

# **“RECONCILIATION THROUGH ART: PERCEPTIONS OF HIJAB”**

CULTURE 2000

## **The debate on the custom of Hijab in Bulgaria**

Prepared by

**Prof. D-r Kiril Topalov**

**Veska Nikolaeva**

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## MUSLIMS IN BULGARIA. THE HIJAB CHALLENGE

*“What shall we say about a man who prefers to obey God instead of obeying men and who is sure that he will step over the threshold of Paradise when he slits your throat?” (Voltaire)*

*“This is the paradox of multiculturalism: it offers equal treatment of all communities but not of people who form them, denying them the choice of liberating themselves from their own traditions. Instead, they are offered the acceptance of the group and the suppression of the individual. The past is valued more than the will of those who wish to leave behind the customs and family, who in reply start living the way they want.” (Interview of Arab dissident Dr. Wafa Sultan, Al-Jazeera)*

In the recent couple of decades a new challenge – the hijab – has been added to the other civilization challenges in Christian Europe. This is the word which has been adopted by the general public together with all the other designations of the veil of Muslim women (various in type, size, area of face they cover, etc.). It has attracted the multidirectional defending and rejecting energies of culture scholars and anthropologists, theologians and ethnographers, journalists and politicians, sociologists and philosophers and all kinds of fans of the discussion discourse as such. The book-newspaper, electronic-media, and also Internet-space of Europe and the greater part of the civilized world is literally clogged up by publications, discussions and forums in which one can encounter different opinions ranging from one-sided and fanatical to attitudes trying to view the issue from all or at least the important sides. In the discussion, fast becoming a worldwide one, eminent scholars, predominantly European, take part along with individuals, often young, whose standpoints and emotions are determined to a greater or lesser extent by personal everyday or random observations or are provoked by a conscious or unintentional reading of a passage or forum related to the problem of hijab.

The overview of the hijab discussion leads the majority of those attracted by the issue to the main conclusion that the European (I underline again that it is not the only one but for now it is central) spiritual-value and political system has been challenged by a new test which has been charged with the task of creating two complexities – a white and a black one. The white one has the reconnaissance mission of testing the defensive mechanisms and to

report on its fighting capability. The black one, as some people think, is more dangerous; it carries yet distant but clear hints of promises – “I shall make your life black”.

For now, Bulgarian public space discusses the hijab problem mostly in its European or generally extra-Bulgarian aspect, i.e. its state in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, the Near East, North Africa, etc., where it has adopted sharp religious, political-ideological and social-psychological dimensions. We shall not analyze this aspect of the issue because it is widely held in the common Internet space. We shall make a general overview of the state of Islam in Bulgaria and in connection with this we shall point out some salient features of the penetration of the hijab problem in Bulgarian society. Our observations and conclusions are based on texts and official statistic data, studies, publications in research periodicals, newspapers and websites (they are included in the bibliography section), discussion forums and on special observations and research.

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According to the census of 2001, Muslims in Bulgaria are 967 000 which makes 12.2 % of the total population of the country. (Bulgaria is the only EU member-state with such a big percentage of Muslim population which is not immigrant but aboriginal.) Muslims form groups: Turks – 713 000, Pomaks – 131 000, Gypsies – 103 000, other – 20 000. According to more recent data from various scientific forums, Muslims in Bulgaria are 1.2 million and Pomaks are 300-350 thousand (their leaders exaggerate the size to 500 000). Some specific aspects of contemporary social-political situation in Bulgaria prevent us from obtaining precise statistical information on this issue. The constant number 12 is kept as the percentage of Muslim population in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian Muslims – Turks, Pomaks, Gypsies, Crimean Tatars, etc. – live mainly in the Rhodope Mountains, south-western and north-eastern Bulgaria. The Pomaks are concentrated in the towns of Smoljan, Karjali, Pazarjik, Blagoevgrad, the region of Lovech, central Balkan Mountains, the region of Golo Bardo in Albania, Macedonia (FYROM) and elsewhere outside Bulgaria. The majority of Bulgarian Muslims are Sunni because they used to be the ruling class of the Turkish population at the time of the conquering of the Balkans and during the five centuries of Ottoman occupation. Shiite sects of the Kazalbashi, Bektashi and some others are less numerous – they live mostly in the regions of Razgrad, Tutrakan and Sliven.

According to researchers of the problem, the Islamisation of Bulgarian population occurred in the period 14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the time when Bulgarian and the other Balkan peoples lived (until the 19<sup>th</sup> century) under the occupation, national, economic and political, of the Ottoman Empire. Bulgaria fell under Ottoman rule in 1393 when the capital city of Turnovo was taken over.

Together with the Turkish army, many administrative officers and other civil Muslims settled in the Balkans; they were needed for the consolidation of Ottoman administration and the introduction of Muslim customs in the life of the occupied lands. Judging by the Turkish names of some of the towns and villages in Bulgaria, we can trace the routes of the invasion of the Ottoman army and the establishment of the new rule. Clearly, there were serious changes in the infrastructure of the occupied towns. Outside the fortified space, new towns emerged with the new-coming Muslims building their workshops. A wave of building mosques, marketplaces, inns, and baths came about.

Experts point out that the Turks arrived in the Balkan Peninsula bringing along their Muslim rough, spacious and pragmatic architectural style. Void of any refinement, it was typical of Bursa – the first imperial capital of the Ottoman state. Early examples are the one-dome Eski Mosque built in Stara Zagora, 1409, the nine-dome Jumaja Mosque in Plovdiv, and the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> century mosques – Tombul Mosque in Shumen, 1744, which is the biggest mosque in Bulgaria, and the mosque in Edirne.

With the new administrative order, the new architecture, the mosques, bazaars, public baths, manufacture workshops, there came also the Turkish style of dressing, internal decoration of houses, the cuisine – rich in sweet and spices. Gradually in the course of the centuries, the musical folklore of the Bulgarians and the other Balkan nations was influenced by the typical Turkish, Arab or Persian musical instruments. Language, especially the everyday register, was affected by many Turkish, Arab or Persian words. The impact of the Turkish lexical system was considerable in the area of onomastics and toponymy. Many nicknames entered the Bulgarian name system; they became family names – meaning different crafts (the respective person was a craftsman).

According to many scholars, the Turkish national identity of the present-day descendants of the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century Turkish soldiers, clerks, craftsmen, suppliers to the Ottoman army, adventurers accompanying the invaders is uncertain because they, and their sons in the following centuries (until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they were the privileged class in relation to the Christian “raya” without any rights) married Christian women from the enslaved local population. However the majority of scholars share the idea that cultural,

religious and national identity is not biological or racial phenomenon but a spiritual issue determined by the basic parameters of Language, historical-cultural memory and religion.

A large group of Muslims in Bulgaria is the Bulgarian Mohammedans, known as the Pomaks. They are the successors of Christian Bulgarians who were forced to adopt Islam in the period 14<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries. During the reign of Sultan Selim II (1512-1520), this process was particularly intense; it was extremely dynamic in 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries when the greater part of the population of the Rhodopes was Islamised.

Most of the Pomaks were Islamised by force and with extreme cruelty. Some scholars claim that in some cases the change of religion was economically motivated – it brought fiscal aid, ownership of land, cattle, houses, etc. or preserved the social-hierarchical status. This is true of some Muslims in north-eastern Bulgaria – the regions of Razgrad, Sliven, Tutrakan. Adopting Islam in order to avoid hard repression on the part of the occupiers, they became Shiite because of that sect with regard to national and religious differences. The Shiite Kazalbashi observe the Christian customs and worship Christian saints. This specific cultural syncretism can be observed only in Bulgaria.

Many written monuments – chronicles, memoirs, manuscripts – indicate that property motivation was not successful in achieving the expected goal. In the majority of cases Islamisation was imposed and repressive.

In the course of time, the new religious identity of the Pomaks separated them from their Bulgarian identity memory. In 1876, the April Uprising (the most important attempt of the Bulgarians to become independent) was suppressed by Pomak mercenaries; they slay inhumanly 5 000 men, women and children of Batak and burnt them in the village church.

Pomaks have different names in different parts of Bulgaria: Pomaks, Ahrjans, Marvaks, Pogantsi, Poturnaks. As descendants of Islamised Christian Bulgarians, they speak different archaic Bulgarian dialects; many of them, especially those Islamised in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, observe the important Christian holidays (Christmas, St. George's Day), but also follow the Christian ritual system. They have lived for a long period of time (partly to present) in isolation (they separate themselves from the Bulgarians on religious grounds; the Turks do not accept them easily on ethnic grounds, considering them "giaurs" which means "of different – Christian – faith"), so they have preserved in their linguistic practice many archaic dialectal features (some of them of the 17<sup>th</sup> century). The study of their dialects is of great linguistic importance – in terms of dialect change and also phonetically, morphologically, syntactically, etymologically. After the reestablishment of the Bulgarian state in the second

half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Pomaks have been considered not as a separate ethnical group but as a religious minority within the borders of the Bulgarian ethnical community. Through education, military service, the media, professional employment, internal migration the differences between dialects diminish and the Pomaks (especially the educated ones) master the norm of the Bulgarian standard language.

The majority of this population consider the word “Pomak” offensive, so the official language uses the term Bulgarian Mohammedans. (In Greece they are known as “Pomaki”, in Macedonia (FYROM) they are called “Torbeshi”.) Scholars have proposed different hypotheses on the issue of the meaning of the word “Pomak”; there is no accepted definition yet. Some scholars relate the “Pomak” to “pomagach” (meaning helper, supporter) on the basis of their function in the Ottoman Empire – they formed the supporting units of the Turkish army. Some experts have tried to derive the word from the phrase “po maki” (meaning hardship and torture) relating it to the fact of the cruel Islamisation of these Bulgarians. Some scholars connect etymologically the words “Pomak” and “Poturnak” (meaning a man who has turned into a Turk).

The name “Ahrjans” is related to the practice of using Old Church Slavonic language in which the word means “of other faith”. Prof. A. Ishirkov associates the etymology of this word with the religious brotherhoods of Ahi, spread across the Rhodopes. Stoyan Rajchevski mentions many other names of the Bulgarian Mohammedans of different parts of the Balkan Peninsula: Apovtsi, Babechene, Kumiatsi, Marvatsi, Skarnatsi, Turkashi, Ulfi, Chechens, Cheshlii, Shopi.

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The first studies of the Muslim population in Bulgaria were made in 1878 after the liberation of the country from Turkish rule, and after the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 (the number of that population was not established). In 1923-1949, a body of 219 700 Turks left Bulgaria. In 1949-1951, 155 000 Muslims emigrated; in the 1950s and 1960s, there were sporadic campaigns to change the Muslim names with Bulgarian ones. A partial emigration campaign was carried out in the 1970s.

The issue of the conduct of Muslim population in Bulgaria is complicated by a line of international contracts which accompanies the development of Bulgarian state right after its Independence. For example, the repressive treaties of Berlin (1878), Bucharest (1913),

Neuilly (1919) permit Turkey to watch over the rights of Muslims in Bulgaria. Until 1934, Turkey had the right to interfere in the elections for grand mufti of Muslims in Bulgaria.

Bulgarian governments have implemented suicidal policies in connection with Bulgarian Muslims, especially the Pomaks – the Bulgarian Mohammedans – using them in their political games (particularly in periods of parliamentary elections). They have methodically driven them away from their Bulgarian identity and have turned them into easy prey for Islamic propaganda, coming from the neighbouring countries. In 1912-1913, right after the liberation of the Rhodopes from Turkish rule, the government and the church decided to Christian all Pomaks – the so-called “kristilka” (meaning “baptising effort”). They did not baptise any Muslim but they provoked an emigration wave to Turkey.

The only serious and positive political step is the creation of the Rodina (meaning “birth country” organisation in 1930 by eminent leaders of the Muslim community in Bulgaria (mainly in the Rhodopes). The main idea of this organisation is the achievement of spiritual truce and human closeness between Bulgarian Christians and Muslims. The Muslim leaders recommend and successfully support the secular way of life, the rejection of the typical Muslim signs in clothing, the Muslim women’s veil, the education of girls and women and their free, full-scale, equal integration in society. Unfortunately, after the Communist coup in Bulgaria in 1944, the leaders of this organisation were murdered or imprisoned in jails or concentration camps; the Bulgarian Muslims were allowed to drift back to the old state of religious, ethnic, cultural and political isolation; they were victimised by their centuries-old Muslim fanaticism in all of its dimensions and manifestations and by foreign ideological manipulations. The repressions against Pomak population continue in the campaigns of June 1948, November 1949, in 1950-1951, and in 1972-1973 when hundreds of people, disagreeing with the policy of the new regime, were sent to concentration camps and prisons, scattered across the country, where very few convicts survived, subjected to a severe regime.

During the 45-year period of Communist rule in Bulgaria (1944-1989) Muslim religion, Like Christianity was persecuted by the regime. Muslims were forced to abandon their traditional beliefs, rituals, dress and also to change their Muslim names into Christian or Slavonic ones. Thus, instead of inclusion, Muslims, particularly Bulgarian Mohammedans (Pomaks), were alienated by the regime; they were forced to encapsulate in their small communities. It was not so difficult to activate a qualified antagonism in the non-Muslim population (especially towards those who declared themselves as Turks). That was prompted by the harsh traces of the Bulgarian historical, social-political and cultural-emotional memory of the epoch of the five-centuries long Turkish rule in the country.

In general, the policy towards the Muslims of the totalitarian authorities was extremely inconstant; it changed in line with the orders received from the Soviet Union (this is true about any other issue). The study of the Turkish language was now banned, now allowed; Turkish theatres were opened in some towns and then they were closed; periodicals in Turkish, totally controlled by the Communist Party and State Security were published for some time. In certain periods, the use of the Turkish language was banned even in everyday, colloquial situations.

Nevertheless, until 1984, when the enforced changing of Muslim names began, there were no visible tensions in the relations between Christians and Muslims. The total imposed atheism made marriages of Christians and Muslims possible; the role of religion in the lives of both groups was brought to zero or strongly marginalised. Muslim population laboured in agriculture – tobacco growing was the most typical livelihood for Muslims. They also were occupied in cattle breeding.

The state predetermined the accumulation during a period of half a century of the potential negative energy which resulted in an ethnic-religious explosion right before, during and after the fall of the Communist system in Bulgaria. That was rooted in the mechanisms of keeping records about the past and present of the families and their individual members, the total control of the activities and political principles of the members of the Muslim communities, the motivating of some of them by including them in the party and administrative totalitarian nomenclature and at the same time the maintaining of a low economic and intellectual status of the population. In 1984-1989, a strong impetus was given by the attempt of the last Bulgarian dictator, Todor Jivkov, and his government to change by force the names, ethnic and religious identity of the Turks and Bulgarian Mohammedans in the country. The main idea behind the so-called “revival process” was that all Bulgarian Muslims (both Turks and Pomaks) were ethnic Bulgarians whose religious and ethnic identity had been changed in the course of the centuries from Bulgarian and Christian to Turkish and Muslim. The campaign of changing the names and imposing a Bulgarian identity also included the Gypsy population. It is believed that one of the motives of the change of names and deportation of Muslims is the big difference in the birth-rate of Christian and Muslim (also Gypsy) population. Despite the campaigns of the Communist government to raise the number of births among the Christian population, it is just a few tenths above zero, while being 2 % for Muslims and Gypsies.

At the time of that campaign, Turkey claimed that 1.5 million ethnic Turks lived in Bulgaria. Bulgaria maintained that there were no Turks; Amnesty International estimated their



number to 900 000. Statistical data of 1987 show that at that time Bulgaria had 1267 mosques (the majority of them did not operate) with 533 Muslim priests; the Muslim religious community was divided into 8 local mufti regions, headed by one grand mufti.

This action, known as “the revival process”, provoked many strikes, including hunger strikes, blood-spattered clashes between Muslims and Bulgarian police or army forces, violence on both sides. It was preceded by terrorist acts against Bulgarian Christian kindergartens and passenger trains arranged by newly founded Islamic organisations, supported from abroad. In many places the change of the names and issuing of ID papers with the new personal data was executed by means of military blocking of the villages and enforcing, beating, and occasionally killing those who opposed. According to researchers, all new documents, especially birth certificates and marriage certificates, were published only with the new Bulgarian names. Any refusal to accept the new ID papers with Bulgarian names would mean stopped payment of salary, pension and bank transaction. Many mosques were closed; clothes indicating non-Christian identity were banned; homes were searched and any insignia of Turkish or Muslim origin were confiscated; the traditional Islamic circumcision of boys was forbidden. The two sides suffered casualties; many Muslims were imprisoned again as in the campaigns following 1944 and in the 70s. The prisons and camps were scattered across the whole territory of Bulgaria.

In 1989, the government undertook the last mass deportation of Bulgarian Muslim population to Turkey (about 310 000) people. They were forced by the authorities to sell cheaply their property in the course of just a few days or hours and formed endless lines of refugees; the Balkans remember similar caravans only from the time of the tragic Balkan Wars. After complicated negotiations, Turkey accepted the refugees and settled the majority in poor regions or in the occupied Turkish part of Cyprus. In south-western Bulgaria, especially in the Gotze Delchev region, there were upheavals; many Pomaks refused to emigrate together with the Turks. Because of their Bulgarian language, they knew that in Turkey they were not welcome; in addition, their everyday and holiday customs and practices were closer to the Christian ones than to the Muslim ones. Despite the strict border control and the repressions of the Communist authorities, they had never ceased to communicate with their relatives and friends in Pomak villages in the neighbouring countries.

Assembling of more than three people was forbidden, as well as the leaving or entering without a special permission of the Pomak villages.

The sudden leaving of so many people led to a crisis in the harvesting of the crops and tobacco in the critical 1989. The government used a method which was well-known from

other occasions – mobilisation of large groups of people of different professions, predominantly civil servants, students and intellectuals. Those people had to do heavy agricultural work. Such compulsory labour in agriculture, the construction of roads and other infrastructure in Bulgaria was used at the time of the Turkish occupation when the common people – the raya – had to work in “angariya” fashion (meaning for free) for the Turkish land owners and the local and central authorities.

After the reestablishment of the democratic system, the rights of Muslims were reinstated; the majority of them took back their old names. Courses for the teaching of the Holy Quran were open (the authorities did not allow that before 1989). Muslim newspapers were published in Bulgarian and in Turkish; Turkish theatres were reopened or newly established in Shumen and Smoljan; Bulgarian National Television started broadcasting a news bulletin in Turkish. Turkish language was added as a school subject in the school curricula in many Muslim regions of the country.

The restoring of the rights of Muslims also provided opportunities for many Islamic organisations in Turkey, the Near East and North Africa, and especially in Saudi Arabia to develop some active anti-Bulgarian activities in the Muslim regions. A number of organisations which openly advocated Muslim political autonomy were established. According to information of News.Plovdiv24.bg, “only by the mid 90s in Bulgaria, there were about 20 Muslim foundations and organisations, the most powerful ones being Vakaf el Islam, Minar, Taiba, whose influence allowed them to interfere with the work of the grand mufti of Muslims in Bulgaria. At first, there were just suspicions but later there was evidence of the fact that behind those organisations there were radical Islamist and terrorist structures like Al-Quaeda and Muslim Brothers.

During the last decade, about 30 leaders of these Islamist foundations have been extradited from Bulgaria. The main target of the foundations are the Rhodopes Pomaks in the regions of Gotze Delchev, Smoljan and Velingrad, and also the Gypsies in Pazarjik and Plovdiv, who are compelled to study the Turkish language (the argument is that it is their original, now forgotten, language). Efforts are made to persuade Bulgarian Mohammedans that they belong to some separate Pomak ethnos. That claim, completely unfounded, is developed by some extremely nationalistic circles in neighbouring countries. The foundations lead by the head of Organisation for Islamic Development and Culture, Arif Abdulah, spread the thesis that Muslim ethnos in Bulgaria is suppressed and is subjected to assimilation. Here, religious attachment is identified with ethnic affiliation; it is a typical fundamentalist approach. A new organisation was created in 2006 – Union of Muslims in Bulgaria – whose

leaders and activities are closely connected to the Organisation for Islamic Development and Culture. The foundations do not hide their policies of separation between Christian and Muslim population, of experimenting with anti-Bulgarian ideas, of testing the resisting force of society and state, facilitated by the feelings of total neglect by the state, experienced by the population of the Rhodopes.

In Muslim and Pomak regions, mosques and Muslim schools are intensively built; dozens of young people study or specialise at different Muslim (often fundamentalist) centres outside Bulgaria – mainly in Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Egypt; there is information in the media that Bulgaria is visited by members of different Muslim terrorist organisations.

After the events in Kosovo, there are grounds for hopes (not clearly expressed yet) among the Muslims, and respectively for fears among the non-Muslims (especially those who live in or near Muslim regions), for implementing the same model in Bulgaria (the Rhodopes and Thrace) in the regions near Turkey. Indicative of the radical Islamist upheaval is the fact that in the Pomak regions Turkish schools and courses include Turkish language teaching (traditionally only Bulgarian is spoken there). There is unofficial information that the leaders of this process from the Organisation for Islamic Development and Culture impose everyday-religious practices which do not correspond to the Turkish Muslim tradition; nobody however dares to oppose openly.

Pomaks of the western Rhodopes (Pazarjik and Blagoevgrad regions) are closer to strict observation of Muslim religious practices and beliefs. The census of 1992 and of 2001 indicates that some of the Bulgarian Mohammedans in this area have declared themselves as ethnic Turks, no matter that they speak only Bulgarian; also, they prefer their Muslim names. Some Pomaks from eastern and central Rhodopes (mainly in Krumovgrad, Nedelino, Zlatograd regions) prefer their Christian and Slavonic names; they do not observe strictly Muslim practices and beliefs. After 1990, there are many cases of voluntary return to Christianity and to the Christian way of life in that area. An activist of this process is Father Boyan Saraev who originates from a Muslim family himself.

The great percentage of Muslim population (12 %) in Bulgaria means that Bulgarian society has been very successful in its strife to avoid blood-covered inter-ethnic conflict. Former Yugoslavia did not achieve that. That success is determined by ethnic tolerance at political and everyday level, and also in international relations in the Balkans. After many futile illusions and national catastrophes, loss of territories and population in numerous wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Bulgarians have learnt that bad peace is better than good war. That is also a lesson learnt in civil wars – Bulgarians still remember the bloody civil war

of 1923 which was started by Stalin's Comintern. The nation has chosen the road of truce and that has been a good alibi for the newly-formed political class before Europe and America. However does that truce not in favour only one of the sides and reject the other? Who will be the winner and who will be the loser? Is it possible for both sides to win or is it certain that both will lose? Aggressive advance of radical Islam in Europe has yet to pose insolvable problems.

Some statements of Ahmed Dogan, leader of Movement for Rights and Freedoms, affirm that the road of Bulgaria to Europe passes via Istanbul, and threaten that if he should release extremism just a little bit, Kosovo would look like a kindergarten to us.

According to some researchers (S. Evstatiev from Sofia University) the tolerance existing in the two main religious communities in Bulgaria can be accounted for by the keeping of correct distance between them – there are rare intermarriages, women's veils do not provoke any mass negative reactions in the non-Muslim population, nobody stops Turks to speak their language amongst themselves; in general, frequent contacts are avoided. But with the increase of self-confidence and wish for more freedoms of the Muslim population after Bulgaria's ascent to EU, it is possible to observe faults in the successful alance, kept until now. Because of that, some Muslim leaders in Bulgaria fear that radical Islamic fundamentalism will penetrate in the country, together with the radical terrorists. Evstatiev is of the opinion that this can be prevented by the fast social and economic integration of Muslims. Economic, social and cultural underestimation and marginalisation of those people is a certain method of surrendering them to radical ideology.

After the political changes in Bulgaria, the new Muslims' constitution lays down the office of Grand Mufti, Supreme Islamic Council with its Head, local council of Muslims and local mufti, committees of Muslim representatives of different villages and towns.

In 2005, an Islamic Conference was held in Sofia; the Shiite Kazalbashi raised the issue of installing a separate grand mufti for the Kazalbashi.

In political terms, Muslims in Bulgaria are united in a party, the Movement for Rights and Liberties. It is organised and managed on the principle of strong authoritarian hierarchy. It has a constant parliamentary presence of about 25 MPs which in the last decade has allowed it to take part in several coalition governments. The powerful total influence of the party over Muslims (according to researchers, if someone does not vote for it, they do not get jobs, business opportunities, etc.), the free bussing of Muslim immigrants from Turkey for voting in Bulgarian local, parliamentary and presidential elections, has determined electoral results. This makes political life in the country dependant on political strategies of the

leadership of the Movement for Rights and Liberties; according to analyses of political scholars and economists, that group of people now possess a great portion of national wealth.

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The half-century long Communist regime in Bulgaria imposed many bans on wearing the typical Muslim clothes and other external insignia, including the characteristic Muslim hijab. The subsequent freedom to implement all Muslim practices lead to the widespread use of the veil as a symbol of categorical, clear and often defiant declaration of non-Bulgarian and non-Christian national and religious identity. Some people think that in Bulgarian public space the problem of the hijab was brought over from France. It is hardly important to argue where exactly it has been imported from, since it is an issue for all big European countries which for more than 50 years have been a magnet for poor Muslims. What matters is that it is advancing aggressively towards the core of Bulgarian society and that the latter is unprepared and confused.

One of the first serious cases occurred at Medical University of Plovdiv which had to decide whether it would lose 400 000 Euro by refusing to register 110 female Muslim students; they demanded that they would study at that university under the condition of being allowed to wear the Muslim hijab. Many applications of that kind had reached the Rector of the university. Other rectors advised him to reject the condition but that would have undermined the financial balance and the institution's vision to enrol foreign students. That was a genuinely legal case because higher education in Bulgaria is secular and free; it does not depend on any political and religious strategies, on racial, national, religious, gender privileges or restrictions. According to legal counsels the right to religious self-definition is protected by Bulgarian Constitution and European Convention for Human Rights; that means that the right to wearing special clothing and insignia is also guaranteed. At the same time, at a number of European universities the wearing of visible and provoking. This problem caused serious social tension in Turkey itself where the political class wavers between different decisions.

In connection with the Plovdiv case, experts are of the opinion that the issue should be solved by legislation, so rectors and academic councils would not have to take a stand; sometimes that might have serious consequences because financial motivation of academic management might lead to the creation of dangerous precedents.

As we judge by the media discussions and comments and views of experts, expressed in different form, public opinion insists on banning the wearing of religious symbols in class, including the Muslim hijab which is one of the most provocative ones. E. Terzieva quotes G. Manolov, a professor at the Institute of Economics and administration of Plovdiv, who claims that in a country where the state and church are separate, religious clothes or symbols should not be worn in educational institutions. The author also quotes J. Bojanova, administrator at the Agricultural University of Plovdiv, who maintains that there is a need for clear legislation in that area because it is so complex that it should not be left to laymen. For example, Vice-Rector Z. Kozlujov, Plovdiv University, does not hold any categorical position with regard to the Hijab because at his university there are several female Iraqis who wear their hijabs in class but nobody pays any attention to that.

The issue of the hijab was passed on to the domain of secondary education despite of the fact that the introduction of school uniforms made easy the solution of the problem. The Organisation for Islamic Development and Culture (OIDC) has filed a complaint to the Commission for Protection against Discrimination, stating that two female students at the Economic College in the Rhodopes town of Smoljan – Michaela and Fatime – were not allowed to wear veils at school. The complaint was not dealt with because the complaint was filed by the OIDC and not by the students themselves. However it became apparent that radical Islam was “testing” the reactions of the state. The Commission answered categorically that at schools where uniforms were introduced the ban on wearing veils was not a sign of discrimination and that the OIDC was infringing the right of the other children; so the Commission imposed a sanction on the OIDC. However the Minister of Education made several contradictory statements; he also claimed to have established a commission. In the end he did not take a stand and left it to the succeeding government to deal with the problem. It is well-known that such “testing” of the reactions of the state met firm and categorical refusal in France. In Bulgaria, the “testing” continued with the complaint of three female students from the Electrical Engineering College in the Rhodope town of Devin that they have been given a verbal warning not to wear veils at school. They demanded that the school principal and a teacher should be dismissed. The Commission for Protection against Discrimination again decided that it was not a case of discrimination and reminded the Minister of Education that two years earlier he had been advised to propose a new law, so that the problem should be solved legislatively. But the Minister does not want to do that because he avoids confrontation with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms in Bulgaria. The Minister is a member of a coalition government in which the Movement is a partner of his monarchist party.

In 2003, Nurjan Georgieva from Plovdiv who changed her Christian religion to Muslim in 1998 subjected Bulgaria to a new “test” with which radical Islam checked the reactions of the state. She demanded that she should be photographed with her scarf for her official papers. When she was refused she filed a grievance at the European Court on Human Rights in Strasbourg. Later she withdrew her grievance.

We have heard recently that a certain foreign Islamist organisation pays 300 Euro per month to two Christian families in the Rhodopes for their daughters to wear veils at school. That is a strange coincidence with a case reported in the European press of an identical situation with two Greek families in Istanbul. The two cases indicate that the wearing of the hijab is not always a franc expression of a definite cultural, everyday or religious tradition; in some cases it is a straightforward sign of well planned provocation, not different from the aggressive challenging of the hundred female students in Plovdiv Medical University. In Bulgarian Internet forums we find reports that in Anatolia, the poorest part of Turkey, girls are paid to wear veils.

This year Arab scholar Boyan Chukov, in a TV interview, stated that the Hijab topic is not a temporary action but a well-planned long-term strategy for imposing Islam in the new lands, including Bulgaria. He thinks that the Pomak regions are attacked because the complex of “second birth country” is rather powerful

There are sporadic attempts in the media (e.g. attorney at law M. Ekimjiev – [mediapool.bg](http://mediapool.bg) / 11.09.2006) to defend the thesis that a ban on hijab at universities is an infringement of human rights. However in the forums and other publications, similar positions are met with disregard despite the seemingly skilful juridical argumentation. Negation of the ban on hijab at universities and schools is put forth by eminent cultural studies researcher Prof. I. Dichev. He claims that the Church should be really separated from the state; negativism towards wearing Muslim symbols is an expression of “secular fundamentalism”. A. Andreev, journalist from the Bulgarian section of Deutsche Welle, reminds the public that hippies’ protest was rendered meaningless by accepting their fashion of dress by young people across the world. He suggests that we should consider the question of a similar approach to the hijab issue.

In a discussion on Bulgarian Radio France International, Hajer Fazlijska, a former Christian lady who has recently adopted Islam (now one of the leaders of the Sofia Branch of Union for Islamic Development and Culture), states that “in Islam the woman wears these clothes, including the hijab, in order to be evaluated for her intellectual merits and personal qualities, and not for her outer beauty. For the development of society, external beauty does

not matter, internal one is important. A moral is necessary. Developed countries in the world have not achieved their prosperity because they have beautiful people and because beauty is exposed. When a woman exposes herself, when she is not respected, the new generations put across even greater disregard to her rights... The Bible says that women should be covered. That is why nuns are covered.”

The media discuss the problem of the inflexible persistence of various Muslim organisations to keep building new temples not only in the Muslim populated areas (there are many new ones there already), but also in Sofia and in other cities. Heated disputes in the media talk about the sound of the loudspeakers of the muezzins calling Muslims to prayer, disturbing the capital city's centre and other towns five times a day.

The topic of the hujab is not an accidental everyday and social problem of violating or defending human rights. There are many proofs of that: the creation and advance of different Islamic foundations with radical ideology, actions of their leaders that threaten the security of citizens. For instance, Y. Yovchev writes in the Monitor newspaper (Feb. 2007) that the leader of radical Islamists in Bulgaria, Ali Hayredin, who was arrested later, went around the Rhodopes accompanied by his aids and enrolled volunteers for an upcoming jihad. The investigation of the National Security Service found that “Hayredin, a former regional mufti of Sofia, succeeded to draw to the idea of a holy war about 30 Christians who adopted Islam. Fundamentalist propaganda was uploaded on the Internet because that was the easiest method of spreading radical Islamism among a great number of people. When the Union of Muslims in Velingrad was established, the meeting was attended by about 50 followers of Hayredin – that was announced in Monitor newspaper. They raised the call: “Rhodopes – Bulgarian Chechenia”. Many of the founders praised the activities of terrorist Shamal Basaev. The reasons for comparing the Rhodopes to Chechenia were related to the connection of Hayredin to Aniola Dimova. She is his second wife whose task was to translate the materials from Chechen websites and to upload them on Islam-bg.net. They were to promote the ideas of radical Islamism in Bulgaria.” I. Delcheva points out that Ali Hayredin, who, according to experts, was driven out of his post as the head mufti of Sofia because he turned away from Turkish and embraced radical Arab Islam, cherishes ambitions for a political career and is trying to become the spiritual leader of Bulgarian Pomaks. He keeps converting to Islam Gypsies in Samokov, Ihtiman, Montana and other regions. Delcheva states that those who return from their studies in Saudi Arabia not only pay Muslim women for wearing hijabs, but also oppose their relatives (also Muslims) because Islam that they bring along is different from the one in Bulgaria. Ali never hides his closeness to Ahmat Musa from Jordan, who was



expelled from Bulgaria in 2000 because he had created a branch of radical Islamic organisation Muslim Brothers. Hayredin's organisation maintained two websites devoted to wahabism – the ideology of modern terrorism which is behind Al-Qaeda. The sites contained calls to Muslim around the world to support the war against the non-believers by physical force, money and weapons. Hayredin is also one of the founders (1990) of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – the powerful political party which has played an important role in Bulgarian political life and has participated actively in the recent governments. His radical ideas are not met well by the Turkish population which observes traditional Islam, so he has directed his energy to Pomaks, Gypsies and some of the Christians. For that purpose he has created two websites where his two wives – both Christian women who have adopted Islam – keep convincing Muslim women that the hijab is a symbol and a relief for the woman. Thus women need not waste time deciding what to wear when they go out.

As is seen, the “hijab” problem is making his first steps in Bulgaria and is not as aggressive as in Western Europe. However it plays the same role of a symbol of the increasing expansion of radical Islam and a test for the reactions of society and state. The still relatively soft measures of Bulgarian society to the veil can be explained by national psychology (the famous Bulgarian tolerance to difference) and also by political factors (the state does not react adequately because of its strong dependence on the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, ethnic and Muslim by nature). An important role is played by the fact that unlike Western Europe, Bulgarian population is not made up of immigrants – it is indigenous (that is also true of the other Balkan countries). That reality changes Muslims' status and position in relation to the other non-Muslim population because it does not live in a foreign but in its own country, its native country.

Finally, the circumstance of the scarf (needed in the strong sun) being the traditional head dress of Bulgarian and Balkan women should be added. It is quite similar to the hijab. In the villages of the Balkans, older-generation women still wear the scarf, no matter what ethnos or religion they have. The scarf is an element of everyday costumes and holiday outfits. The population of the Balkans, unlike people in Western Europe, is not sensitive in its reactions to the Muslim hijab. In addition, the five long centuries of Ottoman rule have developed a trait of tolerating and surviving. People's philosophy formalises that quality in the disturbing maxim “Tolerate and be saved.” For five centuries, people have endured the political, social, everyday, spiritual, mental attributes of a Muslim civilisation system and have preserved their cultural identity. In other words, people have survived the hard times. Perhaps that is why they do not regard the test of the Hijab as a serious matter.

They have not read the formulations of “tolerance” of various European institutions and in generally valid documents but they, people from the Balkans, carry them in their natural value system; they regard the traditionally common element, Muslim and Christian, of women’s dress – the hijab – as an element that does not divide but unites Christians and Muslims, an element that helps them resolve their contradictions. In the long run, if they do not put an end to their disagreement by using the high-brow formulae of the international conferences, they can try to apply the memory of their grandmothers wearing the same scarves on their heads. The memory of your grandmother carries on its back the memory of your own childhood, hopping merrily, and a childhood is always good and loving.