

Eastern Europe
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Since the fall of the communist regime in Bulgaria in 1989, all Muslims in the country have come to experience a changed situation in which democratic consequences are evident: possession of individual rights and freedoms, intensification of contacts with the Muslim world, and free political expression. Because the political heritage of the dismantled communist system is quite original in Bulgaria, in comparison with a number of other Balkan countries, a specific confessional model can be witnessed.

The changes in the last decade for Muslims in Bulgaria are all the more significant when seen against the background of the situation prior: the regime of the last communist president T. Jivkov carried out (like that of Miloshevic in Yugoslavia) a kind of ethnic cleansing by challenging the local Muslims through changing their Turkic-Arab names into Slavic ones. Also the emigration process was indicative of the situation: in the summer of 1989, 500,000 Bulgarian Muslims left the country to settle in Turkey. Yet despite the considerable reduction of the community, the Muslim population in Bulgaria is still quite large. According to the official census in 1992, there were 1,110,295 Muslims registered (800,052 of which declared themselves Turks, 313,396 Gypsies, 4,515 Tartars and other Muslim minorities). Due to the deterioration of the economic conditions, Bulgarian Muslims (especially the Turks) massively migrated to Turkey. This process is still going on up to the present day and because of the illegal forms of



Bulgarian Gypsies before the election day

PHOTO: ROUMIANA ANDREEVA

migration, the exact size of the Bulgarian Muslim community is still unknown.

After the installation of a competitive political system, the Bulgarian Muslim community seems to be an attractive electoral area for the newly established Bulgarian parties. However, the community has made it clear that it possesses its own electoral potation for transforming itself from an object to a subject in Bulgarian political life.

The Turks – leading Muslim group

In June 1990, the Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF) in Varna arose, officially denying that it recruited its activist corpus on an ethnic and religious principle. Political reality proves, however, that the party has become representative of the largest ethnic group among the Muslims: 90% of its membership is comprised of Bulgarian Turks.

Two general issues guaranteed the success of this political formation. The charismatic leadership of Ahmed Dogan, former activist against the 'Revival Process' and the special elitism within the party shaped by him. MRF elitism is strictly conservative, taking into consideration that the party's oper-

ational leadership is entirely based on 'ethnic and religious quota'. In the Central Council (the operational party level) the Turk domination is quite conspicuous with about 80-85%; the Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims) are represented by 10-15% and ordinarily possesses one vice presidential seat.

Bulgarian Christians are involved in the leadership usually with 'external quota' and realize their political presence through participation in the electoral process. They are deprived of efficacious party competence. The MRF usually places between 14 and 24 deputies in Parliament (which numbers 240 in total), while the Christian quota is around 2 to 4 seats.

Concealed emphasis on ethnic (coupled with religious) corporativism is actually the immanent ideological approach to achieving the position of a main political grouping. It is in this way that the MRF's ideological basis intertwined secular ethnical commitment (adherence to Pan-Turkism, not in its radical expression) with unconscious, instinctively acquired Islamism (also as a cognitive – reflexive behavioural system). Com-

bined, the above mentioned Pan-Turkism and Islamism became the ideological tools that MRF elaborated as operational criteria for attracting new supporters.

Meanwhile in the short history of post-communist Bulgarian legislative elections, Turk support is categorical and can be expressed by the following: in 1990 there were 540,000 votes for the MRF, approximately 95% of the Turk voters; in 1991 – 380 thousand, approximately 80% of the Turk voters; in 1994 – 340 thousand, approximately 90% of the Turk voters; and in 1997 – 250 thousand, approximately 90% of the Turk voters. The attempts made to marginalize the MRF – forbidding it by an act of the Constitutional Court in 1991, provoking schismatic disorder within the leadership – all remained unsuccessful.

Schismatic movements

Attempts to remove the ethnic and religious appearance of the party characterize MRF's official fluctuations and its coalition policy. Adem Kenan, former MRF deputy, provoked the first schismatic movement. He founded the Turkish Democratic Party, which remains unacknowledged by the

state. His radicalism, based purely on secular Pan-Turkism, excludes Bulgarian Muslims. The federalist state structure (Bulgarian and Turkish autonomy districts) proposed by Kenan had to be considered as undermining internal peace. The extremist ethnic and religious tendencies had been eliminated since they grew up at the bosom of Bulgarian political thought.

Mehmet Hodja, another former party deputy, initiated the second schismatic movement derived from MRF. His Party for Democratic Changes (PDC) has to be considered as a personal revolt against the authoritarian methods of Dogan. However, PDC acquired a regional profile, strictly limited to the district of Kardjali, the biggest South-east Bulgarian town with considerable Muslim (predominantly Turk) presence. In the legislative elections in 1994, the PDC mobilized 24,000 votes that represented approximately 0,1% of the total votes or 4% of the Turk voters. This electoral failure announced its political death.

The next two attempts for dissipating MRF political and electoral capabilities are related with the aspirations of the biggest local political parties – the Bulgarian Socialist Party (former Communist) and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). The former catapulted Nedim Gendjev, former *mufti*, by aiding him to establish the Democratic Party of Justice (DPJ). As a former cleric, his political formation seemed to utilize religious rather than ethnic slogans, emphasizing contact with the Arab world. Paradoxically, this was mixed with socialist egalitarian elements, which shaped its utopian character and ultimately resulted in failure. The DPJ also remained a regionally represented party. Gendjev organized bases predominantly in northeastern Bulgaria, around the city of Shoumen, ignoring the southeast and the southwest, also populated by a Muslim community. The DPJ logically shared the destiny of the preceding schismatic parties. It earned 24,000 and 27,000 in the 1994 and 1997 legislative elections, respectively, and also has been marginalized.

The last schismatic attempts have been going on up to the present political dislocations in the country. The UDF, as governing party since 1997, makes great efforts to isolate the MRF leaders from their basic supporters by involving them in different levels of its political power. Ivan Kostov, UDF leader and current Prime Minister personally offered a few deputy chairs to the former MRF activists, in opposition to Ahmed Dogan. Mid-1997 saw the establishment of the most important duplicate formation. It adopted the name of National Movement of Rights and Freedoms (NMRF), a very opportune electoral tactic, bearing in mind the potential confusion with the MRF. Guner Tahir, former MRF vice president and deputy, headed the newly founded party. With UDF assistance, he quickly constructed a wide network almost covering the entire country. However, according to the latest estimations, the anti-MRF effects once more proved mediocre because of the appeals of UDF leaders to their MRF opponents to approve their coalition policy during the approaching municipal elections. Indeed, on

the eve of October 1999 the MRF conserved its overwhelming superiority in 30 municipalities representing the Muslim community and exerts influence in 65 municipalities, out of 260 in total.

The most successful political manoeuvre of MRF leadership, and of Ahmed Dogan personally, is the ideological juggling with liberal ideas and slogans. He initiated the Liberal Democratic Union with the former president J. Jeleu, vice president of Liberal International. It seems that the contradiction between the officially adopted individualist ideas and the traditional adjustment of the Bulgarian Muslims to egalitarianism and social equality does not disturb MRF founders. First, the liberal veil breaks up and 'dissolves' MRF into a Bulgarian political multitude. Secondly, it places the party among the family of European liberal parties. Thirdly, it moves the MRF away from the Socialist Party, which remains its true electoral competitor.

The others

The community of Pomaks is estimated between 170,000-200,000. Its political behaviour is different from that of the Turks. It appears that its social and economic marginality, due largely to its rural and especially mountain-dwelling membership (approximately 100%), influences and encourages a kind of 'regionalization' of political preferences. Usually its members adopt negative attitudes towards the dominant regional political tendencies. If they live alongside Turks (as in the district of Kardjali) Bulgarian Muslims generally support the BSP (except in 1997 when their support was for the UDF). On the contrary, in the southwest (Bulgarian Macedonia) the Pomaks ordinarily vote for the MRF, thus denying the UDF and BSP dominance.

Bulgarian Muslim Gypsies are electoral objects whose comportment is categorically unpredictable. Their extremely high level of unemployment, lack of education, and dominant rural status motivate political passivity and disorientation. All attempts at establishing a serious political ethnic formation corresponding to that of the Turkish MRF have failed. However, in 1998 'Euroroma' was founded, pretending to defend the Gypsies interests. Its electoral capabilities seem doubtful in as far as its activities reached only electoral agreements with MRF and the Bulgarian Euroleft party.

Analysing the political behaviour of the Bulgarian Muslim community is quite difficult. It risks running into inexactitudes due to the empirical nature of the data. Considering the characteristic Balkan circumstances, Bulgarian politicians have to do their best to promote the possibility of coexistence between Muslim and Christian communities in the country so as to avoid situations such as that in neighbouring Yugoslavia. ♦

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