

Uncertain Identities: Bulgarian Muslims between Historical Trauma and Resilience

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No Muslim identity in the Balkans is as contested and disputed as the identity of the Bulgarian Muslims (Neuburger, 2000: 181), also known also as “Pomaks” (both appellations are controversial). Bulgarian Muslims “are a religious minority. They are Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, but whose religion and customs are Islamic” (Poulton, 1993: 111; see also Georgieva, 1998: 287; Brunnbauer, 1999: 39). They inhabit mainly mountainous regions in Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo (Georgieva, 1998: 287). The largest and most compact population of Bulgarian Muslims lives in Bulgaria, mostly in the Rhodope Mountains; the present paper is devoted to this group. The cultural expressions and identities of Bulgarian Muslims are marked by considerable internal heterogeneity. Their mutually exclusive collective identities relate identification to language (Bulgarian identity) or religion (Turkish identity, identification as “Muslims” or identification as Pomaks in the ethnic sense). Accordingly, their identities are defined as marginal, hybrid, shifting, fluid, hesitating and multiple (Brunnbauer, 1999: 38; Karagiannis, 2000: 149–153; Benovska-Sabkova, 2006; Benovska-Sabkova, Nedin, 2016). Drawing on years of fieldwork among Bulgarian Muslims, the present work aims to conceptualise the understanding of uncertain identities. Theoretically, I draw on uncertainty-identity theory (Hogg, 2007: 69–126) on the one hand and the notion of unstable identities (Eriksen, Visentin, 2024: 47–56) on the other. I define uncertain identities as a specific concept in the context of global uncertainty in the world of late modernity. The empirical methods are based on: a) observations from repeated short field trips (lasting one week to ten days) among Muslim Bulgarians in the Middle and Western Rhodopes between 1996 and the present day, and on the sixty two autobiographical interviews collected during this period; b) archival sources; c) virtual ethnography in the form of research on specialised Muslim/Pomak groups on Facebook. The analysis reveals a correlation between the severity of state repression against Bulgarian Muslims and the individual and collective trauma generated, on the one hand, and the precariousness

of collective identities, on the other. The economic insecurity/precarity of almost a century in the Rhodopes has been transformed among Bulgarian Muslims into an opportunity for positive change. This is a recent factor influencing identities through the labour migration of Bulgarian Muslims to Western Europe following Bulgaria's accession to the European Union in 2007.

Key words: uncertainty, uncertain identity, Bulgarian Muslims, traumatic memory

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2003, the presentation of a recently published collection of articles took place at the National Library of St Cyril and Methodius in Sofia. As one of the authors, I participated in the event and was surprised to observe the visit of almost the entire leadership of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) at that time – a party electorally supported by Bulgarian Turks and partly also by Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks). But this was not the last surprise of the day. The floor was demanded by a distinctly elegant lady whom I recognised as a deputy from the MRF and a Bulgarian Muslim by origin. Visibly agitated, she said that “science” was in debt to the Bulgarian Muslims because it had not given a clear answer to the question of who they were, what they were, where they came from. According to her, Bulgarian Muslims are neither Turks nor Bulgarians; but then, who are they? The woman burst into tears, saying that she herself had long sought an answer, and the impossibility of finding out who she was gave her no rest.

Frustration with the impossibility of defining a monolithic identity based on origins is not a singular manifestation. A written autobiography of a Bulgarian Muslim, then a student, also shows this:¹

No one, neither historians, nor politicians, nor anyone of any kind, says, and cannot obviously say, what “Pomaks” are [...] This [concept] is empty, because any name for a human community suggests a shared common history and a shared sense of belonging. And we are a people inhabiting a territory who have no conscious past, and our sense of belonging is born out of a still negative sense of difference from all those who surround us, regardless of the fact that with some we share a common language, religion or traditions. [...] Historical processes and influences have totally confused [things] [...] to a state of nothingness. (Pashova, Vodenicharov, 2013: 73)

¹ This narrative is undated; it was recorded before 2013, the date of its publication (Pashova, Vodenicharov, 2013: 73).

I also experienced an emotional reaction related to Muslim identity in May 2014. While I was recording an autobiographical interview with a man, a Bulgarian Muslim by descent, with a university education and a deep interest in folklore, he became emotional and started crying. On a trip to Greece, he spotted a cheap brand of olive oil called *Pomace*: the product of the last extraction of fat from the olives. The analogy between the name *Pomace* olive oil and the name *Pomak* was unmistakable to him. “We are like *Pomace* olive oil: it is a second-class olive oil... we are second-class people!”²

These episodes remind us that fieldwork is “a unique social drama of ethnographic encounters” (Borneman, 2018: xiii). Instances of traumatic personal self-perception among Bulgarian Muslims attest that contested, heterogeneous, and multiple Muslim collective identities can be a source of personal insecurity, frustration and trauma. I call these kinds of personal and collective identities “uncertain identities”. The aim of this paper is to contribute to the conceptualisation of “uncertain identities” through a descriptive analysis of the identities of Bulgarian Muslims. In the following pages, I outline a brief characterisation of Bulgarian Muslims; present the empirical methods I employ and the theoretical underpinnings of the study; and analyse two cases of collective insecure identity.

Despite the vast body of literature on the subject,³ it is not superfluous to recall who Bulgarian Muslims are. The Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) “are Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, but their religion and customs are Islamic” (Poulton, 1993: 111; see also Georgieva, 1998; Brunnbauer, 1999: 39). They inhabit several Balkan countries, most notably Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. Similar groups, though known under different self-appellations (Gorani, Torbeshi) live in Albania, Kosovo and the Republic of North Macedonia. The largest group lives in Bulgaria (mostly in the Rhodope Mountains) and Bulgaria is their homeland (Haksöz, 2016: 21; Brunnbauer, 1999: 37). “The status of the Pomaks [is in] an intermediate position between majority and ‘national’ minorities” (Büchsenschütz, 2000: 4). The Pomak community in Turkey originates from Bulgaria and formed due to several migration and/or refugee waves following the liberation of Bulgaria from the Ottoman rule (1878).⁴ Pomaks in Greece are mainly confined to two enclaves in Western Thrace also adjacent to Bulgaria: around the cities of Xanthi and Komotini. This article is dedicated to the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria.

Both appellations, Bulgarian Muslims (etic) and Pomaks (emic and etic) have been contested for being manipulative (the former one) or derogatory (the latter).⁵

2 Interview with R. H., university education, medical expert. 9 May 2014, city of Zlatograd.

3 Initially modest in volume in the early 1990s, the literature on Bulgarian Muslims now numbers hundreds, possibly thousands, of titles: see, for example, the bibliography compiled by Ali Eminov (Eminov, 2021) available at: https://www.academia.edu/3302407/Bibliography_Bulgarian-speaking_Muslims_Pomaks_.

4 On Pomaks in Turkey see: Kahl, 2007: 227–234; Kyurkchieva, 2008: 454–480; Günşen, 2013: 46–60; Zelengora, 2013: 61–72. The literature on Pomaks in Greece is summarized in: Saraev, 2018.

5 “The appellation ‘Pomak’ is often related with the idea of simplicity, gluttony and clumsiness among Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks” (Arnaudov, 2010: 32). A number of other authors also note the pejorative

In accordance with the majority of authors, I nevertheless use the name Bulgarian Muslims; I use the term Pomaks when referring to Bulgarian Muslims in Greece or Turkey, respecting the preference members of this community give to this self-appellation.⁶

Bulgarian Muslims are perceived as a threat to the national security of Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey (Brunnbauer, 2001) and therefore national statistics on the size of this population in these countries are incomplete or non-existent; the authorities act as if they do not exist. The category of Bulgarian Muslims or Pomaks has been excluded from the Bulgarian survey map for extended periods of time since the mid-twentieth century. The absence of reliable data on their numbers and identities makes them an “invisible group for Bulgarian statistics” (Ivanov, 2013: 160–169; 175). The non-recognition of the independent minority status of the Pomaks in Greece and Turkey led to a similar situation in these countries, although classified information gathered by these countries’ secret services is not lacking (Saraev, 2016: 120–122; 2018: 328).

Although fragmentary, Bulgarian census data on this group are not entirely absent. A secret document from 1957 mentions 138,643 “Bulgarian–Mohammedans” (Ivanov, 2013: 170). Preliminary data from the 1992 census (the last to include options for self-identification as Bulgarian Muslim or Pomak) reported 208,783 Bulgarian Muslims (*ibid.*: 172). According to final data from the same census, “about 196,000 Pomaks lived in Bulgaria in the 1990s. In the 1992 census in Bulgaria, out of all those who declared themselves to be Pomaks, 70,251 identified themselves as ethnic Bulgarians, 65,546 as Bulgarian Muslims, Pomaks or Muslims, 25,540 as Turks whose mother tongue is Bulgarian and about 35,000 as Turks” (Apostolov, 2001: 109). The mass labour emigration (see Deneva, 2013: 6–11) to Western Europe and the USA, especially after the suspension of the visa regime for Bulgarians in the European Union in 2000, certainly affected the number of Bulgarian Muslims. There is no precise information available on the matter, but in some Muslim villages, outflows for emigration reach almost as high as 25% of the population.

After 1992, the data on the identity of Bulgarian Muslims have been only indirect. So, the 2001 census showed that “131 531 persons of the Bulgarian ethnic community profess Islam” (Naselenie [Population], 2001). I perceive these data as an indirect expression of Bulgarian ethnic identity, regardless of religious affiliation, among 131,531 Bulgarian Muslims in 2001.

The Bulgarian Muslim community was formed during the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. Islamisation processes in Bulgaria are noted in historical sources from the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth centuries, but they reached significant intensity during the seventeenth century. This is probably

connotation of the word Pomak. Other emic/vernacular names include Ahryani, Babechani, Gajeli, Apovci, Dilsuz, Torbeshi, Chechlii, cf. Pashova, Vodenicharov, 2013: 79.

6 Based on short field observations (one day each) in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in the Greek Pomak village of Medoussa (Μέδουσα in Greek or Memkovo in Bulgarian), located 7 km from the Bulgarian border near city of Zlatograd.

the same period as the consolidation of the community of the Bulgarian Muslims. The historical reasons behind the adoption of Islam have been fiercely disputed⁷ both inside and outside academic community during the last thirty years.

Empirical methods

I carried out fieldwork using a specific ethnographic approach: periodic short field surveys of a few days each in the Rhodopes, once or twice a year, from 1996 to 2005 and from 2011 to 2023. The study was conducted in three different parts of the Rhodopes: the Central Rhodopes (city of Zlatograd, Smolyan region), the Northwestern Rhodopes (village of Draginovo, Velingrad county) and the Western Rhodopes (village of Satovcha, Gotse Delchev county, and the municipality of the same name). In the key settlements I worked periodically with the same people – key interlocutors – which allowed me to track changes in their identity. I then expanded the geographical scope, working in other settlements outside the key ones, and also expanded the range of interviewees beyond the “core” of key interlocutors. The measurable outcome of the fieldwork was sixty-two autobiographical interviews and twenty-seven semi-structured interviews, numerous informal conversations, field notes, photographs and short films. The interviews, field notes and other empirical material are held in the author’s personal archive.

I have maintained an active friendship with some of the key interlocutors since 1996 and this was an additional source of information. Another part of the observations arose from communication with Bulgarian Muslim students. In this sense, the conclusion is confirmed that in the world of late modernity, not only does the researcher visit the “field” but also the field “comes home” to the social space inhabited by the researcher. Globalisation and technological revolutions since the late twentieth century have led to relativised notions of space and to uncertainty about what constitutes “home” and “field” in ethnographic work (Wilk, 2011: 23). The field can be anywhere, and ethnography is a non-linear process (O’Dell, Willim, 2011: 5; Wilk, 2011: 15). Rather, the ethnographic techniques outlined are the result of the researcher’s adaptation to the possibilities of fieldwork. The realities of academic institutions press upon more than a few researchers, offering a lack of time for fieldwork other than vacation periods (O’Dell, Willim, 2011: 6). In my case, however, the time available to me was concurrent with practical training for students in the field. The presence of these students has had a beneficial influence on my work, and some of the time the work was shared with anthropologists Ilia Nedin and Ana Luleva.

7 For a review of the literature on Islamisation from the 1990s, see Georgieva, 1998: 286–308 and Brunnbauer, 2001: 55. For more recent titles see Todorova, 2004: 129–157; Troeva-Grigorova, 2008: 101–117; Troeva, 2011: 14–19; Troeva, 2023.

Multiple identities

Researchers have noted a splitting of Bulgarian Muslim identity into several mutually exclusive options of multiple identities since the mid-1990s. The 1992 statistics cited above show a splitting of Bulgarian Muslim identities into three main options: Bulgarian, Pomak/Bulgarian Muslim and Turkish (with a “Turks who speak Bulgarian” variety). According to another view, Bulgarian Muslims were a relatively homogeneous group in the early twentieth century (defining themselves as Bulgarian Mohammedans). In the period from 1926 to 1992, changes occurred and the identity unfolded into an “ethnic fan consisting of three main components”: Bulgarians, Pomaks and Turks (Ivanov, 2013: 170). It is impossible to say whether this phenomenon is truly recent or rather has not been noticed by researchers.

Evangelos Karagiannis (1997: 60; 2000: 149–153) distinguishes between the options of “secular–Bulgarian”, “secular–Pomak”, “Turkish”, “Muslim–Pomak/Bulgarian–Mohammedan”, “political–Pomak” and “Christian–Bulgarian” identities. Ulf Brunnbauer presents: a) Bulgarian identity defined on the basis of language; identities based on religious affiliation: b) Muslim; c) Pomak identity in the ethnic sense; d) Turkish identity (Brunnbauer, 1999: 38).⁸ Mikhail Gruev examines three territorially distinct case studies that embody the three options of multiple Bulgarian Muslim identities in the twentieth century: the village of Diamandovo (Kardzhali region) changed its collective identity from Bulgarian Muslim to Turkish, including replacing the Bulgarian language with Turkish; the village of Zabardo (Smolyan region) chose Bulgarian identity; and the “Teteven Pomaks” in the Balkan Mountains region chose to preserve the “specific Pomak identity” (Gruev, 2008: 341–354).

Two sociological surveys conducted in 1997 and 2011 present concrete figures. In 1997, 33% of respondents identified themselves as Bulgarians; 5% as Turks; 62% as “other” (Bulgarian Mohammedans, Pomaks, Ahrians, Bulgarian Muslims and Muslims only). In 2011, 26% defined themselves as Bulgarians, 5% as Turks and 69% as “other” (Ivanova, 2013a: 7–8). The second study outlines a reinforcement of the “other” option: this is “an increasingly distinct process of carving out a separate ethnicity, encompassing not only elites but also ever larger masses of people” (ibid: 7). The term “ethnicity”, however, is highly contested and needs further clarification.

Uncertain identity

Bulgarian Muslims are often studied in terms of ethnic marginality, understood as “a lack of clarity of ethnic affiliation, i.e. an uncertainty and indistinctiveness of assignment between the familiar and ethnically foreign” (Karagiannis, 2005: 21). Apart from being a property of human groups, marginality has also been seen as

8 For a more detailed bibliographic review on that matter, see Troeva, 2011: 15–19.

a property of space, “continually reconstructed while somehow remaining the same. [...] Marginality is a tricky word, a kind of a poor relation to ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’; it explicitly evokes a sense of different location as well as unequal relations” (Green, 2005: 1). I argue that the understanding of “uncertain identities” is closest to the real complexity and entanglement of the facts. To unpick this, I draw on Hogg’s “uncertainty-identity theory” and Eriksen and Visentin’s notion of unstable identities outlined in the quotations below.

The core tenet of uncertainty-identity theory is that feelings of uncertainty, particularly about or relating to who one is and how one should behave, motivate uncertainty-reduction, and that the process of self-categorisation as a group member reduces self-conceptual uncertainty because it provides a consensually validated group prototype that describes and prescribes who one is and how one should behave. [...] Feeling uncertain about one’s perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviours has a powerful motivational effect. We strive to reduce such uncertainties so that we feel less uncertain about the world we live in, and thus render it more predictable and our own behaviour within it more efficacious. [...] Ultimately, people need to know who they are, how to behave, and what to think; and who others are, how they might behave, and what they might think. [...] Uncertainty is related to meaning, and some argue that the primary human motive is a search for meaning. (Hogg, 2012: 64–66)

Eriksen and Visentin (2024: 47–56), in turn, consider unstable identities in the context of “overheating”, in other words, of “accelerated” global social change in the postmodern world. Acceleration, especially since 1991, along with economic precarity makes the world an uncertain place:

It’s very, very hard, you know, to live in a society where everything seems to be in free flow. Perhaps we all need a core which is permanent, which doesn’t change, and if it doesn’t exist, we have to invent it. This is where certain forms of nationalism come into the picture. (Eriksen, Visentin, 2024: 51)

Accelerated changes in the world around create the perception of unstable identities. In the sense outlined, uncertain identities should not be understood as a temporary condition that is associated with certain contexts and is expected to be overcome through the actions of social actors. Rather, uncertain identities are the product of an open-ended, non-linear process stimulated by external and internal factors that create uncertainty, and the associated search for and invention of new identities. An analysis of the changes that have occurred in the identities of Bulgarian Muslims over the last thirty years will be instrumental in testing the validity of this hypothesis.

Uncertain identities of the Bulgarian Muslims: initial hypotheses

My initial hypothesis is that the uncertain identities of Bulgarian Muslims have been influenced by at least three factors since the 1990s. The first is their definition as “others” within Bulgarian society (by Christian Bulgarians or the Turkish minority); the second is the traumatic memory of the collective repression experienced by this group; the third is this community’s prolonged state of economic precarity throughout most of the twentieth century.

Definitions of Bulgarian Muslims by “others”

A national and 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 the official state definitions. (Bringa, 1993: 81)

External influences (description, definition by others, i.e. attitudes of both Christian Bulgarians and the Turkish minority) contribute significantly to the formation of uncertain identities among Bulgarian Muslims.

The competing nationalisms – Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish – ascribe respectively Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish belonging to Bulgarian Muslims. The periodic assimilationist campaigns undertaken by Bulgarian state policies in the twentieth century in 1912–1913, 1962–1964, 1971–1974, 1985–1989 (Büchsenshütz, 2000: 42–48; Georgieva, 1998; Neuburger, 2004: 142–162; Gruev, 2008) fit into such a context. Bulgarian “identity managers” used to take away and replace Bulgarian Muslims’ right to self-determination with the argument of their ethnic origin (based on language). The Bulgarian origin of Bulgarian Muslims, also accepted by authors outside Bulgaria (see Brunnbauer, 2001: 42), is, however, contested in Turkish and Greek historiographies and through the minority policies of both countries.⁹ Hence, external descriptions concerning Bulgarian Muslims are the result not only of official Bulgarian policy but also of the policies of Greece and Turkey towards the Pomaks in their respective countries.

The influences coming from Greece and Turkey are by no means something abstract or distant. Two of the key fieldwork locations presented here are in contact

⁹ Official Turkish theses attribute Turkic and/or Turkish origins (from the Huns, Avars, Cumans, Pechenegs, etc.) to the Bulgarian Muslims (see, for example, Günşen, 2013: 57). For a critical review of this stance, see Balıkcı, 1999: 51–58). A convergence with those of Turkish authors is found in works by the Bulgarian author Georgi Zelengora (2013). On the Greek thesis of the origin of the Pomaks from Slavicized Thracians, see Brunnbauer, 2001: 49; Saraev, 2016: 117.



*Village of Medoussa (Memkovo), Xanthi region, Greece: a general view.
Photo: Milena Benovska, 19 September 2012.*

with historically related settlements across the Bulgarian–Greek and Bulgarian–Turkish borders. Contacts between the village of Memkovo/Μέδουσα (7 km from the Bulgarian–Greek border) and Zlatograd are practically daily since the opening of the Zlatograd–Thermes border checkpoint in 2010,¹⁰ not least because it is cheaper for people from Memkovo to shop in Zlatograd. Kinship ties between the two settlements have not been forgotten. In turn, settlers from the village of Draginovo settled in 1912, after the first

Balkan War, in the village of Akören near Edirne/Odrin in present-day Turkey. Contacts between the two villages resumed following the end of socialism in Bulgaria, with one of the first visits from Draginovo to Akören taking place in 2001.¹¹ Memkovo (Μέδουσα) and Akören can be likened to mirrors in which the people of Zlatograd and Draginovo look around and see other versions of their own traditions.

The traumatic memory of assimilation campaigns, whose most visible expression was the replacement of Muslim names with Bulgarian ones, is paramount to the formation of uncertain identities. These campaigns varied in intensity in different parts of the Rhodopes, from “soft” coercion to violent physical confrontations. There is a correlation between repression and traumatic memory on the one hand, and uncertain identity on the other. In the village of Kornitsa, which suffered the most victims during the Muslim name changes, “people defined themselves as Turks because of the traumatic memory” of the renaming (Ivanova, 2013b: 16–17). In practice, data concerning identification as “Turks” came mostly from anonymous surveys and statistics; possibly due to a certain level of distrust towards myself as

¹⁰ See more in: Benovska-Sabkova and Nedin, 2016: 37.

¹¹ On this visit and the field work in Akören see Kyurkchieva, 2008: 454–480.



The bridge of Medoussa (Memkovo), Xanthi region, Greece. Photo: Milena Benovska, 19 September 2012.

researcher, I did not come across it as a self-appellation while interviewing or observing in the field.

The highest levels of uncertainty around identities and alienation from the Bulgarian state were found in the same settlements that had experienced brutal violence in the twentieth century. The 1971–1974 assimilation campaign in Jakoruda municipality (Western Rhodopes) was marked by serious repression, including people beaten, arrested, sent to prison or penal camps and, in one case, death (Mincheva, 2005a: 83). In the 1992 census in the same municipality, 7,955 or 91% of all Bulgarian Muslims identified themselves as Turks. The case caused a political scandal and the cancellation of the census data for this area. In the next census in 2002, the number of Bulgarian Muslims declaring Turkish identity in the municipality of Jakoruda was 10% lower (Mincheva, 2005b: 88). I take the declaration of Turkish identity as the most radical form of uncertain identity. Internal contradictions within local communities are also a significant factor in uncertain identities. Their origins can be traced to the years shortly before and after the communist coup in 1944, when a proportion of Bulgarian Muslims joined the communist elite. At that time, the Bulgarian communists were looking for allies and managed to find them among Bulgarian Muslims (Gruev, Kalionski, 2019a: 106–108). Later, this led to the participation of Bulgarian Muslim communists in assimilation campaigns (Gruev,

Kalionski, 2019b: 8–33), a source of internal confrontation in local communities and a dividing line in the collective memory to the present day.

Prolonged periods of economic precarity in the twentieth century

Transhumant pastoralism, the traditional livelihood of Bulgarian Muslims in the Rhodope Mountains, used to involve winter migrations to the grasslands of the White/Aegean Sea plains. The establishment of the Bulgarian–Greek state border after the Balkan War in 1912 tore the natural geographical wholeness between the Rhodope Mountains and the White Sea plains, thus interrupting pastoral migrations between the Rhodope Mountains and the pastures near the Aegean seashores. Deprived of their main livelihood, the Bulgarian Muslim population experienced a sharp economic decline. According to documents of the Bulgarian security services, by the end of the 1940s large-scale cattle breeding was dying out and subsistence became problematic:

The strongly marked mountainous character of the Rhodope region, inhabited mainly by Bulgarian-Mohammedans, distinguishes it geographically, but also makes it dependent on the plain. Without the Plovdiv or the White Sea fields this area could not feed itself. The lack of food for the people and fodder for the livestock was particularly acute in spring and summer. Cattle breeding in the Rhodope area was the vital link between the mountains and the fields, mainly the White Sea region. After 1912, this link was broken without creating the same with the Plovdiv plain. Thanks to this, large-scale cattle breeding faded and disappeared. (Panov, 1947 [2014]: 61)

Another secret report (probably from the 1940s) states:

Their [the Bulgarian Muslims'] income was very small. They live under extremely harsh conditions. Their housing is unsanitary. Cases of people and cattle living together are not rare. The proximity of the border also has a bad impact on their livelihoods, as in many villages half of their properties are in Greek territory. (Papalezov, 2014: 192)

Tobacco cultivation since the early twentieth century has only partly compensated for the destruction of transhumant animal husbandry. Kristen Ghodsee (2010: 38) presents evidence of severe poverty and semi-starvation among Muslim families in the mid-century around Madan (Central Rhodopes).

The socialist modernisation project implemented structural changes in the economy of the Rhodope region through the creation of industrial employment. One

of the most significant industrialisation projects in the Rhodopes was the opening in 1950 of the mining enterprise GORUBSO with subdivisions in Madan, Rudozem and Zlatograd. GORUBSO contributed to the transformation of these settlements, new housing construction and improved infrastructure in the region. Together with the improvement of education among Bulgarian Muslims, this led to an increase in their standard of living during the second half of the socialist period (Büchsenshütz, 2000; Gruev, 2003: 144–156, 91–106; Ghodsee, 2010: 58–65; Karagiannis, 2012: 23–24).

The postsocialist changes after 1989 led to the bankruptcy of many enterprises, deindustrialisation and mass unemployment (Ghodsee, 2010: 66–85).¹² A state of precarity once again returned the world to the Bulgarian Muslims. Their mass emigration “to the West” after 2000 has not brought a sustainable solution to the problems. Emigrants’ money, either as investment in the construction and repair of housing or as remittances for families, visibly contributes to improving the condition of Bulgarian Muslim settlements, but emigration, on the other hand, threatens the region with depopulation¹³ (see Luleva, Benovska-Sabkova, Nedin, 2019: 179–215; Benovska-Sabkova, 2014: 95–108).

In addition to these general factors, the identities of Bulgarian Muslims are influenced by specific local contexts: historical, economic and socio-cultural. Not infrequently, significant differences are also found between two neighbouring villages. In what follows I present two cases: the city of Zlatograd and the village of Draginovo, without claiming that they are in any way representative. The case of Satovcha is distinguished by greater complexity and requires independent study. The two examples illustrate two different trends in the development of uncertain identities.

The consensus in Zlatograd

The city of Zlatograd (until 1934 known as Daradere) joined the Bulgarian state in 1912, after the Balkan War, together with most of the territory of the Rhodope Mountains; before then the city was part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1912, 120 Christian Bulgarian families and 200 Pomak families lived in Zlatograd (Miletič, 1918: 295). As a consequence of the three wars (the two Balkan Wars and World War I), some of the villages in the former Zlatograd county remained in the territory of Greece, to which they still belong (ibid: 291–292).

According to unofficial estimates, in the socialist era the Muslims of Zlatograd were five times more numerous than the city’s Christians.¹⁴ The economic boom in

12 The same processes took place in other parts of Bulgaria, as well as in other postsocialist countries in the 1990s. The mountainous area inhabited by Bulgarian Muslims and the scarcity of resources mean that crises take a more acute form there.

13 Apprehension about the depopulation of the Rhodope regions was expressed in an interview with E., born. 1972, in the village of Kochan, higher education, civil servant. 4 March 2016, Satovcha.

14 Interview with K. P., university education, engineer–geologist. 7 August 2013, Zlatograd.



First edition of the newly introduced “Feast of Zlatograd’s cheverme” [roasted lamb]. The opening ritual procession: men in folk costumes bringing the roasted lambs to the accompaniment of a “hundred kaba-gaidi” [bagpipes] orchestra. Photo: Milena Benovska, 5. 5. 2014.

the city and neighbouring municipalities under socialism was mainly related to the mining industry. The decisive impulse to transform the town into a tourist destination was the foundation of the Ethnographic Complex in 2001,¹⁵ a project initiated by businessman Alexander Mitushev and ethnographer Boris Tumangelov (1935–2007). Since then, the city has gradually transformed from a mining settlement into a tourist destination of national importance.

According to the 2021 census, the population of Zlatograd was 5,697¹⁶ but data on ethnicity and religion have not yet been published. In the 2011 census, the city had 5,271 inhabitants, 5,185 of whom declared Bulgarian ethnicity. The remaining eighty-six people declared their identity to be Turkish or “other”. In the nine villages that, together with the town, form the municipality of Zlatograd, the data are almost identical,¹⁷ as they are in the neighbouring municipalities of the Central Rhodopes.

15] The Ethnographic Complex is a cultural complex consisting of four museums, including an Ethnographic Museum, as well as nine craft workshops in restored historical buildings in the older part of the city.

16 <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2981/> (accessed 22 February 2024).

17 Naselenie [Population] 2011. National Statistical Institute. Available at: <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/pagebg2.php?p2=175&sp2=190> (accessed 1 August 2023).



Christians and Muslims celebrating St George's day together in Zlatograd, in the yard between St George's Church and the local Museum of Education. Photo: Milena Benovska, 6 May 2012.

The reliability of the statistics can be checked by comparing them with qualitative research on the use of personal names, clothing, conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity, religious tolerance and bi-confessional marriages between Christians and Muslims.

Several assimilation campaigns among Bulgarian Muslims in the twentieth century affected their personal names, religion and traditional culture. Because of this, but also because of the meaning of the personal name in Islamic doctrines, names and their operation are a particularly sensitive issue (Ghodsee, 2010; Gruev, Kalionski, 2019a; Deneva, 2013). In Zlatograd, however, personal names are not always informative about identity. For various reasons, mostly pragmatic, the choice of Bulgarian or Turkish–Arabic names may differ even between members of the same family.

The handling of personal names in Zlatograd testifies to an advanced, if incomplete, process of adopting a Bulgarian identity. Muslim names are not a preferred choice. Bulgarian names predominate, without avoiding those of a Christian character – in contrast to their avoidance elsewhere in the Rhodopes (Krasteva-Blagoeva, 2001: 129–134; Gruev, 2008).

Since the early 1960s, some Muslim families (usually families of communist activists) have voluntarily chosen Bulgarian names for their newborn children. In

2018, I had the chance to interview the first woman in Zlatograd who voluntarily changed her Turkish-Arabic name to Bulgarian and converted to Christianity in her teens.¹⁸ Her brothers were later named at birth with Bulgarian names. Her brothers did not go through the rite of circumcision. Apart from the memory of family background, nothing connects these people to Muslim identity. The same applies to other interlocutors.¹⁹ This is why there are middle-aged people in Zlatograd whose names were not changed in 1962–1964 because they already had Bulgarian names. Due to the successful and peaceful nature of the 1960s campaign, the inhabitants of Zlatograd were spared the next campaign of 1971–1974, which in places in the Western Rhodopes (see Gruev, Kalionski, 2019b: 8–33) reached the level of armed clashes. It is likely that the local communist elite was relatively successful in its attempts to strike a balance between the central state leadership and local Bulgarian Muslims.²⁰ At present, there are committed Bulgarian nationalists among the citizens of Zlatograd born into Muslim families.

The reverse – people who were given Bulgarian names at birth during socialism but changed them to Arab–Turkish ones following the end of that era – is less common. It is a trend among local Muslim religious activists, but not a universal one. Even among the most devout Muslim believers, there are people who have kept their Bulgarian names. One interlocutor, a professional party functionary during socialism who became a fervent Muslim after the fall of the Berlin Wall, kept his Bulgarian name. During an interview, he ostentatiously showed his Bulgarian passport and stressed, “I am Bulgarian, but with Muslim faith!”²¹

Clothing in Zlatograd is almost entirely European and as a rule cannot serve as a marker of identity due to the urban nature of the city’s culture and, possibly, due to the secular dress code imposed in industrial enterprises under socialism. Most small Rhodope towns are former villages which obtained the status of towns under socialism; unlike them, Zlatograd has been a city at least since the nineteenth century. Family albums from the early twentieth century preserve photographs of people in urban (European) dress. Nowadays, differently dressed people appear only on Fridays, having come to the town for market day or for Friday prayers from other Muslim settlements, including those in Greece. Their clothing displays signs of Muslim affiliation, such as distinctive knitted hats for men or tighter headscarves and long skirts for women.

A group conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity, triumphantly promoted by the national media in the 1990s, took place in Zlatograd and also involved people from the nearby settlements of Nedelino and Startsevo. In 1993, in St Nedelia Chapel at near Zlatograd, several “waves” of group baptisms of Muslims were carried out at

18 Interview with N. B., born 1945, pensioner. 9 June 2018, Zlatograd.

19 Interview with M. S., born 1962, teacher. 6 May 2014, Zlatograd.

20 Interview with N. N., born 1945, pensioner. 9 June 2018, Zlatograd.

21 Interview with S. P., born 1942, high school, pensioner. 11 July 2013, Zlatograd.

the initiative of the Orthodox missionary Father Boyan Saraev (1956–2023), himself of Muslim origin. The conversions are registered in the parish register of St Assumption of the Virgin Mary Church in Zlatograd. In the early twenty-first century, Father Saraev withdrew from group conversions. However, individual conversions attested in the parish register continue; some interviewees mentioned them, and one of the interlocutors had been baptised a month before we met in 2012. The scale of individual conversions was attested to by the then-local priest Father C., who baptised 200 people between 2011 and 2014.²²

However, conversions are not always perceived triumphantly. In September 2012, together with a student, Stanislava Hajdushka, I studied the parish register of the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. We were warned by the clergess not to record or publicise the names of converts, as some of them had stipulated that their conversion should remain a secret. In some cases, the reasons for changing religion were pragmatic, for example, where current or potential immigrants to countries with a strong Christian identity, such as Greece and Spain, decided to convert in order to facilitate their integration into those countries. Perhaps to avoid the effects of negative social control, incomplete information about the convert was recorded in the register.

Attitudes toward the “new” and “old” religion vary. Some converts adhere to “cultural religiosity”, accepting the basic Christian symbols but rarely going to church. Other converts, conversely, become “zealots” of Orthodoxy, but they are few. In most cases, conversion is a manifestation of positive personal transformation, but this “gesture” rather symbolises a crossing of the boundary between local confessional



Everyday and feast female outfits from Zlatograd, during the week of Zlatograd festivities. Photo: Milena Benovska, 21 September 2012.

²² Personal message by Father C. to Ilia Nedin and Ana Luleva. 2 May 2014, Zlatograd, in presence of local citizens.

groups. It is an action with a political meaning and is a sign of acceptance of Bulgarian identity insofar as some people perceive religion and ethnicity as identical. An interview with singers from a local folk group (in May 2014) ended with their exclamation, “We are for Christianity!”

The opportunistic motives in some of the personal conversions do not undermine their significance as a sign of acceptance of Bulgarian identity. Along with this, attitudes towards the “new” and the “old” religion sometimes change over the course of an individual’s personal history. As they grew older, some interlocutors developed an attachment to Orthodox Christianity. Others, conversely, remained nominally affiliated with it, but when life crises arose they turned to Muslim religious professionals for spiritual support. In some cases, individuals celebrated Christian holidays publicly while observing some Muslim feasts in private at home.

The atmosphere of mutual respect in Zlatograd is emphasised by maintaining the memory of common origins and kinship ties between Christian and Muslim families. The reminder “We are relatives!” is a symbol of understanding between the two groups.²³

An atmosphere of tolerance is also indicated by bi-confessional marriages/partnerships. There are no data on their number, but they are certainly not few. Some cases of individual conversion are motivated by intimacy and marital behaviour:²⁴ for example, one young Muslim man converted to Christianity in order to unite with his sweetheart who is a Christian, while a Christian Orthodox young man, conversely, married a young woman of Muslim origin. The parents of the young couples approved of their choice. The interviews show that intermarriage was already occurring in the 1960s.

The existence of a bi-confessional cemetery in Zlatograd where Muslims and Christians are buried is a continuation of the theme of tolerance. The cemetery has existed since 1976 and is often mentioned as a sign of good coexistence. The demolition of Muslim cemeteries and the establishment of common cemeteries alongside Christian cemeteries was part of the repressive campaigns against Muslims during socialism (Gruev, Kalionski, 2019a: 20). In the collective memory of Zlatograd, however, the traumatic events have been reinterpreted and their narrative has become a positive message affirming mutual respect.

While the bi-confessional cemetery is a symbol of tolerance in Zlatograd, for the Pomaks of the Greek village of Memkovo/ Μέδουσα, it is the only thing they disapprove of in the city. I heard this opinion in a conversation (together with students) with local people in Medoussa on 20 September 2012. Our driver, a forty-eight-year-old

23 The memory of a common origin with the Orthodox Bulgarians is preserved and elsewhere in the Rhodopes, and also among the Pomaks in Turkey: “Bulgarians and Pomaks are brothers, only one chooses the church, and the other chooses the mosque, and this is the difference between them” (Kyurkchieva, 2008: 459).

24 See interview with M. S., b. 1962, university education, school teacher. 6 May 2014, Zlatograd; Interview with L. V., b. 1971, university education, school teacher. 12 July 2013, Zlatograd.

man, spontaneously defended the Zlatograd point of view. On that day I noted in my diary:

Here, most unexpectedly, Dimitar intervenes, who until now has been trying to “translate” our words into the local dialect. [...] He says, “Well, how do I separate them now? My mother was Muslim, I buried her Muslim-style.” His father died soon after – he was buried Christian style. But in the same place. That was their wish and Dimitar respected it.

Although a symbol of good coexistence, the mixed cemetery is an ambivalent semiotic field. Each of the two religious groups adheres to its own ritual traditions. One Muslim interlocutor had learned from her grandmother a specific verbal practice when entering cemeteries, alternately pronouncing greetings to the dead, first “Christian-style” and then “Muslim-style”. This practice is an expression of respect, but also of the drawing of symbolic boundaries between the two communities.

Tolerance does not exclude internal differentiation between secularists and actively practicing Muslims, and between the latter and Christians. During fieldwork in 2012, 2013 and 2014, one point of disagreement was the construction of a second mosque in Zlatograd. For secular people of Muslim origin, attempts at re-Islamisation²⁵ in Zlatograd are unacceptable, and the construction of an excessively large and tall new mosque was perceived by them in exactly this way. This contradiction is visualised in the competition in height between the newly built mosque and the shopping centre located twenty metres away from it, crowned by a tall tower.

The contest between Christian and Muslim symbolism in the city is visualised through the “language” of urban space. Alongside the construction of the new mosque (2005–2014 – see Petia, 2014), a project to build four chapels is underway, involving both the construction of new edifices and the reconstruction of old ones. Known as the Cross Mountain (Krastata gora),²⁶ this project aspires to the supremacy of Christian symbolism in the symbolic geography of the city. The “catalyst” in this competition was the Ethnographic Complex referred to, located in the space of the historic nineteenth-century *charshiya* (commercial street), which includes nine traditional craft workshops, four museums, reconstructed historic buildings and newly built hotels designed in a traditional style.

25 Concerning re-Islamization in Rhodopes, see Ghodsee, 2010; Troeva, 2023. Building mosques in the foreign (to the Balkans) Arab architectural style is among the most visible manifestations of this process. Initially, the influence of Salafi Islam in Rhodopes was brought by the presence of Arab missionaries in the 1990s (Ghodsee, 2010: 143–150). Later on, missionaries were replaced by local imams educated in Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, etc. I conducted interviews with three imams, all alumni of Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, who were serving in Zlatograd and the villages of Satovcha and Valkosel.

26 Interview with A. M., born 1952, university education, engineer. 11 July 2013, Zlatograd; Interview with A. Sh., born 1945, university education, pensioner. 21 September 2012, Zlatograd.

At first glance, due to its worldly character, the Ethnographic Complex seems to be out of this “race”. However, as a museum project, it reconstructs (and invents) “national”, i.e. cultural, technologies and artefacts of the Bulgarian (Christian) majority. The ethnographic complex is a miniature image of the national cultural heritage and an emblem of the tourist industry. To the extent that Muslim cultural heritage in Bulgaria is insufficiently socialised and subject to open misrecognition (see, for example, Neuburger, 2004), it is in direct contradiction to idealised images of homogeneous Bulgarian cultural heritage historically linked to Orthodox Christianity. In this sense, tourism-related business interests are a direct incentive to transform urban space by reinforcing its Christian symbolism. Moreover, the cultural calendar of Zlatograd currently includes, apart from the official holidays of the country and the city, only holidays related to Christian traditions; Muslim holidays are not marked in it.²⁷

In general, the Bulgarian Muslim population of Zlatograd is going through an advanced process of adopting a Bulgarian identity. This is due to a number of factors, including the “soft” course of the 1962–1964 name-change campaign and the absence of severe trauma in collective and personal memories; the rapprochement between Christians and Muslims through Zlatograd’s urban culture in the twentieth century, which created common spaces for public communication, and through these communities’ common work in socialist enterprises; and the secularism associated with socialist modernisation (see Benovska-Sabkova, 2015). Manifestations of internal contradictions and fluctuations are also a sign of uncertain identity having not been fully overcome.

The village of Draginovo

The village of Draginovo (Korova – until 1971) is in the Northwestern Rhodopes, two kilometres from the city of Velingrad, Pazardzik region. Its population is 5,027 according to the 2021 census and it is the fourth most populous village in Bulgaria,²⁸ compactly populated with Muslim Bulgarians and about 400 Roma. This village is associated with two personalities significant for the entire Bulgarian Muslim community: Priest Metodi Draginov, considered to be the author of the seventeenth-century *Chronicle of Metodi Draginov*, a text of disputed authenticity (Todorov, 1984: 56–79); and the spiritual leader of all Muslims in Bulgaria, the Chief Mufti Mustafa Hadzi, born in Draginovo.²⁹

My contacts with Bulgarian Muslims from the village of Draginovo are the longest-standing, dating back to 1996. Following my research strategy, I did not ask

27 Cultural Calendar 2024. <https://www.zlatograd.bg/za-obshtinata/istoriya-i-kultura/kulturen-kalendar> (accessed 20 February 2024).

28 Data provided by the municipality of Draginovo.

29 <https://www.grandmufti.bg/bg/za-nas/glaven-myuftiya.html>. (accessed 3 February 2024).



The re-Islamization: the second new mosque in Draginovo, built in Arabic architectural style. Photo: Milena Benovska, 11 July 2020.

questions about the identity of my interlocutors. However, they themselves directed the conversation to this topic and this was also a test of my “trustworthiness”.

In 1997, one of the interlocutors developed a thesis regarding the “Slavic” origin of the Bulgarian Muslims: the people of Draginovo were (according to him) the descendants of mixed marriages between Slavic mothers and Turkish fathers; from their mothers they inherited their language, and from their fathers their religion.³⁰ The continuation of the conversation, planned for the next day, did not take place on the pretext that M. M. urgently had to slaughter a calf. I had failed to gain his trust... At our next meeting in 1999, he began to talk about his own identity. In the presence of a student group, he told them that he was Pomak, which meant that he was Bulgarian because he spoke Bulgarian but was Muslim by faith. This time M. M. abandoned the idiom of (quasi-)history and was interpreting his identity rather than his origins; his definition reflected the bifurcation of Bulgarian Muslim identity between language and religion. I heard similar opinions from other villagers, too.

The interlocutor’s altered view of his own identity expresses a “search for self” and, ultimately, an uncertain identity. The legendary motif of descent from Slavic mothers and Turkic fathers is a small part of a burgeoning narrative “creation” that

30 M. M., born 1942, primary education, worker. 1997, Draginovo.

has been going on since the mid-1990s, a production of quasi-historical legends noted by many authors (see Lozanova, 1998: 455; Brunnbauer, 1999: 49; Mincheva, 2005b; Ivanov, 2013: 21–27, etc.). The origin of the Bulgarian Muslims is linked in their social imagination with the Arabs, Turks, proto-Bulgarians, Cumans, Thracians, Slavs, Peyghambers [the first prophets of Islam], and so on. These legends are an expression of the rejection of Bulgarian origin among a proportion of the people, and of the non-acceptance of the idea of Islamisation in the past. Accepting the historical facts – regarding conversion from Orthodoxy to Islam – would relegate the Bulgarian Muslims to the role of apostates. Narratives are also expressions of identities that distinguish Bulgarian Muslims from both the Christian majority and the Turkish minority.

The Draginovo study “captured” two varieties of identification as “other” (non-Bulgarians and non-Turks): Pomaks (including in the ethnic sense) and Muslims. As in other parts of the Rhodopes (Ivanova, 2013b), some interlocutors ethnicised the term “Pomak”, rejecting its negative use and reinterpreting it in a positive way. The term “Muslim” contains ambivalence insofar as it refers to an indefinitely broad community of people – in Bulgaria and beyond. Despite the stated equal distancing from “Bulgarians” and “Turks”, the self-definitions Pomak and Muslim are an open door for the politics of Turkification led by certain social actors (the party of ethnic Turks, MRF, for example – see Mincheva, 2005b; Ivanova, 2013b: 19), for whom the most important distinction is from Christian Bulgarians.

I interpret the identifications “Bulgarians but Muslims by faith” and “Bulgarian–Mohammedans” as implying a degree of convergence with the Bulgarian identity. “Bulgarians but Muslims by faith” reflects the real double correlation: by language and by religion, respectively. As a linguistic construction, however, the emphasis falls on the definition “Bulgarian”: “Muslim” is a further refinement. Among those who define themselves by it are educated individuals familiar with and referring to historical academic literature. At first glance, “Bulgarian–Mohammedan” sounds like a synonym for the above. This outdated term – coined, used and instrumentalised during the assimilation campaigns of the past – carries the connotation of reconciliation with the ascribed designation of “outside” (by the politics of assimilation) and, at the same time, implies a refusal to accept the designation as pejorative. From what has been said, the internal heterogeneity of the so-called “other” option is evident.

The traumatic memory of the assimilation policy and communist repression of the 1970s and 1980s, is stronger and more vivid in Draginovo than in Zlatograd. The memory of repression was recent and quite vivid during the fieldwork in 1996–1999. I recorded accounts of entire families fleeing to the mountains or to another settlement to avoid name changes. Some of the narratives show a direct correlation between repression on the one hand, and resistance to it as a sign of personal identity on the other. “Back then, I wanted to wear a headscarf [banned during socialism]. Now it’s liberated and I don’t feel like wearing a headscarf,” said one young woman, one of the few exceptions of European-dressed women in the



The beginning of the wedding horo-dances. Draginovo. Photo: Milena Benovska, 29 July 2023.

1990s in the village.³¹ Traumatic memory is a stimulus for “self-searching” and, at the same time, the basis of an uncertain identity; the declaration of a “fan” of identities is a logical outcome.

The village of Draginovo is characterised by cultural “diglossia” (Benovska-Sabkova, 2006) in the sense in which Michael Herzfeld associates the term diglossia with culture (Herzfeld, 1996: 286). The term refers to switching between two cultural codes, each of which refers to different heritage and values. The most visible manifestations of diglossia are the multiple utilisation of personal names and women’s clothing.

Every inhabitant of Draginovo is known, from early childhood, by two names (Turkish–Arabic and Bulgarian), but also by a nickname. This is not just an opportunistic use of Bulgarian names in formal situations and Muslim names in informal settings. It is, moreover, about fluctuations and plurality in everyday uses of names in communication.³² The confusion comes mostly from the preference for nicknames in everyday context. Their informal use is, of course, not specific to Draginovo. Being called by a nickname is also an “escape” from the choice between

³¹ Informal interview with A. B., born 1969, school teacher. 1999, Draginovo.

³² See also Deneva, 2013 on this matter.



Wedding rituals in Draginovo: breaking the ritual loafs of bread. Photo: Milena Benovska, 29 July 2023.

Bulgarian and Muslim names. Paradoxically, the attempt to overcome the hesitation between the two options is a source of communicative uncertainty. The uncertain identity finds expression through the multiple use of personal names. However, this uncertainty is not unproblematic: in order to have one name, one family recently enrolled their newborn child with a newly invented name unrelated to either the Bulgarian or Muslim naming system.

The use of two (or more) names has been the subject of fierce discussion among Bulgarian Muslims themselves in Facebook groups belonging to them.³³ The extreme advocates of Muslim “purism” – that is, the use of only one Muslim name – harshly criticise others while in turn defending

their own choice. This is another proof of the differences, internal contradictions and lack of consensus among Bulgarian Muslims.

Overall, the practices of multiple name usage in Draginovo have not changed significantly from the 1990s to 2023. The issue of women’s clothing, however, has undergone mixed changes. In the 1990s there was a switch between three modes of women’s clothing: semi-traditional clothing in everyday life; standard European clothing when travelling outside the village and the same for children and schoolgirls at school; and fully traditional hand-woven festive costume for holidays. In the 1990s all women, including girls in infancy, wore headscarves.³⁴ By 2022–2023, this practice had lost its universal character and, as a rule, young girls have their heads uncovered.

In 2018, I noticed a new type of clothing previously unknown. Married women around the age of forty wear ankle-length skirts; in their festive version they are sewn from bright shiny fabrics. Women who in everyday life are dressed in standard European clothing also wear long skirts for the festive event, while younger married

³³ See, for example, the Facebook group Pomashka dusha [Pomak Soul], a private group, 33,600 members. Discussion: 4.–6.12.2020. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/247298268805764> (last accessed 6 December 2020).

³⁴ See more on women’s clothing in Benovska-Sabkova, 2006.



A mother and her boy getting ready for the first free celebration of syunet [circumcision] in March 1990, after the ritual had banned for decades under socialism. Draginovo. Photo: Milena Benovska.

women continue to wear the traditional hand-woven (knee-length) costumes familiar since the 1990s.

Clothing usage has transformed and differentiated over the past two and a half decades. Standard European clothing has become mainstream among young girls and women in everyday life; however, clothing unknown in the past has also emerged: long skirts. They are an expression of Islamic piety: “for the sake of the faith”,³⁵ as a group of women dressed in this way explained. To recall, mainstream Islam assigns women the role of guardians of moral traditions. It is visualised through the wearing of specific clothing covering most of the body and includes veiling (Evstatieva, 2022: 164–165). The long skirts were most likely adopted under the influence of existing women’s groups in the village for studying the Qur’an (Olson, 2018: 560–580).

Women’s dress in Draginovo reveals the impact of contradictory socio-cultural processes: of secularism and modernisation of everyday life on the one hand, and tendencies towards re-Islamisation on the other. The economic situation in the village, marked by mass unemployment, closed local businesses and survival through subsistence in 1996–1997, has improved significantly, based on observations in 2022–2023. Due to its proximity to the city of Velingrad, the economies of the village

³⁵ Group interview with four female workers, in their early forties. 21 May 2023, Draginovo.

and the town are in a state of “osmosis”. The village mayor proudly noted in 2022 that there is “no unemployment” in Draginovo and that “every second person” works in Velingrad³⁶ – in the tourism industry as well as in other enterprises. A number of small enterprises operate in the village itself.³⁷

Overcoming mass poverty, working in a nearby city and economic emigration are prerequisites for overcoming the former closedness of a quarter of a century ago. However, opposite trends are also noticeable. The transformation of the local primary school into a secondary school in 2009³⁸ has meant that students from Draginovo are no longer educated in the city, and this has partly limited urban influences on the village.

Some interlocutors found a correlation between the latter fact and re-Islamisation processes. In 2022, a teacher gave her students in Draginovo *martenitsi*³⁹ on the occasion of the First of March festivities; half of the children did not accept the gift because it was a “pagan tradition” incompatible with the Islamic faith.⁴⁰ However, this sentiment is not shared by everyone in the village and the tradition of *martenitsi* continues to exist.⁴¹ Uncertainty at the individual level is shown in the following example. Despite their long sojourn in abroad in a secular and multicultural environment, one family developed a strong commitment to religion after returning to Draginovo. Whether this attachment is enduring or whether there are opportunistic reasons for it, only time will tell. Divergent and non-linear shifts of strategies towards basic identity markers such as religiosity are expressions of an uncertain identity.

The most visible expression of the re-Islamisation trend in the village is the construction of a new, second mosque between 2012–2018. The initiative was taken by the Chief Mufti, Mustafa Hadzi, who had a personal hand in raising funds from sponsoring businessmen.⁴² The temple does not follow the architectural style of traditional “Balkan Islam” (of which the old mosque in Draginovo is a model), but a style typical of Arab countries, also imposed elsewhere in the Balkans. This replacement in the style of Islamic cultic architecture is seen as a form of re-Islamisation (Ghodsee, 2010: 130–149; Troeva, 2023).

Trends towards re-Islamisation are only one of the divergent and contradictory impacts on the local community. My observations during the Second National Folk Festival in the village of Draginovo (1–2 September 2023) show this well. On the one hand, the event was saturated with Bulgarian nationalist symbolism, typical of folklore

36 Interview with Biser Madzirov, Mayor of Draginovo. 1 November 2022, Draginovo.

37 The number of economic emigrants is, however, around 300 people. Information from the town hall – Draginovo.

38 See: <https://sou-draginovo.org/about-us.html>. (accessed 20 February 2024).

39 *Martenitsa*: a ritual object of white and red threads, given as a gift on the first day of March in Bulgaria (and elsewhere in the Balkans); inscribed in 2017 on the UNESCO World Intangible Cultural Heritage list.

40 Interview with S. M., born 1967, university education, historian. 2 November 2022, city of Velingrad.

41 <https://www.facebook.com/pigoipenda/>: a child from Draginovo was awarded first prize in a national competition for production of *martenitsi* (accessed 1 March 2024).

42 Informal interview with B. M., born 1957, university education, pensioner. 18 May 2023, Draginovo.

festivals in Bulgaria in general. During the opening ceremony, the mayor of Draginovo, holding a large national flag in his hand, led a chain dance. On the other hand, during the official opening, the Chief Mufti and the Deputy Governor of Pazardzhik Region (Bulgarian is the native language for both of them) gave speeches in Turkish, on the pretext of the presence of a considerable group of guests from Akören-köy: the twin village of Draginovo in Turkey. The representatives of the Bulgarian institutions referred to were on the edge of the law, as public political speeches in a foreign language are not allowed by Bulgarian law. The simultaneous pressure from Bulgarian nationalist forces on the one hand, and the attempts to Turkify Bulgarian Muslims on the other, are an obstacle to overcoming the internal communal contradictions in Draginovo. This situation is a breeding ground for uncertain identities.

Uncertain identities – conclusion

Feelings of uncertainty caused by traumatic memory, as well as political and economic instability, motivate the drive to reduce insecurity in the process of identification. Cognitive effort, the search for meaning – an answer to the question “who are we?” – is part of this process. In the case of Bulgarian Muslims, the paradoxical result of this effort is the reproduction of uncertainty in other forms (e.g. quasi-historical legends of origin). The two examples presented show that uncertain identity is less pronounced where the perception and memory of trauma is less acute (as in case of the Zlatograd). Economic precarity, on the other hand, is like an open door for divergent influences; this, as well as the highly inconsistent and contradictory Bulgarian minority policies, contribute to keeping personal and collective identities in a state of uncertainty.

Uncertain identity is an open-ended non-linear process in search of belonging where instability periodically returns. Uncertain identity is also similar to marginality, which is, however, a relational concept: marginal in relation to what are Bulgarian Muslim identities? The latter can only be considered marginal in relation to the idealised notion of a monolithic identity whose existence is contested in the contemporary world of “overheating” and global uncertainty. According to an extreme constructivist definition, 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” (Sahliyah, 1993: 178). In this sense, uncertainty is not an anomaly, but is to some extent intrinsic to identities.

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