

## **Comment: Nationalism Retains Grip on Bulgaria's Youth**

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The younger generation seems more susceptible to nationalism than those who grew up under Socialism.

Bulgarian youngsters are falling prey to a new kind of nationalism that is far more visceral and intolerant than anything espoused by those who grew up under communism.

Influenced by the media and by school textbooks that claim to be liberal but often are not, new nationalist sentiments are gripping the nation's youth.

The former regime of Todor Zhivkov espoused internationalist Socialism, while championing nationalism at the same time.

It expelled almost 300,000 ethnic Turks and Muslim Slavs, known as Pomaks, segregated Roma and subdued all expressions of ethnic diversity.

But under the surface, other processes shaped Bulgarian attitudes. In rejecting the regime's totalitarian politics, many Bulgarians also opposed its nationalist propaganda.

Living under a totalitarian regime, where all decisions and responsibilities were appropriated by a handful of communist officials, most people in any case did not feel irritated financially, socially, or in any other way, by minorities.

It was only after the fall of communism in the 1990s that ordinary Bulgarians started looking on minorities as a burden.

Divisions between groups increased as people openly displayed their religious beliefs and ethnic origins, which the old regime had forbidden.

The media began to use hate speech towards minorities, as publishers hid behind the new freedom of speech to disseminate anti-Semitism.

Liberal values were slower to take advantage of the new freedoms and develop in society. More than a decade passed before school textbooks were purged of their most radical nationalist claims and before the media began to moderate its tone.

In the meantime, a new generation grew up, developing a kind of nationalism that is more deeply rooted than that held by its predecessors.

Many young people now demonstrate negative and aggressive attitudes towards ethnic minorities.

A recent survey by the political scientist Petar-Emil Mitev revealed negative feelings towards Roma in particular.

Some 86 per cent said they defined Roma as "lazy and irresponsible", while 92 per cent said the minority had criminal tendencies.

Some 62 per cent in the poll also said they viewed ethnic Turks as "religious fanatics".

Such convictions are even more evident on Internet sites and in chat-rooms, where forums overflow with hatred towards minorities, especially Roma.

Under the cover of anonymity, the youngsters mainly use these sites to express their loathing in radical, even neo-Nazi, style.

Slogans urging gypsies to be turned into soap bars or locked in mine shafts can often be found on the web.

One recent example was an Internet forum on Roma. While the discussion drew a few sympathetic opinions, it was swamped by viciously negative comments.

"You had better disappear and take your tribe with you!" one participant told a Roma woman on the site.

"Go back to your ghetto," another correspondent wrote in.

"Everyone knows you have no state or culture and that you gypsies are dirty, lazy liars," a third participant opined.

While openly proclaiming their racial hatred on the net, these young nationalists tend to hide their convictions when confronted directly.

"Many young people I know express negative attitudes," said Boryana Yordanova, a student at Sofia University. But most would not spell them out in public, she added.

Zornitsa Lateva, another student, says she feels tolerant towards minorities, but insists "the low life quality of gypsies" is their own fault.

"It is grounded in their different value system," she said. "They don't want to study, they prefer to marry at 13 or 14 and not to work."

Other students agreed. "We wouldn't mind gypsies so much if they accepted our culture and weren't such lazy robbers," one said.

Maria Neykova, professor at the Faculty of Journalism at Sofia University, agrees most of her students dislike Roma, and often ethnic Turks as well. She says this is because wider society has been slow to develop liberal values.

The country's media and its school textbooks remain far from politically correct when it comes to minority issues.

Although the media this year signed a code of conduct, pledging not to divulge a person's racial, ethnic or sexual orientation if it was not key to the story, in practice they still disseminate anti-minority ideas.

Many cable channels broadcast nationalistic programmes. A well-known one is Ataka, on SKAT TV, whose host, Volen Siderov, routinely denounces the programmes in Turkish carried by Bulgarian National Television broadcasts.

Research by the Market Test agency from 2001-2002 shows some improvement in the media from the 1990s, when hate speech was common, but not much.

It found that about 60 per cent of stories on Roma still concern crime and social problems, so hardening the public's negative stereotypes.

"The media keeps on mentioning people's ethnic origins even when it has no importance to the story," said Neykova.

Educated on textbooks full of historical myths, they think they are responding to public expectations, she adds.

One of the main activities of Bulgaria's communist intellectuals was rewriting the country's history.

Under Zhivkov, history was rewritten to stress the antiquity of the Bulgarian nation and state and its superiority over Balkan and western rivals.

To compensate for missing out on the Renaissance under Ottoman rule from the 15th to the 20th century, the books were loaded with anti-Turkish propaganda.

After more than a decade of freedom, efforts to liberalise Bulgarian historical interpretation have yielded only partial results.

Late 19th century books in which Turks are demonised or satirised remain part of the school curriculum.

"Children study so-called history from textbooks in which an openly nationalist ideology and air of patriotic pathos overshadow any real discussion of the benefits and harms of Ottoman rule," the political scientist, Evgeniy Daynov, wrote recently.

He told IWPR that he even detected a backlash towards growing nationalism in schools.

The process of reviewing textbooks is underway, however, driven by a political will to affirm the idea of reconciliation with the country's ethnic Turks in the post-Socialist era.

But it remains unsystematic. Mumun Isov, a researcher, who recently assessed the image of Turks in Bulgarian history books, says efforts to remove myths and stereotypes have been insufficient.

The reality is that the problem of nationalism can only be faced when politicians start openly to admit its existence.

One solution would be to work towards changing ideas about the nation, highlighting it as a civic, rather than an ethnic, unit.

But at the moment this seems an unrealistic expectation. Most of the politicians find the exploitation of nationalism too rewarding.

Albena Shkodrova is the Bulgaria director of the Balkans Investigative Reporting Network – a localised IWPR project.

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