴⁷ Ţurcanu and Tulça, *Dragoste şi revoluţie. Amintirile unei românce în Turcia lui Kemal Atatürk*, 65.

⁴⁸ T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı Türk Diplomatik Arşivi (TDA), 568/ 38783-157185-4 (January 18, 1928); TDA, 568/ 38783-157185-4 (February 07, 1928).

faced? It adopted two solutions. Firstly, to emigrate. And this is what most of the community did. Secondly, to express their attachment to the country they belonged to and especially to the sovereign. At no point was there any criticism of the royal family or the policies adopted by the Romanian state. Usually, even if some dissatisfaction was expressed or certain measures were criticized, the tone was moderate, with mitigating circumstances always being invoked.

This attitude of the Muslim community is clearly evident in two initiatives. Firstly, the most extensive attempts to formulate demands, there were the general congresses of Muslims in Romania organized in 1913, 1919, and 1920. The first congress, organized in Constanța in November 1913, took place shortly after Romania annexed Southern Dobruja following the Second Balkan War. It emerged primarily as a response to the uncertainties generated by this territorial change and functioned as an initial attempt at integration and mediation. The congress addressed practical and institutional issues—such as the establishment of Islamic courts, Muslim schools, the administration of waqf property, and measures against emigration⁴⁹—but its broader purpose was to affirm the loyalty of the Muslim population to the Romanian state. While only some of the proposals were partially implemented, the 1913 congress established a precedent for collective representation and positioned Muslim elites from Northern Dobruja as intermediaries between the authorities in Bucharest and the much larger Muslim population of the newly annexed Cadrilater.

The second congress, held in Constanța in July 1919, unfolded in a markedly different international and domestic context. At a moment when Romania's borders were still under negotiation at the Paris Peace Conference, the congress assumed an overtly political and symbolic character. Its primary aim was to publicly oppose Bulgarian territorial claims and to demonstrate, both domestically and internationally, the allegiance of the Muslims of Dobruja to Romania. The proceedings were highly visible, accompanied by press coverage, telegrams to the King and the Great Powers, and a delegation of the Muslims received by Ferdinand I in Bucharest.⁵⁰ At the same time, the congress coincided with the first postwar parliamentary elections in which Muslims participated as candidates, revealing its dual function as an act of public diplomacy and as a mechanism for political mobilization. The leadership that emerged—figures such as Ibrahim Temo, Mahmud Celebi, and Selim Abdulakim—would dominate Muslim political and institutional representation throughout the interwar period.

⁴⁹ “Congresul Musulmanilor din Dobrogea la Constanța”, *Seara* 4, no. 1316 (November 23, 1913): 2.

⁵⁰ “Ultime informații”, *Viitorul*, no. 3413 (July 31, 1919): 3.

The third congress, convened in Bazargic in April 1920, represented a shift from external political messaging to internal reform and institutional consolidation. Organized with greater preparation and less public attention, it focused on the reorganization and unification of Muslim institutions, including the Muftiates, Qadiates, Muslim Communities, and educational structures. While loyalty to the Romanian state was once again emphasized—partly to reassure the authorities—the central concern was the modernization and regulation of community life. Concrete regulations were drafted and committees established, yet most proposals concerning the election of muftis and the administration of waqfs were ultimately not adopted.⁵¹ This time, no delegation was received in Bucharest, only a telegram was sent to King Ferdinand I.⁵²

The second initiative was to adopt a passive stance toward political changes. This passive attitude can be observed in the way Romanian political life was reflected in the last years of the interwar period in the pages of the *Türk Birliği* newspaper, one of the most important publications of the Muslim community. Between 1933 and 1937, Romania was governed by the National Liberal Party, a party which, according to this newspaper, enjoyed a predominantly positive assessment: “Having remained in power for four years, the National Liberal Party, through its domestic and foreign policies, has won the sympathy of all, its successes being noted by everyone.”⁵³

The change that took place on December 28, 1937, when Carol II appointed Octavian Goga, leader of the National Christian Party, which had come fourth in the elections, as prime minister, represented a major turning point in Romanian political life and the beginning of the decline of interwar democracy. However, *Türk Birliği* presented this decision in a reserved manner, without direct criticism: “His Majesty the King has given power to the National Christian Party. The National Christian Party is an extremist and nationalist Christian party. However, someone in authority assures us that Goga and Cuza will pursue a fair and permissive policy towards the Turkish population.”⁵⁴

Similarly, after the removal of the Goga government on February 10, 1938, and the establishment of the authoritarian regime known as the “royal dictatorship”, the publication did not adopt a different or critical stance. On the contrary, the new transformation of the political regime was presented in a laudatory tone: “Always thinking of the good and welfare of the nation, our great leader, His Majesty King Carol, through the latest reform he has carried

⁵¹ “De la Congresul Musulman”, *Dobruca/Dobrogea* 31 (April 28, 1920): 1; “De la Congresul Musulman (Urmare)”, *Dobruca/Dobrogea* 33 (May 5, 1920): 1; “De la Congresul Musulman (Urmare)”, *Dobruca/Dobrogea* 35 (May 12, 1920): 1.

⁵² *Dobruca/Dobrogea* 29 (April 21, 1920): 1.

⁵³ “Sancağımız idaresinin faaliyeti”, *Türk Birliği* 49 (May 10, 1937): 1.

⁵⁴ Ö. Aziz, “Milli Hıristiyan fırkası ve türkler”, *Türk Birliği* 61 (February 11, 1938): 1.

out, has begun to write the most brilliant pages in the history of the Romanian people.”⁵⁵

Conclusions

This study examined, from a dual perspective—symbolic and political-administrative—how the Muslim community in Dobruja negotiated the transition from the status of "millet-i hâkime" within the Ottoman order to the status of citizens of a predominantly Christian national state, Romania. The trajectory described shows that the relationship with the Romanian monarchy functioned as a mechanism of integration and a strategy of mutual legitimization: the crown provided guarantees and visible gestures of tolerance (the proclamations of 1878, visits, foundations, architecture, and ceremony), and Muslim leaders responded with a consistent discourse of loyalty, converted into symbolic capital and, when possible, into institutional results.

On a symbolic level, the monarchy created a visual and narrative vocabulary through which Muslim otherness could be integrated into the national imagination without losing its specificity: the Royal Mosque "Carol I" in Constanța, the mosque "Hunchiar – King Carol I" in Bucharest, the oriental repertoire of the residences in Balchik, as well as the memoirs of Queen Maria, in which exoticism coexists with empathy. The community, in turn, adopted a series of gestures of symbolic reciprocity (the "King Mihai I" Mosque in Bazargic) through which it reaffirmed its loyalty.

On the political and administrative level, the initial promises regarding the preservation of the institutions (Muftiates, Qadiates, Muslim Communities) were largely respected, but without the legal unification that Muslim elites had been insisting on. The high point of this attempt—the general congress in Bazargic (1920)—produced coherent regulatory projects (the election of muftis, the administration of waqfs, the functioning of schools), but their full implementation failed, partly due to institutional fragmentation (four co-equal Muftiates) and the political developments of the Romanian interwar period, in which constitutional changes (1938) narrowed the channels of representation (senator by right). The creation of the Grand Muftiate (1937) was a late and partial solution, insufficient to stabilize the status of the Muslim community in the long term.

A crucial aspect highlighted by the analysis of the community press (in this paper *Türk Birliği* newspaper) is discursive self-restraint: in the face of major political changes—from the PNL government to the Goga–Cuza government and then to the "royal dictatorship"—the tone remains moderate, loyalist, with the explicit hope that royal benevolence will continue to offer protection. This "prudent loyalty" produced benefits (visibility, occasional access to resources,

⁵⁵ Ö. Aziz, "Yeni rejimin ilanından sonra...", *Türk Birliği* 66 (August 18, 1938): 2.

the maintenance of certain exceptions), but it also had costs: it inhibited the formation of articulate institutional criticism and left systemic problems unresolved (unitary status of worship, predictable funding for religious and educational infrastructure, stable careers for religious and teaching staff).

Comparatively speaking, the Romanian case is part of the transformed continuity of the Ottoman model of *millets* in modern Balkan states: legal integration combined with controlled autonomy. The specific difference in Romania, compared to other regional contexts, lies in the visible combination of royal guarantees with the local pragmatism of Muslim elites, who were able to translate symbolic capital into institutional initiatives (the Medgidia seminar, the regulations proposed in 1920), even if the final result was incomplete.

Looking back, the relationship between the Muslim community in Dobruja and the Romanian royal family produced scenes, objects, texts, and rituals that established tolerance as a public norm and created spaces for negotiating difference in a nation-state. This did not replace the concrete needs of the Muslim community, but it did provide a framework for its development during the years of transition after 1878 and between the wars. At the same time, the dynamics of emigration—chosen by many as a solution—limited the critical mass necessary for a long-term community project, leaving behind mainly institutions and symbolic narratives.