



THEME 2: Intercultural Dialogue

Teaching and Learning Help

Bulgaria

Three Faces of Integration: Turks, Roma and Muslims of Bulgarian Origin

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1 Preliminary remarks regarding use of terms

1.1 Integration

At the outset it needs to be stated what is meant by the integration of a social group within a majority society. Specifically, there needs to be determination of whether the term integration

- a) implies set objectives, i.e. content that must be present, e.g.:
 - Full integration will provide a high degree of equality of opportunity in education, occupational choice and standard of living. Moreover, it will be characterized by mutual acceptance in respect of language, religious beliefs and customs.
 - If integration is to be deemed complete, day-to-day behaviour in all groups needs markedly to involve pro-active attempts to understand each other within an atmosphere of composed level-headedness.

If the term integration is considered to denote such content, then

- b) de facto efforts at integration or refusals to be integrated can be measured.
 - Are government steps undertaken or opportunities used to remove socio-economic disparities, e.g. at school, at work and in the life of the community?
 - As regards personal identity, do conscious or spontaneous violations (or defensive reactions) occur during day-to-day encounters? In any given context, what degrees of individual commitment are involved?

1.2 Subjects of integration

- a) Providing that there is a desire for everyone to live in an integrated nation State, in which every ethnic, language and confessional group has the same rights and opportunities of self-fulfilment as any other, and assuming that a civil society is meant to make all the necessary social and welfare provisions – also for minorities – then
- b) the nation State and civil society must also be the subject or motor of integration.
- c) As integration presupposes inter-subjective, interpersonal acts however, it must always be thought of in terms of a subject-object relationship, whereby each individual is both a subject and an object in the integrative process.

1.3 Legal correctives or tools of integration policy, meant to counteract the political fragmentation of society, but which in fact promote this very fragmentation.

- The easing of restrictions in respect of the granting of Bulgarian nationality to individuals of Bulgarian descent (s. Ts 202/1)

- The separation of State and confessional institutions, plus Constitutional preference for Eastern Orthodoxy (s. Ts 202/2)
- The prohibition of ethnic, confessional and racial political parties within a professed political pluralism (s. Ts 202/3)
- Rulings in respect of the political activities of associations and amalgamations (s. Ts 202/4)
- Formal and de facto integration instead of the assimilation of (quasi)-minorities
By which are meant a) groups differing from the majority in terms of ethnicity or language but which are characterized by no social divergence, b) ethnic, linguistic, confessional groups which, as such, form majorities in certain regions of a nation State.

From a legal viewpoint, the Bulgarian Constitution of 1991 contains no obstacles to integration. The difficulties have been and continue to be of an historical, social and economic variety that are only partially amenable to control through the nation State.

2. The problem of social classification

In the case of almost all Balkan peoples, an exact differentiation between minorities and majorities is not an easy one to make, the more so as there are at times considerable differences between

- a) the self-identification made and felt by any one individual and
- b) the externally applied criteria to categorize membership of particular groups.

Thus, 86%-95% of the population feel they belong to a certain group because of their family name or religious denomination, but absolute external confirmation of these feelings, as provided by other individuals, produces a percentage of only 65%-74%. In the case of language, instinctively felt identification and external evaluation practically coincide at 85%-86%. This means that the latter characteristic is the most certain practicable marker on which to base identification or classification.

Individual identification with a people or State fluctuates considerably between 65% and 86% in the entire population, with the result that external classification is only possible with a margin of certainty of 60%-85%. Chart Gs 202/1 shows a variety of data for Bulgarian minorities depending on which organization undertook the surveys. The large fluctuations in the case of Roma are explicable through the three most significant characteristics of internal and external identification. Thus, whereas name, religious faith and language are equivocally determined and acknowledged - even among many Roma themselves - as being "Roma-Bulgarian and/or "Roma-Turkish", Bulgarians and Turks mostly classify these as clearly being "Gypsy".

Map Cs 202/1 provides an overview of the geographic distribution of particular social groups in Bulgaria. Map Cs 202/2 demonstrates where there is segregation of Roma, through the numerous schools with a higher than 50 per cent Romany contingent.

2.1 Various degrees of autonomy

Table Gs 202/2 shows that Turks can be clearly differentiated from Bulgarians through name, language, religious belief and ethnicity. Only where nationality is concerned can an ambivalent relationship to the Bulgarian State be observed, i.e. in formal, legal terms nationality can be assumed to exist, in actual fact however, identification is uncertain – their nation State, from a literal, ethnic viewpoint, being Turkey.

In the case of Roma, as far as name, language and ethnicity are concerned there are elements that are both their own and also Bulgarian – Christian Orthodox and Islamic. A nationality of their own, fully experienced as such, shows little sign of emergence.

Where Muslims of Bulgarian descent (Pomaks) are concerned, the idiosyncrasies are ambivalent to extents similar to those of Roma. However, since this group is made up of only some 100,000 individuals, there is greatest likelihood of integration here.

3. The difference between the desire for integration and reality

- Employment is a sphere that would provide ideal opportunities for integration. Within it however, there is a scarcity of jobs that allow an appropriate standard of living, and ways of thinking remain traditionalist and hierarchical.
- Education could accomplish a merging of minds. In reality it ensures that it is the “truths” acknowledged within any particular grouping that are passed on.
- Day-to-day encounters between members of different social groups actually require both parties to “cross the cultural divide”. In fact, everyday existence among the various groupings in the population tends to involve people keeping their distance.

4. Factors hindering integration

4.1 Poverty and unemployment

Bulgaria is one of the poorest countries in Europe. Some 22% of the population live below the poverty line. Of these the poorest are Romany - some 84% of Roma have only one euro or less a day at their disposal. Such extreme poverty reduces any chance of integration – when grasped unaided – to a minimum. (s. chart Gs 202/3)

One reason for the privation is the high rate of unemployment, particularly in the case of Roma (35% to 50%) and within the Turkish minority (25% to 35%); the majority of the unemployed live in parts of the country comprising more rural environments. In Sofia on the other hand, unemployment stands at between 3% and 4%, and the average for the country as a whole is around 11%.

4.2 Low educational attainment among minorities

School attendance in Bulgaria is compulsory from age six/seven till the age of sixteen. Phase I of Basic Education (Elementary Stage) spans Classes 1 to 4 of Elementary School, and lasts to age ten/eleven. Phase II is preparatory (Pre-Secondary Stage) and takes place in Classes 5 through to 7/8 at Elementary School, culminating in the Certificate of Completed Basic Education. Thereafter, a pupil proceeds to one of various Secondary schools, such as a Professional, Comprehensive, Specialized or Vocational-Technical Secondary School. With the exception of the Professional Secondary School, these also provide education beyond the compulsory age and take pupils on to gain specialist qualifications and/or certificates in Classes 8/9 to 10. The highest qualification at Secondary Level II, the Diploma of Completed Secondary Education, is obtained in Class 12 or 13.

The differences in levels of attainment among the individual population groups are marked (s. chart Gs 202/4). 55% of pupils of the Turkish minority in any year have only a Certificate of Completed Basic Education. That said, some 27% of a year's leavers obtain a Diploma of Completed Secondary Education, but with only 3% completing a university degree course and around 5% remaining illiterate.

In the case of Romany schoolchildren, only some 65% have basic education in the Elementary School, of whom only 45% of a year obtain a Certificate of Completed Basic Education in Class 7 or 8, some 18% obtain a Diploma of Completed Secondary Education, but only 1% complete study at university, the number of illiterate standing at around 13%.

In the case of Bulgarians, some 22% in any year have a Certificate of Completed Basic Education, but around 54% manage the full Diploma of Completed Secondary Education and around 22% gain university degrees, whereas the rate of illiteracy lies at between 1% and 2%.

Particularly at the top end of secondary education there is a huge potential for integration, but because parents lack the finance and take a reserved attitude towards schooling, further educational obstacles are posed on the path towards integration into the majority society.

Speaking against integration is a de facto segregation in schools; the majority of pupils of Turkish extraction are concentrated in 120 elementary schools and 34 secondary schools; Romany children are concentrated in 350 elementary schools but only 17 secondary schools. (s. chart Gs 202/5) More than 85% of school populations in “institutions” (schools for the mentally handicapped, orphanages, prison schools etc.) are Romany.

Here, too, a considerable educational divide can be observed between Turks and Roma on the one hand and the Bulgarian population on the other, whereby hardly any difference can be noted between Pomaks and Bulgarians, either in education or in the division of labour.

4.3 Social distancing in day-to-day dealings among the individual groups in the population

Table Gs 202/6 illustrates that there are varying degrees of mutual dislike between particular groups in the population of Bulgaria.

For example, around 77% of Bulgarians would not enter into marriage with a Romany partner. Turks have a similar aversion to Roma. However, only 54% are against marriage between Bulgarians and Turks, and 48% of Turks would marry a Bulgarian.

86% of Roma would affirm a friendship between Bulgarians and Roma, but only 74% of Bulgarians. Social distancing between Turks and Roma in terms of friendship is also greater than that between Bulgarians and Turks.

Similar antipathy also comes to light on the issue of wishing to have Roma as neighbours or not.

Across the board, Roma feel less antipathy towards Bulgarians and Turks than the other way round. It is no surprise that the greater the social distancing between Bulgarians and Turks on the one hand and Roma on the other, the more likely there are to be corresponding defensive reactions in everyday life. In the case of municipal housing estates this has led to the formation of full-blown ghettos.

As early as the 1980s, the then communist government sought to forcibly “Bulgarianize” the inhabitants of Turkish descent in the country, which resulted in some 350,000 people migrating to Turkey. After the collapse of communism, the measures introduced were however revoked, which, combined with Bulgaria’s rapprochement with the EU, has brought thousands of Turks back to Bulgaria or led to their acquiring dual nationality.

5. Future prospects

Integration of the Turkish minority into Bulgarian society is likely to continue via its own agencies within the scope of State institutions already in place, or new official organs set up to safeguard the interests of minority groups. It will not be easy to speak of a fully-fledged form of integration, however, since the Turks in certain regions of Bulgaria are in the majority and have a political and cultural clout there that in certain circumstances brings out self-autonomous sentiments.

Romany integration is considerably more problematic. The lack of educational qualifications, unemployment and marginalization prevalent among a large section of this population are all exploited for political ends, a situation that is exacerbated at present by the nationalistic bias that some of the social groups within the Bulgarian populace exhibit against Roma (and also – against Turks). Proposed State policy for the integration of Roma and Turks is described by members representing these tendencies in Parliament as a “denationalization” of the State. Indeed, some 38% of the Bulgarian population desire to solve the problems through ethnic migration. As table Gs 202/7 shows, a third of Bulgarians are even reluctant to be buried in a cemetery beside Roma.

The relatively small group of Muslims of Bulgarian extraction has long been integrated and it is difficult to tell it apart from the Bulgarian majority. In the course of time, it will probably gradually merge with the majority society, since religious differences have always played a lesser role in Bulgaria.

Many of the obstructions that Bulgaria still faces today on its path towards being a "nation State" with the greatest possible measure of ethnic "homogeneity" will recede when the country itself joins the EU and becomes a constituent member of a multiethnic and multi-confessional union. This notwithstanding, the problems arising from the social and economic disparities between the particular groups within the population will only take a turn for the better if the economic situation of the country improves and there is an availability of sufficient funds for investment at every level of education.

Translated from the original German by: *Sandy A Pirie*

Sources and literature

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The charts, tables and maps mentioned in the text are to be found in the Material Collection on Theme 2 of the COMCULT Network.