

# **Dialogue for Changing Stereotypes**

**Tuna Forum as a Social Innovation**



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## **Overview**

Tuna Forum represents the institutionalization of a cultural project of Tuna Foundation in Romania. One of the main objectives of this platform is promoting and facilitating intercultural dialogue.

The concept of intercultural dialogue implies the idea of communication, relations and exchange of ideas between different cultures.

The intercultural communication always implies individuals making interchanges among cultures; hence, the intercultural relations will always require a personal endeavour that implies also contacts with different life styles, ways of thinking and relating to a socio-cultural environment. Intercultural communication implies the establishment of relations among persons or groups pertaining to different cultures.

Tuna Forum has several basic principles by which it performs its entire activities. These principles, posted on its website<sup>1</sup>, are as follows:

-  The differences in values should be considered as richness. Religions, languages and ethnicities exist so that people come together and learn from, not fight, each other
-  The purpose of dialogue is to increase the level of understanding among individuals of different cultures.
-  Real dialogue is possible only in the presence of mutual trust.
-  The pillars of dialogue are love, tolerance, compassion and forgiveness.
-  Dialogue is a necessity today, and the first step in establishing this is forgetting the negative past, ignoring the polemical arguments and emphasizing the common points.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.tunaforum.ro](http://www.tunaforum.ro)



The main mission of this organization is to build bridges of understanding, acceptance and trust within communities by promoting dialogue among different cultural groups, especially between Turkish and Romanians living in Romania, seeking common values and aiming to achieve a mutual understanding regardless of their differences. The main idea of Tuna Forum is to emphasize the common basis of all cultures and the possibility to discover this common basis by dialogue. The fear of unknown may be overcome by gaining perspective, understanding and knowledge of the other cultures and practices of the "others". Communication and dialogue will make these possible in order to prevent misunderstandings by having respect and gratitude towards the others.

For this reason the interaction of different groups is promoted in diverse ways and contexts. By its activities, Tuna Forum intends to promote education, exchange of information emphasizing the inclusion of the diversity of opinions.

As means of accomplishment of these goals, it organizes conferences, workshops, meetings, field trips and

many other activities in cooperation with prestigious cultural and scientific institutes such as Romanian Academy, The Institute of Sociology, The Institute of Research for Quality of Life, Romanian Commission for UNESCO and several associations of students of University of Bucharest. Tuna Forum cooperates research projects in partnership with these organizations to promote intercultural dialogue. Within this projects a series of seminars, panels and courses were realized in the period of February-May, 2011.

A certificate program offering a non-credit course named "intercultural dialogue" taking two hours per week was organized in this period. The number of participants to each course reached up to 60 involving students from various universities in Bucharest (mainly from social science faculties such as history, political science, sociology and philology). A popular intellectual figure was invited to each course to make it more effective. A Turkish language course followed the intercultural course each taking two hours per week. The graduates are supposed to receive an official certificate, signed by the partners: Tuna Forum, the Insti-

tute of Sociology, Institute of Research for Quality of Life, Romanian National Commission for UNESCO.

What we intend to present is an analysis of the impact of the activities, developed and carried out by TF<sup>2</sup> in Romania in the last two years regarding the promotion and development of a basis for intercultural dialogue. The evaluation will be made in two dimensions:

- A quantitative analysis dealing with the measurable indicators such as the number of activities, the number of participants and the profile of the participants
- A qualitative analysis dealing with the subjective indicators of perception of the impact resulted from the evaluation by the participants.

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<sup>2</sup> Tuna Forum

## **Methodology**

The main goal of this publication is to present the results of the survey conducted by Tuna Foundation on the Romanian participants at Tuna Forum. The survey was conducted to explore the impact of Tuna Forum activities on its participants during February-May 2011. The total number of the participants is expected to be 1800, including the ones that participated at the public activities. The events that were organized by the forum such as language courses, conferences and field trips are essential in designing a viable framework for a vivid intercultural dialogue. The results that were obtained can demonstrate the effectiveness of such a cultural project that is based on intercultural communication principles.

The survey was conducted in the summer of 2011 with a representative sample of 447 participants ageing between 26 and 69 with various educational backgrounds (fig. 1). The margin of error for the error sample is plus or

minus 4%. Workers in Turkish companies were surveyed in working places through their employees and online questionnaire was used where it was possible. The quantitative dimension of the study indicates that 66% of the respondents are female and 34% are male (fig. 2). Overall, the majority of the respondents is composed of university graduates or currently enrolled at a university course.

The current study is structured in several major parts. The first section deals with the profile of the participants at Tuna Forum. The educational background and the statistic data retrieved after the survey was conducted offer important data on the target public of Tuna Forum. It is useful to see the profile of the participants who are interested in intercultural activities. The following sections of the book aim to explain how intercultural communication can change the way individuals perceive a particular culture. In our case, the Romanians that took part in numerous activities depicted the image of Turkish people and culture before and after joining Tuna Forum. Moreover, the study identifies the differences of perception that were recorded and the role of intercultural communication in the context of globalization.

## **The profile of the participants at Tuna Forum**

From the results that were obtained a certain profile of the participant at Tuna Forum emerges. In other words, it is very useful to present the features of the individuals that are interested in an intercultural project. As mentioned before, the vast majority of the participants are constituted by young people ageing between 26-36 years old (fig. 1). Most of the participants (62%) have never been in Turkey before knowing Tuna Forum (fig. 4). The fact the majority of the attendants at the public activities has never been to Turkey before, constitutes a relevant issue for this study, because the project aimed in dealing with the negative and positive stereotypes regarding Turkish people. The individuals that never visited Turkey before and their perception on Turkish culture can provide useful information on how this foreign culture is actually perceived by individuals that have never been in contact with it.

The main objective of the cultural project to design a platform for individuals to exchange ideas and cultural experiences is marked by a crucial element which is the educational component. Undoubtedly, individuals that have a strong education background or work in academic institutions are more open towards understanding the implications of intercultural communication. Moreover, the success of such cultural project depends on the research expertise that is meant to point out the benefits of intercultural dialogue. Any ideas, beliefs or genuine projects that are lunched in the society depend on the receptiveness of the targeted group. In this case, the participation of intellectuals and experts has proven to be essential in assuring the success of the organized activities.

Even though most of the respondents have a bachelor degree, another significant segment (79 respondents) is constituted by individuals that have obtained a Ph.D or other high education certificates. Thus, the survey indicates that most of the people that are interested in taking part in intercultural activities are also engaged in other tasks that require a strong educational training.

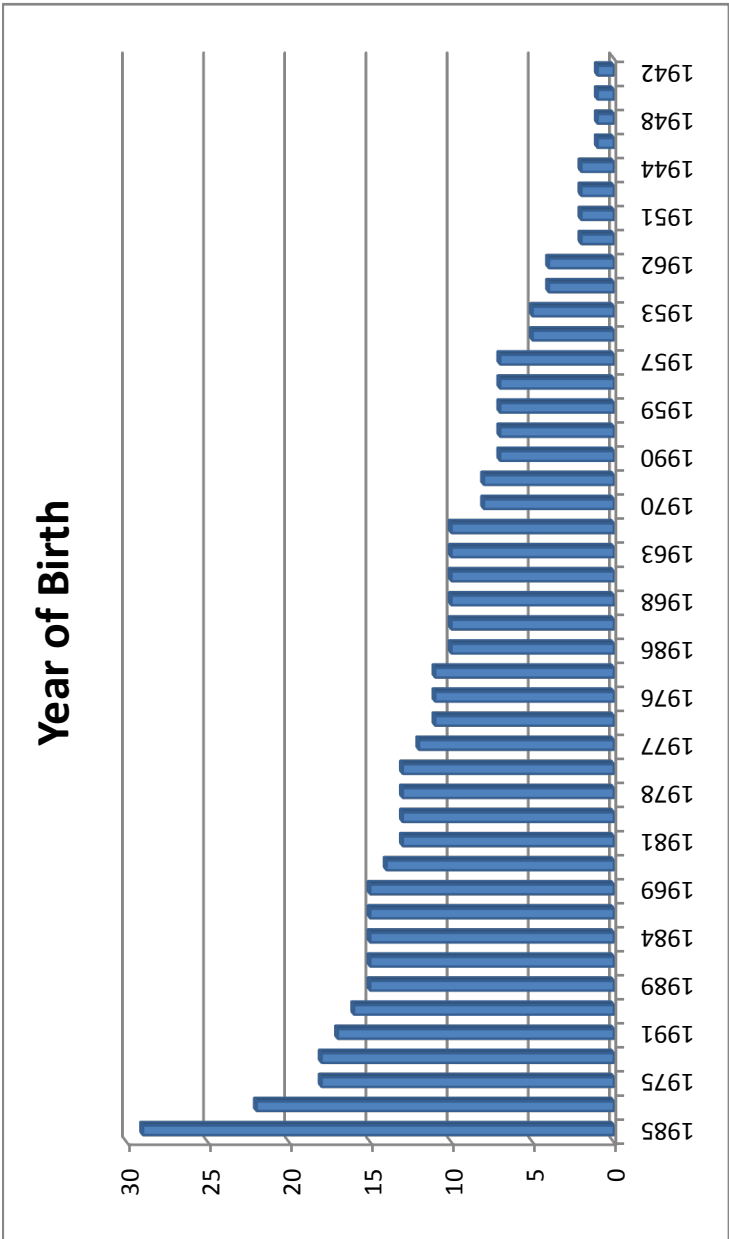


Fig. 1



# Gender

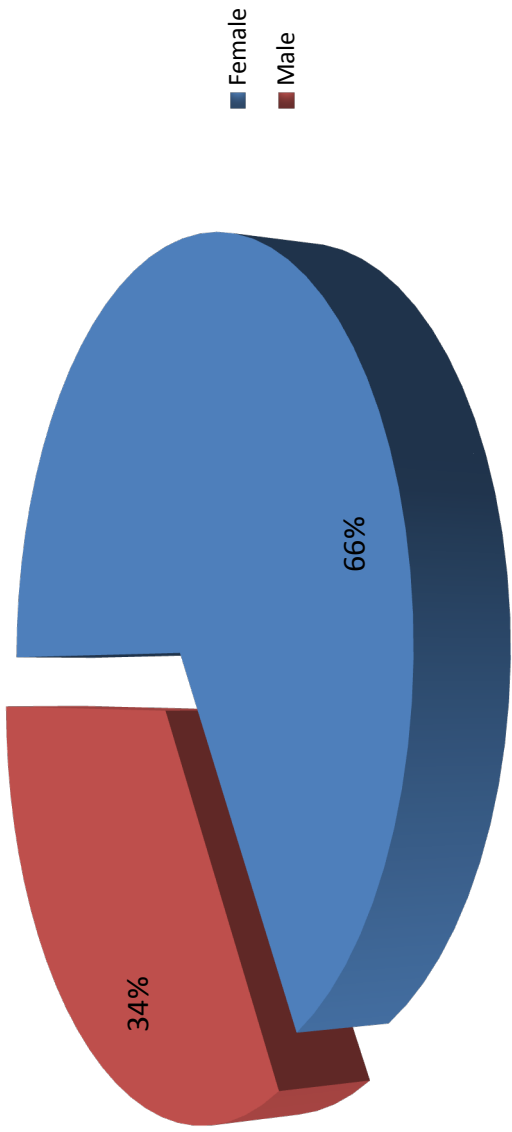


Fig. 2

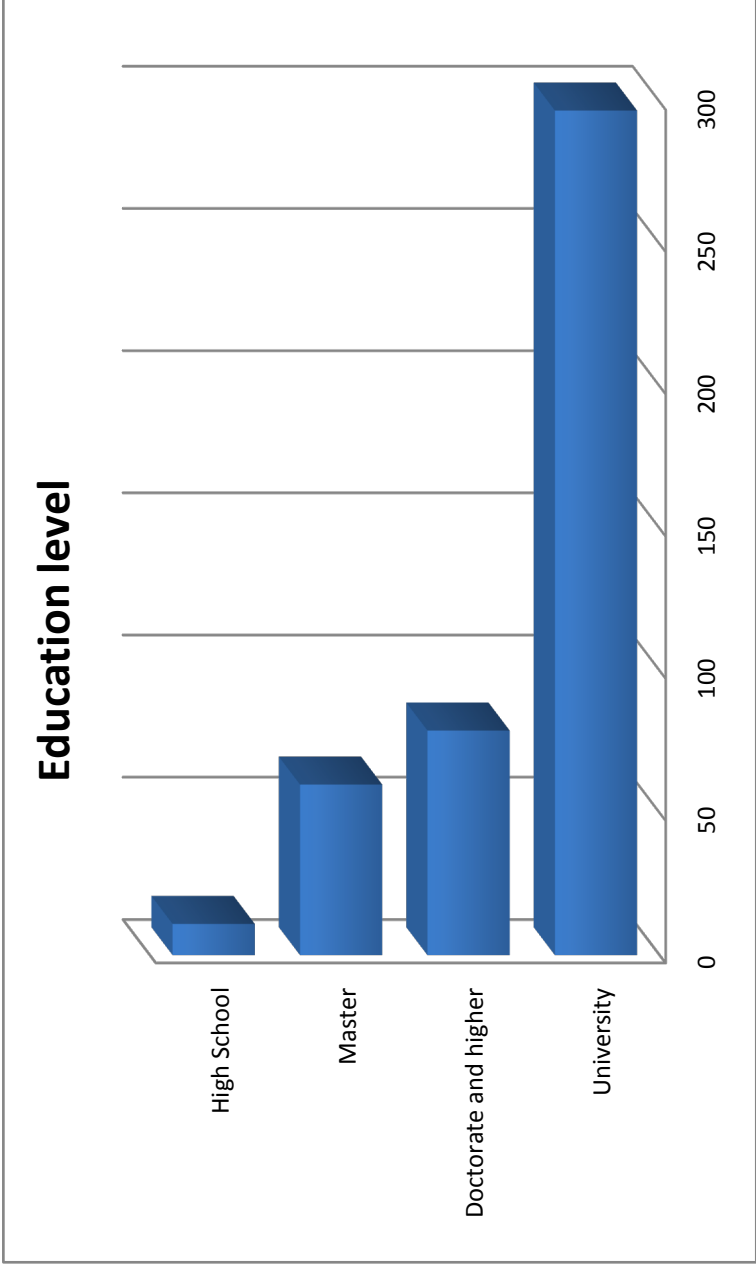


Fig. 3

# Have you been to Turkey before knowing Tuna Forum?

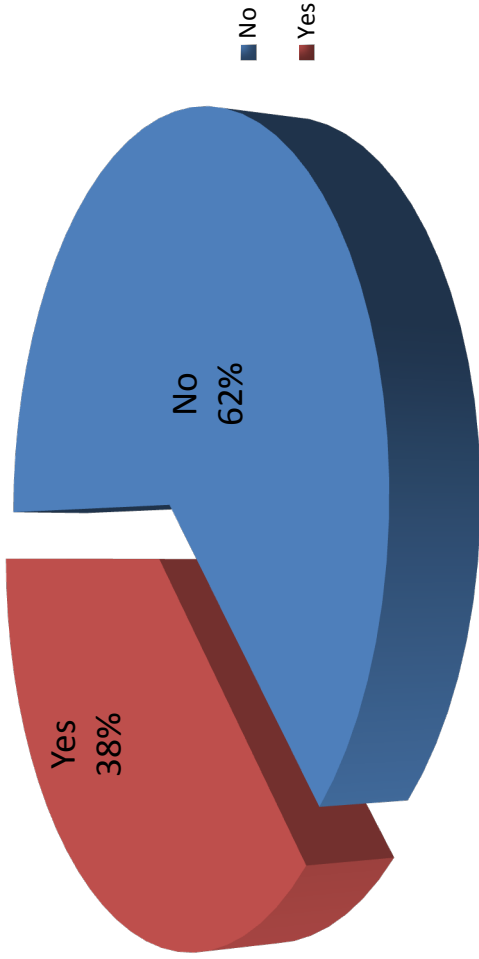


Fig. 4

According to figure 5 most of the participants at Tuna Forum activities are either students or workers in Turkish private business companies. It is worth mentioning that university and foreign embassy staff members, journalists and state administration staff members have shown a powerful interest in the main goal of Tuna Forum and its activities. The main activities organized by Tuna Forum are the following ones: periodic meetings, cultural field trips mainly to Turkey, luncheons, panels and conference series, Kermes traditional Turkish home-made products presentation and Turkish civilization certificate courses. A high percentage of respondents indicated that they participated at least once at the Ramazan dinner and at the intercultural dialogue meetings (fig. 6). However, the field trips, contests and conferences have also registered a high level of interest. The percentages point out the necessity of organizing dynamic activities that bring people together, from different cultural backgrounds.

## What is your occupation?

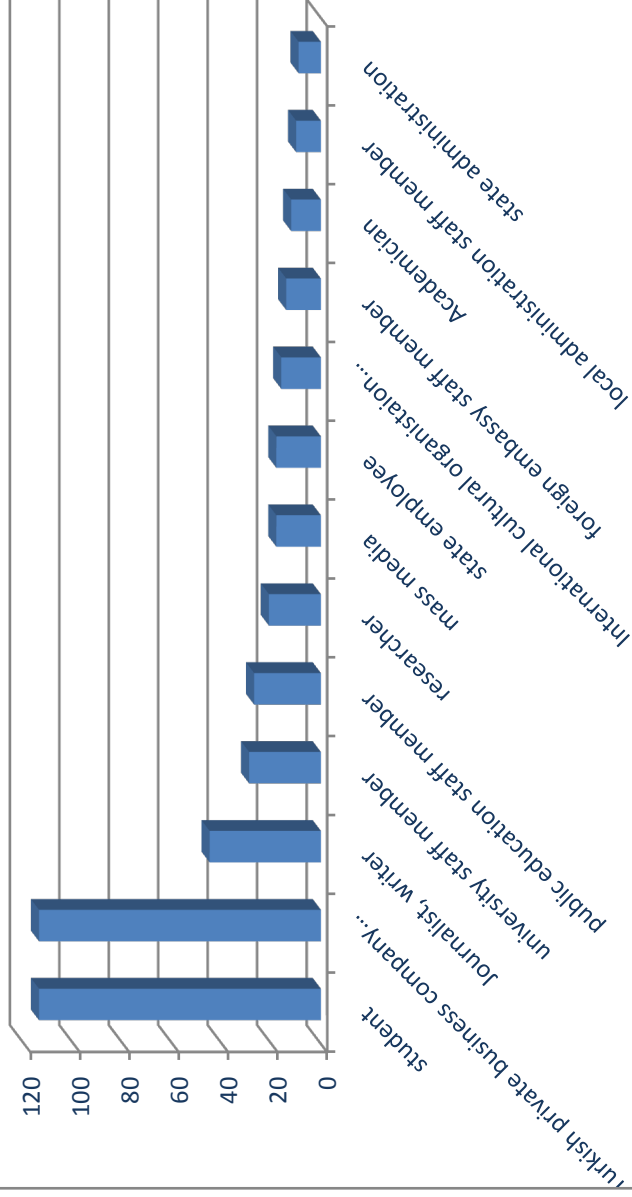


Fig. 5

The impact and efficiency of organizing academic events (conferences, language courses, and civilization certificate courses) is unquestionable. However, intercultural communication requires face-to-face interaction (intercultural dialogue meetings) even though certain misunderstandings cannot be avoided. Uniting individuals from different backgrounds can lead to a series of issues that cause miscommunication. No matter the perspective chosen to debate the issue, communication remains a powerful tool that has the ability to share the beliefs, values, ideas and feelings. In this particular case, most of the participants selected the activities that they believed to have the highest potential of presenting particularities of Turkish culture. Knowledge of Turkish culture and its language can be achieved in various ways.

These include reading books, articles, watching media products or getting in contact directly to people from Turkish culture.

Please kindly select the activities of Tuna Forum that you participated at least once

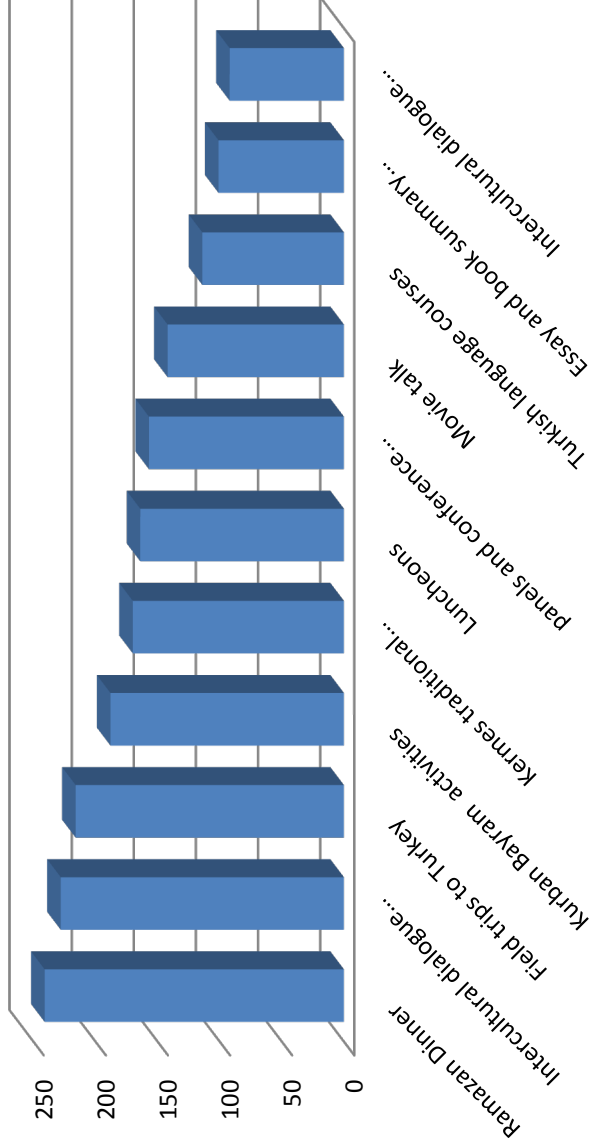


Fig. 6

Most of the participants received information regarding Tuna Forum activities through private invitations from the organizers. However, there are many cases in which people were informed by friends and colleagues. According to fig. 7 the visibility of the events planned by Tuna Forum is not very high. The number of people that came across these activities by surfing the web or by national or local media is reduced.

This aspect reveals the necessity of designing a feasible communication strategy that would have as a main goal to promote organizations or events that deal with intercultural issues. Such messages can be spread also through the usage of partner organizations or various universities. A number of respondents were informed about this project through such communication channels.

A functioning intercultural communication strategy depends not only on the measures that are taken but also on the promotion. Even though Tuna Projects involve almost 1800 people the urge to spread the message at a large scale requires the usage of the national media and new media tools. For example, the Internet can be a really



useful tool in transmitting certain messages to a particular target. In figure no. 7 the number of respondents that were informed about Tuna Forum activities through internet can be considered to be average in comparison to other communication channels.

### How did you learn about this activity?

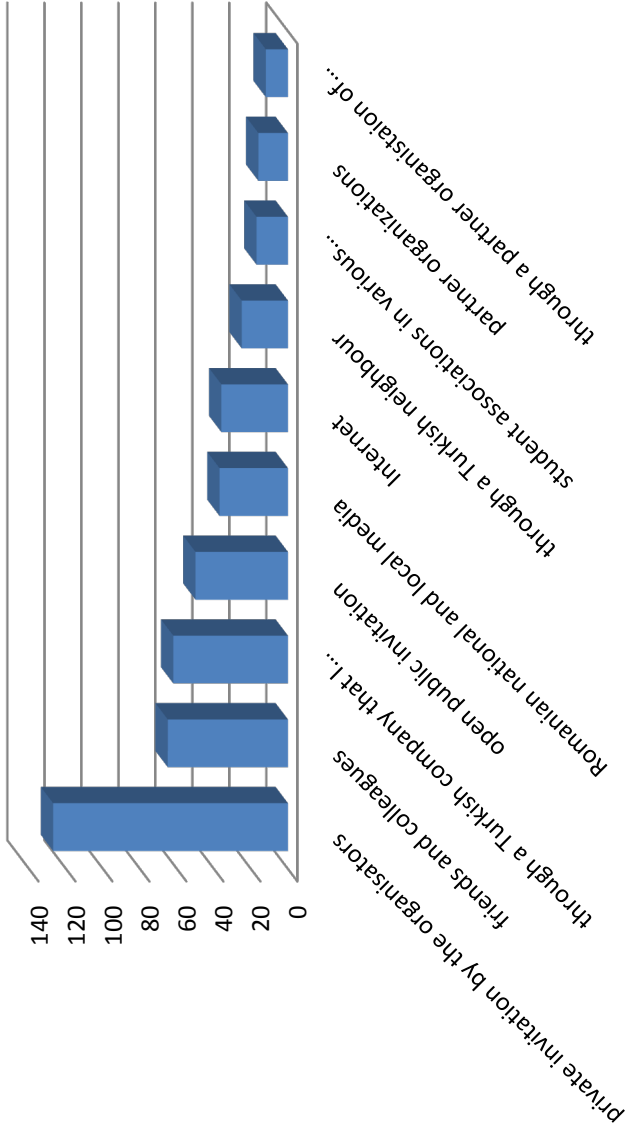


Fig. 7

The participants at Tuna Forum activities play an important role not only by taking part in the organized events but also in sharing information along with shared methods of coding and retrieving that information. The dynamics of the activities required multiple degrees of implication of the participants. General data concerning the individuals that took part in several intercultural activities is important but more significant is their perceptions and attitude towards the information they were given.

Therefore, a relevant aspect besides participating to a certain activity is given by the role played by the applicant. 53% of the respondents identified themselves as a passive actor. Most of them are regular participants that are observers or just part of the audience. Only 26% of the surveyed were discussants and 21% lecturers or presenters (fig. 8).

Any type of passive observation of cultural patterns, media viewing or reading leads to an identification of the receiver with the sender of the message. Thus, even though the majority of the participants declared themselves as observers the process of decoding cultural

symbols is continuous and has multiple effects on creating a certain image of the sender and the information that is being sent.

## What was your role in that activity?

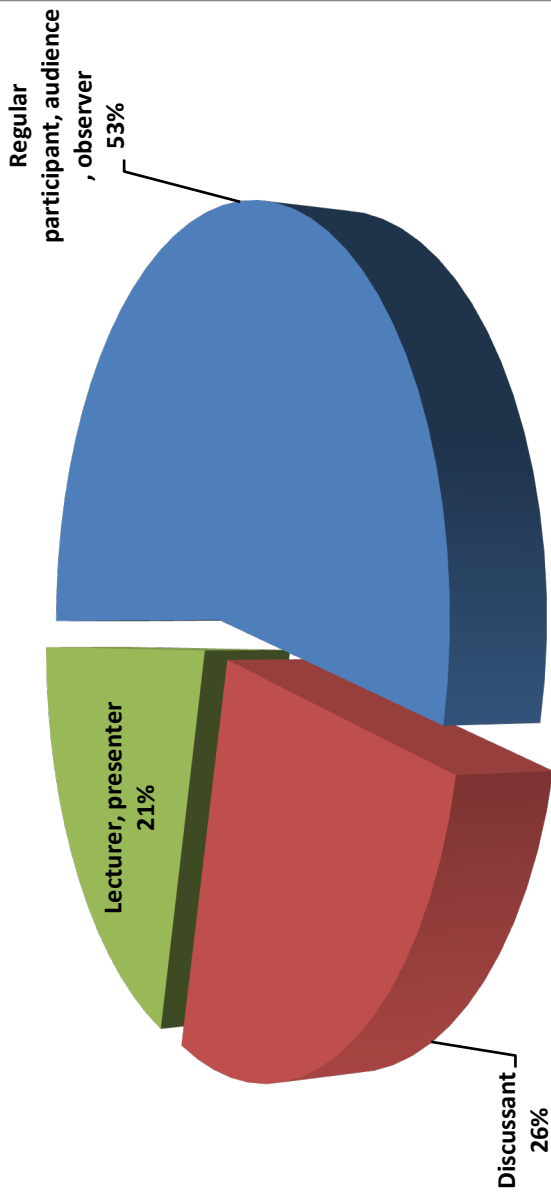


Fig. 8

The respondents were asked to point out the reasons why intercultural dialogue is important and which types of activities promote the best intercultural communication (fig. 9 and fig. 10). Undoubtedly, the intercultural dialogue explores the communication dimension. In the context of globalization, the communication processes are crucial due to their role in creating different images of reality. Any transfer of information encloses a series of signs and symbols that determine the specific social and culture context.

The diversity of the system of values is currently being expanded and preserved in terms of globalization and universalism. In other words, the social and political architecture of the globalized world allows societies to characterize themselves not only through a single perspective. The tendency is to develop a hybrid type of pluralism that is lacking in unifying patterns. In order for the intercultural dialogue to be possible in such conditions, a functional solidarity between cultures is more than mandatory. Moreover, the intercultural platform gives an opportunity for the cultures to rebuild or consolidate their

identity. Constructing a more fluid communication process, increase tolerance and reduce areas of possible conflicts are just a few of the effects of a proficient intercultural dialogue. The participants at Tuna Forum activities indicated that the intercultural communication is affecting even the economic relations between the states and helps increasing the social security.

A high percentage of respondents indicated that essay and book summary contests promote best the intercultural dialogue. The less appreciated form was considered to be the language courses. This indicates that individuals are more open towards experiencing the traditional cuisines or learning about the specificities of a culture than actually learning the language and the normative construction of a culture. Coping in intercultural assignments implies establishing interpersonal relations with the individuals from the host culture. Organizing field trips, dinners and experiencing home-made products are activities that allow the establishment of a first contact with the host culture.

One of the best ways of gaining information about Turkish culture is to study their language. Educational

courses that focus on the language and history are also appreciated but they require a profound level of comprehension and adaptation to the foreign culture. However, literature is an accessible tool for understanding the social and cultural components of a society. Most of the participants considered literature contests to be the most suitable activity in promoting intercultural dialogue because media products are accessible and they lead to an improvement of the communication between cultures.

All in all, a high percentage of the participants at Tuna Forum activities are engaged in other intercultural activities (work and education) that increase their tolerance and acceptance towards a foreign culture. Culture is conceptualized in a variety of ways from race, social class to gender but communication is the appropriate tool for generating intersection points between societies. The success of creating a global network of intercultural communication depends on the educational and cultural development of today's young people. Furthermore, the targeted public has proven to be receptive towards the public activities and was willing to exchange ideas regarding Turkish people.



The activities of Tuna Forum have proven to be fruitful because the target group was suitable for intercultural activities. Their educational background and their personal development were matching the objectives of the organization. Not every individual is willing to establish connections with a foreign culture. The study shows that young people that are enrolled in a high education system or people that are involved in similar activities are more receptive in adapting to a multicultural environment. Nevertheless, the impact of intercultural projects depends not only on the profile of the target group but also on how the intercultural communication process is done in order of changing the attitude towards the other culture.

### In your opinion which of these activities promotes the intercultural dialogue best?

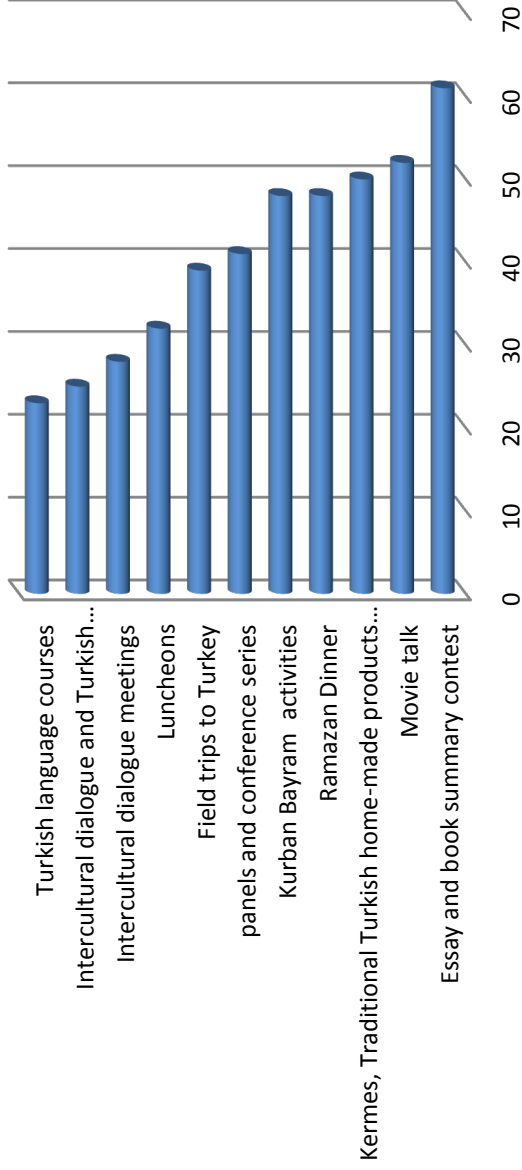


Fig. 9

# Why do you think that the development of intercultural dialogue is important?

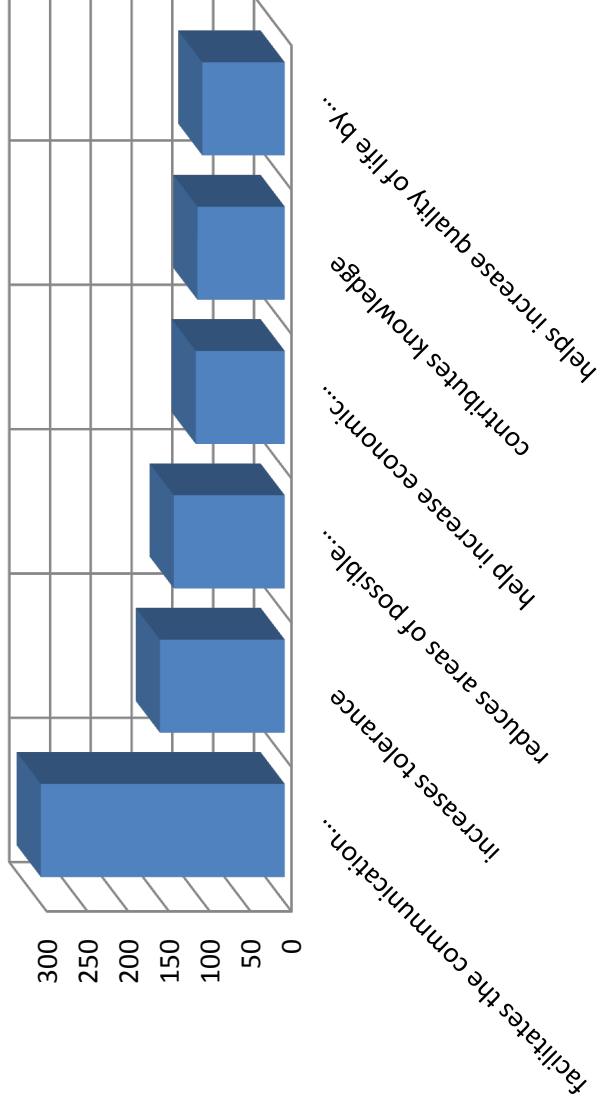


Fig. 10

# **Intercultural Dialogue and stereotypes.**

## **The case of Tuna Forum**

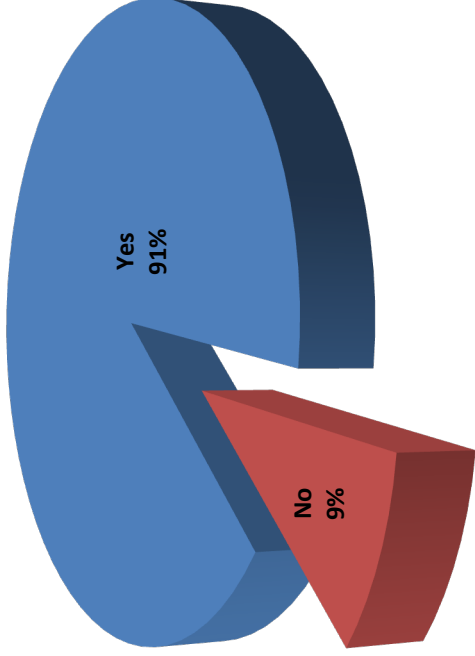
The impact of intercultural activities can be easily traced from the changes it causes at the stereotype level. Each individual has a series of images, attitudes and emotions towards a certain culture. Intercultural communication has the potential of changing the way we perceive the 'other'. In Tuna Forum case the participants were asked in the survey to identify their positive and negative stereotypes regarding Turkish people.

The following results deal with the issue of constructing an appropriate attitude towards Turkish culture. The ideal situation is described by two dimensions: the first one deals with the respect towards the foreign culture as a whole and the other one regards the respect for the individuals which whom one interacts. In other words, the ability to cope in another culture is affected by the

knowledge of the culture, its language, stereotypes and general attitude. The individual is willing to change his/her attitude when he/she is being able to evaluate the others as cultural beings.

Cultural stereotyping and the individual's tendencies to bias are linked to a deficient intercultural communication process. The study explores the results on negative and positive stereotypes in Romania regarding Turkish people and the impact of intercultural activities on the participants' attitudes. 91% of the respondents said they had positive stereotypes before joining Tuna Forum (fig. 11). The percentage proves once more that individuals that are receptive towards intercultural communication are more likely to be respectful and empathetic in understanding other cultures. The targeted group proves to be receptive and willing to explore Turkish culture.

**Did you have positive stereotypes regarding Turkish People before joining activities of Tuna Forum?**



**Fig. 11**

The following section of the study deals with the actual stereotypes of the Romanian people regarding Turkish culture. The survey indicated the existence of the following positive stereotypes: good merchants (the highest percentage), honest, good family people, religious and respect their life principles (fig. 12). The respondents were asked to mention several negative stereotypes among which the following are worth mentioning: very strong smokers, traditional and rigid in their tradition, bigots (fig. 13). The results indicate that Romanians appreciate the characteristics of Turkish people but disagree with normative aspects of their culture. For example, Turkish acceptance of bigotry and their strong traditional life style is considered to be problematic for many Romanians. However, Turkish approach towards family, honesty and their merchandise skills are positively associated with Turkish culture. Some of the negative stereotypes are linked to Romanian traditional sayings or expressions such as "fumează ca unTurc; smoking as hard as a Turk" or "Turco plateste; the Turk pays".

Due to the strong religious dimension of the Romanian people, characteristics that belong to this sphere are positively asserted (honesty, family, religiousness). However, elements that belong to the same series of individualities are thought to be a faulty of Turkish society. For example, their rigid traditional approach towards women and foreigners are also associated with the image of Turkish people. The obtained data cannot indicate clearly a distinction between the constructive aspects of the tradition and its harmful components. In other words, the *cultural empathy* (Ridley and Lingle 1996) depends on the level of contextualization. Only on the basis of a common knowledge can an accurate labelling be achieved. In this case, a common knowledge is lacking and the senders that communicate, project their expectations upon the receivers in order of establishing a common knowledge. The same process occurs in stereotyping. The function of characterizing people equals to stereotypical knowledge. Such cultural stereotypes appear because the intercultural misunderstandings occur. The Romanian understanding of tradition is lacking in consistency because religious component seems to be ripped off. However, it is well-known



that relationship between traditional beliefs and behaviour, religion and the state are differently perceived by Turkish society. Such discrepancies lead to the emergence of intercultural misunderstandings.

## Which do you consider to be the positive stereotypes in Romania regarding Turkish People?

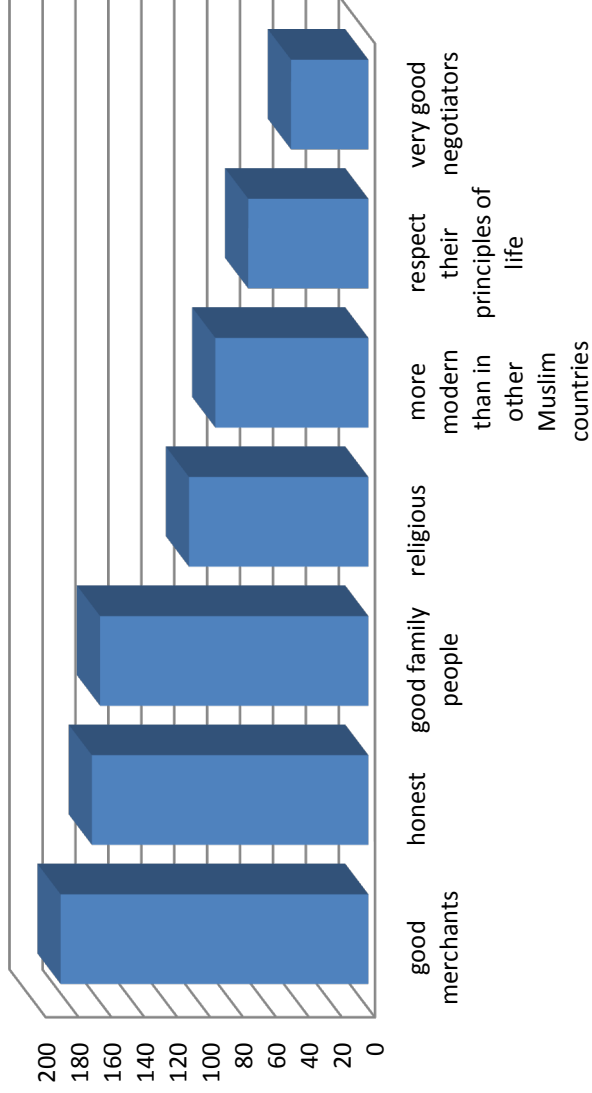


Fig. 12

## Which do you consider to be the negative stereotypes in Romania regarding Turkish People?

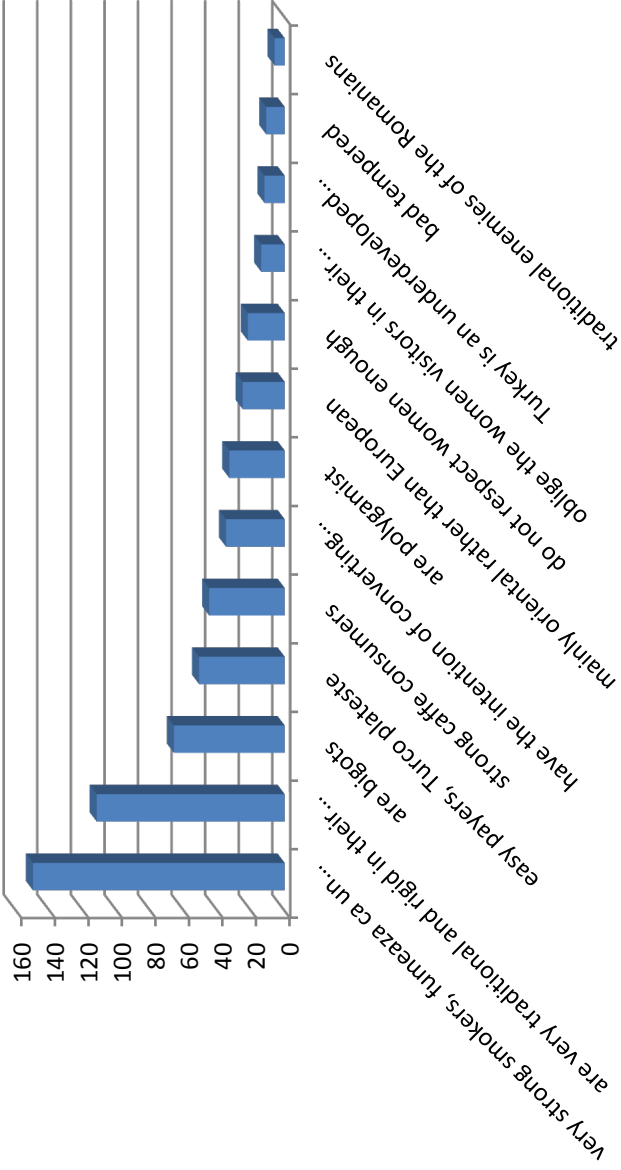


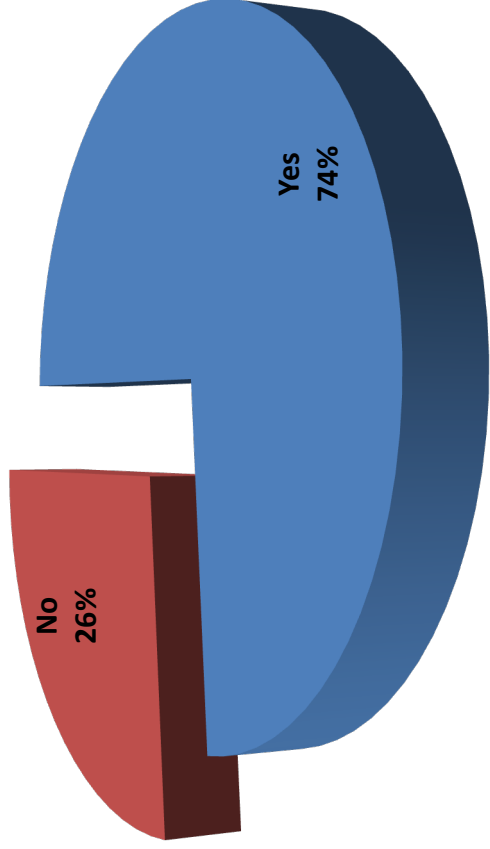
Fig. 13

By acknowledging the similarities and differences between the Romanian culture and Turkish one, a certain pattern of behaviour can be established. 74% from the respondents said that there are resemblances between the two cultures and 76% identified the similarities of these cultures (fig. 14 and fig. 15). Knowing specific similarities and dissimilarities is essential for accurately interpreting the behaviour of the people in another country.

In our study case, the main resemblance indicated between Romanians and Turkish people are the national dishes, the hospitality, linguistic similarities, religiousness and the common type of music. Some respondents even indicated that Turkish people are more religious than Romanians and that there is a significant dissimilarity in terms of tradition and customs (fig. 16). Therefore, from the retrieved data the most substantial dimension is constituted by the religious element. Attitudes are results of the beliefs and positive or negative evaluations. In our case, the image of Turkish people and culture has been build based upon religious aspects.

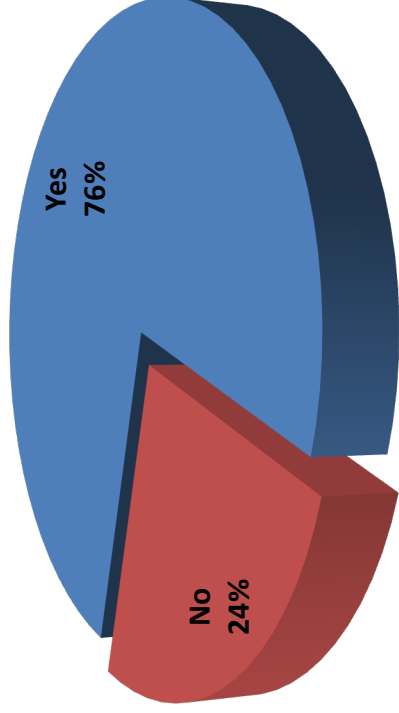
However, differences in defining tradition or religiousness can lead to transformations in behavioural expectations of the parts implicated in intercultural activities. Moreover, such distinctions distort the perception of the foreign culture and influence their relationship. For example, the fact that Turkish people are considered to be more rigid concerning their traditions and customs affects the gender role expectations. One negative stereotype of Turkish people was indicated to be the following one “do not respect women enough” or “oblige the women visitors in their country to wear headscarf”. The link between the two results is more than understandable in terms of intercultural perception.

**Do you think there exists resemblance between Turkish and Romanian cultures?**



**Fig. 14**

**Do you think there are differences between Turkish and Romanian cultures?**



**Fig. 15**

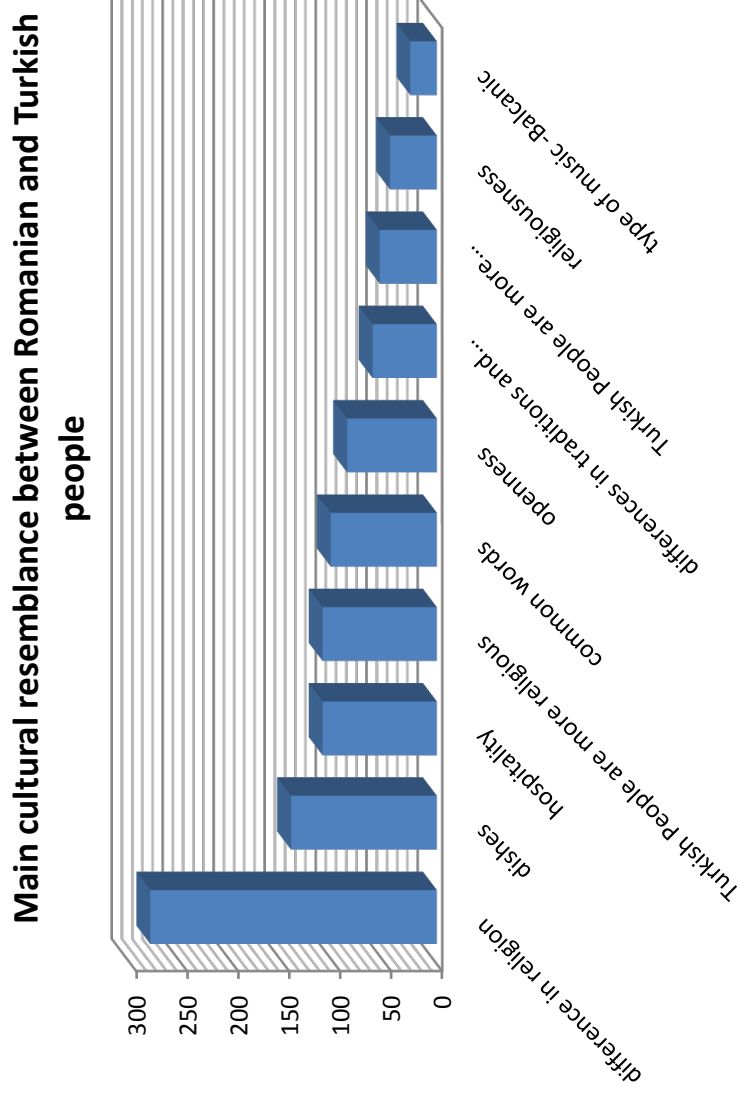


Fig. 16



## **Intercultural activities and changes in the perception of Turkish people**

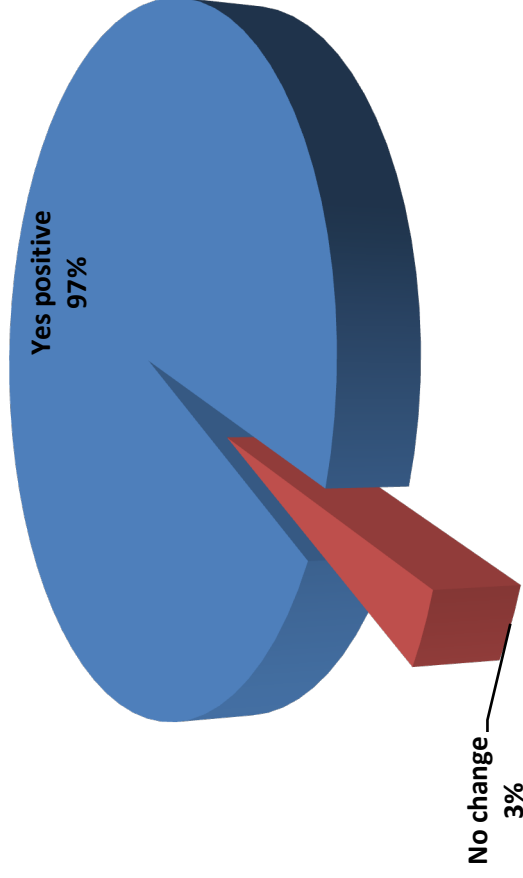
After participating at the intercultural activities organized by Tuna Forum, 97% of the respondents said that their perception on Turkish people and their culture has been modified (fig. 17). *The high numbers that were registered show that the main goal of the cultural project was a successful one.* All the intercultural activities that involved the participants no matter the degree of implication (passive observers or active participants) have altered the initial attitude towards Turkish people. Individuals that take part in intercultural become multi-culturally competent. The differences between the Romanian culture and Turkish one is not perceived or treated as a deficit.

According to figure 18 most participants experienced a change in the way they characterized Turkish people. Also, economic and cultural aspects of Turkish society have been

clarified (availability for intercultural dialogue, economic development). These types of changes are key elements in designing any other future intercultural communication between Turkish people and the Romanians.

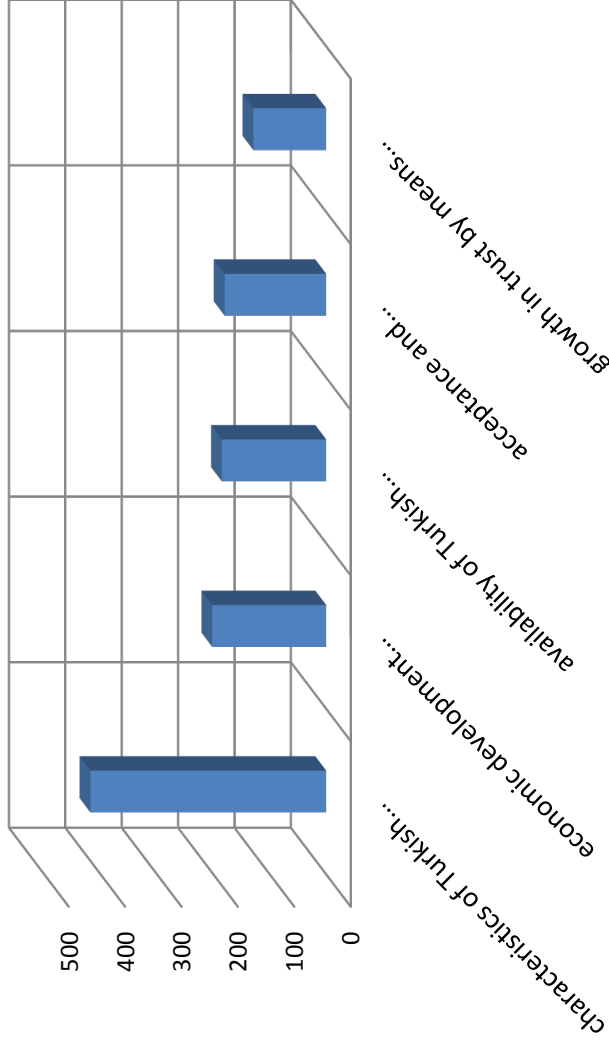
A fluid communication process between the two different cultures is essential for a proper construction of the cultural identity. Intercultural communication represents a tool for the consolidation of the national identity. The way the other culture is perceived has an enormous impact on the political and economic level. A positive image of a certain culture leads to an improvement in bilateral relations. The Romanians are receptive towards experiencing Turkish culture and better understanding their life style. Organizing such intercultural activities has proven to be critical in designing a viable intercultural communication strategy.

**Did the participation in Tuna Forum activities make changes in your perception on Turkish People and their culture?**



**Fig. 17**

**How did the participation in Tuna Forum activities make positive changes in your perception on Turkish People and their culture?**



**Fig. 18**

## **Intercultural dialogue as a social innovation**

The results that were obtained in Tuna Forum case study demonstrate that despite the fact that intercultural communication is problematic due to the implicated wide range, it also covers behaviours and traits such as tolerance and openness. The study of intercultural communication brings forth the relevance of an emotional and cognitive dimension. Thus, the perception of Turkish people and its culture is directly linked to affective perspective of the Romanian people and their negative/positive stereotypes. The high impact of intercultural activities is given by the change they cause in the perception of the culture of "other". The results of the survey show that the participants at Tuna Forum have changed their perception of Turkish people and culture. The question that remains is how intercultural communication can be made more effective.

The level of effectiveness depends on 'universal' barriers that apply to intercultural communication. For example, recognizing that someone's nationality, religiousness or gender is different leads to a specific interaction between the individuals of a group or intergroup. Moreover, the identification of a series of distinctions between the individuals of a group has as common consequence as the formation of an intergroup. This type of discrepancies that lead to the formation of distinctions such as 'we' and 'them' can cover a range of subjects from the social status to religious aspects. In other words, by defining the boundaries of identity of an individual or a group a certain image is created and associated with the 'other' group. In most cases, this projected identity is not matching with the real image of the 'other' individual, group or culture. There are several sources of potential miscommunication and stereotyping represents one way of creating a false image of Turkish people and culture.

Tuna Forum case demonstrates that certain stereotypes can distort the process of intercultural communication. In general, any type of stereotype influences how

information is processed. The fact that Turkish people are heavily smokers or that they are very traditional and rigid is not going to be easily forgotten by the individuals that have such perceptions even if they meet Turkish people that are non-smokers and very open-minded. Stereotypes have the potential of creating expectations about 'others' and the general tendency is that the individual tries to confirm these opinions. Thus, the stereotypes on Turkish people and culture create self-fulfilling prophecies. Negative stereotypes contribute to prejudices. Because Turkish people respect their tradition and have a strong perception of the religious element, the Romanians considered them as being rigid towards the Western culture and identity.

Moreover, stereotyping implies overlooking individual characteristics and projecting them to the level of a group or society. The Romanians and the participants at Tuna Forum based the communication process (the message itself, ways of transmitting it and their reception) on false assumptions because of the previous stereotyping. Romanian respondents to the survey perceived the religious dimension as problematic in their interaction with Turkish people.

The survey clearly demonstrates that values, emotions, beliefs, assumptions and expectations can shape the behaviour of the individual regarding the 'other culture'. The non-acceptance of the others' values produces major miscommunication defaults that can lead to economic and social shifts between societies. Nowadays, the concept of *culture* has a strategic value and every discipline that belongs to the social science sphere offers a diverse meaning of it. The connection that has been built between *culture* and *communication* is one of the pillars of contemporaneous paradigms. The cultural factors and the new means of communications have shaped the development process of the societies.

One dimension of cultural diversity is constituted by the construction of the identity of the 'other' culture meaning that individuals can define identity depending on their particular life stage and cultural circumstances. An active intercultural communication requires that the individual is mindful in 'naming' or identifying the 'others' (Stella Ting-Toomey 1999). Any culture that plays under the rules of globalization has to learn to be sensitive to how other cul-



tures define themselves (both at the group level and at the personal identity level). Intercultural communication provides a set of ideals of how social interaction between cultures can be accomplished. A shared consensus way of understanding particular values, beliefs and social norms can be considered to a safe path of achieving boundary regulations, adaptations and communications coordination. The *symbolic exchange* that occurs during the process of intercultural communication has an impact on the motivation of the participants and the meaning they give to a certain cultural specificity.

Intercultural communication represents a social innovation because it has the potential of shaping the image of individuals and cultures. An effective intercultural communication leads to the change in the behaviour and attitude of the individual that identifies himself/herself as not belonging to a group/culture. Intercultural communication involves more than simultaneous encoding and decoding of messages in the exchange process. The context in which intercultural communication takes place and the system in which it is embedded constantly produce new

ways of perceiving the others. Moreover, the role of intercultural communication and all the types of activities associated to it is underlined by the globalization process. Nowadays, the economic and political global movements require a fluid communication between the societies in order of establishing peace and a prosperous cooperation. Intergovernmental collaboration, the interdependencies and the exchange of values necessitate the design of an effective intercultural cooperation that overcomes the economic and political dimension.

Therefore, the significance of culture is immeasurable because the effects of globalizations of the economies and the global consumer practices cannot be diminished if intercultural conflicts are not solved. For example, the diplomatic bilateral relations between Turkey and Romania depend on the way the two societies perceive each other. The public activities organized by Tuna Forum represent an opportunity for people with different backgrounds to comprehend Turkish culture, to become more tolerant towards a society that they have rarely interacted with. Moreover, their perception on Turkish culture was marked

by a series of characteristics that can be changed through intercultural communication. This latent potential of intercultural communication makes it a powerful tool of a social innovation.