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Negative Ecodomy in Romanian Politics and Religion: Anti-Muslim Attitudes in the Bucharest Mosque Scandal during the Summer of 2015

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Abstract: This paper focuses on a chronology of events presented by the Romanian media, especially newspapers with national coverage and impact like *Gândul* and *Adevărul*, between the first week of June to the first week of September 2015, when the issue of having a mosque erected in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, was intensely debated by intellectuals, politicians, and religious professionals. The debates were intensely heated from the onset of these events and most of them revealed that most of the participants were driven by anti-Muslim attitudes, xenophobia, and assertive nationalism, a complex of feelings that I called “negative ecodomy”. The concept of “negative ecodomy” presupposes an attempt to build a safe environment, in this case for Romanians in their own country, but the adjective “negative” was added to the the positive idea of “ecodomy” because these efforts to offer a safe context for Romanians were accompanied by the negativity of anti-Muslim, xenophobic, and nationalistic activities. This array of negative ecodomic attitudes were displayed by Romanians not only in online media but also in the street through protests and other similar actions in a country which has been a member of the European Union for almost a decade and was supposed to adhere to the European Union’s basic principles of multiculturalism and the free circulation of persons. The totality of these events show that Romanians are still rather far from accepting the European Union’s fundamental philosophy or perhaps these principles themselves should be reconsidered and reinterpreted in the context of the massive Middle Eastern and African immigration and the constant, if not increasing threat of Islamic terrorism.

Keywords: ecodomy; mosque; Muslim; Islam; Romania

1. Contextualizing the Scandal: the Role of Negative Ecodomy

10 June 2015 was not an ordinary day, at least not for Romanian politics. The day before, on 9 June 2015, the media kicked into high gear when it had been announced that the National Anti-Corruption Department was formally indicting Prime Minister Victor Ponta in a case related to money laundering activities which supposedly happened some years before [1]. Coincidentally or not, the next day, on 11 July 2015, Ponta paid a visit to the Military Hospital in Bucharest for a knee-related injury and the physicians there recommended that he undergo surgery [2], which he did days later in Turkey [3]. Between these two scandals, the former of Ponta's corruption and the latter of his knee surgery—which, in some quarters, was perceived as an attempt to flee legal responsibility mainly because on 15 June, when he was supposed to defend himself at the National Anti-Corruption Department, he was having his health restored surgically in Turkey, [4] and another scandal was about to break; this time, however, it was not about politics and law, but about politics and religion. Strangely or not, in both cases, money appears to have played a crucial role.

Thus, on 9 June and 11 June, Romanians found out that their Prime Minister was not only being accused of corruption but was also attempting to evade responsibility and/or solve his medical issues by going to Turkey when he should have visited the headquarters of the National Anti-Corruption Department. On June 10, they were informed that the very same Prime Minister—whose personal ethical standards had long been damaged beyond repair since his plagiarism scandal started on 18 June 2012, following the publication of a devastating analysis of his doctoral dissertation by Quirin Schiermeier in *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science* [5]—was involved in what was about to become another scandal with specifically religious overtones, which succeeded in putting to the test a wide spectrum of Romanian feelings ranging from blind adherence to Eastern Orthodoxy to violent nationalism and boastful, although rather untested patriotism.

Thus, on 10 June 2015—although some media, such as *b365.ro* announced the breaking news as early as 9 June [6]—it was heralded by *Adevărul* (“The Truth”), one of the most famous Romanian newspapers, that the largest mosque in Christian Europe was planned to be erected in Bucharest, the capital city of Romania, a huge project which was supposed to serve not only religious purposes, but also educational and cultural preoccupations in a building covering eleven thousand square meters donated by the Romanian Government to the country's rather small Muslim community in the previous month of May according to Decision no 372/2015 [7]. With an estimated value of 17.2 million RON (3.9 million EUR), the land is supposed to host “the largest mosque in a European capital city” according to mufti Iusuf Murat, who also declared that this government donation “speaks by itself about the ethnic respect and understanding [which exist] in Romania” [8]. In addition to the mosque, the land will also host an educational center with a scientific library, classrooms where the imams will teach the doctrines of Islam, and residential buildings with accommodation facilities for students as well as guests, all built with financial means provided by the Turkish government.

The official reason behind this megalomaniac project is the fact that the number of Muslims has doubled in Bucharest in the last few years now amounting to ten thousand individuals, half of which are foreign citizens: business persons, students, or spouses attending four small mosques in the capital city. It is here that Romanian secret services have defused some potentially harmful incidents related to terrorist activities, although in Dobrogea, the extreme South East of Romania where the vast majority of Muslims have lived traditionally since the thirteenth century [9], the potential for the escalation of such events is currently almost non-existent. The building project includes a center for the social assistance of economically vulnerable Muslims who are believed to be much more prone to radicalization and terrorism, although these social activities are meant to serve all those in need regardless of their religious convictions and affiliations. This is why mufti Murat appears convinced that this venue is most assuredly going to be a “realm of peace” offered as gift by the Romanian government to the Muslim community in Romania, which indicates “how much we mean to Romania” defined by Murat as “our country”. He also pointed out that the support that was offered to the Romanian Muslim minority is indicative of Romania’s democracy [10].

In an attempt to defuse possible terrorism charges, mufti Murat underlined that the actual building of the mosque and its correspondent facilities was nothing new for Romania given that a similar project was completed over a century ago when Carol I, the first king of Romania, inaugurated on 31 May 1913, what was then the largest mosque in Romania which was built in the city of Constanța on the shore of the Black Sea. Officially named after its benefactor, the “Carol I” mosque demonstrated the gratitude of the Romanian Muslim community for the German-born king of Romania who made such a generous gift to the Muslim community on behalf of all Romanians. It is obvious from mufti Murat’s explanation that the current situation is almost identical to its historical counterpart at least in the gratitude of the Muslim community as well as in its peaceful intentions, so any possible charge or accusation whatsoever should be considered invalid from the onset. In line with this argument, he also stressed that the library will hold “scientific and religious books, written in many languages” but the most significant aspect of these academic sources will be, according to mufti Murat, the fact that they are going to be “without interpretations”. Leaving aside Murat’s hermeneutical comment about the future books in the mosque’s library which was clearly intended to counter possible accusations of radicalization and terrorism, he did stress that the mosque was intended to function as an authorized religious institution. This way, he continued, young people are not going to be drawn to “unauthorized mosques, where radical propaganda is being taught by various Muslims schooled in fundamentalist institutions from abroad”. In the future Bucharest mosque, the young generation of Muslims—Murat contends—will have the chance “to learn the teachings of the Quran correctly”. While the meaning of this affirmation is not entirely clear, the mufti explained that Islam must not be translated as proselytism, hence his undeterred conviction that “Islam is a religion of peace” [11].

Obviously or less so, the mufti’s belief in the peaceful character of Islam was not shared by most Romanians who commented on the news online, a fact which led to virulent reactions, comments of all sorts, and quite a number of newspaper articles which were decisively against the building of the Bucharest mosque. Although this breaking news was first announced on June 9 by *B365.ro*, this site was unable to draw the public’s attention on the mosque project. With only eight online comments, *B365.ro* failed to appeal to the public despite the decent quality of the journalists’ work in putting

together informative material. The next day, however, the situation changed dramatically, so when *Adevărul* published the news online, almost two hundred interventions flooded its comments section; hence 10 June as *the* date for the outbreak of the scandal. With a huge majority of negative comments, *Adevărul* became a crucial instrument for what was to become the summer anti-mosque campaign, an online phenomenon which displayed the Romanians' anti-Muslim feelings in a general context dominated by the national problem of the Prime Minister's chronic lack of credibility as well as by the international dilemma of what was about to turn into the "Syrian migrants crisis", although the phenomenon was neither altogether Syrian, nor was it entirely related to migrants since many people trying to enter Europe were refugees from other parts of the Middle and Far East as well as from Western, Northern, and Eastern Africa [12].

This very heated political, economical, and social environment became the perfect crucible for the Romanian mosque scandal to the point that the national media turned into a genuine pot in which most ingredients were extremely hot while moderate and even supporting comments were not only very few but also almost impossible to detect. Consequently, when on 10 June 2015, *Adevărul* managed to store almost 200 interventions, most of which were negative and anti-Muslim, in its comment section and was joined the same day by *Gândul* ("The Thought"), another mainstream Romanian newspaper, which did an equally effective job in displaying over 100 comments with a winning majority of anti-Muslim stanzas, the media pot had piled up just enough hot potatoes for an overheated summer [13].

The anti-Muslim campaign hosted by two notoriously influential Romanian newspapers like *Adevărul* and *Gândul* primarily in the sections dedicated to readers' comments is part of a larger frame of thought which has been dominated by the Romanian [Eastern] Orthodox Church. Consciously or unconsciously, the vast majority of Romanians have been drawn into an antagonistic pattern of thinking for over a century and especially during the decades between the two world wars, when many Romanian intellectuals associated themselves with the Legionary Movement in attempting spiritually to reform Romanian society. In so doing, they not only promoted a radicalized interpretation of Eastern Orthodoxy as applied to the specifically Romanian context, but they also fostered a philosophy which was both nationalistic and xenophobic. Thus, Romanians were taught that the prosperity of the nation could be guaranteed only if foreigners are excluded from leading political, social, and economic positions (and, even better, expelled from the country; hence the anti-Semitic, anti-Hungarian, and anti-Gypsy interwar discourses of intellectuals like Miron Cristea, Nicolae Iorga, and Simion Mehedinți) while Romanians are promoted to the front seats because of their racial superiority and even ontological features (an idea which one can find even in Dumitru Stăniloae, one of Romanian's foremost theologians). These attempts to glorify Romanians while downplaying foreigners can be defined—to use just one phrase—as "negative ecodomy" [14]. "Ecodomy" because—in light of Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz's definition of ecodomy as "any constructive process" [15]—they represent a wide range of efforts to provide Romanians with a supposedly better and safer environment in their own country and "negative" because they focus on belittling anything which is not Romanian by ancestry, race, ethnicity, and culture, to pinpoint only a few such domains of interest.

In other words, it is a Romanian adaptation of a "conspiracy theory" kind of philosophy that blames everybody, with the exception of Romanians, for the misfortunes of the country regardless of the specific nature of these problematic issues. This negative ecodomy, so particular to Romanians for the last hundred of years, is not exclusively a joint effort to launch accusations against other

people/nations but also a constant attempt to exceedingly praise some “positive” features believed to be specific to the Romanian people/nation. This particular ideology has been perfected by Romanian Orthodox theologians not only before and during the Second World War, but also during Communist times and even to this day. Dangerously combining Eastern Orthodox spirituality, militant nationalism, and ethnic enthusiasm [16], leading representatives of the Romanian Orthodox Church including Teoctist, the former Patriarch, and Dumitru Stăniloae, the theologian *par excellence* of the Romanian Orthodox Church, as well as a significant number of intellectuals like Simion Mehedinți and Nicolae Iorga made significant steps towards convincing Romanians that they were so very special that they should be perpetually proud of themselves for any positive achievement while remaining simultaneously vigilant as well as critical of other nations, especially Hungarians, Jews, and Gypsies, for any negative developments [17].

Thus, their “negative ecomomy” focuses on three distinct aspects: first, the exceptional character of the Romanian Orthodox Church which deserves a Cathedral for the Salvation of the Nation (a megalomaniac project which is currently under development), the special nature of the Romanian nation which must be praised for its Dacian-Thracian-Latin origin, and third, the exquisite flavor of the Romanian culture, including ecclesiastical achievements, which must be glorified for its nationalistic spirit [18]. Quite obviously and in addition to its traditional stand against Jews, Hungarians, and Gypsies, this threefold negative ecomomy which has defined Romanian mentality in the last century succeeded in listing a new nation, as well as a new religion among “the hated”: Turkish people and especially their religion, namely Islam.

Although Romanians and Turks have shared a common history since the mid thirteenth century [19], the former seem to have lost interest in the latter following the War of Independence, fought by Romanians against the Ottoman Empire in 1877. The situation changed suddenly on 10 June 2015, when the Romanian government decided to donate a large piece of land for the construction of “the largest mosque in Europe”, as it was described in the first press releases, a project sponsored by the Turkish government. After almost three weeks of apparent calm, this breaking news ignited an impressive summer media storm that, interestingly enough, did not focus on Turkish people but rather on their Islamic religion. Coupled with the “Syrian migrants crisis”, Romanians started to feel threatened by Muslims in general, so the summer media storm turned into an anti-Muslim campaign.

2. Igniting the Scandal: Academics, Politicians, and Religious Leaders

On 30 June 2015, a very brief article was published in *Gândul*, with an update the very next day, on 1 July, when most of its 223 reader comments were posted online. While the article appears to be neutral, it does contain the opinions of two noted scholars on the issue of the Muslim mosque which was planned to be erected in Bucharest: the first was Neagu Djuvara, an old historian and reputed academician, while the second was Radu Preda, a young theologian from the Faculty of Orthodox Theology within Babeș-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca and director of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile. Although both focused on denying the validity of building a mosque in Bucharest, Djuvara’s argument was anchored in the past while Preda’s observation was rooted in the present. Thus, Djuvara is reported to have pointed out that “it [wa]s absolutely inadmissible for a country [like Romania] which fought for centuries against the

establishment of Muslim religious entities” on its territory should become a “center for the dissemination of Islam”. To strengthen his argument, Djuvara emphasized that contemplating such a possibility was “absolutely inconceivable”. As far as Preda was concerned, he came up with a question: “if this mosque is part of a geopolitical plan, I would have some question marks. The money is given by Turkey, a country which is declaratively a lay state. This money must be the bearer of a certain message. Hence a legitimate question: what message can be delivered by such a project?” [20].

The comments section registered 223 interventions from various readers, most of which wrote inflammatory comments against Islam and Islam-related terrorist activities. While the comments are understandable in the light of the recent escalation of Islamic terrorism, the opinions provided by the two Romanian scholars are not exactly what one may expect from contemporary European intellectuals. Openness to multiculturalism and the freedom of conscience, both fundamental characteristics of the contemporary European spirit, are replaced by suspicion and conspiracy theories, a common feature of Romania’s antagonistic negative ecomomy. Thus, Djuvara resorts to the historical past when the three Romanian states—not Romanian as a whole, as he alleges, because Romania has been one state only since 1859 when Moldova and Vallachia were united, and they since 1918 when they were joined by Transylvania—were attacked by the Ottoman Empire, hence blaming the Turks for Romania’s misfortunes, while Preda asks, rather rhetorically, whether the Turkish funding of the mosque is the bearer of a message, thus indirectly as well as suspiciously pointing in the direction of a maleficent plan against Romania. Both Djuvara and Preda picture an image of possible perils that threaten the currently and relatively safe environment in which Romanians live these days. These two opinions were enough to ignite a furnace of fiery comments in which 223 people got scandalized over the imminent threat of Islam and its Muslim proponents, especially with regard to the safety of the Romanian realm.

Less than a week later, on 5 July 2015, with an update on 6 July 2015, *Gândul* published an article that reflected the very same Romanian leaning towards negative ecomomy. Focusing on Traian Băsescu, the former president of Romanian and a most outspoken person famous for his politically incorrect statements, the article highlights what Băsescu called “the highest risk” when referring to accommodating Muslim students in Romania. In order to strengthen his argument, Băsescu launched an attack against Victor Ponta who was recovering after his knee surgery in Turkey; thus, the former president insisted on the Prime Minister’s inability to think straight while he was reportedly hiding in Istanbul. Băsescu accused Ponta of taking the “mosque decision” when he was still “limb” which alluded to the fact that the Prime Minister “had a surgery to the head, not the knee”. In line with the conspiracy theory and the permanent foreign threat against Romanians promoted by the philosophy of negative ecomomy, Băsescu labelled Ponta’s decisions as “reckless if not even anti-national”. In an attempt to add more weight to his theory, Băsescu mentioned that Ponta’s decision—which was after all a decision of the whole Romanian government irrespective of the Prime Minister’s influence—should have been discussed by the Supreme Council of National Defence [21].

Băsescu’s fears were shared by most of the 123 online commentators as well as by the majority of the 127 readers who posted comments on mufti Murat’s press conference, held the very same day and intended to counter Băsescu’s intervention. Published by *Gândul* in the same 6 July 2015, online edition, the mufti’s arguments focused on stressing the potential of the mosque to unite the whole Muslim community in Romania, including possible radical individuals and even groups. The mosque

project is thus described by Murat as “beneficial to Romanian society” mostly because it would serve as a key factor in centralizing Muslim religious authority. In addition to showing that Bănescu himself discussed the possibility of building a mosque in Bucharest during his official visits in Turkey while he was still the president of Romania—an idea he appears not to have opposed back then—Murat dramatically changed some basic information about the mosque which, in contrast with the original description he himself had released to the media on 9/10 June 2015, was no longer presented as being “the largest in Europe”—another European city, which he did not name, would be the host for such a project—and neither was it advertised as an institution of learning meant to accommodate “students”; only “children” were now mentioned as the beneficiaries of Muslim teaching in the vicinity of the mosque, while the initial project which was supposed to be a teaching center suddenly shrank to merely “two classrooms”. The Turkish investment though would match the Romanian land gift as “about 3 million euro” was believed to be the highest cost for the building of the Muslim mosque as well as for its adjacent teaching and social center, a sum that is, in theory, similar to the 3.9 million euro worth of the land [22].

Despite mufti Murat’s reassuring words that Romania was never going to become an “Islamic center” [23], the Romanians who were following the online stream of news about the mosque project were far from being convinced by his press conference published by *Gândul* on 6 July 2015. Thus, in an online questionnaire initiated and published by *Gândul* on 7 July 2015, with an update on 8 July 2015, a rather impressive number of 12,681 readers decided to go online and provide a “yes” or “no” to a simple question: “Do you agree with the project of building the largest European mosque in Bucharest?” While the question was a bit misleading from the start since only a couple of days ago mufti Murat had clarified that the mosque was not to be the largest in Europe, the Romanians’ anti-Muslim feeling seems to have already kicked in, irrespective of the actual dimensions of the future mosque; to be sure, a staggering 91.72% of the readers (11,631 respondents) slammed a decisively and categorically clear “no” against the mosque project [24], thus confirming their indebtedness to the philosophy of negative ecomomy with its xenophobic and anti-Muslim feelings which seems to have become part of Romania’s national cultural heritage. 8 July 2015 was not yet over when Romanians were joined in their fears by the Romanian Jewish community which voiced its reluctance towards the mosque project through the declarations of Aurel Vainer, the president of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania and a member of the Romanian Parliament. Following the politically correct assessment that Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania has “very good ties” with the Muslim community through both the Constanța Muftiat and the Turkish deputies in the Romanian Parliament, Vainer still expressed his conviction that “having the largest [European] mosque [in Romania]” is not currently “auspicious” [25].

After the rather hot day of 8 July 2015, when *Gândul* not only published the online questionnaire with almost 92% of the readers voted against the building of the mosque, but also voiced the official concern of the Romanian Jews regarding the Islamic initiative, mufti Murat felt compelled to intervene in an attempt to calm these manifestations of negative ecomomy. On 9 July 2015, he revealed his incapacity to understand why a “peaceful project” turned into a “political quarrel” and in so doing he must have also pointed to Bănescu’s 5 July position when he made it clear that the mosque project presents a high risk for national security. Dwelling again on the necessity to build an authorized mosque with a social and teaching center in Bucharest in order to unify the 90,000 members of the

Romanian Muslim community as well as to reduce the influence of the 17 unauthorized mosques extant in Bucharest, Murat expressed his confidence that the mosque itself would assist the other officially recognized mosque in Bucharest as well as the 78 mosques extant mainly in Romania's South-East Dobrogea in joining forces to prove that Romanian Muslims are very serious about their patriotic duty regarding the country of Romania. Thus, he pointed out that Romanian Muslims contributed to the salvation of Romania from Ottoman rule in the 1877 Independence War as well as in the two world wars [26].

This affirmation prompted the journalists from *Gândul* to play with words in the sense that they put together the specifically Eastern Orthodox Romanian and Christian “Cathedral for the Salvation of the Nation”—advertised by the Romanian Orthodox Church as a decisive factor for the religious, social, and economic prosperity of the Romanian nation and estimated to cost about 100 million euro [27] and the Muslim Bucharest mosque project which was dubbed the “Mosque for the Salvation of the Nation” [28]. Murat's clarifications continued along the line of the idea of security/salvation because, according to him, the Bucharest mosque was meant to contribute “to the benefit of the [Romanian] citizen(s), of those living in Bucharest”. Faced with a rather long list of accusations about possible terrorist acts presumed to be concocted in the future Bucharest mosque, Murat said that he would personally “withdraw from the project” if such allegations were proved. He also indicated that the Romanian Muslim community “has not yet formally acquired the land”. Moreover, given the obvious public as well as the more or less evident political opposition to the project, Murat went as far as to acknowledge that the government would no longer give them the land for the mosque. Expressing his disappointment in Băsescu's bellicose declarations, Murat revealed that the Turkish state had already donated a piece of land for a Romanian Orthodox cemetery in Istanbul and that the Romanian Turks “consider themselves more nationalistic and more loyal to Romanian national interests than Romanians themselves” [29], a statement which neither calmed the already inflamed Romanian spirit(s) nor did anything to hinder the wave of ecodomically negative interventions in the Romanian online media.

Mufti Murat's dismay regarding Băsescu and his anti-Muslim campaign did not go unnoticed by the former president. Thus, later on 9 July 2015, Băsescu wrote a short but virulent attack against the mosque project on his Facebook page, which he addressed to Prime Minister Ponta and mufti Iusuf Murat whom he called “two reckless individuals”. Going against Murat's previous clarifications delivered to the media just hours before, Băsescu reiterated the idea that the mosque project would end with the building of the “largest mosque in Europe” and a corresponding “university hosting 6000 students selected from the whole Arab world” [30]. Then he invited his readers to contemplate the possibility of a gloomy scenario in which a “young [Muslim] believer blows himself up in the name of Allah” or even of “young Romanians whose failure in their personal lives made them easy converts to Islam; people who could be then sent to training camps in Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan only to return to Europe in order to bring us the benefactions of the Islamic State”. Then, personalizing his attack, Băsescu asked Ponta if he was sure that his surgery had been performed “to the leg/knee, and not the head” and told Murat “to zip it, because the whole [mosque affair] is not about [ethnic] minorities”. He ended his anti-Muslim rant by recommending that [Recep] Erdoğan—former Prime Minister and current President of Turkey—should preach Islam in Turkey, not in an [Eastern] Orthodox Christian country [Romania] [31].

3. Feeding the Scandal: The Impossibility of Finding a Consensus

Bănescu's violent as well as rude demonstration of negative ecomomy on his Facebook page did not appease the spirits; on the contrary, it provoked responses from various intellectuals who accused him of being intentionally slippery and cunning while, at the same time, creating a context in which finding a consensus about the mosque project became almost impossible. In doing so, however, they did not intend to quench Bănescu's adherence to the Romanian philosophy of negative ecomomy because they only criticized his outspoken impertinence. Thus, the few intellectuals—professional journalists included—who attacked Bănescu for his discourtesy tended to defend his political insights and thus contributed to the dissemination of Romanian negative ecomomy by promoting anti-Muslim feelings of social unrest and the possibility of catastrophic terrorist attacks in the more or less distant future.

Thus, in an article published on 10 July 2015, in *Gândul*, Lelia Munteanu expresses her belief that there is a kernel of truth in Bănescu's words, namely that there is no reason, either confessionally or rationally, to have a large mosque erected in Bucharest, especially not if supported financially by the Turkish state which, in Munteanu's opinion, has geo-strategical plans in Europe and consequently in Romania. Munteanu also criticizes the idea that the mosque project is a "parity" initiative given that the Romanian Orthodox Church was given land for a cemetery in Istanbul. For Munteanu, however, there is no parity here since Romanians are not going to build a huge Eastern Orthodox Cathedral in Istanbul while the Turks will erect a large synagogue in Bucharest. The issue of whether the mosque is going to be larger or less so is still a dispute issue following the information provided by mufti Murat on 9 July 2015, but it is quite clear that the aspect of the actual dimensions of the mosque remains problematic [32].

An even more problematic issue is the fact that the Turkish state, through the voice of Erdoğan, is very determined to build mosques all over the world. Thus, many other states beside Romania were approached in the recent past with the offer to have mosques built on their territories, but all have refused. Thus, Hungary, Cuba, and Greece have so far refused the Turkish offer while others—like Germany, the United Kingdom, Somalia, Russia, Albania, and the Palestinian Territories—accepted it. At the same time, Munteanu writes, Erdoğan has serious competitors in the quest for building mosques all over the world: the king of Saudi Arabia and the emir of Qatar, both highly interested in promoting mosque project on all continents. For Munteanu, the Islamic religion is much too aggressive in this respect and Romania seems to have fallen for rather weak political arguments. In Munteanu's view, Romanian politicians are ignorant when it comes to understanding the dynamics of Islam and especially of its radical wing(s): neither the former president (Traian Bănescu), nor the current one (Klaus Iohannis), nor the prime minister (Victor Ponta) appear to be aware of the inherent dangers posed by Islam. The worse situation, however, is given by the fact that, according to Munteanu, not even mufti Murat is capable of controlling his community of Muslim believers in Romania which is "a piece of news bordering catastrophe" [33]. In other words and very much in line with the philosophy of negative ecomomy, Munteanu is convinced that Romanians are not safe in their own country and that the mosque project represents a real threat to the lives of Romanian citizens.

A similar approach is taken by Radu Carp, professor of political science at the University of Bucharest, in an article published by *Adevărul* in its online edition and then republished on *Știri pe surse.ro* [34], also on 10 July 2015. In Carp's view, the mosque project is motivated politically and

theologically; a project which is rooted in the history of political relationships between an increasingly confessionalized Turkey and an increasingly secularized Europe. Like Munteanu, Carp notices that Erdoğan has a clear strategy for the Turkish diaspora, which is perhaps most visible in Germany, and especially in the city of Köln, where a huge mosque is going to be erected in the very near future. The result of the positive vote of Köln's city council in 2008 but opposed by Merkel's political party, the mosque, which has not yet been completed, is going to be an immense building already aiming at the official shift of the city's religious gravity center from Christianity to Islam, Carp believes. Financially supported by the Turkish state, the Köln mosque resembles the one that is planned to be erected in Bucharest, which leads Carp to believe that a similar shift from Christianity to Islam was envisioned by the Turkish state when Erdoğan offered to provide the financial means for the building of the mosque. As far as Carp is concerned, the Bucharest mosque project is meant to be the Islamic equivalent of the Eastern Orthodox Cathedral for the Salvation of the Nation—a project not without its own problems—while its final purpose is to symbolically shift the religious center of the city of Bucharest [35].

Carp also expressed his concern regarding the way the mosque project was discussed in Romania. While other states like Germany, Austria, and Switzerland took precautionary legislative measures against the possible radicalization of Islamic believers on their territories, Romania's representatives seem to have reacted in totally different "paradigms". Thus, Prime Minister Ponta displayed a favorable attitude, perhaps a little bit too favorable for Carp's taste, mufti Murat was conspicuously conciliatory, the organizations monitoring anti-semitism rejected the project from the start, while former president Bănescu was both choleric and irrational in discussing the mosque project. In light of these reactions, Romanian citizens seem to be the only ones left in a rather dangerous situation, especially because the Turkish state—and Islam, by extension—managed to implement in Romania what it was incapable of doing in Western Europe. This particular situation, which made the approval of the Bucharest mosque project possible in Romania—albeit impossible in Western Europe—without corresponding precautionary legislative measures, leads to the active support of religious proselytism, Carp believes [36], an attitude which places him among the contemporary promoters of Romanian negative ecomomy.

Within the same day of 10 July 2015, another sample of negative ecomomy was offered by Andrei Cornea, a Romanian philosopher and classicist of Jewish stock and currently professor of classical philology at the University of Bucharest, in an interview for *Gândul*, a piece which was updated on 11 July 2015. Cornea is convinced that the mosque project will end up being an Islamic academy, where Muslim students from all over the world will study the theology of Islam, a prospect about which Cornea says that he does not understand why it should happen in Bucharest. He is also critical of the fact that the whole project is going to be financed by the Turkish state which these days seems to be engaged in a "anti-liberal politics against laicity" under what Cornea considers the "autocrat leadership" of Erdoğan [37]. The Romanian philosopher believes that Turkey has a coherent enough plan to regain some of the influence it lost with the dismantling of the Ottoman empire, so fears about the possible radicalization of Muslim believers in Romania is entirely justified. As a perfect example of a negative ecomodist, Cornea doubts that Romanians would like such a possibility that normally comes with a wave of Muslim immigrants, so he calls into question the reasons of the Prime Minister when he approved the mosque project. "I do not want to be seen as a chauvinist", Cornea stresses, "but I would like to understand why" [37]. These words are evidently addressed to Ponta, who was severely

criticized by Cornea in an article he had published on 6 July 2015, in *Revista 22*, about the possibility of Bucharest turning into a center of Islamic influence [38].

Two days after Cornea's interview, Prime Minister Ponta provided the media with clarifications on 13 July 2015 in a series of declarations that seemed not only defensive but also defeatist. Thus, in his defense, Ponta explained that he did nothing but to implement an initiative that had been discussed by the former president Băsescu. At the same time, and it was in this that he sounded defeatist, he also underlined that the agreement between Romania and Turkey concerning the mosque project "may fall" [39]. Whether this is going to happen or not remains to be seen; Ponta, however, continued to defend the project by saying that it had been discussed not only with the former president Băsescu but also with the acting president Iohannis which indicates that, at least in his opinion, the agreement between Romania and Turkey is "beneficial for Romania" [40]. The Prime Minister's assessment seems to be shared, at least to some extent, by Ioana Ene Dogloiu, senior editor at *Ziare.com*, which published a brief article of hers on 15 July 2015. Going against the huge negative economic wave in the Romanian media, Ene Dogloiu somewhat innocently asserts that "no religion teaches us to kill; only false prophets do so", but she does fairly admit—from an obvious sociological perspective—that "being a Christian is not automatically a virtue while being a Muslim is not automatically a crime". She then refers to the exasperation of imam Selcin Ali, a Romanian Muslim citizen from Dobrogea, who is reported to have said: "What have we [the Romanian Muslims] done wrong that you are mocking us so bitterly for those 11,000 square meters of land? Do we not deserve anything at all? Give me, in the name of God, Allah, one example, just one example of a Turk or Tatar from Romania who has ever threatened national security. About some Romanians, however, we cannot say the same thing". Then Ene Dogloiu moves her explanation more into the realm of spirituality when she concedes that "being truly faithful to a set of beliefs, regardless of the faith one shares, represents the premise for a proper behavior". This is why, Ene Dogloiu writes, playing the "nationalist-Orthodox card" which stimulates fear does not lead to "profitable political results". Hence, it is her conviction that the Muslim community in Romania should be allowed to have a mosque and a teaching institution affiliated to it because it is the job as well as the duty of the Romania's secret services to make sure that nothing dangerous is going to happen in that mosque so that the safety of Romanian citizens may remain intact [41].

As far as Romania's secret services are concerned, George Maior, the former director of the Romanian Intelligence Service gave an interview on 19 July 2015, during which he was asked about the possible dangers of building a mosque in Bucharest. Maior's responses were not alarmist and neither were they representative of negative economic tendencies. Thus, contrary to the declarations provided to the media by Băsescu, Maior said that, in his opinion, the number of Muslim migrants coming to Romania will remain the same irrespective of whether a mosque is going to be erected in Bucharest or not. Should it happen to increase, it will not do so dramatically. Maior also pointed out that if anyone really wants to devise and proliferate perilous activities on Romanian soil, including radical Muslim propaganda, such acts will happen anyway in obscure, concealed places. He also expressed his belief that the mosque project, if dealt with properly, will most likely pose no danger to Romania's national security [42].

Maior's reassuring attitude did not manage to prevent further manifestations of negative economy in the country. To give just one example, the very next day on 20 July 2015, a protest was organized in

Bucharest against the mosque project. Attended mostly by young people bearing national flags and waving placards with slogans ranging from “We do not want a mega-mosque in Bucharest” to “Ponta, a Turkish wannabe, plagiarizer and corrupt”, the rather small march of about one hundred persons included representatives of the Noua Dreaptă—or the New Right (Wing), a legionnaire and nazi organization—and an Eastern Orthodox priest, all shouting that “the Romanian nation is not a Turkish pashalic” and “Romania is an Orthodox Country” [43]. Despite the protest and further criticism against the notion of “reciprocity”—which is based on the fact that the Romanian state receives a compensation in Istanbul for the land given to the Muslim community in Bucharest [44]—the protocol for the building of the Bucharest mosque was eventually signed on 28 June 2015, by Victor Opaschi, secretary of state at the State Secretary for Religious Denominations, and mufti Iusuf Murat, the representative of the Muslim Muftiat of Romania [45]. The next day, on 29 July 2015, the Patriarchy of the Romanian Orthodox Church officially announced that it had no objections against the mosque project, but it demanded that a corresponding compensation, namely a piece of land, should be given to the Romanian Orthodox Church for a similar construction [46]. The non-combative reaction of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy was perceived as nothing less than a “blessing” of the mosque project [47], which on the same day of 29 July 2015, was criticized once again although this time by the representatives of the Secular-Humanistic Association of Romania whose negative economic attitude put an end to one of the hottest months of July ever without a consensus having been reached in connection with the mosque project.

4. Escalating the Scandal: From Theory to Practice in Negative Ecodomy

The month of August offered similar critical as well as opposing attitudes to the mosque project with evident manifestations of negative ecodomy which were no longer left at the level of theoretical insights but were eventually turned into practice. Thus, on 5 August 2015, Anca Manolescu published an article on *Contributors.ro*, a site dedicated virtually to everything where various intellectuals were invited to share their thoughts on various hot issues happening in Romanian society. The mosque project, therefore, could not be neglected, so it was tackled by Manolescu, who does not criticize the project itself as much as the “scale (dimensions)” of the mosque. Manolescu underlines that in a liberal Europe principles like religious and cultural pluralism, respect for minorities and free circulation of people should guarantee the freedom to pursue the mosque project. However, the mega-dimensions of the mosque, the lack of any public consultation, and the fact that the project is supported financially by the Turkish state are all aspects, Manolescu believes, that attracted a high degree of criticism. Her critical views were directed primarily against Prime Minister Ponta and his political party, hence her conclusion that the Bucharest mosque is nothing less than a “state and party mosque” [48].

A week later, on 13 August 2015, an article in *Gândul* noticed that the Bucharest mosque scandal made it into American media, especially in *Washington Times*, which mentioned that the main concern of most Romanians was the fact that the mosque project can turn anytime into a terrorist nest. No wonder that such a view came from Tudor Ionescu, the leader of Noua Dreaptă—The New Right (Wing)—an organization that promotes xenophobic and Nazi ideologies. Mufti Murat is portrayed as promoter of the counter opinion, that which supports that idea that the mosque project is going to be fully beneficial for Romania, hence he was quoted as saying: “I thought about the good of my country

(Romania)”. The Turkish state led by Erdoğan could not have been left aside, so it is mentioned as promotor of Islamic projects throughout Europe, the largest of them being currently erected in Tirana, Albania, where the huge sum of 33 million U.S. dollars is being invested in what may well be the largest Islamic center on the European continent [49]. The article in *Washington Times* was written by the Romanian Vlad Odobescu who indicated that “in the last decade, Romanians appear to be more open to embracing their Eastern heritage: fast-food kebab vendors and Turkish fine dining are now common in the center of Bucharest. Turkish soap operas and music are popular too” [50] (an opinion which could be accepted if other Europeans and their countries were included in his description; for instance, Germany, where key cities like Köln and München can be portrayed within similar lines with “fast food kebab vendors and Turkish fine dining” restaurants being visible in more than one place throughout their downtown areas).

Even if the official position of the Romanian Orthodox Church was favorable to the mosque project, it appears that at least some of its high clergy were not so happy with the Muslim prospect. Thus, Ambrose, the Eastern Orthodox Bishop of Giurgiu in Romania’s southern region, who was visiting the famous Putna Monastery, located in the extreme north of the country, where he conducted the Holy Liturgy, is quoted by *Gândul* on 16 August 2015, as having said that “a mosque just cannot be erected in the country of the Voivodes”, an obvious reference to Medieval warlords and princes like Stephen the Great in Moldova or Vlad the Impaler in Vallachia who fought the Ottoman Turks in the 15th century and were used by 20th century nationalistic and Communist propaganda as representatives of Romanian Eastern Orthodox bravery, sacrifice, and patriotic fervor. Bishop Ambrose is also reported to have said that “some are weak in the knee”—a reference to Prime Minister Ponta’s knee surgery—but “we hope that we are not going to be weak in the mind”. Ambrose’s negative ecdomy is evident in his description of “mind” as “the spirit of our Romanian nation” [51], a catchphrase used by Eastern Orthodox rhetoric to instill the idea that Romanians were born Eastern Orthodox Christians ([52], pp. 97–98).

This type of nationalistic rhetoric informed by reference to Romanian Eastern Orthodoxy surfaced again on 23 August 2015, in an article written by Ionuț Cojocaru, lecturer in history at a private university in Bucharest, who voiced his doubts about the legitimacy of the mosque project for a[n] “[Eastern Orthodox] Christian state” like Romania. Highly critical of Erdoğan’s foreign policy of active promotion of confessionally militant Islam, Cojocaru is convinced that the Bucharest mosque is “just a pinpoint on Erdoğan’s map” which already includes 17 unauthorized mosques in Bucharest. At the very end of the article, Cojocaru exhibits his skepticism about mufti Murat’s plan to convince the Muslim believers currently members of these 17 unauthorized mosques to join the large authorized mosque financed by the Turkish state [53].

Two days later, on 25 August 2015, this rhetoric of negative ecdomy was put into practice. Thus, *Adevărul* informed his readers in an article written by Cristiana Răduță that a citizen of Bucharest “defiled” the land of the future mosque by interring there the carcass of a pig that he had bought from a supermarket. The anti-Muslim activist is Cătălin Berenghi, the owner of Krishna Caffè, which by the way has nothing to do with the Hindu religion but tragically, in a funny way, with Eastern Orthodoxy. Berenghi told the media that Muslim customs forbade the building of a mosque on a land defiled by pigs or pork carcasses; consequently, in addition to burying the carcass there he also bought seven piglets that were released on the mosque’s land. Seven of the piglets were painted in red, yellow, and blue (a reference to the Romanian flag), while two were dyed in pink (possibly a hit to homosexuals)

as they represented “the traitors of the country”. Berenghi also threatened to continue his actions on the mosque’s land by preparing a barbecue there and ordering a whole truck with pork chops to be scattered all over the place on the mosque’s land. He valiantly declared that, if necessary, he is determined to fight them—the Romanian Muslims and/or the Romanian government—for the next 30 years [54]. Later that day, mufti Murat announced that despite Berenghi’s efforts to defile the mosque land with pigs and pork carcasses, the respective lot can always be spiritually cleansed through a specific religious service which renders Berenghi’s gesture futile although it remains highly offensive [55].

On 26 August 2015, two religious reactions followed. The first came from imam Selcin Ali, presented in *Adevărul* as the leader of the “sole Muslim village in Romania” who promised to pray for his neighbors irrespective of their views, which purposefully included Berenghi with his anti-Muslim actions and his pork-related protests [56]. The second religious reaction was that of the Romanian Orthodox Patriarchy which demanded “official explanations” regarding “the necessity, dimensions, purpose, and impact of the new Bucharest mosque for the proper information of Eastern Orthodox Christian believers”, which most likely included the same bellicose Berenghi [57]. It should be noted here that Berenghi was not specifically mentioned in either of the two religious reactions delivered to the media by imam Ali or the Orthodox Patriarchy while both could have made implicit reference to him and his actions.

The day of 26 August 2015 was not over yet as further developments were about occur. Thus, while one cannot say for sure that Berenghi felt targeted by the religious positions of mufti Murat, imam Ali, and the Orthodox Patriarchy, what is definitely sure is that he decided to act again in connection with the mosque project, and he did so shortly after the Muslim and Eastern Orthodox reactions reached the media. In a tragically hilarious intervention, Berenghi admitted that “they” (the Muslims, or more exactly, mufti Murat and imam Ali) scored a point in this “match” between himself and them, so that the score is now equal (“1-1” as Berenghi pointed out), but vowed never to stop his actions until the mosque project is given up. Moreover, he said he would demand to have official meetings with “representatives of the Romanian Intelligence Service, with Patriarch Daniel, but also with the former president of Romania, Traian Băsescu”. He also mentioned about the possibility of him initiating various talks “at the highest level” and “in various embassies”. Berenghi swiftly mentioned that he has nothing against the Muslim world but, to quote him, “why should we light a fire on our heads?” His negative economic rave included further warnings as he threatened not only “to sacrifice pigs on the mosque’s land” but also “to spread [pork] lard on the asphalt and build a catapult to throw pork chops on the construction site of the mosque” [58]. The Romanian Patriarchy did not hesitate to officially condemn Berenghi’s actions in a declaration which was characterized by the media as “slippery”—most likely a reference to Berenghi’s previous threat to spread [pork] lard on the asphalt—because the tone was not vehement against Berenghi and perhaps too conciliatory when it mentioned “social peace” as the final goal of all religious denominations, including Eastern Orthodoxy and Islam [59].

A much more categorical response was released to online media by Eugen Tănăsescu, a priest born, raised, and educated in Dobrogea, the traditional home of Romanian Muslims. Far from exhibiting feelings of negative economy, Tănăsescu strangely and decisively went against the public perception that the Muslim project represented a serious threat to Romanians in an article published by *Adevărul* on 26 August 2015. Thus, Tănăsescu started by pointing out that there was going to be no “mega-mosque” in Romania while believers in the conspiracy theory focusing on Muslim radicalization and terrorism

in Romania were avid promoters of nothing less than “mega-hysteria”, “mega-stupidity”, and “mega-ignorance” in matters pertaining to the Islamic religion. A native of Dobrogea and a pertinent connoisseur of Romanian Muslims, Tănăsescu underlined that “the fear of terrorism blinded the [Romanian] nation” which in turn led to “inept ideas” like that of Berenghi who had buried a pork carcass on the mosque’s land. Tănăsescu called Berenghi “a Romanian legionnaire [promoter of Nazi ideology] who waisted his money on pigs” and urged Romanians to calm down because nobody is going to Islamize them by force. At the end of his online intervention, Tănăsescu concluded with sadness that for some Romanian [Eastern Orthodox] Christians “love towards people of different ethnicity like that depicted in the parable of the Good Samaritan is merely [empty] words from books”, a situation which is worthy of nothing less than shame [60].

Tănăsescu’s sample of anti-negative ecodomy, which is in fact a display of true ecodomy, was matched by the official reaction of Victor Opaschi, the secretary of state for Religious Denominations, who declared that he felt “shame that a fellow citizen was capable of such actions” like those performed by Berenghi. Opaschi defended mufti Murat whose previous discourse was more than sufficient in Opaschi’s view to demonstrate how good relationships between representatives of two different religions should actually develop. The state secretary also said that Berenghi’s gesture was “revolting” and “unacceptable for a European society [like Romania]”. Opaschi did not forget to express his utmost respect for the Romanian Muslim community which, in his opinion, was an “Islamic model” as well as a “chance” for Romania given its “old tradition in the country” and the fact that it was not only “perfectly integrated in Romanian society” but also “balanced and a model of open, European Islam”. Opaschi also indicated that the whole issue is a matter of mutual respect, which is fully deserved by the Romanian Muslim community [61]. The state secretary’s idea was reiterated the next day, on 27 August 2015, by Aziz Besir Osman, the imam of Bucharest, who pointed out that the Bucharest mosque arrangement was a “moral duty” for the Romanian government following the destruction of the “largest mosque in Romania” when Ada Keleh island was flooded by the waters of the river Danube in 1970 as part of a huge hydro-energetic project designed for the building of Porțile de Fier power plant by both Romania and Serbia [62].

Unfortunately, the hot summer of 2015 did not end in this reconciling mode because the “pig terrorist”, as Berenghi was dubbed by *Adevărul* on 1 September 2015, saw it fit to strike again. Thus, in a burst of negative ecodomic “rage” resembling past legionary Nazi practices, Berenghi told the media that he had brought a huge [Christian] cross, reportedly carved in stone over a century ago in Moldova and weighing about one thousand kilograms, which he planted on the land designated for the [Muslim] mosque. If not even this was capable of stopping the promoters of the mosque project, he threatened not to stop either which means that he will also bring “a small church and a defrocked priest” on the mosque’s site. “I’ll make them stop” was Berenghi’s final warning on 1 September 2015 [63], a “perfect” example of Romanian negative ecodomy, xenophobia, and hatred towards values that lie beyond the influence and scope of faulty interpretations regarding Romanian Eastern Orthodox Christianity.

5. Concluding Remarks: Looking for a Possible Solution

While the mosque scandal appears to be far from over given that the mosque itself has not yet been erected, and further protests in various forms may be envisaged in the near future, the reality of anti-Muslim, xenophobic, and nationalistic attitudes remains an issue not only for Romania but the entire European Union, or at least to some countries like Greece, Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Poland which have all displayed similar attitudes during the same summer of 2015 in the context of Middle Eastern and African migrations. Whether or not the European Union's philosophy of multiculturalism and the free circulation of persons is shared by its member states not only officially and politically but also by the majority of their citizens is still a debated issue but the xenophobic events which happened in Central and Eastern Europe between June and September 2015 may be a warning sign for a possible reconsideration if not a reinterpretation of the European Union's philosophy of multiculturalism and the free circulation of persons in light of the threat posed by Islamic terrorism. For instance, the member states of the Visegrad Group (Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland) issued a common declaration whereby they officially rejected the European Union's proposal to impose compulsory quotas for the Middle Eastern and African refugees [64], which indicate that at least some discussions regarding the application, if not the definition of basic European Union principles like multiculturalism and the free circulation of persons would not be such a bad idea after all. In the words of Teodor Baconschi, former Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Romanian government between 2009 and 2012 as well as a trained diplomat, religious anthropologist, and theologian, "the cholera of political correctness disseminated within [European] universities...gravely twisted the reality of history", which indicates that the European Union's basic philosophy should be discussed again if not even redefined. The anti-Muslim actions which occurred in Romania during June and September 2015 are neither singular, nor an issue of novelty in the European Union which, at least in part, suffers from Islamophobia, a reality defined by Baconschi as legitimate for as long as the threat of terrorism is not annihilated: "We are not interested in the civilization of classical Islam, such as the tolerance of the Cordoba Caliphate, if its contemporary followers are the assassins of the Islamic State. It is as if one asked us to accept Hitler for the sake of Novalis or Goethe" [65]. As blunt and politically incorrect as Baconschi's words may be and even if they ignore the tragic reality of genuine Muslim refugees, they do reflect a historical reality which could provide the European Union with proper incentives and sufficient legitimization for initiating at least some discussions over the issue of its fundamental philosophical principles in light of the recent historical developments associated with Islam and the Muslim world.

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