Islam and the state in Romania and Bulgaria

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Abstract

This paper aims at pointing out the actual situation of the Muslim community in Bulgaria and Romania and their religious life. It also deals with the phenomena of immigration and migration of people due to various historical and political reasons and the State policy concerning minorities.

Keywords: Muslim, religion, demographic situation, ethnic minority, religious minority, migration.

I. Muslim Populations

Romania

- 67,257 /0.3% of the country’s 22 million population
- 31,118 ethnic Turks
- 23,641 Tatars
- 3,310 Romanians
- The main Muslim ethnic group follow Sunni Islam

Bulgaria

- 966,978 /12.2% of the population
- 75.3 % Turks
- 7.7% Alevi
- 13.5% Pomaks
- 10.5% Roma
- 4,500 Tatar community
- The majority of Muslims are Sunnis of the Hanafi School.
According to the 2001 census there are 966,978 Muslims in Bulgaria and the majority of them are Sunnis of the Hanafi School. According to the official census (2002) there are 67,257 Muslims in Romania of whom the 31,118 are ethnic Turks, 23,641 Tatars and 3,310 Romanians.

In the official census a small number of Turks and Tatars declared themselves to belong to religions other than Islam, to be atheists or to have no religion. The constitutions of Romania and special laws have guaranteed the rights of certain religious groups, in addition to Orthodox Christians who represent the majority of the population.

An earlier census (1992) indicated that 7.7% of Muslims in Bulgaria were Alevi (also called Kızılbaşi or Aliani). The Turks are concentrate in the South-east and North-east Bulgaria and account for 75.3% of all Muslims in Bulgaria. The Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (also known as Pomaks) are concentrated in the Central and Western Rhodope Mountains in Southern Bulgaria and make up 13.5%.

The tiny Tatar community has some 4,500 members living in North-eastern Bulgaria. Most Muslims live in rural areas but in present days they are under the process of internal or external migration. They have been seriously affected by the economic crisis following the collapse of communism.

II. Immigration/Migration

Romania

- The number of Muslims increased slightly
- 70,000 according to muftiate
- 67,300 according to the State Secretariat for Religious Affairs
- New groups appeared in Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, Timișoara (Palestinians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Syrians, Kurds)
- New communities did not joined the old Muslim communities

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2 http://www.nsi.bg/census_e/census_e.htm.
Bulgaria

- The number of Muslims decreased by 143,317
- Huge emigration to:
  - Turkey
  - More prosperous countries
  - New country for immigration/transit station
  - 107,245 immigrants total (Maghreb, Afghanistan, Middle East)

The results of the census showed that the number of Muslims in Bulgaria decreased, which has been explained by the emigration of Muslims to the Western countries and Turkey and by the conversion of some Pomaks to Orthodox Christianity and to the various Protestant denominations. By 2009 the number of Muslims in Romania has increased due to immigration from Middle Eastern countries and conversion. After the fall of Communism in 1989 new Muslims groups appeared in the cities: Bucharest, Iasi, Cluj, Timișoara. They have not joined the old Muslims communities in Romania and the two groups live parallel live.5 Most Middle Eastern immigrants were of Turkish origin.6

Bulgaria is a new country for immigration and is used as a transit station due to its poor economic status. Most of the immigrants from the Middle East are between 25 and 45 years, males are a majority. Immigrants who have arrived in the past 20-30 years have a Bulgarian Citizenship or status of permanent or long-term residents. A typical example is the community of the Syrian immigrants (mainly spouses in mixed marriages or individuals with legal status). The average immigrant in Bulgaria is well educated: most of them have high school degrees (54%), possess a university degree (Bachelor or Master), 2.1% have higher academic achievements and approximately the same percentage are with secondary education. People from the Middle East and Maghreb also have university or high school education.

Muslim immigrants are heterogeneous with regard to their attachment to Islam and degree of observance of rituals. 84.9% of the Arab immigrants declare that they are Muslim, 6.4% are Christians, 7.8% state that they are atheists, 0.9% belong to other denominations.

In the families of 54.7% of the Arab immigrants the children systematically study traditions, rituals and history of Islam and their own ethnic group. Among the Arabs, 62% insist that their children should study their mother tongue. A significant part of the parents (42%) prefer their children to attend the nearest school, while 19% would like to see their kids in the best

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5 See, Grigore, George, Muslims in Romania, ISIM Newsletter, 3, July 1999, p. 34.
Bulgarian schools. Arab immigrants from the Middle East do not highlight the typical for the Arab religious remarks. Men wear secular clothes identical with those of the Bulgarians. Muslim elements are stronger with the women. As a rule they carry veils or their modern interpretations. Cultural – religious marks are slightly displayed by or totally missing with children.

There are no elements of assimilation of immigrants in Bulgaria. Children of the second and third generation, who have passed through the Bulgarian educational system, are completely integrated without losing memories of their parents’ country of origin.

III. Islam and the State

Romania

- A secular republic without state religion; 86.8% Orthodox Christians
- Islamic faith is one of 18 religious denominations recognized by law /Law 489/2006/
- The muftiate is the only religious institution represents the followers of Islam
- The Synodal Council – mufti, 4 members from UDTMR, 4 members from UDTR, 15 clerics & the principal of the Kemal Ataturk Muslim Theological High School
- 73 purpose-built mosques in Dobrudja and 1 in Bucharest /1960/>15

Bulgaria

- A parliamentary republic without state religion
- 82.64% Orthodox Christians
- The Muftiate
- The Movement for Rights and Freedoms /1990/
- The Supreme Muslim Council - 26 members
- 12 regional muftis
- 1,217 mosques
- 240 masjids
- 50 tekes dated at the Ottoman times
In Romania the Orthodox Christians constitute the majority.7 The Islamic faith is considered a public-utility legal entity. Muslims can receive material support from the State for the maintenance of mosques, monuments and other communal buildings. According to the law only the muftiate has the right to organise pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina.

The “Shura-i Islam” is headed by the mufti and takes decisions regarding the functioning and organization of the Muslim community. The UDITTMR and the UDTR are two of the 19 political parties and cultural associations representing ethnic minorities in the Romanian parliament.

As a good practice we can stress here the condition that the mufti must be a Romanian citizen, born in Romania and with no other previous citizenship and a graduate of an Islamic theological institute in Romania.

In Bulgaria the Constitution designates Eastern Orthodox Christianity as the “traditional” religion (82.64%) of the population belongs to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The Directorate of Ecclesiastical Matters of the Council of Ministers provides financial support from the state budget to denominations with a longer historic presence to cover some of their running expenses. Muslims in Bulgaria are presented religiously through the Muftiate and politically by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. This party was established in 1990 and has been represented in every post-communist parliament since.

The Bulgarian Muslim community, called the Muslim confession, has developed structures and is administered by the Supreme Muslim council. The Chief Muftiate presides over all the Muslims in the country. Twelve regional muftis are responsible for the administration of the community at the provincial level.

IV. Main Muslim Organizations

Romania

• Muftiate together with UDITTMR&UDTR
• Crescent Islamic Cultural Centre Foundation (www.scola-araba.ro)
• Association of Muslims of Romania (www.associatiamusulmanilor.ro)
• Muslim Sisters association (www.surorimusulmane.ro)
• Tuna Foundation (www.tuna.ro)
• Islamic & Cultural League in Romania (www.islam.ro)
• Taiba Foundation (www.islamulazi.ro)

Bulgaria

- Mufti (www.genmuftybg.net)
- Myusyulmansko izpovedanie (Muslim confession)
- Myusyulmansko sunitsko-hanifitsko izpovedanie in Bulgaria (Sunni-hanafi)

In Romania, the traditional Muslim denomination (Sunni) engages in public activities through the Mufti together with UDTTMR and the UDTR. We can see here the newly established associations and foundations dominated by immigrants for various ethnic origins. They are translating and publishing religious literature, teaching Arabic, engage with charities.

The most active of them appears to be the Taiba Foundation (a recently appeared website is the Little Muslim dedicated to children). Tuna Foundation is linked to the Gulen Movement. The mufti considers that many of these associations are harmful to traditional Hanafi Islam in Romania because of their propaganda and conservative views, which come from the Arab schools of Islam.

The long-term period of atheism and religious vacuum in both Romania and Bulgaria allowed the invasion of many different Muslim organizations and foundations.

V. Children’s Education

Romania

- In 1995 the law of education introduced religion as a compulsory subject
- Islam is taught in mosques, by religious-cultural associations
- 2009 on-line version of weekend schools
- 1996 Islamic Secondary school – Medgidia
- “Islam today” – the first magazine

Bulgaria

- Elective classes in Islam were introduced in 2000
- Islam is taught in the mosques – summer Qur’an courses
- Three Islamic Secondary schools – Shumen, Russe, Momchilgrad
- Higher Islamic Institute, in Sofia
There are three Islamic secondary schools in Bulgaria which follow the general curriculum for state secondary schools. The graduates from these schools can serve as imams or continue their education in any discipline they choose. There is a tendency for imams to pursue higher education in the Higher Islamic Institute in Sofia. Apart from these three state accredited schools the Muftiate organizes Qur’an courses for children every summer. Students use textbooks proposed by the Muftiate and approved by the Ministry of Education.

The Law of Education adopted in 1995 introduced religion as a compulsory subject in public schools in Romania. The curriculum and textbooks are approved by the Ministry of Education. According to the Law of Education (Law 4/1995) any legally recognized ethnic minority can draw up a curriculum for special subject teaching on their history and the traditions, for example Turkish-Tatar Minority.

Islam is taught in mosques and by religious and cultural associations, mainly in weekend schools or within an Arabic language programme. In November 2009 the Association of Muslims in Romania launched an on-line version of such weekend schools. Academic courses on Islam and the Middle East are offered at several universities. There are courses on Arabic language, history of Arab culture and civilization and history of Arab literature. All holders of academic degrees in Islamic theology have studied abroad as no such higher education qualifications are offered in Romania. Diplomas issued abroad are subject to the recognition of the Romanian Ministry of Education after endorsement by the mufti.

In Sofia, there is an Islamic Institute, which was founded in 1991 as a semi-higher institution and became a higher institute in 1998. It offers courses in Islamic theology, history of religion, psychology of religion, Arabic language and literature. According to the Muftiate, a small number of students sent by them have graduated from various Islamic schools abroad. Academic courses on the history and culture of Islam and the Middle East are offered on a regular basis by the Department of Arabic and Semitic Studies at Sofia University.

VI. Interreligious Relations

Romania

- DIR promotes dialogue through symposia, publications and websites, such as Intercultural calendar
- The Familiar “Others”
- Romania provides an example of religious tolerance and co-existence

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**Bulgaria**

- Since 1989, BG progress in the area of interethnic and inter-religious relations
- National Council of the Religious Communities
- The Bulgarian model of religious tolerance

Muslims in Bulgaria have lived here for a number of centuries. The existence of religious symbols never bothered them. Since 1989, Bulgaria made a significant progress in the areas of interethnic and interreligious relation. It has adopted a number of important legislative documents, such as the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom. In 2008, a new association was established – the National Council of the Religious Communities in Bulgaria. The Council pledges to represent the Bulgarian model of religious tolerance to Europe and to the Balkans, to develop interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

The Department for Interethnic Relations and non-governmental institutions (Intercultural Institute Timișoara) are promoting dialogue through symposia, publications, websites (http://www.calendarintercultural.ro/index.php). In Romania there is also a long tradition of coexistence with Muslims. Those who are long-established in Romania are regarded as familiar Others, outsiders are regarded with suspicion.

The big challenges before both Romania and Bulgaria are the shift to Islam and the immigrants’ waves.

**VII. Challenges**

**Romania**

- Conversion to Islam
- Immigrants

**Bulgaria**

- Conversion to Islam
- Immigrants
A Proposal for Solution

- To re-formulate the role, place and mission of the Christian tradition as a dynamic tradition
- To discover the value of hermeneutical-communicative model

Our attitude to the culture as a comprehended reality presupposes rationality as a cultural value. The main problem is to combine our values with the values of the other. Are the different cultures incompatible in general? To what extent is possible a cultural synthesis by means of rational ways? Jürgen Habermas speaks about such project – the project for a communicative rationality, in which the people participating in social discussions are engaged. His project assumes that the people accept the rules of a rational discourse, which contradicts to the current situation of the radicalization of controversies. The opposition between the West Christian or the so-called rational culture and the East Islamic or traditional culture is strongly expressed.

One of the main problems today is how to tolerate other cultures and other ritual behavior than those we know from our own tradition. This global problem changes our world as life-world on two levels: the social-political and existential levels. This entails new ideas:

A) A new idea how to live together in peace. This life together can be motivated in two radically different ways: by the fear of one's own death as in Hobbes where people originally involved in a fight of all against all accept to live together accordingly in order to avoid to be killed by the other. On the other hand, by wish to live together in order to be enriched by this common life in the same way that Aristotle described the life in the true friendship. Only the wish to be enriched by a life together can create the true peace.

B) A new idea of the social contract. The contract that we know from Hobbes, Rousseau, and Kant cannot exist only as a national contract any more. We must presuppose a global social contract that maintains a global world order valid for every human being. This idea is taken up in our time by Jürgen Habermas.

Philosophical image of the human being might be a mirror of the state of affairs and a guide of humanity. Interfaith and intercultural dialogue, adequately understood, is the art of being authentically human.

Conclusion

In Bulgaria and Romania, the process of integration stems from their history: it is not simply a bridge between the East and the West but a bridge
between the tradition and the new European values. Co-existence on equal basis of Christians and Muslims, participation in a common cultural model trough rules and rights, mandatory for both communities, is the common value that the two countries reckon on.

The Balkan space is like a big coffee house and a good example of real dialogue, which can be used by European countries.

The famous German philosopher Kant said there were three big philosophical questions: What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope for? Perhaps a great deal of philosophy in the West can be understood as seeing those three questions as pivotal. The Europe has to engage both the issues of the moment and the long-term questions of what we can know, what we should do, and what we may hope for!