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ISLAM IN MODERN BULGARIA: 1878 TO PRESENT DAYS

By Radko Popov

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Muslims have lived in the Bulgarian lands for centuries. Unlike Muslims in Western Europe they are not immigrants or Gastarbeiter. Most of the Muslims in Bulgaria are Sunni, but there is also a significant Shia group, usually called Alevi, Alians or Kazalbash. About half a million (577,139 people, according to the 2011 census), or nearly 6 percent, of today's Bulgarian citizens are Muslims. Some sources speak of 8 or even 10 percent. The country has the largest share of Muslim citizens among EU member-states. Seventy-five percent of the Muslims in Bulgaria are Turks, while the others are Pomaks (Bulgarian speaking Muslims) and Gypsies.

During the 1877-78 Russo-Turkish War, which lead to the independence of Bulgaria, most of those Muslims employed in the Ottoman administration left the country, along with significant part of the Turkish, Circassian and Tatar populations. The war caused serious social changes and the de facto privileged millet of the Muslims has become a minority in a Christian country. This inevitably affected the religious life of the community. For example, Sofia, declared capital of Bulgaria in 1879, had 50 mosques before the Russo-Turkish War. Now, it has only one. Many of the mosques in the other big cities, where the
Turkish population decreased, also disappeared. It is mostly the principal mosques and those of architectural value that have survived.

In the restored Bulgarian state the Muslim religious community preserved a certain degree of self-governance, inherited from the Ottoman millet system. For example, the Shariah norms were still in force and were applied by the imams in matters of family and inheritance.

The first Bulgarian constitution of 1879, (modeled on the Belgium’s Constitution) guaranteed religious rights to all people in Bulgaria, regardless of their religion. The Bulgarian Muslims were organized in ten regions, each with their own mufti, to be headed by the Chief Mufti. After The First World War, when the rights of minorities were again guaranteed by the Treaty of Neuilly, the structure was centralised and consisted of the Chief Mufti’s Office, regional offices and religious communities. The religious schools, where Turkish was taught, remained open and were partially financed by the state. In the beginning of the 20th Century there were over 1,300 Turkish language schools in the country. A medrese for theological training was set up in Shumen in 1922.

The situation gradually changed with the advent of nationalist governments after 1934. The number of Turkish schools was reduced and the general social and political atmosphere deteriorated for the minorities. But unlike the Republic of Turkey during the rule of Ataturk (1923-1938), Bulgaria did not prohibit non-Orthodox Muslim orders, such as the Mevlevi. Wearing traditional clothes with religious symbolism, such as the fez and the veil, was not banned either. Prior to the Second World War, Bulgaria did make a series of efforts to fulfil its commitments under international treaties to protect the religious and civil rights of minorities, despite some serious breaches by its nationalist governments and organisations.
Pressure on the Turkish minority increased, however, when the Communists came to power in 1944. Like the practitioners of other beliefs, including Orthodox Christians, Muslims suffered under the restriction of religious freedom by the Communist regime that instituted state atheism and suppressed religious communities. The Communist Party condemned Muslim religious practices following the teaching of Karl Marx, who described religion as the "opium of the people." Atheist propaganda among Turks intensified. The wearing of shalwar and veils was banned in the 1950s, while after 1952 religious teaching was prohibited in schools. The medrese in Shumen was closed down and the number of imams and mosques was curtailed.

The Communists' policy towards all minorities, including the Turks, was at best contradictory. Initially, following the Soviet example, the Communist Party hoped to train Turkish Communists who would act as a fifth column in a possible Communist revolution in Turkey. However, this idea was soon abandoned. The authorities focused on secularising and educating the Turks, and threw in several emigration campaigns. In 1978 the government introduced mandatory "Socialist rituals" for weddings and funerals that were supposed to replace the religious ones. In the early 1980s the meetings of the last Sufi brotherhoods that had survived in north-eastern Bulgaria were banned. This process culminated in the recruitment of some members of the Turkish intelligentsia, which had been created by the regime, and of some imams as agents of the Secret Service, followed by the forced name-changing campaigns that culminated in 1985.

In 1989, 310,000 Turks fled Bulgaria to Turkey as a result of the communist regime's assimilation campaign. That campaign, which began in 1984, forced all Turks and other Muslims in Bulgaria to adopt Bulgarian names and renounce all Muslim customs. The motivation of the 1984 assimilation campaign was unclear; however, many experts believed that the disproportion between the birth rates of the Turks and the Bulgarians was a major
factor. After the collapse of communism, Muslims in Bulgaria restored their banned Turco-Arab names.

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, the Muslim names of those Turks who had stayed in Bulgaria were reinstated and they received the freedom to practice their religion. Some old mosques have been restored and new ones are being built. Theological schools have been established. Funding comes from private donations in the country, support from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party (DPS), funds from Turkey and religious foundations from the Persian Gulf. Muslim nongovernmental organisations often use material incentives to encourage Muslims to lead a more intense religious life, attend courses in Islam, and wear clothes in accordance with the Islamic tradition. (This is also practiced by Foreign Christian missionaries working especially with gipsies, but not only.)

Today, there are about 1,300 mosques and prayer houses in Bulgaria. Due to the shortage of imams, only about 1,000 of them are in active use. Muslims in the country are not divided by ethnic origin and it cannot be established precisely which mosques and prayer houses are used by Turks and which by other ethnic groups. Besides, many Muslim Roma and some Pomaks identify themselves as Turks.

The Chief Mufti is the head of the Muslim religious hierarchy. He is based in Sofia and is the head of 21 regional muftis, elected for a term of five years by the representatives of the Mosque Boards of Trustees. The religious leadership is still experiencing the negative consequences of the activity of the Communist secret service. These often find expression in division and infighting about who is to represent the ummah in Bulgaria.

There are three religious high schools in Ruse, Shumen and Momchilgrad, and one Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia. The Chief Mufti’s Office also organises courses for imams. Many young Muslims, mostly Pomaks, receive grants to study Islam in Arab countries.
However, these are sometimes viewed with distrust by traditional Muslims and Christians who suspect them of being Wahhabi, or fundamentalists. They are, rather, Salafi who aspire to the "pure" Islam of the time of Muhammad. The neo-Salafis disseminate print and electronic publications and books that are not based on the traditional practices in Bulgaria’s Hanafit School but rather on interpreting systems popular in the Arab world. Neither the muftis, nor the Diyanet (the Turkish Religious Affairs Directorate in Ankara) approve of these activities.

The Alevi in Bulgaria, also called Alians or Kazalbash, number about 60 to 70 thousands and are most likely descendants of Turkic tribes which initially lived in the north-eastern Persian province of Horasan. There, they adopted Shia Islam and later settled in Asia Minor. However, due to their non-Orthodox faith, the Sunni Ottoman Empire considered them to be rebels. At the beginning of the 16th Century Sultan Selim I (1512-1520) dispersed the Kazalbash across the empire and some of them settled in the territory of present-day Bulgaria. The Alevi light candles in the tekkes (shrines) of their holy persons, pray before them, and believe in their protection. They would also drink alcohol and allow their women to participate in religious ceremonies and not cover their heads. The Kazalbash do not have mosques because Ali was killed in a mosque, at Kufa, and they keep their rituals secret. They conduct their prayer gathering (cem) in private houses and do not reveal anything about the sema, a religious dance accompanied by saz music and songs. There are still several Alevi shrines in Bulgaria. Most are visited not only by Alevi, but also by Sunni Muslims and even Christians. The most popular among them are Demir Baba near Isperih, Ak Yazili Baba near Balchik and Osman Baba near Haskovo.

A Bulgarian court in the town of Pazardzhik, situated between Sofia and Plovdiv, has been holding a trial against thirteen religious leaders since 2012 who are accused of preaching radical Islam. The defendants face up to five years in prison, which is viewed
abroad as a test for the limits of religious freedom and tolerance in the country. Prosecutors say the Saudi-financed activities of the imams have been spreading religious extremism and that they have used a local soccer team to indoctrinate boys. Prosecutors allege that three of the imams were undermining the state by encouraging people to boycott parliamentary elections and spreading religious hatred. The other 10 are implicated in working with *Al Waqf al Islami*, a Saudi-financed charity that built mosques, sent boys on trips to the Middle East, and financed religious education in Bulgaria that prosecutors say embraced the Salafist brand of fundamentalist Islam. The Netherlands-based but Saudi-funded organisation is suspected of links to Al-Qaeda. The Bulgarian government withdrew *Al Waqf al Islami*’s permit to operate in 2003, but prosecutors say the 13 accused continued its work without a registration. All defendants have pleaded not guilty and several witnesses have so far refused to confirm their initial written testimony. Whatever the outcome, the trial risks raising tensions between Bulgaria’s Christian majority and the Muslim minority.