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## PART III. COUNTRIES IN TRANSITION

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### Introduction

From the very moment of the formation of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, the Bulgarian society and the state institutions had to face the problem of balancing between the accommodation of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity in the country and the aspiration for building a unitary nation-state. For more than a century (until 1989), Bulgarian legislation practically ignored the existence of different minority groups in the country and did not explicitly protect their rights. The process of changing the legislation to recognize the diversity and multiculturalism in the Bulgarian society and to protect the rights of minorities has started only after 1989, as an inseparable part of the democratisation of Bulgaria and its aspiration to join the EU.

In addition to the legal recognition, different ethnic and religious groups were also “discovered” by the scholars from various fields in social sciences. The avalanche of studies dedicated to the ethno-cultural situation in Bulgaria followed soon, including the first sociological studies about the levels of tolerance and mechanisms for coexistence of different communities. The interdisciplinary research “Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria” (1993-2000), conducted by historians, ethnologists, sociologists, political scientists, has brought forward the thesis that during the centuries of coexistence, the Bulgarian society has set up a sustainable mechanism for accepting otherness under the strictly observed unwritten rules.<sup>1</sup> Both the majority Bulgarians and the minority groups accept otherness and are tolerant towards it on the level of everyday life, but the psychological division line is preserved and the boundaries of the formal parallel existence are seldom crossed. It was also noted that Bulgarians often have negative stereotypes about the “others” on the group level, but disregard them on the personal level and have no problem in accepting their neighbour, colleague or friend from a different ethnic or religious community.

Gradually the debates have centred on the question whether tolerance in Bulgaria truly exists or is the notion about tolerant Bulgarians basically a well-entrenched myth. Studies from the 1990s and the last decade show that Bulgarians predominantly perceive themselves as tolerant.<sup>2</sup> This stereotype has been actively promoted by the media and the leading Bulgarian politicians.

1. The first published result of the research was the book *Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims*. (Zhelyazkova, Nielsen, Kepel, 1995).
2. The survey of the Open Society Institute Sofia conducted in June 2008 gave the following answers to the question “Are Bulgarians tolerant towards those who are different”: fully tolerant - 15.1%, rather tolerant - 37.7%, rather intolerant - 23.6%, not tolerant at all - 10.1%, cannot say - 13.4% (OSI, 2008).

Examples of tolerant Bulgarian attitude towards the others are usually brought forward from history. One such case is the shelter provided to the Armenian refugees, fleeing the genocide in 1910s. Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians who emigrated from the Russian lands after the October Revolution in 1917 were similarly accepted in an organised manner by the state and have quickly integrated into the Bulgarian society. The crucial evidence, however, is the saving of the Bulgarian Jews during the WWII. Bulgarians defied the German demands for the deportation of Jews and the Bulgarian Jewish community survived the Second World War unharmed.

An interesting case in which discourses of tolerance and acceptance, or indeed intolerance and rejection, developed in Bulgaria concerns the repressive assimilation campaigns undertaken by the Communist government against Pomaks and Turks in the 1980s and the reaction of ethnic Bulgarians. In the 1980s, the Bulgarian Muslim communities were forced to change their names and to accept "Bulgarian" ones. In addition, all other distinctive signs defining them as a group like wearing of traditional clothes, customs and religion were also prohibited. A small but active group of Bulgarian intellectuals has condemned this act, but under the strict control of the Communist regime and bombardment of the media propaganda, there was no popular reaction on the larger scale. The mass protests of the Turkish community and especially their exodus in the summer of 1989 have been recognized as being among the most important events leading to the fall of the Communist regime. The protests, initiated by the Turkish community, soon acquired a national character and among the demands put forward to the authorities were the protection of minority rights and the return of the original names to Turks and Pomaks (Stoyanov, 1998; Yalamov, 2002)

Although these protests and especially the restoration of the names are often considered as additional examples of the Bulgarian tolerance, it is much more difficult to evaluate how involved the Bulgarian society really was in trying to protect the rights of the Bulgarian Muslims. On one side, the society at the time was sharply divided over the issue and there were also counter protests, where demands that the Muslims should remain with the Bulgarian names were voiced. On the other, it is an indisputable fact that Bulgaria has avoided the ethnic conflicts of the Yugoslav type and that the political class and the media intentionally imposed the notion of the Bulgarian ethnic model, which was widely accepted by the society (Erdoğan, 2002; Zhelyazkova, 2001a: 295-300).

In recent years, debates on ethnic diversity and tolerance have focused on the thesis that coexistence with others over the centuries was not a result of conscious tolerance towards diversity and otherness, but merely a manifestation of putting up with it. In other words, what can be observed in Bulgaria is above all the liberal tolerance. While allowing for the free expression of ethnic, religious and cultural identity of minorities, the majority society is not really prepared to respect and accept the minorities in the country.

To a large extent, this is a consequence of the fact that for decades, the minorities have been strongly marginalised in the public spaces, which were strictly controlled by the state. This is especially the case with the Roma, who were practically invisible for the wider society under the Communism. They lived in clusters in segregated settlements and worked only

in certain professions. In the democratic period, they have become visible to the society, while at the same time their social problems have become ever more intense. As a consequence, the level of dissatisfaction and rejection of the Roma among Bulgarians has been steadily rising (Tomova, 1995; Mizov, 2003; Pamporov, 2006; Grekova, 2008).

The same is true about an increasing anti-Turkish sentiment in the country, fuelled above all by several nationalistic and extreme right political parties, which gained popularity in the second half of the 2000-2010 decade. The increased intolerance towards the Turkish community has also come as a consequence of the widespread dissatisfaction over the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the main political party representing the Bulgarian Muslims. The influence and importance of the MRF has been steadily increasing over the years and the party has been a virtual king-maker from 2001 to 2009. The distrust and dissatisfaction of the majority population over what is perceived as “Turkish” party has quickly transformed into the ever strengthening perception that Turks in Bulgaria yield too much political and economic power.

### Cultural diversity challenges during the last 30 years

Since the liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, the population of Bulgaria has always been ethnically and religiously diverse. The first Bulgarian constitution (Tarnovo Constitution) included articles safeguarding the rights of the Bulgarian citizens belonging to ethnic and religious minorities. For example, Article 40 guaranteed the right to free practice of religion to those subjects of the Bulgarian Principality who were “Christians of non-Orthodox denomination or other believers.” The Constitution guaranteed the autonomy of minority religious communities and wide cultural rights for minority groups (the right to have their places of worship, schools, newspapers and journals). In Turkish schools, which were financially supported by the state, the language of instruction was Turkish. Turks also had their political representatives in the Bulgarian National Assembly, but had no right to form a political party on ethnic grounds (Tarnovo Constitution, 1879; Nazarska, 1999).

Despite that, Bulgarians have not been able to accept the minorities (especially the Turkish one) as an equal and inseparable part of the nation before 1989. The national minorities have thus felt insecure and marginalised, although at the same time they viewed themselves as part of the Bulgarian nation.

There are over 15 ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The largest group are Bulgarians (84.8% according to 2011 census), followed by Turks (8.8%) and Roma (4.9%).

The religious division of the population is the following (according to the 2011 census – see NSI, 2011): 76% are Eastern Orthodox Christians; 10% are Muslims (546,004 are Sunni, 27,407 are Alevi; 3,727 just declared “Muslims”); 0.8% are Catholics; and 1.10% are Protestants.

The three largest minorities in the country are Turks, Roma and Pomaks (or Muslim Bulgarians). Pomaks have not been included as a special ethnic group in the census as they are considered a religious and not an ethnic minority. These are also the three groups with the most significant

tolerance-related problems – each in a different way and for different reasons. Turks are well integrated, politically organised and with a very clear and well-expressed self-awareness, but are faced with the increasingly intolerant attitude of the majority population, which perceives that Turks control too much political power in the country. Roma are almost completely excluded from the society. They are rejected not just by the majority population but other minorities as well. The widespread perception is that the state institutions “tolerate” Roma too much and that instead of tolerating, the state should control them. Pomaks are tolerated as a religious minority, but any attempt to assert their different ethnic or national identity is met by a furiously intolerant rejection of such claims. Pomak self-identification is often presented as a threat to the national interests and an attack on the national unity.

**Table 1. Division of the population according to ethnic group**

Ethnic group	2011	2001	1992
Bulgarians	5,664,624	6,655,210	7,271,185
Turks	588,318	746,664	800,052
Roma*	325,343	370,908	313,396
Russians	9,978	15,595	17,139
Armenians	6,552	10,832	13,677
Vlachs	3,684	10,566	5,159
Macedonians	1,654	5,071	10,803
Karakachans	2,556	4,107	5,144
Greeks	1,379	3,408	4,930
Ukrainians	1,789	2,489	1,864
Tatars		1,803	4,515
Jews	1,162	1,363	3,461
Romanians	891	1,088	N/A
Gagauz		540	1,478
Cherkez		367	573
Arabs		328	N/A
Albanians		278	N/A
Others	19,659	11,369	N/A
Undeclared	53,391	62,108	N/A
No answer		24,807	N/A
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,364,570</b>	<b>7,928,901</b>	<b>8,487,317</b>

Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/EPDOCS/Census2011final.pdf>

\* Most experts consider that the real number of Roma in Bulgaria is almost double the official number – between 600,000 and 700,000.

## Turks

Turks are the largest minority in the country and are among the most homogeneous ethnic groups. They have started to settle in the Bulgarian lands after Bulgaria was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During the five centuries of the Ottoman rule, Turks became the majority population in the urban centres, while Bulgarians remained the majority in rural areas. After the Bulgarian independence, numerous Turks have retreated from northern and central Bulgaria towards the eastern parts of the country. In the following century, huge numbers of Turks left the country in several emigration waves, although their share of the Bulgarian population always remained close to 10% (Eminov, 1997: 76-78; Zhelyazkova, 1990).

The minority rights of the Bulgarian Turks have been defined in several international and bilateral agreements (the Berlin Treaty of 1878, the Istanbul Protocol of 1909, the Peace Treaty of 1913, the Bulgarian-Turkish Government Treaty of 1925 and others). These agreements offered the Turkish community the judicial guarantees for establishing their cultural and religious institutions in Bulgaria. On the other hand, very often Bulgarian state failed to live up to the obligations it has signed up to in the agreements. Quite the contrary, the state periodically tried to limit the rights of the Turkish minority. The situation worsened after the coup of 1934. Under Tsar Boris' authoritarian rule, Turks suffered social, political and cultural discrimination (Yalamov, 2002: 142-164).

The Communist regime, which took power in Bulgaria after the WWII, initially endorsed a liberal and tolerant policy towards the Turkish community. The authorities allowed the existence of Turkish elementary schools and print media in Turkish language, and introduced preferential quotas for acceptance of Turkish students in the universities. The main goal of these policies was the integration of the Turkish minority into the society and their active involvement in the processes of modernisation and construction of a Socialist state. At the same time, significant emigration to Turkey was also permitted, as this was a way for the state to "get rid of" those Turks, who did not accept the Communist regime and its anti-religious policies<sup>3</sup> (Stoyanov, 1998; Büchschütz, 2000; Gruev, 2003; Gruev, Kalionski, 2008). It can be said that the actions of the state in this period were an example of policies, which seemed liberal and appeared to be designed to stimulate the identity of the minorities, but were in fact used for the purpose of assimilation. Above all, the education and cultural policy of the state towards Turks aimed at weakening one exceptionally important segment of their identity – Islam (Büchschütz, 2000: 131).

Yet, seemingly liberal policies did not last long and in the early 1960, a drastic change occurred. Under the pretext of "integration" all specific features of Turkish identity (language, religions, customs and ultimately even their names) were first restricted and later prohibited. The process of complete assimilation of the Turkish minority reached its peak in the mid-1980s, when the names of the Bulgarian Turks were administratively substituted with Bulgarian-sounding names. The so-called "regeneration process" has caused an immense rift between the Bulgarian majority and Turkish minority, which has still not been completely overcome (Yalamov, 2002: 365-388).

The aim of this exceptionally repressive assimilation campaign was the complete annihilation of a separate Turkish ethnic and religious identity in the country. As a result, the Turkish community reacted by withdrawal and self-isolation. Despite the obligatory change of the names and their use in the public space, Turks continued to use their original, Muslim names within their families and communities. The efforts to preserve identity were manifested through many everyday practices. For example, most of the rituals connected with the life cycle like births, weddings and funerals were conducted in secrecy. The newborn children received a traditional name, alongside the official Bulgarian-sounding name under which they were listed in the documents. This widespread resistance on numerous levels made it possible to quickly return to the traditional public manifestation of ethnic, religious and cultural identity after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. Furthermore, the return to tradition in some cases exceeded the restoration of practices banned by the Communists. Various

3. In the period summer – fall 1951, around 155,000 people left Bulgaria. Majority were Turks, but Pomaks and Roma were also among them. Büchschütz, 2000: 130.

religious and cultural practices, which have naturally withered away as a result of modernisation, were brought back to life (Zhelyazkova, 1998: 381-382).

The restoration of minority and human rights of the Turkish and other minority communities after 1989 did not occur smoothly. A significant opposition to the reversal of the assimilation policies has appeared, especially among the Bulgarians living in the ethnically mixed areas and among the members of the security sector (the Ministry of Interior, secret services, army), who were directly involved in the implementation of “the regeneration process.” In their opinion, the process has achieved certain results and brought Bulgaria into a position from which there should be no retreat – otherwise the national interests of the country could be threatened. On the other hand, the Turkish community, encouraged by the restoration of their names, raised other demands: study of Turkish language and Islamic religion in schools in regions with predominantly Turkish population, proclamation of Islamic holidays Kurban Bayram and Sheker Bayram as official state holidays, and recognition of the Turkish community as a “national minority” (Baeva, Kalinova, 2009: 36-39).

The first democratic Constitution, adopted in 1991, included no reference to the term “minority.” The Constitution only mentioned the “citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian” (article 36) and added that everyone had the right to “develop their own culture in accordance with their ethnic affiliation, which is endorsed and guaranteed by the law” (article 54).

Although the post-1989 period saw numerous positive developments regarding the change of legislation and the general consensus among the main political parties regarding the protection of minority rights, there was also a notable opposition to these trends and above all to the political participation of minorities (especially Turks) in the central and local government. The article 11 (4) of the Bulgarian Constitution states: “There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties which seek the violent seizure of state power.”

Despite this, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the first political party representing Turks and other Muslim communities in Bulgaria, was formed in 1990. Since then, the MRF has always been represented in the parliament, and has been a member of three government coalitions. The reaction of the majority population to the appearance of the MRF on the political scene was predominantly negative. The public disapproval was reflected by the negative response of the main political parties – both from the right and from the left. Despite the persistent efforts of the MRF leaders to present the party as a national civic party and not as a representative of a single ethnic group, its political opponents time and again insisted on using “ethnic” terminology in the political debate, referring to the MRF as “the Turkish party.” On several occasions, most notably prior to the 1992 elections, efforts were made to ban the MRF on the grounds that it was unconstitutional (Article 11). In 1992, the Constitutional Court declared that the MRF was not unconstitutional and could operate as any other political party as its statute made no restrictions to membership in the party on ethnic grounds, nor it included any other provisions defining it as “ethnic party” (Constitutional Court, 1992).

Political attacks on the MRF have continued until today. While most of the criticism towards the party deals with its alleged high level of corruption,

black funds and links with the grey economy,<sup>4</sup> some accuse the MRF's leaders of trying to isolate the Turkish minority in order to preserve full control over its votes, thus obstructing its integration into the Bulgarian society. The anti-MRF rhetoric (which often spilled over into anti-Turkish hate speech) characterised the 2009 parliamentary election campaign, bringing substantial gains to the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party (the winner of the elections) and the extreme nationalistic Ataka (Attack) party.<sup>5</sup> President Parvanov's comment on the election campaign was that "this was not anti-MRF talk, it was openly anti-Turkish and anti-Roma talk" (BTV News, 2009). The widespread dissatisfaction over the political party generally considered to be Turkish has in recent years thus grown into a widespread intolerant attitude towards the Turkish minority.

Since 1989, the Bulgarian Turks have succeeded to fully integrate into all spheres of public life. As far as the official state policy is concerned, Turkish minority has been recognised and accepted by the Bulgarian state. The education in Turkish language is provided on all levels of education, they can freely practice their religion, they have newspapers and electronic media in their language and are actively involved in the political life in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, the full integration into the political and public space did not lead to genuine coexistence based on respect and acceptance on the side of the Bulgarian majority population and for the larger part of the last 20 years, their attitude towards the Turkish minority can best be described as a case of liberal tolerance. Furthermore, in recent years the anti-Turkish sentiments and intolerant attitude have been on the rise. The majority believes that the Turkish community has too much political and economic power and finds such situation to be intolerable. Turks are a minority and should therefore know their place – they are tolerated as long as they keep a low profile in public space. On the other hand, Turks do not want to be simply tolerated – they want to be included and actively participate in all spheres of public, political, cultural and economic life in the country.

## Roma

Roma are the third largest ethnic community in the country. The real number of Roma in Bulgaria is highly disputed and ranges from the official 325,343 (Census 2011) to 700,000 (expert estimates). The reason for the difference is that a large number of Roma self-identifies as Bulgarians or Turks, while some also choose Vlach identity. An additional reason for inaccurate numbers is the high mobility – many Roma do not live on addresses where they are officially registered, but have migrated to other towns or villages in search of temporary or seasonal employment and are therefore hard to track during the census.

According to the 2011 census data, 37% of Roma are Orthodox Christians, 18% are Muslims, while 10% are Protestants (it is interesting to note that out of 64,476 Protestants in Bulgaria, more than one third – 23,289 – are Roma). 24.6% of Roma did not declare their religion (NSI, 2011).

Roma are the most heterogeneous community in the country. In addition to professing different religions and identifying themselves as belonging to different ethnic groups, they speak a number of languages – Bulgarian, Turkish, and Romany (numerous forms and dialects). Some differ according to their lifestyle – they can be either "settled" or "nomads." Roma

4. This perceptions have been fuelled by numerous corruption scandals, which were brought to the public attention in the recent years – the most important being the allegations made by the Parliamentary Anti-corruption Committee that Dogan (philosopher by education) breached the conflict of interests provisions and has served private interests when receiving 750.000 EUR fee as a consultant of four large-scale hydroelectricity projects, funded by the state - 'Tsankov Kamak', 'Dospat', 'Gorna Arda' and 'Tundzha' Dam (Novinite.com, 2010a). Anti-MRF sentiments were also intensified by two scandalous Dogan's public statements, made by the MRF leader Ahmed Dogan. Just before the parliamentary elections in 2005, he used the term "circle of firms" to describe the fact that each political party has a network of economic groups and companies that support it financially – quite often through illegal payments (Gounev, Bezlov, 2010, p. 210). While talking to MRF supporters in Kochan village ahead of July 2009 elections, Dogan said: "I am the instrument of power, who distributes the bits of financing in the state. The power is concentrated in me, not in your MPs" (Sofia Echo, 2009).

5. The official slogan under which the 2009 elections were conducted was "Buying and selling of votes is a crime" to which Ataka added: "So is the Turkisation and plunder of Bulgaria." Ataka's election platform included the following points: Bulgaria must not be governed by the Turkish party MRF; a Turkish common worker in Bulgaria cannot receive a salary of 2400 BGN while a Bulgarian teacher is struggling to receive 600 BGN; Turkish language cannot be used in state and municipal institutions; Gypsy, Turkish, homosexual and other minorities cannot have any privileges. See Ataka election brochure: [http://www.ataka.bg/images/documents/broshura\\_09.zip](http://www.ataka.bg/images/documents/broshura_09.zip)

are further divided into numerous sub-groups. For example, the Bulgarian speaking Roma are divided into 21 subgroups. For all these reasons, Roma are perceived as a “community” above all by the non-Roma population. They rarely perceive themselves as a united and unified “Roma community” and the differences, distances and conflicts among various Roma sub-groups are often larger than between Roma and other ethnic groups (Tomova, 1995; Pamporov, 2006; Grekova, 2008).

An expected consequence of this situation is that the Roma community never managed to unify behind one Roma political party and elect its representatives into the National Assembly, despite potentially having more than enough voters to do so. There are over 20 registered Roma parties in the country, which fragments the Roma votes, keeping their electoral results well below the 4% parliamentary threshold. Only a few Roma parties (especially the Party “Roma” and Euroroma) had some modest success on the local level (Hajdinjak, 2008: 119-120.).

To say that Roma in Bulgaria are not integrated into the society and that they are not tolerated by the other communities (not just the Bulgarian majority but by other minorities as well) is an understatement. The majority of Roma live in segregated city ghettos or village settlements, separated from the rest of the population. In the 1945-1989 period, the Communist regime employed various measures (often repressive) to force the Roma minority to abandon their traditional nomadic lifestyle. After being made to settle, Roma were included (if not really integrated) into the country's social-economic system. They received access to health care and education, and were included into the labour market.

However, the situation has dramatically changed during the transition period. Today Roma are largely excluded from the legal labour market and work predominantly in grey and black sectors. Their access to proper health care is very limited, while the children drop-out from schools has dramatically increased. The prejudices and stereotypes about Roma are exceptionally negative – they are described as “dirty,” “lazy,” “thieves,” “liars,” “cheaters,” “irresponsible” and “hopeless.” As a consequence, Roma are rejected and according to recent sociological studies, only a third of Bulgarians are content with living in the same town with Roma (Tomova, 1995: 58-61; Pamporov, 2006: 37-38; Grekova, 2008: 20-28).

The first genuine and purposeful attempt to deal with the problem of Roma exclusion was the *Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society*, which the Bulgarian government passed in 1999. The Framework Programme was an attempt to set up a comprehensive state strategy for accomplishment of real equality of the Roma people in Bulgaria. It served as a base for various strategies, plans and programmes prepared and implemented by consecutive governments and individual ministries.

The *National Action Plan – Decade of Roma Inclusion*, passed in 2005, was the most ambitious attempt to address the multifaceted problem of Roma exclusion. Despite much optimism and hope that accompanied its launch, the Plan has not achieved much in terms of tangible results over the following years.

The programmes, action plans and other measures implemented by the government and various state institutions demonstrate that on the

institutional level, the state policies towards Roma can be rated as tolerance but with a reservation that it is tolerance with the clear goal of social-economic integration. Despite these measures (many of which suffered from poor implementation, insufficient funding and lack of commitment), the situation of the Bulgarian Roma has not changed substantially yet. If anything, the situation changed for worse. The general public still perceives them in overwhelmingly negative terms and continues to reject and exclude them (Grekova et al., 2010: 16). This is perhaps most visible in the institutional efforts to integrate Roma children into the system of education as quite regularly, attempts to desegregate Roma schools and transfer the Roma children to normal, or “integrated,” schools result in the resistance of Bulgarian parents (and quite often also teachers) against such moves. On numerous occasions, Bulgarian parents begun withdrawing their children from integrated schools and transferring them to other schools with little or no Roma children. Acceptance and toleration of Roma are a precondition for their successful inclusion into the society, but at the same time only their participation in all spheres of public life can reduce the distances and rejection. For now, the Bulgarian Roma are entangled in a web of rejection, exclusion and intolerance and the prospects for this to change in the near future are not very bright.

## Pomaks

The fourth significantly large ethno-religious group is the Muslim Bulgarians or Pomaks. The issue of Pomak identity has been a controversial one ever since the establishment of independent Bulgaria in 1878 and has yet to be resolved. The widespread belief is that Pomaks are not a separate ethnic group as the only difference between Pomaks and other Bulgarians is religion. Very often, Pomaks are seen as the “lesser” Bulgarians – inseparable part of the Bulgarian family-nation, but blemished by the “wrong,” Muslim religion.<sup>6</sup>

The majority of Pomaks live in the area of the Rhodopa mountain. According to the Census data, there were around 160,000 Muslim Bulgarians in 1992, and 131,531 in 2001 (NSI, 2001). According to various expert data, their number could be between 180,000 and 250,000 (Kostova, 2001: 26; Troeva, 2011: 14). The main reason for this conflicting and inaccurate data is the lack of internal homogeneity. Many Pomaks have problems with self-identification (Troeva, 2011: 14-19) Some identify themselves as Turks, some consider themselves as Bulgarians<sup>7</sup> (there has been a strong tendency towards converting to Christianity among some of them), while others believe their origin is entirely different from both dominant groups (some believe they have Arabic origin). Many identify simply as Muslims, equalising the religious identity with the ethnic one.

Many times in history, the academic discourse about Pomaks as “brothers who have lost their way” transformed into violent campaigns of forced assimilation during which Pomaks were forced to abandon their religion, customs and even their names. As a result, even today, the Pomak community is still very divided and uncertain regarding their identity. There is a very strong sense of isolation among them, especially those residing in the geographically remote and inaccessible Rhodopa mountain villages. A growing distrust towards the Bulgarian population and the state of Bulgaria, which has virtually abandoned them during the painful years of transition, has also been observed among Pomaks (Tomova, 2000: 131).

6. One of the best such examples is the book “On the Past of the Bulgarian Mohammedans in the Rhodopes,” published in 1958 by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.
7. It is interesting to note that those Pomaks who live among Christian Bulgarians, more often identify themselves as Turks, while those who live in the regions with a compact Turkish population prefer to identify as Bulgarians.

All attempts to assert a separate and unique Pomak identity (especially if they came from within the community) have provoked a very strong negative reaction among the majority population, including the political and intellectual circles. The most recent example was the case of the pilot internet census, which started in September 2010. The questionnaire prepared by the National Statistics Institute offered as possible answers for respondent's ethnic group also ethnicities such as Bulgarian-Muslim and Macedonian. This triggered a wave of criticism. The NSI Head stated that NSI has no authority or goal to determine what ethnic groups live in Bulgaria, but just wanted to give every Bulgarian citizen an opportunity to self-determine his or her ethnic background. The nationalist political parties demanded the categories to be removed from the questionnaire over fears they would divide the nation. In response, two Deputy Directors of the NSI resigned, while the resignation of the Head of the NSI was rejected by the Prime Minister (Novinite.com, 2010b).

The state policy towards Pomaks is a combination of tolerance and exceptional intolerance. On the one side, Pomaks are free to practice their religion and manifest their cultural identity without hindrance both in the private and public sphere. On the other side, the state and the majority population strictly refuse to acknowledge their right to genuine self-identification and the attempts from within the Pomak community to assert their identity as different from the Bulgarian majority usually lead to an overly negative and aggressive reaction from the state institutions, media and the public. The overall attitude towards Pomaks can thus be rated as intolerance. Without recognising its existence, there can be no discussion about tolerance and acceptance of a particular community.

All other minority communities in the country are relatively small. Only Russians, Armenians and Vlachs number more than 10,000 people, while all other are smaller than 5,000. Most (with the exception of Macedonians, who have problems similar to those faced by the Pomaks) are well integrated into the Bulgarian society and have no acceptance-tolerance related difficulties. Two of these communities (Armenians and Jews) deserve to be mentioned here because of their special place in the Bulgarian social and cultural life. Their presence and practically complete integration into the society is perhaps the only indicator giving ground to the claim that the Bulgarian society is not a complete stranger to mechanisms of acceptance of otherness.

### **Jews**

Jews have settled in Bulgaria in 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, when they were expelled from Spain. The community has integrated exceptionally well into the Bulgarian society and played an important role in the development of the Bulgarian state. Their level of integration was such that Bulgaria was the only country in Europe, where the number of Jews increased during the WWII. Despite being the ally of the Nazi Germany, in 1943 the entire Bulgarian society rose up in defence of the Bulgarian Jews, when the order came from Berlin that they should be sent to the concentration camps. As a result, none of the 50,000 Bulgarian Jews ended up in death camps. Despite that, in 1948-1949 over 30,000 Jews emigrated from Bulgaria to Israel to avoid living under the Communist regime and today, only a fraction of the once large Jewish community still resides in the country. The census data give the following numbers: 1,162 for 2011 and 1,363

for 2001. The representatives of the Jewish community believe there are around 10,000 Jews in Bulgaria, which are difficult to trace because they are so well integrated into the Bulgarian society, have intermarried with ethnic Bulgarians, and have in numerous cases abandoned their mother tongue for Bulgarian language (Barouh, 2001).

## Armenians

The majority came to Bulgaria during the period of the Armenian Genocide in the 1910s. They were well received and acquired refuge in Bulgaria, which provided them with good conditions for adaptation and integration. Their numbers were significantly reduced as a result of two large emigration waves to the Soviet Armenia (in 1935 and 1946).<sup>8</sup> The majority of Armenians live in the city of Plovdiv. The community is well organised and there are numerous Armenian organisations all over the country involved with educational and cultural activities. Armenians have been disproportionately active and prominent in the cultural life of the country (Miceva, 2001).

Both Jews and Armenians can be seen as examples of minority groups that have been treated with respect and recognition. They have always enjoyed full freedom to express their ethnic, religious and cultural identity. One pragmatic explanation for this is the small number of members of both communities. For this reason, the majority has never perceived them even as a potential threat to the national unity. Most Jews and Armenians also live dispersed in the larger cities and towns of Bulgaria, and are integrated into the majority population to the extent that the only visible marker distinguishing them from the rest of the population are their names. Both communities have been fully accepted and are respected both on the state level and by the society, as is manifested by numerous highly respected individuals from both communities who have left their mark in the Bulgarian politics, culture, science and sport.

## Immigrants

Bulgaria has only recently become a country attracting a more significant flow of immigrants. Neither the society nor the state institutions are truly prepared for this process. The state structures respond slowly and chaotically to the increasing numbers of refugees, asylum-seekers and economic immigrants, and the state has no clear policy on how to accommodate them and integrate them into the country. The society is only partially aware of the issue, as the immigrant communities are still small in number and relatively invisible for the average citizen. Having in mind the problematic attitude towards the traditional minorities, it can hardly be concluded that the increase in immigration will be met with understanding and benevolence.

## Definitions of tolerance in Bulgaria

Traditionally the debates about how tolerant the Bulgarian society was were based on the entrenched auto-stereotype among the Bulgarians as an exceptionally tolerant nation. This belief has its roots in the period of the National Revival, when the spiritual leaders of the nation advocated

8. It is estimated that around 5000 people left on both occasions.

the equality of all ethnic and religious communities in the country. The belief was further strengthened at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Bulgaria accepted and accommodated thousands of Jews fleeing from anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia (1895) and Romania (1904). A decade later Bulgaria welcomed Armenians who had escaped from the genocide in Turkey. Finally, Bulgarians stood up and saved their Jewish co-citizens in 1943, when they prevented their deportation to the Nazi concentration camps. Even the fall of the Communist regime and the transition to democracy occurred under the sign of protection of minority rights and equality of all religions. All this made it possible for the Bulgarian political elites to talk about the existence of a unique “Bulgarian ethnic model,” based on tolerance and respect for the others (Zhelyazkova, 2001b: 62-66).

Yet, when the general self-perception is juxtaposed to a concrete manifestation of tolerance, the results are less encouraging. Thus for example a survey from 2000 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents believe that Bulgarian Christian majority is tolerant (the belief shared by 89% of respondents who defined themselves as Christians and by 87% of those who said they were not religious). However, only 25% of Christian and 17% of non-religious respondents support the construction of temples of other (non-Christian) religions (Fotev, 2000: 34-35). Several sociological and anthropological studies conducted in recent years have shown that the ethnic Bulgarian majority is in general very distrustful and distant from the various minorities in the country. Bulgarians have incomparably more stereotypes and prejudices regarding the minorities than it is the other way around (Pamporov, 2009; Kanev, Cohen, Simeonova, 2005; Fotev, 2009).<sup>9</sup> The minorities are in general much better disposed towards the majority, and more open to various kinds of contacts and cohabitation.<sup>10</sup> One of the more recent studies on social distances and ethnic stereotypes in Bulgaria has shown that even after 130 years, the majority of ethnic Bulgarians still associate the Turkish minority with the Ottoman rule and the term “Turkish yoke” (Pamporov, 2009: 113). This is a clear sign that the education and integration policies in Bulgaria are still very far away from becoming multi-cultural.

Before 1989, in the regions where ethnic Bulgarians were a minority population, while Turks were a local majority, almost all prestigious political, intellectual and business positions were occupied by ethnic Bulgarians. The logic behind this was that Bulgaria is a country of Bulgarians, while the others were “intruders” and a heritage of unfavourable historical circumstances (Zhelyazkova, 2010: 9-11).

Post-1989 democratic transition has reversed this trend and now Turks are well represented in regional and municipal administration, local economy and other spheres of social life in regions where they represent majority population. This reversal has caused many Bulgarians residing in the mixed regions to believe that Turks pushed them out of the public space and are (again) dominating them. A research conducted in 2006 in one such municipality (Ardino; population: 68.2% Turks, 16.9% Bulgarians and 14.9% others – mostly Pomaks) showed that many Bulgarians do not regard the local administration as theirs. They feel marginalized and believe it is not in their power to influence the social processes in the municipality. Frustrated by the lack of perspectives, the young Bulgarians “are escaping” to bigger towns in search of professional realization and very few are still living in Ardino (Troeva-Grigorova, Grigorov, 2006).

9. For example, one study which compared results from 4 surveys, conducted in years 1992, 1994, 1997 and 2005, showed that between 87% (in 2005) and 91% (in 1994) of Bulgarians believe that Roma are predisposed towards crime; between 84% (in 1997) and 86% (in 1994) believed that Roma cannot be trusted; between 63% (in 2005) and 69% (in 1997) did not want to live in the same neighbourhood with Roma, while between 27% (in 2005) and 38% (in 1997) did not want even to live in the same country with them. The results show that there has been no decrease in the negative attitudes and prejudices against Roma over the years. The situation is somewhat different regarding the Turks. While the perception that Turks are religious fanatics (84% in 1992 and 59% in 2005) and that they cannot be trusted (62% in 1994 and 35% in 2005) have decreased considerably, the belief that Turks are occupying too much space in the political life of the country remained high (62% in 1992 and 69% in 2005). 18% of Bulgarians stated that they do not want Turks to live in Bulgaria. See Kanev, Cohen, Simeonova, 2005: 41-47.

10. 53% of Roma respondents in a survey said that Bulgarians can be counted on; 40% believe that Bulgarians are not ill disposed towards Roma, 59% would marry a Bulgarian, while 89% would make friends with them. Rejection of Bulgarians as colleagues and neighbours is between 2 and 6%. See Kanev, Cohen, Simeonova, 2005: 52-53.

Tolerance is a quite under-represented notion in the Bulgarian education system. The education is still quite unreformed and the curriculum is based on the Bulgarian ethnocentric national viewpoint. Roma children are predominantly segregated in separate schools and all the efforts to integrate them into mixed schools usually encountered active resistance of (Bulgarian) teachers and parents. Even if they do not protest openly, the Bulgarian parents remove their children from classes or schools where larger groups of Roma children are studying. The studies on ethnic discrimination in Bulgaria show that Roma are victims of institutional discrimination on daily bases. In most cases, however, this discrimination remains largely hidden and is not officially registered because Roma rarely use legal and institutional resources available for protection of their rights. This is not a result only of the lack of information, but above all of their isolation from the Bulgarian society and the lasting distrust and fear of the Bulgarian institutions (Grekova et al., 2010).

Another important criteria for tolerance in the society are the political parties. One of the first political parties founded in 1989 was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a party widely considered as a political party of the Muslim communities (especially the Turkish one). Its appearance and activities were met with very mixed reception. On one side, its representatives have been promoting themselves as the protectors of the ethnic model in the country and have on numerous occasions (especially in the beginning of the transition) contributed to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence and tolerance in the country. On the other side, the MRF has caused also a considerable negative backlash among the Bulgarians. The long years of its participation in the political games in the country and above all the increasingly authoritarian structure of its political apparatus have significantly contributed to the predominantly negative attitude towards the party in Bulgaria today.

The increasing popularity of nationalistic and xenophobic political parties says much about the levels of tolerance in the country. Two most popular such parties are VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement, and Ataka (Attack). VMRO (which stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) focuses on the national dignity and integrity and is less radical in its public statements and activities. It was established in 1989, but never gained significant popularity and usually participated in the Bulgarian parliamentary life as a member of various coalitions. Ataka relies on extremely aggressive nationalistic, racist and xenophobic rhetoric.<sup>11</sup> It appeared on the political stage shortly before the 2005 elections and achieved an unexpectedly high result with 8.14% of the votes. Contrary to the predictions that this would remain its best achievement, Ataka performed even better on the 2009 elections (9.36%). On the 2006 Presidential elections, Ataka leader Volen Siderov received 21.49% in the first and 24.05% in the second round of voting.

A very good test of how tolerant is the society is its reaction to various political initiatives regarding the Turkish minority. On numerous occasions and especially during the election campaigns, Ataka has raised the issue of the Turkish language news programme on the national TV channel “Kanal 1.”<sup>12</sup> After the parliamentary elections in 2009, the party demanded the referendum on the issue, provoking a heated public discussion for and against the news. After a significant number of aggressive and intolerant statements were made in the media and public space, in the end the position prevailed that the Turkish language news should be preserved.

**11.** This was especially the case from its establishment in 2005 to 2009. After the change of the government in 2009, the party made a visible effort to soften its rhetoric and move closer to the mainstream. Although officially not a coalition member, Ataka has been the most loyal and unquestionable supporter of the government, formed by the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party in 2009.

**12.** A 15-minute long summary of the main news in Turkish language (with Bulgarian subtitles) has been broadcast on the national TV channel since 2004.

Another test for the Bulgarians is the increasing anti-Islamic sentiments in the world. On the one hand, there is the opinion that “our” Muslims are well integrated and are “not like the others.” On the other hand, the suspicions and allegations about the spread of the radical Islam in the Turkish and Pomak villages have become quite common in the recent years. Even the traditional and well established norms from everyday life (like headscarves) are used by certain political circles as evidence that “radicalism” has entered Bulgaria. On several occasions, the special police investigators were called in to investigate the “manifestations of radical Islam” in various Bulgarian villages, but so far they have only confirmed that there was no such phenomenon in the country. Despite that, the media usually exploits these issues in a very sensationalistic manner, intensifying the public feelings of distrust and tension.

Media are in general a very important factor forming the public opinion and an indicator of the existing tendencies. Unfortunately, some media have in the recent years contributed to the spread of intolerance instead of trying to achieve the opposite. One of the TV channels, quite popular on the national scale, is SKAT. Its programme orientation is openly nationalistic, and anti-Islamic and racist messages are a common feature in many of its shows. The Council for Electronic Media, the state regulatory institution, rarely intervenes against the hate speech featured on SKAT and in other media, which regularly use negative and offensive terms for various minorities.

The situation has somewhat improved in the recent years with the passing of the new Law on Protection against Discrimination (in force since January 1, 2004) and the establishment of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The increasing number of NGOs has been engaged with the protection of human and minority rights and protection against discrimination. They have sent a number of signals to the Commission and started procedures with the goal of creating legal precedence and bring public attention to the issues of anti-discrimination and tolerance. The NGOs are also the most active in the research of tolerance in Bulgaria and in efforts to build a truly tolerant society.

The issues of tolerance, equality of citizens and fight against discrimination have been included in the relevant Bulgarian legislation: the Constitution, Law on Religion (or Confessions Act) of 2002, Law on Political Parties (2005), Law on Protection against Discrimination (2004), and Penal Code (from 1968 and amended many times since then). Special state institutions in charge of these issues have also been formed: the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (1997), Ombudsman (2003), and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (2005).

Monitoring of tolerance and anti-discrimination practices in Bulgaria has been conducted since 1998 by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). ECRI has issued four reports on Bulgaria until now.<sup>13</sup> Despite certain remarks, ECRI believes that the Bulgarian Constitution safeguards the equality of all Bulgarian citizens. Regarding the Confessions Act, ECRI recommends that the Bulgarian authorities continue the process of amending the law in order to ensure the full freedom of religion in accordance with Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

ECRI's most categorical recommendations deal with the prevention and punishment of racist crimes and offences based on discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and other indicators. ECRI

13. The latest report is from 2009. See *ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 2009.

recommends that the Bulgarian authorities ensure that such offences are duly punished in accordance with the law and that the authorities continue to foster awareness among the judiciary in this regard to ensure that the law is applied when necessary.

Despite the reports of various NGOs and findings of ECRI, the Bulgarian state institutions still do not recognize the existence of racism, xenophobia and manifestations of intolerance and hate crimes, and consequently they do not act accordingly to prevent and punish them. For this reason, ECRI again recommends that the Bulgarian authorities insert a provision in the Criminal Code expressly stating that racist motivation for any ordinary offence constitutes an aggravating circumstance (*ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 2009: 15). Regarding the relevant state institutions, ECRI recommends that the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues is reinforced and that its responsibilities are clarified in order to make a greater impact, especially in areas affecting Roma. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination has been positively evaluated, but ECRI recommends that its human and financial resources be increased – especially through establishment of its local offices (*ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 2009: 17-18).

## Concluding remarks

Bulgarians have been used to living in a multi-cultural environment since the times of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, this experience of cohabitation has led to the construction of models of parallel existence – the otherness is tolerated without being actually accepted. From the very formation of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, the Bulgarian society and the governing circles viewed Bulgaria as a mono-national Orthodox-Christian state. All Bulgarian Constitutions and principal laws noted the existence of various ethnic and religious communities and upheld the principle of equal rights and obligations, but at the same time all these legal documents (all Constitutions and the Law on Religion) placed the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the privileged position compared to other religions.<sup>14</sup>

The perception of a mono-national state has resulted in corresponding policies towards the minorities. They were accepted as a part of the Bulgarian society, but at the same time were in practice highly marginalised – Roma live mostly in segregated settlements at the edges of cities and towns, while majority of Turks and Pomaks reside in peripheral rural regions. In this way, they remain largely “invisible” in the everyday life of the majority population. The public attitudes towards them is directed and regulated mostly by the media and certain political parties with nationalistic orientation. Most often, the minorities fall into the media and political spotlight in election periods, or in times of political, economic or other crises, when they are most often presented as being responsible for a given problem, or as a problem itself.

At the same time, the mere fact of practical cohabitation in a multi-cultural environment is often enough for Bulgarians to perceive themselves as tolerant. However, the “tolerance” in this case can be understood only as “putting up with someone different,” without accepting and understanding them. A similar attitude can be observed even in the academic circles. The humanities in Bulgaria have failed to conceptualise the issue of tolerance. The thesis that the Bulgarian society is tolerant because of the traditional coexistence of various ethnoses and religions is accepted as an

14. Article 13 (3) of the current Constitution states: “Eastern Orthodox Christianity shall be considered the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria”. *Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*: <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>

axiom. An Orthodox and a Catholic church, a mosque and a synagogue, which stand almost side by side in the centre of the capital Sofia, are frequently pointed out as a symbol of tolerance in the country.

And yet, the term “tolerance” remains above all a synonym of bearable and parallel cohabitation. The situation could be classified as liberal tolerance – the right of the minorities to express their ethnic, religious and cultural characteristics is respected, but only as long as it is considered (by the state institutions, political actors and even the majority population) that this is not in contradiction with the national interests. The Bulgarian intellectuals have only recently (through import of the European discourse) begun to understand the tolerance in a broader way – as acceptance of the different groups. Such discourse for now exists predominantly in the projects and work of the non-governmental organisations. The particular studies actually show that the attitude of the majority of Bulgarians towards otherness is still based on deeply entrenched disregard, apprehension and prejudice.

The legislation and the state policies follow the European norms and are largely in line with the EU legal practices, but this is above all a result of the EU accession process as the Bulgarian legislation had to be changed so that the accession criteria could be fulfilled. The practical implementation of these legal texts often leaves much to hope for, and the comprehensive policy on equal treatment of all citizens belonging to various minority groups has yet to be developed. The traditional distrust towards the state institutions is another reason why many representatives of the minority communities remain very reserved regarding the possibility to turn to the state for protection of their rights.

Many minority communities feel that they are not equally treated and that the majority society and the state institutions are neglecting them. They have set up various NGOs and political parties in an effort to protect their interests. Roma are the most active in the NGO sector. They have not succeeded in uniting around a single political party, but have their representatives in many municipal councils. Turks and Pomaks have a political representation on the central level, and the political majority in many municipalities where they live. The Chief Mufti office is also actively involved in the protection of religious freedoms on the national and local level.

In conclusion, several recommendations can be made on how to increase the sensitivity and ability to accept the otherness in the Bulgarian society. In the first place, the state should more actively support the work of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, which has until now shown the best concrete results in the fight against discriminative treatment. The Commission itself should intensify and widen its media campaigns and its activities aimed at encouraging citizens to protect their rights through legal means. The media control institutions should be much stricter towards the cases of hate-speech and intolerance in the media

The state needs to develop a comprehensive and purposeful policy on acceptance of otherness in the Bulgarian society. To make this possible, a centralised system for collecting information on actual existence/lack of tolerance in the society, media and institutions is needed. The cases of discriminative practices, registered by various NGOs, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, courts and other institutions should be structured in a common database.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bulgaria is still searching for the proper balance in accommodating its ethnic, religious and cultural diversity. To a large extent, the Bulgarian political circles and the society have declared their support for the process of recognition and acceptance of “otherness” in the country. However, only a few concrete measures have produced effective and genuine results to date.

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