



## Post-Communist Bulgaria's Ethnopolitics

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### **Introduction**

In culturally heterogeneous societies, vertical differentiation (segmentation) on the basis of ethnicity, race, language or religion often has higher salience for their members than horizontal differentiation on the basis of socio-economic class or ideology (Bryant 1992). This may give rise to what Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan call a 'stateness' problem in aspiring new democracies. This may occur 'when there are profound differences about the territorial boundaries of the political community's state and profound differences as to who has the right of citizenship in that state...' (Linz and Stepan 1996: 16). Most scholars see 'stateness' issues as basic for democratic transition and consolidation, and some even consider a sense of national unity to be the only necessary condition for achieving stable democracy (cf. Rustow 1970, Schmitter 1994, Tarrow 1995). The democratisation literature has devoted relatively little theoretical attention to 'stateness' problems, because it has focused mostly on transitions in Southern Europe and Latin America, where the challenge of competing nationalisms is not a major issue (Linz and Stepan 1996: 16). By contrast, the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe precipitated a region-wide drift towards ethnic tensions, demagogic ethno-nationalism and separatism, culminating in the tragic fratricidal wars in Yugoslavia and in parts of the former USSR.

The explosiveness of cultural divisions is clearly a problem for ethnically plural new democracies of Eastern Europe (Bogdanor 1995). Ethnic nationalism, long suppressed by the former communist regimes, has re-emerged as the dominant political trend in the region. But how much of an existential threat is the new democracies' ethnic heterogeneity?

While majority-minority problems have strained the transition to democracy in Bulgaria, ethnic heterogeneity has not become a major obstacle to democratisation.<sup>1</sup> When the country began its democratic transformation, the ethnic conflict between the Slavic majority and the Turkish minority inherited from the communist past appeared to pose a threat to political stability and consolidation, if not to state cohesiveness itself. Trying to shore itself up by manipulating the majority's nationalist sentiments, the old regime had created a polarising conflict along ethno-religious lines by subjecting the Muslim Turkish minority in Bulgaria to a campaign of cultural and linguistic assimilation. When the anti-Turkish assimilation drive was officially ended in December 1989 and the rights of ethnic Turks began to be restored, this reversal of policy provoked an explosion of nationalist sentiments among majority Bulgarians. Symbolic for majority-minority tensions here and elsewhere, the leaders of neo-nationalist groups even denied the existence of any ethnic minorities in Bulgaria. In an atmosphere of heightened tensions and nationalist mass protests, the ethnic Turkish-dominated Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the largest and most influential ethnic minority party in Bulgaria,<sup>2</sup> barely won legal recognition and for a time its very existence was in danger. The ethnic issue has resisted democratic crafting as much as any other major problem on the transition agenda. Even

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<sup>1</sup> 'Minority' is understood here to mean an ethnically, racially, religiously, culturally, or linguistically distinct group living within the context of a larger society. As the term is used in political science, a minority is usually (but not necessarily always) subordinate to the dominant majority within such a plural society, thus making both numerical inferiority and subordinancy the main defining characteristics of a minority group.

<sup>2</sup> Although the MRF is not officially registered as an ethnic minority party, everyone in Bulgaria is aware of and recognises its status as an ethnic minority party comprising over 100,000 ethnic Turks and just 3,000 ethnic Bulgarians (most of them Muslim Bulgarians or Pomaks).



today, ethnic tensions continue to smoulder beneath the seemingly placid surface. For instance, recent events in Kosovo have encouraged Bulgaria's ethnic Turks to take a more assertive stand against the Bulgarian majority. The Bulgarian case confirms that it is much harder for political leaders to reach consensual unity in societies deeply divided along ethno-religious lines, and that such divisions have a powerful impact on elite strategies and interactions. It may take much longer for such societies to achieve the political consensus and cooperation essential for democracy, even though a broad-based bargain is obviously not altogether impossible.

Table 1: Bulgaria's Ethnic Groups

Ethnicity	Population	Percent
Bulgarian	7,271,185	85.67
Turkish	800,052	9.43
Gypsy	313,396	3.69
Armenian	13,677	0.16
Others	89,007	1.05
Total	8,487,317	100.00

Source: Official Population Census, December 1992

Despite the existence of unmistakable evidence of nationalist fervour and irredentist aspirations, the ethnic conflict has not exploded into a 'stateness' crisis, thus strengthening the democratisation process and reducing the danger of future challenges to the integrity of the Bulgarian state. All post-communist governments have publicly admitted the existence of a Muslim Turkish minority in Bulgaria, including through the officially published results of the December 1992 population census (cf. Table 1), and have taken steps to promote its human rights and freedoms. When the Bulgarian government signed the Council of Europe's Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1997, it officially recognised the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, even though the Constitution of 1991 does not acknowledge it as such. The political establishment now includes Bulgaria's largest and most influential ethnic minority party, the MRF. The democratic logic of bargaining and cooperation between different ethno-religious groups has ultimately prevailed over intolerance and divisiveness, providing an effective solution to ethnic minority problems.

### ***The Ethnic Conflict***

Bulgaria's minority problems arose well before the transition process was initiated. One of the darker legacies of Todor Zhivkov's rule was the conflict involving the large Turkish community, which comprises over 9% of Bulgaria's population, according to the 1992 census. More than 80% of Bulgaria's ethnic Turks are concentrated in the north-eastern and the south-western parts of the country. A majority of them are employed in tobacco farming, but a large number of Turks also used to work in the more profitable manufacturing sector. A privileged elite of urban-based, college-educated Turks was formed during the communist era and, as one Bulgarian-born writer notes, 'among them are to be found the most ardent exponents of a distinct ethnic consciousness.' (Todorova 1992: 154) It is from this influential and well-to-do ethno-social stratum that the future ethnic Turkish leaders arose.

Turks and Bulgarians had coexisted peacefully for much of the last century, although the absence of reliable polling data makes it impossible to judge what the prevailing attitudes towards the Bulgarian majority were in the Turkish-populated areas. Tensions between them flared up in the winter of 1984-1985 when the Zhivkov regime initiated the so-called 'national revival' campaign, that is, the outright attempt to assimilate ethnic Turks within the larger Bulgarian population. Provoked by the rise of Islamic theocratic fundamentalism abroad and the intense pan-Turkish propaganda by neighbouring Turkey, the forced assimilation of ethnic Turks led to clashes with the police resulting in about a half dozen deaths and strained relations between the two ethnic communities. The Zhivkov regime declared that those claiming to be minority Turks were actually Bulgarian Muslims, known as 'Pomaks', that is, ethnic Bulgarians descended from ancestors who had converted to Islam during the five centuries of Ottoman rule.<sup>3</sup> The government decided to Christianise the names of the Turkish-speaking and Muslim population for the purpose of forming an ethnically monolithic Bulgarian nation and reducing the danger of Turkish irredentism and Islamic fundamentalism in the country. Muslim Turks were suddenly deprived of the right to study the Turkish language in school, observe Islamic holidays, or openly follow Islamic customs and traditions—practices that had been earlier tolerated, if not encouraged, by the communist regime in the hope of winning the support of the ethnic Turkish minority. Turkish-language newspapers, magazines and radio broadcasts that were legal and state-supported until 1984 were also banned, leading to charges from Turkey (itself with a record of abusing human and minority rights) that Bulgaria was engaged in 'cultural genocide.' These measures radically mobilised minority public opinion in Bulgaria and led to sporadic protests and demonstrations by ethnic Turks and Pomaks. In reaction to the activities of an underground Turkish resistance, a number of Turkish activists were imprisoned or expelled from the country. Bulgarian courts passed death sentences on several ethnic Turks implicated in isolated acts of political murder and terrorism.

Pressure to assimilate the Turkish minority continued through 1989, despite the fact that such a policy was obviously in conflict with the political and economic liberalisation of late Communism. Many Bulgarians, especially the pro-Western urban-based intelligentsia, viewed the 'revival process' as a national embarrassment brought about by the regime's chauvinism and political insensitivity (Perry 1991: 5-8, Poulton 1991). Encouraged by widespread sympathy among Bulgarians, the Turkish minority staged mass demonstrations and hunger strikes in May 1989. In a televised speech, Zhivkov urged Turkey to open its borders for all ethnic Turkish Bulgarians willing to emigrate. As a result, some 310,000 ethnic Turks departed for Turkey before the startled Turkish

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<sup>3</sup> Muslim Bulgarians or Pomaks number 143,788, according to the official results of the 1992 census (24 Chasa, April 4, 1993).



government sealed the border. Nearly half of them eventually returned because they were disappointed with poor living conditions in Turkey (Engelbrekt 1991: 5-8). During this mass exodus, another 400,000 filed emigration applications, creating a fertile ground for the rise of both ethnic Turkish separatism and Bulgarian defensive nationalism.

The assimilation campaign only served to deepen divisive national identities and exacerbate ethnic scapegoating and myth making. At the beginning of the transition, the problems of ethnic conflict seemed particularly intractable, since such indivisible fundamentals of identity like culture, language, religion and ethnicity were at stake. Old prejudices and stereotypes and the poisonous effects of the previous regime's anti-Turkish propaganda lingered on, creating serious political tensions within post-communist Bulgaria's democratic consensus.

Even though Bulgarian nationalists have refused to negotiate with the MRF and there is no grassroots-level dialogue between the two ethnic communities, the more pragmatic argument that reconciliation and cooperation are necessary for peace and stability has prevailed. Another reason why mass mobilisation based on traditional ethnic identities and animosities has faltered is the evolution towards moderation by both the MRF and its neo-nationalist foes, both of which were frightened by the extreme interethnic violence in neighbouring Yugoslavia. Even though the ethnic conflict has continued throughout the transition period, it never evolved into a serious stateness problem.

### ***The Nationalist Backlash***

After the fall of Zhivkov in November 1989 and following mass demonstrations by ethnic Turks and Pomaks, the rights to practice Islam and bear Turkish names were legally restored. The ruling communists rejected Zhivkov's campaign of forced assimilation as anti-constitutional and leading to a serious erosion of national unity. But the decision to renounce the 'revival process', made public on 29 December 1989, sparked nation-wide protests by Bulgarian nationalists to resist the new policy. Widespread fears of Islamic fundamentalism and Turkish irredentism as well as the negative historical memories of five centuries of Ottoman domination fuelled the protests. With slogans like 'No to Separatism' and 'Bulgaria for the Bulgarians', the protesters demonstrated against what they called the government's 'policy of national nihilism.' They set up the Committee for the Defence of National Interests (CDNI), which accused the Turkish minority of nourishing irredentist aspirations and called for a referendum on the ethnic issue. The ethnonationalists saw the return of Turkish names as a step toward Muslim cultural and administrative autonomy, as well as a threat to the territorial integrity of the nation-state. By exploiting widespread fears of a military invasion by NATO member Turkey and the 'Cyprusisation' of Bulgaria (that is, the forcible partition of the country between ethnic Bulgarians and Muslim Turks), the nationalist backlash seriously threatened the country's political stability and peaceful transition to democracy.

The post-Zhivkov communist government must be given credit for restoring peace and tranquillity in the country with the help of other mainstream parties and public organisations. It rejected a referendum on the ethnic question on the grounds that human rights issues should not be resolved by popular opinion. During the weeks of protests and strikes by ethnonationalists, the opposition Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) openly supported the government's principled position on ethnic issues.

Alarmed by the nationalist demonstrations, the Grand Mufti (the spiritual leader of Bulgaria's Muslims) declared that the Muslim clergy were opposed to extremist demands for regional autonomy or territorial partition, and supported the current status of Bulgarian as the only official language. His conciliatory stance was intended to reassure the nationalists that ethnic Turks were not seeking to fragment Bulgaria. Talks aimed at ending ethnic strife and restoring order were held in January 1990 between the government and various independent groups and associations organised in the Social Council of Citizens (SCC). The rallies and strikes ended only after the Council, representing forces from the entire political spectrum, reached a compromise that condemned past violations of minority rights in Bulgaria, but opposed separatist movements and confirmed Bulgarian as the official language. A draft declaration was signed by the government and the SCC and presented to the National Assembly for approval. It pledged to restore ethnic Turkish names and religious freedoms, but rejected local autonomy for the Turkish minority and recommended that all secessionist groups be outlawed (Perry 1991). It also insisted that Bulgarian should remain the only official language of the country. In January 1990, the Assembly approved the declaration and passed an amnesty for all ethnic Turks prosecuted in connection with the assimilation campaign.

In the wake of the SCC talks, the atmosphere in the country improved to such an extent that the danger of violence between Bulgarian nationalists and ethnic Turks seemed to have been averted (Ashley 1990: 4-11). A Turkish-language newspaper published by the MRF and focusing on Bulgaria's ethnic problems was allowed to appear for the first time since 1984, when all Turkish-language publications had been banned. But the danger of interethnic conflict had not completely disappeared. While the government pledged to restore civil and religious freedoms to the ethnic Turkish population, the nationalists were engaged in well-organised mass resistance to the new ethnic policy. Moreover, thousands of ethnic Turks and Pomaks protested in the capital Sofia in March 1990, demanding more concessions from the government on the restoration of Muslim names and rights (BTA in English, 5 March 1990). President Petar Mladenov met with their representatives who complained about employment, housing, and education problems faced by migrants returning from Turkey. As a result, another high-level body was formed, the Public Council on the Ethnic Issues (PCEI), which included representatives of the ruling Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), the MRF, the UDF, the labour unions and other concerned public organisations.

Following the June 1990 elections, in which 24 MRF representatives were elected to the constituent Grand National Assembly (GNA), the PCEI reported mounting ethnic tension in the country and issued an appeal for calm and tolerance. The PCEI blamed the problem both on the legacies of the Zhivkov era and on minority impatience with the slow progress in combating human rights abuses. After nationalist demonstrators had tried unsuccessfully to prevent MRF deputies from attending the first session of the new parliament, CDNI organised several large demonstrations to protest what it called 'the creation of a pro-Turkish parliamentary group in the Grand National Assembly.' The protesters demanded the immediate recall of the parliamentarians from the MRF, which they blamed for the recent escalation of ethnic tensions. But in a rebuff to the ethnonationalists, the newly elected parliament passed a resolution firmly supporting the rights of ethnic minorities in Bulgaria (BTA in English, 20 July 1990).

In November 1990, the Assembly finally approved a law allowing ethnic Turks and Pomaks in Bulgaria to resume the names they were forced to give up during the period of involuntary assimilation. In reaction to this decision, the neo-nationalists staged protest demonstrations in areas where the population is ethnically mixed. CDNI



announced the establishment of the so-called 'Bulgarian Republic of Razgrad.' (BTA in English, 22 November 1990) Centred in the city of Razgrad, which is located in a region in north-eastern Bulgaria heavily populated by Muslim Turks, the Razgrad Republic grew into the Association of Free Bulgarian Cities with Free Bulgarian Citizens, which included dozens of towns with large Turkish populations. The nationalists threatened that if the government remained indifferent to the alleged militant separatism of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, the Associated Free Cities would declare their independence from the Bulgarian state and perhaps even join Greece. Bulgarian citizens of other cities and towns announced their intentions to join the Association. After staging several protest rallies in ethnically mixed areas, CDNI and the neo-nationalist Fatherland Party of Labour (FPL) appealed for work stoppages and civil disobedience. They declared all branches of the national government to be illegitimate, because, in their opinion, they did not reflect the actual correlation of political forces in the country (BTA in English, 19 November 1990)

Most Bulgarian politicians criticised the neo-nationalist campaign and distanced themselves from its demands. President Zheliu Zhelev went on national television to denounce the Razgrad Republic and call on all political parties and public institutions to condemn the nationalist protests, strikes, sit-ins, and traffic blockades (BTA in English, 24 November 1990). But many ordinary Bulgarians living in predominantly Turkish regions vehemently opposed the new policy as betrayal of national interests. The government had to perform a delicate balancing act—from the point of view of the MRF, progress was too slow, but from the neo-nationalist perspective, the regime was encouraging anti-Bulgarian separatism (Perry 1990).

Mass protests by the nationalists thwarted government plans to reintroduce Turkish-language instruction, starting in January 1991, in the school curriculum in areas inhabited by ethnic Turks. The new government decided, in an attempted compromise, to include the extracurricular teaching of Turkish and other minority languages in Bulgarian schools only from the next academic year. In response, 35,000 ethnic Turkish students went on strike and boycotted classes throughout Bulgaria to protest this delay. The MRF leadership called this step a 'moratorium' on the issue and insisted that it contradicted President Zhelev's recent assurances in the European parliament at Strasbourg that the rights and freedoms of ethnic Turks in Bulgaria had been reinstated.

In a televised speech to the nation, the new, politically independent Prime Minister Dimitar Popov criticised the nationalists for spreading feelings of mistrust and intolerance between Bulgarians and ethnic Turks. He warned that ethnic hostility was damaging Bulgaria's image abroad and declared that his cabinet was determined to implement the parliamentary decision on the optional teaching of Turkish. Turkish was finally included in the school curriculum in September 1991 and, with the exception of some nationalist groups which opposed it as a surrender of national interests, most political parties supported the change.

The government's room for manoeuvre remained limited, as Bulgarian public opinion was badly divided on this issue. According to one poll (Times Mirror Center 1991), an absolute majority of Bulgarians (59.5%) blamed post-communist reforms for the worsening state of interethnic relations in their country. Hunger strikes and sit-ins organised by the nationalists continued, as the protesters demanded that the legislature take urgent measures to deal with the ethnic tensions. Strong resistance to the government's policy on the ethnic question brought these groups dangerously close to being an anti-system opposition. At a press conference in April 1991, FPL leader Roumen Popov vowed that his party would fight with all legal means at its disposal to preserve the Bulgarian character of the nation-state. He implicitly endorsed Zhivkov's policy of

ethnic homogenisation by suggesting that an 'agreement be concluded on the emigration of all those who do not feel Bulgarian and wish to leave the country.' With reference to the conflict over the teaching of Turkish in Bulgarian schools, he also complained that learning a foreign language should be a common right and not a 'privilege for people with non-Bulgarian consciousness.' (BTA in English, 4 April 1991)

The next month, another neo-nationalist group, the National Radical Party (NRP), held the constituent session of an 'alternative civil parliament' to serve as a counterweight to the existing Grand National Assembly, electing party leader Ivan Georgiev as its 'speaker.' It also appointed a 'shadow' cabinet as another forum for expressing nationalistic public opinion and called President Zhelev 'a traitor and inspirer of the idea of introducing Turkish language in our schools.' If its demands were not met, the NRP threatened to wage 'a life-or-death struggle for the survival of the Bulgarian nation.' (Duma, 15 April 1991)

Tensions were aggravated by hunger strikes of ethnic Turks calling for the restitution of their homes, which had been sold during their mass exodus to Turkey in 1989. Bulgarians who had cheaply purchased real estate and other property from the departing Turks were now opposing a government decree that annulled all such transactions and compensated ethnic Turks who had returned to Bulgaria. The nationalists protested that the measure was an act of illegal discrimination against ethnic Bulgarians (BTA in English, 16 May 1991). They also opposed the so-called Dogan Act of 1992, which restored housing, property and employment to all ethnic Turks who had fled to Turkey in 1989.

Public opinion polls illustrate some of the difficulties that the new pluralistic regime experienced in satisfying legitimate minority demands, while trying to placate hard-line nationalist opposition, which claimed substantial popular backing for its anti-Turkish stance and engaged in a dangerously acrimonious and demagogic style of political discourse. It is evident from statistical data presented by McIntosh and MacIver (1993: 14) that Bulgarians tend to be more willing than most West Europeans to grant ethnic minorities the right to form political organisations or have parliamentary representation. However, they lag behind other European nations on the more divisive issue of teaching classes in minority languages – a reluctance that was skilfully exploited by the Bulgarian nationalists in their anti-Turkish propaganda.

Majority suspicions of any positive measures to protect minorities also found reflection in the 1991 Constitution. While providing extensive legal safeguards for individual rights and freedoms, the constitution avoids explicit recognition of collective rights and restricts the electoral participation of parties based on ethnic or religious allegiance. The parliamentarians who drafted the constitution sought to counteract the effect of the new proportional representation (PR) electoral law, introduced in the same year as the new constitution, which tends to encourage the formation of such parties. Although constitutional clauses allow minority language schools and other elements of minority cultural life, there is no emphasis on consociational power-sharing at the executive level or any other institutional mechanisms by which the political participation of Bulgaria's ethnic minorities could be guaranteed. This reflects the great concern felt by a strong majority of ethnic Bulgarians (69.9% in the 1991 Times-Mirror Center for the People & the Press, East/West Poll) that minority groups inside the country pose a serious threat to national unity and territorial integrity. This level of apprehension was exceeded in the same poll only by Czechs and Slovaks on the eve of their federation's 'velvet divorce.'



Despite such constitutional omissions and strong nationalist pressures, Bulgaria's various post-1989 governments stood firm in their determination to guarantee basic rights to every Bulgarian citizen regardless of his or her ethnic origin and religion. There are several reasons for the regime's resolve and steadfastness in the face of heated nationalist opposition. To begin with, the nationalists have a relatively narrow political base, as popular support for their protests and radical positions has been unstable and generally limited in scope.<sup>4</sup> Public opinion polls in particular show that the level of xenophobic, including Turkophobic, intolerance is quite limited in Bulgaria, depriving the nationalists of a reliable base of mass support. When asked to rate various ethnic minorities in their own country, Bulgarian respondents are distinctly more positive in their ratings of minorities when compared to answers to similar questions in the other East European countries. Only the Roma come out with an unfavourable rating of more than 50%, while all other ethnic groups receive more than a 50% favourable rating (cf. Table 2).

Table 2: Opinions about Different Ethnic Groups in Bulgaria (in percentages)

*Question: I'd like you to rate some different groups of people in Bulgaria according to how you feel about them. For each group, please tell me whether your opinion is very favourable, mostly favourable, mostly unfavourable or very unfavourable?*

	Very favourable	Mostly favourable	Mostly unfavourable	Very unfavourable
Turks	13.7	38.4	28.4	10.9
Muslim Bulgarians	13.6	47.6	17.4	4.3
Roma	5.5	15.2	31.8	39.3
Jews	11.1	52.1	8.3	1.3
Armenians	15.1	52.6	5.8	1.3
Bessarabian Bulgarians	10.9	45.3	2.2	1.1

Source: Times-Mirror Center for the People & the Press, East/West Poll (1991).

The extent of Bulgaria's ethnic and racial tolerance can also be gauged from a comparison of attitudes towards different ethnic and racial groups. Bulgarian respondents in the 1991 Times-Mirror Center for the People & the Press, East/West Poll emerge as more tolerant than most other East European nations (Macintosh et al. 1995). Therefore, the new regime's principled consistency and firmness on this issue has been based on a relatively solid foundation of ethnic and racial tolerance, which is the result of centuries of multinational and multilingual communal life.

Although there is a strong popular opposition to granting too many rights and privileges to ethno-religious minorities in Bulgaria, neo-nationalist parties have garnered few votes from the population in national electoral races. Only the FPL has had a representative independently elected to parliament in June 1990. In October 1991, the nationalists made it into parliament thanks to their pre-election union with the BSP, but the combined total votes for their two most successful parties, the National Radical Party (NRP) and the National Democratic Party (NDP), did not exceed 1.5% of the total vote. Nationalist candidates had their best showing in the second round of the 1992

<sup>4</sup> This finding is supported by attitudinal data and electoral results, as well as the observations of area specialists (cf. Troxel 1993: 200f.).

presidential elections with 47.15% of the vote, but that was only because the Valkanov-Vodenicharov ticket was officially backed by the Socialists. Not a single nationalist candidate has been independently elected to the National Assembly since then, even though the neo-nationalist parties had united in an electoral alliance called the Patriotic Union. This, however, only brought them 1.4% of the popular vote in the December 1994 election. The only exception is again the FPL whose candidates have been elected on the party list of the BSP. Nationalist-leaning George Ganchev received nearly 22% of the ballots in the first round of the 1996 presidential race, while his party, the Bulgarian Business Bloc, got about 5% of the vote in both the 1994 and 1997 parliamentary elections. However, this good showing owed a lot to the votes of disgruntled BSP members and supporters.

The regime's opposition to chauvinistic sentiments has paid off over the long run. After consecutive governments resisted successfully the nationalist challenge to the restoration of the rights and freedoms of minority Turks and Muslims, tensions between the two ethnic and religious communities are on the decline. Organised nationalist opposition to the MRF has declined. Despite intense political competition for office, most of the party elites representing the two major ethnic groups clearly subscribe to a broad system of democratic norms and values, which has allowed the ethnic conflict to proceed within established institutional channels, thus gradually dissolving the initial explosive disagreements into compromise solutions.

### ***The Evolution of the MRF***

Another reason why the minority problem has been resolved peacefully and in a manner acceptable by international norms is the evolutionary change of the MRF itself, which has cast off its earlier semi loyal overtones and ambiguities. The central government's firm stand against minority discrimination and exclusion has been facilitated by the gravitation of the MRF from sectarianism, political alienation and semi loyalty to greater participation and accommodation. While Turks and other Muslims face some ethnic hostility on the part of the Bulgarian majority, for the most part they have not responded with destabilising demands for political and territorial autonomy and separatism, thereby precipitating a stateness crisis, similar to the one experienced by neighbouring Yugoslavia.

The MRF began its activities openly in January 1990, claiming to represent the interests of the sizeable Turkish community. It also claims to have previously existed in secret and to have been behind the anti-government protests of May 1989. Its political platform is based on defending the rights of Bulgaria's Turkish and Muslim population, including the Pomaks. The MRF has demanded legal protection for the Muslim community in accordance with international standards of political and civil rights and guarantees for the protection of distinct ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identities. MRF leader Ahmed Dogan, a former university professor of philosophy imprisoned by the Zhivkov police for anti-government activities, insists that 'anyone who neglects the liberties of citizens and the ethnic minorities inevitably places a question mark over the security of the entire community and the whole of civil society.' (Duma, 5 November 1990) From this perspective, his party has sharply criticised the new constitution for inadequately protecting collective minority rights and especially for banning political parties on grounds of religion and ethnicity. The Movement has also criticised the lack of Turkish-language instruction in the regular curricula of public schools. In this way, the MRF has been able to articulate the interests of ethnic Turks and other Muslims in Bulgaria, successfully mobilising their electoral support.



While insisting on group rights and limited cultural autonomy, the MRF has opposed the idea of political and territorial autonomy, declaring it dangerous for national unity. It maintains that the rights of ethnic minorities can be safeguarded only if the rights of all Bulgarian citizens are guaranteed (Nedeva 1993: 136f.). Therefore, its priority of defending minority rights has not been at odds with the struggle to build a new democratic order in Bulgaria. The Movement has in effect become the party of human rights, an understandable position for a minority party.

The MRF has often drawn suspicion among ethnic Bulgarians because of its alleged links with the Turkish government and because of media reports accusing it of pressuring Pomaks to declare themselves as Turks. But it has generally avoided ethnic confrontation by pursuing a policy of defending minority rights based on loyalty to the national independence and territorial integrity of Bulgaria. This pragmatic approach is motivated partly by the fact that demands for political and cultural autonomy have met with intense opposition on the part of Bulgarian nationalists who have accused the MRF of being Turkey's 'fifth column' in Bulgaria. There were also implicit threats that the Movement might be outlawed under the new Constitution of 1991.

Its strategy has been very cautious, avoiding any sign of extremism, ethnic separatism, or pro-Turkey bias (ibid. 144f.). The MRF demonstrated from the outset that the promotion of ethnic minority rights will be achieved only by peaceful means and with due regard given to the rights of the Bulgarian majority. Its vice-chairman Yunal Lutfi has declared that

'the Movement will do all it can to secure a firm place for Islam as the second religion in Bulgaria after the Orthodox Church. At the same time we have to recognise as peaceful and friendly citizens that the Christian majority must be approached and treated with common sense and tact, because all minorities must co-exist without favouritism' (quoted in Ward 1992: 23).

Ethnic co-existence and cooperation in Bulgaria are possible because the extent of ethnic nationalism and religious fanaticism is quite limited. Very few ethnic Turks in Bulgaria fear that they may suffer the tragic fate of other minorities in the Balkans. Yunal Lutfi has predicted that '[t]he situation will never explode here as it did in Bosnia, because Bulgarians and Turks are not extreme nationalists or fanatics. They have a tradition of peaceful coexistence.' (The Economist, 1 April 1995: 45)

To allay the fears of Bulgarian nationalists, the MRF has also distanced itself from the extremist and pan-Islamic Turkish Democratic Party of Adem Kenan, which advocates the creation of a federation of Bulgarians and Turks in Bulgaria, in which all predominantly Turkish areas should be given administrative and cultural autonomy. The MRF has become a significant force in Bulgarian politics and has even played a broker role, holding the balance of power in an evenly split parliament between 1991 and 1994. The fact that it was also able to nominate a minority government headed by the politically independent Lyuben Berov shows that it has become part of Bulgaria's new political establishment.

Thus, neither the MRF's ideology nor the policies it advocates have deviated from the prevailing consensus about the basic system of government and economy appropriate for Bulgaria. Dogan has stressed from the very beginning that his Movement

'is not interested in turning Bulgaria into a second Lebanon ... We have not taken a destructive position on a single issue and there can be no question concerning separatism. Quite the contrary, we are striving to contribute to the positive development of the renewal' (FBIS-EEU, 7 November 1990: 8).

In this respect, the MRF's constructive attitudes and tolerance can serve as an example for minorities in other multiethnic societies. The activities of Bulgaria's largest and most influential ethnic minority party do not jeopardise the stability of the new democracy, nor are they an immediate threat to the integrity of the Bulgarian polity. The MRF is an actor quite unlikely to challenge democratic norms and institutions, especially since the Turkish minority is a major beneficiary from the effective and unimpeded functioning of democracy in Bulgaria.

It must be noted that the MRF's original aloofness and perceived semi-loyalty was not entirely its fault. Its leaders were excluded from the round-table talks between the post-Zhivkov communist government and the anti-communist opposition in early 1990. It was not given due attention because the major political parties believed that it lacked a sufficiently strong base of mass support to challenge or disrupt the inter-elite negotiations (Simeonov 1996). The UDF leadership even refused to include MRF representatives into its round-table quota, fearing that anti-Turkish sentiments among Bulgarian voters might lessen its own electoral appeal. The UDF leaders also accused the MRF of being a creation of the BSP designed to split up the anti-communist opposition.

The MRF had to wage an uphill battle to overcome its public image as a polarising political force with a hidden separatist agenda. Dogan has had difficulty convincing Bulgarians that his party is not ethnically based. Public opinion polls show that most Bulgarians regard the MRF as the political party of the Turkish minority and many resent its ability to play the role of political powerbroker. Filip Bokov, a former reformist BSP leader, echoed such misgivings about the MRF's real motivations and intentions:

'They claim that they are not a movement based on ethnic origin but rather that they work for the freedom and human rights of all. But if one looks at where they campaign and hears their speeches, it is doubtless that they are a movement based on the ethnic origin of its members ... This movement cannot be viewed outside the context of Bulgarian-Turkish relations, what Turkey does to encourage this movement. There is also the fear that this movement might put up the question of autonomy in this country, which might be encouraged by Turkey. We are very aware of Turkish policies in the last 20-25 years in Cyprus' (quoted in Feffer 1992: 235).

Because the MRF was for a long time saddled with a semi-loyal reputation, its leaders repeatedly had to proclaim that their organisation supports the sovereignty and national security of Bulgaria. While striving to secure for ethnic Turks in Bulgaria the possibility of learning their mother tongue in school, the MRF has accepted the principle that the Bulgarian language is the only official language of the country. Also contributing to the MRF's perceived semi-loyal profile was its ambiguous stance on the issue of cooperating or entering alliances with ethnic Bulgarian parties. Partly because of the perceived strong anti-Turkish orientation of many Bulgarians, the MRF's early agenda precluded building coalitions with other parties or entering the government – an act of self-isolation that hampered its inclusion in the political elite structure early on. Invited by the victorious Socialists to participate in a broad-based coalition government after the June 1990



elections, Dogan refused and proposed instead that the BSP and the UDF form a ruling coalition as a 'way of guaranteeing the promotion of the democratic processes in Bulgaria.' (BTA in English, 29 June 1990)

It was only at a national conference in October 1990 that the MRF, decrying the dangerous political polarisation in the country and the shrill partisanship of public debate, decided it should join forces with other centrist opposition parties to become 'the nucleus of a future political centre.' (BTA in English, 25 October 1990) But given its vague position on the issue of entering the government, the MRF was not included in Prime Minister Dimitar Popov's grand coalition government, which incorporated all other legislative parties and governed the country in 1990-1991. Nor was the MRF included in the short-lived UDF cabinet of Prime Minister Filip Dimitrov.

Beginning in 1991, the MRF had to adjust to a new political situation created by the greater intensity of nationalist opposition and the adoption of a constitution banning ethnic and religious parties. In the June 1990 election, the ruling Socialists supported the MRF obviously in the hope of drawing votes away from the UDF, but during the October 1991 election the BSP sided with the nationalists, trying to exploit ethnic divisions in order to broaden its electoral base. Given the participation of several parties with extreme nationalist agenda, ethnic issues assumed a much more central and divisive role in the emotionally charged atmosphere of the 1991 electoral campaign. The neo-nationalist parties accused the Movement of being a disloyal player, pointing to the fact that all but two of its deputies had abstained in the parliamentary vote for the new Constitution.

In response to such challenges, the Movement broadened its political platform to embrace all issues of civil liberties, while continuing to advocate full and unequivocal respect for the rights and freedoms of ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria. The MRF took this step partly to avoid the constitutional prohibition of political parties based on ethnic and religious ties. Another likely reason is that the 150,000 ethnic Turks who have returned from Turkey since 1989 tend to identify themselves more closely with Bulgaria than with Turkey (Nedeva 1993: 138), thus contributing to the restructuring of their national political identities. 'Such identities are less primordial and fixed than is often assumed', according to Linz, Stepan and Gunther (1995: 92), who assert that the emergence of complementary multiple identities among minority populations is conducive to democratic consolidation in polities with 'stateness' problems. While stressing the importance of Muslim religion, ethnic Turkish culture and close ties with neighbouring Turkey, Dogan has publicly professed that 'Bulgaria is our fatherland and our national self-consciousness is a Bulgarian one.' (Quoted in Angelov 1990: 27) The Movement has explicitly endorsed the new capitalist-democratic order as well as Bulgaria's traditional unitary state organisation, thus refuting the nationalist charge that its disagreement with certain constitutional clauses amounts to an anti-system stance. With these steps, the largest ethnic minority party fully joined in the democratic consensus, which more or less unifies post-communist Bulgaria's otherwise bitterly squabbling party elites.

The MRF's political and institutional integration has been assisted by a PR electoral system which, though limited by a 4% threshold, has contributed to accommodating minority interests. One of the political consequences of a limited PR system, with a mean index of proportionality (i.e., the fit between votes and legislative seats) of 85% in Bulgaria (Rose 1996: 163), has been to achieve a relatively fair representation of minorities, allowing minority voters to elect candidates who truly represent their interests. A PR system does not automatically guarantee a say in government for a small

ethnic party like the MRF, which will always remain a minority presence in the national legislature. But it has ensured that the MRF's constituents are accurately represented in parliament and fairly treated, so that their voices can be heard in the halls of government. This has also been made possible by post-communist Bulgaria's revolving-door system where stable legislative majorities with firm control over the executive have been more the exception than the rule.

The constitutional ban on parties with ethnic and religious affiliation was clearly designed to avoid the proliferation of separatist ethnic minority parties, which could pose a threat to the internal cohesion of the Bulgarian polity. Since the MRF was already part of the existing national party system, and because it is too powerful and well-organised to be easily suppressed, the Constitutional Court ruled in 1992 that the prohibition should not be enforced against it. But the constitutional ban has nonetheless forced the MRF to broaden its electorate beyond the Turkish and Muslim communities and to incorporate in its agenda many non-minority issues with wider voter appeal, which has further legitimised its right to compete for political office despite its minority status.

### ***The Integration of the MRF***

Initially the MRF aligned itself with the UDF in an anti-communist alliance aimed at removing the Socialists from power and punishing those responsible for the assimilation campaign. Because of the sensitivity of the Turkish issue, the Movement was not made part of the first UDF government formed in October 1991. Even though it provided the votes necessary for parliamentary approval of the new cabinet, the MRF again remained without a fair share in government. An informal elite coalition was formed between the two parties, as the parliamentary caucus of the MRF extended crucial legislative backing to the minority UDF cabinet of Prime Minister Filip Dimitrov, helping it to survive in office for almost a year. The two parties became allies in parliament due to the ideological hostility they shared towards the BSP, but their strategic alliance fell apart in October 1992. When the UDF refused to accommodate many of its social and economic demands, the MRF withdrew its support from Prime Minister Dimitrov, forcing him to resign (Bates 1994).

The *de facto* coalition with the UDF was replaced by a marriage of convenience with the BSP, which allowed the minority cabinet of the MRF-nominated Prime Minister Berov to survive in power for almost two years. The UDF leaders accused the MRF of betrayal and of selling out to the ex-communists, but the dogmatic neo liberal economic policy of the Filip Dimitrov cabinet had been controversial even within the UDF's own parliamentary caucus. Policy differences, rather than any unilateral demands for government posts or the formation of a coalition cabinet, split up the UDF-MRF alliance. With the Left-Right dimension regaining its traditional relevance in terms of party identification in Bulgaria, socio-economic interests rather than ethnic aspirations or ideological anti-Communism were increasingly defining the MRF's place in the political continuum. There was growing antagonism between the two partners over the UDF policy of economic austerity, crash marketisation, privatisation and land restitution, which was hurting the interests of the MRF's impoverished rural constituency. Social and economic interests have replaced ethnic nationalism and the goal of retribution for past communist abuses, redrawing the previous battle lines between ex-communists and anti-communists in Bulgaria. Miroslav Darmov, a former MRF parliamentary deputy, acknowledged this change of focus:

'We emphasise the social orientation of the market economy. Because our electorate is people of middle status, they are concerned with the social



plan of the government. We also differ with the UDF on land policy. Because the Turkish population is mostly agrarian, they are not interested in having the land go to the previous owners' (quoted in Feffer 1992: 236).

Another reason was the deliberate policy of the MRF leadership to prevent, by means of shifting alliances, the dominance of national politics by either of the two party behemoths, the BSP and the UDF. The MRF assumed the dual role of defending minority rights and maintaining a balance of power in Bulgarian politics by careful equidistance between these modern-day successors to Bulgaria's traditional Left and Right.

The evidence thus points to the MRF's evolution from an alienated minority organisation with a narrow, ethnic-based agenda into a national centrist party, which has become a 'critical player' in modern Bulgarian politics (Ilchev and Perry 1993: 40). It is an explicit exponent of the socio-economic interests of its rank-and-file members (a large majority of whom are impoverished farmers) understood according to the traditional Left-Right model of party politics. At a press conference on 6 October 1991, Dogan announced that the MRF was 'returning to its natural place in the centre.' (BTA in English, 7 October 1992) In an article for the *168 Chasa* weekly, he explained this change in his party's position:

'In its analysis of the situation in Bulgaria, the MRF reached the conclusion that right-wing conservatism is taking the upper hand in this country and that there is a dangerous tendency of its development into right-wing extremism.' (Ibid.)

Dogan was clearly referring to the radicalism of the MRF's own coalition partner, the UDF. According to him, this 'dangerous tendency' had forced his party to 'turn to the left after having occupied the political space of moderate conservatism for months on end.' The MRF leader went on to criticise the 'shock therapy' economic policies of Prime Minister Dimitrov's cabinet, as well as its pro-NATO foreign policy:

'The failure of the government to take into account the interests of the majority of the Bulgarians may provoke social cataclysms which we do not wish to be held responsible for. They are trying to include us in certain international structures but this runs counter to the vital interests of the Bulgarian people and we can no longer remain accomplices and powerless observers of these tendencies. (Ibid.)

Pragmatic policy considerations and the socio-economic interests of destitute constituents have taken the upper hand over narrowly focused ethnicity, religious and cultural issues. The MRF has clearly evolved from a marginal ethnic-based group into a moderate mainstream party, whose pragmatic-minded leadership could not ignore the demands and preferences of its own mass membership, which was suffering from the hardships of the transition. Nor could it accept the instability and social conflicts brought on by its partner's hard-line policy of virulent anti-Communism and historical retribution against members of the old ruling elite.

The turning point of the MRF's gradual incorporation in the political elite structure was the appointment in December 1992 of the MRF-nominated government of Professor Berov.<sup>5</sup> The MRF's ultimate control over the new cabinet was recognised by Zlatka

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<sup>5</sup> Although most of the ministerial appointees were ethnic Bulgarians, First Deputy Prime Minister Yevgeny Matinchev was a senior member of the MRF who supervised the work of the Berov cabinet on behalf of his party.

Rouseva, deputy head of the UDF parliamentary caucus, who declared that '[t]he mandate of the MRF means in practice the formation of a Turkish government in our country! Even if no MRF member participates in it, it would still be a Turkish government.' (Svobodan Narod, 23-30 December 1992) The party fragmentation of parliament allowed the MRF to convert its minority status into majority power as a political arbiter between the feuding UDF and BSP. To the amazement of many observers, a tacit BSP-MRF legislative alliance emerged, sustaining the Berov cabinet in office for almost two years until a three-month-old parliamentary boycott by the UDF and the BSP's own desire for new elections forced its resignation in September 1994.

In another important development, the Socialists had to temper their nationalist impulses for the sake of preserving their parliamentary alliance with the MRF. The *de facto* coalition between the two former enemies largely neutralised the polarising effects of the BSP's previous anti-Turkish propaganda and became an important step towards the unification of the national political elite. The unprecedented fact of a modern democracy being 'ruled' by a relatively small ethnic minority party also implies that ethnic cleavages in Bulgaria are neither cumulative nor deep enough to override practical politics and socio-economic interests. Strictly partisan considerations – primarily in the form of an intense political conflict between the UDF and the BSP which led the reins of government to be entrusted to a neutral third party – appear to have been more salient than ethnic divisions and enmities.

Once they were allowed to influence decisions on political power, the MRF leaders realised that their minority party had much more to gain from participating in the democratic game of politics than from staying on the outside. At that point, there was a marked shift in the Movement's attitudes and behaviour, which grew more self-confident, moderate and mainstream in its politics. There was a change also in the pattern of its interactions with the other party elites, all of whom recognised its co-equal status. Even the most fanatical Bulgarian nationalists had to acknowledge that the MRF is not a disloyal political competitor and that their fears of the country being splintered along ethnic and religious lines were exaggerated. Even though many ethnonationalists still believe that the MRF represents a fundamental threat to Bulgaria's unity and territorial integrity, a major precondition for an ethnic majority's toleration of ethnic minorities, namely that the majority must not feel politically or economically threatened, has been satisfied. The 1991 Constitution's non-recognition of any collective rights for ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria may also have made it easier for the nationalists to accept the prominent role played by the MRF in domestic politics.

By the time of the 1997 parliamentary elections, the previously semi-loyal, anti-Turkish elements in the nationalists' rhetoric and propaganda had been largely toned down, thereby contributing further to the widespread acceptance of the MRF. In that election, the MRF led a broad and diverse coalition of left-centrist, centrist and monarchist parties called the Union for National Salvation, which opposed both the UDF and the ruling Socialists and was openly supported by former Bulgarian King Simeon II.

Despite predictions that this time around it might fail to pass the 4% electoral barrier to representation, the MRF received a respectable 7.5% of the vote and 21 seats in the 17 June 2001 parliamentary elections. The National Movement Simeon II, a new political party formed by King Simeon just two months before the election, won a surprise landslide victory. The ideological compatibility between the two centrist movements paved the way to forming a coalition government led by the 64-year-old ex-monarch, in which the MRF is represented with its own ministers. The presence of the ethnic Turkish party in the new cabinet will no doubt be a factor beneficial for the future of interethnic



relations in Bulgaria. The MRF's electoral support also proved decisive in the upset victory of Socialist Georgi Purvanov over incumbent President Petar Stoyanov (UDF) in the second round of the presidential elections between 11 and 18 November 2001.

The ethnicity conflict in Bulgaria has diminished to such an extent that minority questions no longer present a direct challenge to the new regime. Unlike the Kosovo Liberation Army, ethnic minority parties in Bulgaria have not used the country's ethnic and religious heterogeneity to make separatist demands, use violence or seek diplomatic and military assistance from abroad in order to achieve local independence. While it may complicate the democratisation process by creating political tensions and making the political elite's consensual unification and structural integration harder to achieve, the Bulgarian brand of ethnopolitics has not become a threat to democracy.

Of course, a destabilising challenge arising on the basis of ethnic politics cannot be ruled out for the future. Even with the political integration of the Muslim Turkish minority, Bulgaria's ethnic and religious cleavages, exacerbated by an impoverished and chaotic economic environment, remain a potential obstacle to long-term democratic consolidation. But Bulgaria remains nevertheless an oasis of interethnic peace and tranquillity when compared to other ethnically plural societies in Central and Eastern Europe.

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