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DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE IDENTITY OF AROMANIANS OF
ALBANIA:
FROM HELLENIZATION AND THE
ATHEIST DICTATORSHIP, TO
INTERCULTURALISM**

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The thesis "The Identity of the Aromanians of Albania: from Hellenization and the Atheist Dictatorship to Interculturalism" deals with the definition of the identity of the Aromanians, in the context of their coexistence within the same territories as the majority population. To properly understand the complexity of defining the identity features of the Aromanians, the paper begins with a small introduction regarding the legislation on ethnic minorities in the Republic of Albania. Article 3 of Law no. 96/2017 states, in paragraph 1, that the national minority "is a group of Albanian citizens who live on the territory of the Republic of Albania, have early and stable ties with the Albanian state, present distinct cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious or traditional characteristics and are willing to express, preserve and develop together their distinct cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious or traditional identity"; paragraph 2 mentions which are these national minorities in the Republic of Albania: "Greek, Macedonian, Aromanian/Vlach, Roma, Egyptian, Montenegrin, Serbian, Bosnian and Bulgarian."

Until 2017, only three national (ethnic) minorities - the Greek, Serbo-Montenegrin and Macedonian - were recognized and supposedly supported in preserving their traditions, culture and language. Aromanians and Rroma had the same status: they were only linguistic communities. Their languages, Rromaní and Aromanian, were considered by the majority as "languages without an alphabet", transmitted only orally, unwritten, often despised and associated with each other, this aspect directly influencing the self-perception of the members of these communities.

The starting point of this study was the legal and statistical gap between official data and that supported by the Aromanian minority. After a long period of denial of the identity characteristics of the Aromanians, their recognition as an ethnic minority reveals another identity vortex in which the members of this community are caught. Considered an integral part of the Greek minority in Albania by the Hellenic state and at the same time Albanian by the majority population, the Aromanians seem to be constantly reconfigured as a minority under the pressure of contradictory attitudes, both external and internal to the community. Debates on the language used in the church or for establishing schools in the mother tongue clearly underline the three major categories into which this minority is divided: pro-Greek, pro-Romanian and pro-Albanian.

This study, which, among other things, is based on the close coexistence and long interaction of Aromanians with Albanians, is stimulated by, but does not start with the recognition of Aromanians as an ethnic minority in 2017, the moment of the first acceptance of the fact that Aromanians are ethnically distinct from Albanians and Greeks.

The study analyzes the essential elements of the identity of an ethnic minority, as presented in the Framework Convention (Art. 5.1): religious faith, language, traditions and cultural heritage, all during the turbulent history of the Albanian state.

The research initially focuses on the historical dimension and importance of interethnic and interreligious coexistence in Albania, on how the identity of the Aromanian minority is constructed and integrated with that of the majority population. Through complex historical processes, in the constant confrontation of the values and norms of the Aromanians with those of the Albanian people, their identity, albeit with blurred features, especially religious faith and language, was continuously integrated into that of the majority population. For this reason, Aromanians are considered a component of the Albanian national identity in a Balkan space known for nationalism and ethnocentrism.

The present study also offers an interpretation of the changes that the Aromanian minority went through, of the impact that the communist regime had on the individual, in particular, and on the minority in general, as well as the identification of a number of factors that served to create the identity vortex of the Aromanians in Albania.

By clarifying concepts such as "minority" and "identity" together with their constituent elements such as "culture", "language" or "religion", the study focuses on tolerance and harmony in this model of coexistence, both inter-ethnic and inter-religious.

Another important objective of the study, apart from the clarification of the key concepts mentioned above, is the support of the thesis that neither the Greek Orthodox faith, nor the Aromanian language, as a dialect of the Romanian language, diminishes the Aromanian efforts for the creation of the independent Albanian state.

Although classified as an autochthonous ethnic minority, a term which, according to contemporary sociological theories, defines a socio-human group concentrated in a certain part of the territory of a state and presenting specific linguistic, racial and religious characteristics, different from those of the majority population, the Aromanian minority does not always fold on this definition.

First of all, Aromanians are spread throughout Albania, no longer being the majority in almost any administrative-territorial unit. This is not only because of their way of life, with seasonal transhumance, but also because of socio-historical changes, especially during the communist dictatorship, when the demographic movement was controlled and imposed from the center.

Second, members of this community, historically integrated into Albanian society, have not always preserved their specific linguistic characteristics. The change in the composition of the family, from the extended family to the nuclear one, caused the children to distance themselves from their grandparents, who traditionally taught them the language. The emancipation of women, the employment of mothers who were previously housewives, was another major change in the family structure. All these are some of the reasons that led to the interruption of the inter-generational transmission of the language, which was the only way to learn it.

Thirdly, after several decades of atheism imposed by the communist regime, the membership of the Orthodox religion of this community was erased to the point of extinction, thus blurring one of the socio-cultural differences between Aromanians and Albanians, the majority of whom are Muslims. The Orthodox religion, which differentiates them from the Albanians, brought them closer to another ethnic group, the Greeks, with whom they shared the same territory of origin, namely the regions of Macedonia and Epirus, over which the Greeks had - and still have - territorial claims.

Baptismal names, not just family names, served as an important indicator of religious and ethnic affiliation. The compulsions during the communist dictatorship to use exclusively Albanian names are considered another cause of the Aromanians' Albanization. The imposition of an Albanian name, especially in the context of forced atheism, directly attacked the religious affiliation of minorities, as the traditional names of Aromanians or Greeks were closely linked to the Orthodox Church calendar. This loss of tradition even in the choice of children's names is treated in the study to emphasize the transformation of the individual and the indoctrination of the population during the communist dictatorship.

Thus, starting with this complex relationship between the Aromanian ethnic minority and the majority Albanian population, in which, on the one hand, the Aromanians are blamed for not preserving their traditions, language and religion, and, on the other hand, they are asked to return precisely to the status they had in the period they were denied this identity elements, we begin with a sociological definition of minority groups.

Studying these theoretical concepts and trying to apply them to the studied ethnic group, it becomes obvious that the Aromanians are not a typical autochthonous ethnic minority, being recognized as such very late (2017). Not only did they identify with the majority population, becoming one with it in defining moments for the Albanian nation, fighting alongside it in conflict situations, but they often took a leading role in these interactions. And, in a way, it is precisely this continuous social interaction between culturally and ethnically different groups, but with common goals, defined by many researchers as the basis of a nation, that can be considered the source of the identity chaos that the Aromanians face.

Especially after the Second World War, while the characteristics of the Aromanians, especially the language and religion, were fading, the rites, the lifestyle, the construction or furnishing of the houses, the food, etc., were identical to those of the majority population. Consequently, we can advance the idea that, especially during the totalitarian regime of Enver Hoxha, when the aim was to erase the differences between social or ethnic groups, the coexistence of Aromanians with Albanians did not involve only their cultural assimilation. The fact that this ethnic group has never been treated as different (even now it is not considered different by the

majority population, despite the Minority Law), shows that the level of socio-cultural integration of the Aromanian community in the majority society is high, unlike than the case of other ethnic minorities in Albania, making the study of Aromanians even more complicated.

Starting from the present, when the fading of the main characteristics of the Aromanian minority is evident, this study regarding the identity of the Aromanians in an extended temporal context is based on two axes:

a) The historical one, regarding the early ties of this community with the Albanians, the Greeks and Romania. Around this axis gravitate the facts that demonstrate: 1. The important role of the Aromanians, especially those who lived in Romania, in the opening of Albanian schools and in the declaration of Albania's independence; 2. Their suffering during the communist dictatorship; 3. Living with Albanians in the post-communist period, with a tendency towards Hellenization;

b) The sociological one, where the analysis is focused precisely on the characteristics of the coexistence of Aromanians with Albanians and on their long historical interaction. This analysis gives an answer to the formulated hypotheses, which, due to the complexity of coexistence, are stated in the form of variables.

From a sociological point of view, the integration of minority groups into the majority culture is seen as a value, cultural assimilation being considered an inevitable process. Members of minority groups, who are supposed to preserve and transmit identity traits from one generation to another, live between two cultures, the one of origin and the one of the majority, cultures considered different in terms of language, belief, rituals, values and norms. Coexistence leads to the emergence of intercultural exchanges that make possible mutual knowledge, the essence of interculturalism.

But in the present case of the Aromanians of Albania, an atypical autochthonous ethnic minority, one observes, at different times, paradoxically, both their complete Hellenization and their Albanization.

The objectives of the paper are to highlight the transformation of this minority, caught between the three cultures: the family, Aromanian, the ecclesiastical, Greek and the social, of the majority Albanian population; highlighting the possible socio-cultural problems generated by living with those who are different; highlighting the negotiation strategies of the Aromanian minority to minimize the undesirable aspects of cohabitation in the common social space.

In order to outline the identity of Aromanians, the paper analyzes the interaction between social groups, especially the adaptation and integration of Aromanians in society, both as a community and as its members.

The objectives of the study are treated from a sociological point of view, starting from theories about living between two cultures, cultural space, etc.

The hypotheses of the study, confirmed or disproved by field observations, data collected from interviews and questionnaires, are:

- The Aromanian minority group preserves the characteristics of an ethnic minority group (indigenous): language, religion, history, territory, sense of belonging and origin.

- Inter-religious tolerance, considered characteristic of Albanian society, does not have an inter-ethnic dimension.

- The social interaction between members of the Aromanian and Albanian minority is positive.

- Members of the Aromanian ethnic minority are not prejudiced against the majority Albanian population and vice versa.

- Socio-cultural relations between members of the Aromanian minority and the Albanian population are positive.

- There are no problematic situations or conflicts in the socio-cultural interaction of the Aromanian minority group with the Albanian population.

- None of the ethnic social groups (Aromanian and Albanian) use insulting (negative) mutual labels.

- In the interaction of the Aromanian ethnic minority group with the majority Albanian population there are forms of positive assimilation.

- The Aromanian ethnic minority group does not present forms of social conflict.

- There are no significant cultural differences between the members of the Aromanian minority and the Albanian population (both being characterized by the dominant Balkan culture).

- The Aromanian ethnic minority is characterized by a very good educational level.

- The social space positively influences the socio-cultural integration of the Aromanian minority in the Albanian culture (by living together in the social space the minority group improves its collaboration with the majority population).

- Atheism, like the mass media, was used by the communist dictatorship to blur ethnic differences between various groups.

- The social policies of Hoxha's communist dictatorial regime influenced the socio-cultural integration of the Aromanian community. The establishment of Hoxha's dictatorial regime also marks the beginning of the assimilation process of the Aromanian population.

- The erasure of the ethnic identity of the Aromanian minority began with the creation of the Albanian state.

- The Hellenization of the Aromanian community is a phenomenon of the post-communist era.

- The Hellenization of the Aromanian community is an archaic concept, which ended with the proclamation of the independence of the Albanian state.

- Greek Orthodox religious affiliation facilitated the Hellenization of the Aromanian community in Albania.

- The tendency to convert to Uniatism in the territories shepherded by the Ohrid Archdiocese was influenced by the linguistic links with the Latin language, as well as the Aromanian origin of its leaders.

- The religious tolerance of the Albanian society favored the preservation of the main identity features of the Aromanian minority.

- The lack of a mother country that favors and maintains ties with tradition, customs and language, made the Aromanian minority more vulnerable to assimilation.

- The silence by the Albanian governments of Romania's support for Albanians and Aromanians in the Balkans was intentional.

- The atheistic dictatorship favored the blurring of the ethnic identity of the Aromanian minority.

- In Albania, ethnic differences have always been associated with religious ones.

- Placing the Aromanian community in the same category as the Roma led the Aromanians not to self-identify as such, fearing marginalization.

- Religious affiliation served as a determining factor of the ethnic affiliation of the population.

- The association of the Orthodox religion with the Greek ethnicity led the Aromanians to fight for the establishment of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

- The Aromanian population did not suffer ethnic persecution from the majority population.

- Romania supported the creation of an Albanian state, considering it a solution to the problem of the Romanians in the Balkans.

There is a specific feature added to the complexity of analyzing the identity of Aromanians in Albania: they live in a geographical area which covers several districts, not being a majority in any of them.

The Albanian minority is spread almost all over the country, but the largest communities are in the districts of Korçë, Gjirokastër, Sarandë, Durrës, Tiranë, Berat, Elbasan and Fier. According to the records made by the Aromanian researcher Valentino Mustaka, the total number of Aromanians in Albania is 172,430 people, of which 172,294 are found in the eight districts chosen for the study, divided as follows:

District	Population	Aromanians 2011 census	V. Mustaka's records
Durrës	429.300	184	6.241
Tiranë	1.058.418	824	31.440
Elbasan	439.404	735	9.188
Fier	498.168	1.551	52.616
Berat	231.453	667	13.100
Korçë	379.051	2.666	36.144
Gjirokastër	152.691	686	11.759
Vlorë	380.791	878	11.806

Tab. 1. The choice of the eight districts for the study based on the number of Aromanians according to the statistics of the 2011 census and that of the researcher Mustaka (2019)

The following table shows the number of respondents, in percentage, for each district in this study.

Town	Respondents number	% of respondents
Durrës	40	10
Tiranë	80	20
Elbasan	32	8
Fier	40	10
Berat	52	13
Korçë	28	7
Gjirokastër	48	12
Vlorë	80	20
Total	400	100%

Tab. 3. The number of respondents (expressed as a percentage) from each district included in the study

Considering this variety of objectives and hypotheses, three tools are used in the paper: interviews, questionnaires and a language comprehension test. In addition to the structured questionnaire for the Aromanian population, two semi-structured interview guides were used: one for the Aromanian population and one for the Albanian population. The objectives and/or hypotheses of the research determine how a questionnaire should be organized and what items (construct/correlates/variables-as questions) should be included. To be more practical and easier to administer, the questionnaire is divided into two.

The first part contains 30 questions and includes variables of everyday reality (cultural socialization influenced by family, education, neighborhood, level of living conditions, cultural activity, etc.). The Assertions Scale was used to measure cultural shaping, acceptance, rejection, social and cultural interaction, and integration through different cultural groups. Given that this study focuses, among other things, on measuring socio-cultural interaction and that cultural activities are significantly influenced by the areas in which they are carried out, a ready-made questionnaire model could not be used. For this reason, the scales used are combined.

To find out how they position themselves regarding everyday realities, the subjects answer the question: "What nationality would you like your wife/husband to have?" The alternative answers are classified according to the degree of approval or disapproval of inter-ethnic marriages. On the cultural socialization scale, respondents are asked "In which school would you like your child to study?" As answers, alternatives are offered on the basis of which the type of socio-cultural model represented by the respondent is determined. The data obtained in the first part of the questionnaire represent the respondents' attitudes.

This first part, which contains 30 questions, is made up of demographic variables: age, gender, professional status, education, religious affiliation, etc.

It is from here that all the structured and general information about the respondents - regarding religious affiliation, mother tongue, assimilation, their perception of interaction with the majority population, as well as their approach to origin, culture, language, customs, etc. - was collected (see Appendix, Questionnaire, part 1).

The second part, which proposes to collect information as structured as possible, consists of variables that measure the appreciation of cultural values (between the two cultures). It aims to measure the mutual appreciation of Aromanians and Albanians for each other's cultural values. This part contains seven questions. It was considered important, in this section of the questionnaire, to observe the socio-cultural interaction between the two populations. To measure this, questions about relationships between colleagues, neighbors, etc. were used.

This second part of the questionnaire aimed to measure the degree of appreciation of cultural values and social relations in everyday life. Here, respondents answered questions such as: "In your opinion, how developed are the following cultural values among Albanians?". For each of the values listed in the table, the respondent gives his assessment, choosing one of the alternatives: "a lot", "somewhat", "a little", "not at all" (see Annex, Questionnaire, part 2).

The scales used in the questionnaire were tested on a group of 60 people in order to measure the level of confidence, the clarity of the wording of the questions and to see how well these questions were understood before they were included in the final questionnaire, used for the whole sample. Data collected from all questionnaires was analyzed, each value was calculated as a

percentage of the total participants. The results are presented in table form. For this study, the relationships of the independent variables, educational level and tolerance were identified. This correlation was analyzed based on positive or negative links.

At the end of the questionnaire, the respondents were given a text, taken from the book "Socrat Buba"¹ by the Aromanian author Thanas Medi, translated from Albanian into Aromanian by Andon Kristo²:

„Ancă aestu ți vini aveau păpuți cu mâl'iau, lustrafine lai, pantaloni terital ancupurati Tirana, geachetă di cadifei cu line supsări ș-săhati di mână cu singhir ti asimi, di marca «Popjeda». Tu gepea ali geacheti, țanea ș-un cheptini di fildiș vartos, șamei diplusită cu mirachiâ ti sădori ș-natyral, rivista cu articulu ti copulație artificială. Numa a lui ira dusă maninti di el singur la Gorița Mare. Ș-tot ți u adunară, ahorea di Josif Șolla, polițul a tută-puteriei nou-numit a reghinul, u spusiră dișchis entuziazmul. Ama ma entusiast ti toț era tatăl cu tută că nu s-feați vărnoară curios s-nvăța țiș criira articul, lă s-mărea alăntor, anda u băga capela ninga ș-ma strămbă: - Socrat al melu, va si facă mari!”³

Based on the aforementioned study of Valentino Mustaka "Arumunët e Shqipërisë...", the number of Aromanians who are able to read a written text is much smaller than those who speak it.⁴ To verify this, in the questionnaire version, the above text has been modified, removing the diacritics (which do not exist in the Albanian language). A phonetic approximation was also made, using the letters that best correspond to the sounds represented by the diacritics and letter groups of the Romanian language (g, ge-gi - xh; ch, c -k; ț-c; ș- sh and ä-ë). The modification was necessary, because the questionnaire was in written form, and three of those who helped fill out the questionnaires are not part of the Aromanian community.⁵

Starting from the statements of those interviewed and questioned, a tendency of a triple identity of the members of this minority was observed: Aromanian-Albanian, Aromanian-Greek and [a]Romanian. This identity overlap was treated in the present study as a consequence of the interweaving of the destinies of the ethnic groups that, living in the same territories, influenced each other, their distinctive features being partly common. The long interaction, under different empires,

¹ The Aromanian version and the Albanian version with which the respondents' translations were compared were used with the author's and the translator's permission, respectively.

² Elsa Stavro, *Vârtejul identitar al aromânilor din Albania: albano-români, macedo-români sau vlahi?*, în „Studium”, nr. XIII (2020), pp. 201–219.

³ Thanas Medi, *Socrat Buba*, Andon Kristo (trad.), Tiranë: FLESH, 2018, p. 91.

⁴ Stavro, *Vârtejul*, p. 202

⁵ Ibidem.

in some areas where these three peoples met - Epirus, Thessaly, Macedonia, Greece and Albania - led to the merging of the three ethnic groups into a single social group.

The characteristics of social identity are territory, history, faith (religion) and sense of belonging, and for ethnic identity language and origin are added to the above. To have a clearer picture, these features are presented in the table below:

Social identity	Ethnic identity
Territory	Territory
History	History
Religion	Religion
The feeling of belonging	The feeling of belonging
	Language
	Origin

Tab. 4. Characteristics of social and ethnic identity

As it emerged from this study, the cultural elements of the Aromanians are, if not identical, very similar to those of the Albanians, except for language and religion. Precisely these two features, which, historically, have differentiated them from the Albanians, are the ones that connect this community to Greece and Romania.

From the responses of the subjects, divided into three large groups, pro-Albanian, pro-Greek and pro-Romanian, it appears that each of them argued their self-declared ethnicity with the characteristics of ethnic identity, which include language, origin and Orthodox religion. I have made, in the table below, a division of the ethnic and social characteristics among the three fractions of the Aromanian minority in Albania, and as you can see, only the pro-Romanian one contains the two defining characteristics of ethnic identity, language and origin.

Pro Greek group	Pro-Albanian	Pro-Romanian
Territory	Territory	-
Common history	Common history	History
Religion (Orthodox Church)	Autocephalous Church / (BOAA)/Atheism	-
The feeling of belonging	The feeling of belonging	The feeling of belonging
		Language
		Origin

Tab. 5. Breakdown of ethnic and group characteristics among the three fractions of the Aromanian minority in Albania

As can be seen from the above, religion links them to the Greeks, while their language, considered a dialect of the Romanian language, is an indicator of their affinities with Romania, and it was exactly on attacking these two elements that the strategy of their Albanization was based. The lack of schools and religious freedom deepened their identity crisis, completing the goal proposed

by the communist dictatorial regime, to standardize/homogenize the population, in which there would no longer be differences in beliefs, regions and ideas.

According to some researchers, the difference between the identity of a social group and that of an ethnic group is language and origin, while history, cultural and religious elements, as well as territory may be common. That is why the questionnaire also contains the questions on origin and language, to highlight that although they lived together for a long time with Albanians and formed a state together, they were different, but historical circumstances led them to self-identify as Albanians.

The construction of the work on two axes, historical and sociological, aims to present as clearly as possible the transformation of the Aromanian minority in different stages through which the Albanian nation went. From a vital part of it, the Aromanians only become an ethnic minority in 2017, one that has suffered the accentuated fading of identity traits, as a result of a number of factors that influence their self-identification.

Data collected from questionnaires and interviews revealed a multitude of perceptions, opinions and attitudes. Different causes and factors made the interaction between this minority and the majority population not an example of a typical interaction between ethnically different social groups, where new experiences vs. they usually accompany the process of identification in intergroup situations.

This paper on the identity of the Aromanians in Albania asserts that the forms and intensity of interaction and communication influence the processes of socialization and identification. Statistical data showed that the majority of those surveyed, although self-identified as Aromanians, also self-identified as Albanians, not considering themselves part of an ethnic minority. Precisely in this double self-identification, as part of the majority and the minority population, lies the complexity of belonging to the Aromanian community in Albania.

According to Oakes, the perception of similarity with others in a certain social context serves as the basis for defining group membership, which is one of the reasons why Aromanians do not consider themselves different from the majority population, having no other political, religious or cultural ambitions than this. Their common denominator – territory, history and nationalist and national feelings (of belonging) – inspired the patterns that influenced socio-cultural adaptation, lack of conflict, tolerance and harmonious coexistence.

Mutual appreciation and positive attitude were observed in most of the questionnaires and interviews conducted, emphasizing the successful coexistence between Aromanians and Albanians, considered a cultural value of both social groups.

The interviewees stated that these two social groups (at the level of individual interactions) supported each other in creating a harmonious climate, in conditions where ethnic or cultural

differences actually did not exist. Aromanians have always collaborated with Albanians for the socio-cultural, political and economic development of the Albanian state, thus blurring the barriers between the groups.

As shown in the study, the common cultural elements include a multitude of traditions, from gastronomic customs, to the style of building houses, to the organization of weddings or funerals, etc. It is precisely the process of socialization within the majority population that diffused the cultural elements, thus giving rise to the similarities that are now found in both ethnic groups, the Aromanian and the Albanian. This study also established that fully diffused cultural elements are acquired during everyday life interaction. Language and traditions, as well as other elements inherited from the culture of origin, are partially diffused. The less similar elements of the Aromanian and Albanian cultures, according to the survey data, are religious customs, songs and dances (folklore).

Therefore, this study revealed that, during cultural contacts between two ethnically different groups, cultural elements of everyday life are diffused, and those originating from the culture of origin remain distinct. With the progressive loss of language, specific cultural elements are altered or disappear.

Learning the Albanian language, which Albanian philologists consider a main feature of the nation, influenced the integration and socio-cultural adaptation of the Aromanians. The study showed that a small part of the Aromanian subjects communicate freely in both languages. Although the majority declared themselves bilingual, in free conversations as well as in the text comprehension test, it was observed that Aromanian was not one of the languages spoken.

Learning the Albanian language, which was compulsory, certainly helped them to adapt and integrate into society. The educational level, which defines that of learning a language, had no influence on the knowledge of the mother tongue or, expressed in variables, the educational level of the subjects does not influence the degree of acquisition of the Aromanian language. The subjects with elementary or intermediate level of education had acquired Albanian as a mother tongue also.

Few of those surveyed speak the Aromanian language fluently, and even fewer write or read it. It has been observed that most Aromanians do not know the Aromanian language, although they have declared it as their mother tongue. Except for those who were born and live in Greece, all respondents speak and write very well in Albanian, the official language of the Republic of Albania. A good knowledge of the Greek language was also observed in many of the members of the Aromanian community.

These data support the hypothesis that the Aromanian minority did not enjoy the fundamental rights of a distinct ethnic group (the right to education in the mother tongue, religious

service in the mother tongue, the preservation and display of ethnic symbols, access to information in the mother tongue, etc.), this influencing their perception of their own ethnic identity.

Being educated exclusively in Albanian schools increased their socio-cultural contacts with Albanians, favoring the overcoming of prejudices, the abolition of stereotypes, thus increasing the level of knowledge of the cultural elements of the majority. We must remember that the idea of a unitary Albanian state underwent changes in different historical periods. In the beginning, the desire to form and strengthen the Albanian state was raised above religious, ethnic, cultural and regional differences, without implying the loss of the identity of the different ethnic groups that made it up. During communism, however, the imposition of the elimination of these differences led to the uniformity/homogenization of the population, for the Aromanians this meant the main cause of the identity chaos in which they find themselves now. The coexistence of Aromanians with Albanians, especially during the communist regime, meant more frequent socio-cultural contacts, the standardization creating the possibility of mixed, inter-ethnic and inter-religious marriages, thus eliminating any prejudices. It was observed from the study that the Aromanians in Albania do not have prejudices towards the Albanian population, on the contrary, showing a respect for it that extends to the socio-cultural, economic and political level in the individual and group level.

As noted, both from the historical analysis and from the collected data, in this long coexistence and social interaction between Aromanians and Albanians there were no conflicting aspects, socialization being one of the most important factors in the process of adaptation and influencing the identity traits of the minority. Aromanians have appropriated the cultural models of the majority group, those of the culture of origin being relegated to second place.

In this process of socialization, two integral attitudes were observed:

1. Although faded, the cultural models of the culture of origin are kept in the background, but adapted to those of the majority population, part of which the Aromanians consider themselves.

2. According to the data from the questionnaires, the Aromanians, although they respect the members of their own group, have a much higher level of socialization with the majority population. When asked "what ethnicity does your best friend have", most Aromanian subjects answered "Albanian".

They do not show negative attitudes towards the majority; they do not use offensive labels for its members, thus demonstrating that tolerance and respect are the basic patterns of their social interaction. In the few cases in which the interviewed Aromanians made disparaging comments, they were directed at the communist regime or political figures from the atheist era whose destructive actions were remembered as directed against the entire Albanian population.

Only one of the 400 respondents, originally from Saranda, said that the Armenians were persecuted, deported and imprisoned by the communist dictatorship. A former political prisoner

during Hoxha's time, he stated that he was imprisoned as part of the communist regime's policy aimed at the identity transformation of Aromanians. But, from free conversations with him, it emerged that the president of the court panel that sentenced him to 15 years in prison as an "enemy of the people's power" and for "participation in a group hostile to the people's power, in favor of Greek espionage", was also Aromanian. Moreover, the prosecution witnesses were also Aromanians.

Therefore, the data collected does not confirm the persecution based only on belonging to the Aromanian community, but the hypothesis that "the Aromanian population did not suffer ethnic persecution from the majority population".

Although many of the interviewees spoke in detail about the persecutions of the communist regime, no connection was made between them and their religious affiliation. However, this does not illustrate inter-confessional tolerance, since during that period of forced atheism individuals were all treated the same, regardless of which religion they belonged to.

Starting from J. Berry's theory, the study highlighted that the forms of complete socio-cultural integration of the Aromanians have a primary and secondary character, belonging not only to the public sphere, but also to the family sphere, thus confirming the hypothesis "The merging of the Aromanian element into the dominant group, as an indicator of the high level of integration in Albanian society".

Integration in the public sphere assumes that the minority shows a high level of adaptation to the cultural models of the majority population, communicates very well in its language, in our case, Albanian, the official language of the Republic of Albania, actively participates in the educational, health, and local and central politics, as well as in the media. Knowing very well the mentality of the majority group, of which they were considered part until 2017, Aromanians respect its traditions. This situation also explains their self-identification as Albanians.

In the private sphere, although complete integration has been highlighted in most cases, through the continuous fading of the mother tongue and the exclusive use of the Albanian language in society, they also retain cultural aspects of origin, aromas. Communication in the family in the mother tongue, celebrating with songs in Aromanian, etc. are indicators of keeping the tradition, although in a very narrow circle.

The study revealed that Aromanians consider education a common cultural value with Albanians, particularly appreciating the scholarships offered by the Romanian state, from which many have benefited. The hypothesis that "the Aromanian ethnic minority is characterized by a good educational level" is therefore confirmed.

The questionnaire revealed that other cultural values, such as tolerance, keeping one's word, generosity, respect, honesty, etc., were valued as common to both groups. These data state the

hypothesis that "Between the members of the Aromanian minority and the Albanian population there are no meaningful cultural differences (both being characterized by the dominant Balkan culture)."

Although the hypothesis "The Aromanian minority group preserves unchanged the characteristics of an ethnic minority group (indigenous), language, religion, history, territory, sense of belonging and origin" is not confirmed, it was observed that, despite the historical context of the communist-atheist period, Aromanians prefer to marry within their own group, now characterized mainly by the Orthodox Christian religion. Even in the atheist period, the simple recognition of the family name as an indicator of belonging to the Orthodox religion encouraged family alliances within the same religious group.

From the historical analysis it emerged that the Albanianization and Hellenization of the Aromanians have been examined for a long time, their beginnings not coinciding with the period after the Second World War. Thus, the hypothesis "The establishment of Hoxha's dictatorial regime also marks the beginning of the process of assimilation of the Aromanian population" is not confirmed. It is true, however, that this regime determined the homogenization/ uniformization of the population through terror and violence, blurring ethnic, religious, cultural and regional differences to the point of disappearance, the hypothesis that "The social policies of Hoxha's communist dictatorial regime influenced the socio-cultural integration of the Aromanian community" confirming itself.

It also emerged from the socio-historical analysis that the hypothesis "The religious tolerance of the Albanian society favored the preservation of the main identity features of the Aromanian minority" is not confirmed.

From the data collected through questionnaires, interviews and free discussions, it was observed that the commercial and transportation skills of the members of the Aromanian community, which helped them to know the country well and the mentalities of different regions, were important factors for a successful socio-cultural adaptation. Thus, the hypothesis that "The social space positively influences the socio-cultural integration of the Aromanian minority in the Albanian culture (by living together in the social space, the minority group improves its collaboration with the majority population)" is confirmed.

Also, from the questionnaire it emerged that both groups value each other as good neighbors, even friends. Aromanians are neither discriminated against nor favored, which is another indicator of their successful integration into Albanian society. In the case of the Aromanians, their non-recognition as different from the majority population, education exclusively in Albanian, the continuous political and social pressure to merge with the majority population, erasing the elements that differentiated them, the closing of private schools, the prohibition of religious service, initially

in the mother tongue , and then determinedly completed the cultural assimilation of this minority that had already begun in 1913, with the definition of the borders of the Albanian state. It is confirmed, from the socio-historical analysis, the hypothesis that "The erasure of the ethnic identity of the Aromanian minority began with the creation of the Albanian state".

As for the identification of the elements that make it possible to live between two cultures (the one of origin and that of the majority population), the analysis of qualitative and quantitative data identified four main ones: language, socialization, inter-ethnic friendship and inter-ethnic marriages.

So, summarizing these data from the study on the identity of Aromanians in Albania, it is emphasized that the Aromanians are very good connoisseurs of the Albanian language, they use this language in socio-cultural interaction not only with the majority population and in state institutions, but also in inter-group relations and family. This knowledge of the language helped them in adaptation and integration, influencing their identification as Albanians.

The study identified the important role of socialization in the process of adaptation and integration of minorities in the majority society. From the qualitative data it was observed that socialization, although it was not the only factor that determined the creation of similar patterns, influenced their diffusion. This aspect is clearly observed in the case of building houses, for example, or in the preparation of food, the communist dictatorship being the decisive factor in the creation and imposition of these models or similar rituals. The period of the dictatorship influenced almost all cultural elements, from wedding rituals, to funerals, to songs, etc., causing the fading of the characteristics of the culture of origin in the minorities.

Since the only differences between the Aromanians and the majority population are language and religion, not being allowed to learning the mother tongue and being forced to atheism particularly affected this minority, confirming the hypothesis that "in Albania, ethnic differences have always been associated with religious ones". The fact that the Orthodox religion was always accompanied by the Greek danger, including during Hoxha's time, as well as the qualitative and quantitative data of the study confirm the hypothesis "Greek-Orthodox religious affiliation facilitated the Hellenization of the Aromanian community in Albania".

From this analysis, we also find that the hypothesis "Hellenization of the Aromanian community is an archaic concept, which ended with the proclamation of the independence of the Albanian state" is not confirmed.

Based on the recent statements of some Greek historians who insist that the Aromanians of Albania declare themselves part of the Greek minority, the hypothesis that "Hellenization of the Aromanian community is a phenomenon of the post-communist era" is partially confirmed. We say partially, because before the 1920s Greece considered all Albanian Orthodox Greeks. Although the

Hellenization of Aromanians is not a phenomenon of the post-communist era, it can be said that, after 1991, this process was not only linked to the quality of being Orthodox, but extended to all those who were born in (Northern) Epirus, an attitude that also threatened the Albanian population, not only the Aromanian one.

From the analysis of the qualitative data and the attitude of the Albanian elite, reflected in the press of the time, it was observed that the very notion of nation undergoes changes.

If, at the beginning, those who did not speak this language were also accepted as part of the Albanian nation, because the nation was made up of the inhabitants of the same territory, once the borders of the new Albanian state were defined, this pattern changed. The language became the main feature of the Albanian nation and the Aromanian Orthodox Christians were used to counter the claims of Greece. This confirms the hypothesis that "The association of the Orthodox religion with the Greek ethnicity led the Aromanians to fight for the establishment of the Albanian Autocephalous Orthodox Church".

During Hoxha's time, when historical manipulation aimed, among other things, to homogenize and standardize the population, in the publications of the Academy of Sciences of Albania the term Aromanian was used only for those who lived in Pindus (Greece). The name was considered to show their connection with Romania (in Albanian - Romania - Rumania, Aromanian - Arumun), while the Vlachs (Vlahii) were those who lived in Albania.

By anathematizing all previous regimes and having no other historical options than those promoted by the communist dictatorship through the mass media and "ideologically clean" publications, Hoxha's regime therefore created its own version of the poor, illiterate Vlachs, thus causing the implicit marginalization of anyone who self-identifies as member of this ethnic group. This aspect confirms the hypotheses that "Atheism, like the mass media, was used by the communist dictatorship to blur ethnic differences" and that "The silence by the Albanian governments of Romania's support for Albanians and Aromanians in the Balkans was intentional".

Overall, this study, "The Identity of the Aromanians in Albania, from Hellenization and Atheist Dictatorship to Interculturalism", concludes that if the Aromanians had remained as they were until 2017, a cultural community, never considered distinct from the majority population, their identity as a group socially it would be the same as that of the Albanians.

Being as much "Albanian" as the Albanians themselves, the Aromanians contributed to the creation of this nation, turning into reality the writing of the language with Latin letters, the national anthem and not only the officiating of religious services in the Albanian language, but the very creation of an Albanian National Orthodox Church, of whose archbishops were almost all members of this community.

The members of this nation, although with different languages and religions, were united by living in the same territories, by the common history and by the feeling of belonging to this state. Since the Aromanians were recognized as an ethnic minority, considered different from the Albanians precisely on the basis of language and origin, Aromanian as a dialect of the Romanian language and their origin in the region of Macedonia, they can only be "Macedo-Romanians", part of to "Romanians everywhere", as they have always been considered by Romania.

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