

The Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece: Comparative Remarks

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The Pomaks are Bulgarian-speaking Muslims living in Southern Bulgaria and Northern Greece. Both countries developed different strategies to deal with the minority. While Bulgaria's policy aimed at both the cultural assimilation into the Bulgarian nation and the socio-structural integration into the Bulgarian society, Greek policy resulted in the assimilation of the Pomaks into the Turkish minority of Greece.

The term Pomaks refers to the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, who live in the western and central Rhodope Mountains on both sides of the Greek-Bulgarian border. Due to their Slavic dialect and their Muslim faith they are viewed as the counterpart of the Bosnian Muslims in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. Since 1919 the Pomaks have been divided into a Greek and Bulgarian population segment. As they are not counted as a separate group in the Bulgarian or Greek census figures, we do not know their exact number. However, they are estimated to be around 250,000 people.

The Pomaks are nowadays well-researched. The considerable improvement of the research conditions in both countries after the political transformation of 1989 resulted in the publication of a series of empirical studies (cf. Trubeta 1999; Velinov 2003; Brunnbauer 2004; Karagiannis 2005). However, all existing studies deal either with the Bulgarian or the Greek Pomaks. What is still lacking is a comparative study of both Pomak segments. Such a comparison is indispensable for a better understanding of the minority. First, only such a comparison could systematically uncover the remarkable divergent development of the Pomaks since their separation after the First World War. Second, a comparison could shed new light on relevant developments on both sides of the border. The objective of this paper is to present the principal lines of such a comparative analysis.

SIZE OF THE TWO GROUPS

But first, two fundamental remarks are essential in order to highlight the different relevance of the Pomak issue in Bulgaria and Greece. The number of the Bulgarian Pomaks is considerably higher than that of the Greek Pomaks. There are an estimated 200,000 to 220,000 Bulgarian Pomaks, while in Greece not more than 40,000. Similarly, the overall Muslim minority of Bulgaria (primarily Turks, Roma and Pomaks) is much larger than in Greece. A series of sources estimate there to be around 1.5 million Muslims in Bulgaria, amounting to 15-20% of the entire population. By contrast, the number of Muslims in Greece is estimated to be 150,000, thus 1.5 per cent of the Greek population.

The size of (religious) minorities in a country is not *per se* significant. However, if nation formation is based on cultural homogeneity and, further, entangled with a certain religious tradition, the size of the deviant religious population can become a very explosive issue. The Balkan nations have pursued a variety of strategies in order to achieve cultural homogeneity. The most important event in the history of the consolidation of the Greek nation is the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in 1923. To a large extent, this event created the conditions for the construction of a culturally homogenous nation in Greece. Since the Muslims (and thus the

Pomaks as well) from Western Thrace were excluded from the population exchange, they have been a “small exception” within a culturally highly homogenous population since their official recognition as a minority (Karagiannis 2010). There is no comparable event in the history of the Bulgarian nation. Bulgaria’s efforts at cultural homogenization failed miserably, even though the Bulgarian authorities took every possible measure in this regard.

CONTACTS WITH THE NEIGHBORS’ NATIONALISM

The Bulgarians focused their attention on the Pomaks much earlier than the Greeks (approximately 40 years). The category “Pomaks” is in its own right a by-product of Bulgarian nationalism: Up to the 19th century there is no evidence in the sources of the existence of the Pomaks as a separate group. The term “Pomaks” was first introduced in the mid 19th century as a collective name for several local Slavic-speaking groups of Muslim faith, who were previously called differently. The emergence of a universal term for all these local groups epitomizes a new view towards this population, which was shaped by Bulgarian nationalism.

The (early) Bulgarian interest in the Pomaks was by no means a matter of course and inevitable. The language of a people is not *per se* important for their national affiliation. It is the political selection of the language as a criterion of national inclusion which makes it relevant. In principle, the language of a population can also be entirely ignored as a criterion of nationality. For example, in the 1980s the Bulgarian government declared the Turks of Bulgaria to be Bulgarians, who in the past had lost their Bulgarian language as well as their Bulgarian faith. Greece, by contrast,

never considered the Greek-speaking Muslims living in the country to be Greeks. On the contrary, during the Greek-Turkish population exchange they were declared to be Turks and had to leave the country. So, it was not the common language which attracted the interest of Bulgarian nationalists in the Pomaks, but rather the other way around: motivated by genuine interests, Bulgarian nationalism invented the meaning of the common language. As a criterion of national inclusion it was very important for the prospects of Bulgarian irredentism. By contrast, the linguistic criterion was never politically expedient for Greek nationalism. Only the adherence to the Greek-Orthodox faith could justify the Greek state’s claim to territories with Slavic, Albanian and Turkish-speaking populations. Accordingly, the country’s Muslims (regardless of their mother language) were systematically ignored.

Although Bulgarian nationalists at times strongly emphasized language as a criterion of national affiliation, they never succeeded in offering the Pomak Muslims a serious concept of ideological inclusion. The affirmations of the Bulgarian origins of the Pomaks were always accompanied by lamentations for their alleged violent conversion to Islam (during the Ottoman rule over the Balkans). The ideological efforts which aimed at including the minority into the Bulgarian national community thus never implied the reconciliation of Bulgarian nationality with Islam. By contrast, they implied the expectation that the Muslims in a free and independent Bulgarian state return to the heart of the Bulgarian nation by converting to Christianity.

Even the first encounter of the Pomaks with Bulgarian nationalism was conflictual: They took part in the repression of Bulgarian rebellions and vehemently resisted any Bul-

garian control over their settlement area (Karagiannis 2005, pp. 67-77). When the Bulgarian troops conquered the Rhodope Mountains during the Balkan Wars (1912/13), the Pomaks were violently Christianized on a mass scale in order to justify Bulgaria's claims to the area primarily inhabited by Muslims (Georgiev/Trifonov 1995). For the first time in history the Pomaks were forced to change their Muslim names to Christian ones. In that historical period, Greece encountered the Pomaks for the first time and attempted to capitalize on their aversion to Bulgarian nationalism. Greece and the Greek-Orthodox Patriarchate of Constantinople condemned in the strongest of terms the measures carried out by the Bulgarian church and paramilitary organizations. Bulgarian historians even report that Greek bishops sent irregular forces to the area in order to remove the Christian symbols (icons and crosses) from the houses of baptized Pomaks (Shishkov 1914, p. 19). Even though these formal conversions to Christianity were short-lived (in 1914 they had to be reversed due to international pressure), they were trend-setting with regard to how the Pomaks were treated in the Bulgarian state. The fact that the measures were limited to the Pomaks exclusively (Turks were not affected by them) also reflects a distinction made by the Bulgarian state between "more and less foreign" Muslims. This distinction corresponded to the view that some Muslims could be won over for the Bulgarian cause more easily than others. And this reveals a fundamental difference in the treatment of the Pomaks by the Bulgarian and Greek states: *In contrast to Greece, Bulgaria never regarded or treated its Muslim minority as a uniform entity.*

This difference was most apparent in the school education of the Pomaks: Bulgarian Pomaks always visited regular Bulgarian schools. The Greek Pomaks, by contrast, vis-

ited minority schools, which were tailored to the needs of the Turkish minority (lessons in Greek and Turkish) (see Kanakidou 1994). Unlike the Bulgarian Pomaks, the Pomaks in Greece never had the opportunity to be taught in their mother language. While the schools in Bulgaria strongly enhanced both the cultural assimilation as well as the structural integration of the Pomaks, they made both processes unlikely in Greece. They instead facilitated the assimilation of the Pomaks into the Turkish segment of the Muslim minority. This comparison exemplifies another important difference in the treatment of the Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece. Bulgaria's policy aimed at *both the cultural assimilation and the socio-structural integration* of the minority (the latter after the Second World War). In Greece neither of these occurred.

ASSIMILATION AS BULGARIZATION AND TURKIZATION

After the Christianization campaign of 1912/13 the Bulgarian Pomaks were confronted with violent assimilation campaigns two more times. The primary aim of these campaigns was to separate the Pomaks from their Turkish neighbors and thus to limit the Turkish influence on the minority. The first of these campaigns was carried out by the cultural and educational organization *Rodina* ("homeland"). *Rodina* was founded in 1937 by the Bulgarian ethnographer Petar Marinov, but was spearheaded by young Pomak "intellectuals" who made it their objective to promote the Bulgarian national consciousness among the Pomaks through propaganda and work in the educational field. Over the course of time the *Rodina* campaign took on very violent characteristics, and the Pomaks were again forced to change their names and relinquish numerous

symbols of their faith (Neuburger 2000, pp. 186-190). It was the Bulgarian Communists who put an end to *Rodina's* repressions. In 1944 the Pomaks were allowed to take back their Muslim names.

However, the liberal treatment of the Pomaks in Socialist Bulgaria did not last long. In the mid-1950s the Communist Party initiated an anti-Islamic campaign, which increased slowly but steadily and lasted until the collapse of the regime. In the early 1960s the Pomaks were increasingly recommended to change their names. Most Muslims were not willing to do so though and accepted several disadvantages due to their decision. What was to be done "voluntarily" in the 1960s became mandatory soon after. In 1970 all Pomaks had to take Bulgarian names by decree. In the early 1980s the anti-Islamic campaign reached its peak. The numerous restrictions and regulations (including the name changes) were abolished only after the collapse of the Communist regime (Karagiannis 2005, pp. 107-116).

The developments in Greece go in the opposite direction. In the initial years after the Treaty of Lausanne, which excluded the Muslim minority of Western Thrace from the population exchange, the Greek state supported the traditional religious and anti-Kemalist forces within the minority. However, this changed radically after the Greek-Turkish Friendship Agreement of 1930. As a result of the agreement, the decisively anti-Kemalist leadership of the minority was replaced by a Kemalist one. This allowed Turkish nationalism to take roots in Western Thrace. After a short deterioration of the Greek-Turkish relationships in the 1940s, a rapprochement of both countries took place as they were to join NATO in the early 1950s. The most important modification in Greek minority policy at that time was the recognition of the entire Mus-

lim minority of Greece as a Turkish minority. Along these lines, the word "Muslim" was replaced by the word "Turkish" in all official documents. The bureaucratic Turkization of the Greek Pomaks coincided with the anti-communist imperatives of Greek policy at that time. This was aimed not least at preventing any potential Bulgarian claims to Western Thrace (cf. Trubeta 1999, pp. 84-85). Despite the Cyprus crisis and the pogroms against the Greeks of Istanbul (1955) Greece did not revise its minority policy until 1969. The Greek junta first re-introduced the word "Muslim" to refer to the minority and began to deny its Turkish identity. This is still official Greek policy.

A comparison of the above described developments in Bulgaria and Greece is very instructive, in particular if one considers the time periods in which the various turns in policy took place. There are grounds for assuming that the turns in Bulgarian and Greek minority policies were related to one another. It can hardly be seen as a coincidence that - after the installation of Turkish-nationalist leadership over the Muslim minority of Greece - Pomaks with a Bulgarian nationalist orientation would assume leadership over the minority in Bulgaria attempting "to protect them from Turkish influence". A similar situation can also be identified in the 1950s. The anti-Islamic policy of the Bulgarian state, which involved a strong emphasis of the internal diversity of the Muslim minority, was introduced after Greece declared all Muslims on its territory to be Turks. The new revision of Greek minority policy in 1969 (reintroduction of the term "Muslim minority") had no impact on the developments in Bulgaria, because it was not accompanied by any serious measures to prevent the influence of Turkey on the minority. The renaming of the minority even coincides with the introduction of the so-called "principle of reciproc-

ity”, which made the treatment of the minority in Greece dependent on the treatment of the Greek minority by the Turkish state. Thus, the Muslims of Greece were practically declared to be foreigners, which significantly increased the level of solidarity among them.

SOCIO-STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION VS. MARGINALIZATION

An additional important difference in the treatment of the Pomaks by the Greek and Turkish states pertains to the socio-cultural integration of the minority. The Communist leadership of Bulgaria was the first to take serious efforts to win over the Pomaks with a large-scale modernization of their settlement area. In the Central Rhodope Mountains, where good agricultural lands are rare, industrialization and urbanization radically changed the character of the region. The illiteracy rate and unemployment dropped drastically and the standard of living of the native population considerably improved (Karagiannis 2005, pp. 90-96). Irrespective of its aggressive assimilation policy, Socialist Bulgaria thus strongly promoted the socio-cultural integration of the Pomaks, and it is not surprising that even resolute anti-Communists recognized this contribution of the Communist regime.

Greece, by contrast, never used its economic and social policy as a vehicle to assimilate minorities. Thus, the country’s Muslims were never among the beneficiaries of the modernization and economic upturn. In clear contrast to Bulgaria, Greece consistently ignored its Muslims.

CONCLUDING COMPARISON

Even if Bulgarian and Greek policies to-

wards the Pomaks can be described as anything but success stories, a comparison clearly shows that state policies in both countries proved to be decisive formative factors of the identity of the minority members. The various efforts of the Bulgarian state to win over the Pomaks yielded fruits. Thus, a significant part of the Bulgarian Pomaks has a Bulgarian national consciousness nowadays. Accordingly, only few Pomaks in Bulgaria regard themselves as Turks. With the increasing establishment of religious freedom in Bulgaria, those who consider themselves to be Pomaks (probably most of them) indeed view this identity as compatible with Bulgarian citizenship.

In Greece the ethnic identity of the Pomaks even more obviously reflects the state’s minority policy. The treatment of the Muslim minority as a uniform entity and/or as a Turkish minority strongly facilitated the Turkization of the Pomaks. It is no wonder that the overwhelming majority of the Greek Pomaks consider themselves to be Turks. Even those who view themselves as Pomaks regard their ethnicity as compatible with the Turkish nationality. The Turkish self-perception of the Greek Pomaks should also be viewed against the background of their future prospects, as Turkey offers opportunities to at least the highly skilled Pomaks. This does not hold for Bulgarian Pomaks since they do not speak Turkish. The assimilation of the Pomaks of Greece into the Turkish segment of the Muslim minority is reflected in particular in the numerous Pomak-Turkish marriages, a phenomenon which occurs quite rarely in Bulgaria. Finally, the fact that there are no Greek Pomaks who regard themselves as Greeks should not be a surprise, as Greek policy never pursued such a goal.

Even if the increasing liberalization of the policy towards the Pomaks in Bulgaria and

Greece since the political transformation of 1989 will not cause any noteworthy shifts in the identity of the Pomaks, the deepening of democracy in both countries remains the only possible way to reconcile the Pomaks with the countries in which they live.

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