

## Country Report

# Bulgaria

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This Country Report offers a detailed assessment of religious diversity and violent religious radicalisation in the above-named state. It is part of a series covering 23 countries (listed below) on four continents. More basic information about religious affiliation and state-religion relations in these states is available in our Country Profiles series. This report was produced by GREASE, an EU-funded research project investigating religious diversity, secularism and religiously inspired radicalisation.

### **Countries covered in this series:**

Albania, Australia, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Egypt, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Russia, Slovakia, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

<http://grease.eu.eu>



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**The EU-Funded GREASE project looks to Asia for insights on governing religious diversity and preventing radicalisation.**

Involving researchers from Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, GREASE is investigating how religious diversity is governed in over 20 countries. Our work focuses on comparing norms, laws and practices that may (or may not) prove useful in preventing religious radicalisation. Our research also sheds light on how different societies cope with the challenge of integrating religious minorities and migrants. The aim is to deepen our understanding of how religious diversity can be governed successfully, with an emphasis on countering radicalisation trends.

While exploring religious governance models in other parts of the world, GREASE also attempts to unravel the European paradox of religious radicalisation despite growing secularisation. We consider the claim that migrant integration in Europe has failed because second generation youth have become marginalised and radicalised, with some turning to jihadist terrorism networks. The researchers aim to deliver innovative academic thinking on secularisation and radicalisation while offering insights for governance of religious diversity.

The project is being coordinated by Professor Anna Triandafyllidou from The European University Institute (EUI) in Italy. Other consortium members include Professor Tariq Modood from The University of Bristol (UK); Dr. H. A. Hellyer from the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) (UK); Dr. Mila Mancheva from The Centre for the Study of Democracy (Bulgaria); Dr. Egdunas Raciunas from Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania); Mr. Terry Martin from the research communications agency SPIA (Germany); Professor Mehdi Lahlou from Mohammed V University of Rabat (Morocco); Professor Haldun Gulalp of The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (Turkey); Professor Pradana Boy of Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (Indonesia); Professor Zawawi Ibrahim of The Strategic Information and Research Development Centre (Malaysia); Professor Gurpreet Mahajan of Jawaharlal Nehru University (India); and Professor Michele Grossman of Deakin University (Melbourne, Australia). GREASE is scheduled for completion in 2022.

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GREASE - Radicalisation, Secularism and the Governance of Religion: Bringing Together European and Asian Perspectives

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## Introduction

Since its foundation as modern national state in 1878 Bulgaria emerged as multi-confessional secular state with proclaimed freedom of religious beliefs. With respect to the historical context Orthodox Christianity as the religion of the majority of Bulgaria's population constituted an important aspect of Bulgarian cultural and national identity while the largest minority religion, that of Islam, has been perceived as the "other" within the construct of the Bulgarian national idea. With the exception of the communist period the relationship between state and religion has been dominated by two-way autonomy with the government exerting moderate control over country's denominations and Orthodox Christianity being designated as dominant faith. Throughout the end of the XIXth century to the present particular state institutions have been designated to supervise denominations and maintain and negotiate the relationship with the state – they have had different levels of control with the most aggressive interferences observed in the communist period. In the pre-WW II period this role was played by the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Denominations, during the socialist period this role was played by the Committee on the Matters of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Religious Cults at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Today, these functions are undertaken by the Council of Ministers' Directorate of Denominations. During the communist period (1944 – 1989) Bulgarian society was subjected to a process of forced secularization dominated by policy of state promoted atheism and full subjugation of the Orthodox Church which was deprived of both its autonomy and public prestige. The communist suppression of religion did impact the period after 1989 which has been characterized by low levels of canonical literacy among Bulgarian citizens and by weak and divided structures of country's biggest denominations.

This report is structured in four chapters. The first chapter outlines the ethno-confessional structure of Bulgarian population and the attendant socio-economic characteristics. The second chapter traces the dynamics of state-religion relations and the governance of religious diversity. Chapters three and four aim to discuss how global phenomena of radicalisation influence Bulgarian society, how these influences are manifested in the country and how are they perceived and addressed by Bulgarian institutions and society.

## Population Composition

### Current composition of the population, economic and challenges arising from it

As of 2018 the population of Bulgaria amounts to 7 000 039 persons. The country's negative natural growth coefficient is – 6,5% with the population having decreased with 46 329 persons between 2017 and 2018<sup>1</sup>. The ethnic and religious composition of Bulgaria's population is diverse and can be discussed based on the results from the last

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<sup>1</sup> НСИ, Население и демографски процеси през 2018 г., достъпно на:  
[http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Population2018\\_ZG7X53J.pdf](http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/Population2018_ZG7X53J.pdf)

census conducted in 2011. The majority of country's population are ethnic Bulgarians (84.8 %), with Turks being the largest ethnic minority (8.8 % from the total population), followed by Roma who from a share of 4.9 % (325,343 persons). The Turkish and the Roma communities are historic minorities that have been formed during the centuries of Ottoman domination between XIV and XIX century. Smaller ethnic minorities such as Armenians, Aromanians, Jews and Valachs from a share of 0.7 % of the total population.

**Table 1: Population of Bulgaria by ethnicity in 2011**

<b>Ethnic affiliation</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Share</b>
Total population	7,364,570	100 %
Bulgarians	5,664,624	84.8 %
Turks	588,318	8.8 %
Roma	325,343	4.9 %
Other	44,304	0.7 %
Not declared	53,391	0.8 %
Ethnic affiliation	Number	Share

*Source: National Statistical Institute, National Census Results 2011*

When it comes to religious affiliation the majority of the country's population professes Orthodox Christianity (76%). The largest religious minority is that of Muslims (10%). There are a number of other religious denominations that encompass very small communities: Protestants 1.1%, Catholics (including Uniates) 0.8%, Armenian-Gregorians 0.03% and Jews 0.01%.

**Table 2: Population of Bulgaria by denomination in 2011<sup>2</sup>**

<b>Denomination</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Share</b>
Total population	7,364,570	
Those who responded to the question of religious affiliation	5,758,301	100 %
Eastern Orthodox	4,374,135	76 %
Muslim	577,139	10 %
Catholic	48,954	0.8 %
Protestant	64,476	1.1 %
Jewish	706	0.0 %
Armenian – Gregorian	1,715	0.0 %
Not self-identified	409,898	7.1 %

*Source: National Statistical Institute, National Census Results 2011*

<sup>2</sup> НСИ (2012) Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 г. Том 1 Население. Книга 2 – Демографски и социални характеристики, с. 132.

While Orthodox Christianity is professed exclusively by ethnic Bulgarians, Islam is the religion of different ethnic groups, all of which are old historic minorities: Turks, Bulgarians (Bulgarian speaking Muslims) and Roma. The Bulgarian speaking Muslims are a community formed during the Ottoman domination when under various circumstances they converted from Christianity to Islam. Members of this community today self-identify in three different ways. Some of them consider and declare themselves Bulgarians, other Turks and a third group self-identify as Pomaks. All of them are Muslims with Bulgarian being their mother tongue.<sup>3</sup> Members of the Roma community share different religious affiliations, including Orthodox Christianity, Evangelism and Islam. Owing to a tendency among some Roma to self-identify as Bulgarians (those professing Eastern Orthodoxy, Catholicism or Protestantism) or as Turks (those professing Islam), different researchers put the number of Roma in 2008 between 641,735 and 831,130 people.<sup>4</sup> A note should be made that processes of conversions from one religious profession to another within the Roma community area common phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 3: Distribution of religious affiliations among self-identifying ethnic Bulgarians<sup>6</sup>**

East-Orthodox Christians	4, 240, 422	86.70 %
Catholics	43, 985	0.90 %
Protestants	36, 613	0.75 %
Muslims	67, 350	1.38 %
No religion	222, 387	4.55 %
Not stated	273, 891	5.60 %

Source: NSI Census results 2011

**Table 4: Distribution of religious affiliations among self-identifying ethnic Turks**

Sunni Muslims	20, 816	87.60 %
Shi'a Muslims	21, 260	4.10 %
Muslims not specifying Sunni or Shi'a	2, 008	0.42 %
East-Orthodox Christians	5, 279	1, 10 %
Catholics	1, 182	0.25 %
Protestants	2, 400	0.50 %
No religion	14, 698	3.06 %
Not stated	39, 529	7.23 %

Source: NSI Census results 2011

<sup>3</sup> To pay respect to the differentiating ways in which members of this community self-identify, the term chosen to denote them in this report is Bulgarian speaking Muslims. For a detailed account of the representation of Bulgarian speaking Muslims in the demographic statistics note: Иванов, М (2012) „Помациите в българската етнодемографска статистика“, сп. Население, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> Отворенообщество (2008) Ромите в България. Информационен справочник. Институт „Отворенообщество“ – София.

<sup>5</sup> Беновска-Събкова, М. и Велислав Алтънов (2010), „Евангелската конверсия сред ромите в България: между глобалното и локалното“, в: Българска етнология, бр 1-2, 32-50; Славкова, М. (2004) „Турските цигани в България и евангелското движение“, в: Българска етнология, бр. 3: 17.

<sup>6</sup> Data in tables 3-5 is based on 2011 Census results, cited in: Evstatiev, S., P. Makariev and D. Kalkandjieva (2015) Christianity, Islam, and Human Rights in Bulgaria, in: Ziebertz Hans-Georg, G. Cripic (eds.) Religion and Human Rights. An International Perspective, Springer, pp. 1-17.

**Table 5: Distribution of religious affiliations among self-identifying Roma**

East-Orthodox Christians	84, 867	36.60%
Muslims	42, 201	18.30 %
Protestants	23, 289	10.10 %
No religion	30, 491	13.22 %
Not stated	49, 491	21.46 %

Source: NSI Census results 2011

The majority of Muslims in Bulgaria are *Hanafi Sunni* (95 % or 546,004 persons) followed by a small *Shi'a* community (27, 407 persons). It shall be noted that in the National census the only available Islamic denomination different from *Sunni* is that of *Shia*. In effect many of the Muslims who are Alevi/ Kizlibashi/ Bektasji identify as Shia for census purposes (to distinguish themselves from the *Sunni* Muslims). Not given proper option to self-identify these communities formed out of old heterodox orders, evolved across the Balkans during the Ottoman rule, remain somewhat silent and invisible minority within the Turkish/ Muslim minority in Bulgaria. Both the *Sunni* and the minority of *Shi'a* (as per census denomination) profess traditional Islam which has been developed under the influence of the Ottoman Empire and during centuries of interaction with majority Christian populations. This Islamic tradition is different from interpretations and practices of Islam across other continents and was termed “Balkan Islam” by one of the leading scholars in the field Alexandre Popovic.<sup>7</sup>

A note of importance is that the share of both the Orthodox Christian and the Muslim population in the country decreased as compared to previous national censuses.

**Table 6: Population of Bulgaria by denomination in 1992 - 2011<sup>8</sup>**

Denomination	1992	2001	2011
Total population	7, 274 592	7, 928 901	7, 364,570
Eastern Orthodox	85.7 %	82.6 %	76 %
Muslim	13.1 %	12.2 %	10 %
No affiliation declared	0.1 %	3.9 %	7.1 %

Source: National Statistical Institute, National Census Results 2011

The gradual decrease observed since 1992 is due to the increasing share of people who have not declared religious affiliation in the national censuses (from 0.1% in 1992 to 7.1% in 2011).<sup>9</sup> The decrease could be the outcome of lower levels of affiliation with religion for some members of the Bulgarian society (i.e. secularisation) or could be due to unwillingness on the part of some Muslims to affiliate themselves officially with Islam due to a public atmosphere of prejudice and suspicion towards this denomination. It shall be noted that 21.8 % of national census respondents did not provide an answer to the question of religious affiliation. The fact that the majority of them belong to young age groups and come from the three biggest cities

<sup>7</sup> Popovic, Alexandre (1986) L'Islam balkanique: les musulmans du sud-est européen dans la période postottomane.

<sup>8</sup> НСИ (2012) Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 г. Том 1 Население. Книга 2 – Демографски и социални характеристики, с. 132.

<sup>9</sup> НСИ (2012) Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 г. Том 1 Население. Книга 2 – Демографски и социални характеристики, с. 132.

of the country (Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna) speaks that this might be an indication of secularisation. Additionally, the fact that 7.1% of the population (that responded to the question of religious affiliation) did not declare religious affiliation and 4.7 % declared that they have no particular religion<sup>10</sup> could also be viewed as an indication of secularisation (a total of 682, 162 persons or 11.8 % of the total population).

It should be noted that religiosity in the canonical sense has not been high in Bulgarian society taken both the historical and the contemporary perspective. Experts in the field usually prefer definitions such as ‘traditional Christianity’ and ‘traditional Islam’ to explain the specifics of religiousness in Bulgaria – often characterized as a mixture of pagan beliefs and practices covered by a thin layer of official religion.<sup>11</sup> Many of those who declared themselves Eastern Orthodox in the last Census of 2011 are not practicing believers and many are not baptized. This is the outcome of high levels of secularization among both orthodox Christians and Muslims on the one hand and of tradition to perceive religion as a component of one’s ethnic or cultural identity.<sup>12</sup> This trend is demonstrated in the results of both quantitative and qualitative studies. According to the European Value Survey for Bulgaria (2008)<sup>13</sup> 73.3 % of Bulgarians declare affiliation to a particular denomination (58.6% with Orthodox Christianity and 12,8% with Islam) but only 55,2% identify as religious. Still, 49 % do not affiliate themselves with the monotheist idea of “One God” but express belief in the existence of “a Spirit or Force”. When it comes to practicing religion it is 4.4 % that take part in religious sermons on weekly basis, 9.2 % on monthly basis and 45,5% only on religious holidays. One fourth of respondents (25 %) declared that they never go to religious sermons. At the same time the majority of Christian Orthodox Bulgarians state that religious rituals have to be performed at birth (63%), marriage (68%) and death (73%) – a demonstration of the use of the ritual side of religion in the context of low theological and faith based literacy. Still, only 4 % of Bulgarians declare themselves as atheists. Some of the main conclusions of the study point to low theological competences of those Bulgarians who declared themselves Orthodox Christian due to absence of systematic catechisation and the weak relationship between clergy and parish members; cultural significance of religion for the majority of Bulgarian citizens and only nominal practicing of religious faith. These conclusions seem to be confirmed by a qualitative study of religious values in Bulgaria, including interviews with 110 clergymen (93 % of whom members of the Christian Orthodox Church) and a survey among 175 students.<sup>14</sup> The main findings of the study point to low levels of individual religiosity and absence of basic canonical literacy among parish members, the utilisation of religion for everyday purposes and often at the level of superstition (visits to the church only on religious holidays for luck and good health). The main factors contributing to this type of religiosity relate to the absence of system for catechisation of the population and the lack of

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<sup>10</sup> НСИ () Преброяване на населението 2011 (окончателни данни), с.5.

<sup>11</sup> Zhelyaskova, A., Nielsen, J. (1995) Relations of Compatibility and Incompatibility between Christians and Muslims in Bulgaria. Sofia: IMIR.

<sup>12</sup> The instruction for collecting data under the 2011, defines “religious affiliation” as the “historically determined belonging of an individual or his/her parents and forefathers to a particular group with specific religious views“.

<sup>13</sup> Карамелска, Теодора(2009) Нагласите към религията в България според Европейското изследване на ценностите (2008), Християнство и култура, № 4, с. 28-35.

<sup>14</sup> Назърска, Жоржета (2015) Изследване на религиозните ценности в съвременна България , в: Крикорян, Р., Камелия Славчева, Ст. Пенев (съст.) Ценности, парадигми и предизвикателства в междурелигиозните отношения, София, с. 68 – 80.

comprehensive concept for religious education on the part of the Orthodox Church; the encapsulation and passivity of the Orthodox Church and its weak presence in the social sphere with respect to marginalized groups and groups in need; the absence of tradition of introducing religion to children within the family; the forceful atheist propaganda during the communist regime (1944 – 1989).<sup>15</sup>

A most recent national representative study of religiosity among Muslims in Bulgaria conducted in 2016<sup>16</sup> with 1 200 respondents, reveals clearly manifested religious identity, respect for certain religious norms, yet low rather than high religiosity at the deeper level. While 86 % of the Muslim respondents declare that religion plays important role in their lives, 41 % reported that they don't go to the mosque and 54 % reported to pray. Those that identify as deeply religious are 20 % and those that pray 5 times a day are 8.8 %.

Bulgaria hosts a small immigrant community with the annual inflow of immigrants being low. The total number of legally residing immigrants in the country in 2013 was 43, 215 persons. The share of Muslims from the top ten countries of origin was 23 % (a total of 9, 973 persons coming from Turkey, Syria and Iraq). As of December 2017 the number of third country nationals with long term or permanent residence in Bulgaria was 31 578 persons. The top five countries of origin for third country nationals in Bulgaria were Turkey (13 034 persons), Russia (4 721), Macedonia (3 208), Ukraine (2 757) and Serbia (1 095).<sup>17</sup>

**Table 7: Newly registered third country nationals by year**

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
TCN	5 003	12 265	15 671	13 066	10 677	11 888	12 452

Source: NSI

When it comes to refugees between 1993 and 2018 a total of 85 537 asylum applications were registered and 25 156 persons were granted international protection. About 68 % of asylum seekers arrived in the country in the period 2013 – 2016 (58 034 persons).<sup>18</sup> The three top countries of origin since 2013 appear to be Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. Refugees respectively are prevailing Muslims. Available research which is still scarce reveals that there is little religious interaction between local Muslim minorities and Muslim immigrants in Bulgaria.<sup>19</sup> Little is known at the academic level about the religiosity and religious practices of immigrant and refugee communities in Bulgaria.

<sup>15</sup> Гарванова, Магдалена, С. Шапкалова, Има ли криза на ценностите сред традиционните религиозни общности в България, в: Назърска, Жоржета, М. Гарванова, С. Шапкалова (съст.) Опазване на нематериалното културно наследство: религиозните ценности в съвременна България, 75-88, с. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Press release: Основни резултати от проект „Нагласи на мюсюлманите в България - 2016“. The study was conducted by Alpha research and New Bulgarian University.

<sup>17</sup> National Statistical Institute, Data provided upon request on 31 May, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Държавна агенция за бежанците, Информация за лицата, потърсили закрила и брой на взетите решения за периода 01.01.1993 – 30.04.2019, достъпно на: <https://aref.government.bg/bg/node/238>

<sup>19</sup> Troeva, E. and Mila Mancheva (2010) "Gender, Migration and Religion. Immigrant Muslim Women in Bulgaria", ([www.gemic.eu](http://www.gemic.eu)).

## **Economic and cultural factors relating to population composition**

The social and economic status of Bulgaria's Muslim minorities (Turks, Bulgarian speaking Muslims and Roma) is lower than that of the Orthodox Christians (the majority of whom are ethnic Bulgarians). In the post-communist period and in the context of country-wide economic crisis the Muslim minority communities such as Turks, Roma and Bulgarian speaking Muslims were the hardest hit. They were continuously displaying higher levels of unemployment and had poorer access to healthcare and public education.

Statistical data from 2011 (census results) reveals that the Roma and the Turkish ethnic community share lower levels of employment and educational attainment than members of the majority Bulgarian ethnic community.

The ethnic differences in employment and unemployment are stark with 19.4 % of the Roma, 33.7 % of the Turks and 46.9 % of the Bulgarians being employed and 19.3 % of the Roma, 11.7 % of the Turks and 6.6 % of the Bulgarians being unemployed.<sup>20</sup>

In education 23% of the Bulgarian ethnic population, 5 % of the Turkish ethnic population and 0.3 % of the Roma population have attained high university education. Similarly 47.5 % of the Bulgarian ethnic majority, 26 % of the Turkish ethnic minority and 6.8 % of the Roma minority have secondary education. At the same time 20 % of Bulgarian citizens with Bulgarian ethnicity have only basic education against 43 % of those with Turkish ethnicity and 35.3 % of the Roma.<sup>21</sup> Of the population aged 7 and above in 2011 only 0.4 % of the ethnic Bulgarians have never attended school as opposed to 3.6 % of the ethnic Turks and 9.4 % of the Roma.<sup>22</sup>

## **State-religion relations and religious diversity governance**

### **State-religion relations in historical perspective**

Since the establishment of Orthodox Christianity as official state religion of the medieval Bulgarian state in 885 it has significantly been influencing the formation and development of Bulgarian cultural identity. In the XVII century the process of development of national consciousness was intertwined with the struggle of Bulgarians for liberation from the Ottoman

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<sup>20</sup> Национален статистически институт (2011) Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 година. Том 1 Население, Книга 3. Икономически характеристики на населението, с. 56. <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/pagebg2.php?p2=175&sp2=218>

<sup>21</sup> Национален статистически институт (2011) Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 година. Том 1 Население, Книга 2. Демографски и социални характеристики, 2-11, с. 194. <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/pagebg2.php?p2=175&sp2=218>

<sup>22</sup> Национален статистически институт (2011) Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд през 2011 година. Том 1 Население, Книга 2. Демографски и социални характеристики, 2-11, с. 194. <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/pagebg2.php?p2=175&sp2=218>

Empire. In this context Orthodox Christianity attained the role of important identity marker around which the modern Bulgarian national identity was constructed.<sup>23</sup>

In the modern period, since the foundation of the Bulgarian national state in 1878, the relationship between state and church and the management of religious diversity were shaped by four Constitutions – from 1879, from 1947 and 1971 and from 1991. In the Constitutions of 1879 and 1991 the domination of Orthodoxy over the other confessions is constitutionally guaranteed. The principle is abandoned in the two “socialist” Constitutions from 1947 and 1971 which postulated separation of church and state.

With the establishment of the independent national Bulgarian state in 1878, the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was one of the important factors engaged in constructing the new state and national identity based on Bulgarian ethnicity and Orthodox Christianity. In the Constitution of 1879, Orthodox Christianity was defined as ‘dominating faith in the Bulgarian principality’ (Chapter 9, Article 37). According to D. Kalkanjeva, a leading scholar of the history of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church the 1979 Constitution confirms de facto the role of the exarchate as a guardian of the national unity of Bulgarians.<sup>24</sup> The Constitution also postulated that religious faith could not be the basis to avoid compliance with state laws (Chapter 9, Articles 41).

Church-state relations in the period till World War II were marked by stronger role on the part of the state.<sup>25</sup> According to the Constitution country’s denominations were to be supervised by the corresponding minister (Chapter 9, Article 42). Respectively a trend evolved towards direct interference on the part of the state in financial and internal church matters. The trend was reinforced through the eparchial statute from 1883 which allowed the participation of state power in the church government, in particular when it came to its property.<sup>26</sup>

During the socialist period (1944 – 1989) the relationship between state and church changed abruptly, the Bulgarian society being subjected to a process of forced secularization. Before 1944 the Orthodox Church was seen as one of the pillars of the national state carrying strong

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<sup>23</sup> Christians, including Orthodox, Armenian, Protestants and Catholics, together with Jews in the Ottoman Empire were given the right to religious self-governance. However, until 1870 Bulgarians were part of the Rum millet and subordinated to the Greek Patriarchate.

<sup>24</sup> Kalkanjeva, D. (2014) *The Bulgarian Orthodox Church at the Crossroads: Between Nationalism and Pluralism*, in: Krawchuk, A., Thomas Bremer, *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness, Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> One historical factor that accounts for this reality is the model of the Constantinople Patriarchy of the Byzantine Empire, inherited by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church which is characterized by persistent political interweaving between state and church with the state dominating this relationship. On the historical genesis and meaning of the term “symphony” denominating the nature of church-state relations in the Orthodox world note: Kalkanjeva, D. (November 2011) *A Comparative Analysis on Church-State relations in Eastern Orthodoxy: Concepts, Models and Principles*, in *Journal of Church State Relations*, pp. 587-614.

<sup>26</sup> Даскалов, Р. (2005) *Българското общество 1878-1939, Том. 2, Население. Общество. Култура*. София – Гутенберг, с. 445. It should be stated that the close relations of church and state in Bulgaria were no exception from Orthodox dominated countries in Europe where the phenomenon of autocephaly (referring to the status of a hierarchical Christian Church whose head bishop does not report to any higher-ranking bishop) was major reason for the international decentralization of Orthodoxy and the close relations of church with not only the state but also the nation (Kalkanjeva, D. (November 2011) *A Comparative Analysis on Church-State relations in Eastern Orthodoxy: Concepts, Models and Principles*, in *Journal of Church State Relations*, p. 600.

public prestige. With the imposition of the communist regime the Orthodox Church assumed subordinate position with regard to the state and became viewed as ideological enemy of the new regime. In essence the Orthodox Church lost its autonomy and active public presence in the context of state promoted atheism that dominated all aspects of social and public life, including education and culture.<sup>27</sup>

State church relations during the communist period were regulated by the Constitutions of 1947 and 1971 which guaranteed freedom of religion and religious rites and proclaimed the separation of church and state. The two Constitutions also forbade the misuse of church and religion for political purposes and the formation of faith based political organisations (Article 78, 1947 and Article 53, 1971). A separate Denominations' Law governed the legal status and material support as well as the internal self-government of the different religious communities.<sup>28</sup> The Law postulated for aggressive control and interference on the part of the state in religious matters. For example religious denominations had to be recognized by the State by way of approval of their Statutes by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Art. 6); the leadership of each denomination was to be responsible before the state (Art. 9); the Minister of Foreign Affairs was entitled to fire representatives of the clergy of any denomination if they abuse state laws or the public order (Art. 12); the finance of all denominations was put under the control of state financial institutions as any other public organization (Art. 13); denominations could receive grants and subsidies only upon approval by the Minister of Foreign Affairs (Art. 24). Last but not least all denominations fell under the Law on nationalization and agricultural lands losing their main source of income. The state compensated this loss by introducing annual state subsidies for the denominations which were effectively used to subordinate them to state power further.

### **Governing religious diversity in historical perspective**

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century state policy towards the traditional Muslim minorities in Bulgaria was highly inconsistent with periods of free and liberal expression of traditional religion alternating with periods of repression and assimilation attempts.

According to the 1879 Constitution all religions, other than Orthodox Christianity of both Bulgarian citizens and foreigners residing in the country enjoyed freedom of profession under the condition that they do not abuse country's laws (Chapter 9, Article 40). They were to be organized according to their respective Statutes.

In the period prior to WW II the Islamic denomination was constituted through the 'Statute for the spiritual leadership of the Muslims in the Kingdom of Bulgaria' of 1919. The head of the community was the Chief Mufti with regional muftis directly elected by Muslims. Between 1880 and 1934, the attitude towards Islam was comparatively liberal. One stark exception is the campaign for forced conversion of Bulgarian speaking Muslims conducted

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<sup>27</sup> Калканджиева, Д. (2002) Българската православна църква и „народната демокрация“ (1944-1953). Силистра: Фондация Демос.

<sup>28</sup> Закон за изповеданията, 1949 г., available at: <http://santokiriko.blog.bg/politika/2015/02/09/zakon-za-izpovedaniyata-1949g.1336990>

by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church between 2012-2013 and in the context of the Balkan wars.<sup>29</sup> Once the Wars were lost by Bulgaria the converted population returned to their Islamic faith and rituals with the approval of the Bulgarian government. The overall state policy towards Muslim communities till 1944 was one of isolation and marginalization, economic, educational and social. It was compounded with support for the preservation of communities conservative religiosity as a safeguard to Kemalist influences for secularization and modernization which were seen as a vehicle for emancipation and political self-organisation of these communities.

After 1945, minority denominations, similar to the Orthodox Church, were subject to strict regulation including stark administrative interference in denominational matters. In addition, a process of repression against clergymen of all denominations was started which took more severe forms since 1947 on.<sup>30</sup> The severest anti-religious attacks were directed against the non-Orthodox Christian communities who comprised some 100 000 believers. A show trial of 15 Protestant Pastors in 1949 destroyed the leadership of the main Protestant churches. Between 1951 and 1953 the Roman Catholic and the Greek Catholic Churches were decapitated, their priests, nuns and many laymen being tortured and prosecuted in series of trials.<sup>31</sup> With respect to Islam the main goal of the communist regime was to integrate Muslims in the unitary socialist nation. Islamic practices and traditions were subject to pressures from two sides. On the one hand, religion in general was officially persecuted as incompatible with the socialist ideology and values. On the other hand, Islam was seen as a basis for maintaining an identity different from the Bulgarian one. The communist state policy of forced assimilation used different methods starting with closing down Muslim newspapers and schools in the late 1950s and reaching as far as conducting several assimilation campaigns against Bulgarian speaking Muslims and Turks during the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Muslim names were forcibly changed, religious practices and customs were persecuted and traditional Muslim clothing was prohibited.<sup>32</sup>

### **Current institutional structure for governing religion and religious diversity**

According to the current Constitution of 1991 (last amended in 2015) Bulgaria is established as a secular state respecting freedom of denominations (Art. 13, 1) and proclaiming separation between religion and state (Art. 13, 2). With respect to religious diversity it proclaims the principles of non-discrimination (Art. 6, 2), freedom of choice of denomination and of religious or atheist beliefs (Art. 37, 1). The state is mandated to assist in the maintenance of tolerance and respect among believers of different denominations as well as between believers and nonbelievers (Art. 37, 1). The Constitution also stipulates that religious institutions and

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<sup>29</sup> Георгиев, В., Ст. Трифонов (1995) *Покъстването на българите мохамедини 1912 – 1913*. София - Академично издателство Марин Дринов; Елдъров, С. (2004) *Православието на война. Българската православна църква и войните на България 1877 – 1945*. София – Военно издателство.

<sup>30</sup> Peteva, J. (2003) *Church and State in Bulgaria*. In: Ferrari, S. and Durham CW (eds.) *Law and Religion in Post-Communist Europe*. Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Kalkandjieva, D. (2014) *The Bulgarian Orthodox Church at the Crossroads: Between Nationalism and Pluralism*, in: Krawchuk, A., Thomas Bremer, *Eastern Orthodox Encounters of Identity and Otherness, Values, Self-Reflection, Dialogue*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 56.

<sup>32</sup> Груев, А., Калъонски, А (2008) *Възродителният процес. Мюсюлманските общности и комунистическият режим*. София: Сиела.

beliefs shall not be used to political ends (Art. 13, 4) and that freedom of denominations cannot be used against national security, the public order or against the rights and freedoms of other citizens (Art. 37, 2). While the Constitution proclaims religious pluralism it also declares Eastern Orthodox Christianity the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria (Art. 13, 3).

The relations between religion and state are currently regulated in operational detail in the Denominations Act of 2002 (last amended in 2019).<sup>33</sup> Until 2002 state-religious relations were regulated through the old Denominations Act from 1949 as at the political level and the Orthodox hierarchy there was strong support for the old system of registering religious institutions with the executive power (the Directorate of Religious Affairs).<sup>34</sup> The current Denomination's Act, similar to the Constitution, differentiates between the Eastern Orthodox Church and the other denominations. While, the equality, freedom and autonomy of different religions is guaranteed with no state interference allowed in their matters (Article 4, 1-4), Orthodox Christianity is distinguished from the rest of the denominations as the "traditional denomination" in the Republic of Bulgaria with the Orthodox Church legally established by the Law itself (Art. 10, 2).

All other denominations are to be legally established based on registration at the Sofia City Court along the Civil Procedure Code (Article 15, 1). In addition, registration by the Sofia City Court could be aided by expert opinion of the Directorate of Denominations at the Council of Ministers upon request (Art. 16). Some of the main denominational rights established by the Act include: foundation of religious communities; establishment of prayer houses, temples and monasteries; performance of religious rights; conduct of religious education in a language of choice; establishment of humanitarian institutions; publishing of religious publications; gathering financial donations from persons and institutions; use of language other than Bulgarian in religious sermons according to the traditions of the respective religious community (Art. 5 and 6). In addition, all denominations are eligible for state budget subsidies with amounts calculated based on the number of believers as per registration in the national censuses (Art 28).

The state body designated to coordinate the relationship between the executive power and the denominations is the Directorate of Denominations at the Council of Ministers (DDCM) (Art. 35). DDCM is the administration exerting control over the implementation of the Denominations Act (Art. 35, 1), assisting the implementation of state policy for maintenance of tolerance and respect among the different denominations (art. 35, 2), providing expert positions as foreseen per the Law (Art. 25, 4), preparing proposal for annual state budget subsidy distribution among the different denominations (Art. 35, 9). In addition, DDCM maintains public register of all prayer homes, temples and monasteries (Art. 12, 3) based on information provided by each denomination on annual basis (Art. 12, 2). DDCM is also mandated to issue requests for closure of registered denominations to the Sofia City Court (Art. 20a, 3).

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<sup>33</sup> Закон за вероизповеданията, available at: [www.lex.bg](http://www.lex.bg), accessed on 30 May 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Kalkandjieva, D. (2006) "The Consent of the State and the Blessing of the Church: A Case Study on the New Bulgarian Denomination's Act, The Romanian Journal of Political Science, p.102.

Some articles of the present Denominations Act relating to registration (Art. 16) closure (Art. 20a, 3) and subsidy proposals (Art. 35, 9) provide possibility of political interference in denominational matters.

### **Institutional organisation of Country's denominations**

**The Orthodox Church:** In the post-socialist period developments respective to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church have been influenced by the communist legacy. Between 1992 and 2002 The Orthodox Church appeared divided into two Synods with the dispute between them being strongly influenced by political actors – the United Democratic Forces (UDF) supporting the Alternative Synod and the Bulgarian Socialist Party the old Synod. The so called Alternative Synod was established in 1992 by a number of synod members upon UDF acting government accusation to the then acting Patriarch Maxim of having been elected by the communist party. The accusation was compounded by the Directorate of Religious Affairs' denouncing Maxim's election in March 1992. An essential aspect of this dispute involved the restoration of church properties nationalised by the communist regime. Restored church property followed the trajectories of political power – when UDF was in government restorations were transferred to the Alternative Synod, when BSP was in power they were directed to Maxim's Synod. The dispute was solved by the new Denominations Act of 2002 which defined Maxim's Synod as the only legitimate successor to the historical Bulgarian Orthodox Church. (Art. 10, 1-2; Transitory and Final Provisions, Para 3).<sup>35</sup>The final solution was delivered by the intervention of the Chief Prosecutor of the Republic of Bulgaria in 2004 who ordered the confiscation of the churches and property of the Alternative Synod and their transfer to the Holy Synod of Patriarch Maxim.

**The Islamic Denomination:** The structure of the Islamic denomination in Bulgaria is governed by internal Statute<sup>36</sup> and attendant Regulations for the functioning of its main bodies.<sup>37</sup>The National Muslim Conference (NMC) is mandated to approve changes in the statute of the Denomination, the election of the Chief Mufti and the chairman and the members of Senior Muslim Council (SMC). NMC is summoned by SMC at least once in every 5 years. It consists of delegates by right and elected delegates (1 representative of each and any Muslim Board of Trustees in the country of the number of 1, 225 in 2011). SMC is composed of 31 members, elected by NMC and acts as the highest administrative body of the Muslim denomination mandated to convene Muslim Conferences for the election of the Chief Mufti, his deputies and the Chairman of the SMC. It convenes every 3 months. The SMC elects the deputy Muftis and the regional muftis and issues decisions in all financial and organisational

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<sup>35</sup> Kalkandjieva, D. (2006) "The Consent of the State and the Blessing of the Church: A Case Study on the New Bulgarian Denomination's Act, The Romanian Journal of Political Science, pp.101 – 114; Bogoomilova, N. , R. Cacanaska (2011) Religion and National Identity in Moni-confessional and multi-confessional countries in Europe and the Balkans, in: Institute for Sociological, Political and Juridical Research, XXXV/I, p. 35-36.

<sup>36</sup> Устав на Мюсюлманското изповедание, 2011, available at: <http://www.grandmufti.bg/bg/zanas/normativni-dokumenti/881-ustavi.html>

<sup>37</sup> Правилник за организация на дейността на Главното Мюфтийство и структурите на мюсюлманското изповедание, 2011; Правилник за организацията и дейността на Висшия Мюсюлмански Съвет на мюсюлманското изповедание в Република България, 2011; Правилник за дейността на свещенослужителите (ваиз, имам-хатиб, мюезин), 2011. Available at: <http://www.grandmufti.bg/bg/zanas/normativni-dokumenti/880-pravilnitsi.html>

matters of the denomination. The Chief Muftiate is the institution in charge of administering and exerting control over the Islamic denomination in the country and of representing it before third parties. The Chief Muftiate represents all Muslims in Bulgaria, regardless of their ethnicity and the branch of Islam they belong to. Thus it is in charge not only for the *Sunni* from the *Hanafi* school (the majority), but also for those Muslims who identify as *Shia* (who have representatives in SMC).<sup>38</sup> In 2019 the Chief Muftiate includes 20 regional Muftiates in towns with larger Muslim communities and administers 1 154 mosques and masjids.<sup>39</sup> In 2010 the number of imams was approximately 1,000. The number of mosques and masjids in 2010 was 1, 156 and 302 respectively and the number of registered mosque boards of trustees in 2011 was 1,225.<sup>40</sup>

With regard to funding the absolute volume of the state subsidy to the Muslim denomination has been traditionally low and insufficient to cover the denominational needs of the Muslim community, amounting to 180,000 levs in 2011 to 360,000 levs in 2014.<sup>41</sup> In 2017 of the 5 million BGN allocated from the national budget for the construction and maintenance of religious facilities and related expenses, 3, 37 million were directed to BOC, 360 000 BGN to the Chief Muftiate and 50 000 BGN each to the Catholic Church, AAOC and the Jewish community.<sup>42</sup> That reality to certain extent prompted the openness of the Chief Muftiate to foreign funds coming either through bilateral agreements (from Turkey and Iran) or through donations from other Muslim states.

In the post-communist period the Muslim leadership appeared deeply divided by struggles for control over the Chief Muftiate. Factors that promoted this division were very similar to those that prompted the division of the Orthodox Synod into two rival entities. The struggles within the Muslim religious leadership were manipulated by political parties among which the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF)<sup>43</sup> played an active role. The control over the Chief Muftiate and the resources which the institution was managing translated into political capital and provided opportunities for consolidation of the Muslim/Turkish vote. As a result, since the early 1990s two Senior Muslim Councils have existed, each backed by a different political party and electing two different Chief Muftis. One the one side was the Chief Mufti elected in the last years of the communist regime - Nedjim Gendjev whose legitimacy was objected by the majority members of the Muslim Conference. The conflicts between the two fractions of the Muslim denomination pertained up until 2011 and served to weaken the authority of the institution as spiritual leader of Muslims in Bulgaria.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> When it comes to Islam *Shia* is the only available denominational sign different from Sunni Muslims in the national census card of Bulgaria. For this purpose many Muslims who are Alevi (also called Kizilbashi/Bektashi) tend to identify themselves in national censuses as *Shia*. The internal division of Muslims into Sunni and Alevi was never officially recognized by the modern Bulgarian state and all Muslims have always been dominated by the Chief Mufti's Office, which is *Sunni*.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.grandmufti.bg/bg/glavno-menyu-rm.html>

<sup>40</sup> Zhelyazkova, A. (2014) "Bulgaria", in Joselyne Cesari (ed.) Oxford Handbook of European Islam, Oxford University Press, p. 591-592.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Reports, Bulgaria for 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> U.S. Department of State, International Religious Freedom Reports, Bulgaria for 2017.

<sup>43</sup> The Movement for Rights and Freedoms was established in 1990 as political party of the Turkish and Muslim population in Bulgaria.

<sup>44</sup> For a detailed account and analysis of the history of post-communist rivalries and divisions in the Muslim leadership see Ghodsee (2010) pp. 116-129.

## Violent religiously inspired radicalisation challenges

So far there has been no known involvement of Bulgarian citizens in acts of violent Islamist radicalization or in Islamist terrorist attacks both at home and internationally. Unlike many European countries, both those home to immigrant Muslim communities and those home to old Muslim minorities, Bulgaria donated no transnational fighters and has no cells of radical Islamists in the country.<sup>45</sup> The country however, like other EU countries, has become a transit route for transnational fighters on their way to Syria or Iraq and back. Between 2015 and 2018 a total of 97 foreigners were subjected to compulsory administrative measures due to affinity/engagement with terrorist activity/ organisations (29 persons in 2015, 22 in 2016, 31 in 2017 and 15 in 2018). The measures enforced included removal of residence rights, expulsion or ban on entry into the country.<sup>46</sup> In 2017 three Syrian citizens were convicted to 6 years in jail each under charges of entering the country to commit terrorist act in a third country (Art. 108a (7) of the Penal Code). The three of them have been granted refugee status in Germany and were intercepted by Bulgarian authorities on their way back to Syria.<sup>47</sup>

In addition, few isolated cases were registered of Bulgarian citizens related to Islamist networks. In 2018 one Bulgarian citizen was sentenced to 7 years in jail by Austrian court. Following two years spent in Syria and upon return in 2015 he was intercepted by Austrian authorities of preparing for terrorist activity together with an Austrian citizen of Bulgarian and Turkish descent, who was sentenced to 8 years in jail for recruiting people to join the IS group.<sup>48</sup> In June 2017 Bulgarian court sentenced to 4 years in Jail a double Australian and Bulgarian citizen of Bulgarian father. He was convicted under charges for training for terrorist activity in Bulgaria (Art. 108a (4) of the Penal Code) following his return from Syria as of lack of combat experience.<sup>49</sup> Finally, an individual of Syrian origin who received Bulgarian citizenship in 2008 was arrested in 2017 and is currently on trial on terrorism and organised crime charges simultaneously. The charges against him include participating in a terrorist organisation, financing terrorism, and leading an organised criminal group involved in illicit tobacco trade. He is said to have been part of ISIS forces having spent time in combat activity in Syria.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Acknowledged by the then head of the National Security Service, Vladimir Pisanchev at a press conference on 26 November 2014. в. Дневник, „това не е клетка на „Ислямска държава“, но можеше да бъде“ и „ДАНС и Прокуратурата с акция за „генерална превенция“ срещу Ислямска Държава“, 26.11.2014.

<sup>46</sup> ДАНС, Годишен доклад за дейността на Държавна агенция „Национална сигурност“, 2015р 2016р 2017, 2018. Достъпни на: <http://www.dans.bg/bg/dokladi-23012018-sec-bul>

<sup>47</sup> Елвира Георгиева, „По шест години затвор за трима сирийци, обвинени в тероризъм“. News.bg, 14.09.2017, available at: <https://news.bg/crime/po-shest-godini-zatvor-za-trimata-siriyci-obvineni-v-terorizam.html>

<sup>48</sup> <http://bnr.bg/en/post/101051289/bulgarian-national-sentenced-to-7-years-in-prison-in-austria>

<sup>49</sup> <https://news.bg/crime/ivan-zahariev-dzhon-terorista-se-otkaza-ot-predsrochno-osvobodhdavane.html>; <https://www.24chasa.bg/novini/article/6765331>

<sup>50</sup> Дневник.bg. (14 October 2017). Задържаният в София командир на "Ислямска държава" е заснет във видеа на групировката. [https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2017/10/14/3059754\\_zadurjaniiat\\_v\\_sofia\\_komandir\\_na\\_isliamska\\_durjava\\_e/](https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2017/10/14/3059754_zadurjaniiat_v_sofia_komandir_na_isliamska_durjava_e/); Роров, А. (14 October 2017). Търговец или командир на ИД е арестуваният сириец у нас?. Dnes.bg. <https://www.dnes.bg/crime/2017/10/14/tyrgovec-ili-komandir-na-id-e-arestuvaniiat-siriec-u-nas.356207.image4#photo>

In 2012, Bulgaria for the first time was targeted by a terrorist attack, which was plotted externally and committed against Israeli citizens visiting the country for holidays. In the attack, five Israelis and one Bulgarian were killed together with the perpetrator himself and another 35 persons were injured. On 5 February 2013, the Bulgarian government officially named Hezbollah as the perpetrator of the terrorist act<sup>51</sup> and as a consequence the military wing of the organisation was included in the EU list of terrorist organisations.<sup>52</sup>

### **Salafi influences among Muslim communities in Bulgaria and how they pose challenge to the governance of religious diversity**

While Bulgaria has not been home to any violent manifestations of Islamist radicalisation some processes relating to religious resurgence and adoption of Salafi interpretations of Islam by some segments of the Muslim community have played a role in the governance of religious diversity and in the way Islam was appropriated for political purposes and in public discussions by certain political actors.<sup>53</sup>

Since 1989 and in the context of open borders and freedom of religious expression Muslims in Bulgaria have been exposed to the outside world and the umma and to interpretations of Islam different from the Hanafi Sunni tradition prevailing in the Balkans. The main channels through which these new (for the region) interpretations of Islam were reaching Muslims in Bulgaria involved: 1) foreign missionaries; 2) foreign charitable aid coming from Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Kuwait; 3) migration for religious education by young Muslim Bulgarian Citizens in the prestigious religious universities of Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia; and 4) migration of Muslim Bulgarian citizens to Western European countries and encounters with local (immigrant) Muslim communities.

While foreign emissaries proselytizing Salafi interpretations of Islam were not accepted by the Turkish community and also by the Bulgarian speaking Muslims (after an initially better reception by some of them) more important appeared the influence exerted by young Muslims who returned in Bulgaria upon graduation from Islamic universities in Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia to become imams or teachers in the network of Qur'an schools.<sup>54</sup> Some of them started introducing among Bulgarian speaking Muslim communities new practices related to orthodox Islam entailing the purification of local traditional Islam from so-called non-canonical practices. This process has been uneven with some communities refuting the new preaching, other adopting it and still others becoming the arena of intergenerational conflicts between old and young religious leaders. The outcome of the intergenerational tensions in the villages of the third type was the establishment of two mosques with two different imams.

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<sup>51</sup>Лалов, Н., „България официално обвини Хизбула за атентата в Бургас“, Mediapool.bg.

<sup>52</sup>Янков, К., „ЕС постави военното крило на „Хизбула“ в списъка с терористични организации“, в. Дневник, 22.07.2013.

<sup>53</sup> A detailed account of these developments is provided in: Mancheva, M. (2015) "Risks of Islamist Radicalisation", in: Shentov, Todorov, Stoyanov (eds.) *Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends*, Sofia – CSD, pp. 27-53.

<sup>54</sup> Ahmed Ahmedov, Chief Secretary of the Chief Muftiate shared the following data regarding graduates from foreign Islamic universities in an interview in *Capital weekly* (Зорница, С., „Какво патриотично има в това да изправяш хората едни срещу други“, в. Капитал, 28.03.2014). In 2014 their number amounted to 300 persons, of whom about 70% graduated in Turkey, 10% in Jordan, 10% in Saudi Arabia and the rest in Egypt and other countries of the Arab world.

A process of adoption of Salafi interpretations of Islam was also observed among segments of some Roma communities (most prominent is the Roma neighbourhood of the town of Pazardjik) based on contacts with mosques in Western European countries, specifically Austria and Germany.

The process of adoption of Salafi interpretations of Islam by some segments of the Muslim community has been manifested in acts of prozelytism (mosque preaches, informal discussions at local cafes and dissemination of related theological literature<sup>55</sup>); in attempts to change traditional Islamic practices and in the adoption of *Salafi* style dress by both men and women. For some Roma, the process was manifested through isolated acts of sympathy to radical Islamist organisations. The first such act was reported as early as 2003 when a flag with the sign “The state is a Halifat” was displayed above two houses in the Roma Quarter of “Iztok” in the town of Pazardjik, where followers of the banned Islamist organisation “Halifat” were gathering together<sup>56</sup>. About 10 years later in cities like Pazardjik, Plovdiv and Asenovgrad some acts of demonstrating sympathy to organizations such as “Al Qaeda in Iraq”, and later IS were observed. For example, in October 2014 the chief Islamic preacher in the Pazardjik Roma quarter – Ahmed Musa uploaded a video on his facebook profile displaying waiters at a Roma wedding wearing T-shirts with the sign of IS group.<sup>57</sup> The operation led by the State Agency for National Security (SANS) that followed (25 November, 2014) collected evidence that members of the community possessed IS advertisement materials such as hats, T-shirts, stickers, flags, all with the IS sign, as well as video materials displaying preaching and glorifying IS and advocating for the establishment of a *Sharia* state.<sup>58</sup> In addition, facebook monitoring by law enforcement services identified user profiles with systematic postings of IS symbols, pictures of leaders of terrorist organizations and video clips glorifying the Islamist fighters.<sup>59</sup> Law enforcement has also registered instances of provision of logistical support to transiting transnational fighters by some Muslim Roma in the same town who facilitated their accommodation on their way to Syria.<sup>60</sup>

It has to be pointed out that the adoption of *Salafi* interpretations of Islam has found root among minority segments of some Muslim communities in Bulgaria and in some isolated instances. Muslim communities in general and ethnic Turk Muslims in particular have proved resilient to external theological influences and more dogmatic readings of Islam different from

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<sup>55</sup> Indicated in the Indictment under pre-trial proceedings (Обвинителен акт, досъдебно производство № 9/2009, Преписка вх. № 1122/09, Окръжна Прокуратура - Пазарджик).

<sup>56</sup> Йово Николов, „Първи идват емисарите“, в. Капитал, 14.08.2004 г.

<sup>57</sup> В. Капитал, „Обичат Аллах и навсякъде го пишат“, 3.10.2014 г.

<sup>58</sup> В. Дневник, „ДАНС и прокуратурата с акция за генерална превенция срещу ИД“, 26.11.2014 г.

<sup>59</sup> Обвинителен акт, Досъдебно производство № 87/ 2014, Преписка вх. № 2291/14. The Indictment is not finalized as it has been returned twice for clearance of procedural mistakes by the chief judge (lastly on 23.09.2015).

<sup>60</sup> Expert Interview, representatives of Law enforcement/ intelligence institutions from 12.06.2015, 15.6.2015, 18.06.2015; Стоилова, З. „Как жълтите медии съчиниха история за терористи от „Ислямска държава“, 10.08.2015, available at: [http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2015/08/10/2588238\\_kak\\_jultite\\_medii\\_suchini\\_ha\\_istoriia\\_za\\_teroristi\\_ot/](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2015/08/10/2588238_kak_jultite_medii_suchini_ha_istoriia_za_teroristi_ot/); The circle of persons involved in logistical support to transiting foreign fighters is believed to be limited to up to 10 persons (Expert interview representative of Law enforcement/ intelligence institutions, 18.06.2015).

the local traditions. Among those segments of Muslims communities who adopted Salafi interpretations of Islam, no (violent) religiously inspired incidents have been registered. In essence, the process has been associated with religious resurgence, the adoption of more dogmatic Islamic canon and religious practice but not radicalisation. Signs of symbolic identification with radical Islamist organisations have been registered among a minority segment of the Roma community in the town of Pazardjik and following contacts with Muslim communities and mosques in Western Europe. These processes, however, have been treated as sign of radicalisation by key Bulgarian institutions and addressed from security perspective. In addition, the manifestations of such processes were exploited by certain right wing political actors to meet political ends and fuel prejudiced and often non-informed public debate about the relationship between Islam, Salafi interpretations of Islam and radicalization.

### **Policies and practices addressing and preventing religiously inspired radicalisation**

In Bulgaria, radicalisation and violent extremism as potential threats to society have been only recently raised in policy debates and entered the political agenda, mainly in the light of global and EU-wide responses to so called home-grown Islamist radicalisation, the activities of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State group (IS) and al'Qa'ida, and the issue of foreign fighters. Other forms of violent radicalisation, although having been in existence in Bulgarian society (such as right-wing extremism and football hooliganism), have received considerably lower attention.

In the light of the terrorist act on Bulgarian territory in July 2012 and the global escalation of Islamist terrorist activity, Bulgarian law enforcement and intelligence institutions started developing more systematic counter-radicalization mechanisms. These include relevant amendments in the Criminal Code adopted in June 2015 with provisions on prosecuting acts of terrorism as well as the development of the Strategy for Countering Radicalization and Terrorism (2015-2020).<sup>61</sup> According to the Strategy the main radicalisation and terrorism threats in Bulgaria stem from the activities of terrorist organisations such as Islamic State (IS) and al'Qa'ida, the travel and return of foreign fighters, transiting the country, the high inflows of illegal migrants transiting the territory of the country to Western Europe and the education of Bulgarian citizens in religious educational centers abroad.

The approach that is ingrained in the Strategy acknowledges the importance of prevention measures and cooperation among wide range of state actors and civil society organisations, the private sector and local communities, including religious communities to counter radicalization. The Document distinguishes between radicalisation more generally and radicalisation that leads to violence - a step in the right direction, given the frequent misuse of this concept in public debates as being closely related to, or de-facto a precursor to terrorism. Furthermore, the definitions are broad

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<sup>61</sup> Adopted by the Council of Ministers on December 30, 2015, available at: <https://www.strategy.bg/StrategicDocuments/View.aspx?lang=bg-BG&Id=979>

enough to encompass different forms of radicalisation such as politically or religiously inspired, among others.

### Counter radicalisation measures and programs

Strategies and Action Plans aside, the institutional response with regard to countering risks of religiously inspired (understood as Islamist) radicalization has been dominated by law enforcement actors. The Bulgarian Ministry of Interior, the State Agency for National Security and the Prosecution office have so far been the leading, if not the only, institutions enforcing measures in this regard. Respectively, governmental measures implemented so far have been rather security oriented with no systematic effort being laid in the field of prevention. In addition, the state response towards threats and risks of religious radicalisation has been enacted in the context of insufficient knowledge of religious matter at the respective institutional level and within public space prone to instrumentalisations of religion and ethnicity for political purposes.

The type of measures enforced so far on the part of intelligence, law enforcement and prosecution services are directed at countering external Islamist threats and potential home grown risks. Regarding the first group of measures the law enforcement and intelligence services monitor and intercept transiting transnational fighters as well as foreign citizens suspected in affiliation with terrorist organizations. In addition, SANS monitors the inflow of irregular migrants and asylum seekers and screens persons who might be fighters from Syria. The second group of measures related to countering potential home-grown threats of Islamist radicalization is tied to the understanding that the process of religious resurgence based on adoption of *Salafi* interpretations of Islam bears the potential for “radicalisation” of some local Muslims. In this light measures have been enacted to counter prozelytism by foreign emissaries or Bulgarian citizens, and to counter manifestations of sympathy to radical Islamist organisations. In particular, in the mid-1990s state authorities imposed a more restrictive regime to the externally funded Muslim organisations and foundations involving rejection of the renewal of registrations or subjecting them to investigations on the part of the Prosecution.<sup>62</sup> In addition, Bulgarian security services engaged in deporting some Muslim foreigners for their religious prozelytizing (with the claim they were a threat to the national security<sup>63</sup>) as well as in arresting suspects in propagating more radical Islamist based ideas (2007, 2009, 2010, 2014). Finally, Bulgarian prosecution services have so far opened three court trials against Bulgarian citizens who (based on adopted Salafi interpretations of Islam) were suspected of propagating anti-democratic ideas and hatred on religious grounds

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<sup>62</sup> Евгения Т., „Традиционен“ и „нов“ ислям в България, *Български Фолклор*, 3-4/ 2012 г.; A total of 30 such organizations operated in Bulgaria until 1994. Since then most of them are banned with only 5 remaining by 2004 (в. Капитал, „Първи идват емисарите“, 14.08.2004, available at: [http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/08/14/227488\\_purvi\\_idvat\\_emisarite/](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/08/14/227488_purvi_idvat_emisarite/)

<sup>63</sup> According to Capital Weekly between 1990 and 2004 a total of 8 foreigners were deported from Bulgaria on accusations of preaching “radical Islam” and the establishment of unregistered organisations. (ЙовоНиколов, „Първи идват емисарите“, в. Капитал, 14.08.2004, available at: [http://www.capital.bg/politika\\_i\\_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/08/14/227488\\_purvi\\_idvat\\_emisarite/](http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2004/08/14/227488_purvi_idvat_emisarite/)

(trials against Ahmed Musa<sup>64</sup> from 2004 and against 12 acting imams and Ahmed Musa from 2012 – 2015) and of propagating hatred on religious grounds and incitement of war (trial against 14 Muslim Roma, including Ahmed Musa, from July 2015).

It has to be pointed out that the trial from 2012-2015 against 12 practicing imams of the community of Bulgarian speaking Muslims, raised a heated public debate centered around the question whether the religious proselytism of the twelve imams, based on *Salafi* interpretations of Islam, is a sign or act of Islamist radicalization. While some experts and far right politicians claimed that these are signs of radicalization, key experts in Muslim minorities and Islam claimed that the activity of the twelve imams verifies to a phenomenon of heightened religiosity associated with profession of *Salafi* interpretations of Islam as well as of proselytism of *Salafi* Islam.

The heightened public attention and the growing fears of “Islamist radicalisation” in the context of the ongoing court trial against Ahmed Musa from 2015 contributed to series of resolutions enacted at local level by the municipal councils in a number of Bulgarian cities to prohibit the full face veiling of women. The process culminated in the adoption of the *Act to Limit the Wearing of Clothing Partially or Completely Covering the Face*<sup>65</sup>. Such resolutions were passed by the municipal council of the city of Pazardzhik<sup>66</sup> followed by that of the city of Stara Zagora<sup>67</sup> and that of the city of Burgas<sup>68</sup>.

### **Amending the Denominations Act**

Bulgarian society has traditionally been prone to instrumentalisations of Islam for political purposes and this continues to be the case at present and especially in the context of heightened attention towards Islamist radicalisation at the EU level and the presence of far right parties in the acting Bulgarian coalition government. One demonstration of how the threat of Islamist radicalisation is misused for domestic political purposes is the attempt to enforce amendment of the Denomination Act on the part of the political coalition “Obedineni Patrioti” comprising three far right nationalist parties, part of the acting government of Bulgaria.

On May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, a Project Law for Revision of the Denominations Act in Bulgaria was submitted in Bulgaria’s National Assembly. The proposed revisions were justified with

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<sup>64</sup> The activities of Ahmed Musa, the chief Islamic preacher in the Roma quarter of Pazardjik and the informal leader of the group around him, have been monitored by law enforcement since the early 2000s. He has been the subject of series of arrests and three court trials. His first trial took place in 2004 and ended with a 3 years suspended sentence for participation in banned Islamic foundation, rejection of the secular state and preaching in favor of a Halifat (<http://www.telekabeltv.bg/bg/news/15288.html>, accessed on 10 June 2015).

<sup>65</sup> Passed by the National Assembly on September 30, 2016 and promulgated in issue 80 of the State Gazette (SG) of 2016, <http://www.parliament.bg/bg/laws/ID/42106/>.

<sup>66</sup> On April 27, 2016 (<http://www.focusnews.net/news/2016/04/27/2231229/pazardzhikobshtinskite-savetnitsi-prieha-zabranata-za-nosene-naburki.html>).

<sup>67</sup> On April 28, 2016 (<http://www.focusnews.net/news/2016/04/28/2231932/stara-zagoraobshtinskiyat-savet-zabrani-noseneto-na-burki-naobshtestveni-mesta.html>).

<sup>68</sup> On June 1, 2016 (<http://btvnovinite.bg/article/bulgaria/obshtestvo/iburgas-zabrani-noseneto-na-burki.html>).

the need to impose stricter state control (by the Directorate of Denominations at the Council of Ministers) over the financial and denominational activities of Bulgaria's denominations as means to prevent and fight religious radicalization. The overarching objective of the proposed amendments was to tackle "radical Islam" by way of imposing strict control over the activities of the Muslim denomination in the country. The key and most worrying proposals involved: introduction of the vague term "religious radicalism"; ban on the execution of religious services by foreign citizens; ban on foreign funding to denominations; introduction of state subsidy to denominations based on estimated number of believers of over 1% of the total population. The measures in question were to create stark imbalance of rights between the two largest denominations – the Orthodox Christian and the Muslim Denomination with followers of over 1% of the total population (and respectively eligible for state funding) and the smaller ones with followers of less than 1% of the total population. The smaller denominations were to be effectively deprived of their leading clergy most of whom foreign citizens and of any funding – the Catholic Church, the Protestant Church, The United Evangelist Churches, the Jewish denomination, The Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church.

The proposed Project Law met the concerted opposition of all denominations in Bulgaria. Between the Project Law's official deposition at the National Assembly (May, 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018) and its acceptance at first reading (October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2018) a number of Positions objecting the amendments were submitted by most denominations in the country: The Chief Muftiate, The Holy Muslim Council, The Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church, the United Evangelist Churches, the Catholic Church, the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church and The National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria<sup>69</sup>. As result of this concerted action the proposed Project Law was put under serious public and expert discussion including representatives of all denominations. In effect all controversial project amendments were abolished and the autonomy of Bulgaria's denominations effectively preserved.

However, this recent failed attempt to impose heavy control over denominational matters remains a stark reminder of how far can political actors go with instrumentalisation of religion in the context of heightened attention to Islamist radicalisation at EU and national level.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The model of state-religion relations in Bulgaria is one of a two-way autonomy involving separation of church and state. The country acknowledges freedom of belief and religious pluralism however, maintaining a dominant place of the majority "traditional" religion – that of Orthodox Christianity. While the majority of Bulgaria's population (both Christian

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<sup>69</sup> The National Council of Religious Communities in Bulgaria is established by the Denominations' Directorate at the Council of Ministers and comprises representatives of all denominations to provide fora for discussions relating to denominational questions, intra-denominational relations and questions relating to key question of public interest.

and Muslim) is highly secularised religion holds strong influence as it constitutes important component of the cultural identity if the majority Bulgarians. Another important factor to account for when discussing state-religion relations is the weakness of the main religious institutions (the Orthodox Synod and the Chief Muftiate) in the context of the communist legacy and post-communist political rivalries. It is within this context that until today religion in Bulgaria appears easily manipulated by political actors.

The escalation of Islamist violence in Europe and beyond has turned the eyes of Bulgarian security services to local Muslim communities in the context of the opening of some of their members to Islamic beliefs and practices different from the local traditions. The process of change in canonical observation of Islam due to Salafi influences among some segments of the Muslim community has not been researched sufficiently and little is known about it. However, state institutions, have approached this process of change with suspicion and as a sign or outright manifestation of radicalisation. Respectively the institutional response so far has come from the register of repression with disregard for the social, economic and cultural dynamics associated with religious change at the community level. Such one-sided approach may bring inter-ethnic tensions and jeopardise inter- ethnic balance to fuel processes of retreat and seclusion on the part of certain minority communities.

In this context it is highly recommended that strategies are developed for facilitating and improving the dialogue between the Islamic denomination (represented by the Chief Muftiate) and the Bulgarian institutions. In particular the Department of Denominations at the Council of Ministers needs to develop strategies for communication and regular dialogue with the Muslim Religious Leadership and should also serve to facilitate the dialogue between Muslim religious leaders and the other state institutions. In addition, the Chief Muftiate has to take more proactive role in the Muslim community in the context of the global radicalization challenges for example by way of taking official position on key issues related to the Islamic profession and by tightening control over the Islamic denomination throughout the country. In the context of global radicalization challenges Bulgarian state institutions may consider well taught policies of empowerment of the Chief Muftiate in order to help reinforce the resilience of Muslim communities to imported interpretations of Islam.

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