

ProEtnica 2016: Ethnic minorities concerning themselves over interethnic dialogue

21 Aug 2016, 15:33 •
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Romania's ethnic minorities are living in peace and harmony, while interethnic dialogue should be intensified particularly at a cultural level, debaters in the "Interethnic dialogue in contemporary Romania" event held by the Federation of Romania's Jewish Communities at the ongoing ProEtnica festival in Sighisoara concluded on Saturday.



Ethnic minorities in Romania enjoy public funding, and this year the Romanian Government "has kept its word and met the obligations pledged by its predecessor," Chairman of the Federation of Romania's Jewish Communities Aurel Vainer said.

"National identity is like an ID card. Each minority has its own identity. The right to be represented in Parliament is granted only to the recognised minorities, which have contributed to the long-term development of Romania. National identity can be defined by our birth, our presence in Romania, by components of traditions, culture and arts. (...) Religion is a very important identity component. We, in Romania, have excellent relations. There are no disputes between Muslims and Jews (...). Moreover, this year we have organised a big event called "Bridges of tolerance," under the aegis of President Klaus Iohannis that was a great success, because participation has been broadened by the involvement of Roma and Tartars. (...) Irrespective of the years we have lived, we have borne our national identity. Religion has been a permanent feature of our national identity, helping us a lot preserve our identity and stay Jews," said Vainer.

He added that ProEtnica is still the best proof of excellent dialogue and understanding among ethnic minorities in Romania. "We have always participated in ProEtnica to show what we were and what we are," added Vainer.

He also pointed to an "old, rich and complex" history of the Jews' presence in Romania, enlarging on its developments.

"Jews have an old history in Romania. There is a dispute whether they date back to the Romans or Dacians. There is historical research indicating the presence of military Jews, then mercenaries, in the troops of [Dacian king] Decebal. Later on, during the Roman Empire era, there were legions comprising quite many Jews. In fact we are

talking about a different than military presence, especially in the 15th, 16th centuries, peaking up in the 19th century. (...) Jews in Romania were awarded the Romanian citizenship starting in 1923 only, but they had sacrificed a lot on Romania's battlegrounds — the Independence War, the 1913 War and WWI. These are real contributions, not just to the country's economy, or its defence. (...) Jews and Germans were among the first to hail the birth of Greater Romania. Some not quite nice things followed in the development of anti-Semitism, some pogroms, but certainly the Jews had both a very splendid life and a life of sufferings in Romania. Even when they were gone, they kept Romania in their hearts and souls anytime they could," said Vainer. The presence of the Tartar community in Dobrogea is also quite old, said official of the Democratic Union of Turkish Muslim Tartars of Romania Amet Aledin, head of the Department for Interethnic Affairs.

He mentioned that on December 13, 1917, the Day of Tartar Ethnicity, the parliament of Crimean Tartars proclaimed the People's Republic of Crimea and approved a constitution for it. The Tartars who settled in Romania more than 800 years ago originated from Crimea.

"The Tartars were not completely barbarians, because they lived in a very important culture. (...) Religion to the Turkish Tartar community means a pillar of resistance in preserving our identity. It is religion that has saved our ethnic identity. Had we not had such peaceful existence in religious terms we would have lost ethically," said Aledin.

Chairman of the Hellenic Union of Romania Dragos Zisopol said drawing up a strategy should also take into account the cultural composition of the members of an organisation, pointing out that he teams up very well with his MP colleagues in Parliament who represent other ethnic minorities.

"I have always believed in the essence of education, and I would add verbal as well as non-verbal communication. I want to believe that we depend on culture to a very large extent. (...) I believe that in order to talk about inter-ethnicity we have to underscore that each of our organisations has a distinct cultural profile. Things are very clear: dialogue means interpersonal, intercultural and interfaith relations that can be extended to include many countries, companies. (...) All this entails interferences of different cultures. I believe that in the same context we can talk about the cultural profile of each ethnicity. (...) As far as I am concerned, culture is the spearhead of our existence and there is where a lot has to be done," said Zisopol.

He mentioned that faith has been the force of the Greek people. "Although they were forbidden the sign of the cross in history, Greeks always carried the sign of the cross with them. To the Greeks, dancing is like Our Father, and the fact that the sign of the cross has endured in the Meteora easier than somewhere else, the fact that Christianity never ceased to exist on Mount Athos, is because dancing has preserved the sign of the cross. In the embroidery of the vest of folk costumes there are alpha and omega featuring three times along with the sign of the cross. Nobody has known that the Greeks have always carried with them the sign of the cross. When they would spread out their arms and dance, as you can see Zorba the Greek do, the Greeks would trace the sign of the cross," said Zisopol.

Representative of Romania's Czechs and Slovaks in the Romanian Parliament MP Adrian Merka said Romania is an example right now of what Europe means.

"There are many wondering about how we can live free, how we can express ourselves and how come there is such great ethnic diversity in Romania. But we do not know what future has in stock for us. (...) Our fight right now is against time. The Romanian Government has supported us since the 1990s and I hope it will continue to do so. Ethnic stability makes national stability possible in Romania. (...) The ongoing assimilation is not something forced upon us; it is something for which we, mixed families, are responsible. We cannot stop the fight, but it depends on us, on you, for us to show something to the younger generations. I believe we can no longer show what a united family means, as it used to be," said Merka.

He also mentioned the first question he was asked by a journalist when he entered Parliament: has democracy done any good to ethnic minorities in Romania? "Has that helped us? I did not understand what the question meant in the first place. Now, if I try to break down in stages the history of Romania's Czech and Slovakian communities I would say the truth lies somewhere in between," said Merka.

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