



## **The Ethnic Turks in Bulgaria: Social Integration and Impact on Bulgarian – Turkish Relations, 1947-2000**

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Since the end of WWII, the key issue affecting Bulgarian-Turkish relations has been the status of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. During the period of communist rule in Bulgaria (1946-1989), the policy of the Bulgarian government concerning the rights of the Turkish minority was inconsistent. Periods of relative tolerance and respect for the rights of the Turkish community have alternated with decades of discrimination, including state programs attempting to assimilate the minority into Bulgaria's mainstream. The period of overt discrimination began in the late 1960s. By the 1980s, there were undue restrictions on the expression of the cultural identity of the Bulgarian Turks. Finally, the Bulgarian government's assimilation policies reached a low-point in 1984-1985, with a notorious state program forcing the Bulgarian Turks to 'apply' to change their Turkish names to Bulgarian alternatives. The infamous exodus of ethnic Turks to Turkey in 1989 marked the end of the policies of discrimination. Since the fall of the Communist regime in November 1989, the treatment of the Turkish minority has improved substantially.

Bulgarian-Turkish relations have largely reflected the treatment of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, except for the period 1968-1984 when a relative warming in bilateral relations coincided with a period limiting the cultural rights of Bulgarian Muslims. At present, Bulgarian-Turkish relations can be described as excellent; there are laws to protect the Turkish minority's rights. Bulgarian Turks participate in decision-making, Turkish-language classes continue funded by the Bulgarian government. The case of Bulgarian-Turkish relations in the post Cold war period provides an example of success in maintaining peaceful ethnic relations; hence, contributing to good-neighbourly relations between a Muslim and a Christian country in the Balkans. Analysing the history of the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Turkey parallel to the developments in minority issues should provide valuable insights as to the factors that influence the success of both inter-ethnic and inter-state relations in the region.

### ***The Turkish ethnic group in Bulgaria: government policies in the period 1947 – 1989***

It is impossible to come up with a single term to define Bulgarian citizens of Turkish ethnic origin that would be valid for the period between 1947 and the present-day. In terms of definitions used by the Constitution, three phases can be distinguished. In the first phase, 1947-1971, a communist-dominated Parliament adopted a law that became known as the Dimitrov Constitution after the then head of government, with a clause stating 'national minorities are entitled to be taught in their mother tongue and develop their national culture' thus recognising the existence of national minorities and stipulating the rights conferred to them by the state. During the second phase, 1971-1991, the so-called Zhivkov Constitution was in force that 'dropped all references to minorities.' (Pundeff 1992: 106) The Constitution in force at present was adopted in 1991 by a Grand National Assembly in which the Socialists (the new name of the former Communist Party) had a majority (211 out of 400 seats), sufficient to pass the document despite the vehement disapproval of the opposition. (Bell 1997: 375) This Constitution and existing legislation do not use the term 'national minority.' (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee: 2000) The rights of all Bulgarian citizens are protected through provisions defining their individual, rather than collective rights. The fact that Bulgaria ratified the



framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in February 1999 has led some politicians to believe that the Convention does not have an object to protect in Bulgaria. It remains to be seen whether the concept of 'national minority', and concomitant collective rights, will be employed by the Bulgarian legislature in the future, or whether the emphasis will continue to rest upon individual rights and equality before the law, as is currently the case.

If one could judge the actual situation of the Bulgarian Turks solely from their rights as stated by the Constitution, one would infer that during the period 1947-1971 they enjoyed rights in the sphere of culture, such as studying Turkish and practising Islam. Some Bulgarian scholars argue that this was indeed the case until 1958, when a special plenum of the communist party Politbureau decided to introduce changes to the authority's policies towards the Turks. Thus, until 1958, the Turkish population was able to attend Turkish-language schools and publish periodicals in Turkish.<sup>1</sup> The fact that substantial cultural freedom was established during this period can be inferred by the strong presence of the Turkish language in both education and the media. Hundreds of Turkish-language primary schools operated, several Turkish high schools, three institutes for teacher training, three newspapers and one journal were published in Turkish; local newspapers had Turkish language supplements. In some urban areas plays were staged in Turkish and the state radio broadcast in Turkish on a regular basis. (Zhelyazkova 1997) By way of contrast, a Turkish scholar (Lutem 2000: 4) stated that by 1994 all Turkish newspapers had been closed, and the government insisted that Turkish schools teach the language using Arabic characters even though the Turkey had accepted the Latin alphabet in 1929. However, he admits that once the Communist government had consolidated their power, 'Turkish newspapers were allowed to be published again on the condition that they support government policies.' (Lütem 1999: 4) Since this was the case with all publications at the time, it is fair to say this was not tantamount to discrimination on the basis of ethnicity. In addition, these facts appear to reflect a rather tolerant policy when compared with the Communist regime's measures against other traditional communities: the Catholics and the Protestants during the same period. 'During the first years of communism they suffered severe persecutions when most of their clergy were subsequently executed after show-trials and were forced to lead an almost symbolic existence.' (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2000)

Considering the situation of the Bulgarian Turks in the period 1946-1958, one should keep in mind the fact that the country was undergoing profound socio-economic changes as a result of the arrival of communist rule in 1944-1946. Although the Turkish community could still express its ethnic identity through the media and Turkish language education was a fact, it suffered from the same economic policies of the communist regime as the Bulgarian majority. Forced collectivisation of the land and nationalisation were the measures resented the most by Turks and Bulgarians alike. The centrality of the land in the life of the Balkan peasant is a factor generally recognised by both historians and anthropologists. The majority of the Turkish population consisted of farmers; and the expropriation of the land in 1949 was felt as a severe shock. The collectivisation of land became the reason for the first mass exodus of ethnic Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey in the post-war era.<sup>2</sup> In 1946 the Turkish population numbered

<sup>1</sup> See Zhelyazkova (1997: 20, Krazstev (1997: 2), Lutem (1999: 5)

<sup>2</sup> Zhelyazkova (1997: 1) provides statistics as to the migration of ethnic Turks from Bulgaria to Turkey from the independence of Bulgaria in 1878 to 1944 as follows: between 1878 and 1912 350 000 Muslims; 1913 - 1934 10-12 000 annually; 1940 -1944 15 000

675,500 out of a total population of 7,029,349. (Pundeff 1992) In the period 1950-1951, 154,397 individuals migrated to Turkey. They settled primarily in the Marmara and the Aegean Sea region, setting a pattern for subsequent waves of emigration.

Total Number of Immigrants: 1950 -1988		
Regions: Sea of Marmara and the Aegean	Families	Persons
Bursa	11 828	46 301
Istanbul	13 712	46 152
Izmir	4 874	20 262
Tekirdag	3 852	14 957
Eski Sehir	3 512	14 075
Kirkalери	2 713	11 266
Manisa	2 488	10 241
Ankara	2 713	11 266
Kocaeli	1 694	7 114
Total	49 733	190 285
Other Regions	20 048	80 633
Total	<b>60 781</b>	<b>270 918</b>

Source: Dimitrova (1997)

<i>Total Number of Immigrants : 1950 – 1951</i>	<i>Total Number of Immigrants : 1952 – 1988</i>
154 397	116 521

Source: Dimitrova (1997)

Throughout the Cold War period the situation of the Bulgarian Turks was exacerbated by the fact that Bulgaria and Turkey belonged to the two opposing blocs – Bulgaria behaving as the most loyal satellite of the Soviet Union. This arrangement had one positive aspect: rendering an open clash between the two countries over minorities issues impossible. There were also several major negative consequences for the Turkish population: Bulgaria was increasingly apprehensive about the possibility of the minority's subversive links to an 'enemy' NATO member state; and dialogue aimed at achieving a compromise on minority issues was infeasible given the mutual suspicions about one another's 'real intentions' with the iron curtain between them. Of course, in this international context, any form of condemnation on the part of Turkey or the international community for the policies of the Bulgarian government would also have been futile.

Thus, in December 1947, Dimitrov warned the Bulgarian Turks not to act as agents of the enemies of Bulgaria (the NATO member countries). Furthermore, a Bulgarian government note dated 10 March 1951 accused Turkey of instigating the Turkish minority to revolt, while also accusing them of not issuing enough visas. The note stated that the Bulgarian government was ready to give passports to 250 000 people and asked Turkey not to obstruct their immigration. (Lütem 1999: 5) Turkey rejected the proposal



but did increase the number of visas issued, which made the wave of emigration in 1950-1951 possible. The part of the Turkish community that was least happy with the collectivisation of land had a chance to find a way out of the situation. In less than 2 years more people managed to emigrate than in the following 36 years.

The 1950-1951 events reflected the chaotic and inconsistent policy of the Bulgarian communist authorities regarding the Turkish minority. At first, the government acknowledged Bulgaria's desire to allow the emigration of Bulgarian Turks. Then it twice attempted to send gypsies instead of Turks; Turkey responded by stopping the immigration. Finally, contrary to its own stated goals, the Bulgarian government stopped the emigration flow it had previously asked Turkey not to obstruct.

Since at the time the Bulgarian government was accountable only to its Soviet counterpart, the explanations of its policies by various scholars often hint at a Soviet design for Turkey carried out through Bulgaria. Zhelyazkova (1997: 2) provides the explanation that Bulgaria attempted to export the communist ideology to Turkey through the emigrants. Lutem (1999: 5) indicates that the explanation of the Bulgarian government's policy during 1950-1951 could be that Bulgaria was acting on behalf of the Soviets who wished to punish Turkey for its participation in the Korean War. Both theories appear improbable in the light of the fact that the Bulgarian government halted the emigration unilaterally in 1951, thus abating possible 'punishment' or 'ideology export'. It is possible that the government simply acted alone, aiming to reduce opposition to its unpopular policies, or divert attention from the much-resented economic measures to a possible 'Turkish threat'. This scheme was to appear again at a later stage when it would become clear that the economic policy of the regime was clearly failing.

Whatever the motive behind this policy of the Bulgarian government, one of its logical consequences was that in the following twelve years (1951-1963), Bulgarian-Turkish relations reached their lowest point. The emigration of the Bulgarian Turks was forbidden, and at the same time, the Bulgarian government's policies concerning minorities underwent a change. In 1958, a special plenum of the Politbureau marked the beginning of more restrictive policies concerning the minorities' cultural rights. At first, this change in policies affected the Roma, whose bilingual newspapers began to be published in Bulgarian and the names of the Muslim Roma were changed to Bulgarian names. At the same time, the Turkish-language press was still being published in the early 1950s. In addition, party nomenklatura were recruited from the ranks of the Turks and Pomaks (Muslim Bulgarians). In the 1950s, thousands of Turks became members of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) and tens of thousands held public office and top managerial positions. (Zhelyazkova 1997: 3) Lutem (1999: 5) provides a criticism to the effect that few Turks were elected to the Central Committee and Parliament, and none were members of the Politbureau, ministers or generals.

In the early 1960s a drastic change in both the ideology and the policy regarding the Turks and the Muslim Bulgarians took place. The BCP passed resolutions to accelerate 'integration' of Muslims into Bulgarian society. Gradually, Turkish primary and the secondary schools were closed down, all newspapers were published in Bulgarian, and the curtains closed on Turkish theatres. In 1964, an effort was made to change the name of the ethnic Bulgarian Muslims from the Western Rhodopes region. This attempt was ended by the Central Committee of the BCP due to the strong resistance from the population. (Zhelyazkova 1997: 4) The number of imams (prayer leaders and authorities

in Islamic law) dropped from 2,715 in 1956 to 570 in 1982 and 400 in 1987. (Pundeff 1992: 107) In 1962-1963, the Turkish missions in Bulgaria received more than 380,000 petitions from Turks requesting emigration. (Lütem 1999: 5)

### ***Bulgarian – Turkish Relations, 1968 – 1984***

In 1968, Bulgaria and Turkey again concluded an agreement on emigration of ethnic Turks from Bulgaria. The rationale of the Bulgarian government for concluding this agreement after a ban on emigration for 17 years has given rise to various explanations and hypotheses. Lütem (1999: 5) argues that, for economic reasons, neither country wanted emigration: Turkey refused to accept that Bulgaria needed the cheap labour of the Turkish minority (especially since Bulgarian labour was just as cheap at the time). He offers the explanation that in Turkey public opinion favoured emigration and Turkish diplomacy tried to negotiate an agreement. Since at the time (1968) Turkish-Soviet relations had been improving, the Soviet Union had forced Bulgaria into the agreement. By contrast, some Bulgarian authors (Pundeff 1992: 105, Zhelyazkova 1997: 3) imply that the agreement was in line with the policies of the Bulgarian Communist Party at the time, aiming at creating an ethnically homogeneous Bulgarian nation. Indeed, it appears rather logical that a government pursuing gradual cultural assimilation would prefer to weaken a potential centre of opposition. This is especially understandable in the light of the name-changing campaigns that were about to take place later on during the 1970s and the 1980s. In addition, the BCP Central Committee's propaganda at the time presented the Turks as an alien element and as 'the fifth column' of Turkey in the territory of Bulgaria.

Nevertheless, after signing the 1968 emigration agreement, relations between the two states improved considerably. A number of agreements on transportation, trade, tourism etc. were signed after 1968. The fact that Bulgaria never took sides openly with Greece on the Cyprus issue was appreciated in Turkey. Between 1968 and 1984 there were twenty-two high-level visits between the two (Lütem 1999: 5).



### ***The Situation of Bulgarian Turks, 1968-1984***

The 'warming' in Bulgarian-Turkish relations in 1968-1984 coincided with a period in which the rights of the Bulgarian Muslims were restricted. The Zhivkov Constitution adopted in 1971 dropped all references to minorities. In 1974, Turkish-language lessons became optional and the students were 'discouraged' from attending. (Lütem 1999: 5) In the early 1970s<sup>3</sup> the authorities launched an action for changing the Turkish-Arabic names of the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims to Bulgarian equivalents. Unlike the subsequent renaming of the Bulgarian Turks that was about to follow in 1980s, this campaign produced no policy response from Turkey.

By contrast, the name-changing campaign of 1984-1985, this time affecting the Bulgarian Turks, drew the attention of both the Turkish and the international press. The formal procedure consisted of requiring people to fill out an application for changing their own names. State 'incentives' included measures ranging from economic sanctions to overt violence. Thousands of people who resisted were sent to prison or labour camps. This 'program', carried out in secrecy was completed in several months. Consequently, it was forbidden to employ traditional Turkish or Muslim dress and rituals, and even Turkish folk music, were banned. This policy went as far as destroying Muslim graveyards and changing the names of dead people in the municipal registries. (Zhelyazkova 1997: 4) The state succeeded in curbing all resistance very quickly, as nobody was allowed to visit banks, hospitals etc. without an identity card bearing a Bulgarian name. (Lütem 1999: 6)

The propaganda accompanying the campaign aimed to portray Turkey as an imminent threat to the territorial integrity of the Bulgarian state. The terminology used by the press while describing the Turkish minority included terms such as 'the fifth column of an enemy state', 'terrorists', 'separatists'. Distrust and fear from Turkey and its 'aggressive plans' were instilled. (Zhelyazkova 1997: 4)

### ***Bulgarian – Turkish Relations, 1984 – 1989***

Naturally, Bulgarian-Turkish relations deteriorated sharply as a result of the campaign. In the early 1980s, bilateral relations had reached their highest point with the visit of General Evren to Bulgaria in 1981 and the visit of President Zhivkov to Turkey in 1983. In 1984, a sharp downturn in bilateral relations followed logically as a result of the treatment of the Bulgarian Turks. As a result of pressure from the opposition parties and the press, the Turkish government proposed on February 22 a new emigration agreement with Bulgaria. Bulgaria (and the Soviet Union) considered the question an internal affair and had no intention of signing an emigration agreement at this point. Turkey responded by restricting bilateral relations in the fields of trade, electricity imports from Bulgaria, culture, sports etc. Moreover, Turkey brought the issue to various international forums such as the Council of Europe, the NATO Assembly, the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), and UNESCO.

On the international scene, the US and the UK supported Turkey's claims. Germany, France, Italy and other EC members recommended that handling the matter in the CSCE, rather than bilaterally with Bulgaria. Greece was the only EC member-state that openly supported Bulgaria. Consequently, Greek-Bulgarian relations improved to such an extent that in September 1986 the two countries signed a declaration of friendship,

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<sup>3</sup> There is discrepancy as to when exactly the campaign took place: 1972-1973 according to Zhelyazkova (1997: 3) and 1971-1972 according to Lütem (1999: 6).

good-neighbourly relations and co-operation, including provision for bilateral consultations should a threat to the security of either party arise. In Turkey some argued that this was not compatible with the obligations of Greece as a NATO member (Lütem 1999: 7).

Despite the international condemnation of the policies concerning the Bulgarian Turks, the Bulgarian government pursued its chosen course. This was made possible by the position of the Soviet Union, considering the minority problem as an internal affair of the Bulgarian state. Thus, internal factors rather than international involvement brought about the next development in the situation of the Turkish minority. In the spring and summer of 1989, some Bulgarian Turks engaged in protest actions demanding the recovery of their names. A clash in the village of Todor Ikonomovo resulted in seven deaths after the police had fired at villagers (Lütem 1999: 8). On May 27 the Bulgarian Head of State Todor Zhivkov had promised all its citizens worldwide valid tourist passports and asked Turkey to open its borders (Dimitrova 1997: 2). This 'request' was strange in the light of the fact that it was the Bulgarian government that had refused to sign an emigration agreement with Turkey. The Turkish Prime Minister Ozal replied that the Turkish borders were open and had never been closed (Lütem 1999: 9). This statement also proved to be somewhat far-fetched, as Turkey would close its borders three months after attempting to stop the tide of refugees. As a result of this new policy direction by Bulgaria from 3 June through to 21 August 1989 (when Turkey sealed its frontier), 311,862 ethnic Turks managed to leave. (Dimitrova 1997: 2)

It was during this massive exodus that the Bulgarian Head of State Zhivkov met Mikhail Gorbachev. Gorbachev's views concerning the Turkish minority in Bulgaria as expressed at this meeting indicate the attitude of the Soviet Union throughout the 1980s. Gorbachev's inclination to view the matter as an internal affair of Bulgaria's substantially aided the government in maintaining its policies, despite the international community's criticisms. Zhivkov's views expressed during the meeting shed light on the Bulgarian government's rationale behind these policies.

Com. Zhivkov informed [Gorbachev] about the Bulgarian restructuring process. He pointed out the attendant economic difficulties and the 'Moslem' problem. He stated that the number of the 'Moslems' has been increasing at the rate of 15-16 000 per year and that in 20 years Bulgaria would resemble Cyprus. He confirmed that the country was interested in the expatriation of 200, 300 and even 500,000 Moslems but at the same time said that this was impossible because Turkey has not been able to receive them. He also explicitly pointed out that in no case could or should Bulgaria admit that the Moslems are of Turkish nationality...

[...]

Com. Gorbachev repeatedly stressed the firm position of the Soviet leadership that the responsibility for the situation in each country is its own problem.

[...]

Com. Zhivkov drew attention to the setback in Bulgarian - Turkish relations due to Turkish interference in the internal affairs of Bulgaria. Com. Gorbachev informed [Zhivkov] that two days ago the Soviet Ambassador in Ankara had submitted to him a special message from Turgut Ozal asking for assistance in initiating negotiations between Bulgaria and Turkey. Ozal had said that Turkey was able to receive no more than 30,000 people per year. ...[Zhivkov] said that he had asked the Bulgarian ambassador in Moscow to meet his Turkish colleague



and tell him that a third country, the USA, had interest in such a development of Bulgarian – Turkish relations...Both leaders agreed that the announcement of their conversation should not mention their discussion of the Turkish problem.

[...]

Source: Bulgarian Central State Archives, Fond 1b, Opis 35, a.e. 133 – 189, pp 1-21, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/php/documents/2/890623.htm>

The Soviet attitude has led some scholars to draw such conclusions as: 'According to Benningsen, the forced change of names imposed on ethnic Turks in Bulgaria might be the experimental prelude to a similar policy contemplated by the USSR for the Muslims living there.' (Karpas 1990: 10 quoted in Krazstev 1997: 3) Whatever the actual motivation for the position of the Soviet government, the Soviet policy at the time was indeed crucial for it did enable the Bulgarian government to impose its 'solution' of the Turkish 'problem'.

It is interesting to note that the Zhivkov's position, elucidated in his statement concerning a possible replication of the Cyprus issue in Bulgaria, was to influence events in the Bulgarian Parliament, even after the fall of his regime. Arguments against the Cyprus situation in Bulgaria appeared in the Grand National Assembly, and largely shaped the Bulgarian Constitution of 1991 that is still in force.

### ***The Turkish Minority in Bulgaria in the Post-Cold War Era***

After the ousting of Zhivkov on 10 November 1989, the former foreign minister Petur Mladenov replaced him as leader. Several weeks in advance, on 24 October, Mladenov publicly renounced Zhivkov's policies in his resignation letter addressed to Zhivkov, the Politbureau and the Central Committee. The letter stated, among other things that Zhivkov 'has led the country to a profound economic, financial and political crisis' and had 'succeeded in isolating Bulgaria from the rest of the world.'<sup>4</sup> As a foreign minister since 1971, Mladenov had to confront the criticism of the international community concerning the treatment of the Turkish minority and was aware of the detrimental effect the treatment of the Bulgarian Turks had caused to the image of the country. Reinstating the rights of the Turks and the Pomaks were among the first democratic acts after the fall of the communist regime. Mladenov replaced Zhivkov as head of state, and on 29 December 1989 the government recommended that the Turks be given the right to choose their own names, practice Islam and use their language in public (Koinova 1999: 13).

The new Constitution, adopted in July 1991 by the Grand National Assembly (GNA), reflected marked concern for the preservation of national unity. The document states that Bulgaria is 'an integral state', its 'territorial integrity is inviolable' and that no 'autonomous territorial formations' may exist. During the debates, the example of Cyprus was frequently cited to emphasise the possible danger of separation along ethnic lines. Thus these provisions reflected a fear of potential separatism among the country's ethnic Turks (Bell 1997: 373). Since the name-changing campaign and the related propaganda was not very far behind, one could not fail to notice that the ideas of Zhivkov regarding the Turkish question (as expressed during his 1989 meeting with Gorbachev) were shared by an influential section of the political elite in the Grand

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<sup>4</sup> Excerpt from Mladenov's letter of resignation quoted in Linz, Juan and Alfred Stepan, 1997, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation. Southern Europe, South America and Post-Communist Europe*, 338

National Assembly. In the GNA, the Socialists (the recently renamed Communist Party) had a majority (211 out of 400 seats), sufficient to formulate the necessary legislative provisions and have them passed without consideration of the opinion of the opposition, which tried in vain to block the passing of the Constitution in this form. The Constitution also bans political parties founded on an 'ethnic, racial or religious' base.

In reality, however, the treatment of the Turkish community in Bulgaria has improved steadily over the decade after the fall of the totalitarian regime. The latest (2000-2001) human rights reports on Bulgaria prepared by international organisations such as Human Rights Watch and the US Department of State, either do not mention the Bulgarian Turks at all, or point to the situation of the Bulgarian Turks as an example of successful integration.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, the above-mentioned provisions of the Constitutions are subject to different interpretations. Some authors say they are restrictive, others point out that the situation de facto concerning the rights of the Turkish minority has improved a great deal and the current Constitutional framework is suitable within the Bulgarian context.

Thus, for instance, the 2000 Bulgarian Helsinki Committee report on the implementation of the framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities states that a dispute continues on whether the Convention is applicable to the situation in Bulgaria; provided the Constitution does not use the term 'national minority'. The report indicates, however, that there seems to be an agreement (although not explicitly stated) that the provisions of the Convention will be applied to Bulgarian citizens 'whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian', a definition present in the Constitution, Art. 36 (2) (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2000: 7-8).

By contrast, Karasimeonov (1999: 1) argues that the Bulgarian domestic legal framework has been able to establish an optimal balance between minority and national interests in a situation of a radical social transition conducted under extremely difficult economic, political and international conditions. The report of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee acknowledged the fact that the minorities in Bulgaria are protected directly by the international instruments concerning them, as the Constitution (Art. 5 Para 4) establishes the precedence of international law over Bulgarian national law. Bulgaria is a party to every important international instrument with a bearing on the regulation of the rights of minorities.<sup>6</sup>

What appeared to be a major concern of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee Report – the fact that the Constitution does not use the term 'national minority' – is explained by Karasimeonov as a logical consequence of the fact that Bulgaria is a unitary state. The Bulgarian Constitution follows the doctrine of the so-called 'one nation-state', recognised

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<sup>5</sup> See: US Department of State. 'Bulgaria: Country Report on Human Rights Practices—2000', 15 March 2001 archived at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/200/eur/index.cfm?docid=705>; Human Rights Watch. World Report 2001 Bulgaria Human Rights Developments, 17 March 2001 archived at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2kl/europe/bulgaria.html>

<sup>6</sup> These include the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Covenant on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination of 1965, the Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1946, the Convention Against Discrimination in Education of 1960, the European Convention on Human Rights of 1950 and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, ratified by Bulgaria in 1999 (Karasimeonov 1999)



by all Bulgarian parties, including the representatives of the Bulgarian Turks. The concept of 'national minority' could not be established in Bulgarian law for two main reasons: first, it does not conform to the principle of unity of the Bulgarian nation enshrined in the Constitution. Secondly, the application of this concept could give rise to misunderstandings, because it is not defined exactly in international law. Not one of the many scientific definitions that exist is universally recognised in international law. The Bulgarian Constitution excludes granting collective political rights to the different religious and ethnic groups. The rights of the minority representatives are protected through the provisions guaranteeing protection of their individual human rights. This option was selected, since the Bulgarian state has the sovereign right to substantiate the extent to which human rights are granted by international law in accordance with the specific Bulgarian conditions and geo-political situation (Karasimeonov 1999: 1-4).

Religious and ethnic groups reported to be suffering discrimination in reports by the US Department of State and Human Rights Watch include the Roma and some non-traditional religious communities such as Jehovah's Witnesses. The general human rights situation is burdened by the economic problems associated with the transition. Antiquated procedures, low salaries and corruption obstruct the work of the judiciary. The US State Department 1999 Report noted that the Observation Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recommended its own dissolution in December 1998 when it announced that Bulgaria had made sufficient progress in the fields of democracy and human rights to no longer require monitoring (US Department of State 2000). The US State Department 2000 Report notes that although the Constitution forbids the formation of political parties along religious, ethnic or racial lines, the mainly ethnic Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is represented in Parliament; and the other major parties generally accept its right to participate in the political process. By way of contrast, on 29 February 2000, the Constitutional Court ruled that the United Macedonian Organisation (OMO) political party is unconstitutional on the grounds that it promotes separatism.<sup>7</sup> In terms of religious freedom, the same report notes that the Muslim religious community is among those perceived as holding a historic place in society and benefiting from a high degree of government and public tolerance. Furthermore, no religious group was discriminated against in the granting of restitution of properties nationalised during the Communist regime. Bulgarian Muslims are said to have complained that the procedure for restoring their original names was excessively burdensome. Some ethnic Turkish politicians have claimed that ethnic Turks are underrepresented in appointed positions in the state, police agencies and the military.

In 1992-1996, both the Union of Democratic Forces and the Bulgarian Socialist Party had replaced leading figures from both the Orthodox Christian and the Muslim faiths. There were attempts to substitute the leadership of both denominations with priests supported by one or another government. These attempts resulted in divisions of both religious communities into factions supporting one or another religious leader. The split within Islam was overcome in October 1997 conference when the overwhelming majority of Muslims elected a new leadership, recognised by the government. The split in the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has not yet been resolved, leading to a very strange situation: currently the Bulgarian Orthodox Church has two legitimate leaderships (synods) and two patriarchs (Bulgaria Helsinki Committee 2000).

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<sup>7</sup> According to the court rulings its leaders have advocated the secession of the Pirin Macedonia region of SW Bulgaria and its annexation by FYROM (US Department of State 2000).

In terms of education, Bulgarian Turks are provided the opportunity to study their mother tongue and religion in public schools. The US State Department 2000 Report notes that voluntary Turkish language classes continue, funded by the government. The Ministry of education estimates that 40,000 children currently study Turkish in Bulgaria. In addition, a school for imams, a Muslim cultural centre, university-level theological facilities and religious primary schools operate freely. Classes on Islam in regions with a significant Muslim minority were scheduled to begin in 80 schools from January 2001.

For the benefit of the Turkish minority, Bulgarian National Television launched Turkish language newscasts for the first time on 2 Oct. 2000. The local Bulgarian National Radio network broadcast Turkish language programs in those regions with an ethnic Turkish population (US Department of State 2000). A recent (February 2001) Los Angeles Times article has concluded that Bulgaria exhibits 'one of the past decade's greatest successes of ethnic relations in the troubled Balkans' (David 2001). Perhaps the current situation of the Bulgarian Turks is best described by the chief mufti (the highest Muslim religious leader) of Bulgaria, Mr Selim Mumun Mehmet: 'Bulgaria is going in the right direction and we are very happy with that.' (Mehmed qtd in David 2001)

Bulgaria's success in maintaining peaceful ethnic relations could be explained by a number of factors. One of the most important factors would be the fact that the Turkish ethnic group has been represented in Parliament since the first elections (that took place in 1990) after the fall of the Communist regime. Initially there have been several unsuccessful attempts on the part of the Socialist (former Communist) party to challenge the Muslim-based Movement for rights and Freedoms (MRF) before the court. In the period 1990 - 1996 the Socialists once approached the Constitutional Court with questions about the MRF's legitimacy and twice made petitions demanding the same (Zhelyazkova 1997: 5). However, the choice of proportional representation created a situation in which the MRF provided the swing vote in the first elections (1990 - 1994). Hence, both major parties, the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the Union of Democratic Forces, had followed policies designed to make them a plausible coalition partner of the MRF.

**MRF's Participation in the Elections 1990-2000:**

1990: 6.02% of the vote; 23 seats in Parliament (GNA) out of 400  
1991: 7.55% of the vote; 24 seats in Parliament out of 240  
1994: 5.44% of the vote; 15 seats  
1997: 7.6 % of the vote; 19 seats (In the 1997 elections the MRF participated through a coalition called Alliance for National Salvation.)

**Distribution of seats in Parliament in the elections 1990 - 1994**

1990: BSP 211, UDF 144 seats, BANU 16 seats, MRF 23 seats  
1991: BSP 106, UDF 110, MRF 24  
1994: BSP 125, UDF 69, People's Union 18, MRF 15, Bulgarian Business Bloc 13



There are several reasons to question whether the MRF truly represents the interests of the Bulgarian Turks. Throughout the 1990s, it formed a coalition with BSP; and during the elections of June 2001, the MRF once again allied itself to the BSP. This choice for a coalition partner is strange for a number of reasons: first, BSP representatives attempted to challenge the legitimacy of MRF before the court. Second, one of the most often-stated reasons for emigration of the Bulgarian Turks in the early 1990s was their fear that the Socialist Party would win the elections in Bulgaria. (Gheorgieva 1997). The release in January 2001 of a documentary on the assimilation of ethnic Turks during the communist regime, the leader of the MRF – the party claiming to represent the Bulgarian Turks – criticised the film, saying that the documentary was an attempt to undermine relations between his party and the former communists in the renamed Socialist Party (RFE/RL 2001). In addition, after the confidential files were opened in 1997, it became clear that a number of the leaders of the MRF, including its chairman Akhmet Dogan, were agents of the former secret police (Atanassova 1999). Nevertheless, the MRF did play a crucial role in the process of improving ethnic relations in Bulgaria. It provided the Bulgarian Turks with a chance of participating in decision-making, and it facilitated confidence building between ethnic Turks and ethnic Bulgarians in that it never called for territorial autonomy.

To sum up, the Turkish ethnic group in Bulgaria currently enjoys extensive rights in terms of education, practising Islam and participation in decision-making. Ironically, the improvement in the treatment of the Bulgarian Turks has coincided with a deterioration of the economic situation in Bulgaria. The current economic conditions stand as a major incentive for them to leave to Turkey. Thus, from June 1989 till the beginning of 1997 some 400-450 individuals had settled in Turkey (Dimitrova 1997: 2). It is interesting to note that many young people planned to settle in Western Europe instead. Some of them had new passports issued; re-adopted Bulgarian names and contacted the Bulgarian-based labour recruitment agencies for Western Europe (Gheorgieva 1997: 5). In any event, there is currently a sizeable community of Bulgarian Turks living in Turkey who have retained specific cultural features inherited from their unique background of Bulgarian local customs, communism/post communism and Islam.

### ***The Bulgarian Turkish Immigrants in the Republic of Turkey***

The most important reason for emigration after 1989 was the difference between the living standards in Bulgaria and Turkey. The main reason people decided to emigrate was to ensure a better standard of living in a country where the economic conditions were better. The Turkish government provided accommodation for the 1989 refugees who did not have relatives in Turkey by building ten camps for the purpose. The state provided some assistance in finding employment. The official state policy of providing accommodation, food etc. and the attitude of the Turkish people, differed: ordinary Turks tended to give the Bulgarian immigrants a cold reception. In the words of some of the immigrants from Bulgaria:

They had believed us to be inferior...They did not accept us as equals, even those who had emigrated in 1978 did not treat us as equals...They called us 'giavurlar', 'bulgarlar' (infidels, Bulgarians); we've heard enough names (Dimitrova 1997: 6).

Approximately 150,000 emigrants returned to Bulgaria after having left in 1989, feeling despondent after facing unemployment and a lack of opportunities. However, many of them managed improve their chances of by working hard and living frugally. An interesting feature that recurs often among the emigrants from Bulgaria is that they are willing to live in constant deprivation in order to save money for a house of their own. This reflects to a large extent a typical Bulgarian peculiarity: owning a house is considered an essential achievement and a basis for success. This is something that is in contrast to the Western emphasis on mobility, and produced what Dimitrova labelled a 'construction offensive' of the Bulgarian emigrants in Turkey. Another specific element 'imported' from Bulgaria is that in 'Bulgarian-Turkish' neighbourhoods women often wore miniskirts, and boys and girls wore shorts – far from the characteristic 'dress code' in most of the country. Young people adapt with difficulty to Islamic gender relations: student dormitories are separated, for example; and it would be regarded as immoral were a woman have coffee with a male colleague. Contact between emigrants and their colleagues/classmates are characterised by aloofness and restraint. Most emigrant marriages are consequently contracted within the émigré community. After 1994, the individuals who came as part of the wave of emigration in 1989 were granted dual citizenship. Hence, many children and retired people prefer to spend the summer in Bulgaria. Some prefer to come back to pursue their higher education or perform military service in Bulgaria, particularly since there is a general fear of doing military service in Kurd-inhabited regions. The two states have an agreement concerning the mutual recognition of one another's military service (Dimitrova 1997: 10-17).

Despite problems of adaptation, the Bulgarian Turks have continued to emigrate on a massive scale ever since the end of the Cold War. Fieldwork and surveys indicate that for most of these people emigration is the only way out of the economic difficulties in Bulgaria. Between 1994 and 1997, 200,000 ethnic Turks from Bulgaria settled in Turkey. It is worth noting that the number of people trying to escape from collectivisation in 1950-1951 was smaller – at around 150,000. Seasonal economic emigration has even provided an outlet for obtaining some additional resources. Emigration after the mid-1990s continued to flourish but became, for all intents and purposes, illegal. Many young people had decided that no barriers on the part of either the Bulgarian or the Turkish government could prevent them from leaving. On the other hand, many people in Turkey want their children to be educated in Bulgaria, since they deem the state education in Bulgaria to be better, and they could not afford private universities (Gheorgieva 1997: 7). It is interesting to note that the emigrants in Turkey do not hate Bulgarians in general as a result of the name-changing campaign; they blame the communist regime alone. Furthermore, a number of people interviewed by Bulgarian scholars express their pity for the economic hardships the Bulgarian people currently endure: 'We have already managed; may you, poor things, soon be all right too' (Zhelyazkova 1997: 7).

In any event, hundreds of thousands of Bulgarian Turkish immigrants to Turkey continue to rely on Bulgaria for practical reasons, such as education and military service, or because of the emotional attachment to the homeland. The developments in the Bulgarian-Turkish relations are of importance for these people who, at least for the time being, constitute a distinct community in their new home country.

### ***Bulgarian-Turkish Relations in the Post-Cold War Era***

Restoring the rights of the Bulgarian Turks and improving their treatment after the fall of the communist regime removed a major impediment to the development of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. However, the legacy of uncertainty and fear accumulated through the



Cold War still posed a challenge in the beginning. The first measures aimed at enhancing mutual trust and co-operation included downscaling the military activity on both sides of the common border, and two agreements were signed to this effect: the Sofia Document in 1991 and the Edirne document in 1992 (Atanassova 1999). A Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourly Relations, Co-operation and Security was signed on May 6, 1992 (Atanassova 2000). A series of high-level visits followed: President of the Turkish Republic Turgut Ozal visited Bulgaria in 1993, and Bulgarian president Zhelev visited Turkey in 1994. President Demirel returned the visit in 1995. In 1997 the newly elected president Peter Stoyanov delivered a speech to the Turkish National Assembly asking for forgiveness for what had been done to the Turkish minority in his country (Lutem 1999: 11). A question concerning the delimitation of part of the border between Bulgaria and Turkey and the territorial waters in the Black Sea was resolved after forty years of negotiations, through an agreement signed in December 1997. During a visit by Bulgarian premier Kostov in Turkey in 1998, the two countries signed an agreement about the retirement benefits due from the Bulgarian government to the Bulgarian citizens now permanently residing in Turkey. The agreement affects 40,000-50,000 Bulgarian Turks who emigrated after May 1989. On a number of occasions, Turkish officials have emphasised Turkey's support for Bulgaria's accession to NATO. At a press conference during a visit to Bulgaria in March 1999, President Demirel stated, 'NATO without Bulgaria and Romania is unthinkable' (Atanassova 1999).

In the light of these facts, one might easily conclude that Bulgarian-Turkish relations are currently excellent. Initially, after the end of the Cold War, some scholars in Athens expressed their concern that Turkey was trying to create a 'Muslim arc' on Greece's northern border (Larabee 2000). By contrast, Larabee (2000: 18) claims that Turkey has not tried to 'play the Muslim card'. On the contrary, it has demonstrated its credentials as a good NATO ally. It has participated in IFOR and SFOR and had supported increased political autonomy for Kosovo – though not for its independence – partly out of fear for setting a precedent regarding the Kurdish issue.

With no territorial disputes or claims for further improvement of minority treatment, the problems that need to be addressed through bilateral co-operation concern the economic development of the regions in Bulgaria where Bulgarian Turks are concentrated. Currently, joint projects designed to enhance the economic development in these regions focus on infrastructure and energy production. Turkey participates in financing large infrastructure projects (such as the EU-sponsored pan-European transport corridors number four, eight and ten). The two countries have already agreed that the gas pipelines from Russia for Turkey and from Turkmenia via Turkey to Europe will pass through Bulgarian territory (Atanassova 1999). A joint project expected to provide employment in the Kurdjali region, densely populated with ethnic Turks, is the hydroelectric plant 'Gorna Arda'. Bulgaria is a major exporter of electricity to Turkey (3,000 million kWh for the year 2000, and expected to have reached 4,000 million kWh in 2001). The project was formally launched in October 1999, but implementation stalled, as negotiations continued well into 2000. Deputy Prime Minister Yulmaz concluded in August 2000: 'There is a certain delay and stagnation in the realisation of bilateral projects' (Council of Ministers, Republic of Bulgaria 2000). Indeed, the major challenge facing the two countries is to enhance economic co-operation. A free trade agreement that entered into force on January 1, 1999, marked one more step in the right direction (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Turkey 1999).

It is interesting to note that the major issues in Bulgarian-Turkish relations in the beginning of the post Cold War era differ considerably from the major issues confronting the countries now, a decade after the change of regime in Bulgaria. Initially, the main impediment to the development of bilateral relations was the mutual mistrust and fear on the part of Bulgaria concerning the military strength of Turkey, as well as possible interference in the internal affairs of Bulgaria. Now the situation appears to have reversed. Turkey is one of Bulgaria's major trading partners. Exports to Turkey accounted for nearly 4% of Bulgaria's GDP in 2000 – a significant amount by any standard (European Commission 2001). Thus, negative developments in the Turkish economy are bound to have serious consequences for the Bulgarian economy. If there were any 'Turkish threat' at present, it would be falling demand for Bulgarian exports.

### **Conclusion**

In the first decade after WW II, Bulgarian Turks still enjoyed a number of rights in terms of expressing their cultural identity. The Turkish language was present in both public educational establishments and the local media. Although the Turkish community could, for the time being, express its ethnic identity freely, it was adversely affected by the forced collectivisation of land that followed the change of regime. A number of individuals from some rural areas (nearly 150,000) decided to migrate to Turkey as a direct consequence of the expropriation of land.

The 'Turkish question' policy of the Bulgarian government throughout the Cold War period was highly inconsistent and chaotic. In 1950, the Bulgarian government accused Turkey of encouraging Bulgarian Turks to emigrate and, at the same time, not issuing enough visas. When Turkey did increase the number of visas issued – resulting in the emigration of the above-mentioned 150,000 people – the Bulgarian government halted the emigration unilaterally. In the same fashion it declined a Turkish proposal for negotiating an emigration agreement in 1984, while at the same time conducting an assimilation program in the form of a name-changing campaign that brought international condemnation. Since the late 1960s, the human rights situation in the country deteriorated, until the fall of the communist regime in 1989.

After the change of regime in 1989, ethnic relations in Bulgaria improved considerably. The rights of the Turkish community were reinstated and a Muslim-based party has been participating in decision-making ever since the first free elections were held. However, the emigration of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey has continued. This time it is the low standard of living in Bulgaria that motivates the Bulgarian Turks to continue to migrate to Turkey. This comes as no surprise, as many young people of both Turkish and Bulgarian ethnic origin are currently likely to choose emigration as an alternative to the problems of high unemployment and unattractive remuneration in Bulgaria. Thus, ironically, the Cold War situation of poor human rights records and restrictions on emigration has been completely reversed for the time being in Bulgaria. At present, the country has considerably improved the treatment of Bulgarian Turks and could not stop them from emigrating: this time Turkey is trying to limit the inflow of economic immigrants.

Bulgarian-Turkish relations after WW II had largely reflected the changes in the treatment of the Turkish ethnic group. The period 1968-1984 is the only exception to that trend, as at the time a 'warming' in bilateral relations coincided with curbing the rights of the Bulgarian Muslims. In general, though, the treatment of the Bulgarian Turks has had a direct effect on the development of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. After the



name-changing campaign of 1984-1985 conducted by the Bulgarian government, bilateral relations deteriorated substantially. Only after the change of regime in 1989 did the bilateral relations begin to improve. Currently, a decade after the fall of communism the Bulgarian-Turkish relations could be described as excellent. At present, the focus in bilateral talks has shifted from improving minority treatment to enhancing economic co-operation. Joint projects are underway aiming at increasing the economic development of the Bulgarian regions heavily populated with ethnic Turks.

The improvement in treatment of the Bulgarian Turks over the last decade has been impressive. Currently the treatment of the Bulgarian Turks includes measures Turkey would not be willing to grant to its minorities, although the ethnic Turks in Bulgaria form a significantly smaller minority than the ethnic Kurds in Turkey. Some developments noted by the US Department of State 2000 report include the fact that Turkish-language classes funded by the government continued, and that on 2 October 2000 Bulgarian national television launched Turkish-language newscasts (US Department of State 2000). According to the 1992 census, there were 800,055 Turks out of a total population of 8,487,317; in other words less than 10% of the population (Koinova 1999). Indeed since 1992 emigration to Turkey has been considerable. By contrast, a Turkish MP and professor of constitutional law claims that 'the right to speak one's mother tongue and to write, publish or broadcast in that language may be exercised in the press or the media through books and periodicals and private radio and television stations' (Mumtaz 1999: 17), not the national media. The Kurdish ethnic group comprises one-sixth of the Turkish population. The improvements in the Bulgarian government's policy toward the Turkish community have been recognised in Turkey, as the Turkish head of government thanked the Bulgarian government for the good treatment of the Bulgarian Turks in 1999.

The issues that remain on the agenda in Bulgarian-Turkish relations involve primarily economic problems: alleviating the economic difficulties of the Turkish-inhabited regions in Bulgaria, facilitating trade and infrastructure projects. As we have noted in 2000, 4% of Bulgarian GDP comprised exports to Turkey. Currently there are no obstacles to maintaining good bilateral relations and enhanced economic co-operation. Turkish politicians have repeatedly demonstrated the necessary goodwill in this respect. A constructive, Western European type of vision for the development of bilateral relations was formulated by the Turkish Deputy PM in August 2000: 'We view Bulgaria not only as a neighbouring and friendly country. We view it as a future partner in NATO and we see us both as full EU members...We know that we have great potential for the promotion of the bilateral relations.' (Council of Ministers, Republic of Bulgaria 1999)

Lutem (1999) maintains that the future stumbling block to Turkish-Bulgarian relations could once again be the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, as discrimination still exists in practice. In the light of developments of the last decade, such a scenario appears highly unlikely. The Bulgarian Turks are well integrated into Bulgarian society and are granted more rights than Turkey would be willing to grant its minorities at present. At this point many Bulgarian Turks would like to have the opportunity to migrate to Turkey in search for a better standard of living, an opportunity only the Turkish state could offer. In addition, both countries would benefit substantially from maintaining good bilateral relations.

There is yet another factor that could affect the Bulgarian-Turkish relations: the overall direction of the foreign policy of Turkey as regards the Balkans – especially Greece. From

1945 to the present, the Cyprus question was brought up twice in Bulgarian politics. On the first occasion, the then head of state Zhivkov used it as a justification for the name-changing campaign directed at the Bulgarian Turks in 1984-1985. On the second, deputies in the 1991 Grand National Assembly used it as an argument for the specific formulation of some parts of the present Bulgarian Constitution. Thus, future developments in the Greek-Turkish relations are likely to affect the direction of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. At present, a more flexible position on the part of Greece toward Turkey's candidacy for the EU, and dialogue with Turkey, are causes for optimism.

At present, a number of prerequisites for maintaining the atmosphere of goodwill and co-operation in Bulgarian-Turkish relations are in place. The development of bilateral relations between these two countries in the past decade has demonstrated that minority issues do not present an insurmountable barrier to good-neighbourly relations in the Balkans. This, in turn, provides evidence that a peaceful, Western European type of solution for minority issues is applicable in the region, provided moderation and tolerance on both sides.

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