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Social Construction of Identities: Pomaks in Bulgaria

Ali Eminov

Abstract

There is an ongoing debate about whether individual and group identities are fixed and resistant to change or fluid, changing according to evaluation by individuals and groups of circumstances at a given time and place. This article, by examining the history of Pomak identities during the twentieth century, concludes that identities are socially constructed through performance, political struggle and compromise. Individuals and groups often use identities strategically to adapt to a variety of situations to produce and support effective self-concepts.

The point of departure for this article is the disjuncture between those who define ethnic identities according to essentialist principles and those whose definitions follow constructionist and/or instrumentalist principles. The former insist upon the objective nature of group identities which are fixed and resistant to change. The constructivists, on the other hand, examine the specifics of ethnicity as an individual choice. Ethnic identities are not fixed but fluid, changing according to subjective evaluation by individuals and groups of circumstances at a given time and place. As Emile Sahliyeh has observed, an identity "serves the practical needs and interests of the members of the community. The durability of [an] identity is contingent upon its ability to provide security, social status, and economic benefits for its members more than do other existing alternatives"[1]. If more appealing alternatives for social and economic advancement are present outside one's group, then, individuals will take advantage of these alternatives and modify their identity, at least temporarily, to suit different conditions. Moreover, members of a given community have multiple identities, each activated upon appropriate circumstances. Benedict Anderson has argued that nations are "imagined communities" not necessarily based on 'objective facts' that can be traced to a primordial past[2]. Looking at contemporary ethnic identities in the Balkans through the prism of essentialism we are likely to distort the contingent nature of identity formation. John Fine's analysis of medieval and pre-modern sources, for example, has shown the fluidity of identity on the territory that is Croatia today. Even at the beginning of the nineteenth century most of the people who lived there did not identify themselves as Croatians "but as 'Illyrians' or 'Slavs.' A number also continued to see themselves as 'Dalmatians,' and new 'Slavonian' identity was making its appearance in Slavonia. Thus, as we enter the modern period, as far as

[1] Emile Sahliyeh, "Ethnicity and state building: the case of the Palestinians in the Middle East", in Judith T. Toland (ed.) *Ethnicity and the State* (Transaction Publishers, London, 1993), 178.
[2] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso Books, London, New York, rev. ed. 1991)

identity went, there were still many options for people of Slavonia, Croatia and Dalmatia to take"[3]. An analysis of historical sources for other areas of the Balkans would reveal similar processes at work.

This discussion of Pomak identity(ies) will show that claims to a particular identity are not primordial or a fixed essence. Identity is malleable and can be reformulated, manipulated and changed. According to Tone Bringa, "Different people have different ideas about what decides what kind of person one is or what category of people one belongs to. National or ethnic identity is dependent on ascription (i.e. self definition) and description (i.e. definition by others). People locally define and construct their identity according to their own experiences and perceptions, in interaction with and in relation to members of neighbouring groups, and in relation to official state definitions"[4]. Under ordinary circumstances group identity is not problematic. However, when powerful groups try to impose a different identity on a victim group and the members of the victim group refuse to submit to pressure, group identities become a serious problem to both the victim and the victimizer. Since Pomak identity has been tied to nationalist discourse (especially of the romantic kind) since Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule in 1878, this article also spells out the relationship between nationalism and ethnic diversity in a modern nation-state.

Nationalists everywhere consider the existence of multiple ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities within the same state undesirable. To them, cultural diversity is a threat to the stability and integrity of the nation-state. Therefore, they seek ways to culturally homogenize the nation so that the state and nation come to coincide with one another.

Since Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule in 1878 political action in Bulgaria has been directed toward the creation of a territorially, culturally and linguistically unified nation-state predicated upon the elimination of non-Bulgarian minorities through migration (voluntary or forced), assimilation (voluntary or forced), and at times, through violence. Bulgarian nationalists, like other nationalists in the region, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries sought not only to liberate their people from Ottoman rule but also to reconstitute their national communities within pre-Ottoman medieval imperial borders. Bulgarian nationalists sought the origins of their

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[3] John Fine, *When Ethnicity Did Not Matter in the Balkans: A Study in Identity in Pre-Nationalist Croatia, Dalmatia, and Slavonia in the Medieval and Early-Modern Periods* (University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2006), 556.
[4] Tone Bringa, "Nationality categories, national identification and identity formation in 'multinational' Bosnia", 11 *The Anthropology of East Europe Review* (1993), 70.

national community in an imperial medieval past, specifically the First Bulgarian Empire under Car Simeon (893-927) when Bulgaria reached its greatest territorial expansion.[5] Of course, the Greek nationalists wanted to reconstitute their nation within the borders of the Byzantine Empire at its greatest extent and similarly with other Balkan nationalists. Such ambitions ignored the fact that the borders of these early states were impossible to define since they had expanded and contracted through time. Since the establishment of Balkan nation-states, serious conflicts over borders have periodically turned violent and these conflicts persist to this day.

Moreover, Bulgarian nationalists, contrary to historical evidence, imagined these medieval Bulgarian empires to have been ethnically and religiously homogeneous. The new nation-state too would restore that assumed ethnic and religious homogeneity. A strong adherence to this mythologized history created insurmountable barriers that did not admit newcomers into the nation or the nation-state. Turks, as speakers of a different language, and Muslims (Turks, Pomaks and Gypsy Muslims), as carriers of a different religious tradition, posed a serious problem to the integrity of the state because their integration and absorption into the majority population would be difficult if not impossible. The coercive methods used by the Živkov regime to absorb these populations into the majority failed and indirectly contributed to the downfall of the communist regime in 1989.

The idealization of the pre-Ottoman Bulgarian medieval past was accompanied by the demonization of everything Ottoman. To this day most Bulgarians refer to the Ottoman period as the darkest period in Bulgarian history, 500 years of 'slavery' or 500 years "under the yoke" in Vazov's famous phrase, during which Ottomans are said to have deliberately and methodically destroyed Bulgarian culture, forced Bulgarians to convert to Islam and Turkified them (Snegarov, 1958, for example). After Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule, the question became, what was to become of the Turks and other Muslims that remained within the borders of Bulgaria? What was to be done with the reminders of Ottoman rule in Bulgarian culture and Bulgarian

[5] Bulgaria came close to this ideal in the Treaty of San Stefano signed on 3 March 1878 between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, which created a large autonomous Bulgarian Princedom that included most of the areas claimed as historic Bulgarian lands. Western powers did not want a large Bulgarian state friendly to Russia in the Balkans and quickly proceeded to dismember it during the same year at the Congress of Berlin. What emerged from the Congress of Berlin was a small vassal principality north of the Balkan mountains plus the *eyalet* of Sofia. As Richard Crampton has observed, "For every Bulgarian, however, the real Bulgaria remained that of San Stefano. The new Bulgarian state was to enter into life with a ready-made programme of territorial expansion and a burning sense of injustice meted out to it by the great powers" (Richard Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997), 85. From then on Bulgaria would use every opportunity to regain the territories lost at the Congress of Berlin and each attempt would end in failure and loss.

landscape? The answer was to cast aside and eliminate these reminders. Ottoman dress, housing styles, urban layouts, architectural monuments, and place names had to go.[6] As Stephen Lewis notes, "hostility to history and place names is only one step away from hostility to people" (Lewis, 1998), and in one way or another non-Bulgarians and the non-Orthodox had to go too.

The leaders of nation-states in the Balkans have used various strategies to achieve cultural homogeneity. They have often tried to maintain the illusion of cultural homogeneity by denying the existence of ethnic or religious minorities within their borders.[7] Even when the existence of minorities was recognized, citizenship in a nation-state did not necessarily entitle members of minority groups to full human rights. They were discriminated against in various ways. Minorities were often used by nation-states as pawns in their internal and international relations. Also, nationalist leaders have exploited minority groups to promote national self-interest or the interests of particular political factions or to further their own political power and personal ambitions. Not infrequently, attempts at absorption of minority groups into the majority through acculturation or assimilation and/or attempts to persuade members of minority groups to emigrate have turned violent, at times even genocidal. Recent ethnic cleansings in Bosnia and Kosovo are the latest examples of recurring ethnic cleansings of Muslims in the Balkans dating back to the mid-nineteenth century[8].

For most of the twentieth century, Bulgarian ideologues have used essentialist notions in their attempt to create a homogenized nation: that everyone in Bulgaria should belong to one nation, with one language, one religion, and one set of cultural traditions. The Bulgarian nation was imagined to have been formed during the ninth and tenth centuries from a blending of Slavs, Thracians, and Asiatic tribes and to have remained 'pure' since its formation. There is no reliable historical evidence to support the claim that Bulgarian ethnogenesis was completed by the end of the tenth century. We can not even speak of a fully formed Bulgarian identity at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless lack of evidence did not stop many Bulgarian scholars from

[6] Petŭr Koledarov and Nikolaj Mičev provide a comprehensive list of place names that were changed between 1878 and 1987 (Petŭr Koledarov and Nikolaj Mičev, *Promenite v Imenata i Statuta na Selištata v Bŭlgaria*, 1878-1972 (Nauka i Izkustvo, Sofia, 1973; Nikolaj Mičev and Petŭr Koledarov, *Rečnik na Selištata: Selištnite Imena v Bŭlgaria, 1878-1987* (Nauka i Izkustvo, Sofia,1989).

[7] Between 1985 and 1989 the Bulgarian government maintained that there were no Turks in Bulgaria. According to government officials, Bulgaria had achieved a historic reunification of all Bulgarian citizens into a single Bulgarian nation.

[8] Justin McCarthy, *Death and Exile: The Ethnic Cleansing of Ottoman Muslims*, 1821-1922 (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995).

insisting on the ancient origins of the Bulgarian nation.

Two defining characteristics of this nation were the Bulgarian language and Orthodox Christianity. Although it was possible to impose a different religious identity (Islam) or a different language and ethnic identity (Turkish) on the members of this imagined nation, deep down they remained Bulgarians. State policies could help these people to recover their Bulgarian identity so that the Muslim Bulgarians (Pomaks) would once again have Bulgarian names, give up their Islamic beliefs and practices, replace them with Christian beliefs and practices (pre-1944 and post-1989), or under communism, replace their Islamic beliefs and practices with Bulgarian 'socialist' ones.[9] To change the ethnic and religious consciousness of Pomaks, Turks, and Roma (Gypsy) Muslims, Bulgarian governments launched several campaigns of assimilation against these populations during the twentieth century.[10]

This article assumes that claims to a particular identity are malleable, open to modification, reformulation and replacement "within the context of opportunity, constraint and power"[11]. Identities are socially constructed through performance, political struggle and compromise. They may be used as strategies by which to adapt to a variety of social situations and to produce and support effective self-concepts. The durability of an identity is therefore contingent upon its ability to provide security, social status, and economic benefits for its members. If there are more attractive alternatives, then individuals may take advantage of these alternatives by modifying, even changing, their identity.

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[9] Mary Neuburger provides a detailed discussion of state policies aimed at management, modification or elimination of markers of identity between Pomaks and Bulgarians in order to create a unified Bulgarian nation and to validate Bulgaria's claim to modernity and Europeanness and to cast off the orientalist label which Bulgarians felt had been unfairly imposed on them by the West (Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2004).

[10] In the 1980s, the essentialist notion that 'Once a Bulgarian, always a Bulgarian,' was extended to the members of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. On the grounds that they had once been Bulgarians who had been forced to convert to Islam by the Ottomans, they were forced to replace their Turkish names with Bulgarian ones, prohibited from speaking Turkish in public, pressured to give up their cultural and religious practices or replace them with 'socialist' ones. A campaign was launched to eradicate most reminders of Ottoman architectural presence from the Bulgarian landscape. No credible claims could be made about the Bulgarian origins of the Gypsies (Roma). Consequently, the word 'Gypsy' disappeared from official discourse. In large cities such as Sofia, Gypsy neighborhoods were surrounded by high walls to shield them from the eyes of tourists and diplomats.

[11] Bette Denich, "Unmaking Multi-ethnicity in Yugoslavia: Metamorphosis Observed", 11 The *Anthropology of East Europe Review* (1993), 44.

How do members of minority communities respond to attempts by government officials or outsiders who try to manipulate their identity? This article focuses on Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) in Bulgaria and examines the strategies they have used in response to pressures from the government as well as pressures from their Bulgarian and Turkish neighbours to alter their identity.[12]

Hugh Poulton defines Pomaks as "Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, but whose religion and customs are Islamic"[13]. People who have no ideological axe to grind generally agree with this definition. In Bulgaria, Pomaks represent one of three major Muslim groups. The other two are Turkish and Roma Muslims. According to the results of the 2001 census, there were 996,978 Muslims in Bulgaria, making up 12.2% of the Bulgarian population. Muslims were concentrated in the southeastern and northeastern regions of the country. The 2001 census results show that Muslims were in the majority in two districts: in Kŭrdžali in southeastern Bulgaria with 69.6% and in Razgrad, northeastern Bulgaria, with 53.7% of the district population. In the districts of Tŭrgovište, Smoljan, Sliven, Šumen, Blagoevgrad, Ruse, Burgas, Pazardžik, and Xaskovo, Muslims made up more than 10% of the population (Table 1). Out of 262 municipalities in the country Muslims were in the majority in 43 municipalities. Between the 1992 and 2001 censuses the number of Muslims in Bulgaria declined by 143,317, from 1,110,295 in 1992 to 966,978 8 in 2001. This decline was largely due to emigration to Turkey and other countries in search of jobs and a better life. The greatest decline in the number of Muslims occurred in the district of Smoljan, a predominantly Pomak district, from 87,834 or 55% of the district population in 1992, to 58,758 or 41.9% in 2001[14]. This decline can be attributed not only to emigration but also to the considerable success of Christian missionaries in converting Pomaks to Orthodox and other branches of Christianity since 1989. The success of

[12] Although the word 'Pomak' has negative connotations, Pomak *(Pomaci*), or Bulgarian Mohamedans (*Bŭlgaro-Moxamedani, Bŭlgaromoxamedani*) are the most frequently used ascriptive designations by scholars and journalists. Their Turkish and Bulgarian neighbors also used the word 'Pomak' in referring to this population. Kamen Burov, the founder of a Pomak party in 1993, the Democratic Labor Party, in an attempt to free the word 'Pomak' from its negative connotations, has lobbied for the recognition of a Pomak ethnic minority in Bulgaria. To date, his party and his ideas have gained few followers among the Pomak population. Most Pomaks prefer 'Mohamedans *(Moxamedani*) or 'Muslims' (*Mjuslumani*) as self-ascriptive terms. However, there is no consensus on these terms either. Depending on the situation, they may identify themselves as Pomaks, Muslims, Bulgarians, Turks, etc.

[13] Hugh Poulton, *The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict* (Minority Rights Group Publications, London, New ed. 1993), 111.

[14] Nacionalen Statističeski Institut, *Demografska Xarakteristika na Bŭlgarija (rezultati ot 2% izvadka). Prebrojavane na Naselenieto i Žilištnija Fond kŭm 4 Dekemvri 1992 g. Sofia* (Sofia, 1993); National Statistical Institute, Census 2001 – Final Results. Available at, www.nsi.bg/census_e/census_e.htm, Access date: July 1, 2007.

missionaries representing evangelical Protestant denominations in converting Pomaks and Gypsies is indicated in almost doubling the numbers of Protestants in Bulgaria between 1989 and 2001. Protestants are the only group that increased in number during this time.

The Pomaks live in compact settlements in the central and western Rhodope Mountains of southern Bulgaria, from the Mesta River Valley in the west to the Xaskovo-Kŭrdžali line in the east, in Western Thrace of northern Greece, throughout Macedonia, eastern Albania and in Turkey. Estimating the number of Pomaks in these countries is difficult because in national censuses they have been counted either as members of the majority ethnic group or under the general category of Muslims.[15] In Bulgaria, estimates provided by knowledgeable scholars vary from a low of 80,000 to a high of 269,000[16] . Other estimates fall between these numbers. In the 1992 census, some 164,000 Muslims identified their mother tongue as Bulgarian. However, the ethnic identity of these Bulgarian-speaking Muslims was problematic, some identifying themselves as Bulgarians, others as Bulgarian Muslims, and still others as Turks. According to the census results of 2001, 131,531 ethnic Bulgarians choose their religious affiliation as Muslim (NSI, Census, 2001). The number of Pomaks in Greece and Macedonia has been estimated at around 40,000 and in Albania at between 80,000 and 120,000[17]. In Turkey Pomaks have largely been assimilated into the majority culture.

The unofficial 1989 statistics of the Ministry of the Interior and local officials provide a good illustration of the territorial distribution of the Pomak population in Bulgaria (Table 2). The great majority lived in the Rhodopes, primarily in the districts of Smoljan and Kŭrdžali, in the Mesta River Valley of the district of Blagoevgrad, and in the southern mountain regions of the district of

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[15] Prior to the 1992 census in Bulgaria there was heated debate over the inclusion of questions on ethnic affiliation, mother tongue, and religious affiliation on census forms. Results of the census also proved controversial. Nationalist groups claimed that over 25,000 Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) in the municipalities of Jakoruda, Satovča, Gŭrmen, and Goce Delčev have been pressured by the representatives of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms to declare their ethnic affiliation as Turkish (Rada Nikolaev, "Bulgaria's 1992 Census: results, problems, and implications", 2 RFE/RL Research Reports (1993), 60. A parliamentary commission assigned to investigate the matter found no evidence of pressure on Pomaks to declare their ethnic affiliation one way or another. Nevertheless, in 1993 a legislative commission decided to annul the census results on ethnic criteria for the Jakoruda and Goce Delčev municipalities on the grounds that the people in question were Bulgarians, not Turks. When the final results of the 1992 census were published in 1994, the number of Turks in Bulgaria was revised downward (Nacionalen Statističeski Institut, 1993, 1994).

[16] Nikolaj Vrančev, *Bŭlgari Moxamedani (Pomaci)* (Biblioteka Bŭlgarski Narod, Sofia, 1948, 17; Yulian Konstantinov, Gulbrand Alhaug, and Birgit Igla, "Names of the Bulgarian Pomaks", 17 *Nordlyd: Tromso University Working Papers on Language and Linguistics* (1991), 103-105.

[17] Mario Apostolov, "The Pomaks: A Religious Minority in the Balkans", 24 *Nationalities Papers* (1996), 728-729.

Pazardžik. In 1989 they constituted the majority of the population only in the district of Smoljan with over 70%. Since then, their numbers in this district have steadily declined to 55% in 1992 and to 41.9% in 2001, primarily due to migration and conversion to Christianity.

In addition to the Rhodopes region there were small groups of Pomaks living in the villages of Galata, Glogovo, Gradešnitsa and Babinci of the Loveč-Teteven region north of the Balkan range[18]. A smaller group inhabits several villages near the towns of Elena, Zlataritsa, and Veliko Tŭrnovo. These groups represent Pomaks and their descendants who were removed from their villages near the Bulgarian-Greek border by the Ministry of Internal Affairs between 1948 and 1951 and resettled in northern Bulgaria.[19] There are scattered Pomak enclaves in the districts of Burgas, Šumen, Razgrad, Tŭrgovište, and Stara Zagora in areas of compact Turkish settlement.

Traditionally, in Bulgaria, the Pomaks were stockbreeders and agriculturalists. Under communist rule the transhumant nomads were settled down and many came to specialize in tobacco farming and in construction and mining trades as the state undertook an aggressive industrialization program. Today, with the collapse of the construction and mining sectors of the economy in the Rhodopes, a process of deindustrialization is under way, forcing some Pomaks back to traditional agriculture and stock breeding, while many are leaving their villages in search of jobs elsewhere, including abroad.

Historically, Bulgaria, Greece, and Turkey have contested the identity of Pomaks, each country claiming them as their own. Greek historians consider the Pomaks as the descendants of ancient Thracian tribes who, over the centuries "were Hellenized, Latinized (Romanized), Slavicized, Christianized, and were converted to Islam"[20]. Greek historians have also pointed to some ancient Greek words preserved in their language as proof of their Hellenic origin, while conveniently forgetting that today they speak a dialect of Bulgarian, which contains many Turkish words.

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[18] Bernard Lory, "Une communaute musulmane oubliee: les Pomaks de Lovec", 19 *Turcica : Revue d'Etudes Turques* (1987), 117.

[19] After World War II, the communist government wanted to secure the Bulgarian-Greek border by removing what it considered to be troublesome villagers from the border area to the interior of the country. After the establishment of the Greek-Bulgarian frontier following the Balkan Wars, sheep herders in border areas had continued to move across the border with their flocks during their seasonal migrations; relatives who had been separated by the border also continued to cross the border for visits. Pomaks living close to the border were accused of espionage and sabotage, and of being unreliable people. Communist authorities felt it was necessary to resettle these suspect people in the interior of the country in order to maintain the integrity of the frontier.

[20] Tatjana Seyppel, "The Pomaks of Northeastern Greece: an endangered Balkan population", 10 *Journal of Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* (1989), 42.

Greeks along with Bulgarians also point out to their physical features, predominance of fair skin and blue eyes, as proof of their Greek or Bulgarian origin.

Most Bulgarian scholars have mainly used linguistic evidence to claim them as their own. Since Pomaks speak a Bulgarian dialect with numerous ancient Bulgarian constructions, it is argued that they must be of Bulgarian origin. They are Muslim today only because they were forced to convert to Islam sometime during the seventeenth century. Bulgarian scholars have also pointed to what they call 'Christian' and 'pre-Christian' features in their culture to support the Bulgarian/Christian origin of this population[21].

Turkish scholars have dispensed with linguistic and cultural arguments and have emphasized the religious affiliation of Pomaks. They are Muslims; therefore they must be of Turkish origin. These scholars trace the origins of Pomaks to the descendants of various Turkic peoples who had settled in the Balkans and had converted to Islam long before the Ottoman conquests in the area. When Ottoman conquerors started moving into the Balkans beginning in the mid-fourteenth century they found a sympathetic Muslim population ready and willing to help them. For this their Bulgarian Christian neighbours called them 'pomagač' or 'helper' or collaborator' (of the Turks). This word was later shortened to 'Pomak.'[22] Thus, according to Turkish scholars, Pomaks and Turks are not only related by religion, but Pomaks are 'pure-blooded' Turks, representing the oldest Turkish population in Europe[23].

Even though in Bulgaria linguistic evidence was used to support the Bulgarian origin of Pomaks, for decades after Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule in 1878, the Pomaks were alienated and marginalized. The new nation-state made no effort to integrate the Pomaks into Bulgarian society. Instead, Pomaks were treated as part of the larger Muslim group in the country. In early censuses they were identified as Turks, encouraged to emigrate to Turkey, or to assimilate into the Bulgarian majority by converting to Orthodox Christianity. It was only during the 1920s, and especially the 1930s, that Pomaks were officially identified as Bulgarians and "a sustained campaign began in the press urging public opinion to discriminate between religious and ethnic

[21] Carol Silverman, "Pomaks", in R. Weekes (ed.) *Moslem Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey* (Greenwood Press, Westport, 2.ed. 1989), 614.
[22] Maria Todorova provides additional probable derivations of the word 'Pomak' as well as other designations used by non-Pomaks to describe this population (Todorova, 1998, p.p. 480-481).
[23] Seyppel, *The Pomaks*…, 43; See especially Hüseyin Memişoğlu, Pages of the History of Pomak Turks (H. Memişoğlu, Ankara, 1991); Hüseyin Memişoğlu, Balkanlarda Pomak Türkleri: Türk Dünvasi Araştirmalari Vakfi (Istanbul, 1999).

allegiance and to accept Pomaks as part of the Bulgarian nation"[24]. The distinction between religious and ethnic allegiance, and the acceptance of Pomaks as part of the Bulgarian nation was slow in coming. Čičovski, writing about Pomaks in 1934, accuses the Bulgarian authorities of not being able "to make a difference between Turks and Bulgarian Mohammedans. We regard them as Turks because of their religion and often hate them. We persecute them. In their willingness to buy their property for nothing, crafty speculators make every effort to fan our hatred towards them, to discredit them so as to achieve their emigration"[25].

A relatively successful effort to replace, or at least subordinate, Ottoman derived dominant religious identity among Pomaks by a language-based identity promoted by the Bulgarian nation-state was undertaken by the Rodina (Motherland) movement during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Between 1937 and 1944, it "introduced Bulgarian language worship in the mosques, translated the *Qur'an* into Bulgarian, created a Bulgarian Muslim establishment separate from the Turkish, and promoted the creation of a local elite by enrolling Bulgarian Muslims into secondary and higher education establishments"[26]. Unfortunately, this program to promote Bulgarian ethnic/national consciousness among Pomaks also involved efforts to eliminate the wearing of traditional clothes, especially by Pomak women, and changing the Muslim names of Pomaks to Bulgarian. Between 1942 and 1944 some two-thirds of Pomaks living in the central Rhodopes changed their names. The questionable tactics used in these efforts generated considerable resistance toward the Rodina movement. When the Communist party came to power in Bulgaria after World War II, Rodina was branded as a reactionary nationalist organization and dissolved. The Muslim names of Pomaks were restored by 1945. Unfortunately for the Pomaks, the communist regime would resort to the same questionable tactics and worse in its efforts to assimilate them into the majority population during the 1960s and 1970s.

Depending on the ideology of political leaders, at times the Pomaks have been allowed to maintain their religious identity unhindered, while at other times authorities have attempted to assimilate them into the majority Bulgarian culture by forcing them to replace their Muslim names with Bulgarian names, renounce their Islamic faith and convert to Christianity. Four times

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[24] Maria Todorova, "Identity (trans)formation among Pomaks in Bulgaria", in Beverly Crawford and Ronnie D. Lipschutz (eds.) *The Myth of 'Ethnic Conflict': Politics, Economics and 'Cultural' Violence* (University of California International and Area Studies Digital Collection, 1998), 476.
[25] Cited in Krastjo Mancev, "National Problem in the Balkans until the Second World War", in Krastjo Mancev, Zhortheta Chakuorva and Boby Bobev (eds.*) National Problems in the Balkans* (Arges Publishing House, Sofia, 1992), 37.
[26] Todorova, "Identity (transformation)"…, 476

during the twentieth century (1912, 1942, 1962, and 1971-74) they were forced to change their names, and four times (1913, 1945, 1964 [partial restoration], and 1990), they were allowed to reclaim their Muslim names[27]. The name changing campaigns of 1912 and 1942 were also marked by intense Bulgarian Orthodox missionary pressure to convert them to Christianity. Similar pressures reemerged after the fall of communism. This time, in addition to Orthodox missionaries, every imaginable Christian group has entered the fray to save Pomak souls.[28]

After World War II the Bulgarian origin of Pomaks gained official support. Now they were considered Bulgarians, "flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood" of the Bulgarian nation. Many Bulgarian scholars and ideologues insisted that Pomaks were Bulgarians, not only because they spoke Bulgarian but also because they were said to have preserved Bulgarian language and culture in a 'purer' form and substance than other Bulgarians[29]. Therefore, they should have Bulgarian names and replace their Islamic beliefs and practices with socialist beliefs and practices. They are Muslim today, they insisted, only because they were forced to convert to Islam by Ottoman Turks. Bulgarian scholars generally ignored the ideas of Pomaks themselves about their origins and history. The Pomaks have had to react to externally imposed notions about their identity and history, notions that have changed according to the whims of different governments in power over the years.

After 1948, repeated attempts were made "to induce Pomaks to change their names, renounce their faith and become integrated into the socialist Bulgarian state"[30]. Some Pomaks, who resisted the initial campaign (1948-1952), were resettled to other areas of Bulgaria, far away from their natal communities. As Pomaks came under increasing assimilatory pressure, many among them began to identify themselves as Turks in an attempt to preserve their Muslim identity. The government saw this 'Turkification' process as a mortal danger to their goal of establishing a single-nation state. After the April 1956 Plenum of the Communist Party, steps were taken to counteract this alarming trend among Pomaks (as well as Roma Muslims and Tatars). The

[27] Yulian Konstantinov, "An Account of Pomak Conversions (1912-1990)", in Gerhard Seewann (ed.) *Minderheitenfragen in Südosteuropa* (Südost-Institut, R. Oldenburg Verlag, München 1992).
[28]Some in Bulgaria have long argued that complete blending of Pomaks with the Bulgarian majority is only possible by eliminating the existing religious barrier between them, that is, by converting Bulgarian Muslims to Orthodox Christianity. Father Sariev, the leader of a grassroots Christianization movement in the central Rhodopes, claims to have converted at least 50,000 Bulgarian Muslims to Orthodox Christianity during the mid-1990s (Todorova, 1998, 483). According to Father Sariev, the return of Pomaks to their 'native' Bulgarian faith would complete the process of Pomak 'reunification' with the Bulgarian nation.
[29] Seyppel, *The Pomaks*…, 42.
[30] Poulton, *The Balkans*…, 111.

Politburo charged the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences (BAS) to undertake wide-ranging studies to discover "the historical truth about the results of the assimilation policies of the Turkish oppressors, about the mass and individual conversions to Islam"[31]. An interdisciplinary expedition was organized by the BAS and sent to the Rhodopes to study the historic past of Pomaks and to establish their Bulgarian origins. The findings of this expedition were published in 1958[32].

In April 1962 the Politburo approved "Measures Against the Self-Identification of Gypsies, Tatars, and Bulgarians Professing the Mohamedan Religion." These 'Measures' included expediting change of names from Turko-Arabic to Bulgarian; making sure that Pomak children are taught only in Bulgarian, avoiding the appointment of Turkish teachers in schools in which Pomak students predominated, not assigning Pomak and Turkish children to the same hostels or study groups, not appointing Turkish clergymen to Pomak villages, and so on[33].

Soon afterward, part of the Pomak population was forced to replace their Muslim names with Bulgarian ones and pressured to give up their Muslim beliefs and practices. Resistance to the assimilation campaign was brutally put down. On 12 May 1964, the Politburo issued a directive entitled "Work among the Bulgarian Mohamedan Population in the Blagoevgrad District and its Abuses." This directive strongly condemned the over-zealousness of local party officials in carrying out the name-changing campaign and the Muslim names of Pomaks were partially restored. However, several years later, on 17 July 1970, the Politburo again reconfirmed the necessity of "changing Turkish-Arab names and dress" of the Bulgarian Muslim population[34]. This directive was carried out between 1971 and 1973 when all of the Pomaks were forced to adopt Bulgarian names. The official explanation was that "the Bulgarian Mohamedan (the prescribed reference to the Pomak) was given the opportunity to regain his/her original Bulgarian identity. The Mohamedan was expected to embrace that chance with gratitude and henceforth proceed in life as a member of the Bulgarian community"[35]. During the campaign, scores were killed, hundreds were arrested and sentenced to long years of hard labour. It was only after 1989

[31] Theodore Zang and Lois Whitman, "Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Gypsies of Bulgaria", *Helsinki Watch* (Human Rights Watch, New York 1991), 72-73.
[32] Bŭlgarska Akademija na Naukite, *Iz Minaloto na Bŭlgarite Moxamedani v Rodopite* (Sofia, 1958).
[33] Zang and Whitman, "Destroying Ethnic Identity"…, 72-73.
[34] Kiril Kertikov, "The ethnic nationality problem in Bulgaria (1944-1991)", 1 *Bulgarian Quarterly* (1991), 83-84.
[35] Konstantinov, Alhaug and Igla, "Names of the"…, 24-25.

that the Pomaks would once more be allowed to freely choose their names.

The emphasis on changing the names of Pomaks and other Muslims and the extraordinary steps taken to accomplish it make sense within the Balkan context. As Neuburger has observed,

> In the Balkan context, where there is no visible racial/color difference between Christian and Muslim, names are one of the primary indicators of ethno-religious affiliation. Names, like the turban, fez and veil, are obtrusive markers of Muslim belonging. . . As with Muslim-style dress, Turco-Arabic names became explicit targets of twentieth century Bulgarian crusades to control their Muslim provinces and, ultimately, to remake Muslims in their own image. . . In turn, Muslim attachment to names ran as deep as the Bulgarian fixation with changing them[36].

For the Pomaks the consequences of these name-changing crusades have been profound. As Tatjana Seypel has noted, several name-changing campaigns "have driven the Pomaks into a state of confusion in respect to their identity. The question put to them: 'Who are you?' forces them to all kinds of reactions, to taking this or that position . . . to either resistance or opportunism, depending on the assumed purpose of the question or the questioner"[37]. Yulian Konstantinov *et al*. have noted that, because of several historic 'interruptions' in their lives during the twentieth century, it is almost "impossible to penetrate into Pomak identity and its way of thinking . . . When they are asked as to their identity, Pomaks practically always tend to hesitate. Some people prefer to utter the word 'Pomak' only in a subdued manner, just like the word 'Gypsy' or 'Jew' elsewhere"[38]. While Bulgarians answer questions about their identity in an unambiguous and straightforward fashion, Pomaks always hesitate. Konstantinov *et al*. find a two level identity structure among Pomaks, a religious orientation level and an ethnic orientation level (see Figure 1)[39]. Which of these levels will be activated at any given time depends on social context.

According to Konstantinov *et al*., "In formal, out-group contexts -- such as an official

[36] Neuburger, *The Orient Within*…, 143.
[37] Seyppel, *The Pomaks*…, 43.
[38] Konstantinov, Alhaug and Igla, "Names of the"…, 46.
[39] Konstantinov, Alhaug and Igla, "Names of the"…, 27.

FIGURE 1. TWO-LEVEL IDENTITY STRUCTURE AMONG POMAKS

	POMAKS	TURKS	BULGARIANS
First (Islamic) level	Pomak = Muslim	Turk = Muslim	Bulgarian = non-Muslim
Second (ethnic) level	Pomak = 'not pure' Turk	Turk	Bulgarian

discussion of identity problems at a meeting, when reading and discussing what the papers report about the issue, or in conversation with Bulgarians -- the religious level seems to be activated"[40]. Traditionally, Pomaks have found it difficult to identify themselves as Bulgarians, because, as the figure above suggests, being Bulgarian implies that Pomaks are not Muslim.[41] "An 'ethnic' interpretation of the identity issue is only possible therefore in an in-group context of discussion, but even then, it has to be borne in mind, a popular description such as 'not pure Turk' does not automatically lead to identifying with the Bulgarian majority."[42] The Bulgarian and Turkish neighbours of Pomaks have their own notions about Pomak identity, notions that are not helpful to Pomaks at all. As Magdalena Elchinova has noted, "Christians say: 'Yes, they are Bulgarians but not exactly.' Turks state: 'Pomaks are Muslims but not as true as we are.' So an existential question for the Pomaks becomes 'Then who and what are we?'"[43].

Other authors suggest that Pomak identity is indeed more complex than the above. According to Mario Apostolov, there are three or more levels of Pomak identity: "a Pomak as a member of a small community, a Muslim as a member of a universal Islamic community, the *umma*, or a Bulgarian on the basis of his language or citizenship if he lives in Bulgaria . . . On another level one may demonstrate Turkish, Albanian or Macedonian identity which may not correspond to the

[40] *Ibid*.
[41] This is due to the persistence among Pomaks of *millet* consciousness from Ottoman times where religion was the most important source of personal identity. Among Bulgarians. on the other hand, *millet* consciousness was replaced by national or ethnic consciousness during the period of national revival and struggle for independence against Ottoman rule during the nineteenth century.
[42] See footnote 39; The self-ascriptive designation 'not pure Turk' refers to individuals who claim to be ethnically Turkish but speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue. However, they insist that their ancestors spoke Turkish as their mother tongue before the areas where they lived were incorporated into Bulgaria in 1912. Once part of Bulgaria they were required to speak Bulgarian only.
[43] Magdalena Elchinova, "Ethnic disourse and group presentation in modern Bulgaria", 30 *Development and Society* (2001), 73-74.
Available at, www.iea.pmf.ukim.edu.mk/EAZ/EAZ_00/elchinova_angl_EAZ_00.pdf.
Access date: June 30, 2007.

linguistic one"[44]. Evangelos Karagiannis identifies six options of identity that Pomaks may exercise depending on the situation. These include three assimilation options: Christian Bulgarian, secular Bulgarian, secular Pomak, and three dissimilation options: Bulgarian Mohammedan, Muslim Pomak, and Turkish[45]. More recently another option has emerged among the Pomak population as Pomak cultural identity has become politicized, a political Pomak option. As Karagiannis has written, "such a political articulation may not be connected with a specific ethnic self-perception, but, due to its integrating demand as well as its attempt to remove Pomak ethnicity from its position of marginality, and place the Pomak issue on the political agenda, is worthy of separate contemplation."[46] Today the mobilization of the Pomak population for political action stresses not identity issues but economic concerns that they share with other minority populations. If a group/party is perceived to be strong and as having financial backing from outside of Bulgaria, Pomaks may not only support such a group/party politically but may also modify or change their identity to that of the members of the group/party they support.

Notions of Pomak identity are also influenced by the identity of their neighbours. Tomova has written that "In the Western Rhodopes, where Bulgarian Muslims live among Bulgarian Christians, they refer to themselves as Turks; in the Eastern Rhodopes, where they are surrounded by Turks, they stress their identity as Bulgarians"[47]. When Pomaks who don't speak Turkish but claim Turkish identity are pressed to explain, they invoke their own version of their history, which is at odds with the official version. This parochial version is based partly on myths and partly on historical truth and goes something like this:

> The Pomaks lived for centuries in the Rhodopes and Southern Thrace. When the Bulgarians overran those regions in 1912 [the First Balkan War] their Bulgarian priests made us give up our language [Turkish] and [Turco-Arabic] names, but we did not give up our religion. The Bulgarians have been trying to do that ever since, but with no success[48].

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[44] Apostolov, *The Pomaks*…, 729-730.
[45] Evangelos Karagiannis, "An Introduction to the Pomak Issue in Bulgaria", 2 *In and Out of the Collective, Papers on Former Soviet Bloc rural Communities* (1999), 10.
Available at, www.ethno.unizh.ch/pdf/Karagiannis/Introduction_Pomak_Issue_Bulgaria.pdf.
Access date: July 21, 2007.
[46] *Ibid*.
[47] Cited in Stephen Lewis, "Muslims in Bulgaria", 45 *Aramco World* (1994), 27.
[48] Konstantinov, Alhaug and Igla, "Names of the"…, 28.

Or they may assert that the language a person speaks does not necessarily predict the ethnic identity of a person or his/her descendants. Moreover, what is important for Muslims, they say, is not the language they speak but their Islamic faith. Regardless of their ethnic background, they are all Muslims and there are no differences between Muslims.

There is much more behind the choice of Turkish ethnicity by some Pomaks than the claim that they were once Turkish speakers; that Bulgarian language was imposed on them by Bulgarian authorities when their villages were incorporated into Bulgaria after the Balkan wars. The main premise of this article is that people choose between alternative identities in terms of the extent to which a particular identity serves the practical needs and interests of the individuals or groups. Some Pomaks, by choosing Turkish ethnic identity, make an emphatic statement that, even though they speak Bulgarian, they are not ethnically Bulgarian. This is a response to the kind of negative treatment they have received at the hands of Bulgarians in the past and an attempt to avoid similar treatment in the future. Moreover, choosing Turkish ethnic identity makes them members of the largest minority community in the country, whose interests are represented by a powerful political party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), with representatives in Parliament.[49] The support of the MRF among Pomaks who identify themselves as Turks is also based on the perception that the MRF, with the help of Turkey, is in a position to solve their economic and social problems. Of course, those who claim Turkish identity comply with the provisions of the emigration agreement with Turkey. Emigration to Turkey can be a safety valve for Pomaks with Turkish ethnic identity.

These Pomaks, by choosing Turkish identity, are trying to escape or transcend one version of history, nationality, and language imposed on them by the majority by insisting that identities are created as much as they are inherited; that identities are not primordial, carried in the 'blood,' but can be consciously chosen. As Michael Ignatieff has noted, however, for most people it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the ties of nationality, religion and language. They have to struggle against identities chosen mostly by powerful others with all of the attendant

[49] In all national elections since 1989 the MRF has been quite successful in electing representatives to the National Assembly, establishing itself as the third political force in the country. In the last national elections held in 2005, MRF registered its greatest success so far, electing 34 representatives (out of 240) to parliament. It joined a coalition government with the Bulgarian Socialist Party and the National Movement Simeon II, and secured important ministerial positions in the government. MRF was an official coalition partner in the previous government as well. Officially the MRF represents the interests of all minorities in Bulgaria, not just Turks or Muslims. However, the membership of the Party, its leadership, and the candidates it fields in elections are predominantly Turkish. Turkish speakers vote in far larger numbers for MRF candidates than do Pomaks or Roma (Gypsy) Muslims.

psychological trauma that such a struggle involves[50].

According to Lewis,

> Despite the strength of their beliefs, Bulgarian [-speaking] Muslims are caught between two worlds - that of the Bulgarian Christians to whom they are related linguistically and that of their ethnic Turkish fellow Muslims. To complicate matters further, the arrival in the Rhodopes of Muslim teachers from Turkey, North Africa, and the Middle East [after 1989] gnaws away at local custom even while strengthening the religious identification of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims[51].

Some Pomaks, in an attempt to support an identity separate from both Bulgarian and Turkish, have resurrected myths of their own ancient origins. One such myth is that they are the descendants of ancient Thracians who converted to Islam during the seventh and eight centuries as a protection against Bulgarian attempts to Slavicize them and Byzantine attempts to Christianize them. Muslim religious workers from Arab countries especially targeted the Pomak population during the 1990s. Under their influence another version of Pomak origins has gained increasing acceptance among some segments of the Pomak population. According to this version "the Pomaks are not Slavs and converted to Islam during the century immediately following the death of Prophet Mohammed"[52] or they are the descendants of Syrian Arabs who were relocated to southeastern Europe and settled in the Rhodopes during the wars between the Byzantine Empire and the Caliphate during the eighth century. These scenarios contain some grains of truth. It was common practice by rulers of multiethnic empires, for political and/or strategic reasons, to relocate populations from one area of the empire to another. The Byzantines resettled Arabs from Syria into what is today Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire resettled Yoruks, Tatars and Turkomans from Anatolia to the Balkans[53]. However, there is no evidence linking contemporary Pomak populations directly to Arabs, Yoruks, Tatars, Turkomans, Cumans or any other non-Slavic group. Nevertheless, lack of concrete evidence does not prevent a group from imagining a

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[50] Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience* (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 1997), 166 ff.
[51] Lewis, "Muslims in"..., 27..
[52] Kristen Ghodsee, "Religious freedoms and Islamic revivalism: some contradiction of American foreign policy in Southeast Europe", *East European Studies News* (May-June 2007), 5.
[53] Tayyib Gökbilgin, Rumeli Yürükler, Tatarlar ve Evlad-ı Fatihan, "Istanbul: Osman Yalçın Matbaası" (1957).

genealogy and a history to support a claim for a particular identity. This is especially the case for groups such as the Pomaks in Bulgaria where two powerful groups, the Bulgarians and the Turks, claim them as their own. In each of the above scenarios the Pomaks are claiming an ancestry that predates the history of Orthodox Bulgarians and Turkish Muslims on the Balkan Peninsula in an attempt to support an identity separate from both Bulgarians and Turks. Unfortunately, to the consternation of Pomaks, these attempts to claim a separate identity are met with ridicule by Bulgarians and Turks alike.

After the downfall of communism in Bulgaria in late 1989 there was hope that Pomaks, along with other minorities, would be allowed to freely construct their own identities according to their own wishes. All Muslims were allowed to reclaim their Muslim names after 1989 and the new constitution adopted in 1991 granted all citizens broad rights regardless of ethnic, religious, and linguistic background (Sofia Press Agency, 1991). Unfortunately since 1989 the pressures on Pomaks to change or modify their ethnic and religious identity have increased. While under communism they had to contend only with arbitrary police coercion, today they must respond to assaults upon their identity from several sources -- the parliament, the Directorate of Religious Affairs, political parties, official and unofficial nationalist organizations, Muslim and Christian missionaries, various cults, Turks and Bulgarians. These outside forces are all trying to impose their own notions of who the Pomaks are. None of these groups are willing to accept Pomak self-definitions of who they are.

Many Pomaks have not been able to develop effective strategies to counteract these forces. They have reacted to the restoration of their Muslim names after 1989 with mistrust and ambivalence. Some have maintained the Bulgarian names imposed on them by the Živkov regime. Many Pomak women have insisted on keeping their Bulgarian names because they consider having Muslim names a sign of low status and a target for discrimination. Many young Pomaks have also chosen to keep their Bulgarian names, creating serious generational conflicts within Pomak families. Others have converted to Orthodox and other branches of Christianity in an attempt to avoid any future pressures upon their identity.

Several campaigns by Bulgarian governments to assimilate Pomaks into the Bulgarian majority through coercive tactics have forced Pomaks to develop multiple identities to cope with changing circumstances. Unfortunately, most of these identities are contested by other Pomaks, by their Bulgarian and Turkish neighbours, by nationalist organizations, and by state authorities. The

unwillingness of others to take Pomak claims seriously has led to increasing confusion, insecurity, frustration, conflict, and alienation for many Pomaks in Bulgaria.

APPENDIX

Table 1. Territorial Distribution of Muslims in Bulgaria: 2001 Census

District	District pop.	# of Muslims	Percent
Blagoevgrad	341,173	62,431	18.3
Burgas	423,547	64,568	15.2
Varna	462,013	45,672	9.9
Veliko Tŭrnovo	293,172	26,085	8.9
Vidin	130,074	139	0.1
Vraca	243,036	4,223	1.7
Gabrovo	144,125	8,860	6.1
Dobrič	215,217	44,277	20.6
Jambol	156,070	13,700	8.8
Kŭrdžali	164,019	114,217	69.6
Kjustendil	162,534	231	0.1
Loveč	169,951	10,501	6.2
Montana	182,258	283	0.1
Pazardžik	310,723	46,338	14.9
Pernik	149,832	178	0.1
Pleven	311,985	15,681	5.0
Plovdiv	715,816	62,595	8.7
Razgrad	152,417	81,835	53.7
Ruse	266,157	41,997	15.8
Silistra	142,000	54,174	38.1
Sliven	218,874	21,668	9.9
Smoljan	140,066	58,758	41.9
Sofia City	1,170,842	8,614	0.7
Sofia	273,240	3,348	1.0
Stara Zagora	370,615	21,423	5.8
Šumen	204,378	72,544	35.5
Tŭrgovište	137,689	58,838	42.7
Xaskovo	277,478	33,780	12.2
Totals:	7,928,901	966,978	12.2

Source: National Statistical Institute, at www.nsi.bg/census_e/census_e.htm

Table 2. Territorial Distribution of the Pomak Population around January 1, 1989

Regions/ districts	Total population	Pomaks	**Regions**/ districts	Total Population	Pomaks
Sofia City	1,199,405	55	**Mihajlovgrad**	677,521	40
Sofia	1,016,346	56,262	**(Montana)**		
Blagoevgrad	346,266	56,191	Vidin	166,388	--
Kjustendil	190,410	14	Vraca	287,841	40
Pernik	174,419	16	Mihajlovgrad	223,292	--
Sofia	305,351	41	**Plovdiv**	1,244,931	153,484
Burgas	892,547	3,332	Pazardžik	326,315	29256
Burgas	449,314	3,330	Plovdiv	754,393	7,089
Sliven	239,429	2	Smoljan	164,223	117,139
Jambol	203,754	--	**Razgrad**	847,669	6,947
Varna	976,788	1,642	Razgrad	198,007	2,897
Varna	464,701	20	Ruse	304,443	865
Tolbuhin (Dobrič)	257,298	--	Silistra	174,052	210
Šumen	254,789	1,622	Tŭrgovište	171,167	2,975
Loveč	1,079,078	8,933	**Haskovo**	1,015,333	38,276
Gabrovo	175,120	28	Kŭrdžali	302,578	30,075
Loveč	202,708	8,013	Stara Zagora	411,506	4,141
Pleven	362,130	--	Xaskovo	301,249	4,060
Veliko Tŭrnovo	339,120	892			
Totals				8,949,618	268,971

Source: After Konstantinov, Alhaug and Igla, 1991, pp.103-105.

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