

**THOU SHALT NOT TAKE THE NAMES ETHNIC OR MINORITY,
AND I WILL BLESS THEE:
POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF MINORITIES IN BULGARIA**

Marko Hajdinjak

Introduction

Talking about minorities and minority political participation in Bulgaria is a curious affair. Despite the fact that over 16 percent of Bulgarian population is of minority origin, the authors of the first democratic Bulgarian Constitution of 1991 strongly believed that “minority” is a “no-no” word, which does not go together with the “territorial integrity” and “unitary character” of the Bulgarian state. To be on an even safer side, they added the infamous Article 11, which prohibits the formation of political parties on ethnic grounds.¹ Yet, despite the ban, what is widely perceived as “the Turkish Party” has become one of the most important political parties in the country. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) is the only party in Bulgaria, which can boast that it has increased its results on each consecutive elections. Its political record is impressive: three times it was a member of governing coalition under three different Prime Ministers (a conservative, a liberal and a socialist), two times it was given the mandate by the President to form a government, and once it brought down the government in which it participated by supporting the opposition’s vote of no confidence.

As mentioned above, the term “minority” is neither mentioned nor defined in the Bulgarian constitution. The constitution states that “all citizens shall be equal before the law” and that “there shall be no privileges or restriction of rights on the grounds of race, nationality, ethnic self-identity, sex, origin, religion, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status or property status” (Article 6).² On the other hand, the Article 36/2 explicitly mentions those “citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian” and who have “the right to study and use their own language alongside the compulsory study of the Bulgarian language.”³

All citizens belonging to various ethnic, religious, linguistic and other communities in the state are regarded as part of the Bulgarian nation and according to the constitution have no collective minority rights, but only individual ones.⁴ For example Article 54 defines their right to “develop their own culture in accordance with their ethnic affiliation, which is recognized and guaranteed by the law.”⁵ Bulgarian citizenship is defined in the following way (Article 25/1): “A Bulgarian citizen shall be anyone born of at least one parent holding a Bulgarian citizenship, or born on the territory of the Republic of Bulgaria, should he not be entitled to any other citizenship by virtue of origin. Bulgarian citizenship shall further be acquirable through naturalization.”⁶

Despite the fact that the highest Bulgarian law is silent on the issue of minorities in the country, a number of laws, acts and court orders contain texts referring to groups other than the majority. In its Decision No. 4 from April 21, 1992 the Constitutional Court stated that despite being based on the principle of national integrity and unity, “the Bulgarian Constitution acknowledges the existence of religious, linguistic and ethnic differences, and respectively, of bearers of such differences.”⁷ Bulgaria has

¹ Article 11 (4): There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties which seek the violent seizure of state power. <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>

² Full text of the Bulgarian Constitution can be found on <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>

³ Ibid.

⁴ For a very detailed and informative overview of the legal status of minorities in Bulgaria, read Orlin Avramov, *Citizens for Human Rights Vol.1: We and the Others. On Minorities and Law*. Sofia: IMIR, 2004.

⁵ <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Съдия Александър Арабаджиев - Решение N: 4 на Конституционния съд от 21 април 1992 г. по конституционно дело N: 1 от 1991 г. - група н.п. -> ТЪЛКУВАТЕЛНО /чл. 4, 5, 11, ал. 4 и чл. 44, ал. 2 от Конституцията,” http://www.constcourt.bg/re4_92.htm. The Court named the following Articles of the Constitution as those mentioning the

also ratified the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in 1999. Both conventions, which contain articles mentioning national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, are now a part of the Bulgarian legislation and even have priority over it.

When ratifying the Framework Convention, the Bulgarian National Assembly declared its commitment “to the policy of protection of human rights and tolerance to persons belonging to minorities, and their full integration into Bulgarian society,” on the condition that such policies “do not imply any right to engage in any activity violating the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the unitary Bulgarian State, its internal and international security.”⁸

In the beginning of 2004 Bulgaria passed the Law on Protection against Discrimination,⁹ which brought the country closer to the European standards in this sphere. The law provides for the special measures benefiting minorities, for example protection of their distinctive culture and identity, the right to maintain and develop their culture, the right to practice their religion and use their language. The law obliges the ministries of education and of culture and the local authorities to take the necessary measures to avoid racial segregation in schools and other educational institutions. The central and local authorities must also implement a policy resulting in the minorities’ participation in governance and decision-making.

The principle of equal treatment of all the citizens regardless of their ethnicity is established in many other Bulgarian laws, like the Labor Code, the Law of Encouragement of Employment, the Law for Protection, Rehabilitation and Social Integration of Disabled, the State Employees Act, the Criminal Code, and others. The same principle was fortified by a number of Constitutional Court’s rulings.

Minorities in Bulgaria¹⁰

There are over 15 ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The largest group are Bulgarians (83.9% according to 2001 census), followed by Turks and Roma. Most experts consider that the real number of Roma in Bulgaria is almost double the official number – between 600,000 and 700,000. The reason for the difference is that a large number of Roma self-identifies as Bulgarians or Turks, while some also choose Vlach identity. Additional reason for inaccurate numbers is that many Roma do not live on addresses where they are officially registered, but have migrated to other towns or villages without officially changing their residence and are therefore hard to interview during census.¹¹

persons belonging to different religious, linguistic and ethnic communities: Article 37/1 (The state shall assist the maintenance of tolerance and respect among the believers from different denominations, and among believers and non-believers), Article 36/2 (Citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian shall have the right to study and use their own language alongside the compulsory study of the Bulgarian language), Article 29/1 (No one shall be subjected to forcible assimilation), Article 44/2 (No organization shall incite racial, national, ethnic or religious enmity or an encroachment on the rights and freedoms of citizens) and Article 54/1 (Everyone shall have the right to avail himself of the national and universal human cultural values and to develop his own culture in accordance with his ethnic self-identification, which shall be recognized and guaranteed by the law).

⁸ Human Rights and National Minorities: Country Specific Information, Council of Europe, September 19, 2007.

http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/minorities/Country_specific_eng.asp#P129_6593

⁹ The Law is available on <http://www.mlsp.government.bg/equal/qualen/anti-discrimination%20law%20en.doc>

¹⁰ An excellent encyclopedical publication containing articles dedicated to a variety of ethnic and religious groups in Bulgaria (including Pomaks, Turks, Gagaus, Tartars, Jews, Armenians, and Catholics) is Anna Krasteva, (ed). *Communities and Identities in Bulgaria*. Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1997.

Other suggested reading on minorities in Bulgaria:

Antonina Zhelyazkova, Bojidar Alexiev, Georgeta Nazarska, *Мюсюлманските общности на Балканите и в България*. Sofia: IMIR, 1997.

Vera Mutafchieva, (ed.) *Многоцветие. Из културата на малцинствата в България*. Sofia: IMIR, 2001. [http://www.imir-](http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Mnogocvetie.pdf)

[http://www.imir-](http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Katolicite.zip)

Svetlozar Eldarov, *Католиците в България (1878-1989)*. Sofia: IMIR, 2002. [http://www.imir-](http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Katolicite.zip)

Iva Kyurkchieva, *Светът на българите мюсюлмани от Тетевенско*. Sofia: IMIR, 2004. [\[http://www.imir-\]\(http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/myusyulmani-Teteven.pdf\)](http://www.imir-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

Table 1: Division of the population according to ethnic group

Total	Ethnic group												Undecided	No answer
	Bulgarians	Turks ¹²	Roma	Russians ¹³	Armenians ¹⁴	Vlachs	Macedonians	Greeks	Ukrainians	Jews ¹⁵	Romanians	Others*		
7 928 901	6 655 210	746 664	370 908	15 595	10 832	10 566	5 071	3 408	2 489	1 363	1 088	18 792	62 108	24 807

Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Ethnos.htm>

* Other smaller minority groups include Karakachans,¹⁶ Tatars, Gagaus, Cherkez, Arabs and Albanians.

The fourth significantly large ethno-religious group are Bulgarian Muslims or Pomaks. The issue of Pomak identity has been a controversial one ever since the establishment of independent Bulgaria in 1878 and has yet to be resolved. The widespread belief, shared by many politicians, intellectuals (especially historians) and the predominant part of the majority population, is that Pomaks are not a separate ethnic group as the only difference between Pomaks and other Bulgarians is religion. Over the years, much political, scientific and quasi-scientific effort has been made to “prove” that Pomaks are an inseparable part of the Bulgarian national body. These efforts were especially determined under the Communist rule. One of the best such examples is the book “On the Past of the Bulgarian Mohammedans in the Rhodopes,” published in 1958 by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.¹⁷ The book strongly reflected the cultural policy, which viewed Pomaks as “lesser” Bulgarians – inseparable part of the Bulgarian family-nation, but blemished with the wrong, Muslim religion.

Many times in history, the academic discourse about the Pomaks as “brothers who have lost their way” transformed into violent campaigns of forced assimilation during which Pomaks were forced to abandon their religion, customs and even their names. As a result, even today, the Pomak community is still very divided and uncertain regarding their identity. As no official data about their number exist, only estimates can be made. One indicator about their approximate number can be the census data, which show that around 130,000 people belonging to the Bulgarian ethnic group are Muslims by religion.¹⁸ Some experts believe the real number is much higher. For example, one publication quotes an unofficial estimate made by the Ministry of Interior that there were 270,000 Pomaks in Bulgaria in 1989, however there is no explanation about how the Ministry came up with the number in the first place.¹⁹ Another author presents similar figure of one quarter of a million.²⁰

All other communities are relatively small. Only Russians, Armenians and Vlachs number more than 10,000 people, while all other are smaller than 5000. Most of the people belonging to small minorities

¹¹ For more on Roma in Bulgaria, see: Ilona Tomova, *The Gypsies in the Transition Period*. Sofia: IMIR, 1995.

http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Gypsies_in_Transition_Period1.zip

Ilona Tomova, “Migrations of Roma in Bulgaria,” in *Forced Ethnic Migrations on the Balkans: Consequences and Rebuilding of Societies*, ed. by Katerina Popova, Marko Hajdinjak. Sofia: IMIR, 2005. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Forced_Ethnic_Migrations.pdf, pp. 122-135.

Alexey Pamporov, *Ромското всекидневие в България*. Sofia: IMIR, 2006. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Pamporov_Roma_everyday_life_2006.pdf

¹² See Ibrahim Yalamov, *История на турската общност в България*. Sofia: IMIR, 2002; Myumyun Isov, *Най-различният съсед*. Sofia: IMIR, 2005.

¹³ See Tsvetana Kyoseva, *Руската емиграция в България (20 – 50-те години на XX в.)*. Sofia: IMIR, 2002. <http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/Ruskata%20emigracia.pdf>

¹⁴ See Evgenia Miceva, *Арменците в България – култура и идентичност*. Sofia: IMIR, 2001. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/armencite_v_bulgaria.pdf

¹⁵ See Emmy Barouh, (ed.) *Jews in the Bulgarian Lands: Ancestral Memory and Historical Destiny*. Sofia: IMIR, 2001. <http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/jews-ancestral%20memory.pdf>

¹⁶ See Jenja Pimpireva, *Каракачаните в България*. Sofia: IMIR, 1998. <http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/karakachans.pdf>

¹⁷ Из миналото на българите мохамедани в Родопите, Sofia: БАН, 1958.

¹⁸ The National Statistical Institute provides a very detailed analysis of data on religious division of Bulgarian population on <http://www.nsi.bg/Census/StrReligion.htm>

¹⁹ Yulian Konstantinov, Gulbrand Alhaug, and Birgit Igla. “Names of the Bulgarian Pomaks.” *Nordlyd*. Tromsø: Tromsø University Working Papers on Language and Linguistics, 7, 1991, p. 103.

are well integrated into the Bulgarian society, intermarried with ethnic Bulgarians, and have in numerous cases abandoned their mother tongue for Bulgarian language. Almost all of them, however, are active in preservation of their culture and traditions through organization of various cultural societies and publication of newspapers, journals and books. As a rule, they are not politically organized, with one notable exception – Macedonians.

Apart from Roma and Pomaks, Macedonians are the third minority group in Bulgaria whose numbers are highly disputed, ranging from the official 5,071 to 200,000, claimed by some Macedonian nationalists. The experts of Bulgarian Helsinki Committee estimate there are between 15,000 and 25,000 people with Macedonian self-awareness in Bulgaria, but add that most of them have a Bulgarian national self-consciousness and a regional Macedonian identity similar to the Macedonian regional identity in Greek Macedonia.²¹ Historically, the policies of Bulgarian state toward its citizens with Macedonian self-identity have been highly controversial. In the 1940s and 1950s, the Communist Party encouraged the inculcation of Macedonian self-awareness in the Pirin region, but in the mid-1950s this policy was dramatically reversed. The official Bulgarian position became the complete denial of existence of Macedonian nation and language, not only in Bulgaria, but also in the neighboring Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – something many in Bulgaria are still having difficulties in overcoming even today. In the censuses the number of Macedonians miraculously dropped from 187,789 in 1956 to 9,632 in 1965 to disappear altogether in the later censuses.²²

Table 2: Division of the population according to religion (Principality of Bulgaria, 1878-1908)

Religion	1887		1893		1900	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Orthodox	2 424 371	76.86	2 606 786	78.74	3 019 999	80.66
Mohammedans	676 215	21.44	643 258	19.43	643 300	17.18
Israelites	24 352	0.77	28 307	0.86	33 663	0.90
Catholic	18 505	0.59	22 617	0.68	28 569	0.76
Protestant	1 358	0.04	2 384	0.07	4 524	0.12
Armenian-Gregorian	5 839	0.19	6 643	0.20	13 809	0.37
Others	1 461	0.04	-	-	326	0.01
Undeclared	2 274	0.07	718	0.02	93	0.0
Total for the Principality	3 154 375	100.0	3 310 713	100.0	3 744 283	100.0

Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/Census/StrReligion.htm>

Table 3: Division of the population according to religion

Religion	1910		1920		1926		1934		1946		1992		2001	
	Number	%												
Total	4 337 513	100.0	4 846 971	100.0	5 478 741	100.0	6 077 939	100.0	7 029 349	100.0	8 487 317	100.0	7 928 901	100.0
Eastern Orthodox	3 643 918	84.0	4 062 097	83.8	4 569 074	83.4	5 128 890	84.4	5 967 992	84.9	7 274 592	85.7	6 552 751	82.6
Muslim	602 078	13.9	690 734	14.3	789 296	14.4	821 298	13.5	938 418	13.3	1 110 295	13.1	966 978	12.2
Catholic	32 150	0.7	34 072	0.7	40 347	0.7	45 704	0.8	-	-	53 074	0.6	43 811	0.6
Protestant	6 335	0.1	5 617	0.1	6 735	0.1	8 371	0.1	-	-	21 878	0.3	42 308	0.5
Jewish	40 067	0.9	43 232	0.9	46 431	0.8	48 398	0.8	43 335	0.6	2 580	0.0	653	0.0
Armenian-Gregorian	12 259	0.3	10 848	0.2	25 402	0.5	23 476	0.4	-	-	9 672	0.1	6 500	0.1
Other	706	0.0	371	0.0	1 456	0.0	1 802	0.0	79 604	1.1	15 226	0.2	7 784	0.1
No answer / undeclared	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	308 116	3.9

Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/Census/StrReligion.htm>

²⁰ Dobrinka Kostova, “Minority Politics in Southeast Europe: Bulgaria” *The Ethnobarometer Working Paper Series*, Rome: International Research Network on Interethnic Politics and Migration, 2001, p. 26. <http://www.ethnobarometer.org/pdf/wp05.pdf>

²¹ Mariana Lenkova, *Macedonians of Bulgaria*. Center for Documentation and Information on Minorities in Europe - Southeast Europe (CEDIME-SE), <http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/pdf/cedime-se-bulgaria-macedonians.PDF>

²² Ulrich Büchschütz. *Малцинствената политика в България. Политиката на БКП към евреи, роми, помаци и турци (1944-1989)*. Sofia: IMIR, 2000, p. 128. <http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/malcinstvena%20politika.pdf>

Brief Historical Overview of the Bulgarian State Policies towards Minorities

The first Bulgarian Constitution (1879) guaranteed the right to free practice of religion to those subjects of the Bulgarian Principality who were “Christians of non-Orthodox denomination or other believers” (Article 40).²³ The Constitution guaranteed the autonomy of minority religious communities and wide cultural rights for minority groups (the right to have their places of worship, schools, newspapers and journals). In Turkish schools, which were financially supported by the state, the language of instruction was Turkish. Turks also had their political representatives in the Bulgarian National Assembly, but had no right to form a political party on ethnic grounds. Yet, despite the Constitutional guarantees, the rights of the Muslim population were often not respected.

The Bulgarian borders changes after the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 and again after the World War I. As a result, despite the mass migrations, the size of the Bulgarian Muslim population increased instead of decreasing for the first time since 1885 (see tables 2 and 3). This had a predominantly negative reaction among the majority population and some of the most important institutions in the country. Thus in early 1920s, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, supported by the government, organized the first forced mass attempt to Christianize Pomaks. After the 1923 coup in Bulgaria, the state limited the autonomy of Turkish schools. In 1934, the King outlawed all political organizations in the country, including those of the Bulgarian Turks. The number of Turkish schools significantly decreased. At the same time, attempts to assimilate Pomaks were intensified, culminating with a forced substitution of the names of Pomaks with Christian Bulgarian names.

When the communists-dominated coalition came to power in September 1944, the state policies towards minorities initially changed for the better. Turks received a wide cultural autonomy, periodical publications in the Turkish language reappeared and private Turkish schools were legalized. Old names of Bulgarian Muslims were restored and restrictions on wearing of traditional clothes were lifted. The Constitution of 1947 is the only Bulgarian constitution ever to directly mention “national minorities.” Article 79 stated that “the national minorities have the right to study their mother tongue and develop their national culture.”²⁴ The Constitution guaranteed equal rights to all Bulgarian citizens regardless of their nationality, origin, denomination and property, while the propaganda of racial, national or religious hatred was declared to be against the law (Art.71). In the same period, the plans developed by Georgi Dimitrov and Josip Broz Tito about the creation of a federation between Bulgaria and Yugoslavia resulted in a political decision to count the entire population of Pirin Macedonia as members of Macedonian national minority. With Dimitrov’s death and Tito’s break with Soviet Union, the plans for Federation became irrelevant and several years later, the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, which officially numbered almost 200,000 in the 1956 census, all but “disappeared” as its existence was denied by the authorities.

The period of tolerant policies towards ethnic and religious minorities did not last long. In 1953, religious holidays were officially discouraged, in 1958 wearing of traditional Muslim clothes was outlawed and a year later the circumcision was prohibited. All private schools were closed down and religious education was forbidden. Children of Turkish, Jewish and Armenian origin, which could previously receive their education in private schools, had to enter secular state schools. Periodically, authorities tried to deal with the “Turkish issue” by forcing Bulgarian Turks to emigrate to Turkey. For example, between 1949 and 1951 over 150,000 Turks left Bulgaria.²⁵

²³ Read the text of the Constitution on <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=history&lng=bg&hid=4>

²⁴ Read the text of the Constitution on <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=history&lng=bg&hid=5>

²⁵ For a concise analysis of the history of (forced or voluntary) emigration of Turks from Bulgaria from 1878 to 1989 see Omer Turan, “Turkish Migrations from Bulgaria” in *Forced Ethnic Migrations on the Balkans: Consequences and Rebuilding of Societies*, ed. by Popova, Hajdinjak, pp. 75-91.

See also Mila Maeva, *Българските турци - преселници в Република Турция (Култура и идентичност)*. Sofia: IMIR, 2006. <http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/books/balgarskite%20turci%20preselnici.pdf>

The situation of minorities further worsened in the beginning of 1960s, when the communist authorities begun changing the names, seen as a mark of “foreign” ethnic and religious affiliation.²⁶ First victims of this forced assimilation were the Roma Muslims whose names were replaced with Bulgarian Christian ones. At the same time, the nomadic Roma were forced to settle. Next were the Pomaks in Western Rhodopes. An unprecedented resistance to the name changing among the population in several villages in 1964 led to deployment of army units. Despite that the majority of Pomaks had their names changed between 1970 and 1974.

A decade later, the authorities for the first time initiated similar oppressive measures against Turks. In the period 1984–1985, the government forced nearly one million Turks (around 10% of Bulgaria’s population) to change their names. As a result of cruelty and large scale of this campaign, more than 360,000 Turks left the country in 1989, when the authorities decided to open the border with Turkey.

The fall of communist regime and the democratization of Bulgaria, which started in late 1989, enabled a full restoration of human and minority rights in the country. All those whose names have been changed were able to restore their original names, people who were forced to leave the country were able to return (although only a small portion in fact did return, the reasons for this are mostly economic rather than political), and all the restrictions on free expression and development of minorities’ culture, religion and language were lifted. Although the first democratic Constitution, adopted in 1991, did not include the term “minority” nor its definition, it did specifically mention “citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian” (article 36) and added that everyone had the right to “develop their own culture in accordance with their ethnic affiliation, which is endorsed and guaranteed by the law” (article 54).

In December 1997 the government established a special body called the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Issues (now named the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues).²⁷ The Council’s main task is to coordinate the cooperation between government institutions and NGOs of the Bulgarian citizens, belonging to ethnic minorities, or NGOs concerned with the issues of interethnic relations and minorities. The main goals of this cooperation include strengthening the ethnic tolerance in the country, monitoring that policies of equal rights and development for all citizens are respected, and assisting the preservation and development of culture, identity, religion, language, tradition and cultural heritage of Bulgarian minorities. The Chairperson of the Council is Emel Etem, the Deputy Prime Minister and a representative of the Turkish minority. The Council has around 70 members, including the Deputy Ministers from all ministries (three of them are minority representatives), several representatives of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and over 40 representatives of various minority NGO’s, cultural societies or other organizations. These include the following minority organizations:

1. Armenian organizations:

- Association of Armenian Schools “Stepanos Hovagimian” (Sofia)
- Armenian General Benevolent Union “Parekordzagan” (Sofia)
- Union of Cultural-educational Societies of Armenians in Bulgaria “Erevan” (Sofia)
- Armenian Society “Homenatmen” (Sofia)
- General Armenian Union for Education and Culture “Hamazkain” (Plovdiv)
- Female Union “Armenian Benevolent Society HOM – Bulgaria” (Plovdiv)

2. Aroumanian organizations:

- Centre for Aroumanian Language and Culture (Sofia)

²⁶ A detailed account of the renaming, or the “revival” process, as it was known in Bulgaria, can be found in Evgenia Ivanova, *Отхвърлените “приобщени” или процесът, наречен “възродителен”. 1912-1989*, Sofia: Institut za iztochnoevropska humanitaristika, 2002.

See also Ibrahim Yalamov, “The ‘Renaming’: Consequences and how to Overcome Them,” Evgenia Ivanova, “The ‘Renaming Process’ among the Pomaks: Thirty Years Later,” and Moyuru Matsumae, “Traces of the ‘Renaming Process’ among Pomaks in Bulgaria” in *Forced Ethnic Migrations on the Balkans: Consequences and Rebuilding of Societies*, ed. by Popova, Hajdinjak, pp. 103-139.

²⁷ For more on the NCCEDI, see <http://www.nccedi.government.bg/index.php>

3. Jewish organizations:
 - “Shalom” Organization of the Jews in Bulgaria (Sofia)
4. Karakachan organizations:
 - Federation of Karakachan Cultural-educational Societies in Bulgaria (Sliven)
5. Roma organizations:
 - National Roma Centre “St. George” (Sofia)
 - Foundation “Gyulchai” (Sofia)
 - Foundation “SHAM” (Montana)
 - Center for Interethnic Dialogue and Tolerance “Amalipe” (Veliko Turnovo)
 - National Centre of Roma in Bulgaria (Kostinbrod)
 - Foundation Regional Roma Union (Burgas)
 - United Roma Union Sliven (Sliven)
 - Society “World without Borders” (Stara Zagora)
 - Foundation “Lozenc” (Stara Zagora)
 - Foundation “Ethno-cultural Dialogue” (Sofia)
 - Democratic Union Roma (Sofia)
 - Foundation “Romano Drom” (Sofia)
 - Confederation of Roma Europe (Sofia)
 - NGO “Gypsy Europa” (Stara Zagora)
 - Foundation “S.E.G.A.” (Sofia)
 - Foundation “Hope for Roma” (Yambol)
 - Foundation for Regional Development Roma (Plovdiv)
 - Foundation “Roma-Lom” (Lom)
 - Foundation “Integration and Development of Minorities” (Yambol)
6. Turkish organizations:
 - Cultural-Educational Centre “Navrez” (Dobrich)
 - Turkish Cultural Society “Dobrudzha” (Dobrich)
 - Society for Cultural Links with Turkey “Gyunesh” (Ruse)
 - Foundation “Centre for Youth Initiative” (Antonovo)
 - Cultural Centre “Yumer Lyutvi” (Kardzhali)
 - Turkish-Alevi Cultural and Charity Society “Akkadanlar” (Dulovo)
7. Vlach organizations:
 - Association of Vlachs in Bulgaria (Vidin)

It needs to be noted that these are not all minority organizations active in Bulgaria nor should they be considered as official representatives of above mentioned minorities. On the contrary, the NCCEDI composition has on occasion been a cause of heated debates within the minority communities as members argued why a certain minority organization is involved in the council and another is not.

In addition to the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, there are also District Councils for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues. District Councils include experts from the district administration, municipality mayors, representatives of the regional offices of the central government, representatives of the regional providers of communal services, representatives of non-profit organizations and especially of minority NGOs, as well as the municipal experts on ethnic and demographic issues. Many municipalities have adopted municipal programs and plans for integration of minority communities and some municipal governments are trying to solve the most important problems in cooperation with the central authorities and the NGO sector. Unfortunately, there are large differences between municipalities, both in their willingness to address the existing problems and in their capacity to deal with them.

While the post-1989 period was in general characterized by the positive developments regarding the change of legislation and the general consensus among the main political parties regarding the protection of minority rights, there was also a notable opposition to these trends and especially to the active participation of minorities (most notably Turks) in the political life of the country. For example, when in December 1989 the parliament passed the decision to restore the names of the people, whose names were forcibly changed, the nationalists organized a large protest meeting in Sofia. Many people rejected also other religious and cultural rights of minorities, like teaching of Turkish language (introduced to the state schools in 1991). The nationalists are also outraged by the daily 10-minute long news program in Turkish language on the national TV and have repeatedly demanded its removal. Sociological studies showed that only one half of the Bulgarians recognized the right of minorities to participate in the political life and to be involved in government.²⁸

The inter-ethnic relations in Bulgaria, which have developed in the course of the centuries, are manifested very differently on an individual and on a group level. The traditionally good relations on the individual level have assisted in formation of mechanisms for prevention of conflicts on the local level, which were often strong enough to successfully counteract the policies, made on the central level. Yet, at the same time the deep-rooted prejudices and stereotypes continue to prevail in the society, and have in recent years been marked by an exceptionally worrying rise in popularity of ultra-nationalist political parties.

Minority Participation in the Central and Local Government

The participation of minorities in the political life of Bulgaria has been from the very beginning shaped by the Article 11 of the Bulgarian Constitution. Whether this Article is undemocratic and discriminatory, as it potentially denies a large number of the Bulgarian citizens a proper political representation, or was its introduction a wise decision, which helped to prevent the ethnicisation of politics that brought about a series of bloody conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, can be a subject of a long debate. The fact is that despite the Article 11, most voters belonging to Bulgarian minorities are represented and feel represented both on central and on local level of government.²⁹

This is especially the case for Bulgarian Turks and Pomaks, the majority of whom vote for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the third strongest party in the Parliament and member of the governing coalition. Roma minority is poorly represented on the central level, despite the fact that Political Party “Roma” is one of the eight members of the Coalition for Bulgaria (a coalition overwhelmingly dominated by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, and officially the senior member – rather than BSP on its own – of the current governing coalition). Party “Roma” does not have much say in the work of the government, and has one single representative in the Parliament – its leader Toma Tomov. Another Roma party, Movement for an Equal Public Model – DROM, is nominally represented in the Parliament, as it is one of 6 parties comprising the right-wing coalition United Democratic Forces, dominated by the Union of Democratic Forces. While UDF used to be the strongest political force (along with the BSP) in the 1990s, its 2005 election result was very poor and as a consequence, none of DROM’s candidates (who were rarely placed near the top of coalition’s candidate lists) managed to enter the National Assembly. There are two more “hidden” Roma in the Parliament, members of the MRF, but as many others from the ethno-religious community of Muslim Roma, they self-identify as Turks.

²⁸ Peter Emil Mitev, “Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility in the Everyday Life of Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria,” in *Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility*, ed. by Antonina Zhelyazkova. Sofia: IMIR, 1994, pp. 180–182; Попа Томова, “Социални промени и етнорелигиозни отношения” in *Съседство на религиозните общности в България*, ed. by Georgi Fotev. Sofia: Institute of Sociology, BAN, 2000, pp. 171–269.

²⁹ On the other hand, one has to raise a question how many people actually do feel represented by any given political party in a country like Bulgaria, where only 10% of citizens trust the political parties, while 82% have no trust in them (trust/distrust values for the government are 21%/69% and for the parliament 14%/76%). *Стандартен Евробарометър 66: Национален доклад България*, European Commission, Fall 2006, pp. 44-47, http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb66/eb66_bg_nat.pdf

In addition to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which has 34 MPs in the current parliament (23 of whom are Turks, 4 who are Pomaks, and 2 who are Muslim Roma), there are only three other minority representatives in the Bulgarian National Assembly. All are members of the governing coalition member National Movement Simeon the Second: Rupen Krikorian is Armenian, and Soloman Passy and Nina Chilova are Jews. Passy was a Foreign Minister in the previous government, while Chilova served as Minister of Culture from February to August 2005, replacing the highly unpopular Bozhidar Abrashev on the post. However, it needs to be noted that none of them are in the parliament as representatives of their ethnic communities – they have not been elected as such and make no claims to stand for them and their interests.

In general, it is a bit of a problem to obtain accurate data about the ethnic origin of members of the parliament and municipal councils or in general about the ethnic composition of Bulgarian political parties. In line with the legal environment, set by the Constitution, ethnic and religions affiliation of each person, including public servants, is an individual affair and is never declared. There are no official statistics, no database. The available personal information about MPs includes date and place of birth, education, previous employment, languages spoken, family status, and political career. Thus virtually the only way to determine the ethnic background of a politician is by name. This however works only for some ethnic groups with distinctive names, for example Turks, Armenians and Jews, although even in their case, this method is not always reliable (for example, Chilova has an ordinary Bulgarian name and surname). In most cases Pomaks can be identified by having Muslim first names and surnames, often ending with Bulgarian suffix –ov or –ev, but this is not always the case. Some of the Pomaks whose names were changed before 1989 have kept their new, non-Muslim names. Roma are in general almost impossible to identify solely by name and thus often remain “hidden.”

The situation regarding minority political participation is more diversified on the local level (see tables 5 and 6). In 2003, 13 and in 2007 ten minority parties and coalitions entered municipal councils all over Bulgaria, along with many independent minority candidates or minority candidates elected on the lists of the civic parties. Although the number of successful minority parties decreased in 2007 as compared with the previous elections, their overall result increased. The number of minority municipal councilors rose from 908 to 1181, the number of minority municipal mayors from 30 to 45, and of village mayors from 573 to 883.

The vast majority of minority municipal councilors and mayors belong to the most important minority party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. In most municipalities, the MRF run independently, but (in line with the party’s declared political goal of “expanding its geography”³⁰) in many municipalities with no or with insignificant Turkish or Pomak population, it run in coalitions with different civic parties. For example, in several municipalities in the district of Vidin, its coalition partner was the Bulgarian Socialist Party. In Kyustendil district, however, MRF allied with several right and center-right parties in joint opposition to the BSP candidates. In several municipalities, MRF’s partners were small non-parliamentary parties like Christian Social Union, Agricultural National Union, Liberal-Democratic Union and Bulgarian Party Liberals. In two municipalities (Belogradchik and Samokov), MRF entered the municipal councils in coalition with the main Roma party, Euroroma. In Samokov, this coalition was in fact the winning political formation, taking 6 out of 29 places in the council.

The main (and only) competitor of the MRF for the Turkish votes, the National Movement for Rights and Freedoms, fared much worse than in 2003 and seems to be slowly disappearing from the Bulgarian political landscape. The results of Roma parties have also been poorer than in 2003, although in total they have received more votes than on previous elections (to be discussed in more detail later). Six Roma parties have gained places in the municipal councils: Euroroma, Party “Roma”, Movement for an

³⁰ Filiz Hyusmenova, MRF’s representative in the European Parliament, said on the press conference after the proclamation of unofficial results from the 2007 local elections that “compared to the 2003 elections, MRF significantly expanded its geography.” Quoted on the Movement for Rights and Freedoms web site, October 29, 2007, <http://www.dps.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0232&n=000035&g=>

Equal Public Model (DROM), Party for Liberal Alternative and Peace (PLAM), Movement for Freedom and Justice, and Solidarity.

On the last local elections there was a significant increase in the number of civic parties, running with minority candidates in municipalities with ethnically diverse population. However, in most cases the motivation for this decision was not so much the genuine desire of civic parties to diversify their own ranks and provide more political space to the minority representatives, as was their desire to use minority candidates to try to fight the overwhelming dominance of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms in the predominantly Muslim populated areas of Bulgaria. The best example for this is the Ardino municipality, where the non-parliamentary party the New Time supported the former MRF minister Mehmed Dikme, who was forced out of the party after publicly voicing his criticism over authoritarian style of the party leaders. Dikme came close second behind the MRF candidate Resmi Murad, but owing to him, New Time received 9 out of 21 places in the municipal council, which was previously dominated by the MRF (18 out of 21 places). This was by far the best result New Time scored in any of Bulgarian municipalities.

Despite the fact that those civic parties, which tried to fight the MRF in “Turkish” municipalities by running minority candidates on their lists, more often than not did this to benefit themselves, rather than the local population, this new trend can be seen as a positive development. Unlike the rest of the Bulgarian voters, the MRF electorate base suffers from the lack of genuine political choice, as the MRF virtually monopolized the minority vote and established a de facto one-party rule in the minority populated areas. This has in recent years led to the increase of ethnic tensions in the country and fueled the popularity of newly-formed nationalistic parties. On the other hand, it was increasingly capsulating the Turkish and Pomak communities, driving them away from the majority population. While the 78 minority municipal councilors elected on the lists of various civic parties is a small step forward compared to 850 councilors, won by the MRF, a step forward it nevertheless is. The above mentioned Ardino case shows that even the MRF’s strongholds can be shattered or perhaps taken over if minority voters are taken seriously by civic parties and given a genuine alternative they can vote for.

The last local elections have thus shown that the civic parties have started turning their attention to minority voters and have tried to win them over by putting forward minority candidates. But what place do the minorities have in the programs of the main political parties? The program of the Bulgarian Socialist Party describes the party as “a national party, standing for the policy of national unity,” which can be guaranteed only through “national consensus among different political, ethnic and religious communities.” The BSP is declared as open for all people from “various social levels, age groups, ethnic communities and professional backgrounds.” The party is strongly against any attempts to stir up ethnic and religious tensions in the country and openly promotes inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance. Socialists vigorously defend the principle of equality of all Bulgarian citizens and fight against any kind of discrimination, including on ethnic and religious grounds. They however believe that human rights should be seen as individual, as collective rights on ethnic, religious, linguistic or other criteria could lead to conflicts within a given society, often with “serious or even dramatic consequences.”³¹

Among the main civic parties, the National Movement Simeon II seems to be the one not only most concerned with the minority issues, but also one of the few to formulate concrete policies aimed at minorities. Its program, entitled “People are the Wealth of Bulgaria,” names the integration of minorities and development of the “Bulgarian ethnic model” as one of its priorities.³² Among the concrete steps the party wants to pursue are improving the education level of minorities (financial stimulation of schools to enlist and teach minority children, work with parents to encourage the education of their children) and providing the minorities, especially Roma, with proper employment (through social programs which would address concrete obstacles that keep them away from the regular labor market). The NDSS also

³¹ *Program of the Bulgarian Socialist Party*, February 23, 2006, <http://www.bsp.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0323&n=000002&g=>

³² *People are the Wealth of Bulgaria*, <http://www.ndsv.bg/?magic=0.1.19.129.0.2.0>

believes an active state policy is needed “to preserve and encourage the culture of various ethnic and religious communities.”³³

The leaders of the Union of Democratic Forces viewed it as necessary to define that among the values and principle their program is based on, “nation” is among the most important ones. Nation is one, regardless of the ethnic, religious and racial origin, and the members of Bulgarian nation are “all its citizens, who recognize Bulgaria as their motherland, who preserve and pass on the spirit of Bulgarian historical destiny, who can speak Bulgarian language well enough to participate in the society, and who do not lean towards a foreign national identity.” The main principle of UDF’s social policy is defined as “No discrimination, but also no privileges.” In other words, the UDF is against special social programs for minorities, which would put them into a privileged position compared to the rest of the citizens.³⁴

Their colleagues from the UDF’s splinter party, the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, state in their program that there are against “a special Bulgarian ethnic model, the sole protector and guarantee of which one ethnic party claims to be.” Bulgarian Turks, Bulgarian Roma and all other ethnoses belong to the national cultural wealth and the Democrats for Strong Bulgaria “strongly believe in European integration and free coexistence of people with different ethnic and religious identity.” The party is open for all citizens, belonging to all ethnic and religious groups, but are, like the UDF, against any privileges for minority groups and against quota principles and positive discrimination. The DSB believes that Roma integration can be achieved through better education for minorities (setting up of pre-school classes for minority children, desegregation of schools, adult education), improved health care for minorities and more active employment policy.³⁵

The program of the small nationalist party, VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement (VMRO is a part of a parliamentary coalition Bulgarian People’s Union, together with the Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union and Union of Free Democrats) is hardly surprising. VMRO is deeply concerned that the MRF is turning the Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) and some Roma into Turks and sees MRF’s alleged efforts for having Turks recognized as the “national minority” as threatening to the Bulgarian state. Fighting such developments is among VMRO’s main priorities. The party also came up with the “Demographic Program Bulgaria 2050” in which they speak about the need to overcome the demographic catastrophe threatening the Bulgarians, and to integrate the minorities into one, homogenous society.³⁶ Among many interesting surveys, published on the VMRO web site, one is particularly telling about the people running the party and those supporting it. The question was “What do you think about the MRF’s victory on the elections for European Parliament?” The following answers were provided (in brackets – the number of votes / percentage for the answer):

1. Tragedy, I’m leaving the country (45 / 15.79%)
2. I don’t care, I’m a liberal (8 / 2.81%)
3. I’m cleaning my grandfather’s rifle (97 / 34.04%)
4. I support it, but let me continue later, because it’s Ramadan now (5 / 1.75%)
5. Congratulations, Yusuf (79 / 27.72%)
6. I’ll kill ‘em all (51 / 17.89%)

All answers: 285³⁷

The program of Ataka, the ultra-nationalist political coalition,³⁸ well known for its anti-minority (and especially anti-Turkish, anti-Roma and anti-Jewish views) was not available at the time of writing of this report, as its web site has been closed down “for maintenance” for more than a month. The slogan

³³ *Ten Visions for Better Bulgaria*, <http://www.ndsv.bg/?magic=0.1.19.139.0.2.0>

³⁴ *Prosperity and Security*, April 19, 2006, <http://www.sds.bg/full-story-137.php>

³⁵ *For Strong Bulgaria in United Europe*, 2005, http://www.dsb.bg/upload_files/Programa%20DSB.pdf

³⁶ *VMRO – BNM: Protector of the National Democracy in the 21st Century*,

<http://www.vmro.org/modules.php?name=Programa>

³⁷ http://www.vmro.org/modules.php?name=Voting&op=poll_show&poll_id=35

³⁸ Coalition Ataka (Attack) consists of political party Ataka, Political circle “Zora” (Sunrise), Union of Patriotic Forces and Military Reserves Union, National Movement for the Salvation of Homeland, and the Bulgarian National-Patriotic Party.

under which Ataka participated on the 2005 elections was “Bulgaria for Bulgarians” and its populist program covered the widest possible spectrum of “anti” sentiments in the country – from anti-EU and anti-NATO, through anti-mainstream political parties and anti-corruption, to anti-minorities. It would thus be wrong to assume that all almost 9 percent of voters who supported Ataka share its nationalistic and xenophobic views, as a large portion of their voters voted for Ataka as some sort of protest vote against the established political parties. This was evidently demonstrated on the 2007 local elections, where Ataka performed modestly, most of the protest vote switching to the newly formed populist GERB party, headed by the controversial, but popular Sofia mayor Boyko Borisov. Ataka’s pre-election program was titled “20 Principles.” It defined Bulgaria as a one-nation state and asserted the supremacy of the state and the Bulgarian nation above ethnic and religious diversity, while simultaneously demanding the Orthodoxy to receive the status of official state religion. Among the main principles was also the change to the penal code, which was to include a crime of “national betrayal” and criminal prosecution of the “national traitors” (most Bulgarian politicians and almost all human rights and minority rights activists are national traitors according to Ataka). For Ataka, the biggest Bulgarian problem is called the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. The MRF has been attacked time and again by Ataka leader Volen Siderov and other coalition figures. For example, on the Ataka meeting in Sofia on March 3, 2006, Siderov declared that Bulgaria was not yet free as it was still under Turkish rule (i.e. governed by the MRF).³⁹

GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) is a non-parliamentary party due to the fact that it was formed in 2006, but it is widely perceived as the most likely winner of the next elections in 2009. GERB won the local elections 2007, taking positions of mayors in many Bulgarian cities, including in the capital Sofia. The party was also a winner among those civic parties which decided to run minority candidates for municipal councils in minority populated municipalities – 22 minority councilors from GERB were elected. GERB’s program does not devote much space to the minorities, yet it is one of the few to actually feature a word “minority.” Program notes that the “state should implement the will of a majority in a democratic way, while at the same time protecting the rights of the minorities.” Program also mentions that the rich national culture of Bulgaria consists of the cultures of all communities, living on its territory, and that GERB will work to protect the diversity of cultures and religious in Bulgaria.⁴⁰

Minority Political Parties in Bulgaria

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the first political party, representing Turks and other Muslim communities in Bulgaria, was formed in 1990. Since its establishment, the MRF has always been represented in the parliament, and has been a member of three governing coalitions.

The MRF’s statute defines the party as “political organization, established to contribute to the unity of Bulgarian citizens through respect of rights and freedoms of minorities in Bulgaria – in accordance with the Constitution and laws of the country, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and other international documents.” It further defines the MRF as a liberal-democratic party. Among its priorities is to “create legal and social guarantees for prevention of ethnic and religious intolerance and discrimination and for equality in rights, freedoms and social security for all communities.”⁴¹ The MRF believes that the state has to lead an active policy for integration of minorities into all spheres of civil society, with special attention given to the study of mother tongue – a condition for preservation and development of unique culture of all minority groups.⁴²

The reaction of the majority population to the appearance of the MRF on the political scene was predominantly negative. Such reaction was to a large extent caused by the attitude of the main political

³⁹ *National Union Attack*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Union_Attack

⁴⁰ *Political Program of GERB*, <http://gerb-bg.com/index1.php?menu=dokumenti&id=2>

⁴¹ *The Statute of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms*, <http://www.dps.bg/fce/001/0061/files/Ustav.pdf>

⁴² *Program Declaration Adopted on the VI National Conference*, 2006, <http://www.dps.bg/cgi-bin/e-cms/vis/vis.pl?s=001&p=0062&n=&vis=>

parties – both from the right and from the left – towards the MRF. Despite the persistent efforts of the MRF leaders to present the party as a national civic party and not as a representative of a single ethnic group, its political opponents time and again insisted on using “ethnic” terminology in the political debate, persistently referring to the MRF as “the Turkish party.” On several occasions, most notably prior to the 1992 elections, efforts were made to ban the MRF on the grounds that it was unconstitutional (Article 11). The Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) questioned the legitimacy of the MRF before the Constitutional Court. However, the Court ruled in 1992 that the MRF was not unconstitutional and could operate as any other political party as its statute made no restrictions to membership in the party on ethnic grounds, nor it included any other provisions defining it as “ethnic party.”⁴³ Since then the MRF has always been represented in parliament, successfully passing the 4% threshold on each elections.⁴⁴

Among the main “national” political parties, the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF) coalition has been the most sensitive to minority issues in the first years of the transition. Advocating the minority rights was also seen as one of the main identity markers, separating the “democrats” from “ex-communists,” who continued to talk about “protection of Bulgarian national interest” and the “Turkish threat.” After winning the 1991 election, the UDF formed a government with the MRF. However, the coalition was short lived and in 1992 the MRF, dissatisfied with the UDF’s approach to agrarian reform, toppled the government by supporting the BSP-organized vote of no confidence. The MRF received the mandate to form an expert government, which was in power until the 1994 elections, won by the BSP. The MRF remained in opposition until 2001, when the elections were won by a new political force, National Movement Simeon II (NMSS), led by the former king Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha. The decision of Prime Minister Saxe-Coburg-Gotha to invite the MRF into the coalition was not a necessity, as the NMSS could have formed a government on its own, holding exactly 50% of the seats in the Parliament. However, being aware that a more comfortable majority was needed in the crucial years of Bulgaria’s NATO and EU accession, the MRF was a natural partner. First reason is that both parties are (or claim to be) liberal and the second that the NMSS largely won the election due to the protest votes against the BSP and the UDF, parties which largely disappointed the voters with their performance in the previous two mandates. As a result, for the first time since gaining its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, Bulgaria had two ethnic Turks as ministers.

Table 4: Parliamentary elections results in Bulgaria after 1989

Elections	BSP Seats (%)	UDF Seats (%)	NMSS Seats (%)	MRF Seats (%)	Others Seats (%)	Voter turnout %
1991	106 (33,14)	110 (34,36)	-	21 (7,55)	-	84,82
1994	125 (43,50)	69 (24,23)	-	15 (5,44)	31 (11,24)	75,34
1997 ⁴⁵	58 (22,07)	137 (52,26)	-	19 (7,60)	26 (10,43)	64,11
2001 ⁴⁶	48 (17,15)	51 (18,18)	120 (42,74)	21 (7,45)	-	67,03
2005 ⁴⁷	82 (33,98)	UDF 20 (8,44) DSB 17 (7,07) ⁴⁸ BPU 13 (8,93)	53 (21,83)	34 (14,07)	Ataka (Attack) 21 (8,93)	55,76

⁴³ “Съдия Александър Арабаджиев - Решение N: 4 на Конституционния съд от 21 април 1992 г. по конституционно дело N: 1 от 1991 г. - група н.п. -> ТЪЛКУВАТЕЛНО /чл. 4, 5, 11, ал. 4 и чл. 44, ал. 2 от Конституцията,” http://www.constcourt.bg/re4_92.htm.

⁴⁴ There is a 4% threshold at the national election for a party to enter the Parliament. Seats in Parliament are distributed proportionally among the parties that have passed this threshold.

⁴⁵ All main parties participated in the elections in coalitions: the United Democratic Forces (Union of the Democratic Forces, the Democratic Party, the Bulgarian Agrarian People’s Union -BAPU, the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party -BSPD); the Bulgarian Left (BSP and *Ecoglasnost*); the National Salvation Alliance (BAPU-Nikola Petkov, MRF, the Green Party, the New Choice, and the monarchist Federation “Kingdom of Bulgaria”).

⁴⁶ The coalitions were UDF (approximately the same composition); Coalition for Bulgaria (alliance of the left parties led by the BSP); MRF (in coalition with the Liberal Union and the Roma party Euroroma).

⁴⁷ The coalitions on the last elections: UDF (UDF, Democratic Party, *Gergiovdan* (St. George’s Day Movement), BAPU, National Association–BAPU, Movement for Equal Public Model); Bulgarian People’s Union - BPU (Union of Free Democrats, which separated from the UDF, BAPU–People’s Union, IMRO); Coalition for Bulgaria; Coalition *Ataka* (Attack; the *Ataka* Party and several other nationalist parties, which have not been represented parliamentary until now).

⁴⁸ Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, another party which separated from the UDF, led by former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov.

After the 2005 elections, the Movement remained a part of the governing coalition, this time together with the NMSS and the reformed Socialist Party, which has won the elections. The post-election government forming process was a long and troublesome one. The BSP and the MRF made a pre-election agreement to govern together, and while the MRF provided more votes than expected, the BSP, despite winning the elections, did significantly worse than was predicted. Two parties were therefore 5 votes short from the needed majority and a third partner was needed. The only possible candidate, the NMSS, however refused to enter the government with the MRF, which almost toppled the government in the last year of its mandate, due to strong disagreements over the privatization of the tobacco giant *Bulgartabak*.⁴⁹ The attempt to form a minority BSP-MRF government failed, as did the second attempt to form a government, with President giving the mandate to the NMSS, the second political force. The third mandate was given to the MRF, which “nominated” BSP leader Sergey Stanishev as “its” Prime Minister and after over three months of post-electoral crisis, the new three-party government was finally elected.

The MRF has three ministers in the current government: Emel Etem is a Deputy Prime Minister and a Minister of the State Policy for Disasters and Accidents, Dzhevdet Chakarov is the Minister of Environment and Waters and Valeri Cvetanov is the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry.⁵⁰ The movement also has Deputy-Ministers in all ministries. The MRF has 4 (out of 28) District Governors (post appointed by the government) in the following districts: Dobrich, Lovech, Smolyan, and Sofia. In the state administration, the MRF holds leading positions in most agencies, which are important for the minority population. As already mentioned, Emel Etem chairs the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues, Kemal Eyup is the chairperson of the Commission on Discrimination, Gyursel Emin is the executive director of the State Fund “Tobacco,” while Shirin Mestan heads the Agency for Child Protection.

While former arch enemies the MRF and the BSP are now governing together, former MRF’s partners from UDF (and especially from the splinter party Democrats for Strong Bulgaria) are now (together with nationalist and populist parties like Ataka) among the Movement’s fiercest critics and opponents. They often accuse the MRF’s leader Ahmed Dogan of trying to isolate and confine the Turkish minority in order to preserve full control over its votes, thus obstructing its integration into Bulgarian society.

The UDF encouraged the formation of an alternative National Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which remained a loyal coalition partner of the UDF but never managed to gain significant influence among the Turkish population. The party did manage to obtain a number of places in several municipal councils on the local elections (although far less in 2007 than in 2003), but had only negligible results on the national elections. Another party, the Turkish Democratic Party led by Adem Kenan, has been active since the autumn of 2005. The TDP has caused much controversy when it appeared with its Turkish nationalist political platform. The registration of the party has been rejected and in 2005 Kenan has been summoned for interrogation by the Bulgarian Supreme Prosecutor’s Office on suspicion for crimes against the state in connection with special services’ information about the activities of the Turkish Democratic Party and media statements by Kenan. In an interview given to the Darik radio, Kenan said that Sofia should be subjected to a bomb raid by NATO troops as Bulgaria was violating the rights of the ethnic Turks on its territory, while on other occasions, he demanded the change of the Bulgarian Constitution, establishment of autonomous territories in Turkish-populated regions, and introduction of Turkish as the

⁴⁹ *Bulgartabak* is of prime importance for the MRF, because a significant number of the MRF voters live on tobacco growing – a traditional livelihood of Turks and Pomaks living in the Rhodope mountain. The MRF was strongly against the privatization of the company without sufficient guarantees that the new owner would continue to rely predominantly on Bulgarian grown tobacco for *Bulgartabak* production.

⁵⁰ Cvetanov became Minister in April 2008, substituting the previous Minister Nihad Kabil.

second official language in the country.⁵¹ The MRF distanced itself from the nationalist actions of the TDP, which also failed to attract any significant support among the Turkish population.

As mentioned above, the MRF always did its utmost to deny the claim it was an ethnic party (for example, during the 2007 elections for the European Parliament, their list of candidates included exactly 50% of ethnic Turks and 50% of ethnic Bulgarians). The party also made sure to always disassociate itself from any possible separatist agendas, strongly rejecting even the claims for some sort of territorial autonomy for Turkish populated areas. Because of this, and because of its strong control over the minority votes, the party was able to pursue realistic policies benefiting minorities (legal protection in conformity with international law, political rights and participation at all levels of local and central government structures, guarantees for cultural and linguistic identity).

During the last two parliamentary mandates, the MRF prepared and proposed the following laws, which have been to a significant extent important for the minority population:

- Amendments to the Law on restitution of ownership of lands and forests owned by the State forest fund
- Law on religious rights and religious association
- Amendments to the Law on tobacco and tobacco products
- Amendments to the Law on local elections
- Amendments to the Law on local self-government and local administration
- Amendments to the Law on political and civil rehabilitation of repressed persons
- Amendments to the Law on regional development
- Amendments to the Law on citizens' registration
- Law on access to the documents and archives of the State Security Service and the Intelligence Headquarters of the Bulgarian People's Army

As can be seen from Table 4, the MRF has become the third strongest party in Bulgaria and since 1994, its electoral results have been steadily increasing – an achievement unparalleled on the Bulgarian political scene. This was possible above all by its ceaseless effort to defy the “ethnic” limitations and appeal to voters across the ethnic spectrum. Thus in 2005, the MRF achieved good results in some areas of Bulgaria which are not populated by Turks or Pomaks and where its election results had previously been negligible. For example, in the district of Vidin, the party came third, with 13.39% of the vote (there are no Turks living in Vidin district, which has a significant Roma population), in Gabrovo and in Lovech (both with less than 1% of Turkish residents) it was fifth with respectively 6.16% and 7.37%, in Pleven (2% Turks) MRF was fifth with 8.24% of the votes, and in Montana (no Turkish population) sixth with 4.12% of the votes cast. The MRF was an overwhelming victor among the voters living abroad, winning 59.09% of their votes.⁵²

Vidin is perhaps the most striking example. On the parliamentary elections in 2001, the MRF received 753 votes (1.01%) in this electoral district, while in 2005 the party convinced 8026 voters (13.39%). Prior to the elections, the MRF opened offices in Vidin and other districts where they have never been active before and campaigned tirelessly, visiting towns, villages and above all, Roma settlements. The MRF representatives met and talked with the most important informal leaders of the Roma community, discussing the problems and concerns of the community, and carefully choosing who to place on the party's candidate lists. As a result, the leaders of the MRF's lists in areas with important Roma population were popular and influential Roma persons. Due to the fact that personalities are much more important for Roma voters than programs, a wise selection of candidates helped the MRF to break new ground, while taking the wind out of the sails of Euroroma, which remained far behind the MRF in most municipalities with significant Roma minority. In Vidin, for example, it received only 341 votes.

⁵¹ Адем Кенан и дейността на нерегистрираната “Турска демократическа партия.” *Fokus News*. September 10, 2005. <http://www.omda.bg/bulg/NEWS/DPS/Adem%20Kenan.htm>

⁵² <http://www.2005izbori.org/results/index.html>

On the local level, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms has also been very successful. On the local elections in 2003, the party came second with 13.16% of the vote (elections were won by the BSP with 17.64%). The MRF received 695 places in municipal councils (out of 5281), 29 mayors of municipalities (out of 263 municipalities) and 549 positions of village/settlement mayors (out of 2545).

Table 5: Minority parties on local elections 2003

Party	Municipal councilors	Municipality mayors	Village mayors
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	695	29	549
National Movement for Rights and Freedoms	65	1	22
Party "Roma"	62		1
Euroroma	33		1
Free Bulgaria	18		
Coalition for Justice and Unity	10		
Democratic Party of Justice in Bulgaria	5		
Patriotism 2000	7		
Democratic Congress	4		
Bulgarian Party "Future"	3		
Union for Democratic Development	2		
Movement for Rights Roma Drum	3		
Civil Movement for Equality	0		
Political Movement "Bulgaria for Everyone"	1		
Democratic Movement "Patriotism"	0		
All-national Social Party	0		
Coalition "Roma-Pirin"	0		
TOTAL FOR MINORITY PARTIES	908	30	573
TOTAL FOR THE COUNTRY	5281	263	2545

Source: Central election commission, <http://izbori2003.is-bg.net/rez/partii.html>

The MRF again improved on their previous result on the 2007 local elections, not just in terms of the absolute numbers (compare tables 5 and 6), but also by winning places in the councils of some municipalities, where they previously had none. For example, in Vidin coalition MRF-Euroroma received 1538 votes and 3 mandates, while in 2003 the MRF had only 128 votes. In Chuprene coalition MRF-Agricultural People's Union received 473 votes and 5 mandates against 27 MRF votes in 2003. The MRF received a place in municipal council in Krivodol, where it did not even run in 2003. In Nova Zagora, the party now has 4 councilors, having received 1649 votes against 656 in 2003. The coalition MRF-Euroroma was a winner in Samokov, receiving 3088 votes and 6 places in the council. In 2003, the MRF did not run in Samokov, while Euroroma received 1325 votes.

Table 6: Minority parties on local elections 2007

Party	Municipal councils - mandates	Municipality mayors	Village mayors
Movement for Rights and Freedoms	850	35	713
MRF in coalition with civic parties	63	8	25
Coalition MRF – Euroroma	9		
National Movement for Rights and Freedoms	17 (+ 4 in coalition)	1	3 (+9 in coalition)
Euroroma	39 (+29)		4 (+1)
Party “Roma”	28 (+22)		2 (+4)
Solidarity	10		
Movement for an Equal Public Model – DROM	6		1
Coalition DROM – Euroroma	3		
Party for Liberal Alternative and Peace (PLAM)	12		
Movement for Freedom and Justice	4		
Independent	7	1	43
Minority candidates elected on the lists of civic parties	78		78
Total for parties	1051		844
Total for coalitions	130		39
TOTAL	1181	45	883
TOTAL FOR THE COUNTRY	5231	264	2916

Source: Central election commission, <http://www.mi2007.org/results1/01/index.html>

While one can view the MRF as a success story, the situation regarding other minority-related parties has been quite different. The Roma community, the second largest minority group in Bulgaria, has never managed to unify behind one Roma party and send it into the National Assembly, despite potentially having more than enough votes to do so. By 2005, there have been 26 registered Roma parties in the country (although only few of them contain word “Roma” in their name). During the local elections 2003, 15 of them participated actively in the election process and their results can be seen in table 5. All 15 parties together have received 84,044 votes. The already modest electoral result, given the potential number of Roma voters, have been additionally fragmented by a large number of parties, which more often than not tried to decrease the number of opponents’ voters rather than increase their own support. Thus only two parties, Party “Roma” and Euroroma had more than symbolic success.

The most ambitious attempt undertaken so far by a Roma party on the Parliamentary elections occurred in 2005, when the Euroroma party tried to rally its voters by placing a set of the most well-known Roma persons (including few of the most popular pop-folk performers in the country) on their electoral list. Despite the well-organized and long campaign, the party received only 1.25% of the votes, well below the 4% needed for entering the parliament.⁵³ Instead, the largest share of the Roma votes seems to have benefited the MRF, which significantly improved their results in a number of municipalities with large Roma population, but none or negligible Turkish presence. As already mentioned above, such was the case in the electoral district of Vidin, where the MRF received 8026 votes against only 341 votes for Euroroma.

⁵³ Ibid.

In Gabrovo district, the ratio was 4041 against 403, in Kyustendil 978 against 339, in Lovech 5658 against 2007, in Montana 3047 against 1008, and in Pleven 10238 against 855.⁵⁴

Apart from Euroroma, which was the only Roma party to run independently on the 2005 elections, two other Roma parties participated as coalition members. As mentioned above, Party Roma received one seat in the parliament as part of the winning Coalition for Bulgaria (33.98%), led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, while DROM was less successful, due to the disappointing result of the United Democratic Forces, a right-wing coalition in which they participate (8.44%).⁵⁵

The only Roma party currently represented in the Bulgarian parliament is thus Party “Roma,” which has been a member of the Coalition for Bulgaria since 2001. Its leader Toma Tomov has been an MP since 2001. Tomov is at the moment the only Roma MP, but there have been others in the past (apart from the 1991-1994 period, there have always been 2 or 3 Roma MPs in the Assembly). The most well known among them is Cvetelin Kunchev, the current leader of Euroroma, who entered the parliament in 1997 as member of Bulgarian Business Bloc party, only to have his immunity revoked in 1999 to face charges for kidnapping, beating, robbery, and blackmailing persons in his district of Zlatiza. In February 2000 he received 6 years imprisonment sentence, but was released in 2003 by the Sofia City Court for good behavior.⁵⁶

Among the smaller Bulgarian minorities, Macedonians are the only community, which has organized politically in the OMO Ilinden party. The presentation on the party’s website describes it as “a democratic party in the Republic of Bulgaria that protects the rights of the minorities and strives for the decentralization of the country. It is the only political party that fights for the rights of the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria.”⁵⁷ The party was registered in 1999 and participated in municipal elections in October 1999. It ran only in 9 municipalities of the Blagoevgrad electoral district, receiving a total of 3069 votes, winning three seats in three different municipal councils (Goce Delchev, Razlog, Hadzhidimovo) and two positions of village mayors (both in Goce Delchev municipality).⁵⁸ On February 29, 2000, the Constitutional Court declared the party unconstitutional. OMO Ilinden was described as a separatist party, working against the unity of Bulgarian nation and against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country.⁵⁹ The European Court on Human Rights has condemned Bulgaria, accusing it of violating the European Convention on Human Rights, however this did not revoke the ban on the party.

In 2006, OMO Ilinden significantly rewrote its statute and by-laws after holding a new founding meeting. Despite that, the Sofia City Court refused the party’s application for registration, claiming that the necessary 500 signatures collected for setting up a political party cannot be verified due to “irregularities.” Despite additional critical remarks and recommendations from various EU bodies (including from Franco Frattini, the Vice President of the European Commission), OMO Ilinden has not been registered to this very day.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Bulgarian Parliamentary Deputy Jailed”, *RFE/RL NEWSLINE*, Vol. 4, No. 29, 10 February 2000, <http://www.hri.org/news/balkans/rferl/2000/00-02-10.rferl.html#21>; *Bulgaria: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - 1999*, Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, February 23, 2000, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/1999/322.htm>

⁵⁷ <http://www.omoilindenpirin.org/about.asp>

⁵⁸ <http://www.namrb.org/izbori/info.html>

⁵⁹ Constitutional Court Decision No. 1, February 29, 2000, http://www.constcourt.bg/re1_2000.htm

⁶⁰ “EU calls on Bulgaria to recognize OMO Ilinden,” Sofia Echo, September 18, 2007, http://www.sofiaecho.com/article/ec-calls-on-bulgaria-to-recognise-omo-ilinden--macedonian-media/id_24945/catid_66

Concluding remarks

It can be said that Bulgaria has come a long way in 20 years. Managing to overcome the consequences of the shameful and cruel assimilation campaigns, undertaken by the communist regime, Bulgarian politicians and society in the first years of transition succeeded in avoiding the traps of nationalism. Instead of slipping into the chaos of ethnic conflicts and war, which engulfed the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria was able to set up a so-called “Bulgarian ethnic model,” which made possible a peaceful regulation of ethnic relations during a period of excruciatingly difficult economic and social changes.⁶¹ The Bulgarian ethnic model is described as “a successful development of multiethnic policy in Bulgaria resulting in tolerant, peaceful co-existence and co-operation of different ethnic and religious communities” and as a “social and political construction, which is characterized by stability, equality and common responsibility” with complete absence of any separatist claims.⁶² The biggest “asset” of the model is that, unlike in some of the former Yugoslav republics, where the post-conflict efforts to build a multi-ethnic society have been imposed from above and from outside, it has developed in an exceptionally democratic way, from bottom to the top. Based on a centuries long tradition of “komshiluk,” or neighborhood, characterized by a genuine inter-ethnic and inter-religious tolerance and cooperation, the model proved strong enough to defy all the attempts made by a number of political actors to play on the nationalist cards, especially in the pre-election periods.

The critics however point out that the model practically concerns only the relations between Bulgarians and Turks.⁶³ The most important “left-outs” are the Roma. During the whole transition period, the social, educational, economic, health and housing situation of the Roma community has been progressively deteriorating. The government-endorsed Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, a number of other initiatives launched both by the central and local authorities, and even the pressure and assistance of the EU bodies have so far proved too little, too late to change this negative development. As mentioned, Roma have also failed to secure proper political representation, despite a big number of Roma political parties. The common and very serious problem with these parties is that they often have no genuine political platform and offer no realistic solutions for improvement of dire situation of Bulgarian Roma. Instead, they often pursue only economic interests of their leaders.

Another dangerous setback of the Bulgarian ethnic model is that for almost 15 years it has been used as an excuse, which allowed the Bulgarian politicians and the wider society to live in a selfish self-deception. While self-promoting Bulgaria as an island of stability on the Balkans and as a genuine multi-ethnic paradise where no nationalistic political party ever managed to score more than one or two percents on the national elections, a much darker picture has been developing underneath. In 2005, when the ultra-nationalist and xenophobic Ataka entered the National Assembly with a bang, riding high on the platform of open hatred towards minorities, especially Roma, Turks and Jews, Bulgarians suddenly realized they were no less racist or nationalist than any of their neighbors. Unlike them, however, Bulgarian society overslept a decade and a half, failing to develop any defense mechanisms against these social-political diseases. As a consequence today, despite Bulgaria’s successful EU accession, the situation regarding inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, minority rights and minority political representation gives more cause for concern than it has been a case in quite a long time.

On the positive side, studies like the ones conducted by the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations in regions with mixed population show that the inter-ethnic relations in

⁶¹ Antonina Zhelyazkova, “The Bulgarian Ethnic Model,” *East European Constitutional Review*, Volume 10, Number 4, Fall 2001, <http://www.law.nyu.edu/eecr/vol10num4/focus/zhelyazkova.html>

⁶² Yantsislav Yanakiev. *The Bulgarian Ethnic Model – A Factor of Stability in the Balkans*. Sofia: Institute for Advanced Defense Research, http://www.bmlv.gv.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/wg3-yanakiev.pdf

⁶³ See Alternative Report to the Bulgarian State Report Pursuant to Article 25, Paragraph 1 of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, Sofia: Inter Ethnic Initiative for Human Rights Foundation, October 2003, pp. 34-35, www.minelres.lv/reports/bulgaria/Bulgaria_FCNM_NGO_2004.doc and Krastyo Petkov, “The late ethno-nationalisms in Bulgaria: their economic and social roots,” *South-East Europe Review* No. 2/2006, pp.15-17, <http://www.cecol.com/asp/getdocument.aspx?logid=5&id=4F351EEF-FA04-41F8-BBEB-C49040F1C988>

such areas continue to develop in the spirit of tolerance, mutual understanding and respect.⁶⁴ Unlike certain political circles in the country, which have in recent years opted for the dangerous game of playing with nationalism, the ordinary citizens in most of the ethnically mixed areas tend to sit-and-wait through the election craze, and then again resume their life as usual.

Most of the reasons for general deterioration of inter-ethnic relations in the country have social-economic origin. Especially the alarmingly dire situation of the Roma community has been in recent years among the most important generators of the rising anti-Roma sentiment in the country. The increased awareness among the politicians that after long years of neglect, serious effort needs to be made to secure the genuine inclusion of the Roma community into the Bulgarian society, also gives us some reason for cautious optimism.

Most importantly, the appearance of Ataka and other, even more extreme political formations (like the Bulgarian National Union, which has set up a Nazi-like paramilitary formation National Guard) have served as a wake-up call for many politicians, journalists, intellectuals, NGO activists and other members of the society. It is true that nationalist parties have never since 1989 been so strong and prominent as today. However, the awareness how dangerous this is and that every possible effort needs to be made to not only preserve, but also strengthen, develop and expand the “Bulgarian Ethnic Model” has also never been stronger.

Marko Hajdinjak is a researcher and international projects coordinator at the International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR).

Address: Antim I St. 55, Sofia 1303, Bulgaria

Tel: (+359 2) 8323-112, 8324-044 Fax: (+359 2) 9310-583

E-mail: marko@imir-bg.org Web site: <http://www.imir-bg.org/>

⁶⁴ See Evgenia Troeva-Grigorova and Valeri Grigorov, *Minority Rights Protection and Inter-ethnic Relations in Municipalities with Diverse Population*, December 2006, http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Finalreport_IMIR-Ardino_eng.pdf and Galina Lozanova, Bozhidar Alexiev, Georgeta Nazarska, Evgenia Troeva-Grigorova and Iva Kyurkchieva, *Regions, Minorities and European Integration: A Case Study on Muslim Minorities (Turks and Muslim Bulgarians) in the South Central Region of Bulgaria*, 2006, http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Bulgaria_Muslims_case_study_FINAL-ed.pdf.