

The Political Participation of Turkish Minority in Bulgaria and the Public Reaction: The Case of Movement for Rights and Freedoms (1990-1994)

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Özet:

Toplam nüfusun yaklaşık % 10'unu oluşturan Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlık, 1908'de Bulgaristan'ın bağımsızlığından beri ciddi asimilasyon teşebbüsleri ile karşılaşmış ve göçe zorlanmıştır. 1980ler'de komünist lider Zhivkov'un liderliğindeki "diriliş süreci", uluslararası antlaşmalardaki azınlık haklarını ihlal ederek bu konuda had safhaya ulaşmıştır. Ancak, komünizmin çöküşüyle birlikte Bulgaristan, 1990lar'da başlayan bir geçiş sürecine girmiş ve bu süreç azınlıklar için yeni bir aşamayı oluşturmuştur. Avrupa-Atlantik kurumlarıyla bütünleşmeye yönelik dış politika, Bulgaristan'daki azınlıklara yönelik tutumları da etkilemiştir. O zamandan beri Bulgaristan, çoğulcu bir topluma doğru adım atmaya başlamıştır. Azınlık haklarıyla ilgili bazı sorunlar varsa da, Türk azınlık, diğer Bulgar vatandaşlar gibi özgürlüğüne sahiptir. 1990'da resmî olarak Ahmet Doğan tarafından kurulan Haklar ve Özgürlükler Hareketi, Türk azınlığının sesi olmuştur. Söz konusu parti, koalisyon hükümetlerinde yer almıştır. Ancak, emsalleri İttifaki-UDRM ve MRF gibi o da radikal Bulgar milliyetçilerinin ana hedeflerinden biri olmuştur. Partiyi yasaklama ve seçimlere katılımını engelleme gibi teşebbüsler, 1992'de Anayasa Mahkemesi'nin kararı ile sonuçsuz kalmıştır. Bu makalede, barışsal bütünleşmede etkin bir rol oynayan Haklar ve Özgürlükler Hareketi'nin rolü incelenmekte, Türk azınlığının siyasal katılım ve temsili ile Bulgaristan'da milliyetçi çevrelerde ayrılığa yol açan etkenler değerlendirilmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Balkanlar, Türk Azınlık, Bulgaristan, Siyasal Partiler*

Introduction

The world witnessed the "Balkanization" of the Balkans again in the 1990s. Dissolution of Yugoslavia proved a proficient example of how an all-out conflict may result. The Turkish minority of Bulgaria with other Muslim minorities, suffered from the assimilation policy of the communist regime and it reached its climax in the mid 1980s. This policy increased ethnic hatred and strengthened stereotypes and only paved the way for an ethnic conflict. It damaged the culture of peaceful coexistence by polarizing the community. The effects of "communist legacy" didn't disappear with the fall of the com-

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munist regime. This article deals with the anti-Turkish movements in Bulgaria which appeared in the transition period, between 1990-1994, against the restoration of minority rights and the presence of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. The first part mainly deals with the Turkish presence in Bulgaria throughout the history and the assimilation policy of communist regime and its consequences in order to shed light on the reasons why anti-Turkish movements opposing Turkish minority rights and political participation emerged. The second part examines the transition process of Bulgaria with a special emphasis on the restoration of minority rights, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and anti-Turkish movements. The third explains factors which avoided a probable ethnic conflict. The main aim of this article is that minority parties with moderate demands are useful to prevent ethnic conflict and in the long term serves as the best tool of peaceful integration.

The Historical Background

The Turkish presence in the Balkans (also referred as "Roumeli") especially in the territory what is called Bulgaria today, started with the Ottoman conquest in the late 14th century (Sofia was conquered in 1392). Also as suggested by Kemal Karpat, even before the Ottoman conquest there were some Turkish groups settled in the Balkans¹. The Byzantine Empire wanted to form a buffer zone against the Latin and Slav raids so encouraged the settlement of Turkish groups in the Balkans.² However, the dramatic change in the demographic structure of Bulgaria occurred with the Ottoman conquest. The main aim of colonization of Turks in the Balkans was to secure strategic corridors and cities.³ This policy caused a significant Turkish/Muslim presence in Bulgaria. Conversion to Muslim faith among local Christians took place, though out of the scope of this article, this topic is a controversial one between historians whether the Ottoman Empire forced conversion or just encouraged it.⁴(On the other hand, the forced conversion thesis was very useful to legitimize assimilation attempts targeting Muslims in Bulgaria especially in the communist era.) Until the Russo-Turkish War in 1877-1878, Turks and other Muslim

¹ Kemal H. Karpat, *Balkanlar'da Osmanlı Mirası ve Ulusçuluk [Nationalism and The Ottoman Legacy in the Balkans]*, Trans: Recep Boztemur, Ankara, Imge Kitabevi, 2004, p.386

² Ali Dayıoğlu, *Toplama Kampından Meclis'e (Bulgaristan'da Türk ve Müslüman Azınlığı) [From Concentration Camp to the Parliament (The Turkish and Muslim Minority in Bulgaria)]*, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2005, p.56

³ M.Türker Acaroğlu, *Bulgaristan Türkleri Üzerine Araştırmalar I [Studies on Turks of Bulgaria I]*, İstanbul, IQ Yayınları,2007, p.35

⁴ Turkish historians refuse the forced conversion thesis because it's against the basic principles of Islam, Acaroğlu, op.cit., p.36. According to Barbara Jelavich, forced conversion was exception and rarely occurred.Barbara Jelavich; *Balkan Tarihi 18. ve 19. Yüzyıllar [History of the Balkans: Eighteenth & Nineteenth Century]*, İstanbul, Küre Yayınları, 2006, p.44 For the discussions on the topic in Bulgaria, see: Maria Todorova, "Conversion to Islam as a Trope in Bulgarian Historiography, Fiction and Film", *Balkan Identities (Nation and Memory)*, Ed: Maria Todorova, London, Hurst&Company, 2004,pp:129-157

groups constituted the one third of total population, after the war, Bulgaria became quasi-independent as an autonomous principality (independent in 1908) and huge emigration waves which changed the demographic pattern occurred, finally Turkish population was below %10 percent of the total population in 1934.⁵ With Maria Todorova's words, "It is preposterous to look for an Ottoman legacy in the Balkans. The Balkans are the Ottoman legacy"⁶, so from this point of view the Turkish and Muslim presence in Bulgaria may be considered as "the Ottoman legacy." The migration has been the fate of Turkish minority in the Balkans, thousands of people headed Turkey for a new life and it continued throughout the 20th century.

Bulgarian nationalism included some anti-Turkish sentiments⁷ like other Balkan nationalisms which often emphasized "Turkish yoke" that lasted five centuries. Nationalists claimed that it was the main reason of backwardness, while historians put all the emphasize upon their nation's ancient and medi-aeval history while neglecting their more recent history.⁸ Also in Bulgaria, a revisionist power in the Balkans, participated in Balkan Wars, World War I and World War II but was on the losing side, these traumas may have strengthened radical sentiments in Bulgarian nationalism.

Thus, the place of Turkish minority in the society has been problematic since Bulgaria's independence. As put forward by Mary Neuburger:

"All of the primary political turning points in Bulgarian history—quasi-independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, the dawning of the communist era in 1944, and the post communist period beginning in 1989—have required a re-positioning of Bulgarian national, cultural and political postures on the so called "Turkish question"."⁹

Today in Bulgaria a significant Muslim minority still exists. According to 2001 census Muslims constitute %12,2 (966.978) of the total population (7.928 901). Muslim population includes Turks, the Muslim Roma population and Pomaks. The Turkish minority constitutes %9,4 (746.664) of the total population.¹⁰ Turkish minority is concentrated in the southeastern and north-eastern districts of Bulgaria like Kurdzhali, Razgrad, Silistra, Ruse, Shumen, Burgas, Turgovishte, Haskovo and Blagoevgrad. (In Kurdzhali, they form the majority with a population of 101.116 in 164.019 total population¹¹) and gen-

⁵ Ali Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria: Post-1989 Developments", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol:27, No:1, 1999, p:31

⁶ Maria Todorova, "The Ottoman Legacy in The Balkans", *Balkans, A Mirror Of The New International Order*, Eds: Günay Göksu Özdoğan, Kemali Saybaşı; İstanbul, Eren Yayıncılık, 1995, p.55

⁷ Mary Neuburger, " Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters and the Re-imagining of the Bulgarian Nation (1878-1995)", *East European Quarterly*, Vol:XXXI, No:1, March, 1997, p.1

⁸ See Nergis Canefe, "Foundational Paradoxes of Balkan Nationalisms-Authenticity, Modernity and Nationhood", *Turkish Review of Balkan Studies*, 2003, pp:107-147

⁹ Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters...", p.1

¹⁰ For the results of 2001 census see: National Statistical Institute, http://www.nsi.bg/Census_e/Census_e.htm , (02/08/2007)

¹¹ National Statistical Institute , http://www.nsi.bg/Census_e/Ethnos.htm (02/08/2007)

erally working on the agricultural sector (like tobacco growing). However, Ina Merdjanova suggests that the number of the Turks should be smaller than the census indicate (between 600.000 and 700.000), "as a number of Muslim Roma and Pomaks have identified themselves as ethnic Turks in the census."¹² Pomaks, Slavic-speaking Muslims or Muslim Bulgarians, inhabiting in Rhodope Mountains mostly, have a very "disputed identity" like the term "Macedonian", as Tsvetana Georgieva suggests, "the origin of Pomaks is the only issue that may be defined as pan-Balkan, since almost every country associates them with its past."¹³ In Bulgaria, they were regarded as the "victims of Ottoman yoke", because it's believed they were forced to convert and lose their real Bulgarian identity. It becomes more complicated when some of them call themselves Turks. This matter had been important for Bulgaria since its independence and Pomaks unfortunately faced many assimilation campaigns starting with the Balkan Wars (1912-1913) and continued until 1989. A Pomak man named Hasan had to change his name six times in his lifetime, because dependant on the political atmosphere he had to change his name with a Slavic one but later he was able to use his original name, and this circle continued until the post-communist rehabilitation process, finally he was able to use Hasan instead of Dragan.¹⁴

After the dissolution of Ottoman Empire, the former dominant group has been transformed into a minority and has been excluded from the nation building process. The presence of a "kin state", namely Turkey, added an international dimension to the problem and the minority has become an important subject in bilateral relations. The Turkish minority then has been perceived as members of the formerly dominant class and a potential destabilizing factor inside the country due to the presence of Turkey.¹⁵ Another source of fear was, "Turkification" of other Muslim minorities by the larger Turkish community. In 1958 a Plenum of the Central Committee of the Bulgarian Communist Party restricted the use of Turkish language while prohibiting Pomaks and Muslim Roma from studying Turkish.¹⁶ As Ulf Brunnbauer depicts;

"Those policies of 'national rebirth' were first conducted among the smaller Muslim minorities (Muslim Roma and Pomaks), which were said to be in danger of being 'Turkified' by the larger Turkish minority. In or-

¹² Ina Merdjanova, "Uneasy Tolerance: Interreligious Relations in Bulgaria After the Fall of Communism", *Religion in Eastern Europe*, Vol:XXVI, No:1 (February 2006), p.1, fn.1

¹³ Tsvetana Georgieva, "Pomaks: Muslim Bulgarians", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol.12, No.3, July 2001, p.304

¹⁴ Mary Neuburger, " Pomak Borderlands: Muslims on the Edge of Nations", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.28, No.1, 2000, p.181

¹⁵ Milena Mahon, "The Turkish Minority Under Communist Bulgaria – politics of ethnicity and power" *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Volume:1, No:2, 1999, p.153

¹⁶ Daniel G. Bates, "What's in a Name? Minorities, Identity and Politics in Bulgaria", *Identities*, Vol.1 (2-3), p.207

der to substantiate this policy, the Bulgarian population was brain-washed with new arguments for the 'Otherness' of Turks."¹⁷

We should note that at that time neither the Communist regime nor the academic world would have yet denied the existence of "ethnically" Turkish Muslim population in Bulgaria. (This view was going to change dramatically in the 1970s.) The fear emanating from the presence of an intense Turkish minority, settled especially through the borderline, increased during the Cold War since Turkey and Bulgaria were members of different blocs respectively the NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Turkey's military intervention in Cyprus in 1974, fueled the exaggerated fear about Turkey's intentions, and Bulgarian leaders felt threatened by the "Cyprus Scenario".¹⁸ Turks were perceived as the "fifth column of Ankara". The perception of threat concerning Turkey in Bulgaria is explained by Yulian Konstantinov as follows:

"Current nation-state thinking, as far as Bulgaria and the wider Balkan region is concerned, seems to be characterized by a preoccupation with well-entrenched nationalistic stereotypes. A very central motif here may be said to be that of unity, the central underlying contention being if the nation is not united and homogenous ('one') it will bring itself to ruin. These sentiments reflect a view of the country ('us') as surrounded by potential aggressors ('them') who are only waiting for signs of inner weakening to strike. For obvious historical reasons Turkey is considered as precisely such a potential aggressor."¹⁹

In the winter of 1984, a forced assimilation campaign, so called National Revival/Regenerative Process started. The Turkish names had to be changed with Slavic ones, use of Turkish and all Islamic rituals were banned. The name change campaign was implemented with the help of military units, tanks and elitist paratroop red beret units were deployed, it was the largest military operation undertaken by the Bulgarian army since the Second World War.²⁰ According to Western estimates, over 1000 people who resisted the campaign were killed, several thousands were arrested and many people were sent to the Belene Camp.²¹ The assimilation campaign was accompanied by a huge wave of "academic" literature which aimed to prove the ethnic Bulgarian roots of Turkish minority.²² According to this, the Muslim minority in Bulgaria was in fact descendants ethnic Bulgarians, they were exposed to assimilation

¹⁷ Ulf Brunnbauer, "The Perception of Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece: Between the 'Self' and the 'Other'", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol.21, No.1, 2001, p.53

¹⁸ Neuburger, "" Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters...", p.5

¹⁹ Yulian Konstantinov, " 'Nations-State' and 'Minority' Types of Discourse—Problems of Communication between the Majority and the Islamic Minorities in Contemporary Bulgaria", *Innovation in Social Sciences Research*; Vol.5, Issue.3, p.75

²⁰ R.J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, 2.ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p.204

²¹ Victor D. Bojkov, "Bulgaria's Turks in the 1980s: a minority endangered" , *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol.6, No.3, September 2004, p.359

²² Brunnbauer, op.cit, p.53

and forced conversion in the Ottoman era. There are different views on why the communist regime attempted this assimilation campaign. As the first of all, Zhivkov was encouraged because of his success in assimilating other Muslim groups in the past years while international reaction lacked. Dennis P. Hupchick emphasizes the need for Zhivkov to distract the people's attention to internal affairs in order to avoid complaints concerning declining living standards so "Zhivkov decided to intensify anti-Muslim assimilation efforts to foment the Slavic majority's traditional anti-Turkish nationalist sentiments in his favour."²³ In Bulgaria living standards had stopped in the mid-1980s and dissent began to increase especially amongst intellectuals.²⁴ Also demographic trend might have caused fear. "By then the Turks formed approximately 10 percent of the population but differential birth rates meant that this proportion would grow rapidly."²⁵ The concentration of Turkish population in some districts and the probability of call for autonomy might have increased this fear.

The assimilation campaign caused reaction and resistance and Muslim inhabited regions were under martial law.²⁶ Also there were some terrorist attacks, which were attributed to the Bulgarian Turks by the government even though there was not any certain proof.²⁷ Turkish prisoners in the Belene Camp were offered contact with their relatives if they agreed to say publicly that the Turks of Bulgaria planned terrorist activities.²⁸ On 30 August 1984 bombs exploded in Plovdiv train station and Varna airport, on the same day Zhivkov was expected to visit both cities and after the explosions there were leaflets in the streets proclaiming "forty years-forty bombs".²⁹ However the Turkish minority preferred passive resistance; on 8 December 1985, "The Turkish National Salvation Movement in Bulgaria" was founded by Ahmed Doğan (current leader of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms) in Varna and its program prepared by Ahmed Doğan called for "unarmed war" against the assimilation campaign and boycott the elections to be held in 1986.³⁰ Twenty-eight Turkish activists including Ahmet Doğan was arrested later and imprisoned because of acts against "the state's security."³¹

²³ Dennis P. Hupchick, *The Balkans, From Constantinople to Communism*, New York, N.Y., Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p.428

²⁴ Tom Gallagher, *Outcast Europe: The Balkans, 1789-1989 (From the Ottomans to Milosevic)*, New York, N.Y., Routledge, 2001, p.257

²⁵ Crampton, op.cit, p.205

²⁶ Hupchick, op.cit, p.428

²⁷ Bojkov, op.cit, p.356

²⁸ Ibid, p.359

²⁹ Crampton, op.cit., p.206

³⁰ Nurcan Özgür, *Etnik Sorunların Çözümünde Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi [The Movement for Rights and Freedoms in Solving Ethnic Problems]*, İstanbul, Der Yayınları, 1999, p.77

³¹ Dayioğlu, op.cit, p.300

Zhivkov has made a statement on TV in 1985 (after the name change campaign finished) and declared "There are no Turks in Bulgaria."³² Due to Turkey's efforts to internationalize the problem, Bulgaria faced an international criticism and official view of the Bulgarian government was that the Muslims of Bulgaria changed their names voluntarily³³; after suddenly discovering their Bulgarian roots. In the era of Socialist transition and introduction of perestroika and glasnost, Zhivkov couldn't enjoy the support of Soviet Union.³⁴

In the summer of 1989, the Communist regime shifted its policy and wanted to get rid of them completely by forcing them to emigrate to Turkey. In a T.V. address by Zhivkov himself, he asserted that Turks "...are infidel to the Bulgarian state and should leave forever."³⁵ He also called Turkey to open the borders. The government granted passports to the people with "Turkish ethnic self-consciousness" while Bulgarian speaking Muslims or Pomaks were excluded. This led to exodus (the so called "grand excursion" in Bulgaria) of the Turkish minority, the largest wave of emigration since the Second World War. Approximately 350.000 people left Bulgaria (150.000 of them returned subsequently)³⁶ from June to 22 August when Turkey closed the border. At the same time another 400.000 filed immigration applications.³⁷ Many ethnic Bulgarians benefited from the exodus of the Turks because they were able to buy property owned by the leaving people, due to the increasing supply but not equal demand, at low prices.³⁸

Inside the country the dissent was growing. "The Turkish areas of the north east were in a state of virtual revolt."³⁹ The Turkish minority staged mass demonstrations and hunger strikes. They were not alone in opposing the current regime; also many Bulgarians especially the intelligentsia viewed the revival process as a national tragedy.⁴⁰ It was the symbol of Communist repression and this view paved the way for establishment of opposition groups in the form of associations and clubs like the Independent Association for the Defence of Human Rights in Bulgaria. During the exodus, The Federation of Clubs supported a petition protesting at the assimilation attempts while describing it as "against the best traditions of the Bulgarian nation."⁴¹ However state-driven mass rallies took place in many cities includ-

³² Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters...", p.6

³³ Bojkov, op.cit, p.357

³⁴ Brunnbauer, op.cit, p.54

³⁵ Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters...", p.6

³⁶ Eminov, op.cit, p.32

³⁷ Rossen Vassilev, "Bulgaria's Ethnic Problems", *East European Quarterly*, Vol.36, No.1, March 2002, p.105

³⁸ Bojkov, op.cit, p.362

³⁹ Crampton, op.cit, p.210

⁴⁰ Vassilev, op.cit, p.105

⁴¹ Tom Gallagher, *The Balkans After The Cold War, From Tyranny to Tragedy*, New York,N.Y., Routledge,2003,p.17

ing Sofia accompanied with the slogans like "Bulgaria for the Bulgarians" and "Death to the Enemy".⁴² The departure of the Bulgarian Turks had negative effects on Bulgaria's already unstable economy. The government ordered general mobilization of adults and many were sent to rural areas to help the harvest. This was another factor fuelling anti-Turkish sentiments. "Resentment was equally enhanced by the official media's presentation of the departing Turks as national traitors who were abandoning their homeland when it needed them most."⁴³ Many town-dwellers thought that they had to work instead of Turks.⁴⁴

In the winter of 1989, Communist regime was in a real trouble. It was isolated in the world. Zhivkov's assimilation policy and the exodus of Turks caused criticism especially in the West. The image of Bulgaria was really bad. That was not all, Gorbachev's reforms were a challenge for the regime and Zhivkov was reluctant to introduce them. He initiated some reforms but they largely remained on paper.⁴⁵ This harmed the relations with Moscow. At the same time dramatic events occurred. Bulgaria was not immune to the change so 10 November 1989, just one day after the collapse of Berlin Wall, Zhivkov was deposed by the Central Committee of Bulgarian Communist Party.⁴⁶ Minister of Foreign Affairs Peter Mladenov succeeded Zhivkov. This was a palace-coup when compared with the revolutions in other Eastern European countries. While the Communist Party enjoyed wide public support, Mladenov promised to implement a far reaching reform program, like the separation of state and the Communist Party and freedom of expression.⁴⁷ Reforms were going to be introduced from above due to the fact that the Bulgarian Communist Party was still unquestioned by the vast majority of public. However, the Turkish minority has played an important role through the transition period. The outcome of assimilation policy also served to the downfall of the regime:

"Zhivkov's persecution of ethnic Turkish population in Bulgaria which led to international censure by the fall of 1989 may also have swayed these members of the Party leadership interested in improving Bulgaria's international image to support an attempt to remove him."⁴⁸

It's generally argued that the most important result of the revival process, though unintended, was the strengthening of Turkish identity amongst

⁴² Mahon, op.cit.,p.159

⁴³ Nadege Ragaru, "Islam In Post-Communist Bulgaria: An Aborted 'Clash Of Civilizations'", *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.29, No.2, 2001, p.298

⁴⁴ Mahon,op.cit,p.160

⁴⁵ Renee De Nevers, *Comrades No More, The Seeds of Change in Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2003, p.223

⁴⁶ Gallagher, *The Balkans After...*, p.19

⁴⁷ De Nevers, op.cit,p.218

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.238

the minority.⁴⁹ As Talip Küçükcan notes, “discrimination and exclusion of Turks have crystallized the boundaries of collective identity among Turkish-Muslims.”⁵⁰ Also the members of other Muslim groups started to identify themselves as Turkish.

Another consequence of the revival process was destroying what had been built in the name of peaceful coexistence, so “only served to deepen divisive national identities and exacerbate ethnic scapegoating and myth-making.”⁵¹ State-led propaganda strengthened the stereotypes and it may be argued that the effects of Zhivkov’s policy still exist in contemporary Bulgarian politics which may be referred as “the communist legacy.” Daniel G. Bates emphasizes the role of media and schoolbooks in fostering anti-Turkish propaganda and gives an example:

“In 1985 the museum in Shumen hosted an exhibit that schoolchildren and others were required to visit. Entitled ‘Anti-Bulgarian Turkish Propaganda’, it was in fact, virulently anti-Turkish and specifically attempted to demonstrate that there was no long-standing Turkish or Moslem presence in the region—one of the principal cultural and administrative centers of Ottoman rule.”⁵²

On 14 December 1989, fourteen non-communist political groups came together and formed a federation named the Union of Democratic Forces. Its leader was a well-known philosopher Zheliu Zhelev who had opposed the Zhivkov regime.⁵³

Developments in the Transition Process (1990-1994)

The Bulgarian Communist Party made a scapegoat of Zhivkov and condemned the assimilation policy. Mladenov and the Party decided to implement reforms and also played an important role for a “bloodless transition.” On 29 December 1989 The Communist Party leadership reversed the forced assimilation policy of Zhivkov and promised to restore the right of Turkish minority.⁵⁴

The revoking of the assimilationist decree by the BCP, created a strong reaction in the society. First days of 1990 witnessed mass-demonstrations of ethnic Bulgarians with anti-Turkish sentiments. The protests especially took place in provinces with mixed population like Kurdzhali. They also organized another rally in Sofia, and their slogans “betrayed fears of territorial mutilation (because of assumed Turkish separatism), invasion (in case Ankara de-

⁴⁹ James W. Warhola, Orlina Boteva, “The Turkish Minority in Contemporary Bulgaria”, *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.31, No.3, September 2003, p.265

⁵⁰ Talip Küçükcan, “Re-claiming Identity: Ethnicity, Religion and Politics among Turkish-Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol.19., No.1, 1999, p.57

⁵¹ Vassilev, op.cit, p.106

⁵² Bates, op.cit, p.217

⁵³ Crampton,op.cit, p.212

⁵⁴ Eminov, op.cit., p.32

cided to use local Muslim minorities as a fifth column), or denationalization (through forcible Turkification)."⁵⁵The escalating nationalist movement could create a risky environment for the transition process which was being discussed in the Round Table talks. Many ex-communists used this opportunity to gain power. As Tom Gallagher puts forward "nationalism proved to be a political currency which kept much of its value, as other political brands from socialism and liberalism to peasantry and civic politics fluctuated wildly in the political marketplace."⁵⁶ The protesters set up the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI) and demonstrations went on until the declaration of Public Council on the National Question on 15 January 1990 that aimed to calm down nationalist fears: While the 29 December decree was confirmed, Bulgarian was confirmed as the official language of the country, and brought a ban to display Turkish flag except the diplomatic residencies and during official visits from Turkey, also the principle of autonomy for minorities and forming organizations with separatist aims were ruled out.⁵⁷ However the situation was critical. The mass demonstrations could have ended in an ethnic conflict including use of force. The UDF was a target of popular anger. "Party spokesmen were heckled by local crowds and the UDF Secretary, Peter Beron, was 'almost lynched' when he was mistaken for Konstantin Trechev, another party official who had made a television appearance at a Muslim celebration."⁵⁸

In March 1990, the parliament passed a law allowing Muslims to take up their old names even though it envisaged a long procedure and this was followed by the protests of Turks. (However, the problem concerning the real estate which was hastily sold during "the grand excursion", was to be solved in July 1992 under the framework of "Doğan Law").⁵⁹ In November 1990, with the introduction of the new law on names, the ethnic tension rose again. Razgrad a city highly populated with Turkish population, witnessed demonstrations organized by Committee for the Defense of National Interest (CDNI). They even went further and declared the establishment of "Bulgarian Republic of Razgrad" (also a member of neo-nationalist organization, "Association of Free Bulgarian Cities with Free Bulgarian Citizens" that included other towns populated by Turks). They threatened that if the government remained indifferent to the separatist movement of Turks in Bulgaria; the Associated Free Cities would declare independence and may join Greece. At the same time CDNI and Fatherland Party of Labor called for civil disobedience.⁶⁰ While President Zhelev denounced the Razgrad Republic, many ordinary Bulgarians

⁵⁵ Ragaru, op.cit, p.298

⁵⁶ Gallagher, *The Balkans After...*,p.15

⁵⁷ Ragaru, op.cit, p.299

⁵⁸ Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters..." , p.9

⁵⁹ Ragaru,op.cit, p.299

⁶⁰ Vassilev, op.cit, p.109

saw the new policy as the betrayal of national interests.⁶¹ It's argued that the neo-nationalist organizations were supported and controlled by the BSP, the BSP's purpose was to prove that only it can protect the interests of Bulgarians against the secessionist Turks.⁶²

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms was officially founded in January 1990 with the purpose of taking part in the forthcoming multiparty elections. It was decided to hold elections 10 and 17 June 1990 to form the Grand National Assembly that was also responsible for adopting a new constitution. It's also possible to say that the MRF enjoys a monopoly on the votes of Turkish minority. It aimed at the restoration of minority rights and providing guarantees for them because it was possible to return to the old days of the revival process. As Yulian Konstantinov argues "the fact of the matter, however, is that a government decree allowing a return to Turkic-Arabic names and the use and teaching of Turkish, can well be followed by a ban, should a shift of majority opinion occur with a next government."⁶³ The MRF applied a very cautious policy to sustain its presence and tried to convince the public opinion about the policies of the party. The MRF has not called for independence, not even political or cultural autonomy or bilingualism in Turkish populated areas.⁶⁴ The party didn't even push for the recognition of Turks as a national minority.⁶⁵ With their words;

"The Movement for Rights and Freedoms is a centrist, liberal political party formed initially to protect the rights of minorities in Bulgaria in the period of communism and other parts of Europe... and strongly opposes to any manifestation of national chauvinism, revenge, Islamic fundamentalism and religious fanaticism. The MRF categorically renounces Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, all kinds of discrimination and political and religious extremism." ⁶⁶

The neo-nationalists tried to prevent the MRF from registration as a political party and declare it illegal on the grounds that the Political Party Act prohibits the formation of political parties on religious or ethnic bases. Sofia City Court and then the Supreme Court denied permission to MRF to register. According to Ali Eminov, the decision of the Central Electoral Committee which granted permission to MRF to register on 26 April 1990, just two months before the elections, was a consequence of the international pres-

⁶¹ Ibid

⁶² Özgür, op.cit, p.89

⁶³ Konstantinov, op.cit, p.76

⁶⁴ For a comparison concerning the demands of Turkish minority in Bulgaria and the Hungarian minority in Bulgaria see: Carter Johnson, "Democratic Transition in the Balkans: Romania's Hungarian and Bulgaria's Turkish Minority", *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, Vol.8, No.1, Spring 2002, pp:18-20

⁶⁵ Eminov, op.cit, p.40

⁶⁶ The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, "History"

[http://www.dps.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0368&g= \(02/08/2007\)](http://www.dps.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0368&g= (02/08/2007))

sure.⁶⁷ Another view stresses the BSP's intervention on CEC to register the MRF in order to avoid a united front of opposition; the ban on MRF could have directed Turkish voters to UDF.⁶⁸ Finally the MRF managed to participate in the elections and the result was surprising. The MRF gained 23 seats in the parliament. (BSP 211, UDF, 144, and the Agrarians 16)⁶⁹ This created another nationalist wave. During the symbolic opening of the Grand National Assembly in Veliko Turnovo on 11 July, there were demonstrations organized by Anti-Turks angered by the presence of a "Turkish Party" in the Assembly.⁷⁰ The National-Radical Bulgarian Party (NRBP) under the leadership of Dr. Ivan Georgiev organized a human chain to prevent the MRF deputies from getting into the Parliament building. The MRF deputies had to leave the Assembly through the backdoor.⁷¹ There were discussions on the legality of the MRF inside the Assembly too.

Mladenov resigned in June 1990 and Zheliu Zhelev was elected as the new president in August. In December 1990, Dimitur Popov founded a caretaker cabinet. The restoration of minority rights increased the tension. In February 1991 the Ministry of Education permitted 4 hours of Turkish classes per week in Turkish-populated areas. Especially in the areas with mixed population like Kurdzhali, Shumen and Razgrad; teachers went on strike whilst ethnic Bulgarian parents demonstrated and withheld their children from school. The UDF declared that those opposing the reforms were who had taken part in the revival process. However, the introduction of Turkish classes had to be postponed.⁷² The new constitution adopted in July 1991 brought another challenge for the MRF. The constitution states that (article 11, para.4) "There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties which seek the violent seizure of state power."⁷³ After the adoption of the Constitution, elections were to be held in December 1991.

The Proportional Representation system with a %4 electoral threshold applied in the elections. Only three parties were able to surpass the threshold, the UDF gained 110 seats, the BSP 106 and the MRF 24 seats (%10 of the total seats in the parliament) This gave the MRF the holder of balance status in the parliament. At the local level, the MRF was successful in electing 27 mayors, 653 village headmen and 1144 representatives to the municipal councils.⁷⁴ Anti-Turkish parties like The National-Radical Bulgarian Party and

⁶⁷ Eminov, op.cit, p.36

⁶⁸ Dia Anagnostou, "Nationalist Legacies and European Trajectories: Post-communist Liberalization and Turkish Minority Politics in Bulgaria", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol.5, No.1, January 2005, p.97

⁶⁹ Crampton, op.cit, 215

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ragaru, op.cit, p.299

⁷² Crampton, op.cit, p.217

⁷³ For the Constitution see: National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria, *Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*, <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en> (02/08/2007)

⁷⁴ Eminov, op.cit, p.37

the National Democratic Party couldn't surpass the threshold. Patriotic Labor Party managed to get one seat in the Parliament thanks to its coalition with BSP in the 1991 elections.⁷⁵

The cabinet of Filip Dimitrov consisted mainly of UDF members, "but the MRF on whom he relied for his parliamentary majority, declined to enter a coalition lest this alienate public opinion from the new administration."⁷⁶ One deputy of the MRF was a elected Vice-President of the Parliament and a number of them elected to the second positions in ministries.⁷⁷ As Carter Johnson argues, "the ensuing coalitions also enabled the MRF to prove the Bulgarian people that the Turkish interests were moderate and not threatening."⁷⁸

There was another attempt to illegalize the MRF: The BSP joined by 100 deputies from the UDF petitioned to the Constitutional Court to declare the MRF illegal, on the grounds that the MRF violates the eleventh article of the Constitution. Bulgaria had applied for full membership in the Council of Europe in January 1991. "Shaped by a complex interplay of domestic elite support and external influences from the CoE, the milestone decision of the Constitutional Court affirmed in April 1992 the legality of the MRF narrowly by one vote, largely with the support of Bulgarian liberals."⁷⁹ Bulgaria became a member of the CoE on 7 May 1992⁸⁰ that shows the role of external influence. Dimitrov government's economic reforms had hit the Turkish populated areas harder than the rest of country and many Turks believed that the land privatization program was discriminating against them, the economic conditions led to another emigration wave to Turkey.⁸¹ In October 1992 the MRF withdrew its support from the UDF government. Neither the BSP nor the UDF were able to form a government. The MRF offered Professor Lyuben Berov and this offer was found acceptable by other parties so the government of technocrats was formed and the MRF was instrumental in finding a solution to the crisis.⁸²

Before the 1994 elections new parties were founded by the members of Turkish minority. Democratic Party of Justice was founded by Nedim Gendzhev (The former Chief Mufti, 1988-1992) introduced its party as the left alternative of the MRF and aimed at uniting all the Muslims under his party's umbrella. The Party of Democratic Changes was founded by the former deputy of MRF, Mehmet Hoca. Its position was closer to the UDF. Those parties were not able to surpass the %4 threshold in the 1994 elections but they took

⁷⁵ Ragaru, op.cit, p.299

⁷⁶ Crampton, op.cit, p.211

⁷⁷ Eminov, op.cit, p.37

⁷⁸ Johnson, op.cit, p.11

⁷⁹ Anagnostou, op.cit, p.99

⁸⁰ The Council of Europe,

http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/About_Coe/Member_states/e_bu.asp#TopOfPage 02/08/2007

⁸¹ Crampton, op.cit, p.223

⁸² Eminov, op.cit, p.37

votes of the MRF and this reduced the representation of the party in the parliament. The MRF had 15 deputies in the new parliament, it was 9 fewer than the last election result. This was seen as a tactic of Bulgarian nationalists who failed to ban the MRF through legal ways, encouraged those parties to divide the votes of minority. Later Nedim Gendzhev was appointed as Chief Mufti of all Muslims in Bulgaria, this was a reward for him.⁸³

Avoiding ethnic-conflict

The anti-Turkish movements could have ignited an all-out ethnic conflict which was regarded as "the fate of Balkans" in the era of "Balkanization"⁸⁴ of the Balkans again. Nadege Ragaru, refers to escalating ethnic tension in this period as "an aborted clash of civilizations."⁸⁵ The communist legacy, (exploiting nationalism and ethnic hatred, strengthening negative stereotypes by state-propaganda) contributed anti-Turkish movements during this period. It's clear that the stereotypes can not easily disappear. The transition process also created a fertile ground for this kind of conflict. As Jack Snyder and Karen Ballentine suggests:

"Historically and today, from the French Revolution to Rwanda, sudden liberalizations of press freedom have been associated with bloody outburst of popular nationalism. The most dangerous situation is precisely when the government's press monopoly begins to break down. During incipient democratization, when civil society is burgeoning but democratic institutions are not fully entrenched, the state and other elites are forced to engage in public debate in order to compete for mass allies in the struggle for power. Under those circumstances, governments and their opponents often have the motive and the opportunity to play the nationalist card."⁸⁶

In Bulgaria, different factors avoided this outcome fortunately. As the first of all, the mainstream political parties (respectively the successor of BCP, The Bulgarian Socialist Party and The Union of Democratic Forces) generally speaking tried to distance themselves from those radical anti-Turkish groups. That doesn't mean they never played the "nationalist card" both to attract the elector and appease their members to keep their party united, but they avoided the escalation of crisis. This was clearly seen when the Committee for the Defense of National Interests (CDNI) called for a referendum on Turkish issue in 1990. With the support of Union of Democratic Forces the post-Zhivkov Communist government rejected the referendum "on the grounds

⁸³ Ibid, p.38

⁸⁴ For discussions on the term "Balkanization" see Maria Todorova, *Balkanları Tahayyül Etme*(*Imagining The Balkans*), Trans: Dilek Şendil, İstanbul, İletişim Yayınları, 2.ed., 2006,pp:75-85

⁸⁵ Ragaru,op.cit, p.294

⁸⁶ Jack Snyder, Karen Ballantine, "Nationalism and the Marketplace of Ideas", *Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict*, Eds:Michael E.Brown, Owen R.Cote,Jr, Sean M. Lynn-Jones, Steven E. Miller, Revised Edition, Cambridge,MA, The MIT Press,1997,p.62

that human rights issues should not be resolved by popular opinion."⁸⁷ As Tom Gallagher depicts; "at elite level, the BSP and UDF cooperated to defuse ethnic sentiment and to channel it in safe political directions."⁸⁸ This ended with the marginalization of anti-Turkish parties. As Ekaterina Nikova suggests:

"The openly nationalistic parties had only modest success in the elections, their press is not influential, and their leaders are caricatures. Nationalism has been used mostly as a tactic, rather than as an ideology. Both political giants have not hesitated to play the nationalistic card-first the Bulgarian Socialist Party tried to present itself as the bearer of nation's idea during the October 1991 and the presidential January 1992 elections, later the Union of the Democratic Forces used ethnic arguments to attack its 'disloyal' former ally MRF after the split in their formal coalition in late 1992."⁸⁹

Also the electoral system of Bulgaria forced coalition governments and the MRF's participation in the UDF coalition created a positive impact, it made the cooperation vital. Carter Johnson emphasizes that:

"Neither the BSP nor the UDF were particularly desirous of an MRF coalition, as they feared punishment from the nationalist polity. Fear notwithstanding, both parties were forced to temper their nationalist rhetoric. The temptation for power was such that the UDF agreed to an unofficial coalition with the MRF."⁹⁰

The role of external factors should be taken into account too. Bulgaria, needed a new image for foreign policy purposes like integration to the Euro-Atlantic structures. The increasing wave of democratization was so strong that Bulgaria couldn't stand it. Also the dissolution of Warsaw Pact and later the NATO enlargement, made it compulsory for Bulgaria to develop friendly relations with neighboring Turkey and this wouldn't be possible if Bulgaria maltreated the Turkish minority. The exaggerated fears emanating from Turkey as the kin state of Turkish minority persisted during this period too. Many Bulgarians believed that Turkey was going to get the revenge of revival process and lack of any alliance to protect Bulgaria due to the dissolution of Warsaw Pact increased this fear.⁹¹ The demands of the residents about introduction of Turkish classes in the districts populated by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims created dissent in nationalist circles. When some of them identified themselves as Turkish, this was followed by the rumors that the MRF was

⁸⁷ Vassilev, op.cit, p.107

⁸⁸ Gallagher, *The Balkans After...*,p.20

⁸⁹ Ekaterina Nikova, "Changing Bulgaria in the Changing Balkans", *Balkans, A Mirror Of The New International Order*, Eds: Günay Göksu Özdoğan, Kemali Saybaşı;Istanbul, Eren Yayıncılık, 1995, p.192

⁹⁰ Johnson, op.cit, p.11

⁹¹ Nurcan Özgür, "1989 Sonrası Türkiye-Bulgaristan İlişkileri"(Turkish-Bulgarian Relations After 1989), *Türk Dış Politikasının Analizi [The Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy]*, Ed:Faruk Sönmezoglu, İstanbul, Der Yayınları,2004, p.615

Turkifying “the victims of the Ottoman yoke”, and the dissent grew. Turkey’s increasing role in the Central Asia and the high profile foreign policy in the Balkans were perceived as Turkey’s intention to restore the Ottoman Empire. However, bilateral relations developed especially in 1990-1994 period, Turkey and Bulgaria signed a Friendship, Good Neighborship, Cooperation and Security Agreement in 1992 and later withdrew their military forces from their borders, this period was referred as “honeymoon in Turkish-Bulgarian relations” by Şule Kut.⁹²

It’s the main argument of this article that the MRF as a political party representing the interests of minority played a very important role during the transition period to avoid ethnic conflict. It opened the channels for dialogue and its modest and realistic demands convinced the public opinion. As the results of statistical study proves, the MRF contributed to lower the ethnic tension and ethnic Bulgarians developed more positive views on the minorities. As the study suggests, while %62 of ethnic Bulgarians supported the right for minorities to form their cultural organizations in Fall 1991, it was %66 in Spring 1992. On the representation of the minorities in the parliament, the number was %44 in Fall 1991 and with an increase it was %54 in Spring 1992.⁹³ Unlike the “Balkan tradition” the MRF opposed the idea of reaching political goals by using violence. As Rossen Vassilev puts forward:

“While Turks and other Muslims face some ethnic hostility on the part of the Bulgarian majority, for the most part they have not responded with destabilizing demands for political and territorial autonomy and separatism, thus precipitating a stateness crisis, similar to the one experienced by neighboring Yugoslavia.”⁹⁴

Conclusion

Transition of Bulgaria with a significant Turkish/Muslim minority has not ended with ethnic violence as it did in Yugoslavia in the same period. Ethnic conflict may be prevented with dialogue and calm approaches to the problems as it worked in Bulgaria. Fuelling up negative stereotypes and propaganda of ethnic hatred by the state through mass media and education, as it was the case in Bulgaria during Zhivkov period, ends with a polarized or deeply divided society. It’d be too optimistic to expect the effects of this elite and state-led radical nationalism disappear in the short term. While building a sense of peaceful coexistence may take centuries, it’d be destroyed in a decade easily.

⁹² Şule Kut, *Balkanlar’da Kimlik ve Egemenlik | Sovereignty and Identity in the Balkans*, İstanbul, Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2005, p.202

⁹³ Mary E. McIntosh, Martha Abele Mac Iver, Daniel G. Abele, David B. Nolle, “Minority Rights and Majority Rule: Ethnic Tolerance in Romania and Bulgaria”, *Social Forces*, Vol.75, No.3, March 1995, p.944

⁹⁴ Vassilev, op.cit, p.113

While suffering from the crises of transition, Bulgaria didn't become another version of Yugoslavia. From this point of view, Bulgaria's approach to the minority issue, the role of external factors shouldn't be underestimated, may be appreciated. The behaviors of mainstream parties and elites generally distanced themselves from anti-Turkish parties, even though they used nationalism as a currency in the political market sometimes, this contributed to the marginalization of radical nationalist, anti-Turkish parties. The MRF made the greatest contribution to this result. Its moderate demands and calm approach even when attacked by the nationalist circles, avoided the escalation of crises. It proved that an ethnic party could be useful for democratization and dealing with minority problems. It also proved that a minority party if not excluded by the rest of the society may serve as a tool of integration and peace. It seems that both the majority and the minority have great responsibilities in order to provide peace and mutual trust in ethnic problems.

Abstract

Forming approximately %10 percent of the total population, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria had faced serious attempts of assimilation and forced emigration since Bulgaria's independence in 1908. But "The Revival Process" led by Communist leader Zhivkov in 1980s, violating the minority rights envisaged in international treaties, was its paramount. However, with the fall of Communism Bulgaria entered into transition process starting in 1990s and that meant a new phase for the minority. The foreign policy aim of integration to Euro-Atlantic structures affected Bulgaria's treatment of minorities. Since then, Bulgaria has stepped forward to become a plural society. Even though there are some problems concerning the minority rights, the Turkish minority is enjoying freedom like other Bulgarian citizens. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms founded officially in 1990 by Ahmet Doğan has become the voice of Turkish minority. The party took place in coalition governments. However, like its counterpart Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania, the MRF has become the main target of radical Bulgarian nationalists. The attempts to prohibit the party and avoid its participation in the elections have been fruitless due to the Constitutional Court's decision in 1992. This article examines the role of Movement for Rights and Freedoms as a successful way of peaceful integration, while analyzing the factors causing dissent in nationalist circles of the society in Bulgaria due to the Turkish minority's political participation and representation.

Key-words: Balkans, Turkish Minority, Bulgaria, Political Parties.

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