

# **The Bases of Bulgaria's Ethnic Policies**

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Ethnicity and nationalism occupy a central space in the ongoing negotiation of transition throughout much of Eastern Europe and it is clear that the viability of some governments in the region, and perhaps even some of the states themselves, now hinges upon the successful management of these forces. Eminov provides a useful description of two such cases, the Soviet Union and Bulgaria. This combination is very illustrative since, as Eminov points out, the Soviet ideology provided a basis for Bulgaria's nationality policies. However, from a local Bulgarian perspective, the adherence to the Soviet line on nationality issues often coincided with indigenous Bulgarian bases for allegiance that were not strictly ideological. These bases account for the continued Bulgarian pursuit of ethnic homogeneity even after this objective was being questioned in the Soviet Union. Furthermore, in the current context of retreat from monolithic ideology in Bulgaria, these bases are likely to be the primary concerns in the continuing search for a solution to the "nationality problem." I would like to devote this commentary to a discussion of some of these bases, examining how they have influenced the evolution of ethnic conflict in Bulgaria and suggesting how they might be approached theoretically to further our understanding of the Bulgarian case.

As Eminov makes clear, the Zhivkov regime was engaged for almost two decades in an attempt to eradicate ethnic variation in Bulgaria by such measures as restricting the use of the Turkish language and prohibiting the practice of Muslim religious rites. This assimilation campaign culminated in the attempt by the government in 1984-85 to forcibly change the names of all Turks in the country into standard Bulgarian names. Continued Turkish resistance to this policy then led to the forced, or at least rushed, exodus of thousands of Turks from the country in the summer of 1989, many of whom subsequently returned. One of the first actions of the post-Zhivkov government was to halt this assimilation campaign, which, in turn, sparked anti-Turkish demonstrations on the part of Bulgarians in early January of 1990. To better understand this turn of events we must start with the assimilation campaign itself.

One of the primary factors prompting the assimilation campaign was the country's demographic decline--a suggestion made by Crampton (1987:205), although not pursued in most other discussions of the issue, whether popular or scholarly. This is surprising given the fact that

while living in Bulgaria I was constantly confronted with comments about the specter of declining population, usually in the context of discussions about Turks and Gypsies. Government officials and ordinary Bulgarians perceive a demographic crisis. Bulgarian birth rates are very low, families with one child are common, and families with more than two children are unusual in both urban and rural contexts. Conversely, there is a perception, true to a degree, that Turks and Gypsies have a high birthrate. The logical result is clear: limited growth of the overall population with an increasing percentage of Turks and Gypsies. Bulgarians express this in the often repeated summation: "we are disappearing." Theoretically assimilation was to forestall the "disappearance" of Bulgarians. Having failed to reverse the fertility decline of the Bulgarian population, officials attempted to incorporate the reproductive resources of Turks and Gypsies.

As the above statement suggests, the government had also attempted to raise Bulgarian birth rates in an effort to solve the population problem. This attempt included a restriction of abortion availability and installation of a series of pro-natal financial incentives (McIntyre 1975:367-375). The timing of the assimilation strategy in relation to these other efforts supports a demographic role for the former as well. Assimilation attempts followed upon the early failure of the pro-natal policies and became more severe as the failure of the pro-natal policies became more evident. In 1987 an official describing the pro-natal policies advised me not to worry about remembering them because "they are not working and are going to be changed." It is logical that the continuing failure of these strategies prompted the greater reliance on assimilation tactics which characterized the last several years.

Besides the timing, the structure of the pronatal policies also reveals a concern with ethnic demographic differentials. Abortions were restricted for the first three births and financial incentives increased for each child up to three, while for subsequent children the incentives dropped and abortion restrictions disappeared. Why did the government cut back incentives at all if their objective was overall population growth? This paradox reflects the fact that Bulgarians rarely have more than two children so that encouraging a third birth is the objective of the incentives. Turks and Gypsies, however, commonly have more than three children so the incentives diminish beyond three births. As another official put it, "the incentives are cut back after three children because some groups will have as many children as they get paid for." No one needed to clarify who these groups are. The assimilation campaign was intended, at least in part, to redress these demographic differentials. Obviously, it was not going to solve the problem

of low population growth, but it would eliminate the compounding problem of an increasing Turkish presence in the population.

The possibility of assimilation as a solution, however, must also be connected to the existence of the Pomaks, a group of Bulgarian speaking Muslims. The existence of this group provided empirical evidence for the claim that Bulgarians were forcibly converted to Islam during the Ottoman period, which was the government's main justification for the assimilation attempts. It is certainly arguable that such a severe program of assimilation would not have been pursued toward the Turkish population without this empirical "justification." Thus, as Eminov points out, the Pomaks were the first to be forced to change their names back in the 1970s, and there can be little doubt that the success of the policy among this segment was important in the decision to extend the accusation of Ottoman conversion and the correction of Bulgarian assimilation to other Muslim groups as well.

Of course neither the demographic factor nor the existence of the Pomak category justifies or excuses the responses of the government. They also do not explain why the government chose the assimilation strategy as the primary response. Clearly the assimilation policy articulated with other objectives as well. Paramount among these was the more general goal of cultural homogenization or standardization. By this I refer to the Bulgarian government's desire to bring all areas and groups in the country into conformity with the government's centrally defined profile of "Bulgarian culture." Clearly the assimilation of Turks fit well with this more general cultural policy which attempted to eradicate the distinctiveness of various groups in the society. This process was by no means limited to ethnic minorities and, in fact, also affected many Bulgarians whose regional differences of dialect and especially folklore were devalued and restricted (see e.g. Silverman 1983).

Explaining the standardization policy itself brings up the issue of what Eminov refers to as the "strong dose of romantic Bulgarian nationalism" evident in Bulgarian nationality policy. Clearly standardization had nationalistic motives, yet I would suggest that such nationalism was not solely "romantic," but pragmatic as well. Each of Bulgaria's modern tragedies have ended with territorial losses and the desire to thoroughly "Bulgarianize" the current territory is less a reflection of frustrated greater ambitions of romantic nationalism than it is a rational policy to ensure that further losses do not take place. The more the country succeeds in creating a standardized Bulgarian population, the less the perceived threat of further territorial retrenchment

coming from political changes in the area. Meanwhile, current political discussions in Eastern Europe reveal that this longstanding concern with territorial violability was not as irrational as it might have seemed a few years ago.

While the standardization of all social groups in Bulgaria clearly serves nationalistic aims, there are reasons why the process seems more like "romantic nationalism" in the particular case of the Turks. Bulgarian nationalism had its modern origins in the period of the National Revival in the 18th and 19th centuries. As Bulgaria was still under Ottoman control, this "national awakening" contained an expressly anti-Turkish component. Subsequent national events and policies have done little to supercede this association. Lacking great achievements in modern nation-building, Bulgarian leaders and historians have continued to characterize Bulgarian nationalism as a force of "struggle" and "survival" rather than "achievement," and particularly struggle and survival in the face of insurmountable odds. In this characterization, the 500 years of Ottoman control is the penultimate illustration.

Nonetheless, there is a limit to how far Bulgarian resentment of Ottoman control can be said to be the basis of contemporary ethnic conflicts. The excuse, "500 years under the yoke," as Eminov notes, is pervasive in Bulgaria as an excuse for any difficulty or deficiency, but it would be a mistake to suggest that the pervasive appeal to this excuse reveals the extent of anti-Turkish sentiments today. The common resort to this cliché on the part of Bulgarians is more akin to a layman's attempt at historical socioeconomic analysis than an expression of ethnic hostility. I have heard this comment from many different people--some who express negative stereotypes of Turks and others who do not. One of the latter had actually worked a few years in a Turkish village, had learned a little Turkish, was proud of his knowledge of Turkish cultural practices, and in no way ever expressed anti-Turkish feelings. Bulgarians do not necessarily blame contemporary Turks for Ottoman actions or their long-term consequences.

To say the connection is not always made between Ottoman and contemporary Turks is not to deny that the potential association exists and can be mobilized when conflict surfaces for other reasons. Clearly, officials thought it could be mobilized to muster support for the assimilation campaign, but they were wrong. In nearly two years of residence in Bulgaria--in towns and villages, among intellectuals and agricultural workers--I came across only one individual who voiced support for the policy of changing the names of the Turkish population. Clearly such a politically volatile issue was not a common topic of conversation, but people I

knew well would reveal to me in private conversations their opposition to the policy and their genuine inability to understand why it was implemented. One woman said, in the context of an unrelated political discussion about Zhivkov, "I'd like to ask Zhivkov what was the purpose of changing the names of the Turks, that's what I'd like to know. It is not easy to be called by a name all your life and then one day to be called by another name. That would be hard." Similarly, even in more casual and public conversations the mere mention of the name changing campaign usually elicited a shake of the head and the mumbled evaluation, "stupidity" from someone present. Clearly, any strong support for the assimilation strategy of changing names was restricted to government officials and Party ideologues involved in the program. If this was the case, then why did Bulgarians take to the streets in anti-Turkish demonstrations when the new government reversed the assimilation policy? I admit that this was as much a surprise to me as it was to many Bulgarians. Some of the latter have attempted to make sense of this response by insisting that the demonstrations were organized by Party leaders who had been responsible for the policy and whose positions were being threatened by the new regime. While the conspiratorial flavor of this explanation might render it unpalatable to some, the degree of organization exhibited in the protests is consistent with a degree of central coordination. The Party leaders in the Zhivkov regime responsible for the assimilation campaign certainly had reasons for creating an impression of indigenous support for their policies, either to undermine the new regime or, failing that, to diminish the possibility of punitive actions being taken against them for their complicity in the discredited campaign. Bulgarians, for their part, are used to being mobilized by the Party for official "manifestations" and the demonstrations would not have been difficult for Party officials to arrange. Whether or not this proves to have been the case, there are other local factors that can help make sense of the popular response to the policy reversal and account for the receptivity of certain people to mobilization for opposing demonstrations.

The geography of the demonstrations is revealing in this regard. Apart from Sofia, the demonstrations were restricted to those cities with large Turkish populations. Besides the obvious issue of proximity, this geography is related to two other factors. Most important is the temporal dovetailing of the regime change with the abandonment of assimilation policies. The former rendered the pre-existing rhetoric of political-economic reform much more credible. The reform message in Bulgaria during the preceding years had included a heavy emphasis on greater decentralization and local autonomy, though most individuals remained skeptical that major

changes would ever be implemented. With the ousting of Zhivkov in November of 1989, such changes suddenly appeared much more likely. In this context the simultaneous restoration of Turkish rights appeared threatening for those individuals residing in areas of Turkish predominance. If the ideals of democracy and decentralization were implemented on the local level, these Bulgarians were likely to lose out in various ways to the surrounding Turkish populations. Such losses were likely to be further extended and entrenched by linguistic exclusion of Bulgarians from commercial and political activity conducted in Turkish. Bulgarians in these areas already perceived themselves as a numerical and perhaps even cultural minority but the newly perceived threat of "losing ground" is linked to the possibility of political economic change and is a conclusion they would not have drawn if the assimilation policy had been halted by the previous regime when talk of reform was not taken seriously and central Bulgarian authority remained unquestioned. At the same time, the new reform context allowed for the expression of their concerns in a public way that also was not feasible previously.

The second factor that nourished the concerns expressed in the January demonstrations was the negative fallout from the excesses of the assimilation policy itself, especially the mass exodus of Turks in the summer of 1989. The exodus of thousands of Turks created hardships for many Bulgarians which easily translated into hard feelings. Such a sudden and extensive movement of people was a major shock to an economic system that is not noted for its quick response capabilities. Crops, especially tobacco, were left in the fields without provisions for care or harvest, and enterprises were rendered inoperative by the flight of their Turkish workers. Subsequent shortages were then blamed on the Turkish exodus, not only because of the consequent labor shortage, but also because they bought up mass quantities of goods to take with them to Turkey. Mind you, there were recurrent shortages before the Turks left and the buying up of goods was connected to the fact that all their Bulgarian currency was not convertible nor exportable. Still, the upheaval of the exodus provided an irresistible, if temporary, explanation for systematic problems.

While Bulgarians may have seized upon the opportunity to blame the Turks for their problems, we should not assume that blame means hate. To say, as was apparently common in the months following the exodus, that "the Turks are to blame for the lack of cheese" is not to deny that the Turks had legitimate reasons, such as attempted assimilation, for leaving. Nonetheless, the more Turkish responses to such provocations negatively affect the lives of

Bulgarians, the less sympathetic Bulgarians are likely to be. In this way anti-Turkish sentiments can be generated where they previously did not exist.

I am not suggesting that tensions and conflicts between Bulgarians and Turks did not predate the current problems. They are indeed, as commentators on East European ethnic conflicts are wont to point out, "centuries old." Such observations, however, contribute very little to our understanding of ethnic-based processes. We need to look at these processes both holistically and with historical specificity to see how they interact with changing circumstances in creating the current profile of conflict and tension. As Verdery (1983) definitively demonstrates, processes of ethnicity interact with political and economic processes and change over time so that a particular ethnic identity or conflict does not necessarily represent the same thing at different periods and under different circumstances. Following Verdery's insight we should, therefore, be skeptical of explanations of current ethnic strife in Eastern Europe as simply age-old conflicts forcing their way through the weakening restraints of authoritarian communism. To suggest that ethnic conflict developed in the distant past and that communism simply suppressed its expression is to miss the sociologically interesting issue of how political, economic and ethnic issues have interacted in the past and how they continue to do so in the present.

As an example of this process I have suggested here that the reforms and political-economic changes occurring since November of 1989 in Bulgaria did not simply release pent up ethnic animosities but may have actually generated and intensified conflicts that were less significant and less charged, at least from the Bulgarian side of the issue, under previous political and economic conditions. In other words, it is not simply that new changes allowed old animosities to be expressed, but to a degree the tensions themselves were created and affected by these changes.

There are other ways as well that current changes may have exacerbated ethnic differentiation and tension. On a general level the current process of democratization requires competing representations and thereby enhances the potential of ethnic identity as a vehicle of both local interest promotion and political differentiation among non-minority political parties. Ethnic mobilization then engages international interest from those states with ethnic ties to minority populations, in this case Turkey, who often see an opportunity to pursue political interests in a humanitarian vein. The threat of intervention by Turkey acquires greater urgency

with the declining reliability of Warsaw Pact alliances, which is another aspect of the current situation that has further sensitized the Turkish ethnic issue for Bulgarians.

In response to the potential political mobilization of Turks in Bulgaria and the perceived external threat of intervention by Turkey, Bulgaria has sought out a new security with Greece. In a report on this developing alliance Anastasi (1990:A9) suggests that "growing concern in Athens and Sofia over unrest among Muslim minorities may render Greece and Bulgaria allied 'front states' in Europe against the spread of Muslim fundamentalism." He goes on to report that "Greece no longer feels threatened by totalitarianism but by nationalist tensions in the Balkans." In these circumstances it is intellectually and politically crucial to have an appreciation of how ethnic processes in the area are being manipulated and exhibited in political-economic arenas. One consolation is that while such processes are becoming more significant in Bulgaria, they may also be more open to scholarly investigations. Hopefully, other scholars of the area will follow Eminov's lead and take up the issue.

## Notes

1. All references to Eminov are to his article in this issue.

## References

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