

Bulgaria: Raw Deal for the Pomaks

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Institutional discrimination against Pomaks may be rare, but they still feel the state neglects them.

The country's Pomaks, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, may have been spared the forced assimilation campaigns of the past, but members of this poverty-stricken minority continue to feel disenfranchised, scorned and view apparent state indifference to their plight as discrimination.

As Bulgaria moves toward European Union integration and the adoption of international human rights standards, outright institutional discrimination against Pomaks is increasingly rare. Neither do they experience the blatant racism suffered by the Roma. But the community continues to fall victim to bigotry and prejudice on a regular basis.

The state's refusal to officially recognise the Pomaks as an ethnic minority means they're denied the government assistance that might help alleviate their dire poverty.

Estimates based on the Bulgarian census results of 1992 and 2000 put the size of the Pomak minority at approximately 200,000 - 2.5 per cent of the population. They live in the western, central and eastern Rhodopi Mountains, a range spanning southern Bulgaria, and in a small enclave of villages in the central Teteven region.

Since Bulgarian independence from the Ottoman Empire, there has been a number of waves of forced assimilation of Pomaks, first by the tsarist state and later the communist authorities, which included the forcible renaming of those with Bulgarian Orthodox names and the banning of Muslim clothing and religious practices. The most vicious of these campaigns resulted in violent clashes and deaths, in 1912 and in the early 1970s.

Today, the Pomaks live in the poorest regions in the country. Education levels are low and joblessness is high, and the industries that tend to employ them - construction, agricultural harvesting, mining and textile manufacturing - are extremely low paying.

While Bulgarian post-socialist politicians, in an effort to break with the past, pay special attention to the country's ethnic Turks, they fail to address the Pomaks' problems.

The reason for this is that Bulgarian leaders - long suspecting the Pomaks of an allegiance to Turkey - have sought to identify them as Bulgarians who happen to practice Islam, rather than as a separate group. This policy continues today, although in a much less aggressive form than in the past, when even their right to identify themselves as Muslims was taken away.

As a result, today the Pomaks are something of an invisible minority.

Because it doesn't recognise them as a distinct ethnic group, the government has no policy for addressing their problems. Pomaks see this failure as discrimination.

A survey by the Bulgarian Centre for the Study of Democracy shows that only 20 per cent of the minority receives secondary school education - for ethnic Bulgarians the figure is 53 per cent. As a consequence,

job prospects for Pomaks are poor.

Radoslav Lyokov, mayor of the Pomak village of Galata, told the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network, BIRN, that the socialist-dominated local government of the Teteven region treated the Muslim villages within it unfairly. He said that Galata, with a population of 3000, receives the same amount of municipal funding for schools - supposedly allocated on a per capita basis - as the Orthodox village of Golyam Izvor, whose residents number 470.

Another problem, which the state seems indifferent to, is the extreme poverty in which 40 per cent of the Pomaks live, ten per cent more than the majority population.

Many Rhodopi Pomaks have traditionally worked in the tobacco industry, which has suffered under Bulgaria's market economy reforms. The state decreased its subsidies to the industry after 1991 - though it has to date failed to privatise the monopoly Bulgartabac - and liberalised prices, which resulted in many Pomaks losing their jobs.

As they struggle to survive in their acutely depressed regions, many of them look to Bulgaria's cities or even abroad for work. In both cases, they are generally exploited as cheap, seasonal, low-skilled labour.

Although the minority receives little specific attention from the government, it may benefit from initiatives aimed at economic development in the regions in which many of them live, says Mihail Ivanov, director of the government department that handles ethnic minority issues. He also claims that schools in Pomak regions of the Rhodopes have received aid under programmes administered by his directorate.

But state engagement with this minority's problems has thus far been inadequate, failing to improve their status and make them feel that they aren't being discriminated against.

One of the areas where the latter is particularly evident is in the provision made by the post-communist authorities for Pomaks to restore their Muslim names through an official court procedure.

Many Pomaks have spoken of instances where court employees laugh or smirk at them when they file for new identities, or make comments asking them why they would want their "Turkish-Arabic" names.

The 2004 State Department human rights country report for Bulgaria, for example, refers to cases in the town of Yakoruda where those calling themselves Pomaks or Bulgarian Muslims alleged discrimination by government officials.

And the previous year's report said, "There were no restrictions on the use of non-Slavic names; however, both ethnic Turks and Pomaks complained that the procedures for restoring their original names were excessively burdensome and difficult to accomplish."

In the Pomak village of Galata, only about one tenth of the 3000 inhabitants now have Muslim names on their official identity documents.

Another reason for Pomaks not restoring their Muslim identities is that many of the younger generation fear it will disadvantage them in the job market.

Café owner Tsvetelina Lyokova, 57, says her friends call her by her Muslim name, Rahma, but her daughter Teodora, a university student born in 1985, has no interest in opting for a new identity “She would be ashamed to,” said her mother.

Brothers Sherif and Mahmud Gaydar, now in their early 60s, both say they restored their Muslim names immediately after 1989, “because [my name] was taken from me illegally”, said Mahmud. However, their grown-up children all continue to have Bulgarian identities.

The reluctance to draw attention to their religion is perhaps understandable given the wave of sensationalist stories in the media since 9/11 warning of the potential danger of Islamic fundamentalism in Bulgaria. This has fuelled suspicion of Muslims in general especially the Pomaks, who many Bulgarians view as Muslim by choice, rather than by tradition.

There’s little the Pomaks can do to improve their circumstances or influence the way in which they’re perceived, as they lack representation in the economic, political and social life of Bulgaria.

The Movement for Rights and Freedoms, MRF, the junior member of the ruling coalition with the National Movement of Simeon the Second, is generally known as the party that represents Bulgarian Turks, and, to some degree, other Muslims and Roma. Many Pomaks feel it doesn’t stand up for them. But they don’t see any alternative means of political representation, as other parties have done little to reach out to their community.

Mehmed Dorsunski, from the town of Madan in the Smolyan region, used to belong to the MRF, and his criticism of the party reflects the views of significant numbers of Pomaks.

“We believed we could defend our rights via that party,” he said, but “we felt betrayed ...[when] former-communist Turks took over the [MRF’s] central leadership and didn’t support the rights of our community”.

Now he and many other Pomaks feel there is no political representation for Bulgarian Muslims and some hope that after EU accession it will be possible for the community to have an ethnically-based party to defend their interests. At present, the constitution bans such parties, but they believe that might change once the country joins the union.

Some believe that one of the main reasons why the minority has struggled to mobilise politically is because of their unequal access to education.

In an effort to address this problem, Velin Belev, head of the Oriental Studies department at the New Bulgarian University and himself a convert to Islam, hopes to offer stipends to promising Muslim students to study in the new Islamic Studies programme he is creating.

“In order to educate people you must know their culture and their problems from the inside,” he said.

Belev says Pomaks are eager to win greater acceptance in Bulgarian society, but not to sacrifice their identity in the process.

“They want to show that they are citizens of this country, part of this society; that they are not Turks or Arabs or some kind of foreign element; they are Bulgarians. . . . [but] integration doesn’t mean giving up your own culture, beliefs and values.”

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Location: Turkey
Iraqi Kurdistan

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