(IN)TOLERANCE OF DIFFERENCE IN BULGARIAN SCHOOLS: DISCOURSES AND PRACTICES

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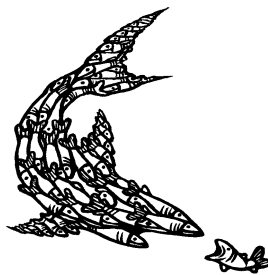
WP3: National Case Studies of Challenges to Tolerance in School Life

D3.1 Final Country Reports on Concepts and Practices of Tolerance Addressing Cultural Diversity in Schools

Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe (ACCEPT PLURALISM)

ACCEPT PLURALISM is a Research Project, funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Program. The project investigates whether European societies have become more or less tolerant during the past 20 years. In particular, the project aims to clarify: (a) how is tolerance defined conceptually, (b) how it is codified in norms, institutional arrangements, public policies and social practices, (c) how tolerance can be measured (whose tolerance, who is tolerated, and what if degrees of tolerance vary with reference to different minority groups). The ACCEPT PLURALISM consortium conducts original empirical research on key issues in school life and in politics that thematise different understandings and practices of tolerance. Bringing together empirical and theoretical findings, ACCEPT PLURALISM generates a State of the Art Report on Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe, a Handbook on Ideas of Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe, a Tolerance Indicators' Toolkit where qualitative and quantitative indicators may be used to score each country's performance on tolerating cultural diversity, and several academic publications (books, journal articles) on Tolerance, Pluralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe. The ACCEPT PLULARISM consortium is formed by 18 partner institutions covering 15 EU countries. The project is hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and co-ordinated by Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou.

IMIR is a private, non-political, non-profit and non-governmental organization, studying the relations and the interaction between different cultures, ethnoses and religions in Southeastern Europe in order to help the development, preservation and integration of all minority communities.

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Executive summary

Contemporary societies are characterised by their diversity. The different communities that comprise them need a mechanism of coexistence, which respects their dignity and provides them with equal rights and obligations.

In Bulgaria, the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has deep historic roots, going back several centuries. During the entire period of its modern history the Bulgarian state has treated its minorities in a way that could best be described as inconsistent and double-natured. Oscillating between intolerance and toleration, the shifting state policies have also influenced the attitude of the majority population, which has often looked at the minority communities through the prism of prejudices and stereotypes.

Such understanding of otherness can only lead to parallel coexistence, which always hides a latent danger that majority population and the state might try to consolidate the nation through (forced) assimilation of minorities. Such policies were enforced most consistently and actively under the Communist rule in the period between mid-1960s and 1989.

After the changes of 1989, the Bulgarian state has tried to pursue policies consistent with the contemporary democratic values, characteristic for the western democracies. These policies include also the recognition of rights and freedoms of minority communities. The mere recognition of equality of minorities, however, has not resulted in their actual acceptance into the Bulgarian society. The negative stereotypes and suspicions have been preserved, resulting in the lack of practical and genuine policies for the inclusion of minorities, which remain largely isolated from the rest of the society.

The focus of the study

The goal of the current research is to analyse the processes and the changes in attitude towards the ethnic, cultural and religious otherness in the Bulgarian society during the first decade of 2000s. The analysis examines the levels of (in)tolerance, recognition and acceptance. The research focuses on the system of education. On the one hand, education is among the most democratic and all-embracing processes occurring in a society, as it brings together all children and youths regardless of their ethnic, religious or racial background and facilitates their adaptation into the society. On the other hand, education is also one of the most conservative systems in Bulgaria, and continues to reproduce the long-lasting national (and nationalistic) ideology.

We have focused our attention on elementary and secondary education. One of the main reasons for this decision was that elementary and secondary schools are places where representatives of different communities come together and are obliged to find ways to interact and coexist.

Two case studies were selected to examine the attitudes towards otherness. The first one deals with the issue of education of Roma children in Bulgarian schools. There is a significant discrepancy between the declared and publicly advocated policy of desegregation and the actually existing segregation. This case provides an excellent opportunity to critically evaluate the attitude of the majority population towards the Roma community and in particular to examine if and how the process of desegregation influences and changes these attitudes.

The second case study deals with the debates about the introduction of compulsory religious education in the Bulgarian schools. In addition to the issue of the place of religion in a secular state, this case study also brings forward the question about the attitude to religious otherness in the Bulgarian society. The main confrontation is along the line Christianity – Islam, and it concerns the position of the traditional Muslim communities in Bulgaria. The presence of other traditional religious minorities (Catholics, Protestants, Armenians and Jews) is not perceived as a problem. The main issue analysed in this case study is in what way religious education in schools could influence the interactions and relations between the majority and the minorities – whether it would lead to more respect and recognition, or would intensify intolerance.

The research took place between January and July 2011. It included a desk research (review and analysis of political documents and relevant media articles) and a fieldwork. During the fieldwork, 22 semi-standardised interviews were made – ten for the case study 1 and twelve for the case study 2 (two respondents were interviewed twice – for both case studies). Finally, a discussion group with six participants (experts from different fields) was organised. The participants discussed both case study topics.

Main findings

Segregation of Roma children

The attitude towards the Roma minority is highly problematic in the Bulgarian society. Roma are perceived as a demographic and social threat. The issue of Roma education is seen as exceptionally important and is considered as one of the most crucial and effective mechanisms for their integration. Despite the clearly expressed opinion that there are no practical alternatives to desegregation, its actual implementation seems very difficult, as there is no clear vision about the concrete steps that need to be taken. The respondents evaluate the state policy in this area as ineffective and failed, and largely believe that the significant funding, which has been allocated for financing various programmes, has not been spent properly.

The predominant opinion is that the desegregation attempts have not raised the levels of tolerance towards Roma. Quite often, the results have actually had the reverse effect and have provoked manifestations of intolerance, leading to secondary segregation. The situation can be improved only through coordinated efforts and genuine cooperation of the state institutions, NGO sector, majority population and the Roma community, but the necessary precondition for this remains the sincere political will of the authorities to implement concrete and effective measures on the national level.

Compulsory religious education

The debate about the compulsory religious education at a first glance presents a more optimistic picture, reflecting higher levels of tolerance and readiness to accept otherness. This can be partially a result of the fact that the Bulgarian society has a relatively low interest in religion. The focus on the secular character of education is exceptionally strong, and there is an underlined desire for preserving it.

There is a significant opposition to introduction of compulsory religious education, often justified with the explanation that such education would be discriminatory for the children from the minority religious communities or for children from atheist families. Even if separate classes on religion were organised for all religions practiced in Bulgaria, the separation of children in different classes according to their religious belonging would only lead to unnecessary division and potential confrontation. The preferred model of religious education would therefore be a course offering the children a comparative perspective and presenting different religions as cultural phenomena, as this could increase not only their knowledge about, but also tolerance towards different religions. Only the representatives of the religious institutions and those respondents who described themselves as (very) religious believe that separate classes (for each religion) of proper confessional education would contribute to the increase of mutual tolerance.

The question about religious education quickly leads to debates about Islam in Bulgaria and the place of the Muslim minority in the Bulgarian society, and at this point, the picture become darker and more pessimistic. European and global tendencies of confrontation with Islam influence the perceptions of some respondents, making them concerned about the possible spread of radical Islam in Bulgaria. In this light, the attitude towards Muslims in general and Turks in particular has in recent years shifted in the direction of increasing intolerance.

The examples from various European countries of policies intolerant towards Islam have strongly influenced the Bulgarian debates about the presence of religious symbols in schools. Most often, these debates are reduced to the issue of headscarves of Muslim girls and women. The French model of prohibition of all religious symbols in schools is most often pointed out as a model Bulgaria should follow.

Concluding remarks

Both case studies show that the Bulgarian society at the current moment in time is moving in a direction opposite from acceptance and recognition of otherness. The incidents and manifestations of intolerance have been on the rise – even regarding issues towards which the society until recently had a (predominantly) tolerant attitude. The measures, which were proposed or implemented in order to counteract these developments, have failed to produce the desired result to date. There is no consensus in the society about which good practices could be followed to change this trend. Yet, at the same time, the stereotypes about the tolerant Bulgarian society continue to be reproduced.

The public debates, especially in the media, are quite often saturated with manifestations of intolerance. To a certain extent, these developments are also strengthened by the all-European tendencies of growing nationalisms, fear of the different and criticism (even rejection) of multiculturalism.

The traditional religious and ethnic minorities are considered a part of the Bulgarian nation. Yet, at the same time the latent rejection and suspicions towards them not only persist, but are intensifying in the recent years. This is especially the case with the Roma community, which is widely perceived as a demographic and social threat for the future of the Bulgarian nation.

The Bulgarian education system has not managed yet to propose effective measures to truly accommodate the diversity in the classrooms and to fully integrate the children from various minority communities. The results remain poor and insufficient despite the numerous and ambitious programmes and declarations made over the past decade. This is a consequence both of the lack of genuine political dedication to solve the problem, and of the related problem of insufficient funding.

The stereotypes and the negative attitudes among the majority population remain strong and overcoming them is a challenging task. Yet, all the efforts are directed only at changing the habits and attitudes of minority communities and the programmes targeting the majority population are practically non-existent.

Keywords

Tolerance; acceptance; segregation and exclusion; education and education policy; Roma children; religious education; religious symbols

1. Introduction[1]

Contemporary societies are characterised by their diversity. The different communities that comprise them need a mechanism of coexistence, which respects their dignity and provides them with equal rights and obligations. Finding a proper balance between the majority population and various minority groups is often a challenging task – both on the level of national states and on the European stage.

In Bulgaria, the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity has deep historic roots, going back several centuries. The establishment of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878 was influenced by two main factors. On the one hand, there was the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. One of the features of this legacy was the exceptionally diverse population, which ended up living within the borders of the new state. On the other hand, the 19th century was the age of national consolidation and formation of nation-states across Europe. Bulgaria was thus set up as a mono-national state, based on the Bulgarian ethnic tradition and the Orthodox Christian religion.

During the entire period of its modern history the Bulgarian state has treated its minorities in a way that could best be described as inconsistent and double-natured. Oscillating between intolerance and toleration, the shifting state policies have also influenced the attitude of the majority population, which has often looked at the minority communities through the prism of prejudices and stereotypes. It is thus rather difficult to identify periods of genuine recognition and acceptance of different communities in the Bulgarian modern history.

The popular self-perception of Bulgarians is that they are very tolerant. However, this tolerance is usually manifested through the feeling of supremacy over different minority groups, which are "tolerated" under condition that they know and accept their "place" in the society. Such understanding of otherness can only lead to parallel coexistence, which always hides a latent danger that majority population and the state might try to consolidate the nation through (forced) assimilation of minorities. Such policies were enforced most consistently and actively under the Communist rule in the period between mid-1960s and 1989.

After the changes of 1989, the Bulgarian state has tried to pursue policies consistent with the contemporary democratic values, characteristic for the western democracies. These policies include also the recognition of rights and freedoms of minority communities. The mere recognition of equality of minorities, however, has not resulted in their actual acceptance into the Bulgarian society. The negative stereotypes and suspicions have been preserved, resulting in the lack of practical and genuine policies for the inclusion of minorities, which remain largely isolated from the rest of the society. This is above all true for the Roma community, although the other two large minority communities – Turks and Pomaks – also remain marginalised in numerous respects.

The goal of the current research is to analyse the processes and the changes in attitude towards the ethnic, cultural and religious otherness in the Bulgarian society during the first decade of 2000s. The analysis will provide information regarding the current situation and examine the levels of (in)tolerance, recognition and acceptance. The research focuses on the system of education. On the one hand, education is among the most democratic and all-embracing processes occurring in a society, as it brings together all children and youths regardless of their ethnic, religious or racial background and facilitates their adaptation into the society. On the other hand, education is also one of the most conservative systems in Bulgaria, and continues to reproduce the long-lasting national (and nationalistic) ideology.

We have focused our attention on elementary and secondary education. Education in Bulgaria is compulsory until the age of 16. The education system consists of the following levels: pre-primary

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[1] This report was written by Maya Kosseva and Marko Hajdinjak, but is based on a research conducted by a team. The interviews were taken by Maya Kosseva, Marko Hajdinjak, Antonina Zhelyazkova and Violeta Angelova, while the discussion group was moderated by Antonina Zhelyazkova and Maya Kosseva.

education, elementary education, secondary education and higher education. Pre-primary education is optional and embraces children between 3 to 6/7 years old. Elementary education (grades 1 to 8) comprises primary school (grades 1 to 4) and lower secondary school (grades 5 to 8). Both elementary and secondary education can be obtained at state, municipal or private schools.

As all-embracing establishments, elementary and secondary schools are also places where representatives of different communities come together and are obliged to find ways to interact and coexist. At the same time, the age between 7 and 18, which are ideally the years needed to complete the elementary and the secondary education, is also the period of the most active development and formation of the personality. This is the time when it is possible to make an impact and influence the way an individual deals with the social stereotypes and prejudices towards the "others" – they can be either embraced or rejected.

According to the data from the 2011 census, 1.5% of the Bulgarian citizens aged nine or more are illiterate. The share of those who are illiterate is 0.5% among the ethnic Bulgarians, 4.7% among the Turks and 11.8% among the Roma. All children between the ages of 7 and 16 should attend school according to the law. However, 23.2% of the Roma children in this age group do not go to school. The share of such children in the Turkish community is 11.9%, while for Bulgarians it is 5.6% (see NSI, 2011).

Two case studies were selected to examine the attitude towards otherness in the frame of intolerance, tolerance, recognition and acceptance. The first one deals with the issue of education of Roma children in Bulgarian schools. There is a significant discrepancy between the declared and publicly advocated policy of desegregation and the actually existing segregation. This case provides an excellent opportunity to critically evaluate the attitude of the majority population towards the Roma community and in particular to examine if and how the process of desegregation influences and changes these attitudes.

The second case study deals with the debates about the introduction of compulsory religious education in the Bulgarian schools. In addition to the issue of the place of religion in a secular state, this case study also brings forward the question about the attitude to religious otherness in the Bulgarian society. The main confrontation is along the line Christianity – Islam, and it concerns the position of the traditional Muslim communities in Bulgaria. Inasmuch as the majority of Muslims in Bulgaria are Turks, the problem is also closely linked to the issue of ethnic diversity. It is very telling that the debate for or against the compulsory presence of religion in the curriculum often turns into a discussion about the attitude towards the Turkish minority in the country. The presence of other traditional religious minorities (Catholics, Protestants, Armenians and Jews) is not perceived as a problem. The main issue analysed in this case study is in what way religious education in schools could influence the interactions and relations between the majority and the minorities – whether it would lead to more respect and recognition, or would intensify intolerance.

2. Methodology and research design

The research took place between January and July 2011. It included a review and analysis of political documents and practices, and of media coverage of the studied issues, as well as a fieldwork. During the fieldwork, 22 semi-standardised interviews were made – ten for the case study 1 and twelve for the case study 2 (two respondents were interviewed twice – for both case studies). Finally, a discussion group with six participants (experts from different fields) was organised. The participants discussed both case study topics. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. The anonymity of all respondents was guaranteed. All interviews were fully transcribed, coded and are stored in the IMIR archive. The interviews were analysed from the viewpoint of the context and subjectivity of the respondents, messages they conveyed and attitudes they displayed.

Our selection of respondents for the case study 1 was motivated by the desire to obtain a well-informed opinion from people, who are directly involved with the question of Roma education. Four interviews were thus made in the town of Samokov and three in Pazardzhik – both towns with a sizable Roma community (Samokov – 10.2%[2] and Pazardzhik – 8.3%[3] of the population). Three of these respondents work at the local NGOs, two are teachers, one is a pedagogical adviser in a school, and one works at a cultural centre. Four of these seven respondents are Roma.

Another three interviews were conducted in Sofia. One respondent is an expert on ethnic and religious issues and has previously worked both for the state administration and in the NGO sector, the second is a Deputy Chief Mufti of Bulgaria and the third is an expert on Roma education with long-time experience both in the NGO sector and in state institutions. Five respondents are men, and five are women.

No interviews were made with the representatives of extreme nationalist groups and parties, as their frequent and aggressive public appearances provide enough materials to analyse their discourse on desegregation.

In order to obtain a better and more comprehensive insight into the research topic of the case study 2, we conducted 12 interviews with representatives of different religions. Three respondents are Eastern Orthodox, three are Muslims, one is a Protestant, and five do not consider themselves religious.

Five respondents are representatives of the clergy: two are Orthodox priests, two are muftis, and one is a Protestant pastor. Four respondents work in different education establishments: one is a principal of a school from a village with predominantly Muslim population; one is a history teacher at a Sofia secondary school; one is a history professor at Sofia University; and one is a kindergarten director in a village with predominantly Roma population. One of the respondents is an expert on ethnic and religious issues and has worked both in the state administration and in the NGO sector. Another respondent is a politician – representative of the Sofia municipal council. Gender division is the following: 2 women and 10 men.

Interviews for both case studies were conducted at a variety of places: schools and other places were respondents are employed, public places (like cafes), IMIR's office, church and at the Chief Mufti office. All interviews took place in a friendly and open atmosphere, and respondents were truly willing (to the extent that time and their obligations permitted) to discuss the issues at length and provide their opinion. The initial selection of interviewees was based on personal and professional networks of the researchers and their colleagues, after which snowballing technique was employed to gain access to further relevant respondents.

The discussion group was organised in the office of IMIR and included six experts in different fields: two university professors (one specialised in relations between Christianity and Islam, and one in minority issues), one expert on Roma issues, one former employee of the state agency for minorities, one secondary school history teacher of minority origin, and one secondary school religion teacher.

The analysis of the data collected through interviews and discussion group was based on the method of critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2001). Each interview was analysed in order to establish the specific contents and topics, and to understand the respondents' positions on all studied themes. After it was established how respondents perceive and interpret various topics, the interviews were compared and a matrix of commonalities and differences was set up, making it possible to come up with analytical conclusions.

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[2] Data from the Plan for Development of Samokov Municipality 2007-2013 – Demographic Development and Human Resources, 2007.
[3] Data from the website Pazardzhik Population – data for 2001.

3. Case study 1: Segregation of Roma children in the education system and desegregation policies

3. 1. Introduction

The Roma in Bulgaria have traditionally been victims of unequal treatment by the state. The attitude of the Bulgarian society towards Roma has been strongly negative and based on numerous stereotypes and prejudices.[4] During the Communist period (1945-1989), the authorities employed different measures – from positive discrimination to repression – to change the traditional Roma lifestyle and to integrate the community into the society. One of the most important such measures was the integration of the Roma children into the system of education. The school attendance of the Roma children was strictly monitored and their parents were compelled to send their children to school. Most experts today agree that certain success was achieved, although many Roma children attended school irregularly, or left before finishing the eighth grade.[5]

After 1989, many of the social benefits aimed at attracting and keeping the Roma (and other children from poor families) in schools, such as free food, clothes, textbooks, etc., were abolished. Representatives of the Roma community have very often interpreted this as a discriminatory measure intended mainly against them, as they have more children and are in a more difficult social position compared to the rest of the population. The number of Roma children in schools started drastically to decrease. According to the National Statistical Institute data, between 26,000 and 33,000 children dropped out of school annually between 1989 and 1995. Roma children represent a huge majority among the children who have never even started going to school and among the school drop-outs (Tomova, 1995, pp. 39-40).

The first purposeful attempt to reverse this trend was the *Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society*, which the Bulgarian government adopted in 1999. The *Framework Programme* was an attempt to set up a comprehensive state strategy for the accomplishment of real equality of the Roma people in Bulgaria. It served as a base for various strategies, plans and programmes, prepared and implemented by consecutive governments and individual ministries.

The government tried to upgrade its efforts through a *National Action Plan – Decade of Roma Inclusion*, passed in 2005. Regardless of all the programmes and action plans of the government and various state institutions, the situation of the Bulgarian Roma has not changed substantially yet. If anything, the situation has changed for worse. The general public still perceives them in overwhelmingly negative terms and continues to reject and exclude them (Grekova et al, 2010, p. 16). Acceptance and toleration of Roma are a precondition for their successful inclusion into the society, but at the same time, only their participation in all spheres of public life can reduce the distances and rejection.

One of the most crucial problems regarding the Roma integration remains the question of education. The entire issue of Roma education could be classified as a combination of non-toleration and attempts to tolerate. On the one side, the state institutions and especially the school system are trying to take in all Roma children and prevent their drop-out from schools at an early stage by various

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[4] According to a research conducted in 2009, the most common stereotypes Bulgarians use to describe Roma are: thieves, lazy, dirty, liars, uneducated/stupid, poor, and cunning. Only one stereotype with a positive connotation was mentioned – that Roma like to party / have fun. See Pamporov, 2009, pp. 110-111.

[5] According to census data, 81% of Roma in Bulgaria were illiterate in 1946. In 1992, among the Roma aged from 16 to 60, 0.6% had higher or college education, 4.1% had secondary or special secondary education (12 grades), 41% had elementary education (8 grades) and 31.4% had finished primary school (4 grades). 8.8% had not finished primary school and 11.1% were illiterate (Tomova, 1995, pp. 39-41). Free-of-charge education and a number of additional incentives (free food and textbooks, daytime care, extracurricular lessons and activities) made possible the formation of so-called Roma intelligentsia even among the poorest Roma sub-groups, despite the fact the Roma remained by far the least educated ethnic community in the country (Pamporov, 2006, pp. 133-134).

measures – including lower requirements for passing onto the next grade. On the other side, the low level of education in the majority of Roma schools strengthens the vicious circle in which many Roma are captured (lack of proper education – unemployment – poverty).

Numerous attempts have been made to integrate the Roma children into desegregated, mixed schools. However, the application of the official state policy of desegregation usually fails because of poor implementation and the inability to put theory into practice. The attempts initiated by the relevant state institutions often encounter resistance on local level – from schools' headteachers and teachers, and from the parents of non-Roma children, who oppose and protest against the actual implementation of such measures.

At the beginning of almost each school year, media feature stories about conflicts in particular schools and about Bulgarian parents moving their children to other schools because "too many" Roma children have been included in a given class or school (Znam.li, 2010). Sometimes even the teachers are against the inclusion of more than a few Roma children into a class. In their opinion, a large number of Roma children in one class would immediately form "a group and impose their model of behaviour on others," which is counterproductive for their integration (Fokus News, 2010).

The problem has been worsened by the ghettoisation of the Roma community. The majority of Roma live in detached peripheral settlements and often do not want to send their children to schools, usually located a considerable distance away from their homes.

The inter-ethnic tensions and non-toleration (especially towards Roma), which have been on the rise in recent years in the country, often escalate into violent incidents in schools – especially in smaller towns. For example, in recent years, a number of violent incidents and fights occurred between groups of Roma and Bulgarian youths in the town of Samokov. Two incidents captured the media attention, as they were exceptionally brutal. In 2007, a Roma teenager died in a mass fight between Roma and Bulgarians. In reaction, around 1,000 Roma people gathered in the centre of Samokov to protest against the murder of the 17-year-old (Novinite.com, 2007). In 2009, during another violent incident involving four youths of Bulgarian origin and four of Roma origin, a 15-year-old Roma youth was stabbed with a knife. The boys from the two groups attended two different schools, a Professional High School for Tourism, where almost all pupils are Bulgarians, and a school almost exclusively attended by Roma children. Both schools are located on the same street. Several days of angry protests by Roma community followed, during which both schools – "the Bulgarian" and "the Roma" school – had to be protected by police (Novinite.com, 2009).

3. 2. Analysis of the field research

Framing of the case

There is a consensus on institutional and expert levels that the Roma community should be segregated neither on national nor on regional level. The problem is considered as exceptionally important also by the wider society, especially in the light of the widespread belief that due to the higher than average birth rate, the size of the Roma community has been allegedly steadily increasing over the years. Before the official data from the 2011 census became available, the media and public space were filled with speculations and comments by political figures and experts, who predicted that the results would show that the number of ethnic Bulgarians has decreased, while the number of Roma has increased.

The official results became available in late summer of 2011 and partially refuted these predictions. While it was true that the total population of Bulgaria, as well as the number of people who declared themselves as ethnic Bulgarians has significantly decreased compared to the previous census of 2001, the number of Roma (the same is true for the ethnic Turks) has also decreased. The results can be seen in the table below (for more detailed information, see NSI, 2011).

Table: Ethnic division of population of Bulgaria

	2001	%	2011	%
Total	7 928 901	100,0	7 364 570	100,0
Bulgarians	6 655 210	83,9	5 664 624	84,8
Turks	746 664	9,4	588 318	8,8
Roma	370 908	4,7	325 343	4,9
Other	69 204	0,9	49 304	0,7
Did not declare	62 108	0,8	53 391	0,8

Source: http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Reports/1/2/R7.aspx

Experts and state officials usually agree that the question of Roma integration and above all the problem of their low level of education are among the most important challenges for the Bulgarian society. There is a practically general consensus that good and quality education of the Roma children is essential for the future of the Bulgarian state. Despite that, suspicions and intolerant attitudes towards Roma have remained widely spread, and are often strengthened by the sensationalistic and non-professional media reporting.

The respondents from our fieldwork have categorically stated that desegregation of Roma children in the process of education has no alternative. Desegregation is essential for their integration into the society. The opinions of the respondents differed in two mains aspects: the analysis of the policies and practices of desegregation in Bulgaria, and the analysis of the obstacles this process is facing. In the course of the interviews, different solutions for the problems have been presented and proposed. Somewhat paradoxically, some of the proposed solutions are actually based on different forms of segregation, but respondents perceive them as essential for better integration.

An NGO activist of Roma origin, close to the governing political party (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria – GERB) has presented the problem of segregated Roma schools in the following way:

> "*Segregated is the correct word and this is a vicious circle, which to a large extent the state… does not want to recognise that it exists and is taking no action to solve it. I can even say that this has deliberately been done this way so that the Bulgarian children of Roma origin do not interfere with the public attitudes…. The idea is to make them less visible, less literate, less aware of everything and this is done deliberately, it is an administrative measure bordering on discrimination. So many strategies, so many action plans, framework programmes, framework conventions and all on paper only. The true integration started in the 1995-2001 period, and here I can note that the role of the NGO sector was very important for the desegregation, but it happened with donor funds from abroad, not from the state. It forced the politicians to start a process, and one by one organisations of the Bulgarian citizens of Roma origin were set up. But unfortunately, in 2001, when the new government came, we thought that they would continue with the policies for this community, but we were disappointed. And then the NGOs pulled away and things were brought to a standstill, we left the desegregation in the hands of the state – to fulfil its duty, to provide funds, to start the real process, but unfortunately – nothing.*" (IMIR-1)

This emotional statement summarises the main problems of the real desegregation of the Roma children. On the one hand, the state is not very active in the genuine realisation of this process. The majority of NGOs work on ad-hoc projects, which rarely have a lasting effect. Many Roma activists believe that the passivity of the state administration is a consequence of a deliberate intention to disregard the Roma population. There is also a widespread belief that the state tries to manipulate the community through sporadic distribution of small financial donations, while not purposefully working towards genuine integration.

Almost the entire interview with respondent IMIR-1 was based on his narrative about the political parties, media and the society, which are deliberately manipulating Roma for their own purposes. The alleged manipulations are his explanation as to why Roma themselves have largely withdrawn from the rest of the society and their marginalisation thus partially comes also as a consequence of intentional self-isolation.

> "*This created an enclosure, this created a separation, and a feeling among the Roma community – even if we go to school and learn, what then? They still don't want us, they hate us, they don't respect us – this is what the society has achieved.*" (IMIR-1)

Such a process was observed and commented on by most people who work on Roma issues on different levels – teachers, NGO activists, experts. Very often, the reasons for the failure of the desegregation policies are connected to the negative attitude of the Roma parents towards schools and to the fact that many of them do not comprehend and recognize the importance of education. The respondent IMIR-1 believes that it is exceptionally important that children from different ethnic communities study together in schools in order to increase the levels of tolerance and acceptance in the society. Tolerance is not possible if different communities do not know each other.

> "*The school and education are not that important. But school gives you the stimulus in life. The general culture to know the society.*" (IMIR-1)

It needs to be noted that the respondent is a member of the Evangelical church and that his views on solving the Roma problems are very close to the principles preached by this church.[6] The best way to develop tolerant attitudes and increase the levels of acceptance of otherness would be through an intensified process of interaction during which those who are different are getting to know each other. The final outcome of such process would be a high level of integration. The respondent IMIR-1 often used the terms desegregation, integration and tolerance as synonyms. He perceives his work among Roma as a Renaissance mission to improve their situation in the long run.

> "*We will create a better generation, not for ourselves, but for our grand-grandchildren. We will leave them freedom.*" (IMIR-1)

Desegregation as a mechanical act and appearance of secondary segregation

Almost all larger Bulgarian towns have one or several separated Roma neighbourhoods. Practically all these neighbourhoods include a so-called Roma school – a school in which all the children are of Roma origin. Desegregation in Bulgaria is usually understood and practiced as a mechanical transfer of Roma children from the Roma neighbourhood (or ghetto) and their transport to and from the "integrated" school on daily basis. As these schools are in most cases located at certain distance from the Roma ghettoes, the children are often absent from home for a better part of the day – one of the reasons why Roma parents are usually very reluctant to send their children to integrated schools.

One of the consequences of such mechanical transfer of children from one school to another is the appearance of secondary segregation. In cases when one or two Roma children are enrolled in an all-Bulgarian class, they often find themselves isolated from the rest of the children and practically

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[6] After the political changes of 1989, missionaries of various evangelical churches started to work very actively among the Roma communities, taking advantage of the very inactive position of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. In addition to their charity activity, they organised educational courses, which tried to convince the Roma that good education was very important. They also organised special courses targeting young Roma girls to decrease the number of early marriages and early pregnancies. In many Roma settlements which include an Evangelical church, the Roma have better education and are better integrated into the society. This observation was also confirmed by respondent IMIR-8, who is an expert on minority issues in Bulgaria. See also Slavkova, 2008.

excluded from the education process. If a larger number of Roma of similar age are enrolled in a given "integrated" or "mixed" school, usually a "Roma-only" class is established – with the explanation that their specific culture and educational needs necessitate such a measure, the Roma children are again segregated inside the desegregated school. If the number of Roma children at a given mixed school becomes significantly large, often the non-Roma parents begin transferring their children to other schools with little or no Roma children. Thus, in the long run, a mixed school in practice turns into a segregated Roma school (Grekova, 2008, pp. 39-42).

Those respondents who work at schools in towns with larger Roma communities, very precisely list the risks involved in the mechanical desegregation.

"*It became clear that mechanical transfer of children from one school to another is not enough, because what follows is secondary segregation. A child is still segregated in the society, where a different ethnic group is dominant. Roma children are separated from the Bulgarian children.*" (IMIR-8)

"*I don't think that such desegregation is needed, as it was done in some Bulgarian towns, where those Roma schools were closed down… There are people who are in a very difficult material situation, they are unemployed… First, they cannot afford it, and the second problem, when there are more Roma children than Bulgarian children in a class, there will be segregation again. There have been cases like that – the previous school year there was one entirely Roma class in one Bulgarian school, and this was the same as in a segregated school. This method is not a correct one.*" (IMIR-5)

"*The main problem that occurs when they try to go through with this process in a given school, in accordance with all the studies and requirements made by the experts, is that usually a process starts in which either Roma or Bulgarian children withdraw from the school. This is something that, at least according to my knowledge of the model, does not help the integration of Roma into schools.*" (IMIR-4)

"*It actually has a negative effect. I had cases of children, who went to a Bulgarian school and then came back, because they see that the level of education there is completely different and they cannot reach it. But I do think that it is good for them to study with Bulgarian children.*" (IMIR-7)

These examples have been brought forward by people with different professional and personal experience, which clearly shows that the idea of mechanical mixing of children in schools and classes cannot work. This context outlines also many of the desegregation related problems, which the respondents have pointed out. They include the economic and social marginalisation; low command of Bulgarian; lack of motivation among the Roma parents to see their children finish school and the parents' fear to send the children into an unfamiliar and relatively hostile environment; the negative attitude of the Bulgarian parents; and the insufficient qualification of teachers to work in multicultural schools.

Social and economic situation as a factor for tolerant coexistence

Linking the material situation of the families with the regular school attendance of children is a permanent leitmotif in all our interviews. Another common theme is the belief that if Roma children visited mixed schools and obtained good education, this would be sufficient for the society to tolerate and accept them. An integrated school is thus seen as a universal medicine for integration and its success. The Roma respondents are for this reason very nostalgic regarding the Communist past, when the state used to provide employment for the parents and monitored the school attendance of the children.

> *"Everything was completely different then. Many factories existed in Samokov. While working there, people communicated, got to know each other, and they saw that there was nothing frightening about the others… While my generation, people aged 31-32, or up to 40, they did not have the state employment, and there the segregation started and that is the problem. He stays at home, gets up in the morning, goes to the neighbourhood to have a coffee and returns home."* (IMIR-5)

Respondent IMIR-3 shared that he obtained good education because he went to school together with Bulgarian children. He believes that being together with children of other ethnicity is more important and beneficial than the education itself. Several respondents, especially those who are of Roma origin, underlined that the situation has changed dramatically since 1989 and that all the benefits and good practices from the Communist period are now gone for good.

> *"The upbringing was different then… but the most important thing is that people had work."* (IMIR-6)

> *"It comes from the parents, but this is not the only problem. The problem is the time in which we all live."* (IMIR-3)

In the current situation, respondents believe that the only solution is an active intervention of the state and the local authorities to improve the social and economic situation of the Roma community.

> *"The most important is the state level, and then the municipal authorities… If these people have employment, it is more than clear that they will want their children to go to school, this goes from generation to generation, it turns like a wheel as it used to be before."* (IMIR-5)

Attitude of the Roma parents

Given the fact that the Roma themselves are those who are most deeply affected by the realities of segregation, their attitude is perceived as crucial for the success of the desegregation. As was mentioned earlier, the respondents perceive the financial situation of the families as the decisive factor. At the same time, they also underline the motivation of the parents and above all the extent to which they see the education of their children as a priority.

> *"If you ask a Roma family: do you want your child to go to school regularly, to become a good citizen? They will all say, yes, we want. But when it is time to act, they are indifferent."* (IMIR-3)

The inability of the parents to provide the needed financial support for their children in schools is named as the most important obstacle.

> *"Many children, who go to mixed schools – their parents make tremendous effort, but this all depends on their standard of living. Not many parents can afford to send their children into central city schools, because they cannot cope with the costs involved, for the dress, the school bag, they don't have the self-confidence. (Roma) children can go to the Bulgarian schools only if the parents have the means, if they have the financial possibility."* (IMIR-2)

> *"This is how I see it – how can I send a child to school, shoes are needed, even food I cannot provide in the morning, how can I send him to school?"* (IMIR-3)

The respondents also mentioned the moral obligation and motivation for the child to go to school. In their opinion, many Roma parents have no such motivation and they prefer to keep their children at home or to send them somewhere to work.

> *"A personal example and regular talking with the children, all this on a daily basis. The school attendance is the problem, not the integration. Parents should be explained that the education of their children is important, as is the opinion of the children. Now they think: 'What should I study for? I'm not going to become a manager.'"* (IMIR-5)

One of the main problems Roma children face at schools is their low command of Bulgarian.

> "*It can be said that they cannot overcome the language barrier. If they learn the language there are ways to motivate them to learn.*" (IMIR-2)

A respondent, who is a teacher, believes that this problem could be solved through special Bulgarian language courses, which would increase the performance of the children in other subjects as well. It is an interesting observation that teachers who are directly involved with Roma children are convinced that different teaching techniques are needed for these children. Such statements carry a certain pejorative meaning, as the proposed methods (interactive games, study trips, theatre visits, cultural events at schools) are attractive for all children, regardless of their ethnic origin. Interestingly enough, these views are shared by the Roma respondents as well.

According to the respondent IMIR-8, it is especially important for the development of Roma children that they are taken out of their family environment, as they can adapt and acquire sustainable social habits only outside the (self)isolated Roma community. Although such a claim appears intolerant and aimed at assimilation, it is actually quite typical for the liberal-minded intellectuals and experts, who perceive such a process as practically the only way towards the genuine acceptance of Roma children in the Bulgarian society. The practice has shown that the majority population largely accepts and treats the educated Roma with profession and employment as equals, although incidental cases of intolerance remain possible.

Attitude of the Bulgarian parents: many or a few?

Many respondents underline that the number of Roma children in a mixed school or class has an exceptional significance for their acceptance and for the establishment of tolerant relations. They have contemplated the appropriate number, which would make the process of desegregation a success. This "quantitative" problem has two aspects, which create a certain vicious circle. On the one hand, there is an apprehension that a larger number of Roma children would cause a discipline problem. In addition, they would form a closed group and communicate with each other only in their language, which would impede the development of their Bulgarian language skills. On the class level, they would most likely delay the progress of the entire class. On the other hand, if they were too few, the children would most likely end up isolated and dominated by the others, and would feel very uncomfortable. As much as this kind of reasoning sounds intolerant, in the mind of our respondents it represents the principal problem of putting the desegregation policies into practice.

Opinion of a teacher, who works in a mixed class:

> "*Five Roma children in a class is OK, but if they are more…*" (IMIR-2)

A Roma respondent, who attended a mixed class, shares similar views:

> "*If, let's say, in a class of 25 children, there are up to 10 Roma, Bulgarians are the majority. There is no way these children would fail to integrate. They will get together, sit behind the desk together… In contrast, for example Zvanichevo village, 10-12 Roma children in a class, and only two Bulgarians. Bulgarians become like the Roma children, do you understand, the majority always takes over. The teachers have given up. And when Bulgarians are many and Roma kids are a few, they all have better grades.*" (IMIR-3)

While the debates in the society continue about the proper balance, both the practice and the experience of the respondents show that the Bulgarian parents are not well disposed towards the presence of Roma children in the classes of their own children. If given a chance, many prefer to transfer their children to another class or to a different school, or do not sign up their children into schools, which admit "too many" Roma children.

> "*Usually when such projects are prepared… they concentrate almost exclusively on preparing the Roma children and their families. I was thinking a lot about these processes, and it seems that the responsibility here is more on the side of the Bulgarian society, because we want in some way to integrate Roma into the society, and actually we work much more with Roma, but we don't work with people who have to accept this process in a certain way, to understand it… We have to work with the public opinion, because it is an obstacle.*" (IMIR-4)

This opinion touches upon the main problem – the genuine intolerance in the Bulgarian society towards Roma. Although the popular politically correct discourse seems to be inclined towards tolerance, in reality a parallel coexistence is the preferred model instead of the genuine acceptance.

In a somewhat apologetic tone, some respondents talk about the concrete representatives of the Roma community (ranging from public figures to personal friends), who integrated well and were accepted by many Bulgarians. Such discourse is often encountered in public discussions as well. However, it is quite obvious that even those Roma were not fully accepted as "equal to us." They remain "others." It is preferable if the parallel coexistence is maintained and they step into "our" world only occasionally, under specific, well-defined circumstances.

Teachers

Teachers play an exceptionally important role in the attempts to achieve the desegregation as they encounter the practical problems discussed above on the daily basis. An overwhelming majority of teachers are ethnic Bulgarians. Only in the recent years, a small number of Roma teachers with university pedagogical education have appeared. Very often, teachers have their own prejudices and stereotypes, yet they make a deliberate effort to overcome them. Our respondents underline that work in a multicultural environment demands special efforts on the part of the teachers, for which special qualification and motivation are needed. In other words, special skills are required for working with classes consisting of children from different ethnic and religious communities.

> "*There are such prejudices, there is an inclination to discriminate, but in some way, at least when I was involved with these issues, they did not dominate. In many places, especially in small towns and villages, but also in Sofia, I met very motivated teachers who understood the problem to its bones. They see with their eyes what it is all about, they are worried, they see numerous obstacles ahead of themselves. They need to obtain additional qualification, but they also have to be motivated to obtain it. Such qualification should also give them some advantage in their jobs.*" (IMIR-8)

In the 2001-2004 period, several hundred Roma received training and qualification as teacher-assistants. The training programme was the result of the cooperation between the government institution the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues and various NGOs, and financed by the Phare Programme of the European Commission. The teacher-assistants were supposed to act as mediators between the school and the Roma children and their families, and to help the children to adapt to the school environment and improve their Bulgarian language skills. According to our respondents who are familiar with the project, the original idea was good and worked rather well initially. Later on, however, the financing of the project was terminated, and the role of the teacher-assistants gradually diminished, being eventually reduced to enforcers of discipline in class and mediators in conflicts between Roma and non-Roma children (IMIR-16). The presence of teacher-assistants in some cases led to the appearance of secondary segregations in classes, as the Roma children grouped around the teacher-assistant and became (self)isolated from the rest of the children.

According to respondent IMIR-16, the teacher-assistants were in principle a very good idea and could lead to much better results if applied systematically, over a long period of time and on the national

level. If successful, this project would not only increase tolerance, but could result in genuine acceptance in school environment.

The short life of the teacher-assistants project and its correspondingly limited effectiveness brings forth one of the main problems of the desegregation process – the issue of financing.

Financing

The general impression of the respondents is that nothing significant has been achieved to date, despite the years of attempts and the volumes of talk about the desegregation of Roma education. In addition to the lack of meaningful and active state policy in this respect, the respondents also highlight the popular belief that the financial resources are used in a faulty and incompetent manner, while in some cases the resources are intentionally misused.

> *"The money was supposed to come to the municipality and from there everything got lost. It didn't reach us because we didn't have some elementary documents to receive the funds. Bureaucratic problems, and we didn't receive it."* (IMIR-3)

The above statement highlights another problem. Different organisations, especially from the NGO sector, which are involved in the issue of desegregation, are often not well prepared and organised to work with the administration and to prepare and implement projects. Their own flaws, however, are usually overlooked and the representatives of such organisations express their suspicions and dissatisfaction.

> *"Nothing reaches the final user, the final beneficiary, and here is the problem. There is all the media talk, now and years ago, about I don't know how much money given for this… And the notorious Decade of Roma Inclusion. This Decade is a complete invention. It started in 2005 and was supposed to last until 2015. And what has been achieved? The reality is that they are not doing anything."* (IMIR-5)

> *"From my personal experience, and I can state with confidence that my experience is not small… It is all just one huge talking exercise. You talk, talk, but actually there are no results whatsoever."* (IMIR-6)

Despite that, numerous successful projects have been implemented over the years, especially by various non-governmental organisations. The main goal of most of these projects was to overcome stereotypes among the teachers and children from both groups (Roma and majority children); to work with Roma parents and make them aware how necessary is the education of their children; to assist the children to learn Bulgarian language; to introduce auxiliary classes and extracurricular activities that could make the education process more attractive and understandable. The negative characteristic all these projects have in common is that once their funding runs out, they are discontinued, despite achieving encouraging short-term results. The respondent IMIR-16, who has been involved in numerous such projects over the years, is absolutely convinced that such isolated projects could not realistically improve the situation with tolerance and acceptance of Roma children. She is convinced that purposeful and active work is needed on the national level. It should be based on the positive experiences from past projects, but, unlike them, future projects need to be sustainable and durable. This view was also supported by the participants in the discussion group.

Tolerance in everyday life

Apart from the concrete topic of access to education and policies and practices of desegregation, perceptions regarding the tolerant coexistence in the society also deserve a comment. The subject has been brought up by many respondents after commenting on the Roma education. It is directly linked to

the degree of the readiness and ability of the Roma parents to let their children attend a school outside the Roma neighbourhood, but also to the readiness of the Bulgarians to accept them.

This topic usually uncovers the main contradictions and the ambivalent coexistence of various communities. A Roma respondent from Samokov tried to show that there are no significant interethnic problems in town, but at some point got confused in trying to formulate the degrees of acceptance, tolerance and intolerance. On the one hand, she said that in her town, Roma are coexisting relatively normally with Bulgarians, but at the same time, she talked about the cases of murdered and wounded children from both ethnic groups – cases that were widely covered also by the media.

> *"In principle, people who live in the Roma hamlet have access to the centre of the town, to everything… And nobody will go to fight with them, to argue… so the tolerance is there more or less… It is a bit different with restaurants that do not want to let them in, and they have placed a note on the door "Access only with membership card" and similar. Well, this exists."* (IMIR-5)

The Bulgarian society has in general a very similar view. There is the usual mantra about the traditional tolerance among different ethnic and religious groups, while the contradictions and even the cases of direct confrontation are perceived as exceptions, which can and should be neglected. The desire to underline the good relations and successful coexistence in their own towns and communities is especially typical and was an often encountered feature during our fieldwork.

> *"Most of them live quite well. Especially in more remote villages, smaller settlements with small population, they live well among Bulgarians."* (IMIR-3)

> *"There are many Roma neighbourhoods in Pazardzhik, as we know, and I see that people perceive things in a more democratic way now, not just in the schools but in the city as a whole."* (IMIR-2)

In conclusion, it can be resumed that the topic of desegregation of Roma is considered as exceptionally significant for the Bulgarian society and is perceived as directly connected to the demographic and socio-economic future of the state. The negative stereotypes about Roma are persistent and very strong, but could be overcome or at least limited if the Roma community was better integrated into the society. The process of marginalisation, which has continued for the past 20 years, is seen as a threat and in its own turn strengthens the rejection of Roma. The overwhelming majority of respondents believe that desegregation is a necessity, which has no alternative. However, the existing practices and policies are perceived as ineffective. The respondents consider that more political will is needed to change the status quo and to implement concrete and effective measures on the national level.

4. Case study 2: Compulsory religious education in public schools

4. 1. Introduction

The question of the introduction of obligatory religious education into public schools is another hotly disputed issue in Bulgaria. The debate was initiated by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) about 15 years ago and continues today. The BOC insists that religious education should be based on Orthodox Christianity. This view is fiercely supported by the nationalistic circles in the society.

The position of the BOC is that the children belonging to the majority population should receive a proper confessional education in schools. The minority children from traditional religious communities (Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, Armenian Apostolic Church) should receive appropriate confessional education in their own faith on condition that there are at least 10 children per class who do not wish to attend the course "Religion – Orthodoxy." If parents of more than 10 children per class

submit a written statement that they do not want their children to study religion, they could attend the course on ethics instead. The BOC believes that the introduction of an obligatory course "Religion – Orthodoxy" would preserve the identity of the Bulgarian nation in the community of the European nations (Holy Synod of BOC, 2007).

The leaders of the Islamic Community in the country (the Chief Mufti office) also support the introduction of obligatory religious classes. Children of Orthodox faith should be provided with confessional education about Orthodox Christianity, while Muslim children should learn about Islam in schools.

The religiosity in Bulgaria has traditionally not been very strong.[7] Thus, a significant opposition has been voiced against the proposed changes. The arguments against the compulsory religious education highlight the secular character of education and underline that religious belonging is an intimate personal choice, influenced by the family environment. School as an institution should not be involved in any way and religious education should remain in the domain of the religious institutions.

The opinion of the majority of experts is that a comparative study of religion, through which students would get acquainted with all religions practised in Bulgaria, should be the preferred solution, as this would be in line with the secular character of the Bulgarian schools. In their opinion, confessional education belongs to religious temples, not to the school environment.

The debates on the compulsory religious education also deal with the very complex issue of defining the content of such a subject and the selection of religion(s) that should be included. These debates are very suitable for testing the levels of non-toleration, toleration and respect/recognition in the Bulgarian society. Actors at various levels are active in the debate: state institutions, media, civil activists, experts. The Bulgarian society, which is usually rather passive and indifferent on most topics, becomes highly involved and all variety of viewpoints can be observed. The question of religious education is often linked with the apprehensions that radical Islam might be spread in the Muslim villages through religious classes. The debate covers both the issues of the relation between the religious and secular spheres, and the complexity of multi-religious landscape of Bulgaria.

4. 2. Analysis of the field research

Framing of the case

As was already noted, the Bulgarian society was never in its modern history characterised by deep religiosity in the canonical sense of the term. The experts usually refer to "traditional Christianity" and "traditional Islam" to describe the religiosity in Bulgaria. The religious practices and traditions are often based on various pagan beliefs and superstitions, dressed up in a coat of the official religions (See Zhelyazkova, Nielsen and Kepel, 1995). This process has intensified substantially during the Communist period, when practicing religion was discouraged and hindered by the state. After the democratic changes in 1989, many people again turned towards the traditional religions, above all in a reaction to the previous prohibitions. This is especially typical for the Muslim community.[8] Although the Communist regime was a foe of all religions, its anti-Islamic campaign was especially fierce.

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[7] The 2007–2008 Gallup poll entitled *Lack of Importance of Religion in Europe* showed that 62% of people in Bulgaria answered "No" to the question "Does religion occupy an important place in your life?" See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Religion_in_Europe#cite_note-3
According to Special Eurobarometer "Social Values, Science and Technology" from 2005, only 40% of Bulgarians stated that they believed in God. See European Commission, 2005.
[8] According to the preliminary data of the first stage of the research "Attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria," conducted by the New Bulgarian University and the Sociological agency Alfa Research in March-April 2011 (presented by Mihail Ivanov on a conference "Dealing with change: Islamic leadership in the Balkans and the Baltic between past and future", 16-17 May, Sofia), the majority of Muslim in Bulgaria have clearly expressed Islamic identity and follow the Islamic cultural traditions. Results of the research: deeply religious: 28.5%; somewhat religious: 63.4%; not religious or in doubt: 8%.

Muslims were forced to change their names into Bulgarian (Christian) sounding names, mosques were closed and some destroyed, Muslim graveyards were demolished, and traditional Muslim clothes, rituals and traditions were prohibited.

Another peculiarity of Bulgaria is that due to the Ottoman legacy, the Bulgarian society has never been mono-religious since the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878. Considerable groups of Muslims (Sunni and Alevi), Jews, Armenians, Catholics and Protestants have coexisted for centuries with the Orthodox Bulgarian majority.

According to the census of 2011, 76% of the Bulgarian population declared themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christians, and 10% as Muslims (this includes Turks Sunni and Alevi, Bulgarian Muslims – Pomaks and some groups of Roma). The other religious communities are small. They include Catholics (0.8%), Protestants (1.1%), Jews, Armenian–Gregorians and others. Additional 21,8% did not specify any religious identification (NSI, 2011).

It should be noted that this religious self-identification is very often based on ethnic identification or family tradition and does not necessarily mean that a person is actually practicing a certain religion or belongs to a certain confessional congregation. For example, not all who declared themselves as Eastern Orthodox Christians in the census were actually baptized or adhered to any prescriptions of the declared religion. Religious self-identification is often perceived as ethnic or cultural identification factor (Kyurkchieva, Kosseva, 2010).

The low level of religiosity and the complex ethno-religious mosaic of Bulgaria are the main reasons why the issue of introduction of compulsory religious education attracts so much attention in the society. The discussion about the technical details regarding the form and contents of the subject and about how to respect the rights of different denominations is actually a very clear presentation of the attitude towards the minority ethnic and religious groups in the country. This case can therefore provide a very good opportunity to evaluate the levels of (in)tolerance, acceptance and recognition.

The recent study conducted in the frame of the international research project IME investigated the public attitudes towards the compulsory religious education in schools. The results showed that there is a large opposition to this proposal. The opponents say that the education in Bulgaria is secular, and that the religion is responsibility of the family and the religious institutions. The study also investigated how compulsory religious education would affect the relations between different ethnic and religious communities. The following three issues emerged as the most disputed ones: what exactly means religious education and what it should include; how Islamic religious education is apprehended by the majority population in the light of the traditional prejudices and the recent Western anti-Islamic attitudes; what is the place of religious symbols in schools and especially the issue of Muslim female headscarves. These topics also provide an interesting angle into the investigation of the levels of (in)tolerance, acceptance and recognition among the Bulgarian citizens (Kosseva, Hajdinjak, 2011a; Kosseva, Hajdinjak, 2011b).

Education about religions or study of the Bible / the Quran

The respondents representing the two main religions in Bulgaria (the Orthodox Church and Islam) do not support the opinion that religious education in schools should be based on the comparative study of different religions. For this reason, they also dispute the term "education about religions" and insist that the subject should be called "religious instruction," "study of the Bible" or "study of the Quran" (IMIR-10, IMIR-11). They also insist that such education should be obligatory for all children – with every child having the freedom to study their own religion.

> "*It is important that religion is studied through conventional approach, Muslims to study their religion, Christians to study theirs, and Armenians and Jews to study their religions. A comparative approach would not be useful.*" (IMIR-11)

Representatives of smaller denominations and experts suspect that the larger denominations are trying to impose their views with the assistance of the state. They clearly object to such a development. A Protestant pastor thus said:

> "*The truth is that, in my opinion, some of our friends from other religions do not want to perform their work and they want the state to do it for them. The religious education should be done in the religious institutions.*" (IMIR-14)

The Orthodox priests and the representative of the Mufti office explicitly link the religious education with the relationship between ethnic and religious belonging.

> "*This question is exceptionally important for Muslims, it deals with their identity, culture, it deals in general with the preservation of Muslim identity of Muslims in Bulgaria.*" (IMIR-11)

An Orthodox priest from a small village was particularly explicit in his interpretation why it was essential to introduce a compulsory religious instruction into schools. In his opinion, the Orthodoxy is one of the most important pillars of the Bulgarian identity and statehood.

> "*(Orthodox religious instruction) has to be introduced, because without it…Bulgaria is like a table, hanging on only three legs because the fourth one was cut off."* (IMIR-10)

During the entire interview, this respondent emotionally demonstrated his contempt and even hatred toward other ethnic and religious groups, which he considered to be dangerous for the state. His opinions and rhetoric are very typical for the extreme nationalistic parties. He underlined that he watches only one television channel – SKAT TV. Its programme orientation is openly nationalistic, and anti-Islamic and racist messages are a common feature in many of its shows.[9]

The moderate representatives of the clergy, as well as those respondents who are believers, defend their demand for the introduction of religious education with the argument that better knowledge of all religions would increase tolerance and lead to better coexistence.

> "*The confrontations in the coexistence of different cultures are results of the imposed complexes and stereotypes. When we get to know each other, it is clear that we become more tolerant of each other. We respect the holy days of Muslims, but nobody forces us to participate in them. They respect our holy days and so on.*" (IMIR-12)

> "*Coexistence of different religious communities is truly essential. Both Christianity and Islam teach people to be good, they don't teach violence.*" (IMIR-9)

> "*All children learn that in the end, we all need to be tolerant to each other.*" (IMIR-13)

It is particularly interesting to note that all three respondents quoted above understand tolerance as parallel coexistence and non-interference, but not as a genuine acceptance of the other. The respondent IMIR-13 uses the term "tolerance" in an especially indicative way. During the entire interview, she was repeating widely known public opinions and perceptions, demonstrating that despite claiming otherwise, she profoundly misunderstands the issue of religious education. In this sense, she also used "tolerance" as a cliché, often used in the media and public space, without being entirely clear what tolerance meant.

The opinion of the expert on ethnic and religious issues was much more focused. He believes that the activities of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church aimed at the introduction of compulsory religious education would cause tensions and confrontations among the children.

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[9] Some of SKAT's regular programmes are: For Bulgarian Faith (hosted by an Orthodox priest and dedicated to various topics, covered from the viewpoint of the Orthodox religion); Class on Bulgaria (different themes from Bulgarian history, archaeology, ethnology, literature and arts); Banished from Their Fatherland (dedicated to Bulgarians, banished from historic Bulgarian lands, which are now part of Turkey, Greece, Macedonia, Serbia and Romania); The Other History (a nationalistic take on Bulgarian history) and similar. http://www.skat.bg/preda.php?action=3

"The separating of Muslim children from the Christian children in such a way is very bad. Instead of learning to get to know each other, instead of teaching them about one and the other religion, you divide them, separate them." (IMIR-8)

The (predominantly) secular experts defended their position that religious education has no place in schools – especially not as a compulsory subject. An alternative that many of them propose is a comparative education on the main religions practiced in Bulgaria. Such a course would take into consideration two main characteristics of Bulgaria: firstly, that the Bulgarian society is highly secular, and secondly, the significant religious diversity of the country, which means that it would be practically impossible to provide education for all denominations. A Protestant pastor agreed with the experts that comparative subject on religions would be the best option for Bulgaria.

"It is clear that those religions, which exist in Bulgaria, should be studied in the elementary course. The Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism, the main differences between them, because here we had a clash between these religions. People should know what are the similarities and differences." (IMIR-14)

Proponents of the secular character of education are convinced that religious belonging is an intimate personal choice and school should not interfere with it in any way. The religious education should remain confined to religious institutions and organised around the religious temples. Any type of religious education or education on religions in schools should be under the supervision of the state. Although the relevant religious institutions could have a say in the formulation of the curriculum, they should not be in charge of the subject.

Islam

While the Bulgarian Orthodox Church is organising public events and is looking for means to influence the authorities to introduce compulsory religious instruction, other religious communities have organised extracurricular religious education for their members. Smaller religious communities (Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Armenians) do not make much impression in the society. One reason is that their number is quite small, and the other is that they are highly integrated into the society.

The case of Islamic religious education is entirely different. The Chief Mufti office has organised numerous summer or year-round courses on the study of the Quran in many towns and villages across the country. On the one hand, the society accepts their right to religious education, but on the other, there is a significant distrust. The media and certain politicians periodically raise doubts and even make direct accusations that radical Islamic teachings are spread under the disguise of Islamic education. The respondent IMIR-10 reflected these perceptions in his extreme opinion:

"They have their education; there in the mosques they have special classrooms. They go. They listen. They read the Quran. But they teach them to deliberately hinder the work of the state, to make provocations and so on. They teach them how to fight, how to take revenge on Bulgarians." (IMIR-10)

The representatives of the Islamic Community and the Chief Mufti office are aware of the public attitudes and suspicions and are taking great care to control the content of the Islamic education they provide. They believe that the good control and supervision are essential to prevent a possible encroachment of extreme Islamism. The expert on ethnic and religious issues supports this view:

"At any rate, the resources to minimise the risk (of Islamism) are in the hands of the community itself. The Muslim community itself has enough potential to prevent it. But this potential has to be stabilised, and this means to have good (religious) education in Bulgaria." (IMIR-8)

Although certain distrust is present, most other respondents acknowledge that everyone has the right to religious education, but they underline the need for strict state control. This is another indicator of the low level of tolerance in the society. The seemingly tolerant understanding that the most significant

"others" in Bulgaria – the Muslims – are entitled to Islamic religious instructions is overshadowed by the entrenched suspicions that they cannot be trusted to manage such education entirely on their own. While it is clear that in this case we cannot even speak about acceptance and recognition, it also remains questionable how tolerant it actually is to "permit" a certain activity on condition that it is strictly supervised and controlled.

Religious symbols

> *"Everyone has the right to wear them, if it is not derogatory, how should I put it, - like burqas, veils, which the young girls have to wear… After all we are a Christian country and we should not allow this in any way."* (IMIR-12)

> *"Everyone can have beliefs, but they should not be demonstrated openly, especially this with the headscarves I would not accept. A cross and similar things, I would wear them, but it should not be made as a demonstration. A Star of David can also be worn like jewellery and is not as striking as a headscarf."* (IMIR-13)

> *"I would leave people to be free, but would not allow veiled women on a public place, because there is an element of insecurity – who knows what is hidden beneath. I'm not suspicious, I'm simply realistic."* (IMIR-14)

These three quotes clearly demonstrate the ambivalence of the issue in the Bulgarian society. They also clearly demonstrate the levels of tolerance in Bulgaria. In the first instance, the right to be different is acknowledged and respected. Immediately afterwards, however, a reservation is added that some forms of otherness should be limited – they are suspicious and as such cannot be accepted. The issue is directly linked to the process in other European countries and the images and perceptions imported from there actually blend with or completely overshadow the Bulgarian reality. This is especially obvious in the first case, as a respondent speaks about burqas and veils, despite the fact that there are practically no women in Bulgaria who would dress in such a way.

Some respondents, who share the opinion that schools are secular institutions and that religious symbols do not belong there, are more cautious about how much regulation is appropriate. Instead, they prefer to rely on the parents to influence their children in an "appropriate way."

> *"I personally see nothing dramatic if headscarves are worn in Bulgaria. I don't think this should be limited in any way by the law. Regarding schools, it would be good if teachers and parents act in a way that religious differences between children are not displayed."* (IMIR-8)

Tolerance

As was already noted, the term "tolerance" is used very often in the Bulgarian public space. It has been overexposed by the media, politicians and intellectuals. It has also been widely accepted by the citizens. Tolerance is most often used to explain the relatively unproblematic coexistence of different communities in the country. However, the deeper analysis and differentiation of nuances of this concept is seldom conducted.

Our respondents have very different viewpoints and understanding of what tolerance is. On the one pole is the extreme denial and open intolerance.

> *"You ask about tolerance? This tolerance will cost us our heads! They will turn us into Turks! You will see what will happen, just wait a bit more…"* (IMIR-10)

Although they do not put it in such a direct and blunt way, this position is not entirely strange to numerous Bulgarians. It is rarely expressed in a similar fashion in the public space, but often shared among the people with similar views. Sometimes it is concealed either for politeness or due to the lack of courage. At this particular case, the respondent was explicitly frank during the entire interview.

The representative of the Chief Mufti office shared the following regarding the tolerance in Bulgaria:

> *"There is much talk about the tolerance, about accepting other ethnic and religious groups, but in reality this process is not truly complete…"* (IMIR-11)

The Muslims in Bulgaria most often feel the duality of the attitude towards them and the emptiness of the term "tolerance" in their everyday life. This position was well explained and backed up with examples by the Turkish participant in the discussion group. This is the reason why the Muslims often think about the dimensions of the mutual coexistence. They often talk about the need "*of getting to know each other*" (IMIR-11) – an indication that a parallel coexistence rather than acceptance is a reality in Bulgaria.

A deeper and more comprehensive definition of tolerance was provided by the expert on ethnic and religious issues.

> *"Tolerance is not simply to live one next to another. Well, if tolerance means simply to put up with each other, that is one thing. But if we want to be some kind of a society, some kind of a community, a national community, than it is beyond question that we need to interact with each other."* (IMIR-8)

The above opinion, which corresponds to recognition, has been represented in the public space above all by experts, scholars and analysts. Unfortunately, for the time being, such views are either not well understood or flatly rejected by the larger part of the society.

5. Conclusion

Both case studies have shown that the self-stereotype about the tolerant Bulgarian society continues to prevail, despite the fact that concrete cases and discussions about actual problems provide a very different picture. The public debates, especially in the media, are quite often saturated with manifestations of intolerance. To a certain extent, these developments are also strengthened by the all-European tendencies of growing nationalisms, fear of the different and criticism (even rejection) of multiculturalism.

The traditional religious and ethnic minorities are considered a part of the Bulgarian nation. Yet, at the same time the latent rejection and suspicions towards them not only persist, but are intensifying in the recent years. This is especially the case with the Roma community, which is widely perceived as a demographic and social threat for the future of the Bulgarian nation.

The Bulgarian education system has not managed yet to propose effective measures to truly accommodate the diversity in the classrooms and to fully integrate the children from various minority communities. The results remain poor and insufficient despite the numerous and ambitious programmes and declarations made over the past decade. This is a consequence both of the lack of genuine political dedication to solve the problem, and of the related problem of insufficient funding.

The stereotypes and the negative attitudes among the majority population remain strong and overcoming them is a challenging task. Yet, all the efforts are directed only at changing the habits and attitudes of minority communities and the programmes targeting the majority population are practically non-existent.

Teachers and school authorities are often left on their own to search for solutions and deal with the various problems. Their usual approach is to deal on case to case basis – to prevent possible confrontation and find temporary solution for each separate incident. Good practices and programmes that could be applied on the national level are very rare.

One of the main conclusions is that the attitude towards the Roma minority is highly problematic in the Bulgarian society. Roma are perceived as a demographic and social threat. Their actual

marginalisation in the society is noted as a significant problem both for the present and for the future. For this reason, the issue of Roma education is seen as exceptionally important and is considered as one of the most crucial and effective mechanisms for their integration. Despite the clearly expressed opinion that there are no practical alternatives to desegregation, its actual implementation seems very difficult, as there is no clear vision about the concrete steps that need to be taken. The respondents evaluate the state policy in this area as ineffective and failed, and largely believe that the significant funding, which has been allocated for financing various programmes has not been spent properly. The Roma community itself is often considered as an obstacle to the process, and not as a factor that could contribute to its success. The desired Roma integration is in many cases actually perceived as assimilation – their complete compliance with the social-economic and cultural norms and values of the majority population.

At this stage, the desegregation attempts have not raised the levels of tolerance towards Roma. On the contrary, the results have actually had the reverse effect and have provoked manifestations of intolerance, leading to secondary segregation. This brings forward the fundamental question: is desegregation the path leading to tolerance and at a later stage to respect and recognition? The answer seems to be negative. The ultimate goal of desegregation is integration in the sense of diminishing or even erasing the differences between the Roma and the majority population. If differences are erased, there is nothing left to recognise and respect.

The issue of Roma education is thus caught between two poles. One is the official declarative support for desegregation (understood as the first step on the path towards making Roma more like "us" and consequently more tolerable). On the other pole are openly intolerant public preferences to maintain the segregation until Roma are "integrated" enough to be allowed into "our" world. Yet, the two different roads have the same goal: elimination of differences. However, this is a strictly one-way process. The characteristics of the majority population are a norm – a constant that does not need to change. All the changes, all the efforts to "fit in" must be made by the Roma.

In sum, in the case of Roma in Bulgaria, difference and otherness are not tolerated. Roma can be tolerated only if they stop being what they are or if they remain confined to their segregated parallel coexistence. In both cases, recognition and respect are not even a theoretical possibility.

The debate about the compulsory religious education at a first glance presents a more optimistic picture, reflecting higher levels of tolerance and readiness to accept otherness. This can be partially a result of the fact that the Bulgarian society has a relatively low interest in religion. The focus on the secular character of education is exceptionally strong, and there is an underlined desire for preserving it.

According to the majority of respondents and numerous public figures, the separation of children in different classes on religion according to their religious belonging would not strengthen tolerance and acceptance among them. Quite the contrary, the separate classes would lead to unnecessary division and potential confrontation. The preferred model of religious education would be a course offering the children a comparative perspective and presenting different religions as cultural phenomena, as this could increase not only their knowledge about, but also tolerance towards different religions.

Only the representatives of the religious institutions and those respondents who described themselves as (very) religious believe that separate classes (for each religion) of proper confessional education would contribute to the increase of mutual tolerance. Their main argument is that by learning their own culture and religion properly, people become more open for others as well. It should be noted that the representatives of the two major religions in Bulgaria (the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Chief Mufti of Muslims in Bulgaria) are the actors who most vocally and persistently demand that the state introduces compulsory religious education into the curriculum. Smaller religious communities

(Catholics, Protestants, Armenians and Jews) all have well-organised religious courses[10] held at their places of worship and do not see any need for the introduction of religious education in schools. This is probably also a result of the fact that they do not believe that in reality it would be possible to organise so many different religious classes as to accommodate all religions practiced in Bulgaria, and that consequently such education would inevitably put the two major religions in advantage over the smaller denominations.

The question about the religious education quickly leads to debates about Islam in Bulgaria and the place of the Muslim minority in the Bulgarian society. Influenced by the European and global tendencies of confrontation with Islam, the respondents belonging to the majority population express their suspicions regarding teaching Islam in schools. The persistent stereotypes, mistrust and alienation from the Turkish minority in combination with the recent suspicions towards Islam in general influence the perceptions of some respondents, making them concerned about the possible spread of radical Islam in Bulgaria. In this light, the attitude towards Muslims in general and Turks in particular has in recent years shifted in the direction of increasing intolerance. The May 2011 incident when a mob organised by the nationalistic political party "Ataka" attacked and beat believers attending the Friday Prayer at the Sofia mosque was just the most shocking manifestation of this tendency.

The examples from various European countries of policies intolerant towards Islam have strongly influenced the Bulgarian debates about the presence of religious symbols in schools. Most often, these debates are reduced to the issue of headscarves of Muslim girls and women. Despite the fact that in Bulgaria, such cases are rather limited, the local media often devote much attention to the topic and try to initiate discussions, which are often characterised by intolerant tone. The French model of prohibition of all religious symbols in schools is most often pointed out as a model Bulgaria should follow.

Despite the arguments that religious education in schools could increase the tolerance, our analysis shows that the real effect would be most likely much different. The discussions on this topic rather point towards increased intolerance and confrontation.

Both case studies show that the Bulgarian society at the current moment in time is moving in a direction opposite from acceptance and recognition of otherness. The incidents and manifestations of intolerance have been on the rise – even regarding issues towards which the society until recently had a (predominantly) tolerant attitude. The measures, which were proposed or implemented in order to counteract these developments, have failed to produce the desired result to date. There is no consensus in the society about which good practices could be followed to change this trend. Yet, at the same time, the stereotypes about the tolerant Bulgarian society continue to be reproduced.

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[10] Actually, the Orthodox Church and the Islamic community also have their Sunday religious schools organised in churches and mosques, but they perceive this as insufficient and demand the introduction of such education in schools.

6. Key messages for policy makers

Roma desegregation:

1. Desegregation comes as a result of a long and complex process and cannot be achieved through mechanical transfer of children from one school to another as the result is usually the appearance of secondary segregation.

2. A large number of NGOs, often in cooperation or with funding from state institutions or the EU, have implemented numerous good and valuable projects. However, the majority of these projects are on ad-hoc basis and rarely have a lasting effect. The good practices from the past successful projects need to be used as an example for purposeful and active work on the national level. Future projects need to be sustainable and durable.

3. Very often, the reasons for the failure of desegregation policies are connected to the negative attitude of the Roma parents towards schools and to the fact that many of them do not comprehend and recognize the importance of education. Much more attention needs to be devoted towards informing the Roma parents and changing their attitudes regarding the education of their children.

4. Similar attention needs to be paid to changing the negative attitude of the Bulgarian parents. Information campaigns at schools, media and local communities targeting the parents of Bulgarian children are a necessary but insufficient short-term measure. In middle- and long-term, mixed schools should be made more attractive for the Bulgarian parents through "incentives" like better services, higher teaching quality and more attractive extracurricular activities compared to other schools.

5. A serious problem is also the insufficient qualification of teachers to work in multicultural schools. This can be rectified through additional free-of-charge training courses and programmes, which would increase their ability and motivation for work in a multicultural environment.

6. One of the main obstacles Roma children face in school is their low command of Bulgarian language. This problem could be solved through special auxiliary Bulgarian language courses, which would increase the performance of the children in other subjects as well.

7. The programmes for training and qualification of Roma as teacher-assistants, which proved successful in the past should be resumed, and the role and responsibilities of Roma teacher-assistants more clearly defined and implemented. If applied systematically, over a long period of time and on the national level, the teacher-assistants project could have very good results, not only increasing tolerance, but resulting in genuine acceptance in school environment.

Religious education:

1. Religious education in schools should not be compulsory. Preferably, it should be conducted in a form of a course offering the children a comparative perspective and presenting different religions as cultural phenomena, as this could increase not only their knowledge about, but also tolerance towards different religions.

2. Proper confessional education should be conducted by the religious institutions at the relevant places of worship.

3. The separation of children in different classes on religion according to their religious belonging, which would be a result of compulsory religious education in school, would not strengthen tolerance and acceptance among them, but would lead to unnecessary division and potential confrontation.

4. In practice, it would be impossible to organise so many different religious classes as to accommodate all religions practiced in Bulgaria. Consequently, such education would inevitably put the two major religions (Orthodox Christianity and Islam) in advantage over the smaller denominations.

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Annex 1: List of interviews

Case study 1:

IMIR-1: H.N., male, from Samokov, Roma, NGO activist

IMIR-2: teacher, female, from Pazardzhik, Bulgarian, works in schools with numerous Roma children

IMIR-3: V., male, from Pazardzhik, Roma, musician, works at a cultural centre

IMIR-4: V. R., male, from Pazardzhik, Bulgarian, NGO activist

IMIR-5: female, from Samokov, Roma, pedagogical advisor

IMIR-6: female, from Samokov, Roma, pre-school teacher

IMIR-7: female, from Samokov, Bulgarian, NGO activist

IMIR-8: M.I., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, expert on ethnic and religious issues, worked both for the state administration and in the NGO sector

IMIR-11: A.V., male, from Sofia, Turk, Deputy Chief Mufti in charge of education

IMIR-16: I.T., female, from Sofia, Bulgarian, sociologist, expert on Roma issues, advisor and participant in numerous projects on Roma education implemented by NGOs and state institutions

Case study 2:

IMIR-8: M.I., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, expert on ethnic and religious issues, worked both for the state administration and in the NGO sector

IMIR-9: M.P., female, from Damyanovo village, Bulgarian, kindergarten director

IMIR-10: father K., male, from Sevlievo, Bulgarian, Orthodox priest

IMIR-11: A.V., male, from Sofia, Turk, Deputy Chief Mufti in charge of education

IMIR-12: father A., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, Orthodox priest

IMIR-13: female, from Pazardzhik, Bulgarian, NGO activist

IMIR-14: male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, Protestant pastor

IMIR-15: male, from Sarnica, Muslim Bulgarian, headteacher of secondary school

IMIR-17: male, from Plovdiv, Turk, former regional mufti

IMIR 18: M.K., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, secondary school history teacher

IMIR 19: M.G., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, university professor in history

IMIR 20: B.M., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, politician – representative of the Sofia municipal council

Discussion group:

G.N., female, from Sofia, Bulgarian, university professor, expert on gender and minority issues

I.K., female, from Sofia, Bulgarian, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, expert on Roma issues

M.N., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, former employee of the state agency for minorities

M.I. male, from Haskovo, Turk, secondary school history teacher

S.E., male, from Sofia, Bulgarian, secondary schools religion teacher, graduate of the Sofia Seminary

C.G., female, from Sofia, Bulgarian, university professor, expert on relations between Christianity and Islam

Annex 2: Interview guide

Interview guide on the topic of Roma segregation / desegregation

1. Are you familiar with the issue of Roma education? How well?

2. Have you heard about the programmes for desegregation of Roma schools?

3. Do you know about any concrete case of desegregation? Can you describe it in more detail?

4. What was the attitude and what were the actions taken by the parents, teachers, local authorities?

5. How would you evaluate these reactions?

6. In your opinion, how could the norms of multicultural diversity and coexistence in schools be put into practice?

7. Should separate Roma schools exist? Why?

8. Should all children visit mixed schools? Why?

9. Should special forms of education like additional and auxiliary classes, and additional extracurricular activities be introduced in schools visited by Roma children?

10. Do mixed schools and mixed classes help or hinder mutual understanding between different ethnic groups?

11. What is the opinion of your colleagues and friends? Have you ever discussed these issues?

12. Under which circumstances would mixed classes and schools be acceptable both for the Roma community and for the majority population?

13. Are you familiar with the measures taken by the state to overcome the resistance to the mixed classes and schools?

14. Are these measures effective?

15. Which other measures are possible in your opinion?

16. What influence do the media have on the formation of the public opinion on the issue of desegregation of the Roma schools?

Interview guide on the topic of religious education in schools

1. Are you familiar with the proposal of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church for introduction of compulsory religious education in schools? What do you think about this issue?

2. Should religious education be compulsory for all pupils?

3. What should the form of this subject be – proper confessional education for children belonging to different religions, or a comparative course presenting the cultorologic aspects of the main religions in the country?

4. Do you know in which way the children learn about the main religions in schools at the moment?

5. How would religious education contribute to the upbringing of the children and to the coexistence of different cultures?

6. What is the role of the religious institutions in this process?

7. What is the role of the state institutions in this process?

8. What is the role of the civil society organisations in this process?

9. How does learning about different religions contribute to the multicultural diversity and cohabitation in schools?

10. What is your opinion about the courses for the study of Quran, organized by the Chief Mufti office in some towns and villages across the country?

11. What is your opinion on religious education organized by some other minority religious communities –Jews, Armenians, others?

12. Do you think that the secondary religious schools (Orthodox and Islamic) have their place and belong into the system of education? Do they contribute to the pluralism in the society?

13. What do your colleagues think about these issues?

14. How do you perceive the religious symbols in schools? Do you approve or disapprove them? What do you think about the proposed changes to the law on education, which would prohibit any kind of religious symbols in schools?

15. Do you think our society is tolerant towards different religious groups? To what extent?

16. What is the role of the media in trying to increase the levels of tolerance towards the cultural and religious diversity in the country?

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