

The Nation and its Margins: Negotiating a National Identity in Post-1989 Bulgaria

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My aim in this article is to illuminate key aspects of how the nation is represented in public discourse in Bulgaria, both as an abstract concept and as a grounded locus of social and cultural life and identity construction.¹ I do this through examining the anomalous position and lack of legitimacy accorded to ethnic and religious minorities through the dominant discourse on national identity, that of the Orthodox Christian majority. I shall focus in particular upon one central element in the discourse on national identity, namely, the claim to identity as a nation within the symbolic space of Europe. I examine this discourse as it plays out in the practice of history teaching in Bulgaria and in the wider public arena.

Much of the work of producing an over-arching national identity and of producing personal identities as Bulgarian national subjects involves distancing both the individual self and the "national self" from practices and traits that are considered un-European, while adopting such that are considered European. Marginalizing minorities who display such un-European traits, I will argue, is integral to this process of defining Bulgaria as a European nation.

Ethnic and religious minorities constitute a significant demographic presence in Bulgaria. While census figures vary considerably from year to year², ethnic Turks (together with Tatars) comprise almost 10% of the population, Gypsies somewhere between 3.5 and 6.5%, Pomak-s (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims) about 3%, and others a little over 1%³. However the place of these minorities within the Bulgarian nation-state is fraught with ambiguity. Official policy regarding minorities has undergone wide fluctuation, and negative stereotypes abound. The socialist-era government swung from an initial position of promoting minority cultural development to one of aggressively pursuing brutal assimilation policies, directed particularly against Muslims and Turks (see Bates 1994)⁴. The Pomak-s and Macedonians have been variously granted and denied separate group identities, and a "fictive" Macedonian identity was imposed on Bulgarians in the Pirin region (adjacent to the Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) for a while in 1947. Since the passing of state socialism in 1989, many of the earlier injustices have

been redressed. Yet, in both official policy and public opinion, the existence of minorities constitutes a problem central to the task of defining the Bulgarian nation-state.

Given the prominence of this "minority problem" in government policy and public opinion, it appears surprising at first glance that the Bulgarian school history curriculum, a major vehicle for the transmission of official national ideology (as cultural policy), reserves little place for minorities, whether religious or ethnic, and that these are consequently largely absent from history classroom discussions. However, it is a mistake to treat cultural policy or official ideological pronouncements as constituting ideology in and of themselves. Ideology, rather, emerges as much in the silences and gaps of such official discourses (see Herzfeld 1987: 14, 21). If, following Fox, we understand national ideology as officially-sanctioned conceptions of what constitutes national "peoplehood" (Fox 1990:3), we must nevertheless approach national ideologies as socially constituted, i.e. as emerging through the social, cultural, economic and political practices of the members of a national society. Ideologies inform yet are also shaped by such practices (Giddens 1984, Verdery 1991, Fox et al. 1990), and official discourses (cultural policy, ideological pronouncements) do not necessarily represent explicit statements of the ideology that they sanction. The silences and gaps, as much as what is explicitly stated, constitute the symbolic field within which ideology emerges through the practices of institutional and private agents. Ideology in this regard may be considered as a kind of "practical consciousness" (Giddens 1984)5. Thus, the absence of ethnic and religious minorities from the official discourse on national identity and their marginality within the wider public discourse must be considered as (in part) constitutive of national ideology. Indeed, the ways in which ethnic and religious minorities (as the obverse of "the national") are marginalized within the discourse on national identity reveals much about how what constitutes "national" identity is defined. This production of the nation through the marginalization of the ethnic and religious "other" is particularly poignantly illustrated in terms of the way Bulgarian identity is framed as a European identity.

As "interested discourse[s]" central to a particular social order (Eagleton 1991:10), ideologies are open to renegotiation when such practices and/or configurations of power change. The post-state-socialist transition in Bulgaria has entailed substantial resignification of the historical underpinnings of national ideology. Official cultural policy -- as expressed through the school history curriculum -- has been adapted rather quickly to change, taking on a more

"European" (i.e. humanistic) image and portraying in principle a more inclusive nation.

However, other aspects of institutional reform that affect the transmission and reproduction of cultural policy (e.g. retraining of teachers, rewriting of textbooks, scholarly production under new paradigms) occur at a slower pace. Textbooks are being continually rewritten, but few are yet considered by their users to be both of "European" standard and suitable pedagogically.

The official history curriculum of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education for the year 1995-96 outlines among the aims of history education for grades IV - XI the following:

- the formation of national historical consciousness [natsionalno istorichesko s?znanie] and national self-confidence [natsionalno samochuvstvie] ... through outlining phenomena, processes and events that demonstrate the inseparability of Bulgaria from European cultural values, the values of European civilization;
- the formation of historical memory and the development of an awareness of national identity [os?znavane na natsionalna identichnost] through placing accents on eminent figures and events of pertinence to concrete periods and historical perspectives, with accents also on enduring, historically intransient factors of meaning and import to the historical development and fate of the Bulgarian people [narod];
- instruction in tolerance and national and human dignity through acquaintance with the history of culture and the contribution of all peoples [narodi] to it, and the development of general human morals and cultural-historical values (Ministerstvo na obrazovaniето... 1995:10, emphasis mine).

These aims are further woven into the curriculum descriptions for particular grades such that demonstrating the Europeanness of Bulgarian culture and history occupies a prominent position both for grades studying Bulgarian history and for grades studying general history, regardless of the historical period in question. The prime subject of history is the Bulgarian nation, both in the sense of "people" (i.e. "narod" in Bulgarian, comparable in meaning to the German term "Volk") and in the historically-specific sense of the modern territorial-political nation (Bulg. natsiya) -- which is conceived of as an organic outgrowth of the narod⁶. However, the primary agent in history is stressed as being the individual human being, rather than either the nation or the working class.

Some room is reserved in the curriculum, particularly that of the lower grades, for studying the development of a specifically "Bulgarian" ethnic and "national" identity in the Middle Ages. Indeed, narodnosti⁷, or ethnic groups (in the sense of culturally-distinct groups) are presented in the curriculum (and widely understood) to have been formed once and for all in the Middle Ages and to be inviolable. Pupils in a variety of grades were able fluently to outline the categorical distinction between narodnosti (ethnic groups), which were formed in the early Middle Ages, and nations (in the modern territorial-political sense), which were formed during the Renaissance. Moreover, I heard repeatedly among pupils and teachers the view that neither "ethnicity-proper" (as in the term "ethnic origin", Bulg. etnicheska prinadlezhnost), i.e. ethnicity understood in a biological, racial sense, nor language are crucial factors in the formation of a nation (or narodnost). Rather, national self-consciousness (natsionalno samosoznanie) is the key. This would seem to contradict both observed practice (marginalization of minorities seemingly on linguistic and ethnic grounds) and common Western understandings of identity issues in the Balkans. However, under further scrutiny this apparent contradiction dissolves. Bulgarian history itself involves the erasure of ethnic and linguistic distinctions between the Bulgar and Slav ethnic groups (and other groups) that merged, ostensibly unproblematically, in the Early Middle Ages to form a unitary Bulgarian narodnost (nation, people, culturally-ethnic group) during the time of the first Bulgarian Kingdom. History teachers and academics, textbooks and pupils alike referred to the formation during this period of a "national/ethnic (self-)consciousness" (narodnostno (samo-)soznanie) which has served to unify the nation since the Middle Ages. The formation of narodnosti (ethnic groups) is seen as a uniform process characteristic of the Middle Ages (at least in Europe). This is presented in sharp contrast to the Ancient World, which is characterized by pure and separate racial-ethnic groups (etnosi, sg. etnos). Narodnosti (peoples, culturally-ethnic groups) are seen as more fluid groupings of people based on consensus and political expediency (not to mention invasion and domination). Modern nations are understood to have arisen on the basis of such culturally-ethnic groups (narodnosti) during the Renaissance as a new form of political integration. There is, however, no general admission that such identities or the nations they reference can be constituted in the present. Only those nations, such as Bulgaria, based on a culturally-ethnic group (narodnost) formed in the Middle Ages, have a legitimate claim to national status now. This results in Macedonian and Bosnian-Muslim national identities being considered almost unanimously by Bulgarians as

fictions. Regional or religious descriptors, yes, but not in any sense national or ethnic. People I asked were unanimous in the case of Bosnia: Islam, or indeed religion, as the basis for a national state in Europe is unthinkable. The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is a sore point for most Bulgarians as it is considered an integral part of Bulgaria historically, culturally, and linguistically (though never part of modern (post-1878) Bulgaria). This organic Bulgaro-Macedonian connection is stressed in the school curriculum. Indeed, officially the Macedonian state is recognized, whereas the existence of a distinctive Macedonian language, culture and history is not⁸.

Let us now return to the question of the marginalization of minorities. Despite their numerical presence (Turks alone comprising almost 10% of the population), minorities are largely excluded from the public discourse on national identity (see Bates 1994). This is not to suggest that members of minorities are denied access to social, legal, economic and political institutions (though at times under the state-socialist regime certain of them were (Eminov 1990)). However, structural discrimination against members of perceived minorities persists (Eminov 1990, Bates 1994), as do widespread prejudice and negative stereotypes. Where minorities seek redress through collective representation, dominant streams within the public discourse on national identity rally against them. What emerges in examining such instances is that they are sites where conflicting visions of Europe⁹ meet: one that regards Europeaness as an exclusive, historically-ordained, organic right; the other as an idea, somewhat synonymous with modern humanitarian values (Donna Buchanan, personal communication), that has to be nurtured, achieved, and demonstrated through the establishment of democratic institutions, the observance of minority rights, etc.

This clash between competing visions of Europeaness was readily apparent when a Turkish candidate of the primarily Turkish/Muslim political party, The Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF), won mayoral office in the predominantly Turkish town of K?rdzhali (in the Rhodope Mountains of Southern Bulgaria). There was considerable public outcry from "ethnic" Bulgarians, which resulted in an inquiry into the election procedure. In the meantime the Mayor was removed from office, although finally reinstated months later, a move that was widely considered a blow to democracy. A newspaper article in a major national daily, *Pari* (Money), appearing shortly before the election, attacked the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF), the main opposition party to the incumbent Bulgarian Socialist Party, which had vowed support for the

Turkish candidate (Panayotov 1995a). The article was interpreted by Turks as inflaming enmity between Bulgarians and Turks (Apostolova 1995). In response, the author of the first article, wrote another article in which he stated: "In reply I can only say that to the best of my belief, in Bulgaria there live Bulgarians", i.e. Turkish identity has no place in Bulgaria. He asserted further, that the MRF party, instead of trying to politicize ethnicity, should "go back to where it naturally belongs, back to where it came from -- the political dunghill of contemporary Bulgarian history" (Panayotov 1995b). This view seems to be widely shared, that a political party based on ethnicity has no place in Bulgaria. The rest of the article, however, is devoted to exhorting "ethnic" Bulgarians to get up and vote for the only viable Bulgarian (in this case, Socialist) candidate.

Similar invective was unleashed periodically during my fieldwork period (1995-96) against the President of Bulgaria, Zhelyu Zhelev, his advisors on minority issues, and the international foundations supporting minorities research. Especially controversial was the raising of the Bulgarian Muslim community (Pomaks) to minority status, when traditionally they have been considered fully Bulgarian in all respects except religion. Minority status is equated with separatism (e.g. Haytov 1996), and in this regard, Pomak minority politics are widely considered to derive from foreign "propaganda" interests believed to be operative in the Pomak region of the Rhodope mountains: Turkish, American, Middle-Eastern, and Greek¹⁰. Pomaks have also a variety of autochthonous theories as to how they ended up as Bulgarian Muslims, and these usually involve a migration from the Middle-East. Officially, however, Pomaks are considered to be Bulgarians who converted to Islam during the period of Ottoman rule (early XVth to late XIXth century); they are thus Bulgarian beyond doubt, members of the Bulgarian *narodnost*. Minority status would in this view imply a greater distinction from the dominant culture than does religion alone, and would achieve legitimacy for Islam as a component of ethnic identity. For this reason, Bulgarians I spoke with often downplayed religion as a component of national and ethnic identity. Language, similarly, is downplayed as a component of ethnic identity, so as to further undermine ethnic Turks' claims to minority status. What makes Bulgarians Bulgarian is thus not their language or religion, but their national self-consciousness. And this is precisely what the dominant discourse on national and ethnic identity denies to the "so-called" minorities. In the case of the Turkish minority, public opinion and government policies over the last decades have moved between two poles: 1). asserting that they

are turkified Bulgarians, the stance behind the socialist-era assimilation campaigns; and 2). recognizing them as members of the Turkish nation, the stance behind the periodic mass expulsions of Turks (see Bates 1994, Eminov 1990). In practice, however, there is widespread recognition of the importance of Turks to the economic well-being of the country (another factor behind the assimilation campaigns). A hybrid Bulgarian-Turkish identity, nevertheless, does not sit well with ethnic Bulgarian understandings of inviolable ethnic identity (*narodnost*). The Turkish minority must be either Bulgarian or Turkish. Pomaks, for their part, have no claim to a separate *narodnost* formed in the Middle Ages, having been Bulgarians who converted to Islam. Indeed, a prominent public figure charged the president's office and foreign foundations with having promoted research asserting the existence of a Pomak ethnicity (in the racial/biological sense, Bulg. *ethnos*) (Haytov 1996). This would be to assert that Pomaks had never been Bulgarian, that they had always been separate. What really upset people across the board, however, was the publication in June 1996 in Greece of a Pomak-Greek/Greek-Pomak dictionary and a grammar of the Pomak language (Standart 1996). Greece, too, has a small population of Pomaks, who speak what Bulgarians would maintain is reasonably pure Bulgarian. Thus, treating their language as a language in its own right (i.e., denying its Bulgarianness) was seen as a deliberate attempt to destabilize Bulgaria. If Pomaks on one side of the border are a nation, then what does that imply for the other side of the border? Moreover, the sinister intent ascribed to the Greek government (which ostensibly had nothing to do with the publication of the books) was heightened by the fact that Greece has usually maintained that it is an ethnically-pure state without ethnic minorities (*ibid.*). This incident commanded a great deal of public attention in Bulgaria, and Greek-Bulgarian diplomacy was decidedly barbed for some time.

These events I have outlined bring into sharp focus tensions and contestation in the public discourse on Bulgarian national identity. Marginalization and exclusion of minorities from the discourse on national identity has often been explained in terms of an imperative to view the nation as a homogeneous whole (for instance Eminov 1990). This explanation fits reasonably the state-socialist-era brutal assimilation policies -- coerced name-changes, restricted civil and language rights. Indeed, Eminov (1990:8) cites government-sponsored research from 1988 that asserted the 'racial purity' of the Bulgarian people, with the implication that Turks and other minorities in the Bulgarian state were in essence Bulgarians who had "lost" their essential Bulgarian identity (through coerced assimilation under Ottoman rule). Turks supposedly all

voluntarily reassumed their Bulgarian identity during 1984-85 (Eminov 1990:9). Such an explanation -- the imperative of a homogeneous nation -- may still hold some validity. It is still adhered to by many Bulgarians. However, the context within which the assimilatory policies were developed was, as Eminov points out ("Eminov 1990"1990:3), that of the pursuit of a unified socialist community, which was to be achieved through the standardization of culture within national boundaries. This was in part predicated on what Baki(-Hayden and Hayden refer to as "the ideology of bounded nations that has for so long driven European thought" (1992:15), and I suggest here that the present situation can be elucidated further by viewing the quest for national homogeneity as part of an assertion of European identity. The archetypical (Romantic) European nation is conceived as homogeneous. In this light, Islam and Turkish (oriental) culture are denied a constitutive role in the production of national identity as they are non-European. They are, nonetheless, partially constitutive of the nation through defining negatively that which is not European/Bulgarian¹¹.

National identity in Bulgaria is thus predicated on the existence of a reaching of consensus in the past concerning common interest. This has become solidified as *narodnost* (cultural-ethnic identity), but the processualness of this identity construction is disregarded in favor of the result. This enables such process to be devalued in the present (e.g. the denial of legitimacy to Macedonian claims to nationhood; Pomak identity recognized only in terms of (relatively insignificant) religious difference; Turks understood as either Turkified Bulgarians or as non-Bulgarian others). The nation is conceived also in terms of Europeanness, which is understood as entailing the imperative of ethnic-cultural homogeneity. Bulgarian identity is presented as having been unproblematic throughout history, while that of the minorities on the Bulgarian (especially those inhabiting border regions, such as the Turks, Pomaks and Macedonians) is considered inherently problematic. This is because they are neither completely Bulgarian nor completely other. Their location within state (=national) boundaries precludes their otherness, yet their religious and/or cultural practices and/or language preclude their full Bulgarianness. However, the discourse on Bulgarian national identity is by no means monolithic. The institution of the presidency and the higher levels of the judiciary throughout the six years of Zhelyu Zhelev's tenure were dedicated to the promotion of civil rights and ethnic and religious tolerance, and continue to be so under President Pet(r) Stoyanov. The Turkish and Pomak examples I presented before testify to the existence of counter discourses, based in a

different vision of Europeaness, where equal rights are accorded despite difference, rather than on the basis of claims to sameness.

These two visions of Europe exist in tension in Bulgaria, as two sides of one coin. However, it is the latter, that of a Europe to which Bulgaria belongs organically, that is stressed most in the school history curriculum. Reference to minorities in the curriculum is almost exclusively restricted to discussion of the sorry fate of Bulgarians in the border regions of neighboring countries, which are presented as having openly flouted international conventions regarding minority rights.

The orientalizing nature of such a Europe-centered discourse on national identity has been discussed by Buchanan (1995, 1996) in terms of the paradigms of musical expression given valence under state-socialism. It accords also with the situation in Yugoslavia described by Baki?-Hayden and Hayden (1992) and that in Greece described by Herzfeld (1987, 1997), in that it is a self-orientalizing discourse. Both visions of Europe are implicated here. While the vision of an organic connection to Europe barely hides a self-consciousness about the failure of Bulgaria to measure up to European standards, both visions of Europe concur on the point that Europeaness constitutes a desirable status. They define this differently, yet it is the perception of an external measure that drives, on the one hand, dignified claims to a European heritage, and, on the other hand, dire self-criticism. I suggest that the marginalization of minorities acts largely as a displacement for self-criticism. Minorities, particularly the sizable Turkish and Roma (Gypsy)¹² communities, personify that which is un-European¹³. Marginalizing and excluding them from participation in the production of a national culture as constitutive minorities is thus a cathartic measure, that serves to ennoble the dominant, Bulgarian culture, and renders the minorities as scapegoats bearing the shame (un-Europeaness) that separates Bulgaria from Europe. Moreover, the counter-discourse of Europeaness and humanistic values is no less an orientalizing discourse, in that it presents Bulgaria as "not quite Europe" in terms of a perceived set of criteria that define Europeaness in terms of human rights and democratic institutions. Approaching the phenomenon of ethnic and minority conflict and marginalization in this way challenges the oft-heard view that such conflicts are the result of pent-up animosities that go back generations. Indeed, as Creed suggests (1990:17) such conflicts may be generated in the present historical juncture. Such an approach -- focusing on the way Europe gets symbolized at the margins of Europe -- may also provide the means for a critical analysis of the production of

"Europe" itself as a symbolic space -- a challenge raised by Baki?-Hayden and Hayden (1992). Moreover, this analysis highlights the problem of equating explicit ideological pronouncements and cultural policy with the reproduction of ideological systems, showing rather how competing ideologies of Bulgarian national identity emerge in the public sphere, wherein official ideological pronouncements are but one constitutive factor. Discursive practices, as well as other social and political practices, are also constitutive of these ideologies.

Notes

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2. This is due both to changing official categorization practices and, especially in the case of Roma, a degree of fluidity in self-definition.

3. Based on 1989 and 1993 figures. For more detail, see Bates 1994:206. Other minorities include Armenians, Greeks, Macedonians, Albanians, as well as Alevi Muslims and Gagauz.

4. "Assimilation" carries a negative connotation in the Balkan context, involving the (forceful) erasure of existing identity. The assimilation campaign did not make Turks feel more integrated into the Bulgarian nation. On the contrary, as Bates (1994:212) observes, the policy of name-changing caused Turks to withdraw from social contact with Bulgarians, since such a violence against their persons made them feel utterly other.

5. This term allows of greater reflexivity on the part of the agent than does Bourdieu's similar term "habitus" (1977).

6. *Narod* and *natsiya* are in fact defined in terms of each other in one popular Bulgarian dictionary (S?vremenen t?lkoven rechnik. Veliko T?novo: ELPIS (1994)). In general usage, however, *natsiya* appears as the marked term, i.e. as more narrowly defined. *Narod* is defined variously as "inhabitants of a state", as a "nation" (*natsiya*), "people/ethnic group" (*narodnost*). *Narod* was, moreover, the term used to mean "the people" (the laboring classes) during the state-socialist period, and is still used to mean the "general public".

7. The singular form, *narodnost*, is essentially an abstract noun meaning "the property of being a

people", and in current usage refers usually to cultural distinctiveness. By extension it means also the people so constituted.

8. Interestingly, a group of Bulgarian politicians and intellectuals descended en masse but unofficially on Ohrid, Macedonia (one-time cultural and religious capital of Mediaeval Bulgaria) at Easter 1996, in a covert symbolic return.

9. Eleanor Smollett makes a similar observation (1993 *America the Beautiful: Made in Bulgaria*. *Anthropology Today* 9(2):9-13): different political groupings approached differently the question of European identity. The socialists saw Bulgaria as already European. Pro-free-market forces spoke of the necessity to become European.

10. Each of these purportedly has an interest in destabilizing Bulgaria and/or Europe. The same suspicion of foreign involvement is true in the case of Turkish minority politics.

11. See Pilbrow (In press).

12. Roma are in a sense less problematic, given that they do not identify with a homeland across the border. Nevertheless, they are seen as epitomizing that which is un-European.

13. Other minorities (e.g. Armenians) are not seen as so problematic, as they have tended to blend into the dominant society more, and do not identify with a homeland that poses a political threat to Bulgaria.

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