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The Turkish minority in Bulgaria

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The Turks constitute the largest ethnic minority in Bulgaria. The Turkish minority is well represented in politics and public administration, but it only marginally takes part in social and economic life in Bulgaria. In the public perception of the ethnic Bulgarians negative attitudes towards "the Turks" and Islam prevail, which can be traced back to the Ottoman era.

According to the results of the last census in 2011, there are 588,318 ethnic Turks living in Bulgaria. This corresponds with 8.8 % of the entire population. However, the significance of Turkish population in Bulgaria should be measured not only by its size, but also by its important role in the political, economic and cultural relationships between Bulgaria and Turkey.

The ethnic Turks primarily inhabit the regions in the North-East and South-East of Bulgaria. The latter directly borders Turkey. Until 1989 this area was very significant: in geopolitical terms it formed not only the international border between Bulgaria and Turkey, but also the border between two socio-economic and political systems: Until 1989 Bulgaria be-

longed to the Eastern Block, while Turkey had been a NATO member since 1952. After 1989 the importance of this region seemed to decline. Since 2004 Bulgaria has been allied with Turkey as a NATO member. The Eastern Block has become something for the school books. The free movement of people and goods between both countries has continually increased in recent years.

After 1989 the position of the ethnic minorities in Bulgaria also changed. Bulgaria's minority policy regarding the Turks has never been clear and constant since the foundation of the Bulgarian nation state in 1878: the approaches spanned from integration attempts with the recognition of minority rights¹ to attempts at assimilation. For example, the Muslim names of the Bulgarian Turks were forcefully replaced by Slavic names during the so-called "renaissance process" in 1984 and 1985. Since the political transition after 1989 however, there has been a clear trend towards legally codifying and *de facto* guaranteeing minority rights. These rights were indeed also *de jure* guaranteed in the socialist laws and constitutions (1947 and 1971), but they were *de facto* disregarded. Only in 1994 were all ethnic groups granted the right to school instruction in their mother language. The radio and television law of 1998 stipulates the right of all ethnic groups in Bulgaria to broadcast programs in their own languages. During the democratization process all previously *de facto* disregarded civil rights of all Bulgarian citizens (freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, freedom of information, the sanctity of private property) were placed under protection.

1 In this regard the Turks were even privileged *de facto* compared to other minorities. See Büchsenschütz, Ulrich, 2000. *Malzinstvenata politika v Bǎlgaria*. Sofia, p. 130 et seq.

How have the improved macro-conditions impacted the situation of the ethnic Turkish groups in Bulgaria? Have they led to changes in their participation in social activities and to an increase in their social recognition and acceptance?

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Since the political transformation the Turks have been well represented in the political and administrative hierarchy of Bulgaria: currently 30 parliamentary representatives, one minister and over 500 mayors are of Turkish origin. Representatives of the ethnic Turkish groups have been members of all parliaments since 1989. However, these figures should not be interpreted as a sign of the successful participation of the Turks in social affairs. The type of their political participation instead points to ethnical "closure": The Turks primarily view themselves as best represented by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Most ethnic Bulgarians, by contrast, do not feel represented by the DPS and define the movement as a "Turkish Party". Sixty-nine percent of Bulgarians believe that the ethnic Turks have taken on too many positions of political leadership in Bulgaria. (Kǎnev et al. 2005) Sixty-four percent of Bulgarians would never vote for an ethnic Turk in parliamentary, presidential or municipal elections, even if the candidate of Turkish origin is "honest and competent" and belongs to the party that one favors. Only 30% of Bulgarians agree to a representative of the Turkish minority being appointed as a minister, even though there have been ministers of Turkish origin in Bulgarian governments for years already. Moreover, 65 % of Bulgarians are against Turks becoming officers in the Bulgarian army.

With regard to economic participation,

significant differences can also be discerned between Turks and Bulgarians: the ethnic Turks are disproportionately affected by the ongoing economic crisis in the country. According to a study by the Open Society Institute in Sofia, the number of ethnic Turks employed decreased from 66% in 2007 to 49.1% in 2010. (Pamporov 2012) By comparison, the number of employed ethnic Bulgarians increased from 62% to 67.1%. One potential explanation for this negative development in the economic participation of the ethnic Turkish group lies in their geographical dispersion: the Turks inhabit the poorest towns in south-eastern Bulgaria. In addition, the Turkish population primarily lives in smaller village communities. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics 37.6 % of Turks lived in a city in 2011 and 62.4 percent in rural areas. By contrast, the number of ethnic Bulgarians that lived in a city in 2011 was 77.5 %. According to World Bank data, the inhabitants of rural areas are most threatened by poverty. (The World Bank Report 2002)

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF EDUCATION ATTAINMENT

An additional potential explanation for the poorer economic situation of the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria can be traced back to their relatively low level of education attainment. According to census data from the past two decades the large differences in education attainment between ethnic Turks and Bulgarians have hardly changed since 1989: while 8.94 % of all Bulgarians had a higher education degree and 17.94 a secondary level degree (upper secondary or intermediate technical education) in 1992, these figures only amounted to 0.4 % and 10.38 % for Turks at that time. The illiteracy rate and primary school drop-out rates among

the ethnic Turks amounted to 7.42 %, but only 1.03 % among the ethnic Bulgarians. (Nacionalen Statističeski Institut 1992)

According to data from the past census from 2011, the number of ethnic Turks who had acquired a higher education degree increased to 4.9 %. However, this still remained low in comparison to the percentage of Bulgarians with a higher education degree (25.6%). There has also been an increase in the number of people with intermediate secondary school degrees: in 2011, 29.7% of the ethnic Turks had an intermediate secondary degree (Bulgarians: 52.3%). The illiteracy and primary school drop-out level among the Turks remained relatively high at 7.5 %, while it dropped to 0.9 % for Bulgarians. A potential improvement of the economic situation of the Turks living in Bulgaria is linked with an intensification of the trade relationships between Bulgaria and Turkey. According to data from the Turkish-Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce, which was established in 2004, the export rate for Bulgarian goods to Turkey amounted to 2,474,620 US Dollars in 2011. Ten years earlier in 2001, Bulgarian firms only exported goods valued at 367,420 US Dollars to Turkey.² Due to their language skills, members of the Turkish minority who generally speak Bulgarian and Turkish fluently have good career opportunities in firms operating in the import-export branch with Turkey. However, a prerequisite for this is an increase in the level of education attainment of the ethnic Turks. Bilingualism can only be a decisive employment factor when the applicants have the necessary education degrees and skills.

2 See Turkish-Bulgarian Chamber of Commerce: http://www.tbcci.bg/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=120&Itemid=161&lang=bg

The economic crisis and the poorer level of education among members of the ethnic Turkish group can be viewed as the main reasons, but not as the exclusive motives for their complicated economic situation. The attitudes of the Bulgarians towards the Turks can also have a negative impact in this regard. According to results of an opinion research study, 75 % of Bulgarians have nothing against working together with people from the Turkish ethnic group. However, 35 % of Bulgarians believe that the Turks cannot be trusted and that one cannot rely on them. (Kănev et al. 2005, pp. 45, 47)

PERCEPTIONS OF THE TURKS IN PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Several sociological analyses since the 1990s have determined a negative image of the Turks among the public in Bulgaria. According to the first representative study, which was carried out after the transformation in 1992, the Bulgarians associate the word "Turk" with characteristics such as "sly" (43 % of those surveyed), "ungrateful" (34 %), "cruel" (53 %), and "greedy" (41 %). (Georgiev et al. 1992, 32; Grekova 1995, 115) A study carried out among Bulgarian students in the 1990s also revealed a "predominantly negative image of the Bulgarian Turks" (Roth 1996, p. 56). In a study carried out in 2005, 60% of Bulgarians claimed that the Turks are "religious fanatics" and 35% believed that one cannot trust them. (Kănev et al. 2005, p. 45)

Current surveys from this year also demonstrate that old negative attitudes still exist. The social distance and the rejection of the Turks by the Bulgarians are still at a high level. However, a trend towards improved attitudes towards the ethnic Turkish group can also be discerned. Among the surveyed Bulgarians,

29.4% indicated that they would be willing to marry an ethnic Turk. (Institut Otvoreno ob-
stestvo 2012, 53, 55) In 2008 this figure only amounted to 21.7% and in 1992 only 14%. In addition, 62.7% of Bulgarians did not have anything against members of the Turkish ethnic group living in their neighborhood (1992: 52%).

The primarily negative social perceptions of the Turks in Bulgaria are not a new phenomenon. The construction of images of Turks by Bulgarians can be traced back to the era of the Ottoman Empire. Different perceptions of Turkey and the Turks have existed and continue to exist in Bulgarian discourses. It is indisputable that many areas of everyday life in Bulgaria, in particular the culinary diversity and the language, have been influenced by Ottoman culture. However, the impact of the Ottoman Empire on the cultural and social development of Bulgaria is disputed.

Individual authors emphasize the positive influence of the large markets of the Ottoman Empire on the economic development of Bulgarian society. (Hadžijski 1974, p. 186) Several academics stress the religious tolerance of the Ottoman Empire in their writings and the resulting cultural and religious autonomy of the Christian population. (Mutafčieva 1994, p. 3-36; Zelyaskova 1990) Individual positive images of the Turks can also be found in Bulgarian literature. (Jowkov 1976, pp. 22-31) However, the narratives about the Ottoman Empire, which every Bulgarian knows, are the negative ones. Despite all the variations in the images of Turks and the Ottoman Empire, Bulgarians are overly exposed to the negative narratives. According to these dominant narratives the Turks are: "different" and "not part of the Bulgarian nation and religion". They "threaten the territorial sovereignty of Bulgaria". They are "uncivilized" and "non-Europe-

an". They are presented as "violent criminals" and "enslavers". Most Bulgarian schoolbooks on history and literature since the foundation of the Bulgarian state in 1878 depict, above all, the military disputes between Bulgarians and Turks. The "peaceful" periods and trade relations between both population groups are hardly taken into account. The period of Ottoman rule from 1396 until 1878 is presented as a period of "slavery", in which the Bulgarians were the victims and the "Turks" the "enslavers". References to those Bulgarians, who made it into the elite of the Ottoman Empire despite their ethnic and religious affiliation, are omitted. As a rule, the Islamization of the Bulgarians is portrayed in schoolbooks as having been violent; most schoolbooks are completely silent about cases of voluntary Islamization.

One potential explanation why such images are so wide-spread is linked to the different geopolitical positioning of Bulgaria and Turkey during the Cold War, during which the school history books had to correspond with official state policy. After 1989 attempts were made to publish new school books on history with more updated interpretations of the past. In some of these interpretations the peaceful co-existence of Bulgarians and Turks in the Ottoman Empire is emphasized more strongly. The animosities between Bulgaria and Turks are downplayed in the "spirit of tolerance, anti-discrimination and European understanding" – a fact which is currently being controversially discussed among the Bulgarian public.³

3 With regard to this debate see the interview with Prof. Evgenia Ivanova in: http://www.dnevnik.bg/intervju/2012/08/23/1893235_prof_evgeniia_ivanova_albumi_s_ikoni_ili_uchebnci/?ref=email_mynews, as well as the analysis by Stefan Popov in: <http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=1522002>.

Another factor for the spread of negative image of the Turks is the participation of the *Movement for Rights and Freedoms* (DPS) in government. The movement was founded in 1990 and has had the aim of politically representing the interests of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. In several political decisions the movement played the role of the decisive third-party that "tipped the scale". (Riedel 1993, p. 111) In the legislative period between 2005 and 2009 the DPS was part of the governing coalition, but there were public speculations about "massive involvement of this party and Dogan himself (the leader of the DPS) in corruption and economic activities". (Schüler 2011, p. 55)

NEGATIVE IMAGE OF ISLAM

The particularities in the construction of the Bulgarian national identity and "oral history" also play an important role in the large-scale dispersion of negative images of "Turks" and "Islam". Precisely the rejection of Turkish and Muslim culture is one of the main pillars of Bulgarian national mythology, in which the Bulgarians are depicted as the victims of Islam, Islamization and the Turkish-Muslim conquerors.⁴ The Bulgarians, by contrast, are the heroes, who suffered but survived every-

4 More on the construction of the Bulgarian national mythology in Liakova, Marina: „Europa“ und „der Islam“ als Mythen in den öffentlichen Diskursen in Bulgarien, In: Hahn, Hans-Henning; Hein- Kircher, Heidi (eds.): Politische Mythen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Perspektiven historischer Mythosforschung. Marburg 2006, pp. 225-242. See also Marinov, Tchavdar: National Myths in Post-Communist Bulgaria and Their Criticism. In: Euxeinos 2 (2011), pp. 5-12; available at: <http://www.gce.unisg.ch/~media/Internet/Content/Dateien/InstituteUndCenters/GCE/Euxeinos%20Folder/Euxeinos%202011.ashx?fl=en>.

thing and who saved Europe from Islamization through their suffering.⁵

After 9/ 11 the fact that the ethnic Turks living in Bulgaria primarily believe in Islam had a negative impact on their public perception: the negative reporting in the Bulgarian media, which presented Islam in the context of terror, increased again.(Liakova, Halm 2009, pp. 131-137)

SUMMARY

One reason for the weaker acceptance of the ethnic Turks living in Bulgarian lies in the difficulties that the Bulgarian public and the Bulgarian state have dealing with the Ottoman past.

Despite the legal codification and granting of minority rights in Bulgaria, the negative attitude of Bulgarians towards the Turks still persists. Even though the political participation of Turks in Bulgaria is at a relatively high level, they are still perceived by the Bulgarians as "others". Symptomatic of this are the public discussions, which are conducted with regard to the participation in elections by those ethnic Turks with Bulgarian citizenship, who live outside the borders of Bulgaria. Although they have unconditional active voting rights as Bulgarian citizens, the exercise of their voting rights, - usually in favor of the DPS - is perceived by political opponents as "manipulative".

The establishment of a political élite

5 This "bulwark myth" can be found in all Balkan societies. See Dimitrova, Snezhana: "Edna Golgota, edno Vazkresenie, edna bariera, edin most ... i tehните vechni vragove. Za njakoi ot mitovete i utopiite na balkanskite natsionalizmi". In: Konev, Iliya ed. 1997. *Predci i predteči. Mitove i utopii na Balkanite*. Blagoevgrad, p. 352.

among the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria in recent years did not lead to broader social participation of the Turks in Bulgaria and therefore cannot be seen as a sign of successful societal participation of the Turkish ethnic group. In particular in the areas of education and employment, there are still large differences between the different ethnic groups in Bulgarian society: in this regard, the ethnic Turks fare worse than the ethnic Bulgarians. The lacking economic and educational advancements among a broad part of the Turkish minority also has prevented the emergence of a more positive image of the Turks within the Bulgarian public.

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