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**ACCEPT**  
PLURALISM

## **TOLERANCE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY DISCOURSES IN BULGARIA**

Marko Hajdinjak and Maya Kosseva  
with Antonina Zhelyazkova

International Center for Minority Studies  
and Intercultural Relations (IMIR)  
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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

# **TOLERANCE AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY DISCOURSES IN BULGARIA**

**Marko Hajdinjak and Maya Kosseva**  
(with contribution of Antonina Zhelyazkova)

IMIR



**Work Package 5 – New Knowledge on Tolerance and  
Cultural Diversity in Europe**

**D5.1 Country Synthesis Reports on Tolerance and  
Cultural diversity - Concepts and Practices**

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## **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 PLURALISM 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.

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**Maya Kosseva** is a project coordinator and researcher at IMIR with PhD in History from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski."

**Marko Hajdinjak** is a project coordinator and researcher at IMIR. He has an MA degree in Nationalism Studies from Central European University, Budapest.

**Antonina Zhelyazkova** is Chairperson of the Board of Directors at IMIR. She holds a PhD in History from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski."

E-mail:

Contact details:

International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations (IMIR)

Antim I St. 55, Sofia 1303, Bulgaria

Tel: (+359 2) 8323-112

Fax: (+359 2) 9310-583

E-mail: [marko@imir-bg.org](mailto:marko@imir-bg.org); [mkosseva@yahoo.com](mailto:mkosseva@yahoo.com); [zhelyazkova@inet.bg](mailto:zhelyazkova@inet.bg)

Web site: <http://www.imir-bg.org/>

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## **Executive Summary**

The following report examines issues of intolerance, tolerance and acceptance of diversity in Bulgaria.

Ethnic, cultural and religious diversity in Bulgaria has deep historical roots, going back several centuries to the times of the Ottoman Empire. When the modern Bulgarian state was formed in 1878, the society and state institutions have had to face the problem of finding a balance between accommodation of this diversity and the aspiration for building a mono-national Orthodox-Christian nation-state. 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.

The process of recognition of diversity and multiculturalism in Bulgarian society and of protection of minority rights truly started only after 1989 as an inseparable part of the democratisation of Bulgaria and its aspiration to join the EU. 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.

### *Chapter 1: Bulgarian Ethnic Model – Parallel Cohabitation or Multicultural Recognition?*

This chapter provides a brief historical overview of the development of Bulgarian state and the process of national identity formation, discusses the main cultural diversity challenges Bulgaria faced in the course of the past 30 years, and analyses the concepts and definitions of tolerance in Bulgaria. Comparing the political, public and media discourse about the notions of tolerance and acceptance, the chapter tries to establish where Bulgaria stands today in its periodic oscillation between two poles – intolerance and multicultural respect.

Despite the political recognition of different ethnic and religious minorities and their rights after 1989, the majority population and the minorities largely continue to live side by side. The otherness in Bulgaria is tolerated without being actually accepted. In other words, ethnic Bulgarians and the minority groups accept the otherness, and there are numerous areas of public life (politics, culture, economy, sports, media, etc) where members of different ethnic and religious communities interact. At the same time, the psychological division line is preserved and in private space, the boundaries of the formal parallel existence are seldom crossed.

Numerous studies conducted between 1990 and 2010 show that Bulgarians perceive themselves as very tolerant. This stereotype has been actively promoted by the media and the leading Bulgarian politicians. However, more recent studies argue that coexistence and cohabitation of Bulgarians with other communities are not a result of conscious tolerance towards diversity and otherness, but merely a manifestation of putting up with it. In other words, what can be observed in Bulgaria is above all liberal tolerance. While allowing for the free expression of ethnic, religious and cultural identity of minorities, the majority society is not really prepared to respect and accept them as equals.

Due to still relatively small levels of immigration to Bulgaria, immigrant communities are not perceived as a diversity challenge. The most important “significant others” for the Bulgarian majority population are the native minorities. There are over 15 ethnic communities in Bulgaria. Bulgarians represent 83.9% of the population. The three largest minorities are Turks, Roma and Pomaks (or Muslim Bulgarians). These are also the three groups with the most significant tolerance-related problems – each in a different way and for different reasons.

Turks are well integrated, politically organised and with a very clear and well-expressed self-awareness. Education in Turkish is provided on all levels, Turks can freely practice their religion, they have newspapers and electronic media in their language and are actively involved in political life in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, the full integration into the political and public space did not lead to genuine coexistence based on respect and acceptance on the side of the Bulgarian majority and for the larger part of the last 20 years, their attitude towards the Turkish minority can best be described as a case of liberal tolerance. Furthermore, in recent years the anti-Turkish sentiments and intolerant attitude have been on the rise. The majority believes that the Turkish community has too much political and economic power and finds such situation to be intolerable. On the other hand, Turks do not want to be simply tolerated – they want to be included and actively participate in all spheres of social, political, cultural and economic life in the country.

Roma are almost completely excluded from the society. They are rejected not just by the majority population but other minorities as well. The widespread perception is that the state institutions “tolerate” Roma too much and that instead of tolerating, the state should control them. On the institutional level, the state policies towards Roma can be rated as tolerance but with a reservation that it is tolerance with the clear goal of social-economic integration. Despite these measures (many of which suffered from poor implementation, insufficient funding and lack of commitment), the situation of the Bulgarian Roma has not changed substantially yet. If anything, it changed for worse. The general public still perceives them in overwhelmingly negative terms and continues to reject and exclude them. This is visible in the education system, health care, housing, labour market and numerous other areas.

Pomaks are tolerated as a religious minority, but any attempt to assert their different ethnic or national identity is met by a furiously intolerant rejection of such claims. Pomak self-identification is often presented as a threat to the national interests and an attack on the national unity. While they are free to practice their religion and manifest their cultural identity without hindrance in the private and social sphere, the state and the majority population strictly refuse to acknowledge their right to genuine self-identification. All attempts from within the Pomak community to assert their identity as different from the Bulgarian majority usually lead to an overly negative and aggressive reaction from the state institutions, media and the public. The overall attitude towards Pomaks can thus be rated as intolerance. Without recognising its existence, there cannot be any discussion about tolerance and acceptance of a particular community.

Two smaller minority communities (Armenians and Jews) are perhaps the only indicator giving ground to the claim that the Bulgarian society is not a complete stranger to mechanisms of tolerant attitude and acceptance of otherness. Both minority groups have been treated with respect and recognition and have always enjoyed full freedom to express their ethnic, religious and cultural identity. One pragmatic explanation for this is the small number of members of both communities. For this reason, the majority has never perceived them even as a potential threat to the national unity.

For the majority of Bulgarians, the mere fact of practical cohabitation in a multi-cultural environment is often enough to perceive themselves as being tolerant. However, the “tolerance” in the Bulgarian case can be understood only as “putting up with someone different,” without accepting and understanding them. The term “tolerance” is thus above all a synonym of bearable and parallel cohabitation. The situation could be classified as liberal tolerance – the right of the minorities to express their ethnic, religious and cultural characteristics is respected, but only as long as it is

considered (by the state institutions, political actors and even the majority population) that this is not in contradiction with the national interests.

*Chapter 2: (In)Tolerance of Difference in Bulgarian Schools: Discourses and Practices*

The goal of the chapter is to analyse the processes and the changes in attitude towards ethnic, cultural and religious otherness in the Bulgarian schools during the first decade of 2000s. We focused our attention on elementary and secondary education. 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. A discussion group with six participants (experts from different fields) was also organised.

The attitudes towards otherness are examined through two case studies. The first one deals with the issue of education of Roma children in Bulgarian schools and provides an excellent opportunity to critically evaluate the attitude of the majority population towards the Roma community.

The research showed that the attitude towards the Roma minority is highly problematic, as they are often perceived as a demographic and social threat. The issue of Roma education 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.

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.

At a first glance, the debate about the compulsory religious education displays a relatively high level of tolerance and readiness to accept otherness. The focus on the secular character of education is exceptionally strong, and there is an underlined desire for preserving it. This results in 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. 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.

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 becomes 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.

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 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.

### *Chapter 3: Voting Rights of Bulgarian Minorities*

The debate about the political participation of Bulgarian minorities and especially about their allegedly disproportionately strong influence on the election results is among the most disputed and polarising issues in Bulgaria. Populist and nationalist political actors have periodically raised demands to limit the voting rights of Bulgarian minorities. Their intentions were partially realised in 2011 with the passing of the new Election Code.

While introducing numerous positive changes and bringing some much needed clarity and order into the previously fragmented and confusing electoral legislation, the Code is highly controversial and has drawn criticism from international institutions, Bulgarian human rights watchdogs and other civic organisations, and some political actors. The most problematic issue is the six-month residency requirement for participation in local elections, which is an infringement on voting rights of numerous Bulgarian citizens. This restriction is aimed above all at the large community of people holding a dual Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship (estimated at up to 380,000).

The new Election Code also tries to prevent or discourage some of the most notorious illegal and illegitimate practices that regularly accompany the elections in Bulgaria. One such practice is the so-called vote buying – a process when people vote for a certain party in exchange for money or other type of bribe. Roma are most often accused that they sell their votes and in this way distort the election results. The media reporting on alleged Roma vote selling also strongly contributes to the prevailing negative public attitude towards Roma.

The key question this chapter therefore tries to answer is how the populist and nationalistic political agenda on voting rights of Bulgarian minorities influences the relations between different ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The debate on voting rights is an excellent catalyst for evaluating the attitudes towards minorities – ranging from extremely intolerant demands for full revoking of existing political and voting rights to calls for genuine acceptance and respect of diversity.

The fieldwork was conducted between October 2011 and February 2012. It included both desk research (the media coverage, statistical data, legal texts, policy documents, and proceedings of the National Assembly and relevant parliamentary committees) and empirical fieldwork. The most

important event that marked the period in which the fieldwork was conducted were the presidential and local elections, which took place in October 2011. During the fieldwork, 14 semi-standardised interviews were taken.

One of the main findings of our research is that the changes introduced by the new Election Code have tainted the pre-election process and the election campaign. They also intensified the inter-ethnic distrust and confrontation.

The research showed that the declarative support for the democratic and tolerant arrangements where all Bulgarian citizens have equal political rights is quickly cast aside when it comes to the concrete cases concerning ethnic and religious otherness. The fact that Bulgarian Turks have been directly affected by the new Election Code has caused a barely concealed relief among the majority population, rather than an open indignation over the undemocratic arrangement. Such an attitude is an indication of a low level of tolerance towards the minorities and of immature civil consciousness of the society.

Three main discourses on the state of inter-ethnic relations in Bulgaria can be identified:

- 1) inter-ethnic relations are not on a downward curve, but follow a cyclical pattern – deterioration in the election period after which they return to normality;
- 2) inter-ethnic relations are steadily deteriorating, not just because of the political games and manipulation, but because of the economic crisis and worsening standard of living
- 3) not only inter-ethnic relations are worsening, but relations among all people in Bulgaria in general

### *Conclusion*

The current research has established a significant discrepancy between the official political and public discourse, and the reality. While the public speech is focused on notions of tolerance and acceptance, the concrete examples and everyday practices testify about entrenched intolerance that can be easily mobilised in the critical moments like political, social and economic crisis.

Despite the fact that the central government periodically comes up with different programmes and strategies for integration of minorities, the practical implementation is either lacking or is flawed and inadequate. The research showed that the regional solutions tailored to the ethnic, cultural and religious structure of the population on the local level can be far more successful than the solutions proposed on the national level. The largest problem is to find a way to transfer the functioning everyday tolerance from the local level into the national context, which continues to be dominated by intolerant stereotypes and prejudices. A larger regional and municipal autonomy to address the needs and problems of the local population according to its specific features would be a positive step in turning the unsuccessful top-down approach into a more appropriate two-way process.

The research also established that many people are either ignorant of or tend to disregard the numerous problems that could provoke or intensify tensions between different ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Forming and changing the collective matrix is a long and contradictory process. Our recommendation is to intensify the research of inter-ethnic relations – not just in Bulgarian context, but also in the European one. The disclosure of good practices and popularisation of results from similar studies increase the sensitivity of the society for such topics. They also stimulate the willingness of state institutions to look for and implement more adequate and comprehensive policies.

### **Keywords**

Intolerance, tolerance, recognition and respect; segregation and exclusion; multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence; ethnic and religious minorities; Bulgaria; Turks; Roma; Pomaks; populism and nationalism; education and education policy; religious education; religious symbols; political participation of minorities; Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens; vote buying; Election Code; voting rights.



## **Introduction**

This report explores and analyses discourses and practices of intolerance, tolerance and respect in contemporary Bulgaria. Although the first chapter of the report briefly looks into the historical experiences of the Bulgarian state and society to deal with ethnic and religious diversity, this historical background serves mainly to help understand the multicultural challenges in Bulgaria today. The report examines what tolerance means and positions it in the relationship with concepts such as multiculturalism, liberalism, national identity, minority rights and pluralism. The critical analysis of institutional and legal arrangements, daily practices, and public discourses with a special attention devoted to conflict areas and contentious issues aims at establishing what kind of policies and practices would be most appropriate to make the Bulgarian society more tolerant. In other words, the ultimate goals of the research presented in the current report is to come up with the relevant messages for Bulgarian policy makers, civil society and minority groups and organisations in order to move a step closer towards building a tolerant society that respects and accepts cultural diversity.

The first chapter of the report represents a review of relevant scholarly literature, policy documents, empirical studies, and other appropriate materials. The chapter begins with a brief historical overview of the development of Bulgarian state and the process of national identity formation. The issue of Bulgarian citizenship is discussed, especially in its relation to the question of inclusion into / exclusion from the Bulgarian national body. The ambiguous and somewhat troublesome relation of Bulgarian state with Europe / EU is also discussed.

The central part of the first chapter examines the main cultural diversity challenges Bulgaria faced in the course of the past 30 years. The most important minority groups, which have posed a challenge to national homogeneity, are presented. The chapter traces how concepts of intolerance, tolerance, acceptance and respect translated into practice over different periods of time. Three main periods are covered: 1980-1989 (the period of most repressive assimilation policies of the Communist regime); 1990-2005 (the period of “the Bulgarian ethnic model”); and from 2005 to today (the rise of nationalism and interethnic tensions).

In the concluding part of the first chapter, the concepts and definitions of tolerance in Bulgaria are analysed. Comparing the political, public and media discourse about the notions of tolerance and acceptance, we try to establish where Bulgaria stands today in its periodic oscillation between two poles – intolerance and multicultural respect.

The second and the third chapter are based on two phases of fieldwork research. One phase looked at the discourses and practices of intolerance/tolerance/respect in the field of education, and the other dealt with the political participation and representation of minorities.

The second chapter “(In)tolerance of Difference in Bulgarian Schools” analyses the attitude towards the ethnic, cultural and religious otherness in the Bulgarian elementary and secondary education. Two case studies were selected: issue of education of Roma children and the place of religion in the Bulgarian schools. The first case study 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 brings forward the question about the attitude to religious otherness in the Bulgarian society and above all the position of the traditional Muslim communities. 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 third chapter “Voting Rights of Bulgarian Minorities” looks at the debate about the political participation of Bulgarian minorities – one of the most disputed and polarising issues in Bulgaria. The fieldwork on which this chapter is based was conducted against the background of two crucial events: passing of the new Election Code (passed in January 2011 and amended in June of the same year) and the October 2011 presidential and local elections. The Code is highly controversial and received much criticism both in the country and abroad. The elections, on which substantial number of citizens, especially those of minority origin, were disqualified from voting, are widely considered to be the most flawed and fraudulent elections since 1989.

The analysis pays attention to one of the most widespread dishonest vote-rigging practices – the so-called vote buying (voting for a certain party or candidate in exchange for money or other type of bribe). As Roma are most often accused that they sell their votes and in this way distort the election results, the public debates are saturated with extreme positions regarding the voting rights of Roma citizens and their ability to take an informed decision on the elections. Hence, certain political forces periodically try to limit the voting rights of Roma citizens.

Another contentious issue analysed in this chapter is the voting of Bulgarian Turks, who have emigrated to the Republic of Turkey and have a dual (Bulgarian and Turkish) citizenship. Although the issue of voting rights of emigrants does not concern only the Bulgarian Turks, but also ethnic Bulgarians who have left the country since 1989, the debates focus on the Bulgarian emigrants of Turkish origin because the practice has shown that they are considerably more active and organised voters than the ethnic Bulgarians in emigration. The attempts to disenfranchise Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens therefore have a very practical goal – to decrease the electoral success of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, the main political party representing the Bulgarian Turks.

The concluding part of this report highlights the new knowledge acquired during the case studies and outlines the main positions, discourses and practices regarding the tolerance and cultural diversity in Bulgaria. Above all, it attempts to answer the following key question: is the Bulgarian society becoming more or less tolerant towards ethnic, religious and cultural diversity? Both case studies examined here have proven to be excellent catalyst for evaluating the attitudes towards minorities – ranging from the intolerant agenda of nationalistic parties to cautious calls for genuine acceptance and respect of diversity.



## **Chapter 1: Bulgarian Ethnic Model – Parallel Cohabitation or Multicultural Recognition?**

From the very moment of the formation of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, Bulgarian society and state institutions have had to face the problem of balancing between the accommodation of ethnic, religious and cultural diversity in the country and the aspiration for building a unitary nation-state. For more than a century (until 1989), the state and the majority population struggled to accept the minorities as an inseparable part of the nation and respect their rights. Although the Bulgarian legislation and above all the Constitution(s) included provisions, which protected religious, cultural and linguistic rights of minority communities, in practice these rights were often violated. Tolerance on paper quite often lost the battle with intolerant practices in reality. The process of recognition of diversity and multiculturalism in Bulgarian society and of protection of minority rights truly started only after 1989 as an inseparable part of the democratisation of Bulgaria and its aspiration to join the EU.

After the Liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, political, academic and cultural elites directed their resources and capabilities to develop and strengthen the Bulgarian national identity. The long tradition of Bulgarian statehood,<sup>1</sup> Bulgarian role in the development of Slavic literature and Cyrillic script, and its belonging to the Christian world were the most common themes in their efforts. In the entire period before the WWII, the existence of various minority groups in the country was perceived as a colourful fact, yet little attention was paid to their specific features or their position in Bulgarian society. During the Socialist period, the minorities were almost completely marginalised in scientific studies and were mentioned only as a folkloric and ethnographic addition to the wealth of the Bulgarian culture. The Socialist regime strived towards building an ethno-national state and the majority of intellectuals and artists have directed their efforts towards justifying such policy.

The debates about diversity in Bulgarian society and about tolerance and coexistence were introduced into the public space after the changes in 1989. The first step was the official recognition of different ethnic and religious groups. They were “discovered” also by the researchers from various fields in social sciences and quickly placed on the ethnographic map of Bulgaria. The avalanche of studies dedicated to the ethno-cultural situation in Bulgaria followed soon.

The first sociological studies about levels of tolerance and mechanisms for coexistence of different communities were also made. The long-lasting interdisciplinary research “Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria” (1993-2000), conducted by historians, ethnologists, sociologists, political scientists, has brought forward the thesis that during the centuries of coexistence, the Bulgarian society has set up a sustainable mechanism for accepting otherness along the line contact – conflict.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Bulgarians and the minority groups accept the otherness, and there are numerous areas of social life (politics, culture, economy, sports, media, etc) where members of different ethnic and religious communities interact.

At the same time, the psychological division line is preserved and in private space the boundaries of the formal parallel existence are seldom crossed (hence the exceptionally low number of mixed marriages in the country). It was also noted that Bulgarians often have negative stereotypes about the “others” on the group level, but disregard them on the personal level and have no problem in accepting their neighbour, colleague or friend from a different ethnic or religious community.

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<sup>1</sup> The First Bulgarian Empire lasted from 681 to 1018, when it was conquered by the Byzantines, and the Second Bulgarian Empire from 1185 to 1396, when it fell under Ottoman rule.

<sup>2</sup> The first published result of the research was the book *Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims*. (Zhelyazkova, Nielsen, Kepel, 1995).

Gradually the debates have centred on the question whether tolerance in Bulgaria truly exists or whether the notion of tolerant Bulgarians is basically a well-entrenched myth. Numerous studies conducted between 1990 and 2010 show that Bulgarians perceive themselves as very tolerant.<sup>3</sup> This stereotype has been actively promoted by the media and the leading Bulgarian politicians.<sup>4</sup>

However, to justify this self-perception one needs to look back into the past – the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first example of Bulgarian tolerance usually brought forward is the shelter provided to the Armenian refugees, fleeing the genocide in 1910s. Preserving their cultural and religious specific features, Armenians quickly integrated into the society and have never been victims of intolerance (Miceva, 2001). Another group of refugees, who settled in Bulgaria after 1917, were Russians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians. They were also accepted in an organised manner by the state, quickly integrated into Bulgarian society, and were often actively involved in academic and cultural life in the country (Kyoseva, 2002).

The crucial moment demonstrating the genuineness of Bulgarian tolerance was the saving of Bulgarian Jews during the WWII. In reaction to the German demand for the deportation of Jews, a massive public protest was organised, headed by the members of the parliament and the leaders of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. As a result, the government defied the German demands and did not deport the Jewish population (Cohen, 1995; Eskenazi, Krispin, 2002, pp. 546-585).

An interesting case for evaluating discourses of tolerance, acceptance or indeed intolerance and rejection in Bulgaria concerns the repressive assimilation campaigns undertaken by the Communist government against Pomaks and Turks. In the 1980s, the Bulgarian Muslim communities were forced to change their names and to accept “Bulgarian” ones. In addition, all other distinctive signs defining them as a group like wearing of traditional clothes, customs and religion were also prohibited. A small but active group of Bulgarian intellectuals has condemned this act, but under the strict control of the Communist regime and bombardment of the media propaganda, there was no popular reaction on the larger scale.

Debate continues as to how much society actually knew about these events, how important was the fear of Communist repression and how widespread was the genuine disinterest in the fate of their Muslim co-citizens. In the end, the mass protests of the Turkish community and especially their exodus in the summer of 1989 (sarcastically dubbed by the media “the great excursion”) have been recognized as being among the most important events leading to the fall of the Communist regime. The protests, initiated by the Turkish community, soon acquired a national character and among the demands put forward to the authorities were the protection of minority rights and the re-instatement of original names to Turks and Pomaks (Stoyanov, 1998; Yalamov, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> The survey of the Open Society Institute Sofia conducted in June 2008 gave the following answers to the question “Are Bulgarians tolerant towards those who are different”: fully tolerant – 15.1%, rather tolerant – 37.7%, rather intolerant – 23.6%, not tolerant at all – 10.1%, cannot say – 13.4%. *Социални дистанции Юни 2008* (Social Distances June 2008). <http://www.opendata.bg/opendata.php?q=44&s=4&c=20&t=1&sel=1>

See also Georgiev, 1992 and Fotev, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the President Georgi Parvanov praised the high levels of ethnic tolerance in Bulgaria at the Alliance of Civilizations Forum held in Istanbul in April 2009 (Novinite.com, 2009a). He described Bulgaria as “a model of religious and ethnic tolerance” at the 15<sup>th</sup> Summit Meeting of Heads of State of Central Europe (Parvanov, 2008) and explained that Bulgaria was “joining the European Union with its best traditions of ethnic and religious tolerance established in the course of decades” in his address to the European Parliament (Parvanov, 2007). In his lecture at the Sofia University, President Parvanov again underlined that Bulgaria offered “a model of dealing with ethnic differences, it set an example of tolerance and understanding at a time when many European states are experiencing ethnic tensions and conflicts (Parvanov, 2002). The former Prime Minister Stanishev also praised “the long history of tolerance based on the common understanding that cultural diversity is a great asset in our society” (Stanishev, 2008) and described the tolerance and mutual respect between the different religions in Bulgaria as “a value that is an indispensable part of our democracy” (Stanishev, 2006). The politicians from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (political party representing mostly interests of minorities) have also often praised the “Bulgarian ethnic model” and their own merits for the levels of tolerance in country – “one of the biggest MRF’s successes is its main role and contribution to establishing the successful Bulgarian ethnic model” (“History of the MRF”).

Although these protests and especially the restoration of the names are often considered as additional examples of Bulgarian tolerance, it is very difficult to evaluate how involved Bulgarian society really was in trying to protect the rights of Bulgarian Muslims. On one side, the society at the time was sharply divided over the issue and there were also counter protests, where demands that the Muslims should remain with the Bulgarian names were voiced. On the other, it is an indisputable fact that Bulgaria has avoided the ethnic conflicts of the Yugoslav type and that the political class and the media intentionally imposed the notion of the Bulgarian ethnic model, which was widely accepted by the society (Erdoğan, 2002; Zhelyazkova, 2001a, pp. 295-300).

The debates on ethnic diversity and tolerance in Bulgaria have become more critical in recent years. A newly surfaced thesis argues that coexistence with others over the centuries was not a result of conscious tolerance towards diversity and otherness, but merely a manifestation of putting up with it. In other words, what can be observed in Bulgaria is above all liberal tolerance. While allowing for the free expression of ethnic, religious and cultural identity of minorities, the majority society is not really prepared to respect and accept the minorities as equals.

Largely, this is a consequence of the fact that for decades, minorities have been strongly marginalised in public spaces, which were strictly controlled by the state. This is especially the case with the Roma, who were practically invisible for the wider society under the Communism. They lived in clusters in segregated settlements and worked only in certain professions. In the democratic period, they have become visible to the society, while at the same time their social problems have become ever more intense. As a consequence, the level of rejection of Roma among Bulgarians has been on the constant increase (Tomova, 1995; Mizov, 2003; Pamporov, 2006; Grekova, 2008).

At the same time, there is an increasing anti-Turkish sentiment in the country, fuelled above all by several nationalistic and extreme right political parties, which gained popularity in the last 5-6 years. The increased intolerance towards the Turkish community has also come as a consequence of the widespread dissatisfaction over the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the main political party representing the Bulgarian Turks. The influence and importance of the MRF has been steadily increasing over the years and the party has been an actual kingmaker from 2001 to 2009, when it participated in two consecutive government coalitions. The MRF is widely perceived as the most closely linked to the grey economy and corrupt practices among the Bulgarian political parties.<sup>5</sup> The distrust and dissatisfaction of the majority population over what is perceived as “Turkish” party has quickly transformed into the ever-strengthening perception that Turks in Bulgaria yield too much political and economic power.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Bulgaria and Europe***

### National identity and state formation

The modern Bulgarian national identity was constructed around the following identity markers: the Bulgarian language, Orthodox Christianity, historic and cultural traditions, and the geographic

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<sup>5</sup> These perceptions have been fuelled by numerous corruption scandals, which were brought to the public attention in the recent years – the most important being the allegations made by the Parliamentary Anti-corruption Committee that the MRF leader Ahmed Dogan (philosopher by education) breached the conflict of interests provisions and has served private interests when receiving 750,000 EUR fee as a consultant of four large-scale hydroelectricity projects, funded by the state – “Tsankov Kamak,” “Dospat,” “Gorna Arda” and “Tundzha Dam” (Novinite.com. 2010b). Anti-MRF sentiments were also intensified by two scandalous Dogan’s public statements. Just before the parliamentary elections in 2005, he used the term “circle of firms” to describe the fact that each political party had a network of economic groups and companies that supported it financially – quite often through illegal payments (Gounev, Bezlov, 2010, p. 210). While talking to MRF supporters in Kochan village ahead of July 2009 elections, Dogan said: “I am the instrument of power, who distributes the bits of financing in the state. The power is concentrated in me, not in your MPs” (Sofia Echo. 2009.).

<sup>6</sup> A very popular expression, especially among certain politicians and often quoted by media, is that the “MRF has overreached with power.” (News.bg. 2009).

boundaries of the medieval Bulgarian state. The Bulgarian struggle for national self-awareness and independence from the Ottoman Empire was based on two main pillars: efforts to establish and spread the Bulgarian national identity through education and culture, and to set up an independent Bulgarian church emancipated from the Greek Patriarchate in Constantinople. A network of secular schools where education was conducted in Bulgarian language led to the formation of the Bulgarian intellectual elite, the core of which represented the teachers.

The Bulgarian language education and the establishment of the autonomous Bulgarian church (both achieved while Bulgaria was still under the Ottoman rule) were the necessary catalysts, through which the Bulgarian national liberation movement acquired a revolutionary character in the period after the Crimean Wars (1853-1856). In the two decades preceding the national independence (1878), Bulgarians formed numerous revolutionary committees and insurgent brigades, ultimately resulting in the Stara Zagora uprising (September 1875), April uprising (April 1876) and all-national participation in the Russian-Turkish Liberation War (1877-1878), which brought about the re-establishment of the Bulgarian state (Zhelyazkova, 2008, pp. 570-582).

The result of the Ottoman defeat in the Russian-Turkish War was the formation of the so-called “San Stefano Bulgaria” – a territorial ideal that the Bulgarian state continued to strive for at least until 1944. Although the San Stefano Treaty (signed on 3 March 1878) was revised after few months at the Congress of Berlin (13 June – 13 July 1878) and the newly established Bulgarian state was significantly cut down in size (with regions of Thrace and Macedonia remaining Ottoman territories and considerable lands becoming a part of Serbia), it became a decisive landmark shaping both the internal and external policies of the Bulgarian state.

By contrast, the Treaty of Berlin, signed on 13 July 1878, has entered the national mythology as the second “black day” for the Bulgarian nation (the first was the fall under the Ottoman rule in the 14<sup>th</sup> century) (Daskalov, 2004; Genchev, 1977). The Congress of Berlin gave birth to the so-called Bulgarian national question – the issue of the national unification of all territories populated by the Bulgarian diaspora, which remained outside the borders of the mother-state. Especially important was the “Macedonian question.” Macedonia (above all Ohrid and its monasteries) was perceived as a spiritual centre of medieval Bulgarian religion, art and education. From 1878 to 1914, Macedonian-born refugees and emigrants to Bulgaria (around 100,000 by 1912) played an exceptionally important role in the political life of the country. Their number and influence increased significantly after the failure of the Ilinden-Preobrazhenie Uprising in 1903. Following this event, there was a general consensus in Bulgaria that war with Ottoman Empire was unavoidable if all-Bulgarian national unification was to be achieved (Lalkov, 1998, pp. 172-178).

The Congress of Berlin also marked the beginning of the long ambiguous relation of Bulgaria with “Europe” and the constant shifts between pro-Russian and pro-Western European foreign policy orientation of the young state. While some prominent Bulgarian intellectuals stressed the Europeanness of Bulgarians, others viewed Europe as something different from and quite often antagonistic to both Slavdom and Orthodox Christianity, which were among the most important Bulgarian identity markers (Mishkova, 2005).

Bulgarian nationalism has been largely a hybrid, containing elements of both German cultural and ethnic nationalism and French civic nationalism. On one side, the Bulgarian nation-building process was driven by a clear goal of establishing a Bulgarian state for the Bulgarian nation and its ultimate goal was the unification of all territories perceived as Bulgarian ethnic and cultural space. On the other hand, the presence of a large number of people belonging to various religious and ethnic communities different from the Orthodox Christian, Bulgarian-speaking majority, also necessitated a different approach. This led to the inclusion of elements of civic nationalism and periodic attempts of the Bulgarian state to come to terms with the ethnic and religious diversity in the country.

Despite certain hesitations and distrust, the period between national independence and the end of the First World War (1878-1918) was generally marked by a strong pro-European orientation of the

Bulgarian state (Daskalov, 1994, p. 46). This has drastically changed in 1918. As the losing side in the WWI, Bulgaria had to conclude humiliating peace treaties, which were perceived in the country as a national catastrophe.<sup>7</sup> Henceforth, Europe was no longer an attractive and desired role model for the Bulgarian nation-building and the political and intellectual elites turned their attention to the search for “the uniquely Bulgarian” features of the national identity and character. In the inter-war period, the discussions on the Bulgarian identity and its place in Europe thus focused on the opposition between “ours” and “foreign” (Mutafchiev, 1987).

Disillusioned and disappointed by the treatment and attitude of the democratic and liberal European countries (mostly France and UK), Bulgaria in the 1930s endorsed the German totalitarian economic doctrine, which placed the state above the needs of the society. The political developments in the country followed a similar direction. Extreme right wing forces and authoritarian ideas gained popularity as a result of the gradual orientation of Bulgaria towards Germany (another country, which suffered a failure in the WWI and was seeking a retribution for the European punitive measures). At the same time, the leftist ideas spread among that part of the society, which turned again to Russia (Soviet Union) and Slavdom as a counterweight to Europe.

In the second half of the 1930s, the political parties were banned and under Tsar Boris’ authoritarian rule, Bulgaria began to gravitate towards the alliance with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The promise of territorial expansion (especially the annexation of Macedonia) was again an exceptionally strong factor, which pulled Bulgaria into the German camp during World War II (Lalkov, 1998, pp. 220-223).

After the war, Bulgaria became a Communist country and a loyal member of the Soviet bloc. In a sharp contrast with the post-independence period (late 19<sup>th</sup> century), when Bulgaria was struggling to “return to Europe” and when its European identity and heritage was strongly emphasised, the political discourse, literature and social sciences of the post-WWII Bulgaria completely lacked any reference to European identity and European orientation. Instead, the Bulgarian “Slavic identity” was emphasised, demonstrating the closeness in origin and culture of Bulgarians with the Soviet/Russian nation (Lory, 2005, p. 57).

Radical changes swept through the education system. Communist ideology and Marxist theory became the backbone of the educational process, aimed at raising the children in the spirit of supra-national Socialist identity. Textbooks were rewritten and purged of any reference to Bulgarian ties with the Western European and other capitalist states (Jelavich, 2003, pp. 351-352; Manchev, 2003, pp. 176-177).

Religious communities were the first to suffer the consequences of the new policies of the Communist regime, aimed at changing the identities of Bulgarian people. As religion was an exceptionally important segment of the national identity on the Balkans, many churches, mosques and other places of worship were closed and through various forms of repression, people were diverted away from the religion. The repressive measures were most severe in the case of the Bulgarian Muslim communities (Turks, Pomaks, Muslim Roma) and their intensity only increased in time, reaching its peak in the 1980s.

The aim of the exceptionally repressive assimilation campaign against the Bulgarian Turks was the complete annihilation of a separate Turkish ethnic and religious identity in the country. As a result, the Turkish community reacted by withdrawal and self-isolation (Zhelyazkova, 1998, pp. 381-382). The opposition to the new rules and deliberate efforts to preserve identity were manifested through many everyday practices. For example, most of the rituals connected with the life cycle like births, weddings

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<sup>7</sup> The most important was the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine, signed on 27 November 1919 at Neuilly-sur-Seine, France. As a result, Bulgaria had to cede Western Thrace to Greece (thereby losing its direct outlet to the Aegean Sea), substantial areas on its western border to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and the region of Southern Dobrudja to Romania. Bulgaria was also required to reduce its army to 20,000 men and pay reparations exceeding \$400 million. See *Treaty of Peace Between the Allied and Associated Powers and Bulgaria*, 1919.

and funerals were conducted in secrecy. Despite the obligatory change of the names and their use in the public space, Turks continued to use their original, Muslim names within their families and communities. The newborn children also received a traditional name, alongside the official Bulgarian-sounding name under which they were listed in the documents.

This widespread resistance on numerous levels made it possible to quickly return to the traditional public manifestation of ethnic, religious and cultural identity after the fall of the Communist regime in 1989. Furthermore, the return to tradition in some cases exceeded the restoration of practices banned by the Communists. Various religious and cultural practices, which have naturally withered away because of modernisation, were brought back to life. The post-1989 democratisation has brought about religious freedom and toleration of Islamic religious practices, but this did not extend to genuine acceptance – the Muslim minorities continued to be viewed with distrust by a significant part of the Bulgarian majority population.

### Citizenship in Bulgaria

The *Law on Bulgarian Citizenship* (1998, last amended in March 2012) is the principal Bulgarian law regulating the procedures for the acquisition of Bulgarian citizenship through naturalization. The amendments introduced in April 2010 eased and accelerated the procedure for citizenship acquisition for the ethnic Bulgarians from other countries. According to Bozhidar Dimitrov (Minister without Portfolio in charge of Bulgarians living abroad, from July 2009 to December 2010), these amendments were especially important for the historic Bulgarian communities in diaspora, which were under the threat of assimilation and consequent loss of their national identity. He believed that Bulgarian citizenship would offer them a significant protection against this danger (Big.bg, 2010). Dimitrov predicted that after April 2010 amendments, up to 30,000 people per year (mostly ethnic Bulgarians from other countries) would be able to obtain Bulgarian passports. In his opinion, this would solve the demographic crisis as the annual difference between the natality and mortality is around 32,000 (Fokus Agency, 2010).

One of the main problems regarding the amendments is the reasoning provided to justify them, as the discourse shows that the Bulgarian government sees the nation in predominantly ethnic terms, rather than as a civic and multicultural community of citizens. The “fresh blood” brought by ethnic Bulgarians from abroad is expected to overcome the demographic crisis and reverse the “percentage battle” – the increasing share of ethnic and religious minority communities among the population of Bulgaria.

The number of foreign citizens interested in acquiring Bulgarian citizenship began to increase after 1999, when Bulgaria was removed from the “black list” of the Schengen agreement. Number of applications reached its peak in 2004-2005, after which it decreased significantly.

**Table 1: Applications for Bulgarian citizenship (1990 - 2011)**

Year	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
<b>Applications</b>	<b>1039</b>	<b>2600</b>	<b>3259</b>	<b>2386</b>	<b>2785</b>	<b>3310</b>	<b>3233</b>	<b>2930</b>	<b>3729</b>	<b>2474</b>	<b>3334</b>
Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
<b>Applications</b>	<b>5495</b>	<b>7438</b>	<b>14306</b>	<b>29493</b>	<b>23200</b>	<b>14468</b>	<b>12870</b>	<b>7184</b>	<b>5549</b>	<b>6322</b>	<b>11458</b>
<b>Total 1990 – 2011:</b>											<b>169,042</b>

Source: [http://www.president.bg/v\\_pravo\\_txt.php?id=4493&st=0](http://www.president.bg/v_pravo_txt.php?id=4493&st=0)

**Table 2: Number of people who received Bulgarian citizenship**

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
<b>Citizenships</b>	<b>3371</b>	<b>4266</b>	<b>5660</b>	<b>5847</b>	<b>6628</b>	<b>5938</b>	<b>7113</b>	<b>9068</b>	<b>14979</b>	<b>18473</b>	<b>81343</b>

Source: [http://www.president.bg/v\\_pravo\\_txt.php?id=4493&st=0](http://www.president.bg/v_pravo_txt.php?id=4493&st=0)

As can be seen from Table 2, the number of citizenships granted to foreign nationals has been steadily increasing since 2002 to 2009. After the April 2010 amendments to the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship, which significantly improved the efficiency of state institutions involved in citizenship granting procedures, the increase in the number of new Bulgarian citizens has been tremendous (in 2011 it was more than double compared to 2009).

Overwhelming majority of people who obtained the Bulgarian citizenship between 1990 and 2010 have claimed to be of Bulgarian descent and were previously citizens of Republic of Macedonia, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine, Serbia (Serbia and Montenegro), or Albania.

**Table 3: Number of people who received Bulgarian citizenship because they are of Bulgarian descent or born to a parent with Bulgarian citizenship**

Year	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
<b>Citizenships</b>	<b>3210</b>	<b>4179</b>	<b>5559</b>	<b>5722</b>	<b>6511</b>	<b>5837</b>	<b>6945</b>	<b>8911</b>	<b>14828</b>	<b>18319</b>	<b>80021</b>

Source: [http://www.president.bg/v\\_pravo\\_txt.php?id=4493&st=0](http://www.president.bg/v_pravo_txt.php?id=4493&st=0)

Between 2002 and 2011, 98.37% (80,021) of all those who obtained Bulgarian passports were (or claimed to be) of Bulgarian ethnic origin, while only a tiny minority (1,322) received citizenship through non-facilitated procedure and for other reasons (Changes in Bulgarian Citizenship in the period 22.01.2002 - 31.12.2011, 2012). More than half of the new Bulgarian citizens have previously been Macedonian nationals. Most of the others came from the following countries: Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Ukraine, Israel and Albania.

**Table 4: People who received Bulgarian citizenship by countries of origin (22.01.2002 - 31.12.2011)**

Country	Macedonia	Moldova	Russia	Serbia**	Ukraine	Israel	Albania	Without citizenship
<b>Total</b>	44211	20668	3161	4009	3079	2638	1399	291
<b>2011</b>	11757	3113	548	1136	836	767	360	64
<b>2010</b>	10507	1802	269	807	341	591	438	25
<b>2009</b>	4398	2676	279	538	274	471	193	40
<b>2008</b>	3624	2464	234	253	185	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>2007</b>	3727	2019	492	306	389	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>2006</b>	2394	2317	189	213	185	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>2005</b>	2435	2465	174	127	251	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>2004</b>	2173	2204	260	160	151	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>2003</b>	1599	1063	337	250	202	95	59	N/A
<b>2002</b>	1597	545	379	219	265	N/A	N/A	N/A

\*\* Serbia and Montenegro until 2006

Source: [http://www.president.bg/v\\_pravo\\_txt.php?id=4493&st=0](http://www.president.bg/v_pravo_txt.php?id=4493&st=0)

Apart from the *Law on Bulgarian Citizenship*, another important legal document dealing with the issues of citizenship and Bulgarian communities living abroad is the *National Demographic Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria 2006-2020* (MLSP, 2006). The document devoted special attention to the diaspora communities. In addition to scholarships, work permits and other incentives envisaged for attracting them to come to live in Bulgaria, the Strategy recommends that the procedures for acquisition of citizenship for Bulgarians from other countries need to be simplified and made easier. This has been largely accomplished with the April 2010 amendments to the *Law on Bulgarian Citizenship*.



## Bulgaria and the European Union

Somewhat similarly to the post-independence period, when the Bulgarian society united behind the effort to “return to Europe,” from which it was (in popular perception) forcibly separated by the Ottoman Empire, “back to Europe” became the dominating public-political slogan after 1989. All post-1989 Bulgarian governments placed the relations with the EU and full integration into all its structures at the very top of the country’s foreign policy priorities (Dinkov, 1999, pp. 993-995).

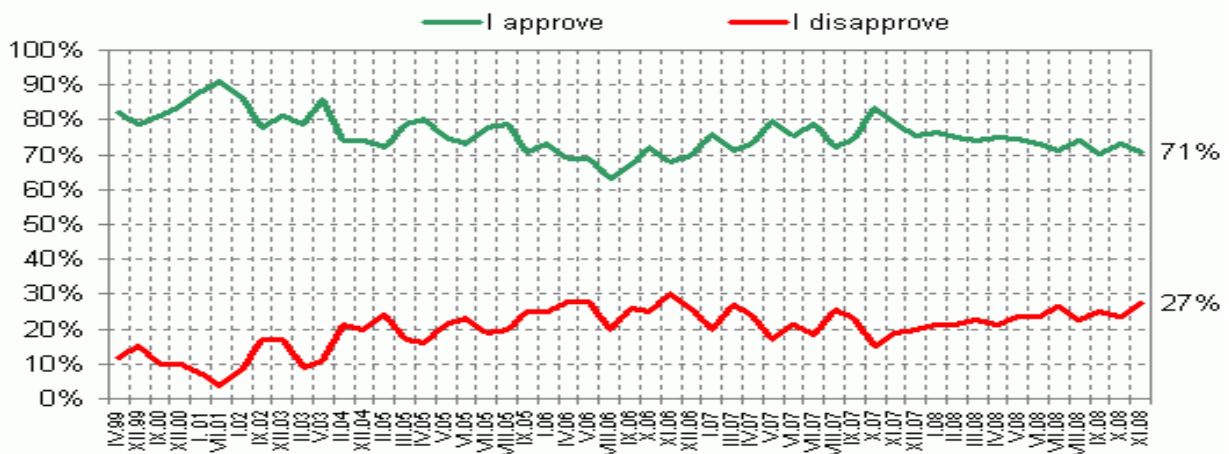
The Bulgarian EU accession process has been a long and troublesome one. On 22 December 1990, the Bulgarian Grand National Assembly passed a resolution expressing the desire of the Republic of Bulgaria to become a full member of the European Community. On 14 April 1994, the Government of Bulgaria adopted a declaration confirming the willingness of the country to become a EC member. The response on the part of the European institutions was cautious. The Agenda 2000 (July 1997) described Bulgaria as a candidate country, which was not sufficiently prepared to start accession negotiations. Recognising Bulgaria as a “functioning market economy,” the European Commission in October 2002 stated in its regular report that it supported Bulgaria’s desire to join the EU in 2007. On 15 June 2004, Bulgaria provisionally closed the negotiations with the EU on all 31 chapters of the *acquis communautaire* and on 13 April 2005, the European Parliament approved the signing of the Treaty of Accession.

From the Bulgarian perspective, the EU accession was often seen as a set of directives that had to be fulfilled, chapters that needed to be closed, values that were expected to be adopted. The highly critical tone of the EU reports on the Bulgarian progress towards the EU accession, the predominantly negative image of the country in many old EU member-states and the additional burden of unfavourable and difficult social-economic conditions in the country have spread significant fears and discomfort among Bulgarians that they were not “European enough” (Kostova-Panayotova, 2004).

At the same time, the support for the EU membership remained high through the entire post-1989 period. Much hope and optimism were expressed in a number of surveys that Bulgaria would benefit from the membership in various ways (this has substantially changed after the 2007 accession).

**Table 5: Public Attitude to Bulgaria’s EU Membership**

**Public Attitude to Bulgaria’s EU Membership**



Source: Alpha Research, 2009



**Table 6: Taking everything into account, would you say that Bulgaria has on balance benefited or not from being a member of the European Union?**

	Has benefited / Would benefit	Has not benefited / Would not benefit	Don't know
Fall 2009	50 %	28 %	22 %
Spring 2009	48 %	28 %	24 %
Winter 2009	31 %	44 %	25 %
Fall 2008	43 %	27 %	30 %
Spring 2008	47 %	23 %	30 %
Fall 2007	52 %	14 %	34 %
Spring 2007	50 %	18 %	32 %
Fall 2006	58 %	16 %	26 %
Spring 2006	54 %	19 %	27 %
Fall 2005	51 %	23 %	26 %
Spring 2005	62 %	16 %	21 %
Fall 2004	66 %	14 %	21 %

Source: Eurobarometer 72, Fall 2009

Kabakchieva (2009) made an interesting observation regarding the sharp division between identity and citizenship in Bulgaria, based on her study of the data from the 2008-2009 European Values Survey. Over three quarters of (ethnic) Bulgarians were very proud of their origin and their belonging to the Bulgarian nation, but were largely disinterested or even dissatisfied with the state of Bulgaria and did not trust its institutions. On the other hand, trust in the EU and its institutions, and the pride for being a part of the EU, were strongly expressed, while European identity and European civic awareness were almost completely absent (Kabakchieva, 2009, pp. 257-278).

Despite being an EU member since 1 January 2007, Bulgaria's position in the Union is still not equal to those of older member states. Bulgaria (along with Romania) is subject to a strict monitoring and control from the European Commission over issues of corruption and organised crime. In addition, 10 out of 25 member states have opted for a period of derogation from the free movement principle for all EU citizens, imposing partial or full restrictions on Bulgarian (and Romanian) citizens' access to their labour markets. Some of the older member states (especially France and Germany) are also highly reserved regarding Bulgarian readiness to enter the Eurozone and Schengen area (both among the priorities of the current Bulgarian government).

The Bulgarian authorities (especially the triple coalition government, 2005-2009) and various state institutions on their part only worsened the situation and deepened the mistrust of the EU and member states – especially through non-transparent and fraudulent management of EU funds. The European Commission's 2008 *Report on the Management of EU-funds in Bulgaria* for example noted that the country lacked sound financial management, had weak administrative capacity and that "there have been serious allegations of irregularities as well as suspicions of fraud and conflicts of interest in the award of contracts" (Commission of the European Communities, 2008).

As a result, Bulgarian access to various financial instruments was temporary suspended. In July 2008, the Commission withdrew the accreditation of two main agencies implementing the EU funds in Bulgaria, and suspended payments under the three pre-accession programmes (PHARE / Transition Facility, ISPA and SAPARD) (Budgetary Control Committee of the EP, 2009). The access to the funds was restored after the new government of GERB – Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (decisive winner of July 2009 elections) initiated the necessary reforms and improved its management of the EU funds.

**Cultural diversity challenges during the last 30 years**

Since the liberation from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, the population of Bulgaria has always been ethnically and religiously diverse. The first Bulgarian constitution (Tarnovo Constitution, 1879) included articles safeguarding the rights of the Bulgarian citizens belonging to religious minorities, although deliberate effort was made to avoid terms like “minority” or “Muslims.” For example, Article 40 guaranteed the right to free practice of religion to those subjects of the Bulgarian Principality who were “Christians of non-Orthodox denomination or other believers.” The Constitution guaranteed the autonomy of minority religious communities and wide cultural rights for minority groups (the right to have their places of worship, schools, newspapers and journals). In Turkish schools, which were financially supported by the state, the language of instruction was Turkish. Turks also had their political representatives in the Bulgarian National Assembly, but had no right to form a political party on ethnic grounds (Tarnovo Constitution, 1879; Nazarska, 1999).

Despite that, Bulgarians have not been able to accept the minorities (especially the Turkish one) as an equal and inseparable part of the nation before 1989. The national minorities have thus felt insecure and marginalised, although at the same time, they viewed themselves as part of the Bulgarian nation, shared the common national goals and participated in all the wars Bulgarian state fought for their implementation (Zhelyazkova, 2008).

There are over 15 ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The largest group are Bulgarians (83.9% according to 2001 census), followed by Turks and Roma.

**Table 7: Division of the population according to ethnic group**

Ethnic group	1992	%	2001	%	2011	%**
Total	8,487,317	100	7,928,901	100	7,364,570	100
Bulgarians	7,271,185	85.67	6,655,210	83.94	5,664,624	84.79
Turks	800,052	9.43	746,664	9.42	588,318	8.80
Roma*	313,396	3.69	370,908	4.68	325,343	4.87
Russians	17,139	0.20	15,595	0.20	9,978	0.15
Armenians	13,677	0.16	10,832	0.14	6,552	0.10
Vlachs	5,159	0.06	10,566	0.13	3,684	0.06
Macedonians	10,803	0.13	5,071	0.06	1,654	0.02
Karakachans	5,144	0.06	4,107	0.05	2,556	0.04
Greeks	4,930	0.06	3,408	0.04	1,379	0.02
Ukrainians	1,864	0.02	2,489	0.03	1,789	0.03
Tatars	4,515	0.05	1,803	0.02	N/A	
Jews	3,461	0.04	1,363	0.02	1,162	0.02
Romanians	N/A		1,088	0.01	891	0.01
Gagauz	1,478	0.02	540	<0.01	N/A	
Circassians	573	<0.01	367	<0.01	N/A	
Arabs	N/A		328	<0.01	N/A	
Albanians	N/A		278	<0.01	N/A	
Others	N/A		11,369	0.14	19,659	0.29
Undeclared	N/A		62,108	0.78	53,391	0.80
No answer	N/A		24,807	0.31	683,590	

Source: <http://www.nsi.bg/Census/Ethnos.htm>; <http://censusresults.nsi.bg/Census/Reports/2/2/R7.aspx>

\* Most experts consider that the real number of Roma in Bulgaria is almost double the official number – between 600,000 and 700,000.

\*\* % of those who have answered the question

The religious division of the population is the following (according to the 2001 census – see NSI, 2001): 82.6% are Eastern Orthodox Christians, 12.2% are Muslims (majority are Sunni, while about

5.5% of them are Shia), 0.6% are Catholics and 0.5% are Protestants. There are also small communities of believers of Armenian-Gregorian (6,500 people) and Jewish (650 people) faiths.

The three largest minorities in the country are Turks, Roma and Pomaks (or Muslim Bulgarians). Pomaks have not been included as a special ethnic group in the census as they are considered a religious and not an ethnic minority. These are also the three groups with the most significant tolerance-related problems – each in a different way and for different reasons. Turks are well integrated, politically organised and with a very clear and well-expressed self-awareness, but are faced with the increasingly intolerant attitude of the majority population, which perceives that Turks control too much political power in the country. Roma are almost completely excluded from the society. They are rejected not just by the majority population but other minorities as well. The widespread perception is that the state institutions “tolerate” Roma too much and that instead of tolerating, the state should control them. Pomaks are tolerated as a religious minority, but any attempt to assert their different ethnic or national identity is met by a furiously intolerant rejection of such claims. Pomak self-identification is often presented as a threat to the national interests and an attack on the national unity.

**Table 8: Main minority groups in Bulgaria and their dimension of difference from the majority population**

<b>Dimension of difference</b>	<b>Citizenship</b>	<b>Racial</b>	<b>Ethnic</b>	<b>Religious</b>	<b>Cultural</b>	<b>Linguistic</b>
<b>Native minorities</b>						
Turks			x	x	x	x
Roma			x	partial x	x	x
Pomaks			x	x	x	
Jews			x	x		
Armenians			x			
<b>Immigrants</b>						
Bulgarian descent	partial x				partial x	
Non- Bulgarian descent	x	x	x	x	x	x

### *Turks*

Turks are the largest traditional minority in the country and are among the most homogeneous ethnic groups. They started to settle in the Bulgarian lands after Bulgaria was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. During the five centuries of the Ottoman rule, Turks became the majority population in urban centres, while Bulgarians remained the majority in rural areas. After the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, the status of Turks drastically changed – from the ruling elite to a minority in a state dominated by people of different ethnicity and religion. Numerous Turks retreated from northern and central Bulgaria towards the eastern parts of the country (closer to the border with Ottoman Empire / Turkey). During the following century, huge numbers of Turks left the country in several emigration waves, although their share of the Bulgarian population always remained close to 10% (Eminov, 1997, pp. 76-78; Zhelyazkova, 1990).

The minority rights of the Bulgarian Turks have been defined in several international and bilateral agreements (the Berlin Treaty of 1878, the Istanbul Protocol of 1909, the Peace Treaty of 1913, the Bulgarian-Turkish Government Treaty of 1925 and others). These agreements offered the Turkish community the judicial guarantees for establishing their cultural and religious institutions in Bulgaria. On the other hand, very often Bulgarian state failed to live up to the obligations it had signed up to in the agreements. Quite the contrary, the state periodically tried to limit the rights of the Turkish

minority. The situation worsened after the coup of 1934. Under Tsar Boris' authoritarian rule, Turks suffered social, political and cultural discrimination (Yalamov, 2002, pp. 142-164).

The Communist regime, which took power in Bulgaria after the WWII, initially endorsed a liberal and tolerant policy towards the Turkish community. The authorities permitted the existence of Turkish elementary schools and print media in Turkish language, and introduced preferential quotas for acceptance of Turkish students in the universities. The main goal of these policies was the integration of the Turkish minority into the society and their active involvement in the processes of modernisation and construction of a Socialist state.

At the same time, significant emigration to Turkey was also permitted, as this was a way for the state to "get rid of" those Turks, who did not accept the Communist regime and its anti-religious policies<sup>8</sup> (Stoyanov, 1998; Büchschütz, 2000; Gruev, 2003; Gruev, Kaljonski, 2008). It can be said that the actions of the state in this period were an example of policies, which seemed liberal and appeared to be designed to stimulate the identity of the minorities, but were in fact used for the purpose of assimilation. Above all, the education and cultural policy of the state towards Turks aimed at weakening one exceptionally important segment of their identity, as significant efforts were devoted to limiting the influence of Islam within the community (Troebst, 1987, p. 240; Büchschütz, 2000, p. 131).

Yet, the seemingly liberal attitude did not last long and in the early 1960s, a drastic change occurred. Under the pretext of "integration" all specific features of Turkish identity (language, religions, customs and ultimately even their names) were first restricted and later prohibited. The process of complete assimilation of the Turkish minority reached its peak in the mid-1980s, when the names of the Bulgarian Turks were administratively substituted with Bulgarian-sounding names. The so-called "Revival Process" has caused an immense rift between the Bulgarian majority and Turkish minority, which has still not been completely overcome (Yalamov, 2002, pp. 365-388).

After 1989, the minority and human rights of the Turkish and other minority communities were restored. This however did not occur smoothly. A significant opposition to the reversal of the assimilation policies has appeared, especially among the Bulgarians living in the ethnically mixed areas and among the members of the security sector (the Ministry of Interior, secret services, army), who were directly involved in the implementation of "the Revival Process." In their opinion, the process has achieved certain results and brought Bulgaria into a position from which there should be no retreat – otherwise the national interests of the country could be threatened. On the other hand, the Turkish community, encouraged by the restoration of their names, raised other demands: study of Turkish language and Islamic religion in schools in regions with predominantly Turkish population, proclamation of Islamic holidays Kurban Bayram and Sheker Bayram as official state holidays, and recognition of the Turkish community as a "national minority" (Baeva, Kalinova, 2009, pp. 36-39).

The first democratic Constitution, adopted in 1991, included no reference to the term "minority." The Constitution only mentioned the "citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian" (Article 36) and added that everyone had the right to "develop their own culture in accordance with their ethnic affiliation, which is endorsed and guaranteed by the law" (Article 54).

Although the post-1989 period saw numerous positive developments regarding the change of legislation and the general consensus among the main political parties regarding the protection of minority rights, there was also a notable opposition to these trends and above all to the political participation of minorities (especially Turks) in central and local government. Article 11 (4) of the Bulgarian Constitution states: "There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties which seek the violent seizure of state power."

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<sup>8</sup> In the period summer – fall 1951, around 155,000 people left Bulgaria. Majority were Turks, but Pomaks and Roma were also among them. Büchschütz, 2000, p. 130.

Despite this, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the first political party representing Turks and other Muslim communities in Bulgaria, was formed in 1990. Since then, the MRF has always been represented in Parliament, and has been a member of three government coalitions. The reaction of the majority population to the appearance of the MRF on the political scene was predominantly negative. Public disapproval was followed by the negative response of the main political parties – both from the right and from the left.

Despite continuous efforts by the MRF leaders to present the party as a national civic party and not as a representative of a single ethnic group, its political opponents time and again insisted on using “ethnic” terminology in the political debate, persistently referring to the MRF as “the Turkish party.” On several occasions, most notably prior to the 1992 elections, efforts were made to ban the MRF on the grounds that it was unconstitutional (Article 11). In 1992, the Constitutional Court declared that the MRF was not unconstitutional and could operate as any other political party as its statute made no restrictions to membership in the party on ethnic grounds, nor did it include any other provisions defining it as an “ethnic party” (Judge Aleksander Arabadzhiev – Decision No. 4, 1992).

Political attacks on the MRF continue today. While most of the criticism towards the party deals with its alleged high level of corruption, black funds and links with the grey economy, some accuse the MRF’s leaders of trying to isolate the Turkish minority in order to preserve full control over its votes, thus obstructing its integration into the Bulgarian society.

The anti-MRF rhetoric (which often spilled over into anti-Turkish hate speech) characterised the 2009 parliamentary election campaign, bringing substantial gains to the GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria) party (the winner of the elections) and the extreme nationalistic *Ataka* (Attack) party.<sup>9</sup> President Parvanov’s comment on the election campaign was that “this was not anti-MRF talk, it was openly anti-Turkish and anti-Roma talk” (“Will the Ethnic Peace in the Country be Shaken?,” 2009). The widespread dissatisfaction over the political party generally considered to be Turkish has in recent years thus grown into a widespread intolerant attitude towards the Turkish minority.

*Diversity challenges:* Since 1989, the Bulgarian Turks have succeeded to fully integrate into all spheres of social life. As far as the official state policy is concerned, the Turkish minority has been recognised and accepted by the Bulgarian state. Education in the Turkish language is provided on all levels of education, they can freely practice their religion, they have newspapers and electronic media in their language and are actively involved in political life in Bulgaria. Unfortunately, the full integration into the political and public space did not lead to genuine coexistence based on respect and acceptance on the side of the Bulgarian majority population and for the larger part of the last 20 years, their attitude towards the Turkish minority can best be described as a case of liberal tolerance. Furthermore, in recent years the anti-Turkish sentiments and intolerant attitude have been on the rise. The majority believes that the Turkish community has too much political and economic power and finds such situation to be intolerable. Turks are a minority and should therefore know their place – they are tolerated as long as they keep a low profile in public space. On the other hand, Turks do not want to be simply tolerated – they want to be included and actively participate in all spheres of public, political, cultural and economic life in the country.

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<sup>9</sup> The official slogan under which the 2009 elections were conducted was “Buying and selling of votes is a crime” to which Attack added: “So is the Turkisation and plunder of Bulgaria.” Attack’s election platform included the following points: Bulgaria must not be governed by the Turkish party MRF; a Turkish common worker in Bulgaria cannot receive a salary of 2400 BGN while a Bulgarian teacher is struggling to receive 600 BGN; Turkish language cannot be used in state and municipal institutions; Gypsy, Turkish, homosexual and other minorities cannot have any privileges while the impoverished Bulgarian pensioners are paying their electricity bills. See Attack election brochure: [http://www.ataka.bg/images/documents/broshura\\_09.zip](http://www.ataka.bg/images/documents/broshura_09.zip)

## *Roma*

Roma are the third largest ethnic community in the country. The real number of Roma in Bulgaria is highly disputed and ranges from the official 325,343 (Census 2011) to 700,000 (expert estimates). The reason for the difference is that a large number of Roma self-identifies as Bulgarians or Turks, while some also choose Vlach identity. An additional reason for inaccurate numbers is the high mobility – many Roma do not have addresses where they are officially registered, but have migrated to other towns or villages in search of temporary or seasonal employment and are therefore hard to track during the census.

According to the 2011 census data, 37% of Roma are Orthodox Christians, 18% are Muslims, while 10% are Protestants (it has to be noted that out of 64,476 Protestants in Bulgaria, more than a third – 23,289 – are Roma). 24.6% of Roma did not declare their religion (NSI, 2011). The census data should be viewed with certain caution. A comparison with the significantly different 2001 census data gives ground to suspicion that there might be a fault in the way results were either obtained or analysed. In 2001, 48.6% of Roma were counted as Orthodox Christians, 27.9% as Muslims, 6.6% as Protestants, and 17% did not declare their religion (NSI, 2001).

Roma are the most heterogeneous community in the country. In addition to professing different religions, Roma also identify themselves as belonging to different ethnic groups. They speak a number of languages – Bulgarian, Turkish, and Romany (numerous forms and dialects). Some differ according to their lifestyle – they can be either “settled” or “nomads.” For all these reasons, Roma are perceived as a “community” above all by the non-Roma population. They rarely perceive themselves as a united and unified “Roma community” and the differences, distances and conflicts among various Roma sub-groups are often larger than between Roma and other ethnic communities (Tomova, 1995; Pamporov, 2006; Grekova, 2008).

An expected consequence of this situation is that the Roma community never managed to unify behind one Roma political party and elect its representatives into the National Assembly, despite potentially having more than enough voters to do so. There are over 20 registered Roma parties in the country (although only few of them contain word “Roma” in their name), which fragments the Roma votes, keeping their electoral results well below the 4% parliamentary threshold. Only a few Roma parties (especially the Party “Roma” and Euroroma) had some modest success on the local level (Hajdinjak, 2008, pp. 119-120).

To say that Roma in Bulgaria are not integrated into the society and that they are not tolerated by the other communities (not just the Bulgarian majority but by other minorities as well) is an understatement. The majority of Roma live in segregated city ghettos or village settlements, separated from the rest of the population. In the 1945-1989 period, the Communist regime employed various measures (often repressive) to force the Roma minority to abandon their traditional nomadic lifestyle. After being made to settle, Roma were included (if not really integrated) into the country’s social-economic system. They received access to health care and education, and were included into the labour market.

However, the situation has dramatically changed during the transition period. Today Roma are largely excluded from the legal labour market and work predominantly in grey and black sectors. Their access to proper health care is very limited, while the child drop-out rate from schools has dramatically increased. The prejudices and stereotypes about Roma are exceptionally negative – they are described as “dirty,” “lazy,” “thieves,” “liars,” “cheaters,” “irresponsible” and “hopeless.” As a consequence, Roma are rejected and according to recent sociological studies, only a third of Bulgarians are content with living in the same town with Roma (Tomova, 1995 pp. 58-61; Pamporov, 2006, pp. 37-38; Grekova, 2008, pp. 20-28).

The studies on ethnic discrimination in Bulgaria show that Roma are victims of institutional discrimination on daily bases. In most cases, however, this discrimination remains largely hidden and is not officially registered because Roma rarely use legal and institutional resources available for

protection of their rights. This is not a result only of the lack of information, but above all of their isolation from the Bulgarian society and the lasting distrust and fear of the Bulgarian institutions (Grekova et al, 2010).

The first genuine and purposeful attempt to deal with the problem of Roma exclusion was the *Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society*, which the Bulgarian government passed in 1999.<sup>10</sup> The Framework Programme was an attempt to set up a comprehensive state strategy for 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 *National Action Plan – Decade of Roma Inclusion*, passed in 2005, was the most ambitious attempt to address the multifaceted problem of Roma exclusion.<sup>11</sup> Despite much optimism and hope that accompanied its launch, the Plan has not achieved much in terms of tangible results over the following years.

*Diversity challenges:* The programmes, action plans and other measures implemented by the government and various state institutions demonstrate that on the institutional level, the state policies towards Roma can be rated as tolerance but with a reservation that it is tolerance with the clear goal of social-economic integration. Despite these measures (many of which suffered from poor implementation, insufficient funding and lack of commitment), the situation of the Bulgarian Roma has not changed substantially yet. If anything, the situation 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). This is perhaps most visible in the institutional efforts to integrate Roma children into the education system as quite regularly, attempts to desegregate Roma schools and transfer the Roma children to normal, or “integrated,” schools result in the resistance of Bulgarian parents (and quite often also teachers) against such moves. On numerous occasions, Bulgarian parents have withdrawn their children from integrated schools and transferred them to other schools with little or no Roma children. 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 social life can reduce the distances and rejection. For now, the Bulgarian Roma are entangled in a web of rejection, exclusion and intolerance and the prospects for this to change in the near future are not very bright.

### *Pomaks*

The fourth significantly large ethno-religious group are the Muslim Bulgarians or Pomaks. The issue of Pomak identity has been a controversial one ever since the establishment of independent Bulgaria in 1878 and has yet to be resolved. The widespread belief is that Pomaks are not a separate ethnic group as the only difference between Pomaks and other Bulgarians is religion. Very often, Pomaks are seen as “lesser” Bulgarians – inseparable part of the Bulgarian family-nation, but blemished by the “wrong,” Muslim religion.<sup>12</sup>

The majority of Pomaks live in the area of the Rhodopa mountain. According to Census data, there were around 160,000 Muslim Bulgarians in 1992, and 131,500 in 2001 (NSI, 2001). According to various expert data, their number could be between 220,000 and 250,000 (Kostova, 2001, p. 26.). The main reason for this conflicting and inaccurate data is the lack of internal homogeneity. Many Pomaks have problems with self-identification. Some identify themselves as Turks, some consider themselves as Bulgarians<sup>13</sup> (there has been a strong tendency towards converting to Christianity among some of

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<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.ncedi.government.bg/en/RPRIRBGO-English.htm>

<sup>11</sup> See [http://www.ncedi.government.bg/en/NAP\\_REPUBLIC%20OF%20BULGARIA.htm](http://www.ncedi.government.bg/en/NAP_REPUBLIC%20OF%20BULGARIA.htm)

<sup>12</sup> One of the best such examples is the book “On the Past of the Bulgarian Mohammedans in the Rhodopes,” published in 1958 by the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that those Pomaks who live among Christian Bulgarians, more often identify themselves as Turks, while those who live in the regions with a compact Turkish population prefer to identify as Bulgarians.

them), while others believe their origin is entirely different from both dominant groups (some believe they have Arabic origin). Many describe themselves simply as Muslims, equating the religious identity with the ethnic one.

Many times in history, the academic discourse about Pomaks as “brothers who have lost their way” transformed into violent campaigns of forced assimilation, during which Pomaks were forced to abandon their religion, customs and even their names. As a result, even today, the Pomak community is still very divided and uncertain regarding its identity. There is a very strong sense of isolation among them, especially those residing in the geographically remote Rhodopa mountain villages. A growing distrust towards the Bulgarian population and the state of Bulgaria, which has virtually abandoned them during the painful years of transition, has also been observed among Pomaks (Tomova, 2000, p.131).

All attempts to assert a separate and unique Pomak identity (especially if they came from within the community) have provoked a very strong negative reaction among the majority population, including political and intellectual circles. The most recent example was the pilot internet census, which started in September 2010. The questionnaire prepared by the National Statistics Institute offered as possible answers for respondent’s ethnic group also ethnicities such as Bulgarian-Muslim and Macedonian. This triggered a wave of criticism. The NSI Head stated that NSI has no authority or goal to determine which ethnic groups live in Bulgaria, but just wanted to give every Bulgarian citizen the opportunity to self-determine his or her ethnic background. The nationalist political parties demanded the categories to be removed from the questionnaire over fears they would divide the nation. In response, two Deputy Directors of the NSI resigned, while the resignation of the Head of the NSI was not accepted by the Prime Minister (Dnes.Dir.bg, 2010).

*Diversity challenges:* The state policy towards Pomaks is a combination of tolerance and exceptional intolerance. On the one side, Pomaks are free to practice their religion and manifest their cultural identity without hindrance both in the private and public sphere. On the other side, the state and the majority population strictly refuse to acknowledge their right to genuine self-identification and the attempts from within the Pomak community to assert their identity as different from the Bulgarian majority usually lead to an overly negative and aggressive reaction from the state institutions, media and the public. The overall attitude towards Pomaks can thus be rated as intolerance. Without recognising its existence, there can be no discussion about tolerance and acceptance of a particular community.

All other minority communities in the country are relatively small. Only Russians, Armenians and Vlachs number more than 10,000 people, while all other are smaller than 5,000. Most (with the exception of Macedonians, who have problems similar to those faced by the Pomaks) are well integrated into Bulgarian society and have no acceptance-tolerance related difficulties. Two of these communities (Armenians and Jews) deserve to be mentioned here because of their special place in Bulgarian social and cultural life. Their presence and complete integration into the society is perhaps the only indicator giving ground to the claim that the Bulgarian society is not a complete stranger to mechanisms of acceptance of otherness.

### *Jews*

Jews settled in Bulgaria in 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, when they were expelled from Spain. The community integrated exceptionally well into Bulgarian society and played an important role in the development of the Bulgarian state. Their level of integration was such that Bulgaria was the only country in Europe, where the number of Jews increased during the WWII. Despite being an ally of the Nazi Germany, in 1943 the entire Bulgarian society rose up in defence of the Bulgarian Jews, when the order came from Berlin that they should be sent to the concentration camps. As a result, none of the 50,000 Bulgarian Jews ended up in death camps.



Despite that, in 1948-1949 over 30,000 Jews emigrated from Bulgaria to Israel to avoid living under the Communist regime and today, only a fraction of the once large Jewish community still resides in the country. The census data give the following numbers: 1,162 in 2011, 1,363 in 2001 and 3,461 in 1992. The representatives of the Jewish community believe there are around 10,000 Jews in Bulgaria, who are difficult to trace because they are so well integrated into the Bulgarian society, have intermarried with ethnic Bulgarians, and have in numerous cases abandoned their mother tongue for Bulgarian language (Barouh, 2001). It is interesting to note that in the 2002-2010 period, 1,594 Israeli citizens received Bulgarian citizenship by claiming the Bulgarian origin. Presumably, many of them are descendants of Bulgarian Jews who emigrated from the country after the WWII.

### *Armenians*

Most came to Bulgaria during and after the Armenian Genocide in the 1910s. They were well received and acquired refuge in Bulgaria, which provided them with good conditions for adaptation and integration. Their numbers were significantly reduced as a result of two large emigration waves to the Soviet Armenia (in 1935 and 1946).<sup>14</sup> The majority of Armenians live in the city of Plovdiv. The community is well organised and there are numerous Armenian organisations all over the country involved with educational and cultural activities. Armenians have been disproportionately active and prominent in the cultural life of the country (Miceva, 2001).

*Diversity challenges:* Both Jews and Armenians can be seen as examples of minority groups that have been treated with respect and recognition. They have always enjoyed full freedom to express their ethnic, religious and cultural identity. One pragmatic explanation for this is the small number of members of both communities. For this reason, the majority has never perceived them even as a potential threat to the national unity. Most Jews and Armenians also live dispersed in the larger cities and towns of Bulgaria, and are integrated into the majority population to the extent that the only visible marker distinguishing them from the rest of the population are their names. Both communities have been fully accepted and are respected both on the state level and by the society, as is manifested by numerous highly esteemed individuals from both communities who have left their mark in Bulgarian politics, culture, science and sports.

### *Immigrants*

Bulgaria has only recently become a country attracting a more significant flow of immigrants. Neither society nor state institutions are truly prepared for this process. The state structures respond slowly and chaotically to the increasing numbers of refugees, asylum-seekers and economic immigrants, and the state has no clear policy on how to accommodate them and integrate them into the country. The society is only partially aware of the issue, as the immigrant communities are still small in number and relatively invisible for the average citizen. Bearing in mind the problematic attitude towards the traditional minorities, it can hardly be concluded that the increase in immigration will be met with understanding and benevolence.

*Diversity challenges:* Europeans represent 71.1% of permanently residing foreigners in Bulgaria, followed by immigrants from Asia (14.2%), North and South America (1.3%) and Africa (1%) (see Table 9). The vast majority of foreign permanent residents came from the former Soviet Union (30.9% are from the Russian Federation alone). Immigrants from the countries neighbouring Bulgaria (especially Macedonia and Turkey) represent 14.7% of all foreign permanent residents. Most of the immigrants in Bulgaria thus originate from countries, which are culturally, linguistically and religiously close to the Bulgarian majority population. Even immigrants from Asia and Middle East, which form the second largest group, are not perceived as a challenge. Two most important reasons

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<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that around 5000 people left on both occasions.

are their relatively small number, and the fact that they rarely compete with the native population on the employment market, but rather come to Bulgaria as investors, opening small business and more often than not providing employment to Bulgarian citizens.

**Table 9: Permanently resident foreigners in Bulgaria by citizenship as of 31.12.2009:**

Citizenship	Permanently resident foreigners					
	31.12.2004	31.12.2005	31.12.2006	31.12.2007	31.12.2008	31.12.2009
<b>Total</b>	<b>50756</b>	<b>53197</b>	<b>55653</b>	<b>63615</b>	<b>66806</b>	<b>69423</b>
<b>Europe</b>	<b>35437</b>	<b>37051</b>	<b>38988</b>	<b>44261</b>	<b>47106</b>	<b>49379</b>
<b>EU - 27</b>	<b>5690</b>	<b>5949</b>	<b>6245</b>	<b>6861</b>	<b>6904</b>	<b>6948</b>
<b>Other European</b>	<b>29747</b>	<b>31102</b>	<b>32743</b>	<b>37400</b>	<b>40202</b>	<b>42431</b>
including:						
Albania	99	113	142	198	229	265
Belarus	283	306	326	351	362	377
Bosnia and Herzegovina	46	47	48	50	58	63
Macedonia	821	918	1115	2188	4375	5507
Moldova	1643	1626	1703	2071	2203	2403
Russian Federation	18639	18947	19216	21171	21309	21483
Serbia	1068	1116	1121	1326	355	593
Turkey	1880	2583	3361	3778	3828	4092
Ukraine	4500	4659	4861	5263	5350	5514
<b>Asia</b>	<b>7060</b>	<b>7700</b>	<b>8162</b>	<b>9308</b>	<b>9623</b>	<b>9888</b>
Armenia	873	1018	1142	1268	1322	1380
Viet Nam	796	832	867	1033	1043	1040
Iraq	359	366	369	430	437	443
China	1081	1421	1581	1785	1934	2011
Lebanon	794	817	832	913	932	953
Syria	1617	1648	1690	1929	1945	1987
<b>Other Asia</b>	<b>1540</b>	<b>1598</b>	<b>1681</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>2010</b>	<b>2074</b>
<b>Africa</b>	<b>546</b>	<b>562</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>611</b>	<b>627</b>	<b>651</b>
Algeria	80	79	85	89	90	91
Egypt	75	86	89	94	102	106
Libya	39	42	37	36	34	38
Morocco	50	49	50	51	56	57
Nigeria	87	86	91	92	92	96
Tunisia	43	45	50	46	46	47
<b>Other Africa</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>189</b>	<b>203</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>216</b>
<b>America</b>	<b>618</b>	<b>669</b>	<b>732</b>	<b>821</b>	<b>838</b>	<b>890</b>
Canada	38	41	40	43	45	49
Cuba	157	158	160	200	203	204
Nicaragua	55	55	54	58	57	58
Peru	20	19	22	24	23	25
USA	221	273	332	360	374	412
Chile	27	28	27	27	27	27
<b>Other America</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Australia and New Zealand</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Stateless</b>	<b>1749</b>	<b>1896</b>	<b>1903</b>	<b>2157</b>	<b>2167</b>	<b>2171</b>
<b>ex-USSR</b>	<b>5316</b>	<b>5285</b>	<b>5238</b>	<b>6404</b>	<b>6386</b>	<b>6372</b>
<b>Unknown citizenship</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>23</b>

Source: [http://www.nsi.bg/ORPDOCS/Pop\\_5.8\\_Migration\\_DR\\_EN.xls](http://www.nsi.bg/ORPDOCS/Pop_5.8_Migration_DR_EN.xls)

### ***Definitions of tolerance in Bulgaria***

Traditionally the debates about how tolerant the Bulgarian society was were based on the entrenched auto-stereotype among the Bulgarians as an exceptionally tolerant nation. This belief has its roots in the period of the National Revival, when the spiritual leaders of the nation advocated the equality of all ethnic and religious communities in the country. The belief was further strengthened at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Bulgaria accepted and accommodated thousands of Jews fleeing from anti-Semitic pogroms in Russia (1895) and Romania (1904). A decade later Bulgaria welcomed Armenians who had escaped from the genocide in Turkey. Finally, Bulgarians stood up and saved their Jewish co-citizens in 1943, when they prevented their deportation to the Nazi concentration camps. Even the fall of the Communist regime and the transition to democracy occurred under the sign of protection of minority rights and equality of all religions. All this made it possible for the Bulgarian political elites to talk about the existence of a unique “Bulgarian ethnic model,” based on tolerance and respect for the others (Zhelyazkova, 1998, pp. 11-25; Zhelyazkova, 2001b, pp. 62-66).

Yet, when the general self-perception is juxtaposed to a concrete manifestation of tolerance, the results are less encouraging. Thus for example a survey from 2000 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents believe that Bulgarian Christian majority is tolerant (the belief shared by 89% of respondents who defined themselves as Christians and by 87% of those who said they were not religious). However, only 25% of Christian and 17% of non-religious respondents support the construction of temples of other (non-Christian) religions (Fotev, 2000, pp. 34-35).

Several sociological and anthropological studies conducted in recent years have shown that the ethnic Bulgarian majority is in general very distrustful and distant from the various minorities in the country. Bulgarians have incomparably more stereotypes and prejudices regarding the minorities than it is the other way around (Pamporov, 2009; Kanev, Cohen, Simeonova, 2005, Fotev, 2009).<sup>15</sup> Minorities are in general much better disposed towards the majority, and more open to various kinds of contacts and cohabitation.<sup>16</sup>

One of the more recent studies on social distances and ethnic stereotypes in Bulgaria has shown that even after 130 years, the majority of ethnic Bulgarians still associate the Turkish minority with the Ottoman rule and the term “Turkish yoke” (Pamporov, 2009, p. 113). This is a clear sign that the education and integration policies in Bulgaria are still very far away from becoming multi-cultural.

Before 1989, in the regions where ethnic Bulgarians were a minority population, while Turks were a local majority, almost all prestigious political, intellectual and business positions were occupied by ethnic Bulgarians. The logic behind this was that Bulgaria is a country of Bulgarians, while the others were “intruders” and a heritage of unfavourable historic circumstances (Zhelyazkova, 2010, pp. 9-11).

Post-1989 democratic transition has reversed this trend and now Turks are well represented in regional and municipal administration, local economy and other spheres of social life in regions where they

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<sup>15</sup> For example, one study which compared results from 4 surveys, conducted in years 1992, 1994, 1997 and 2005, showed that between 87% (in 2005) and 91% (in 1994) of Bulgarians believe that Roma are predisposed towards crime; between 84% (in 1997) and 86% (in 1994) believe that Roma cannot be trusted; between 63% (in 2005) and 69% (in 1997) do not want to live in the same neighbourhood with Roma, while between 27% (in 2005) and 38% (in 1997) do not want even to live in the same country with them. The results show that there has been no decrease in the negative attitudes and prejudices against Roma over the years. The situation is somewhat different regarding the Turks. While the perception that Turks are religious fanatics (84% in 1992 and 59% in 2005) and that they cannot be trusted (62% in 1994 and 35% in 2005) have decreased considerably, the belief that Turks are occupying too much space in the political life of the country remains high (62% in 1992 and 69% in 2005). 18% of Bulgarians state that they do not want Turks to live in Bulgaria. See Kanev, Cohen, Simeonova, 2005, pp. 41-47.

<sup>16</sup> 53% of Roma respondents in a survey said that Bulgarians can be counted on; 40% believe that Bulgarians are not ill disposed towards Roma, 59% would marry a Bulgarian, while 89% would make friends with them. Rejection of Bulgarians as colleagues and neighbours is between 2 and 6%. See Kanev, Cohen, Simeonova, 2005, pp. 52-53.

represent majority population. This reversal has caused many Bulgarians residing in the mixed regions to believe that Turks pushed them out of the public space and are (again) dominating them. A research conducted in 2006 in one such municipality (Ardino; population: 68.2% Turks, 16.9% Bulgarians and 14.9% others – mostly Pomaks) showed that many Bulgarians do not regard the local administration as theirs. They feel marginalized and believe it is not in their power to influence the social processes in the municipality. Frustrated by the lack of perspectives, the young Bulgarians “are escaping” to bigger towns in search of professional realization and very few are still living in Ardino (Troeva-Grigorova, Grigorov, 2006).

Politicians from the nationalistic political parties and some media periodically claim that Bulgarians in mixed regions are victims of discrimination and Turkish oppression. According to their statements, Bulgarians cannot receive employment in municipal administration if local government is dominated by the MRF. Another often voiced grievance is that only Turkish language is used in such municipalities and Bulgarians, who are allegedly referred to as *giaours*<sup>17</sup> by Turks, are made to feel like second class citizens in their own country (Deliyska, 2006; Siderov, 2009; BHC, 2006).

A 2008 sociological research highlighted new tendencies in the development of the Bulgarian nationalism. Bulgaria’s EU accession, open borders and greater mobility of people did not make the majority of the Bulgarian population more secure, open and tolerant, but – it seems – quite the contrary. The opening to the world has intensified the fear from the others, and in many cases, the perceived disappearance of the national borders has been substituted with the construction of the borders around the family and the family home. The situation in which the focus of a significant share of the wider society is on the foreigners, coming to “take our land away,” and the Roma, preying at the gates of our home to rob us, is potentially very dangerous. The desire to “protect the family” can easily expand into the need to “protect the fatherland” and thus give rise to strongly xenophobic and nationalistic political ideology (Kabakchieva, 2008, pp. 87-88).

Keeping in mind the exceptionally low trust in the state institutions and the political class, as well as the large regional differentiations in the country (especially in terms of economy and standard of life), it can be concluded that for majority of Bulgarians the notions of nation and state are no longer part of the indivisible whole. Kabakchieva writes that the nation-state has split into an (ethnically defined) nation and a (disrespected and distrusted) state. This process is the strongest among Bulgarians, who are a dominant group, but similar tendencies can also be observed among Turks and to a smaller extent among Roma (Kabakchieva, 2009, pp. 257-278).

Another important criteria for tolerance in the society are the political parties. One of the first political parties founded in 1989 was the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a party widely considered as a political party of the Muslim communities (especially the Turkish one). Its appearance and activities were met with very mixed reception. On one side, its representatives have been promoting themselves as the protectors of the ethnic model in the country and have on numerous occasions (especially in the beginning of the transition) contributed to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious coexistence and tolerance in the country. On the other side, the MRF has caused also a considerable negative backlash among the Bulgarians. The long years of its participation in the political games in the country and above all the increasingly authoritarian structure of its political apparatus have significantly contributed to the predominantly negative attitude towards the party in Bulgaria today.

The increasing popularity of nationalistic and xenophobic political parties says much about the levels of tolerance in the country. The two most popular such parties are VMRO – Bulgarian National Movement, and Attack. VMRO (which stands for Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization) focuses on the national dignity and integrity and is less radical in its public statements and activities. It was established in 1989, but never gained significant popularity and usually participated in the

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<sup>17</sup> Giaour is an offensive Turkish term for an infidel.

Bulgarian parliamentary life as a member of various coalitions. Attack relies on extremely aggressive nationalistic, racist and xenophobic rhetoric. It appeared on the political stage shortly before the 2005 elections and achieved an unexpectedly high result with 8.14% of the votes. Contrary to the predictions that this would remain its best achievement, Attack performed even better on the 2009 elections (9.36%). On the 2006 Presidential elections, Attack leader Volen Siderov received 21.49% in the first and 24.05% in the second round of voting. Attack's popularity has since fallen considerably. According to March 2012 poll, only 3% of voters would support Attack on the general elections (Lyubomirska, 2012). On October 2011 presidential elections, Siderov finished fourth with only 3.64% of votes.<sup>18</sup>

A very good test of how tolerant is the society are its reactions to various political initiatives regarding the Turkish minority. On numerous occasions and especially during the election campaigns, Attack has raised the issue of the Turkish language news programme on the national TV channel "Kanal 1."<sup>19</sup> After the parliamentary elections in 2009, the party demanded the referendum on the issue, provoking a heated public discussion for and against the news. After a significant number of aggressive and intolerant statements were made in the media and public space, in the end the position prevailed that the Turkish language news should be preserved (24 chasa, 2009; Dnevnik, 2009).

Another test for Bulgarians are the increasing anti-Islamic sentiments in the world. On the one hand, there is the opinion that "our" Muslims are well integrated and are "not like the others" (Zhelyazkova, 1998a; Zhelyazkova, 2010; Roev, 2009; Iliev, 2007). On the other hand, the suspicions and allegations about the spread of radical Islam in the Turkish and Pomak villages have become quite common in the recent years. Even the traditional and well established customs from everyday life (like headscarves) are used by certain political circles as evidence that "radicalism" has entered Bulgaria. On several occasions, the special police units were called in to investigate the "manifestations of radical Islam" in various Bulgarian villages, but so far they have only confirmed that there was no such phenomenon in the country. The only result was the increasing feeling of discomfort and rejection among the Muslim communities.

Media are a very import factor forming the public opinion and an indicator of the existing tendencies. Unfortunately, some media have in the recent years contributed to the spread of intolerance instead of trying to achieve the opposite. One of the TV channels, quite popular on the national scale, is SKAT. Its programme orientation is openly nationalistic, and anti-Islamic and racist messages are a common feature in many of its shows.<sup>20</sup> The Council for Electronic Media, the state regulatory institution, rarely intervenes against the hate speech featured on SKAT and in other media, which regularly use negative and offensive terms for various minorities.

The situation has somewhat improved in the recent years with the passing of the new Law on Protection against Discrimination (in force since 1 January 2004) and the establishment of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The increasing number of NGOs has been engaged with the protection of human and minority rights and protection against discrimination. They have sent a number of signals to the Commission and started procedures with the goal of creating legal precedence and bring public attention to the issues of anti-discrimination and tolerance.

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<sup>18</sup> The poor result has lead to considerable disappointment in the party and calls for resignation of Siderov as the party leader. Siderov reacted by expelling the opposition from the party and Attack has de facto split into several hostile fractions, which additionally eroded its popularity.

<sup>19</sup> A 15-minute long summary of the main news in Turkish language (with Bulgarian subtitles) has been broadcast on the national TV channel since 2004.

<sup>20</sup> 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 Orthodox religion); Class on Bulgaria (different themes from Bulgarian history, archaeology, ethnology, literature and arts); Banished from Their Fatherland (dedicated to Bulgarians, banished from historical 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>

NGOs are also the most active actors in the research of tolerance in Bulgaria and in efforts to build a truly tolerant society. A number of projects and initiatives in the recent years aimed at:

- studying the tolerance and acceptance of otherness
- promoting peaceful coexistence
- reforming the education through introduction of programmes for learning about otherness and setting up models of tolerance
- protection against discrimination

The issues of tolerance, equality of citizens and fight against discrimination have been included in the relevant Bulgarian legislation: the Constitution, Law on Religion (or Confessions Act) of 2002, Law on Political Parties (1990), Law on Protection against Discrimination (2004), and Penal Code (from 1968 and amended many times since then). Special state institutions in charge of these issues have also been formed: the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (1997), Ombudsman (2003), and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (2005; it is the only one with the authority to issue sanctions).

Monitoring of tolerance and anti-discrimination practices in Bulgaria has been conducted since 1998 by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI). The ECRI has issued four reports on Bulgaria to date.<sup>21</sup> Despite certain remarks, the ECRI believes that the Bulgarian Constitution safeguards the equality of all Bulgarian citizens. Regarding the Confessions Act, the ECRI recommends that the Bulgarian authorities continue the process of amending the law in order to ensure the full freedom of religion in accordance with Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The ECRI's most categorical recommendations deal with the prevention and punishment of racist crimes and offences based on discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation and other indicators. The ECRI recommends that the Bulgarian authorities ensure that such offences are duly punished in accordance with the law and that the authorities continue to foster awareness among the judiciary in this regard to ensure that the law is applied when necessary. Despite the reports of various NGOs and findings of the ECRI, the Bulgarian state institutions still do not recognize the existence of racism, xenophobia and manifestations of intolerance and hate crimes, and consequently they do not act accordingly to prevent and punish them. For this reason, the ECRI again recommends that the Bulgarian authorities insert a provision in the Criminal Code expressly stating that racist motivation for any ordinary offence constitutes an aggravating circumstance (*ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 2009, p. 15).

Regarding the relevant state institutions, the ECRI recommends that the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues is reinforced and that its responsibilities are clarified in order to make a greater impact, especially on issues affecting Roma. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination has been positively evaluated, but the ECRI recommends that its human and financial resources be increased – especially through establishment of its local offices (*ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 2009, pp. 17-18).

### ***Concluding remarks***

Bulgarians have been used to living in a multi-cultural environment since the times of the Ottoman Empire. At the same time, this experience of cohabitation has led to the construction of models of parallel existence – the otherness is tolerated without being actually accepted. From the very formation of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, the Bulgarian society and the governing circles viewed Bulgaria as a mono-national Orthodox-Christian state. All Bulgarian Constitutions and principal laws noted the existence of various ethnic and religious communities and upheld the principle of equal rights and obligations, but at the same time, all these legal documents (most notably all Constitutions

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<sup>21</sup> The latest report is from 2009. See *ECRI Report on Bulgaria*, 2009.

and the Law on Religion) placed the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in a privileged position compared to other religions.<sup>22</sup>

The perception of a mono-national state has resulted in corresponding policies towards the minorities. They were accepted as a part of the Bulgarian society, but at the same time were in practice highly marginalised – Roma live mostly in segregated settlements at the edges of cities and towns, while majority of Turks and Pomaks reside in peripheral rural regions. In this way, they remain largely “invisible” in the everyday life of the majority population. The public attitudes towards them is directed and regulated mostly by the media and certain political parties with nationalistic orientation. Most often, the minorities fall into the media and political spotlight in election periods, or in times of political, economic or other crises, when they are most often presented as being responsible for a given problem, or as a problem itself.

At the same time, the mere fact of practical cohabitation in a multi-cultural environment is often enough for Bulgarians to perceive themselves as tolerant. However, the “tolerance” in this case can be understood only as “putting up with someone different,” without accepting and understanding them. A similar attitude can be observed even in the academic circles. Humanities in Bulgaria have failed to conceptualise the issue of tolerance. The thesis that the Bulgarian society is tolerant because of the traditional coexistence of various ethnoses and religions is accepted as an axiom. An Orthodox and a Catholic church, a mosque and a synagogue, which stand almost side by side in the centre of the capital Sofia, are frequently pointed out as a symbol of tolerance in the country.

And yet, the term “tolerance” remains above all a synonym of bearable and parallel cohabitation. The situation could be classified as liberal tolerance – the right of the minorities to express their ethnic, religious and cultural characteristics is respected, but only as long as it is considered (by the state institutions, political actors and even the majority population) that this is not in contradiction with the national interests. The Bulgarian intellectuals have only recently (through import of the European discourse) begun to understand the tolerance in a broader way – as acceptance and respect of the different groups. Such discourse for now exists predominantly in the projects and work of the non-governmental organisations. The particular studies actually show that the attitude of the majority of Bulgarians towards otherness is still based on deeply entrenched disregard, apprehension and prejudice.

Legislation and state policies follow the European norms and are largely in line with the EU legal practices, but this is above all a result of the EU accession process, as the Bulgarian legislation had to be changed so that the accession criteria could be fulfilled. The practical implementation of these legal texts often leaves much to hope for, and the comprehensive policy on equal treatment of all citizens belonging to various minority groups has yet to be developed. The traditional distrust towards the state institutions is another reason why many representatives of the minority communities remain very reserved regarding the possibility to turn to the state for protection of their rights.

Many minority communities feel that they are not equally treated and that the majority and state institutions are neglecting them. They have set up various NGOs and political parties in an effort to protect their interests.

Roma are mostly active in the NGO sector. They have not succeeded in uniting around a single political party, but have their representatives in many municipal councils. Turks and Pomaks have a political representation on the central level, and hold the political majority in many municipalities where they live. The Chief Mufti office is also actively involved in the protection of religious freedoms on the national and local level.

In conclusion, several recommendations can be made on how to increase the sensitivity and ability to accept the otherness in the Bulgarian society. In the first place, the state should more actively support

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<sup>22</sup> Article 13 (3) of the current Constitution states: “Eastern Orthodox Christianity shall be considered the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria.” *Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria*, <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en>

the work of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, which has until now shown the best concrete results in the fight against discriminative treatment. The Commission itself should intensify and widen its media campaigns and its activities aimed at encouraging citizens to protect their rights through legal means. The institutions overseeing the media should be much stricter towards the cases of hate-speech and intolerance in the media.

The state needs to develop a comprehensive and purposeful policy on acceptance of otherness in the Bulgarian society. To make this possible, a centralised system for collecting information on actual existence / lack of tolerance in the society, media and institutions is needed. The cases of discriminative practices, registered by various NGOs, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, courts and other institutions should be structured in a common database.

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Bulgaria is still searching for the proper balance in accommodating its diversity. To a large extent, the Bulgarian political circles and the society have declared their support for the process of recognition and acceptance of “otherness” in the country. However, only a few concrete measures have produced effective and genuine results to date.



## **Chapter 2: (In)Tolerance of Difference in Bulgarian Schools: Discourses and Practices**

This chapter analyses the processes and the changes in attitude towards the ethnic, cultural and religious otherness in the Bulgarian society during the first decade of 2000s.<sup>23</sup> The analysis examines the levels of (in)tolerance, recognition and acceptance, focusing 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 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

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<sup>23</sup> This chapter 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.

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.

### ***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%<sup>24</sup> and Pazardzhik – 8.3%<sup>25</sup> 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 where 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

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<sup>24</sup> Data from the Plan for Development of Samokov Municipality 2007-2013 – Demographic Development and Human Resources, 2007.

<sup>25</sup> Data from the website Pazardzhik Population – data for 2001.

(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.

### ***Case study 1: Segregation of Roma children in the education system and desegregation policies***

#### Background information

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.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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

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<sup>26</sup> 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.

<sup>27</sup> 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).

*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.

As the *Framework Programme* achieved only negligible success in the improvement of the Roma situation, a *National Action Plan – Decade of Roma Inclusion* was passed in 2005. The long list of its objectives, tasks and activities was expected to contribute to the integration of Roma into the society and improve the quality of their life in six priority areas: education, health care, housing, employment, protection against discrimination and provision of equal opportunities, and culture.<sup>28</sup>

Regardless of all the programmes and action plans of the government and various state institutions, the Bulgarian Roma remain exceptionally marginalised. 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 can be classified as a clear case of non-toleration, although periodic attempts to implement tolerant measures have been undertaken by certain state institutions, most often in cooperation with the NGO sector. The state institutions in charge of education 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 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

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<sup>28</sup> The entire document *National Action Plan – Decade of Roma Inclusion* can be downloaded from: [http://www.ncedi.government.bg/en/NAP\\_REPUBLIC%20OF%20BULGARIA.htm](http://www.ncedi.government.bg/en/NAP_REPUBLIC%20OF%20BULGARIA.htm)

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).

#### 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 main 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.” (I/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 I/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.” (I/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 I/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.” (I/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.<sup>29</sup> The best way to

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<sup>29</sup> 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

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 I/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.” (I/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 ghettos, 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 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.” (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/4)*

(Contd.) \_\_\_\_\_

are better integrated into the society. This observation was also confirmed by respondent I/8, who is an expert on minority issues in Bulgaria. See also Slavkova, 2008.

*“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.”*  
(I/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 successful integration. 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.”*  
(I/5)

Respondent I/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.”*  
(I/6)

*“It comes from the parents, but this is not the only problem. The problem is the time in which we all live.”* (I/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.”* (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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?” (I/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.’” (I/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.” (I/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 I/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...” (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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 (I/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 I/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.” (I/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 fabrication. 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.” (I/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.” (I/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 I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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.

## ***Case study 2: Compulsory religious education in public schools***

### Background information

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.<sup>30</sup> 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.

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<sup>30</sup> 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](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.

## 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.<sup>31</sup> Although the Communist regime was a foe of all religions, its anti-Islamic campaign was especially fierce. Muslims were forced to change their names into Bulgarian (Christian) sounding names, many mosques were closed and some destroyed, numerous 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. 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 Sunni and Alevi Turks, Muslim Bulgarians – 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

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<sup>31</sup> 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 2011, Sofia), the majority of Muslims 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 uncertain: 8%.

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 (Hajdinjak, Kosseva, Zhelyazkova, 2012).

*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” (I/10, I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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, standing on only three legs because the fourth one was cut off.” (I/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.

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.” (I/12)*

*“Coexistence of different religious communities is truly essential. Both Christianity and Islam teach people to be good, they don't teach violence.” (I/9)*

*“All children learn that in the end, we all need to be tolerant to each other.” (I/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 I/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.

*“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.” (I/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.” (I/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 I/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.” (I/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.” (I/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 instruction 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.” (I/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.” (I/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.” (I/14)*

These three quotes clearly demonstrate the ambivalence of the issue in the Bulgarian society. They also clearly demonstrate the levels of tolerance. 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 processes 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.” (I/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...” (I/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...” (I/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*” (I/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.” (I/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.

### ***Concluding notes***

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. 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<sup>32</sup> 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 “Attack” 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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<sup>32</sup> 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.

### **Chapter 3: Voting Rights of Bulgarian Minorities**

The debate about the political participation of Bulgarian minorities and especially about their allegedly disproportionately strong influence on the election results is among the most disputed and polarising issues in Bulgaria. In the pre-election periods, the debate usually becomes exceptionally hot, and quite frequently, populist and nationalist political actors raise demands aimed at limiting the voting rights of Bulgarian minorities. Needless to say, these demands are more often than not openly undemocratic, illiberal and intolerant.

Against such social-political background, on 19 January 2011 the National Assembly of Bulgaria adopted the new Election Code. While introducing numerous positive changes and bringing some much needed clarity and order into previously fragmented and confusing electoral legislation, the Code is highly controversial and some of its articles have drawn criticism from international institutions, Bulgarian human rights watchdogs and other civic organisations, and some political actors.

The 2011 Election Code is the first ever unified legislation act dealing with elections in Bulgaria. It substituted four different acts, which previously regulated different types of elections (Act on the Election of Members of Parliament, Act on the Election of President and Vice President, Act on the Election of Members of the European Parliament, and Local Elections Act). The first draft of the Election Code was vetoed by President Georgi Parvanov and returned to Parliament for reconsideration of its numerous articles. The most important complaints voiced by President Parvanov and supported by some opposition political parties and a part of the civil society included: the 12-months residency requirement for participation in local elections; limitations on voting rights of citizens with dual citizenship; abolition of the direct election of district mayors; increased population threshold for the election of mayors of villages; and reduction of the number of municipal councillors.

The presidential veto was eventually overridden by the majority in the National Assembly (more than half of all MPs need to vote for the law to override the President's veto). As none of the demanded changes were made to the Code, the opposition parties approached the Constitutional Court. In its Decision no. 4/2011 from 4 May 2011, the Court ruled that several provisions of the Election Code were unconstitutional. Following the ruling, the National Assembly on 2 June adopted a series of amendments to the Code. Most notably, the requirement to live at least 12 months prior to the election day in a certain Bulgarian municipality to be eligible to vote in the local elections there was shortened to six months (four months for the October 2011 elections).

Attempts to limit the voting rights of entire groups of Bulgarian citizens did not alarm only the minority communities and the political parties, which represent their interests, but also the Bulgarian civil society and the international (especially EU) institutions. Although the nationalistic and xenophobic public dispositions, exploited by various political parties, have been on the rise across Europe over the recent years, the developments in Bulgaria are characterised by several features that make them rather unique in the European space.

One aspect that makes Bulgaria exceptional is the large community of people holding a dual Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship. It is estimated that up to 380,000 people are at the same time citizens of one EU member and one non-member state. Another feature distinguishing Bulgaria from the majority of other EU countries is the sizeable Roma minority – according to expert estimates representing about 7-8% of the population.

Not surprisingly, even the most nationalistic and xenophobic political actors try to conceal their attempts to curtail the political participation of minorities by presenting them as measures aimed at fighting certain illegal and illegitimate practices that regularly accompany elections in Bulgaria. One

such practice is the so-called vote buying – a process when people vote for a certain party or independent candidate in exchange for money or other type of bribe. Roma are most often accused that they sell their votes and in this way they distort the election results by giving advantage to the most corrupt and unscrupulous political actors.

Despite the consensus among all political parties that vote buying and similar schemes are unacceptable and that the legislation and practical organisation of election process need to change in a way that would limit or prevent them, practice shows that virtually no party is immune to such temptation and the phenomenon has been growing from year to year and from elections to elections. Although the investigations conducted by civil society and independent observers show that the vote buying is not limited to the Roma community only, nor that the majority of Roma are ready and willing to sell their votes, the nationalistic parties have managed to force their agenda into the media and public debates. Both are saturated with extreme positions regarding the voting rights of Roma citizens and their ability to take an informed decision on the elections.

Another contentious issue is the voting of Bulgarian Turks, who have emigrated to the Republic of Turkey and have a dual (Bulgarian and Turkish) citizenship. There is a strong position, shared by numerous political actors and a large part of the society, that despite being Bulgarian citizens, they should have no right to influence the Bulgarian politics because they do not live in the country. Periodically, various political parties have proposed and tried to implement different measures to limit their voting rights. Although the issue of voting rights of emigrants does not concern only the Bulgarian Turks, but also ethnic Bulgarians who have left the country since 1989, the debates focus on the Bulgarian emigrants of Turkish origin because the practice has shown that they are considerably more active and organised voters than the ethnic Bulgarians in emigration. The results from the last few elections show that between 50 and 60% of the votes cast abroad are for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a political party representing the interests of Bulgarian Turks and other minority communities. The attempts to limit the voting rights of Bulgarian dual citizens therefore have a very practical goal – to decrease the electoral success of the MRF, widely perceived by other political actors and a significant share of the society as wielding a disproportionately large political and economic power in the country.

### ***Methodology***

The fieldwork was conducted between October 2011 and February 2012. It included both desk research and empirical fieldwork. The most important event that marked the period in which the fieldwork was conducted were the presidential and local elections, which took place on 23 October (the first round) and 30 October 2011 (the second round).

During the fieldwork, 14 semi-standardised interviews were taken. The sample of respondents included representatives of all major ethnic and religious groups in Bulgaria – Orthodox Christian Bulgarians (7), Turks (4), Muslim Bulgarians (2) and Roma (1). In order to capture a wide range of different views and opinions, we interviewed several politicians (two members of the National Assembly of Bulgaria and six who hold or used to hold positions in local government). One respondent is a well-known political analyst and an expert on the topic of political participation of minorities. Five respondents are ordinary citizens with different professions and background.

The elections had a decisive impact on the way the interviews were conducted. On the one hand, the overwhelming share of public debates and media coverage in the period from September to November dealt with the elections and political developments in Bulgaria, making our research topic about the voting rights of minorities highly relevant. All respondents were excited over the elections and eager to share their opinion. On the other hand, some of them (especially the local politicians who were personally involved in the election race) were emotionally affected by the elections and their outcome.

It was very difficult for them to distance themselves from their personal experience and to concentrate on evaluating the issues in the national frame.

Four people were interviewed in the capital Sofia. Three interviews were taken in two villages in central Bulgaria. Both villages have sizable Roma communities. Four interviews were made in an eastern Bulgarian town with the majority Turkish population – two respondents were ethnic Bulgarians and two were ethnic Turks. The remaining three interviews are from a village in south-western Bulgaria, where the majority of residents are Muslim Bulgarians. Our sample thus roughly corresponds to the ethnic structure of the Bulgarian population. Inclusion of small settlements from various parts of the country is particularly important for the research, because the problems, relations, tendencies and perceptions there often significantly differ from those that can be noted in Sofia.

The interview guide (see Annex 1) was divided into two main groups of questions. The first one focused on the new Election Code and its restriction of the voting rights of people with double citizenship. This topic very directly concerns the political representation of the Bulgarian Turks, as it is quite obvious that restrictions are aimed in the first place against people holding a dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizenship. This issue also brings forward the question of how willing are Bulgarians to accept and respect the right to vote of those Bulgarian citizens who live outside the country – especially if they are of a minority origin.

The second topic centred on the so-called vote buying – a notorious practice which seems to spread with each successive elections. The issue is connected with the voting of the Roma community, as Roma are most often believed to participate in such schemes. This group of questions examined the attitude of the society towards participation of Roma in the political and social processes in Bulgaria.

All interviews were transcribed in Bulgarian. The audio files are stored in IMIR's archive. Anonymity of all respondents is guaranteed. They were given assurances that their opinions will be used only for the purpose of this research. The interviews were analysed with the method of discourse analysis, which considers the selection of strategies for providing answers, the way opinions are formulated, and the influence of the environment and circumstances in which the interview took place. The analysis is structured in a way that makes it possible to evaluate the levels of intolerance, tolerance and recognition.

The main part of the desk research consisted of collecting and analysing the media coverage of the main political challenge analysed in this report: the 2011 Election code and its consequences for the voting rights of Bulgarian Turkish and Roma minorities. In addition, statistical data, legal texts, policy documents, and proceedings of the National Assembly and relevant parliamentary committees were also examined.

For the media coverage, we have focused on *Trud* (or Labour; in Bulgarian Труд). *Trud* is the largest-circulation Bulgarian daily newspaper (between 70,000 and 100,000). Established in 1936, it is also the oldest Bulgarian newspaper still in existence. According to public opinion poll, it is the most trusted daily newspaper. Its language and positions are predominantly conservative. It is considered politically neutral and usually critical of the government regardless of its colour. Using the “keyword” search through the *Trud* archive, we compiled three groups of articles around the following keywords: election tourism, vote buying and election code.

The time period for articles on vote buying was October-November 2011 (roughly a month before and after the 2011 presidential and local elections). A month before the elections was the most active period for this illegal practice, while the month after the elections was marked by a number of police investigations and court proceedings against vote buyers and sellers. We opted for a longer period (January- November 2011) for articles on election tourism. Because of the new Election Code, which introduced the six-month residency requirement, the massive voter shifts did not occur few days before the elections (as was the case on previous elections). Instead, a new phenomenon was detected – large groups of voters changing their address registrations en masse during the first half of the 2011.

Leaving out the articles shorter than 200 words, we analysed 21 articles on election tourism and 31 articles on vote buying. Articles were coded and grouped according to the central topics they dealt with. The Critical Discourse Analysis was then used to reveal how the expressed opinions, implied meanings and used language are positioned within the frame “intolerance – tolerance – respect and recognition” regarding the voting rights of the Bulgarian minorities.

### ***Case study 1: Voting of people holding a dual citizenship***

#### Background information

Turks are a well-organised community, with high levels of inter-group support. The Muslim religion, different cultural traditions and ethnic origin are their main identity markers, which they have upheld and protected with consistency both during the periods of tolerance and repression (in the authoritarian past). For numerous Bulgarians, Turks are representatives of an alien ethnos that was hostile to Bulgarians in the past. At the same time, their participation in the cultural, social and political life in the country shows that Turks are dedicated and active citizens. The latent suspicions that they might harbour loyalty to another state (Turkey) often clash with the traditional stereotypes that Turks are hardworking, honest and overall – “non-problematic.” Bulgarians in general appreciate the efforts of Turks to be fully integrated in the society, and acknowledge that in most respects, there are hardly any differences in the way Turks and Bulgarians live.

During the communist rule (1945-1989), the repressive state policies aimed at forced assimilation resulted in several waves of mass emigration of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey (1950-1951; 1968; 1989). After 1989, a large number of emigrants were able to regain the Bulgarian citizenship they have previously lost, and thus they became dual (Bulgarian and Turkish) citizens. This has eased their contacts with the relatives in Bulgaria, made it easier to visit their former homes more often and opened possibilities for starting a business in Bulgaria. In addition, the Bulgarian citizenship also enabled their participation in the political events in Bulgaria – giving them the right to vote.

Among the numerous political parties formed after 1989 was also the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) – a party mainly concerned with the protection of rights and interests of Muslims in Bulgaria. Turks and a significant share of Muslim Bulgarians recognised the MRF as their political representative on the national level. Over the years, the party became an important factor in the Bulgarian politics and participated in or provided a decisive support for several governments. The party has an exceptionally consolidated and organised structure and its activists and offices maintain close ties with the electorate not just in Bulgaria, but also in a number of cities in Turkey, where larger communities of immigrants from Bulgaria reside. Highly cohesive and active electorate means that the MRF can count on a very stable result on all elections – a sharp difference from almost all other political parties in Bulgaria, which have experienced notable shifts in their results in each consecutive election cycle. Although the MRF has never participated in the presidential elections with its own candidate, its support for a given candidate is traditionally decisive for winning the elections.<sup>33</sup>

The Bulgarian citizens holding also a citizenship of another country face no restrictions related to their residency on the parliamentary and presidential elections. The situation is different regarding the local elections and elections for the European Parliament. The Article 3 (2) of the Election Code states that those Bulgarian citizens, who have lived at least three months prior to the election day in Bulgaria or

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<sup>33</sup> The recent presidential elections (October 2011) were a prominent exception, as the MRF supported the candidate of the Bulgarian Socialist Party Ivaylo Kalfin against the winner Rosen Plevneliev of GERB. Although the majority of ethnic Turks supported Kalfin (according to the Institute of Social Surveys and Marketing, the exit polls showed that 71% of Turkish voters voted for Kalfin against 29% for Plevneliev), it seems that many preferred to stay at home and not vote at all. Cvetan Cvetanov, Minister of Interior and the head of GERB’s election campaign team, stated after the first results were published, that “for the first time, a President was elected without the broker MRF” (Novinar, 2010).



in another EU member state, are eligible to cast their vote for the members of the European Parliament.

The right to vote on the local elections is defined by the Article 3 (4) – only those Bulgarian citizens who have lived at least six months prior to the election day in a certain Bulgarian municipality have the right to vote for the mayor and municipal council of that municipality. Exceptionally, as the Code was passed in the election year, the residency requirement for the 2011 municipal elections was reduced from 6 to 4 months. Article 64, which speaks about the removal of voters from the voters' list stipulates that “the names of any citizens, who have had a present address (residence address) outside the Republic of Bulgaria during the last six months before the date of conduct of the elections, shall be removed from the voters' lists.”

Practically all debates on the issue of voting rights of dual citizens focus on the case of Bulgarian Turks with the dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizenship. On the one hand, there is a historical distrust towards the former imperial hegemon and the Bulgarian Turkish emigrants are often perceived as a potential fifth column of the Turkish Republic. On the other hand, the Bulgarian-Turkish voters have over the past 20 years overwhelmingly supported the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – a fact upsetting not only the MRF's political rivals, but a significant share of (ethnic Bulgarian) society.

On the June 2001 parliamentary elections, out of 50,000 votes cast in Turkey, the MRF received 38,840 votes (Özgür-Baklacioglu, 2006, p. 328). On the 2005 general elections, 53.99% of all who have voted abroad (77,020) supported the MRF (the party received 12.81% on the national scale). On the 2009 elections, when the number of voters abroad was more than double compared to 2005, the result was even more astonishing: the MRF collected 61.18% of votes abroad, while altogether its result on the national scale was 14.45%. From another point of view, from 610,521 votes the MRF received in 2009, 93,926 came from the voting sections abroad (see CEC, 2005; CEC, 2009). The number of Turkish-speaking Bulgarian citizens living in Turkey is estimated to be around 1,175,000. Different authors give different figures about the number of people with dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizenship. The highest estimate is around 380,000 people (Özgür-Baklacioglu, 2006, p. 322; Smilov and Jileva, 2010, p. 19). In any case, this is a group that has a considerable electoral potential (the number of voters registered for the October 2011 local elections was around 6,518,000; see OSCE/ODIHR, 2011a, p. 4).

#### Attempts to limit the voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens

In the 1990s, the question about the voting rights of Bulgarian Turks with dual citizenship was not problematic. This was partially a result of the desire to accommodate the Turkish minority and “make up” for the repressive assimilation policies of the communist regime. In the second half of the decade, Bulgaria also went through a deep political and economic crisis (1996-1997), which sidelined the question about the political participation of Bulgarian Turks.

In the first decade of the 2000s, the left-right bipolar model of the 1990s was shattered by the rise of the populist parties, such as the National Movement Simeon II in 2001, GERB – Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria in 2006, and also the extreme nationalist party Attack in 2005. In this situation, the voting rights of Bulgarian citizens residing in Turkey came under fire. In December 2006, the party Attack proposed amendments to the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship. Amendments would eliminate the dual citizenship, with the exception of citizens of Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine, who are of ethnic Bulgarian origin and who would have the right to obtain Bulgarian citizenship “to protect their rights and economic interest” (see Siderov, 2006). The amendments were rejected by the Parliament (19 votes ‘for,’ 78 ‘against,’ 26 abstentions) (News.bg, 2007).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Attack has again sent a bill with their amendments into the parliamentary procedure in July 2011. Before the reading in the National Assembly, the bill needs to be reviewed and discussed by the relevant parliamentary committees – in this case

The demands to limit the voting rights of Turkish-Bulgarian dual citizens intensified prior to the first elections for the European Parliament in Bulgaria in May 2007. The opposition parties demanded the introduction of residence requirements that would disqualify voters residing in non-EU countries (especially Turkey). The proposal had also an overwhelming public support according to the public opinion poll conducted by the Alpha Research Agency. 65% of respondents supported the introduction of residence requirements for the EP elections. 70% of respondents were in favour of introduction of such requirement for all elections, while only 24.8% believed that such measures were discriminatory (Alpha Research, 2007). During the heated parliamentary debate on 8 February 2007, the opposition raised the argument that MEPs elected by the voters residing in Turkey would represent Turkey rather than Bulgaria in the EP. After the proposal was rejected by the majority, Ivan Kostov (leader of Democrats for Strong Bulgaria) called all deputies who did not support “this shameful trade-off” to walk out. Following his address, all deputies from opposition parties (Union of Democratic Forces, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Attack and Bulgarian National Union) left the plenary hall (National Assembly, 2007). The ruling coalition (Bulgarian Socialist Party, National Movement Simeon II, Movement for Rights and Freedoms) ultimately passed the legislation, which gave all Bulgarian citizens the right to vote regardless of where they live.

In 2009, when two elections were held (in June for the European Parliament and in July for the National Assembly<sup>35</sup>), the populist and nationalist parties strengthened their resolve to find a way to prevent the Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin residing abroad from participation on the elections. The convincing victory of the populist-conservative GERB party in 2009 elections and their comfortable parliamentary majority provided by the support of the Attack led to the inevitable: the Election Code passed in January 2011 and amended in June introduced the six month residency requirement for the local elections.

#### “Election tourism” and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms

The mechanism through which the MRF is able to secure a relatively stable and predictable number of votes on all elections is popularly known as “election tourism.” Large groups of voters residing in Turkey are organised and transported to their native towns and villages in Bulgaria to cast their votes. Thus, they often directly determine the outcome of the elections – especially in smaller towns and villages, where literally every vote counts and can decide who is elected as a village or municipal mayor, or a municipal councillor.

The unique position of the MRF – its unchallenged authority in numerous Bulgarian municipalities with the majority Muslim population – has in time increased its exposure to corrupt schemes and practices, and the party is today widely perceived (especially by its political opponents, media and

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the Legal Affairs Committee and the Human Rights, Religion, Citizens’ Complaints and Petitions Committee. The Legal Affairs Committee examined the bill in September 2011. Of 26 members of the Committee, 2 voted to support the amendments, 3 were against, while 15 abstained. The Committee therefore recommended the National Assembly not to support the bill on the first reading (Legal Affairs Committee, 2011). Large number of abstentions, however, most likely means that the majority of committee members did not want to openly support such a discriminatory bill, but were personally inclined to agree with Attack’s argumentation.

In January 2012, the bill was discussed also by the Parliamentary Human Rights, Religion, Citizens’ Complaints and Petitions Committee. Attack’s deputy chairman Pavel Shopov underlined that the holders of dual citizenship have only rights but no obligations towards the Bulgarian state and that in this way, they are in a privileged position compared to other Bulgarian citizens. Speaking very explicitly about the Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens, Shopov described them as “a huge mass of people who are not Europeans, do not accept European values, do not live according to the EU rules and actually reside on another continent.” Hundreds of thousands of such people use Bulgaria as a Trojan horse to have access to the EU, according to Shopov. Several members of the Committee objected to his remarks. The bill with amendments was flatly rejected (9 votes against, 2 abstentions, none for) (Human Rights, Religion, Citizens’ Complaints and Petitions Committee, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> As mentioned above, the MRF collected 61.18% of votes from abroad on the national elections.

political analysts) as the most corrupt political party in the country.<sup>36</sup> Another development provoking negative dispositions towards the MRF is the ever growing political and economic influence of its perpetual leader Ahmed Dogan, who has headed the party since its establishment in 1990.<sup>37</sup>

In recent years, the resentment over the MRF among the majority population has spilled over into a negative attitude towards Turks in general. The discontent over the MRF thus interacted with the traditional stereotypes and prejudices against Turks, resulting in the growing intolerance towards this minority.

The solid grip of the MRF over its electorate is also a consequence of the fact that most other political parties largely neglect the Turkish minority. They rarely conduct election campaigns in regions populated by Muslims, do not try to win their support and rarely address issues, which are of main concern of these communities. Most parties view the “minority regions” as “bastions of the MRF” and prefer to concentrate their resources and attention elsewhere. Instead of finding ways to attract the potential MRF voters, other parties prefer to look for ways to administratively limit the influence of the MRF. The restriction of the right to vote on the local elections only to the people who have permanently resided in a given municipality for at least six months prior to the election day is the latest and bluntest such attempt.

#### The media analysis

The daily *Trud* featured 21 articles mentioning election tourism in January-November 2011 period. Six articles (all from the February-May period) were devoted to the new Election Code and specifically its possible consequences for the election tourism. As this was the period between the passing of the first version of the Code (with 12 month residency requirement) and the ruling of the Constitutional Court, after which the Code was amended and the requirement for permanent address in a given municipality shortened to six months, most articles discussed pros and cons of longer and shorter residency requirement. Articles underlined that the 12-month requirement was unusual for the EU countries and was even in violation of various international agreements Bulgaria has signed.

Four articles (from October and November) analysed the elections and performance of the political parties. In general, the articles were very critical of the elections and stressed that the October 2011 elections were the most poorly organised and implemented elections since 1989. A large share of the blame was assigned to the Election Code, which has created a legal chaos. Analysing the performance of the political parties, articles noted the poorer performance of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (compared to the previous elections). Although the obstacles and limitations to electoral tourism (especially the fact that it was no longer possible to bring buses of voters from Turkey on or prior to the election day) were listed among the reasons for the lower result, other factors were named as more important. They included internal frictions in the party, resulting in the appearance of several splinter groups; a sharp decline in the popularity of nationalistic Attack party, which previously acted as a threat mobilising the minority voters; and the fact that the MRF is not anymore a convenient “shortcut” to the state financing it used to be when it was a part of the governing coalition in the 2001-2009 period. The restrictions introduced by the Code were therefore evaluated as largely irrelevant for

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<sup>36</sup> According to a public opinion research from 2008, 41.4% of respondents believe that “MPs, ministers and other MRF representatives in central and local government are very corrupt,” the same share (41.4%) neither agrees nor disagrees with such statement, while 17.2% disagree (Dimitrova, 2008). A political analyst Ognyan Minchev describes the MRF as “centralized, monopolistic ethnic corporation, which conducts slow, persistent and aggressive strategy for isolating ethnically mixed regions in Bulgaria under its hegemony and control.” In his view, “the massive political corruption (...) of the leaders and the activists of the MRF is unapproachable, solidly entrenched behind the monopolistic control, far from public scrutiny on the mechanisms of governance” (Minchev, 2005). In a recent interview, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov referred to the MRF as “the conductor of corruption in Bulgaria” (Novinar, 2011). For links between the MRF and corruption, see also Koritarov, 2008.

<sup>37</sup> Ahead of 2009 general elections, Dogan has described himself as “the instrument of power, who distributes the bits of financing in the state.” He added that the power was concentrated in him, and not in the MRF’s deputies in the Parliament (Sofia Echo, 2009).

the MRF's result and were instead criticised for preventing numerous eligible voters to exercise their right to vote due to confusion they have created.

Half of the articles on election tourism reported on actual cases of false address registrations, investigated by the police and judiciary. A number of municipal officials (including mayors) were investigated and in some cases arrested for administratively "increasing" the number of eligible voters in their municipality, town or village by issuing false address registrations to groups of people. In one of the more notorious cases, a town of Madzharovo with 1500 residents acquired 140 new residents just a few days before the expiry of the deadline for election residency requirement. Practically all articles on unlawful address registrations tendentiously mentioned that the "new residents" either had "predominantly Turkish names" or that they actually resided in the "nearby Roma neighbourhood."

Despite the conscious attempt of the *Trud* editorial board not to cross the boundaries of political correctness and intolerant speech, the commentaries and especially the questions asked in various interviews implicitly brought forth the stereotypes and intolerant predispositions towards the minorities. This was most evident in the question whether the residency requirement would finally put an end to the buses bringing voters from Turkey to cast their ballots in various Bulgarian towns and villages. In general, in the majority of articles where the issue of election tourism was discussed in principle, the practice was almost exclusively linked to the MRF. Those articles, which reported on the concrete cases of election tourism and false address registrations of voters, however clearly showed that this practice was employed by politicians from almost all political parties.

#### Fieldwork analysis – views of the respondents

##### *Attitudes towards political participation of the Turkish minority*

The changes to the Election Code, which in practice limit the voting rights of numerous Bulgarian citizens, bring forward two problematic issues. The first is the fact that the new Code limits or revokes the hitherto existing rights. The second one is the predominantly intolerant position of the majority population regarding the right of the Turkish minority to participate in the political processes in Bulgaria.

When speaking about the voting rights of citizens in general, practically all respondents defend the opinion that these rights should not be restricted in any way. The new Election Code and especially the obligation to reside in the given municipality for at least six months to be eligible for voting on the local elections is seen as problematic. It seems that most respondents regardless of their ethnic and religious origin support the view of Remzi Osman (deputy-chief of the parliamentary group of the MRF) that according to the Constitution, all Bulgarian citizens have equal rights and obligations regardless of where they live. The conditioning of their voting rights with their permanent residence would therefore be unconstitutional and undemocratic (Apostolova, 2010).

*"There is a problem with democracy here. Citizens of one country should not be prevented from voting. Voting right should not depend on whether the person lived for a certain period of time in the country or not." – II/4*

However, this tolerant and liberal discourse prevails only as long as the discussion remains generalised and the minorities are not specifically mentioned. The general defence of civic rights can quickly turn into something completely different when the question is narrowed down to the rights of the Bulgarian Turks.

*“It is a bit different with Turks. First, many of them left Bulgaria during the Revival Process<sup>38</sup> and perhaps there is some revanchism involved on their side. I suspect that the reason for the enormous support for the MRF is exactly this. They think that by voting for their own people they get some kind of payback, but I’m not 100% certain that this is so.” – II/4*

The traditional suspicions towards the Bulgarian Turks are strengthened by the resentment over the perception that for the larger part of the post-socialist period, the MRF has played a disproportionately significant role in the Bulgarian political life owing to the votes coming from Turkey. Ethnic Bulgarian respondents are therefore quick to draw limits to their tolerant understanding that all Bulgarian citizens are entitled to the same rights. Many see the mass participation of voters from Turkey as something intolerable.

The Turkish respondents are somewhat surprisingly divided on the issue. The two members of the National Assembly are very critical of the Election Code and have little doubt that restrictions are targeting above all the voters residing in Turkey:

*“In my opinion, some things were introduced on purpose to prevent certain minorities, and mainly their representatives who live across the border, from freely exercising their right to vote.” – II/3*

On the other hand, Turkish respondents from a municipality where Turks represent the majority population and who have been directly affected by the practice of “election tourism” display opinions, which are quite close to the discourse of ethnic Bulgarians. The obvious influence (often so strong to play a decisive role) of the “travelling voters” on the local elections is causing discomfort and even annoyance among many Turks residing in Bulgaria.

*“This what they did with the travelling [of voters from Turkey] was not good. You cannot just come here and change everything. To live in another country and then suddenly to decide who you want [to be elected here]. And then he goes back, but we stay here. In a small municipality, this makes the difference. They change the vote, everything.” – II/11*

*“There are people among them I talked to, who are interested in what is happening in Bulgaria. I would accept that they vote for the president, but not on the local elections. They don’t pay taxes. They are not interested in this. If in a large city like Sofia three buses arrive, it will not even be noticed. But in a small village, three voters can turn the elections around.” – II/10*

It is interesting to note that the ethnic Bulgarian respondents from the same municipality express a more cautious opinion. They feel it is less damaging to tolerate the continuation of election tourism than to discriminate against different voters and restrict their rights.

*“On the one hand, I like this [the changes in the new Code], on the other hand I don’t. I like it because for many years, we have to live with the consequences of election tourism. On the other hand, in this way we deprive from voting also people, who are concerned about the development of the country, but are now unable to cast their votes.” – II/9*

The way such opinions are formulated and communicated implicitly indicates that a certain measure of auto-censorship is present. The ethnic Bulgarians who live in regions where they are an actual local minority often tend to express themselves in a more cautious way. Their aspiration to be politically correct and to avoid confrontations reveals that they are, or feel that they are, in a subordinated position – especially in terms of professional development and political participation. Only towards the end of the interview, or in informal talk after the interview, they openly state their grievances that the state and the main political parties are not interested in the problems of Bulgarians living in regions where the ethnic Turks are a majority. Most often, their complaints refer to employment

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<sup>38</sup> The process of forced assimilation of Bulgarian Muslim minorities undertaken by the Bulgarian communist regime. The Bulgarian Muslims were forced to change their names, and their language, religion and traditions were prohibited.

problems and difficulties in communication with the municipal institutions, which are as a rule dominated by the MRF.

In general, respondents try to provide a balanced comment on the restrictions imposed by the new Election Code. They acknowledge that all Bulgarian citizens have equal political rights, which should be respected without any hindrance. At the same time, they experience a certain sense of relief over the fact that people living abroad will have a lesser influence on the political developments in their municipalities. Such a dual attitude is an indication of a low level of tolerance towards the minorities and of the immature civil consciousness of the society. The declarative support for the democratic and tolerant arrangements is quickly cast aside when it comes to the concrete cases concerning ethnic and religious otherness. In our case study, this is manifested in support for the restriction of the voting rights. The fact that Bulgarian Turks have been directly affected by the new Election Code has caused a barely concealed relief among the majority population, rather than an open indignation.

#### *Elections and their influence of the inter-ethnic relations*

Somewhat paradoxically, the changes introduced by the new Election Code have tainted the pre-election process and the election campaign. They also intensified the inter-ethnic distrust and confrontation. The MRF party, faced with the risk of losing a significant number of its voters, started to look for alternative ways to preserve its positions in the regions under its “control.” Our respondents from these regions, including the ethnic Turks not affiliated with the MRF, said that they have noticed a substantial intensification of different schemes for manipulation of the election results. According to their testimonies, the illegal practice of vote buying has risen to unprecedented levels, as did the pressure on people to vote for certain candidates.

In some cases, the pressure was exercised through clientelist networks, while in others it bordered on blunt extortion as people were given “hints” that there would be repercussions (employment problems, administrative obstacles, social isolation) if they voted for the “wrong” candidate. It has to be noted that in small villages, it is practically impossible to protect the secrecy of the ballot.

Two Turkish respondents described concrete practices and mechanisms of election manipulations:

*“The politics [political parties] brings in the money. They give the money [in the proper places] and this changes everything, it changes people. One party decides everything, just like it was during the communism. If you don’t vote, there is no work for you, no nothing. Whether you want it or not – out of fear, you know, people would do anything.” – II/11*

*“I owe the local shop-keeper 400 leva [200 EUR], but I’m an influential person in my village. People take my opinion into consideration. So they [the people working for the party] pay my debt and I start talking to my neighbours. I don’t force them – they trust my opinion and at some point, it turns out that I changed their way of thinking, because my debt was paid.” – II/10*

The two MPs add another, more conceptual dimension to the explanation why it is possible to manipulate and control the votes in the minority populated regions:

*“The vote is controlled through a complete fusion of political and administrative positions. When you add the economic pressure, then [the situation] really moves far away from the free choice.” – II/3*

*“[In these] regions there is no trust in the state, in the institutions.” – II/2*

The trust in the state institutions and the political system is in Bulgaria exceptionally low in general.<sup>39</sup> In the regions where the MRF has been unchallenged and unchangeable political and economic hegemon, the trust in the institutions and the belief that anything can change are even lower. In such

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<sup>39</sup> According to Eurobarometer 71 - Spring 2009, only 17% of Bulgarians trust their government, 10% trust the Bulgarian Parliament, and 14% trust the national judiciary (See European Commission, 2009, p. 20).

conditions, the anxiety and insecurity within the Turkish community can be and indeed were notably exploited during the last elections. According to some respondents, the MRF party was intentionally fuelling the fears and anxieties:

*“I thought that we have left the Revival Process in the past, but in fact it is artificially maintained. I don’t think that these things [fear that Revival Process could be repeated] are passed down in the families. I believe other factors are involved, which abuse [this issue] at the moment.” – II/9*

*“What caught my attention was that right ahead of the elections, the MRF’s youth organisation was distributing books containing testimonies about the Revival Process.” – II/8*

*“21<sup>st</sup> century, we are members of the EU and NATO, and they talk about changing of the names and demolition of mosques.” – II/2*

*“This is the easiest way – to scare and manipulate people this way.” – II/3*

*“And at some point they started with this: ‘Don’t you know what they will do? They will crush us. They will close our mosques.’ And an ordinary man believes that this could really happen, and he goes and votes.” – II/10*

The fact that such tactics and strategies can be successfully applied is a very straightforward indication of how strong are the deeply entrenched antagonisms and suspicions in the relations between the majority and minorities in Bulgaria. These embedded stereotypes have not been modified neither by the processes of democratisation and Europeanization, nor by the participation of Turks in the nation’s political and social life. The feelings of insecurity and tension obviously continue to run strong in the everyday life of the Turkish minority and they can be easily manipulated in a situation like the election period.

Three main discourses on the state of inter-ethnic relations in Bulgaria can be identified in the interviews:

- 1) inter-ethnic relations are not on a downward curve, but follow a cyclical pattern – deterioration in the election period after which they return to normality;
- 2) inter-ethnic relations are steadily deteriorating, not just because of the political games and manipulation, but because of the economic crisis and worsening standard of living
- 3) not only the inter-ethnic relations are worsening, but relations among all people in Bulgaria in general

1) Cyclical pattern:

Perceptions of people about the developments and experiences from their daily lives are often expressed in a very emotional tone. This strengthens the impression that the situation regarding the acceptance of otherness is worsening with an alarming pace. Some respondents disagree and say that there is no cause for alarm:

*“The divisions and alienation are not increasing – they are just hardened and reproduced.” – II/1*

*“Changes happen, but only during the elections, afterwards they are gone. [What happened during the elections] is not typical for the relations among people who live there.” – II/9*

*“The bad thing is that they [the instigators] have started to come to our region. We never had them here before... Some Turks came to visit me, 70-80 years old, and they cry. They say – this can’t be happening, my boy, we are not all like that.” – II/8*

The inter-ethnic tensions thus come to the fore in critical moments, but this is rather an exception than the rule. Even when such processes are in their most active phase, not all people yield to the manipulation.

## 2) Steady down-bound slide:

The events and debates that dominated the public space before and after the October 2011 elections clearly show that the official discourse on equality and acceptance remains only on surface. Beneath the politically correct plaster, antagonisms and non-acceptance remain the thin red line of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Bulgaria. It seems that the prolonged participation of the MRF in the Bulgarian politics did not manage to bring the two communities closer, but exactly the opposite – the MRF is one of the main reasons for the deepening intolerant dispositions towards Turks among the majority population.

*“When I started to work on the [Black Sea] coast, and people realized that I was a Turk... their attitude was a bit strange before they get to know what kind of person I am. They think that Turks are not good people, but when we got to know each other, things changed. They told me afterwards that they have heard that Turks were bad....” – II/11*

These unfavourable tendencies are strengthened also by the current economic crisis and the exacerbated situation in which many people live.

*“Undoubtedly the negative attitudes and divisions are intensifying. The economic situation also contributes to this. I’m even afraid that at some moment, it can actually get much worse. In the situation of economic deficiency, the nationalistic passions can be easily provoked.” – II/4*

This testifies that the tolerance in the Bulgarian society is at a rather low level – both in the majority population and among the minorities. Otherness is accepted only on the declarative level, which is by no means conducive to inter-ethnic trust. The reaction to the ambivalent (to say the least) attitude of the majority towards the minorities is the corresponding position of the minority communities. Burdened by the heritage of past repression and hardships, and facing prejudice and negative reactions in their daily lives, the minorities harbour no illusions about the tolerant attitude of the majority. These anxieties, hostilities and distrust are easily exploited by the political actors in an appropriate moment like elections.

## 3) Trust no one:

Some respondents who talk about the aggravated relations between people stress that this is not happening only among the ones belonging to different ethnic and religious communities, but also among the people from the same group.

*“But after the last elections I see that the distrust has intensified. Now there is distrust even among our own people [Turks]. Now you consider what you do and say even in front of your relatives, your cousins.” – II/11*

On a more positive note, we can mention an example of a municipality populated by Muslim Bulgarians (who are the local majority), Christian Bulgarians, Roma and Turks. The mayor and the municipal council have made a deliberate effort over the years to work for equality of all religious and ethnic groups. As a result, the respondents from the municipality did not talk about antagonisms and inter-ethnic problems, and it seems that worrying developments noted in a large part of the country remain alien to this ethnically and religiously very diverse municipality. This shows that despite the enduring stereotypes, the ethno-religious divisions and conflicts are not something ingrained in Bulgaria, but are above all a tool employed by unscrupulous political actors to gain or preserve their hold on power.

## Conclusion:

Our preliminary hypothesis that the new Election Code and especially the restrictions on voting rights of some Bulgarian citizens will provoke significant outrage was not confirmed during the fieldwork. Most surprising was the fact that (with the notable exceptions of the two MPs) even the respondents



from the Turkish community (which was directly targeted by the restrictions in the Code) were not particularly affected by the issue and rather tried to rationalise or even defend this obvious infringement of civic rights. Other respondents, especially those belonging to the majority population, demonstrated a cautious approval of the restrictive measures. This can be interpreted as a sign that the society is generally not well disposed towards respect and recognition of others, but that the dominant tendency is to support political and legal measures of exclusion and intolerance.

### ***Case study 2: Voting rights of the Roma minority***

#### Background information

Roma are also a traditional minority in Bulgaria, but unlike Turks, they are neither consolidated, nor very active in the political and public life. The community is divided into numerous sub-groups, and the relations between them are most often less than cordial. The main differences between these subgroups are linguistic, cultural and religious. The most important problem of the Roma community is the extreme poverty, combined with the exceptionally low level of education and fast growing illiteracy rates. The main reasons for the alarmingly high dropout rates of Roma children are (beside poverty) lack of family support for education, the need to work at an very early age both at home and outside home, unfriendly environment Roma children are often exposed to in schools (which are often perceived as threatening and restraining institutions), and early marriages and early pregnancies (Tilkidzhiev et al, 2009, pp. 67-82).

Unlike Turks, who overwhelmingly vote for the MRF, the Roma community has never unified behind a single Roma party. Despite having the numerical potential to send such a party into the National Assembly, the Roma votes are usually highly fragmented (by 2005, there have been 26 registered Roma political parties in the country). Additionally, Roma voters display a low interest in the politics and usually fail to rally behind even the most ambitious and well-organised political campaigns of the Roma political parties. Only two Roma parties (Euro-Roma and Political Party Roma) have managed to win a seat or two in the National Assembly in different parliamentary terms. However, this has never happened when they participated on the elections on their own, but were awarded a seat as members of a coalition headed by a larger national party (Hajdinjak, 2008, pp. 119-121).

#### Vote buying and Roma

Most of the elections that took place in Bulgaria over the past decade have been marred by the extensive vote buying and similar manipulations. The Roma community is considered particularly vulnerable to possible malpractices. Media and different observers have witnessed and in some cases documented a number of instances when brokers, “armed” with lists of names, addresses and personal identity numbers, were offering votes for sale in impoverished Roma neighbourhoods (Leviev-Sawyer, 2011). A survey conducted by the National Centre for the Study of Public Opinion showed that vote buying is considered the most widespread and troubling type of election violations (36.6%). Further 52.8% said that the main flaw of the existing election legislation is that it makes the vote buying possible (NCSPO, 2010).

Another NCSPO survey, conducted in 2009, showed that 40% of Roma are prepared to vote for those who pay them. In comparison, among all Bulgarian citizens regardless of ethnic origin, 12% are willing to sell their vote (Vesti, 2009). A more recent survey by Transparency International Bulgaria confirmed this number, showing that this is a persistent tendency – one in every ten Bulgarians openly admits that they would sell their vote despite the fact that this is a criminal offence punishable by law (Novinite.com, 2011).

Vote buying is an illegal practice used by representatives of various political actors to convince voters to vote for the given party in exchange for money or other material gift. Vote buying is most wide-

spread in societies with low democratic culture and traditions, marked by significant distrust and disillusionment with the established political system. The most appropriate targets for vote-buyers are marginalized groups (minorities, rural population, uneducated and impoverished people). Vote buying works best if the voter turnout is low, as even a small number of purchased votes can secure the desired electoral result. The political actors in search of voters usually need to get in touch with “an unofficial community leader.” The Roma ghettos in Bulgarian cities usually have a very strict hierarchical arrangement, with a few wealthy “businessmen” (often with criminal background) at the top of the pyramid. Once such leader is located, the negotiations start. The leader explains how many votes can be secured and names the price (anything from 10 to 100 EUR per vote plus the personal fee of few thousand EUR). The leader makes sure that his “subordinates” vote properly by placing trusted “observers” in the local electoral commission, although control is usually unnecessary as the people selling their votes are neither interested in the politics nor actually aware who they vote for (for a very good and detailed article describing how undercover journalists posing as members of a non-existing political party successfully purchased votes in a Roma-populated Stolipinovo Quarter in the city of Plovdiv, see Dikov, 2009).

The reasons why the willingness to participate in the vote buying is much more common among the Roma community are complex, but are overall connected to their exceptionally low social-economic status and deep marginalisation. The political parties from left, right and centre usually remember the Roma community only during the pre-election periods and Roma are aware that these are not just the only opportunities to have access to political figures or their representatives, but also the only chance to get some practical benefits (like financial or other gifts) from the politicians. In turn, despite their countless declarations to the contrary, most political parties through their behaviour and actions on every election seem to support the established model of attracting the Roma voters only through offering them (legal or illegal) gifts and similar incentives. Almost no political party has tried to win the Roma votes through concrete political platforms for improvement of the Roma situation, inclusion of Roma candidates on the electable positions on candidate lists, or including Roma on important positions in central or local governments. Since 1989, each parliamentary assembly included only one Roma MP, with the exception of 2001-2005 period, when there were two Roma in the Parliament.

In the prelude to the 2011 local elections, various steps were taken to prevent or limit the practice of vote buying. Some were directly aimed at Roma voters and although they do not violate the legislation, their legitimacy can be seriously questioned. It is also very obvious that such measures have a discriminatory character and are an infringement of the rights of the Roma citizens.

In the Kyustendil municipality, the mayor Peter Paunov refused to set up voting sections inside the Roma neighbourhood. On the previous elections, usually 6 sections accommodating about 5500 Roma voters operated in the neighbourhood. Under the pretext that such a measure would remove the preconditions for the controlled vote, pressure and vote buying, Roma voters were “transferred” to the voters’ lists at voting sections in other parts of the town, causing considerable inconvenience to some and discouraging others from participation on the elections. According to mayor Paunov, his model should be applied on the national level on the next elections (Obretenov, 2011). According to the legislation, voting sections are established by the municipality mayors within the territory of the municipality not later than 55 days in advance of the election day (Article 71 (2) of the Election Code). According to an expert working for the regional administration, such arrangement can only intensify the negative predispositions towards Roma. The political actors, who are actually responsible for the vote buying are not sanctioned in any way, while the Roma are punished by having their voting rights restricted (Hristov, 2011)

### The media analysis

The media carry a large share of responsibility for the prevailingly negative attitude towards Roma. According to a research of the Institute of Modern Politics, which studied publications in five Bulgarian daily newspapers in the five months period, from 743 articles on Roma issues, only 15

displayed a positive attitude towards Roma. The issue of vote buying and its link to the Roma was included in 4% of these articles (Panev, 2012).

The daily *Trud* published 31 articles on vote buying in October-November 2011 (roughly a month before and after the 2011 presidential and local elections). More than half of the articles (19) were about concrete cases of vote buying (in numerous articles, more than one case was described). The articles gave the initials and in some cases full names of people who were arrested for involvement in vote buying. In numerous cases, the arrested individuals were promptly put on trial and sentenced. Eight articles analysed the problems and irregularities that occurred during the elections, including vote buying. Several of these articles explained in detail how the vote buying schemes operate. Four articles presented views and reactions of relevant political actors.

Roma were mentioned in 9 articles – most often as people selling their votes. In three articles, Roma criminal bosses or Roma “informal leaders” (usually a local loan shark) were described as people the corrupt political actors turned to in order to purchase Roma votes. It is interesting to note that most articles used language close to ironic to describe the cases of Roma vote trade. Rather than presenting the phenomenon as a harmful social pathology, articles took delight in absurdity of most cases.<sup>40</sup> One article even went as far as to propose that the vote trade should be legalised, as it became more than obvious that it cannot be prevented.

Ironic side of the articles aside, the newspaper reporting on vote buying confirmed that this practice is still exceptionally widespread and damaging. A very concerning tendency is that newly established political parties readily accept vote buying and other election irregularities as a normal part of the political game. Furthermore, it seems that in their aspiration to compete with or defeat the established political parties, the new political actors exploit the illegal and illegitimate way to secure votes even more arrogantly and without any constraints. In this way, this malicious practice will continue to spread in the coming years. Painfully aware of the situation, the majority of the Bulgarian voters are becoming increasingly disillusioned and disappointed over the state of the Bulgarian political system and prefer not to vote at all, which is playing straight into the hands of the corrupt and dishonest economic-political actors. The lesser the turnout on the election day, less votes have to be bought to turn the elections in the desired direction.

#### Fieldwork analysis – views of the respondents

##### *Dispositions towards Roma and their political participation*

All ethnic communities in Bulgaria have substantial and persistent prejudice against Roma. The main negative stereotypes are that they are criminals, do not respect laws and social norms, do not want to work and improve their situation, and that they cannot be integrated into the society. Two of our respondents, who have been involved in the political campaigning on the national level said that the most immense challenge they encountered in their conversations with voters across the country was to overcome the exceptional negativism and prejudice against Roma (II/2, II/3).

The majority population is troubled by the growing fear fuelled by the media that the number of Roma was steadily rising, as were their illiteracy, marginalisation and ghettoisation. A respondent pointed out that these fears are a logical consequence of extremely one-sided public image of the Roma community, which is a consequence of unbalanced and sensationalistic media reporting.

*“Our society lacks a positive image of an integrated Roma person. And there are numerous interesting and telling examples the society just does not know about. What dominates the*

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<sup>40</sup> For example, a 75 year old man was arrested by the police for giving 10 EUR to each person in his village who promised to vote for the designated candidate for the mayor. The aged vote buyer was sentenced to 150 hours of publically-beneficial labour (cleaning of the streets). In another case, a person was fined with 250 EUR for bribing two people to vote for his father by providing them free firewood for the coming winter.

*media is a negative image – a villain of Roma origin. And there are many Roma who have achieved something with honest work and with their abilities.” – II/1*

One of our respondents is a well educated Roma man from a small village. He was invited to become a member of the ruling GERB party and actively participated in the pre-election campaign in the region. His personal expectation was that the party would nominate him as a candidate for the municipal council, only to learn with deep bitterness that despite the promises, he was not included in the candidate list (II/7).

This is a very telling illustration of the problem of the Roma political participation. Most political parties are reluctant to raise Roma candidates for the National Assembly or for the municipal councils. Instead, they prefer to secure the Roma votes through informal channels. The political actors usually offer stereotypical excuses that no Roma candidates have the needed education and experience. However, the practice shows that even when such people are available, they are neglected and rejected.

Respondents are very critical about all political parties and believe that none of them is truly interested in the fate of the minorities. They suspect that most parties simply want to manipulate and exploit minority groups for their own different purposes. Those respondents, who are politically and socially active, leave little room for doubt in their opinions:

*“There is no political force with such a programme. Even if they have something written down on paper, they have no intention of respecting it. Because of the way the entire political situation is constructed in Bulgaria, each political force has a certain interest to manipulate and use minorities.” – II/4*

*“In my opinion there is no political party with a clear programme for integration of minorities.” – II/1*

The comments about the political representation of Roma are similar.

*“I believe that minorities should have their own representatives on all levels [local, regional and central] of government and in all political parties. In municipalities, in the national parliament, in all institutions. Now we still see that certain state institutions are closed for the minorities.” – II/3*

Despite the predominant liberal and tolerant general opinion that minorities should be politically represented in all branches of state power, respondents are very sceptical that this can realistically be achieved. Allowing for the possibility that in near future such development indeed takes place, many respondents wonder how effective would such political participation be. What lies at the bottom of such scepticism are again the entrenched stereotypes and suspicions that people of minority origin (Roma in particular) with necessary qualities and integrity are in a short supply.

*“Quotas, the actual opening of political space for such people, will not automatically lead to improvement of the situation of the minorities.” – II/4*

*“Minorities in the government of the state... if we speak about Roma, I think they are not represented enough. But, if we let more Roma... well it depends on them. Depends on the individual person – what they want to achieve and why.” – II/5*

The issue about the political representation of Roma is thus considered as a problem, but not a very significant one, judging from the very limited and general opinions respondents have shared when asked to comment on it. They see it as one of the potential steps for the improvement of the situation of Roma, but have no clear opinion about the concrete steps that need to be taken.

Additional factor complicating the discussion about Roma and the voting process is the general distrust in the state institutions and the political class. Bulgarians are remarkably critical in their evaluation of the legitimacy of the state institutions and do not trust the government, the Parliament,

the political parties and the judiciary (see European Commission, 2009, p. 20). For this reason, the topics like election frauds and voting manipulation are discussed with noticeable resignation. If anything has surprised them, than it was the sheer scale and unscrupulousness of irregularities on October 2011 elections. Most politicians (with a notable exception of the winning GERB party), media and society have united behind an opinion that the recent elections were the most flawed elections in the recent Bulgarian history. The signals and complaints about foul election play were countless. The results of the public opinion poll show that only a quarter of the population believes that the elections were conducted fairly and democratically.

**Which opinion about the October elections is closer to your opinion? In %**

Opinion	All	Bulgarians	Turks	Roma	Pomaks
Elections were fair and democratic	24	25	20	26	8
Elections were not fair and democratic	36	36	34	27	52
I cannot say	34	32	42	40	28
Refused to answer	7	7	3	8	12

Source: Institute “Ivan Hadjiyski,” Gallup International. December 2011. National inquiry, 1009 respondents aged over 18.

*Vote buying and Roma*

In the context of our research, we have focused most of the questions related to dispositions towards Roma on the issue of vote buying. In the media and in the public perceptions, vote buying is most often attributed to Roma, who are therefore accused that they influence the election results in an illegal and illegitimate way. According to most of our respondents, however, this practice is not limited to Roma anymore, if it ever was.

*“The practice of vote buying is spreading not just among Roma, but among everyone. The people with suitcases [with money] are everywhere.” – II/8*

*“There was vote buying – not just among the minorities and especially Roma. This time there was vote buying among Turks, Roma, Bulgarians. Unfortunately, everyone has sold their vote.” – II/2*

One respondent tried to explain why so many Roma participate in the vote buying schemes, noting that the extreme poverty and difficult circumstances in which they live leave them little choice.

*“Nobody pays any attention to them, only for a moment, when they want their vote to win the elections. After that it is again as if they don’t exist. So they will always sell their vote. For a meal, for beer, for 20 leva, 50 leva... They will give their vote because they live day for a day. There is also a lot of pressure on them.” – II/11*

Interesting observation from the interviews is that most respondents are to such an extent used to the widespread practice of vote buying that they do not find the topic overly interesting and their answers are not particularly insightful. Most respondents preferred to give general opinions about the problems related with Roma marginalisation and the dispositions of the majority population towards Roma.

*“We, the majority, are responsible for what Roma are doing. We spoiled them. We didn’t teach them to share our responsibilities and obligations, even towards their own children. It is true that the national psychology also plays a role, but we have helped them to abuse the state.” – II/9*

*“They can integrate, but only if we also change our way of thinking.” – II/10*

As already mentioned, most respondents tried to explain the Roma situation by defining the main problems – low level of education and bad economic situation.

*“In my opinion, education is the key problem. Only education can bring the next generations of Roma into a position, where they could fully integrate into the society. The social inequality is also a fundamental problem. The differences in the standard of living between the majority and the main ethnic minorities are shocking.” – II/1*

*“The real interest of these minorities is to have an equal access to education and prosperity – just like all other citizens. The political parties which claim to protect their interests are actually doing everything to keep them not educated, illiterate and without livelihood. In this way, the minorities are dependent on these political parties.” – II/4*

Such opinions are quite typical for the Bulgarian society. Roma are stigmatised as poor and illiterate. While most people consider that this is a significant problem, few have any clear ideas about how this could be changed. The public debate and the attitudes towards Roma are concentrated on the issue of their integration. This discourse is dominated by an explicitly patronising tone, where Roma are not considered as an equal community with an unalienable right to manage its own affairs, but as a social problem the Bulgarian society has to “take care of.” In this sense, even the declarative tolerant attitude towards Roma is in fact a very intolerant one in its essence. Blaming the Roma and the alleged widespread Roma vote selling for all the deformities and faults of the Bulgarian political system is just another manifestation of this intolerance.

### **Concluding notes**

The research into the issue of minority voting rights and their political representation has shown that this is among the most contentious problems in the relations between the majority and the minorities. The election periods are highly volatile occasions when confrontations and antagonisms based on ethnic, religious and cultural differences are mobilised and brought to the fore by different political formations that expect to profit from such developments. The fact that similar tactics usually pay off shows that despite the seemingly calm and idyllic ethno-religious relations in Bulgaria between the election turmoils, the potential for inter-ethnic strife and tension in the country is not negligible. As long as the threats and even the fabricated accusations and examples can mobilize the ethno-religious factor to win the elections, we cannot speak about the real tolerance and acceptance of different communities in Bulgaria.

The current research has again highlighted the significant discrepancy between the official political and public discourse on perception and application of democratic norms and values, which are characteristic for the majority of EU countries, and the real situation in the country. While the public speech is focused on notions of tolerance and acceptance, the concrete examples and everyday practices testify about entrenched intolerance that can be easily mobilised in the critical moments like political, social and economic crisis.

Despite the fact that the central government periodically comes up with different programmes and strategies for integration of minorities, the practical implementation is either lacking or is flawed and inadequate. The research has shown that the regional solutions tailored to the ethnic, cultural and religious structure of the population on the local level can be far more successful than the solutions proposed on the national level. Numerous small towns and villages with ethnically and religiously diverse population provide good examples and practices of balanced and stable cohabitation. The largest problem is to find a way to transfer the functioning everyday tolerance from the local level into the national context, which continues to be dominated by intolerant stereotypes and prejudices. As a result, despite the long history of diverse ethnic and religious structure of the Bulgarian state, the traditional mechanisms of coexistence did not lead to acceptance of otherness, but merely to parallel coexistence.

Our recommendation to the policy-makers is to employ the potential existing on the local level and institutionalise it. The local authorities ought to be given a very active role in this process. At the moment, the central government is exercising a much too strong and tight control over the local governments. A larger regional and municipal autonomy to address the needs and problems of the local population according to its specific features would be a positive step in turning the unsuccessful top-down approach into a more appropriate two-way process. Like in numerous other spheres in Bulgaria, this process would benefit tremendously if monitored (and financially supported) by the European Commission.

The research has also established that many people are either ignorant of or tend to disregard the numerous problems that could provoke or intensify tensions between different ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Forming and changing the collective matrix is a long and contradictory process. The humanities and especially interdisciplinary studies can play a very valuable role here. Our recommendation is therefore to intensify the research of inter-ethnic relations – not just in Bulgarian context, but also in the European one. The disclosure of good practices and popularisation of results from similar studies increase the sensitivity of the society for such topics. They also stimulate the willingness of the state institutions to look for and implement more adequate and comprehensive policies.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has investigated how ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is accommodated in education and political life of Bulgaria. On the theoretical level, different concepts and principles for accommodating diversity were examined in order to establish how the notions of tolerance and acceptance are perceived by different actors in Bulgaria. These concepts include the issues of citizenship, multiculturalism, national identity, minority rights, pluralism, liberal tolerance (understood as refraining from interference) and genuine acceptance and respect of diversity.

The empirical research was based on four case studies – two for each policy area (education and politics). The goal of the case studies was to identify and analyse the main discourses and practices of dealing with diversity in Bulgaria and classify them as non-toleration, toleration, or as recognition and respect. The analysis considered discourses and practices on several levels: institutional and legal frame and the position of state actors; media reporting; public opinion tendencies and predispositions.

Many European countries, especially those from the western and northern parts of the continent, have started gradually to turn into multicultural societies in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their dealings with racial, ethnic, religious and/or cultural diversity therefore have a relatively short history. Another important feature of western European encounters with diversity is that they occurred in democratic political systems, characterised by concern for human rights and strongly developed civil society.

In contrast, Bulgaria was “born” multicultural. When the country appeared on the political map of Europe in 1878, it contained a large variety of ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural communities, which had to set up mechanisms for coexistence and toleration of otherness. Despite the promising beginning with a fairly liberal and accommodating (for its time) constitution from 1879, for the better part of the 1878-1989 period, the Bulgarian multicultural diversity did not enjoy the benefits of democracy, liberalism and regard for human and minority rights. Instead, the pro-Nazi regime (1934-1944) and the Communist rule (1948-1989) employed fierce and highly intolerant policies against different ethno-religious minorities in the country with the ultimate goal of erasing (or at least diminishing) the differences between various Bulgarian ethno-religious communities.

The post-1989 democratisation brought about not just an end to intolerant practices and policies, but in many areas lead to genuine respect and recognition – at least as far as legislation is concerned. Although the Bulgarian constitution neither mentions nor defines the term “minority,” it recognises all citizens as equals and states that “there shall be no privileges or restriction of rights on the grounds of race, nationality, ethnic self-identity, sex, origin, religion, education, opinion, political affiliation, personal or social status or property status” (Article 6). Article 36/2 states that those citizens whose mother tongue is not Bulgarian have “the right to study and use their own language alongside the compulsory study of the Bulgarian language.” According to Article 37/1, the state assists “the maintenance of tolerance and respect among the believers from different denominations, and among believers and non-believers.” Article 54 defines the right of all citizens to “develop their own culture in accordance with their ethnic affiliation, which is recognized and guaranteed by the law.”

The principle of equal treatment of all citizens regardless of their ethnicity or religion is established in many other Bulgarian legal acts. Among the most important is the Law on Protection against Discrimination, which brought the country closer to the European standards in this sphere. The law protects distinctive culture and identity of minorities and underlines that they have an unalienable right to maintain and develop their culture, the right to practice their religion and use their language. Article 29 of the law states that “the Minister of Education and Science and the local self-government bodies shall take the necessary measures not to allow any racial segregation in the education institutions.” Article 38 deals with the political participation and representation of minorities: “the state and public



bodies and the bodies of local self-government shall conduct a policy to encourage [...] the representative participation of persons belonging to ethnic, religious or language minorities in the governance and the decision-making.”<sup>41</sup>

In addition, the respect and recognition of diversity is supported by various international conventions Bulgaria has signed and ratified – for example the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. When ratifying the Framework Convention, the Bulgarian National Assembly declared its commitment “to the policy of protection of human rights and tolerance to persons belonging to minorities, and their full integration into Bulgarian society” on the condition that such policies “do not imply any right to engage in any activity violating the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the unitary Bulgarian State, its internal and international security.”<sup>42</sup>

These legal arrangements have enabled the practical implementation of numerous measures and activities through which various minorities can genuinely maintain and develop their culture, religion, language and other identity markers. Minorities have their own religious temples (mosques, synagogues, Catholic, Protestant, Armenian, Russian and other churches), cultural associations, media, and non-governmental organisations.

The institutional design of the two policy areas studied in the current research (education and politics) can also be described as favourable towards recognition and respect of diversity. In education, this is manifested in the policies of desegregation, revision of the history textbooks and history syllabus, special classes for learning minority languages and minority religions, and celebration of minority holidays and traditions in schools.

In politics, despite the restrictive Article 11 (4) of the Bulgarian Constitution (“There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties which seek the violent seizure of state power”), most voters belonging to Bulgarian minorities are represented both at central and local level of government. This is above all true for the Turkish minority. Through the party Movement for Rights and Freedoms<sup>43</sup>, which participated in 2001-2005 and 2005-2009 government coalitions, ethnic Turks served as ministers, deputy ministers, state secretaries, MPs, mayors, municipal councillors, and held other positions in central and local government. For a number of reasons, discussed in more detail in chapter 3, Roma are substantially underrepresented in the Bulgarian political life, however this is not a consequence of the legal-institutional setting. Over the years, a large number of Roma political parties have been established, but only a few have achieved at least a modest election result (on the local elections only).

Apart from political parties and positions in central and local government, minorities have access to and are active in various state bodies and institutions: National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Demographic Issues; Ombudsman office; Commission for Protection against Discrimination.

Considering the situation described above, one would be tempted to describe Bulgaria as a haven of multiculturalism, where diversity is accepted and respected and where different ethnic, religious and cultural communities live happily ever after. The fieldwork presented in chapters 2 and 3, however, provides a far less optimistic picture. Many minority rights and tolerant practices that used to be taken for granted have in recent years come under attack and as a result, some have been fully or partially revoked. Many exist on paper, but have little or no practical value. While minorities continue to ask for genuine recognition and respect and demand to be treated as equals in daily life, the majority

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<sup>41</sup> See [http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country\\_LEGAL,,LEGISLATION,BGR,4562d8b62,44ae58d62d5,0.html](http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country_LEGAL,,LEGISLATION,BGR,4562d8b62,44ae58d62d5,0.html)

<sup>42</sup> See <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/ListeDeclarations.asp?CL=ENG&NT=157&VL=1>

<sup>43</sup> Movement for Rights and Freedoms is not the only gateway to political positions for the minorities. In addition to numerous other smaller parties concerned mainly with the interests of minority communities, which are active mainly on the local level, some of the main political parties also try to provide at least symbolic minority representation. For example, an ethnic Turk Vezhdi Rashidov is the Minister of Culture in the current (2009-2013) government of GERB.

population is growing increasingly intolerant and believes that the state has been “tolerating the minorities too much.”

We are going to evaluate the four cases studies (2 on education and 2 on political participation) in the following way: the institutional and legal framework, its implementation and practical situation, and the public discourses based on the findings from our fieldwork will be juxtaposed and classified as intolerant, tolerant or accepting/respectful towards diversity and otherness.

#### 1. Education of Roma children:

The contradiction between the declared goals and existing policies on the one hand and the actual situation and public attitudes on the other is considerable. Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society (1999) envisaged several measures for improving the quality of education of Roma children. These measures included an end of the practice to send Roma children to special schools for mentally retarded, action against manifestations of racism in the classroom, possibility for Roma children to study their mother tongue at school, training of specialists with university education to work in multicultural classrooms, and also development and implementation of programmes for education and qualification of adult Roma. The most important envisaged measure was the desegregation of Roma schools. The concrete actions that were supposed to achieve the genuine desegregation of education in Bulgaria were based on consideration of specific conditions in which many Roma children live and as such could be described as measures aimed at recognition and respect of diversity.

The political will for integration of Roma children was confirmed on several other occasions. Although the numerous amendments made over the years to the Law for Public Education<sup>44</sup> did not specifically address the problems of Roma education, many of the measures like introduction of free and obligatory pre-school education had potential to improve the integration of Roma children into the education system. The National Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Ethnic Minorities (2004) again underlined the government’s commitment to desegregation (not only in schools but also in kindergartens) and integration. The institutional and legal framework can thus be evaluated as based on acceptance and recognition – the ultimate goal of these policies is to treat the Roma as equal citizens and to fully integrate them into the society while respecting their unique culture and identity.

Despite the declared political will and quite clearly formulated goals and objectives in various strategies and action plans, the state institutions have achieved little progress to date. The limited results have been accomplished on the local level, mostly due to the work of different non-governmental organisations. Experts, NGO activists, minority representatives, teachers and other citizens who participated in the fieldwork are almost unanimous in their critical evaluation that desegregation exists only on paper. In reality, segregated education continues to be the norm across the country. Most Roma children thus continue to visit schools where they cannot interact with children from other ethnicities and where the quality of education is low.

Desegregation is most often understood and practiced as bussing of Roma children from the Roma neighbourhood (or ghetto) to an “integrated” school (usually located a considerable distance away) and back. One of the consequences of such mechanical transfer of children from one school to another is the appearance of secondary segregation. With the explanation that their specific culture and educational needs necessitate such a measure, the Roma children are again segregated inside the desegregated school into a “Roma-only” class. Another consequence that often occurs in practice is the “white flight” – Bulgarian parents begin to transfer their children to classes or schools that do not admit “too many” Roma children. The desegregation attempts have therefore actually led to more

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<sup>44</sup> See [http://www.mon.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/en/top\\_menu/vocational\\_education/Law\\_for\\_the\\_Public\\_Education.pdf](http://www.mon.bg/opencms/export/sites/mon/en/top_menu/vocational_education/Law_for_the_Public_Education.pdf)

manifestations of intolerance. The practical situation regarding the question of Roma education is thus clearly a case of non-tolerance.

The public discourse on this issue oscillates between two positions: declarative support for desegregation and integration, and actual preference for continued segregation and isolation of Roma. The fieldwork has established that practically all respondents regardless of their social, professional or ethno-religious background support desegregation. However, when discussing the policies and practices of desegregation and proposing different solutions, somewhat paradoxically most of them propose solutions that are actually based on different forms of segregation. They at the same time want to see the Roma “integrated,” but expect the process of integration to occur behind the high walls of parallel coexistence. When Roma complete their makeover (drastically change their lifestyle, culture and traditions, and become “like us”), they will be ready to be integrated (or more correctly – assimilated).

The strongly expressed assumption that Roma have to change and that they are “simply intolerable” the way they are is the cornerstone of the intolerant public discourse. Desegregation is thus supported mainly as a tool, which will erase the differences between Roma and the majority population. At the same time, the majority is not willing to make any steps towards bridging the differences and expects all the work to be done only by Roma – preferably, while they remain confined to their segregated ghettos. The public dispositions towards Roma in general and desegregation of Roma education in particular are thus clearly intolerant.

## 2. Religious diversity in schools

Institutional and legal framework largely accepts and recognises religious diversity in Bulgarian schools. Constitution recognizes the religious freedom and establishes the separation between religions and the state. The preamble of the Law on Religious Communities (2002) states that the “Parliament of the Republic of Bulgaria expresses respect towards Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other religions.”

The Law for Public Education defines education as secular (Article 5). Article 4 (2) prohibits restrictions or privileges based on race, nationality, sex, ethnic or social origin, religion or public position. Article 15 (1) defines that one of the goals of the education is to create “a free, moral and initiative personality, who as a Bulgarian citizen respects the laws, the other’s rights, their language, religion and culture.” Finally, Article 30 gives the religious institutions in the country the right to “open religious schools for their ritual needs for children, finished their primary education.” The education, received at the religious schools is equalled to the secular one if the state education requirements for the corresponding degree of education have been met. Article 4 of the Regulation for Implementation of the Law for Public Education specifies that religions can be studied in secular schools “in historical, philosophical and cultural frame” through syllabuses of different subjects, while an elective subject “Religion” can be introduced in the curriculum in accordance with the instructions prepared by the Ministry of Education and Science.

Although the education is clearly defined as secular, legislation recognises the religious diversity among students. While prohibiting any privileges or restriction on the ground of religion, it gives different religious communities the right to set up their schools, while the children can enrol in the elective subject on religion. The legislation does not prohibit wearing of religious symbols in schools. Many girls professing Islam wear traditional headscarves and dresses in schools in municipalities where Muslims represent the majority population. However, this practice is much rarer in schools outside the minority-populated regions. Currently, the only limitations on wearing headscarves in class are the internal regulations of several schools, which have introduced obligatory school uniforms for their pupils. In 2009, the Ministry of Education and Science proposed a new Law on Education, which contained an article prohibiting religious symbols for pupils and teachers, but the proposal was

revoked due to the strong opposition. The new draft Law on Preschool and School Education, which is currently (June 2012) still in the parliamentary procedure contains no such restrictive articles.

Despite strictly underlining the secularity of education in Bulgaria, the legal framework can be positioned between tolerance and acceptance/recognition, as it respects the religious diversity of pupils and gives them the possibility to maintain and develop their religious and cultural identity.

The practical implementation of these provisions is slightly less immaculate. For now, the Ministry of Education and Science has introduced two subjects: Religion – Orthodoxy and Religion – Islam. They are included in the curriculum of all grades from one to twelve, either as a freely elective subject or as a compulsory elective subject.<sup>45</sup> Orthodox Christianity and Islam are the two biggest religions in the country and the reasons why other religions are not studied as a special subject but only through general education on religions are practical – a small number of potential students. Another issue is the lack of qualified teachers for the smaller religions.

In practice, the provision of Islamic religious education is not without problems. According to the information from the Chief Mufti office, Islamic religious education was available in more than 100 schools in 2000, while today the subject is offered only in 35 schools. The explanation offered for this decrease are unfavourable social climate and sporadic incidents of institutional harassment.

In recent years, the State Agency for National Security has investigated several Imams and Muslim religious teachers for their alleged links with the radical Islam. The cases that grabbed most media attention included the closure of a private Islamic school for the training of Muslim clergymen in the village of Sarnica in 2007, detention of a Muslim religion teacher from the Ribnovo village (2009) and Luzhnica incident (2010).<sup>46</sup>

Despite the fact that legislation does not prohibit wearing of Muslim headscarves in class, there have been several cases when girls were prevented from visiting certain schools by the school head teachers, who argued that headscarves were violating the internal school rules regarding the prescribed school uniform. In 2007, the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (CPD) issued a recommendation to the Ministry of Education and Science, asking it to regulate the issues of anti-discrimination and freedom of religion in the Bulgarian education. In response, the Ministry prepared the above-mentioned draft law, which contained an article that would prohibit both school students and teachers to “wear religious symbols aggressively or obtrusively demonstrating their religious or ideological preferences” (respectively, art. 161 (3.6) and 183 (2.13)).

It can thus be argued that the practical situation regarding the religious diversity in schools is predominantly tolerant, although intolerant incidents have been on the rise in recent years. This shows that there is a tendency of moving in the direction of intolerance.

The predominant social predispositions are clearly marked by the increasing intolerance towards Islam, although at the same time, respect and acceptance of all religions traditional for the country is declared. There is a declarative support for proper confessional instruction of both main religions (the Orthodox Christianity and Islam) as this is considered essential for preservation of identity, on condition that such education is not obligatory for all children but available only to those who want it.

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<sup>45</sup> Subjects in Bulgarian schools are divided in three groups: compulsory, compulsory elective and freely elective. Compulsory subjects cover the general education minimum that is obligatory for all schools. Compulsory elective subjects provide additional training within the frames of the main cultural-educational fields that correspond to the interests of the students. The lessons have place within the regular studying time and the students are obliged to select one or several subjects from the field. For example, some schools offer Religion as one of the subjects in the cultural-educational field ‘Social Sciences, Citizenship Education, and Religion’. Freely elective subjects are those which fall out of the main fields, are limited to four hours weekly and are not compulsory – they are offered only if enough children want to visit them.

<sup>46</sup> The agents of the State Agency for National Security came to search the home of Luzhnica village Imam Mohammed Kamber after receiving a signal that he was in a possession of a large number of books and other materials on radical Islam. While in the process of confiscating Imam’s books, personal computer and mobile phone, Imam’s house was surrounded by over 300 angry villagers, who held the agents blocked in the house for more than 4 hours (*Trud*, 2010).

This support, however, is as a rule conditional and accompanied by deep suspicions that radical Islamic teachings might be spread under the guise of Islamic education. The seemingly tolerant understanding that the Muslims are entitled to Islamic religious instruction is thus overshadowed by the entrenched belief that they cannot be trusted to manage such education entirely on their own and that a strict supervision and control of state institutions is necessary.

On the surface, public discourse regarding the presence of religious symbols in schools again seems tolerant on the declarative level, as the right to be different is acknowledged and respected. Like above, in this case a reservation is quickly added. Heavily influenced by examples from various European countries, many Bulgarians believe that certain “suspicious” forms of otherness cannot be accepted. The French model of prohibition of all religious symbols in schools is most often brought up as a model Bulgaria should follow. This shows that the society is in recent years becoming increasingly suspicious and as a result intolerant towards Islam.

### 3. Political participation and representation of Roma

Constitution is very explicit: “There shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines, nor parties which seek the violent seizure of state power (Article 11 (4)). The Political Parties Act from 1990 confirmed this principle in Article 2, stating that “a political party may not be established when it is based on a confessional or an ethnic principle or purports to fan up racial, national, ethnic and religious enmity.” There is no such article in the current Law on Political parties, passed in 2005.

The Constitutional prohibition of ethnic parties can on the one hand be viewed as undemocratic and discriminatory, as it potentially denies a large number of the Bulgarian citizens a proper political representation. On the other hand, it can be regarded as a positive legal arrangement, which forces political parties to work for ideas and interests that go beyond the confines of a particular ethnic community. The fact is that minorities, including Roma, are not excluded from political representation and participation as long as their political associations remain open to people from other ethnic and religious communities.

The Bulgarian legislation contains no measures for positive discrimination. As Article 6 of the Constitution prohibits all privileges or restriction of rights on the grounds of ethnic self-identity (among other criteria), there are no quotas or reserved seats for the Roma in the structures neither of central nor of the local government. These arrangements place the institutional and legal framework regarding the political participation and representation of Roma in a situation, which could be described as conditional or not strictly enforced intolerance.

In practice, the marginalised position of Roma in the society largely excludes them from many domains of public life, including from the politics. Despite that and despite the Constitutional prohibition of ethnic parties, there is a large variety of Roma political parties that operate without any hindrance. The problem is that this large variety (over 20 different Roma parties) fragments the already modest number of active Roma voters, which means that none of the Roma parties has ever come even close to passing the 4% threshold on the general elections. Some Roma parties, above all Political Party “Roma” and Euroroma, had a certain modest success on the municipal elections over the years.

Most Bulgarian citizens of Roma origin display low interest in politics. The reasons are complex, but mostly deal with their exceptional marginalisation, marked by extreme poverty, low education and (well justified) belief that no political party is interested in improving their situation. Uninterested in or unable to understand political programmes of different parties, many Roma voters prefer to trade their vote for short-term practical benefits. This sometimes includes the illegal practice of selling votes in exchange for money or other material gifts.

Despite some exceptional cases like the example of October 2011 local elections in Kyustendil municipality (described in more detail in chapter 3), where administrative obstacles intentionally

hindered the access of Roma voters to the ballot boxes, Roma face no restrictions regarding their voting rights. They can participate in the political processes as all other citizens of Bulgaria, although in practice this does not lead to the level of political representation one would expect based on the number of (potential) Roma voters. Yet, the practical situation can be described as tolerant. While there is no recognition of special needs of the Roma community and of the difficult position in which many of them live and consequently no measures of positive discrimination, there are also no barriers to their participation in the political life.

Regardless of the considerable and enduring prejudices against Roma in the society, the openly intolerant positions regarding their political participation are rare. In general the right of Roma to take part in the political processes is not questioned, although there are occasional calls to restrict the right to vote only to people who are functionally literate or who pay taxes. Most people support the opinion that it would be beneficial not just for the Roma community but for the entire society as well if more educated, influential and capable Roma individuals were elected to positions in the central and local government. At the same time, the respondents believe that such representatives of the Roma community are too few to really make a difference. The overall impression regarding the public discourse about the place of Roma in the Bulgarian political life is that it is neither intolerant nor tolerant – it is marked above all by indifference.

#### 4. Voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens

The old Law on Local Elections, used until January 2011 when the new Election Code came into force, stated that only those Bulgarian citizens who have lived at least 10 months before the election day in a certain Bulgarian municipality can vote for the mayor and municipal council (Article 3.1.). On the first glance, the Election Code which introduced the six month residency requirement actually seems as a step towards a more tolerant accommodation. The major difference between the two laws is actually in the articles dealing with the removal of people from the voters' lists. The old law (Article 13) stated that voters are removed from the voters' lists only if they lose the right to vote or they die. In practice that meant that Bulgarian citizens with a permanent address in Bulgaria were able to vote even if in fact they lived and had their current address abroad. The "election tourism" or free-of-charge bussing of large groups of voters mainly from Turkey to their native towns and villages on or prior to the election day became a popular method for certain parties (mainly the Movement for Rights and Freedoms) to take advantage of this legal loophole.

The 2011 Election Code drastically changed this. Although the issue of the six month requirement<sup>47</sup> dominated the media, political and public debates, the most problematic change came with the Article 64: "The names of citizens, who have had a present address (residence address) outside the Republic of Bulgaria during the last six months before the date of conduct of the elections, shall be removed from the voters' lists." A decision No. 507 of 24.08.2011 of the Central Election Commission specified how voters are erased from the list. The Ministry of Internal Affairs provides to the Central Direction "Civil Registration and Administrative Services" (CRAS) data about people who have left Bulgaria before 28 August 2011 (55 days before the elections). If there is no data about their return to the country, CRAS considers that their present address is abroad and automatically erases them from the voters' list.

These data are notoriously incomplete as the documents of Bulgarians travelling abroad are checked only on the airports and the land borders with Bulgarian non-EU neighbours (Serbia, Macedonia and Turkey). Hypothetically, a person could travel to Turkey a year before the election day and return to the country a week later through Greece. Most likely, the Ministry of Internal Affairs would note in its database only the exit to Turkey and thus such person would end up being erased from the voters' list

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<sup>47</sup> Described in detail in chapter 3: only those Bulgarian citizens who have lived at least six months prior to the election day in a certain Bulgarian municipality have the right to vote for the mayor and municipal council of that municipality.

despite actually living permanently in Bulgaria. A large number of people who complained that they were unfoundedly removed from the list for the October 2011 elections confirmed that this was not just a theoretical possibility. According to the CRAS information, 444,749 people were erased from the voters' list for the October local elections on grounds that they have a present address abroad.<sup>48</sup>

On paper, these restrictions affect all Bulgarian citizens regardless of their ethnic origin and thus cannot be considered as discriminatory on ethnic grounds. However, there is a question of discrimination based on place of residence, as those voters living (or simply travelling to) non-EU countries were substantially more likely to end up being erased from the voters' list and thus unable to exercise their right to vote.

Strictly speaking, the limitation of voting rights for different types of elections is not something exceptional in Europe. Three EU countries (Greece, Ireland and Malta) do not allow their citizens who reside outside the country to vote on any elections.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, Austria, Denmark and Sweden are the only countries where citizens who permanently reside abroad can vote on all types of elections. Only three other countries (Finland, Lithuania, Spain) permit non-residents to vote on the local elections (European Commission for Democracy through Law, 2011).

The restrictions introduced by the 2011 Bulgarian Election Code are therefore nothing exceptional in the European context and while far from being a testimony of recognition and acceptance, they would probably not necessarily qualify as intolerant. What does make them intolerant, however, is the fact that this legal arrangement affected certain Bulgarian citizens to a far larger extent than the others. The government and the parliamentary majority, which passed the Election Code, did little to hide their belief that those citizens with a too strong affinity to Turkey should be kept away from the ballot boxes.

In the case of desegregation of Roma education discussed above, the legal framework designed in a way that respects and accommodates diversity remained only on paper and in reality, intolerant practices continued to prevail. It is hardly surprising that in the case of voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens, the consequence of an intolerant legal arrangement was intolerant practical situation. According to various data presented by MPs from opposition parties and different groups of citizens, which protested after being unfoundedly denied the right to vote, tens of thousands of people were deleted from the voters' lists despite living permanently in Bulgaria and thus fulfilling even the restrictive criteria of the new Election Code (Dimitrova, 2011).

The new regulation also had an important indirect consequence – it intensified interethnic distrusts and tensions. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms tried to compensate the expected decrease in the number of its voters due to administrative obstacles by using different methods to fully mobilise its electoral base. One of the employed mechanisms was exploitation of different fears and anxieties within the Muslim community. Skilfully reviving the memories of the Communist-time repression and assimilation policies, the MRF delivered the message to its potential voters that minorities were again under threat and that they had to support the MRF as the only guarantee of their rights and freedom. The Election Code and other political acts of the governing GERB party, the rhetoric and activities of the nationalist parties like Attack and Order, Law and Justice, and the growing intolerant public dispositions in the country all played straight into the hands of the MRF. The result of all these factors is the souring of interethnic relations in Bulgaria.

The public discourse on the voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish emigrants and of Bulgarian Turks in general is openly intolerant. The Election Code and restrictions it introduced were largely met with barely concealed approval. For years, many Bulgarians were openly dissatisfied with the strong influence of the MRF in the Bulgarian political life. The expression that “the MRF has overeaten with power” has become a cliché regularly used to express the opinion that the party plays an allegedly too

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<sup>48</sup> See <http://bta.bg/bg/c/IN/id/223451>

<sup>49</sup> See [http://aceproject.org/epic-en/CDTable?question=VO004&view=country&set\\_language=en](http://aceproject.org/epic-en/CDTable?question=VO004&view=country&set_language=en)

powerful role not just in the politics but also in the economy. For many Bulgarians, all means were welcome in attempts to reduce this role.

In addition, the fact that Bulgarian Turks who reside in Turkey have an important say in the Bulgarian elections was an exceptionally painful thorn in the side of many Bulgarians – something that was by far not limited only to those people leaning towards the nationalistic parties. Having a law which has at last effectively prevented this specific group of Bulgarian citizens from taking part in at least some of the elections (as discussed above, the restrictions are valid only for local elections and elections for the European Parliament) has brought nothing but relief and satisfaction to a large number of ethnic Bulgarians. Somewhat surprisingly, our fieldwork has established that an end to the practice of election tourism was met with cautious approval also by many ethnic Turks, who live in towns and villages where the election tourists used to decide the election results in the previous years.

**Evaluation of discourses and practices in the four case studies:**

	<b>Institutional and legal framework</b>	<b>Practical situation</b>	<b>Public discourses</b>
<b>Education of Roma children and desegregation</b>	Acceptance and recognition	Intolerance	Declarative recognition, actual intolerance
<b>Religious diversity in schools</b>	Between tolerance and acceptance / recognition	Predominantly tolerance with incidents of intolerance	Suspicious and intolerance towards Islam
<b>Political participation and representation of Roma</b>	(Conditional) intolerance	Tolerance	Indifference
<b>Voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens</b>	Intolerance	(Limited) intolerance	Intolerance

Concluding remarks:

The overview and evaluation of discourses and practices of intolerance, tolerance and recognition in Bulgaria present a rather gloomy picture. This is especially true for the public discourses and dispositions, as previously mainly tolerant (if only in the sense of liberal tolerance) attitude towards diversity and otherness is quickly evaporating, opening space for expansion of openly intolerant discourses.

Even more worrying development is that intolerance is not limited only to the discursive level. In two of our four case studies, the intolerant practices are the norm rather than an exception, while in the third case study, the still tolerant practice is being marred by still sporadic, yet increasing in number incidents of intolerance.

The institutional and legal settings are a mixed blessing. The arrangement in the area of education can rightfully obtain a high mark and be considered as respectful and accommodating. The main problem is in its flawed implementation as the good intentions more often than not remain only on paper. The legislation in the political arena is openly intolerant towards diversity and otherness. It is also a perfect confirmation of an unfortunate and rather depressing axiom: while transforming a tolerant and respectful legal framework into tolerant practices and public dispositions is an exceptionally long and strenuous process, intolerant practices and discourses can easily and relatively quickly lead to intolerant legislation. If political and social watchdogs, civil society and relevant national and European institutions let their guard down...



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**Annex 1: profile of the respondents – (in)tolerance of difference in Bulgarian schools**

**Interviews:**

Code	Place of residence	Origin	M/F	Position	Remarks
I/1	Samokov	Roma	M	NGO activist	
I/2	Pazardzhik	Bulgarian	F	Teacher	Works in schools with numerous Roma children
I/3	Pazardzhik	Roma	M	Musician	Works at a cultural centre
I/4	Pazardzhik	Bulgarian	M	NGO activist	
I/5	Samokov	Roma	F	Pedagogical advisor	
I/6	Samokov	Roma	F	Pre-school teacher	
I/7	Samokov	Bulgarian	F	NGO activist	
I/8	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Expert on ethnic and religious issues	Worked both for the state administration and in the NGO sector
I/9	Damyanovo village	Bulgarian	F	Kindergarten director	
I/10	Sevlievo	Bulgarian	M	Orthodox priest	
I/11	Sofia	Turk	M	Chief Mufti office	Responsible for the field of education
I/12	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Orthodox priest	
I/13	Pazardzhik	Bulgarian	F	NGO activist	
I/14	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Protestant pastor	
I/15	Sarnica	Muslim Bulgarian	M	Headteacher of secondary school	
I/16	Sofia	Bulgarian	F	Sociologist	Expert on Roma issues, advisor and participant in many projects on Roma education implemented by NGOs and state institutions
I/17	Plovdiv	Turk	M	Imam	Former regional mufti
I/18	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Secondary school history teacher	
I/19	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	University professor in history	
I/20	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Politician	Member of the Sofia municipal council

**Discussion group:**

DG/1	Sofia	Bulgarian	F	University professor	Expert on gender and minority issues
DG/2	Sofia	Bulgarian	F	Bulgarian Academy of Sciences	Expert on Roma issues
DG/3	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Researcher	Former employee of the state agency for minorities
DG/4	Haskovo	Turk	M	Secondary school history teacher	
DG/5	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Secondary schools religion teacher	Graduate of the Sofia Seminary
DG/6	Sofia	Bulgarian	F	University professor	Expert on relations between Christianity and Islam

*Annex 2: profile of the respondents – voting rights of Bulgarian minorities*

Code	Place of residence	Origin	M/ F	Position	Remarks
II/1	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Sociology professor	Well-known political analyst; left-wing; he preferred to answer to the questionnaire in a written form
II/2	Sofia	Turkish	M	MP since 1997	One of the most influential figures in the MRF, expelled from the party in 2011
II/3	Sofia	Turkish	M	MP since 2009	Leader of the Youth Section of MRF, expelled from the party in 2011
II/4	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Lawyer	
II/5	Central Bulgaria, village with mainly Roma population	Bulgarian	M	Former village mayor	Mayor for 4 years, ran a campaign in the 2011 local election, was not successful
II/6	Central Bulgaria, village with mainly Roma population	Bulgarian	F	Director of a kindergarten	Member of the Municipal Council from GERB
II/7	Central Bulgaria, village with mainly Roma population	Roma	M	Owner of a small coffee shop	Member of GERB, engaged in the election campaign, expected to be nominated for Municipal Council but was not
II/8	Eastern Bulgaria, town with mainly Turkish population	Bulgarian	M	Former village mayor (3 terms)	Not a member of a political party, ran for a mayor in 2011 elections and lost
II/9	Eastern Bulgaria, town with mainly Turkish population	Bulgarian	F	Teacher in secondary school	
II/10	Eastern Bulgaria, town with mainly Turkish population	Turkish	F	Administrative secretary of a village mayor	Worked with the previous mayor and still holds the position
II/11	Eastern Bulgaria, village with mainly Turkish population	Turkish	M	Construction worker	
II/12	Southern Bulgaria, village with mainly Muslim Bulgarian population	Bulgarian Muslim	M	Municipality mayor (4 terms)	Twice elected with the support of MRF, twice elected as independent candidate; won the elections in 2011
II/13	Southern Bulgaria, village with mainly Muslim Bulgarian population	Bulgarian Muslim	M	Rentier, former mine worker	
II/14	Southern Bulgaria, village with mainly Muslim Bulgarian population	Bulgarian	M	Former mine worker	

