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Stefan Ubiparipovic
University of Belgrade, Serbia and Karl Franzens University in Graz, Austria

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RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE
POMAKS IN GREECE AND BULGARIA: BEHIND THE STATE VALANCE

By Stefan Ubiparipović

Stefan Ubiparipović is a student in the Interdisciplinary Master’s Program in South-Eastern European Studies in the School of Political Sciences at the University of Belgrade, Serbia and Karl Franzens University in Graz, Austria.

Introduction

The political, social and religious diversity and undulating environment of the South-Eastern European region has served as a cradle for many different identities. Depiction of historical legacies, political changes, and state policies has led to the continuous shaping of Muslim identities. This paper will focus on the Pomak\(^1\) community within two states, Greece and Bulgaria. During the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in the period after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, Pomaks have experienced challenges which bore a direct influence on their identity. Both of the abovementioned countries had a specific approach towards minorities, which left noticeable consequences.

First, I will briefly explain the important events that have coincided or strongly influenced Pomak identity during the twentieth century. Several Greek and Bulgarian state policies will be mentioned for they served as fierce attempts to essentially change Pomaks. This

\(^{1}\) Pomaks are non-Turkic and non-Albanian Slavic Muslim communities in south-eastern Balkans.
segment here will focus on the events that occurred between the end of World War I and shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union.

Next, this paper will focus on the period after the fall of communism in Europe and attempt to address the current state policies towards Pomaks. Bulgaria and Greece, as major Orthodox Christian countries, have distinct solutions for cooperating with minorities which reflect the strong or weak influence of Islam.

Finally, I will conclude this paper by showing that the Muslim religious identity is to some extent relative and may individually and directly depends on the strict or loose state policies addressing minorities. Furthermore, the persistent role the state plays here has led to an uncertainty regarding clear Pomak identity. After all, it seems that the state has been successful in influencing Pomaks, resulting in this minority being completely different in these two countries, where they face contrasting existential and structural problems.

**Between Athens and Sofia**

Pomaks represent a Muslim minority which can be found in several states in the South-Eastern Europe region. This paper will focus on their position in Bulgaria and Greece. In Bulgaria, Pomaks are mainly residing in the central parts of the Rhodope Mountains, while in Greece, they are located in the north and northeastern parts, mainly in Western Thrace. In both cases, they live near the border between these two countries. It is believed that there are approximately 50,000 Pomaks in Greece and somewhere between 67,000 to 250,000 Pomaks in Bulgaria. The last national census in Bulgaria took place in 2011, and it showed that ten percent of its population are Muslims, which is approximately 500,000 people, and in which the “persons

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3 Ibid.
who determine themselves as belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic group […] there are] 67,350 Muslims."\(^4\) The Muslim community represents a significant part of the population in Bulgaria, especially in the south and southeastern parts, while in Greece, it accounts for approximately 1.3 percent of the population, which is around 100,000 people.\(^5\)

In the years following the end of World War I and the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, Greece and Turkey agreed to have a population exchange treaty, but Pomaks and Roma were exempted from it. It is believed that Pomaks had hindrances as seen in their historical legacy and geographical positioning, and included the impact of the Cold War and the weight of religion and language.

First, in Greece, the state politics after World War I led to more ethnic purity. Removing all signs of the Ottomans meant pursuing a policy which would ostracize the Muslim population, but Pomaks and Roma people remained a special group. Their position and attitude by the state was a bit derogatory. During the years of the Lausanne Treaty, “most Pomaks in 1920s lived in mountainous areas”\(^6\) and afterwards their settlements included a “multiculturalism based on the Ottoman millet understanding of ‘community’, where religious divisions marked out group boundaries.”\(^7\)

Next, it is very important to mention that the period during the Cold War was essential in shaping identities of the group in both countries. The border between these two countries was the eastern part of the Iron Curtain, therefore causing Pomaks to be portrayed by both sides as potential traitors. In Greece, they were seen as natural collaborators with communists because

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\(^{7}\) Ibid., 4.
they spoke Bulgarian. As a result, the settlements were isolated from the public and required special travel documents which served as a carefully designed concentrated procedure to prevent a possible communist insurgency.\(^8\)

In Bulgaria, the Communist Party proclaimed unity among citizens, women and men, which played a crucial role in internal relations. Nonetheless, Bulgarian nationalist policies initiated “several campaigns by Bulgarian governments to assimilate Pomaks into the Bulgarian majority through coercive tactics […] to develop multiple identities” where “most of these are contested by other Pomaks, by their Bulgarian and Turkish neighbours, by nationalist organizations, and by state authorities.”\(^9\) Bulgarian state nationalism considered Pomaks ethnic Bulgarians because of their Slavic speech which then promoted the discourses that they were violently converted to Islam by the Ottomans.\(^10\) This led to the “Once a Bulgarian, always a Bulgarian” campaign, which meant that “at times the Pomaks have been allowed to maintain their religious identity unhindered, while at other times authorities have attempted to assimilate them into the majority Bulgarian culture by forcing them to replace their Muslim names with Bulgarian names, renounce their Islamic faith and convert to Christianity,” which happened “[f]our times during the twentieth century (1912, 1942, 1962, and 1971-74).”\(^11\) Consequently, living on the border further influenced state policies in order to prevent migrations from the Soviet sphere to Greece and/or Turkey. The situation was not so different considering this: “the

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\(^{8}\) There was even a wall built between two countries which served the purpose of maintaining the Iron Curtain strong. Hugh Poulton \& Taji-Farouki Suha, *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1997), 49.


\(^{10}\) Bulgarians thought that Pomak “origins were always accompanied by lamentations for their alleged violent conversion to Islam (during the Ottoman rule over the Balkans).” E Karagiannis “The Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece: Comparative Remarks,” University of Zurich, Euxeinos, Vol. 8 (2012): 20.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 10.
political freedom from the state pressure of reprisals, is occupied by other political figures, who are no less ambitious.”  

Finally, speaking Bulgarian and being a Muslim did not improve their position or pave way to less assertive policies in identity-shaping. Also, assimilation of the minority in order to achieve a “clean” ethnic image was impossible because “the Pomaks do not share the same historical myths with the Bulgarian [or Greek] majority […] and their culture is Islamic.” Pomaks remained torn between Turkish, Bulgarian, and other ethnic elements and “[s]tanding at the crossroads of language, ethnicity and religion, the identification […] of minority has been highly controversial.”

**From an Iron to an Invisible Curtain for the Pomaks**

There are several important factors Bulgarian Pomaks have that influenced and comprehensively changed their contemporary lives, and helped coax the alteration of behavior within the group. These specific intertwining moments are the direct consequences of the capitalist system, fall of communism, EU integration, and the influence of foreign countries.

First, after the fall of communism, the economic situation drastically changed for the group, where many large state enterprises were privatized and then dismantled. Men and women had more equal positions before so this led to the bartered “patriarchal environment where men

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were dominant, now women earned money.”\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, the local community was devastated by the fact that “Bulgaria was suddenly thrust into the global capitalist economy […] and a fatal combination of labor unrest, international market pressure, bungled privatization, and high-level corruption” took place.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, it was evident that the unemployment rates were “higher among minorities and Pomaks.”\textsuperscript{17}

Secondly, the EU integration process was announced as a positive incentive for the Muslim minority but in practice, this was not noticeable particularly in rural areas in the perplexed state-minority relations. The Bulgarian Constitution of 1990 did prescribe that every citizen was equal and gave certain minority and religious freedoms. The process of accession and membership to the EU did bring improvements and countered the buttressed edifice of inveterate state decisions towards the community. On the other side, it brought limited opportunities, particularly economic ones, and more chances to migrate to other countries which led to a smaller and dispersed Pomak community. Here, it was clear that “in the areas on both sides along Bulgarian-Greek border […] the idea of European identity started to be viewed as an alternative to the deadlock in the identity of the community.”\textsuperscript{18}

Lastly, the strong religious influence of foreign countries was a natural successor backed up by the embitterment caused by state engagement during the Cold War. Pomaks in Bulgaria leaned more against religion, preferring a more conservative, artificially imported Islamic dogma. In some cities, it was noticeable that “restaurants had stopped serving pork […] some women were no longer allowed to leave their homes without their husbands’ permission—something unheard of before 1989 […] men who went to the mosque were being given

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 8.
\textsuperscript{17} Poulton & Taji-Farouki, \textit{op. cit.}, 45.
\textsuperscript{18} G. Lozanova et al., \textit{op.cit.}, 25.
preference for local jobs and old people were now being chastised as “bad” Muslims for carrying on local traditions.”¹⁹ Another more visible sign of the influence was that “an increasing number of young women were dressing head to toe in a new Islamic style imported from abroad.”²⁰ Perspicuous endeavors of religious diplomacy and education led to the understanding that “European Muslim communities share common geopolitical circumstances, such as the ubiquity of globalization, the financial dominance of Saudi Arabia over the international Islamic charitable aid establishment.”²¹ The influence of religious dogma had direct socio-economic benefits for the community by bringing more conservative Islam as well as employment, education, and infrastructure. Furthermore, it built new mosques, brought young imams who were motivated to revive the settlements, while on the other side, the state missed their chance to widely support such activities.

In Greece, we could identify the leading issues clouting the Pomaks, namely the minority state policies and on the other side, the education system and seriousness of the religious dogmas.

First, Greek state policies are noticeably not defining the Pomak identity as unique, but rather a part of the Muslim community. On the other side, the biggest Muslim minority is Turkish, so presumably due to efficient and more adequate control towards the group, the authorities are intentionally not clear in separating the two groups. Encroachment towards this strategy could be depicted as “[t]he bureaucratic Turkization of the Greek Pomaks [which] coincided with the [previous] anticommunist imperatives of Greek policy.”²² In this way, the “Greek government constructed a double-faced imaginary identity for the Slavic speaking

¹⁹ Ghodsee, op. cit., 1.
²⁰ Ibid.
²¹ Ibid., 5.
²² Karagiannis, op. cit., 21.
Muslim populations”\textsuperscript{23} and succeeded in constantly throwing their minds back and forth to Turkish identity.\textsuperscript{24}

Secondly, minority schools in Western Thrace teach in Turkish language with a lot emphasis on “modernization.” This is explained as practically attempting to shake and refresh the Muslim conservative religious dogmas, where in some cases teachers “are very proud when girls come with scarfs and take it off by the end of school.”\textsuperscript{25} Feasibility of educational policies\textsuperscript{26} also shows the influence of younger generations who in some cases, might consider the term Pomak as derogatory and outdated. Notwithstanding, Greek “state politics are revealed as neither a singular nor an unidirectional top-down process”\textsuperscript{27} and it is important to mention that the community is very suspicious towards authorities, where decades of isolation during the Cold War left a genuine mark.

At the end, Pomaks are left with multiple identities and their main flagship characteristics are their language and religion which proudly stand out today.\textsuperscript{28} State predilection and sometimes strenuous actions have contributed to the “lack of consent on Pomak identity”\textsuperscript{29} but they “cannot be considered as migrants or foreigners.”\textsuperscript{30} By the same token, the identity

\textsuperscript{24} Besides, two countries have “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”. See Karagiannis, \textit{op.cit.}, 19.
\textsuperscript{25} Demetriou, \textit{op., cit.}, 108.
\textsuperscript{26} One of the intentions is to try “to persuade them to abandon the language, customs, habits and even their national self-definition, by attributing their suspicion to these elements. In this way their folklore is confronted as a species for rejection and change, since it is squeezed among their national consciousness and their religious identity”. Read more in M. G. Varvounis. “Historical and Ethnological Influences on the Traditional Civilization of Pomaks of the Greek Thrace”, (Komotinie, Greece: Demokritus University of Thrace, Department of History and Ethnology, 2003), 11.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{28} This creates a situation where “members of a given community have multiple identities, each activated upon appropriate circumstances”. Eminov, \textit{op. cit.}, 1.
\textsuperscript{29} Demetriou, \textit{op., cit.}, 103.
\textsuperscript{30} Samim Akgönül, “Is there a Muslim Minority in Europe”, Akademie der Diözese Rottenburg-Stuttgart, (2013), 2.
misunderstanding is developed substantially as “the hybridity and fluidity of Pomak identity [...] where some] make the claim that the Turks should not represent them politically.”31 It could be seen that Pomaks had no other options than to develop a “clandestine identity [which] adopts and employs itself for the sake of its inner stability forms of social organizations borrowed from or even enforced from the majority administration.”32 State actions and policies, together with their previous acts during the Cold War, have significantly marked this identity and “proved to be decisive formative factors of the identity.”33 This leads to the conclusion that “Pomak identity(ies) will show that claims to a particular identity are not primordial or a fixed essence”34 or “an unstable state of a communal identity.”35 Certainly in Bulgaria at least, “the fact that the state policy was different towards Turks and towards Pomaks played an important role.”36 Furthermore, minorities faced confusion “[w]hile private Pomak identity enabled them to enjoy their local affiliation and sustain an inclusion and exclusion system, the Turkish identity enabled them to negotiate their survival through the inconsistent and threatening minority policies.”37

Conclusion

Pomaks, similar to many minorities in the South-Eastern European region, had a burdensome recent history marked by several state interventions. During the twentieth century, particularly the period of the Cold War, both Pomaks in Greece and Bulgaria situated on the borders, faced challenges and were considered a potential political threat to the state.

31 Ghodsee, op. cit., 22.
32 Poulton & Taji-Farouki, op. cit., 52.
33 Karagiannis, op. cit., 23.
34 Eminov, op. cit., 2.
36 Lozanova et al., op. cit., 30.
37 Boboc-Cojocaru, op. cit., 344.
Policies aimed to create a homogenous ethnic image such as Christianization, change of names in Bulgaria, and the restriction of movement and isolation in Greece created a gap in Pomak-state relations. After 1990, this situation changed but their legacy of previous attempts to create this image still remains strong, lamenting in memory today. In Bulgaria, overextended use of force by the state was replaced by almost no socio-economic actions which gave space for third parties to promote a more conservative Islamic dogma. In Greece, education plays an important role in unfastening the Pomak identity, where the minority is pushed towards being a part of Turkish minority for presumably easier oversight.

The final result is their shattered identity and array of options presented to Pomaks to choose from. It is very interesting that this constant switching of identities in Bulgaria is different, between Bulgarians, Turks, Roma, and Pomaks whereas in Greece, they are similarly between Bulgarians, Turks, Muslim, and Pomak. It may be because there are some incentives in Bulgaria to ethnically promote Pomaks to a majority among the Muslim minority, while in Greece these attempts are not so evident.

Nevertheless, the members of the minority have the privilege to use parts of their identities when the need arises, but this poses new problems like uncertainty and inconsistent identity conviction. State policies are very influential factors; Bulgaria and Greece have been trying to change and rewrite the identity of Pomaks so the people could express their cultural and religious uniqueness to a lesser extent. Ironically, the Iron Curtain has switched to a translucent valance, enabling Pomaks to officially participate in activities, but on the other side, preventing them to approach the state without any impediments.