

## STUDIE / ARTICLE

# Muslims in Rural and Municipal Councils in Bulgaria at the Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

KRZYSZTOF POPEK

*Institute of History, Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland*

## **Muslims in Rural and Municipal Councils in Bulgaria at the Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The modern Bulgarian state, created in 1878, was not ethnically and religiously homogeneous. In 1881, 26 % of the country's population were Muslims (527,000) and in 1910 they comprised 14 % (602,000). Despite that, Muslims did not hold any posts in Bulgaria's central administration, nor did they generally occupy them at the level of districts (*okrag*) and counties (*okoliya*). However, the situation was different in commune (*obshtina*) governments. Muslims were formally represented in the councils of cities and villages in the northeastern parts of the country and the Rhodope Mountains (the areas where they were concentrated) and had the opportunity to play an important role in making decisions on key issues related to local finance, infrastructure and education together with Bulgarians. In some cases, they managed to efficiently participate in the functioning of lo-

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cal governments, while in others they played only a symbolic role. The case of Muslim rural and municipal councilors at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century can be analyzed as an interesting example of the durability of the centuries-old tradition of *komsbuluk*. The paper is based on the original studies of the materials found in the State Archive in Varna, as well as on the press from this period.

**Keywords:** Bulgaria; Muslim minority; local government; turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century; Balkan history

The Balkan lands are well known for their ethnically and religiously heterogeneous populations, which were even more diverse in the 19<sup>th</sup> century than today. Bulgaria was no exception and kept its multiethnic character, even though after the creation of the state in 1878 the number of non-Bulgarians markedly declined. There were Greeks, Roma people, Armenians, and Jews, but the most numerous group were the Muslims who were there as a result of the settlement and Islamization taking place during the Ottoman period. The Principality of Bulgaria was inhabited by 527,000 Muslims, who constituted 26 % of the population. Two years after the unification with Eastern Rumelia<sup>2</sup> in 1887, 676,000 (21 %) Muslims inhabited the whole Bulgarian territory; in 1900, 643,000 (17 %); and in 1905, 603,000 (15 %).<sup>3</sup> However, the Muslims had little political influence on the society: they did not

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2 The Principality of Bulgaria, formed according to the San Stefano Treaty of March (February OS) 1878 after the Russian-Turkish War, did not survive in its primary borders (it comprised territories that are today located in parts of Bulgaria and Thrace, Northern Macedonia, southern Serbia, and eastern Albania). According to the Berlin Treaty of July 1878, the state's territory was limited to the northern Bulgarian lands and Sofia district (formerly called the Sanjak of Sofia) as a Turkish vassal state under the strong Russian influences; in the south, Eastern Rumelia was founded as an autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire. In this multiethnic province a balance was to be maintained between Bulgarians, Turks, and Greeks; however, the provincial government and assembly were dominated by Bulgarians. The Muslim community was represented by their religious leaders (*muftis*) who was treated as a part of the local administration. The Principality of Bulgaria unified with Eastern Rumelia in 1885. For more about the relations between the local Bulgarian authorities and minorities in the province of Eastern Rumelia see: Zhorzheta NAZÁRSKA, "Malcinstveno-religiozna politika v Iztochna Rumeliya (1879–1885)," in: *Musulmanskite obshtnosti na Balkanite i v Bálgariya*, ed. Antonina Zhelyazkova (Sofia: IMIR), pp. 155–158.

3 *Istoriya na bálgarite 1878–1944 v dokumenti*, t. 1: 1878–1912, ch. 1: Vázstanovyavane i razvitie na bálgarskata dárzhava, ed. Velichko GEORGIEV – Stayko TRIFONOV (Sofia: Prosveta, 1994), p. 135.

hold any posts in Bulgaria's central administration before the 1920s,<sup>4</sup> nor did they generally occupy positions at the level of the districts (okrag) and counties (okoliya). The situation was different in commune (*obshtina*) governments. Muslims were represented in the councils in the cities and villages in the northeast of the country and the Rhodope Mountains (the areas where they were concentrated) and they had the opportunity to participate in making decisions on key issues related to local finance, infrastructure and education together with Bulgarians and other minorities. In some cases, they managed to participate efficiently in local governments, while in others they played only a symbolic role. The case of Muslim rural and municipal councilors in Bulgaria at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century can be analyzed as an interesting example of the durability of the centuries-old tradition of *komshuluk*.

Turks (approximately 85 % of the Muslim community in Bulgaria) were by far the most numerous Muslims, and they were mainly concentrated in the north-eastern regions of the Principality. The other groups were Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, also known as Pomaks, who were settled in the Rhodopes (most of which was part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912) and also in the Lovech region; and then there were Tatars – descendants of the immigrants from Crimea – who lived near the major centers of the Turkish population. Additionally, a significant proportion of the Bulgarian Roma were also Muslims, despite not being considered part of the ummah. These differences notwithstanding, the Balkan Muslims can be characterized as an ethnic group – a religious community of people living on a specific territory, closely related to each other in terms of mentality, culture, economic interests and sense of belonging, but with distinct origins and not sharing a common language.<sup>5</sup> “Muslim,” “Turk,” or “Ottoman” – these terms were used interchangeably by the Balkan Muslims to refer to themselves, regardless of their ethnicity or language.<sup>6</sup> Although religion was one of the main identity paradigms among the Muslims in the Balkans, it would be inappropriate to speak of a homogeneous com-

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4 However, it should be mentioned that after the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), the government of Vasil Radoslavov and his party (the Liberal Party) cooperated with Muslim members of the Bulgarian parliament who had been elected in the region of the Rhodope Mountains and in Western Thrace (incorporated into Bulgaria in 1913).

5 Vanya DODUNEKOVA, *Izmenenie na etnicheskata struktura na naselenieto v Bălgariya spored prebrojavaniyata v XX vek* (Sofia: Tipografika, 2008), pp. 12–13.

6 Konstantin JIREČEK, *Knyazhestvo Bălgariya. Negova povărkhina, priroda, naselenie, dukhovna kultura, upravlenie i noveysba istoriya*, ch. I: Bălgarska dărzhava (Plovdiv: Hr. G. Danov, 1899), p. 156.

munity. The Ottoman Muslims, retaining the characteristics of an ethnic group, were a conglomerate of communities that professed Islam and had a sense of a bond based on sharing the same faith and subjection to the sultan-caliph.

The topic of Muslim representation in the rural and municipal councils in Bulgaria at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century has not been well researched in historiography, though there are occasional references to it. Muslim representation was addressed in the works of the Bulgarian historian Zhorzheta Nazárska; however, her research discusses all the minorities living in the Bulgarian state, focusing on the period of 1878–1885.<sup>7</sup> Some aspects of the topic were also mentioned in studies published by the Turkish historians Ömer Turan and İbrahim Yalimov.<sup>8</sup> We should additionally mention Milena Methodieva from the University of Toronto, whose book *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans* deals with the question of the Muslims' public activity in Bulgaria at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in some sections.<sup>9</sup> Considering the relatively underdeveloped state of research to date, this analysis had to be based on archival studies, mostly using the materials found in the State Archive in Varna, as well as on the press from this period, examined using the case study method.

The Ottoman Balkan people had developed local government structures based on traditional pre-Turkish forms. At the lowest level, the villages and town districts (mahallahs) were managed by local officials whose titles differed depending on the language: *muhtar*, *kmet*, *arhon*, *knez*, *chorbadzhi*, *koca-başı*, *hodzabashi*, etc. Some of them were chosen by the male population of the village from the wealthiest or most influential members of the commune, and others were nominated because of their kinship or affiliation to the clan which traditionally held the post. They administrated the village in cooperation with the most important members of the community – the elderly men. Most of the villages were part of a larger organization – the commune (Bulgarian *obshtina*). Their duties included acting as mediators between the villages and the Ottoman administration, participating in the assessment and collection of taxes, and preparing lists of conscripts. During the crisis of the central government the position of local authorities strengthened, and

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7 Zhorzheta NAZÁRSKA, *Bálgarskata dárzhava i neynite maltsinstva 1878–1885 g.* (Sofia: LIK, 1999).

8 Ömer TURAN, *The Turkish Minority in Bulgaria (1878–1908)* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1998); İbrahim YALIMOV, *Istoriya na turskata obshtnost v Bálgariya* (Sofia: IK “Ilinda-Evtimov”, 2002).

9 Milena METHODIEVA, *Between Empire and Nation. Muslim Reform in the Balkans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

they retained the Ottoman system in the provinces.<sup>10</sup> In the 1860s, during the *Tanzimat* reforms, *nahiye* councils were elected in rural communes and town districts of the Balkan regions on the basis of these models. The greatest differences compared to the old councils of elders were the guaranteed (theoretically) equal representation of Muslims and Christians and a more formal character (functioning on the basis of written law and not only customs etc.).<sup>11</sup>

The city councils that functioned during the Ottoman era were maintained as an institution after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the emergence of the modern Bulgarian state by the Russian occupant authorities.<sup>12</sup> However, the old council members were dismissed and new ones were nominated top-down by the Russians to ensure the domination of Bulgarian Christians. At the same time, there were also some representatives of the other religious and ethnic groups. In the following years, council members were elected by the city residents. A candidate had to know the Bulgarian language in speech and in writing, be endowed with full civil rights, have lived in the city for a minimum of one year, and own property there. Members of the military, officials, and, most importantly for our study, clergy could not become councilmen. Even though there is no clergy in Sunni Islam, the religious leaders (*imams, muftis, mullahs*, etc.) were treated as such and they did not have passive suffrage. The first elections to the city councils, held in October and November 1878, resulted in the success of the Bulgarians. For example, in Sofia, there were only three non-Bulgarian representatives (10 %), even if 22.8 % of the capital's inhabitants were Muslims and Jews. Just after the war, the Turks were also inadequately represented in the city councils in the towns where they were numerically predominant at that time, such as Ruse, Varna, Silistra, Razgrad, and Eski Dzhumaya (Tărgovishte).<sup>13</sup>

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10 Barbara JELAVICH, *Historia Balkanów*, vol. 1: Wiek XVIII i XIX (Kraków: WUJ, 2005), pp. 67–68.

11 Roderic DAVISON, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856–1876* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 147–153.

12 At the beginning of 1878, the Russians occupied the territories of Bulgaria, Thrace, and eastern Macedonia. Their presence lasted until June 1879 in the case of the Principality of Bulgaria, until March in the Adrianople Sanjak, and until April in Eastern Rumelia. For more about the Russian administration on the Bulgarian lands, see Goran TODOROV, *Vremennoto rusko upravlenie v Bălgariya prez 1877–1879* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Bălgarskata komunisticheska partiya, 1958); Mariya MANOLOVA, *Normotvorcheskata deynost na vremennoto rusko upravlenie v Bălgariya (1877–1879)* (Sofia: CIELA, 2003). More about the transformation of the *nahiyas* into the *obshтинas* in: Valeri KOLEV, *Obshtinitite v Bălgariya (60-te – 80-te godini na XIX vek)* (Sofia: IF-94, 2006).

13 Z. NAZĀRSKA, *Bălgarskata dărzhava*, pp. 120–123.

However, in subsequent years, the representation of Muslims in municipal councils became more adequate to the size of the community in towns in the northeast of the country (not only in the above-mentioned cities, but also in Provadiya, Osman Pazar [Omurtag], Shumen, Kesarovo, Preslav, Tutrakan, and Dobrich [Hadzhioglu Pazardzhik]). For example, in Varna, where 35 % of the inhabitants were Muslims, they had five representatives (out of fifteen) in 1880, and in 1891 it was four out of twenty.<sup>14</sup> In the 1880s–1900s in Provadiya, where about half of the inhabitants were Muslims, they comprised between 25 and 40 % of the city council representatives.<sup>15</sup> There were Muslims in the councils in the western and northwestern Bulgarian towns from which they were systematically emigrating, such as Sofia, Vidin, and Lom Palanka (Lom). For example, in the 1880s, in the capital's city council, one seat was reserved for Muslims, even if there were no homogeneous Muslim communities there. In 1879, in Vidin, there were six Bulgarians (including the chairman) and four Muslims in the municipal council. Additionally, the local Orthodox bishop, *mufi*, and rabbi could participate in the work of the administrative committee (an executive body that was a remnant of the Russian occupation).<sup>16</sup> In the south, Muslims were represented in the councils of Plovdiv, Burgas, Stanimaka (Asenovgrad), Peshtera, and Tatar Pazardzhik. However, it should be stressed that in the cities where Muslims were in the majority (such as Novi Pazar, Osman Pazar [Omurtag], Kurt-Bunar [Tervel], Akkadänlar [Dulovo], and Balbunar [Kubrat]), there were more Christians on the councils, which was the result of the local Muslim community's lack of political involvement, or – in some cases – electoral fraud. In fact, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was a rule that the majority of city councilors must be Bulgarian, regardless of the town's ethnic composition.<sup>17</sup> When a municipal council was dominated by minorities, the

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14 Därzhaven Arhiv-Varna (DA-Varna), f. 58k, op. 2 a.e. 2 l. 1; DA-Varna, f. 717k, op. 2 a.e. 1 l. 1.

15 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 1–14.

16 Felix KANITZ, *Dunavska Bälğariya i Balkanät*, vol. I (Sofia: Borina, 1995), p. 78.

17 *Balkanska zora*, god. I, br. 142, 28 August 1890, p. 2; *Balkanska zora*, god. I, br. 143, 29 August 1890, p. 2; *Balkanska zora*, god. I, br. 153, 11 September 1890, p. 3; *Balkanska zora*, god. I, br. 157, 17 September 1890, p. 3; *Stefan Stambolov. Lichen arkhiv*, vol. 3: 1890, ed. Milen KUMANOV – Dimitär IVANOV (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Ohridski", 1997), pp. 187, 469–470; *Stefan Stambolov. Lichen arkhiv*, vol. 4: 1891, ed. Milen KUMANOV – Dimitär IVANOV (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Ohridski", 1997), pp. 218, 248–249, 256, 271–273, 294–295; Vasil DECHOV, *Minaloto na Chepelare. Prinos za istoriyata na Rodopa*, vol. 2, ed. Georgi Ivan CHICHOVSKI (Chepelare: Obshtina Czepeleare, 2002), p. 213.

central authorities had no qualms about canceling the councilors' mandates in order to guarantee the advantage to the Bulgarians.<sup>18</sup>

The rural councils' composition – as in the case of the municipal ones – was changed after the creation of the Bulgarian state. According to the regulations passed in 1879, half of the councilmen were elected, and half of them were nominated by a mayor appointed by the Minister of Internal Affairs. Then this solution was modified, and the composition of the rural councils was decided entirely by the votes of the commune's inhabitants. The candidate for the council had to have reading and writing skills in "any language";<sup>19</sup> however, not much weight was given to this criterion in practice.<sup>20</sup> In the communes where only Muslims lived, the rural councils were dominated by their representatives, which could be illustrated by the example of Provadiya County after the War of 1877–1878 or Aytos County in 1890.<sup>21</sup> Muslims were represented also in rural councils in communes of mixed populations; however, they were usually in the minority to Bulgarians. In these cases, the Muslims were also not allowed to form a majority in key council committees that dealt with elections, tenders or finances.<sup>22</sup>

A mayor (Bulgarian *kmet*, Turkish *muhtar*) was the head of the commune council and coordinated its work – he was selected from the councilmen and confirmed by the monarch (in the case of a city) or by the Ministry of Internal Affairs (in the case of the countryside). During the Russian occupation, many Muslim *muhtars* were dismissed on the charge of "hostility to the Christian population."<sup>23</sup> After the war, in cities, the mayors were selected in every mahallah (town district) that usually had non-Bulgarian ethnoreligious characteristics, so in the Muslim part of a town there was a Muslim *muhtar*.<sup>24</sup> However, in 1880, central authorities decided that there would be only one *muhtar* for the whole city, and as a result the function was held only by Bulgarians. In rural communes where Muslims were in

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18 Z. NAZĀRSKA, *Bălgarskata dărzhava*, pp. 123–127.

19 Nauchniyat Arhiv na Bălgarskata akademiya na naukite (BAN), f. 3, op. 1 a.e. 1115 l. 10; Z. NAZĀRSKA, *Bălgarskata dărzhava*, pp. 120–121.

20 DA-Varna, f. 158k, op. 2 a.e. 105 l. 23.

21 DA-Varna, f. 852k, op. 1 a.e. 7 l. 3, 6, 40, 56, 63; DA-Varna, f. 659k, op. 1 a.e. 1 l. 3–4; *Dărzhaven vestnik* 12, No 43 (24 February 1890), p. 3.

22 Natsionalna biblioteka "Sv. sv. Kiril i Metodiy" v Sofiya – Bălgarski istoricheski arkhiv (furthermore NBKM-BIA), f. 63k, op. 8 a.e. 99 l. 1365, 1369; DA-Varna, f. 519k, op. 1 a.e. 1 l. 1; DA-Varna, f. 484k, op. 1 a.e. 5 l. 1; *Balkanska zora* 4, No 907, 6 May 1893, p. 2.

23 M. MANOLOVA, *Normotvorcheskata deynost*, p. 47.

24 Borislav DENCHEV, *Varna sled osvobozhdenieto. Edno zakăsnnyalo văzrazhdane na bălgarshtinata* (Sofia: Anubis, 1998), pp. 20–22.



the majority, their representative was usually a muhtar.<sup>25</sup> Mayors were supposed to read and write in the official state language (Bulgarian); however, during Stefan Stambolov's government (1887–1894), muhtars who could write and read in Ottoman Turkish were accepted. It was explained that the non-Bulgarian communities had not had enough time to adapt to the new regulations and should not be isolated from local decisions.<sup>26</sup> In 1902, this solution was legally confirmed – the requirement of literacy in the official language was limited to the communes where Bulgarians were in the majority.<sup>27</sup>

At the local level, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, government was mostly dominated by Bulgarians, so in the communes where there were populous Muslim communities without significant representation, the authorities allowed them to elect special officials. The most important of these was the Muslim assistant (*pomoshtnik*) to the mayor, a position which was not described in any act but was a gesture of goodwill from the Bulgarian government toward the Muslims and a form of integrating that population with the new state. The tasks of the assistants were to advise on matters relating to Muslims, to represent the interests of this population at various levels of local government, and to assist in the performance of tasks that concerned their vital problems. The assistant was also a deputy – he took over the mayor's duties during his absence.<sup>28</sup> In autumn 1881, Muslim assistants were nominated in Ruse, Varna, Silistra, Razgrad, and Sofia.<sup>29</sup> It was the norm that in cities with a significant Muslim community, for example, in Provadiya, there was a Muslim assistant to the mayor throughout the period before the First World War.<sup>30</sup> The assistant was supposed to know how to read in Ottoman Turkish – illiteracy could be a reason for dismissal.<sup>31</sup> The dismissal was an individual decision of the mayor;<sup>32</sup> however, in the face of budget problems and the government's

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25 *Därzhaven vestnik* 16, No 89, 29 April 1894, p. 4; *Därzhaven vestnik* 17, No 75, 10 April 1895, pp. 3–4; Z. NAZÄRSKA, *Bälgarskata därzhava*, pp. 129–130.

26 *Stefan Stambolov. Parlamentarni rechbi 1879–1894*, ed. Dimitär IVANOV – Milen KUMANOV (Sofia: Universitetsko izdatelstvo "Sv. Kliment Ohridski", 1995), pp. 203, 232–233.

27 Richard CRAMPTON, "The Turks in Bulgaria, 1878–1944," in *The Turks of Bulgaria: The History, Culture and Political Fate of a Minority*, ed. Kemal KARPAT (Istanbul: ISIS Press, 1990), p. 67.

28 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 3 l. 1; DA-Varna, f. 484k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 11.

29 Z. NAZÄRSKA, *Bälgarskata därzhava*, pp. 112–114, 123; İ. YALIMOV, *Istoriya na turskata obshtnost*, pp. 76–77.

30 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 1–14.

31 DA-Varna, f. 519k, op. 1 a.e. 5 l. 4.

32 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 19 l. 16.



efforts at economizing, the positions of Muslim assistants were often the first to be abolished. For example, a series of such layoffs took place in early 1894.<sup>33</sup> In addition, in the rural commune that included an individual Muslim village, the mayor could appoint his special representative – someone chosen from the local population to be a mediator between the Muslims from the village and the commune authorities.<sup>34</sup>

The presence of Muslims in the municipal and rural councils was key to the participation of that ethnoreligious group in the public life of Bulgaria – we need to remember that they made the important decisions about the local community related to: the aid to returning refugees after the War of 1877–1878; public health; the preparation of censuses; conscripts and lists of voters;<sup>35</sup> tax collection and financial supervision;<sup>36</sup> the settlement of immigrants;<sup>37</sup> the rent of communal estates (buildings, arable land, vineyards);<sup>38</sup> helping citizens in difficult situations;<sup>39</sup> expropriations related to investments;<sup>40</sup> and the appointment of lay judges.<sup>41</sup> Each of these matters had vital importance not only for the Muslim inhabitants of Bulgaria, but also in many ways for the Islamic schools and mosques – the most important collective institutions for the Muslim community. However, it should be pointed out that the Muslim councilmen were not particularly active during the meetings, even in cases where they were an essential part of the council.

The local elections – unlike the parliamentary ones – were not held directly, but through delegates. In the case of elections in rural communes, every village that was part of the commune chose a defined number of councilmen. For example, in the Cherkovna rural commune (Varna district), all six villages elected two representatives each. Five of the villages were inhabited by Bulgarian Christians; in one, Ayazma, about half of the inhabitants were Bulgarians and the second half were

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33 *Därzhaven vestnik* 16, No 23, 31 January 1894, p. 4.

34 DA-Varna, f. 519k, op. 1 a.e. 2 l. 86–88; DA-Varna, f. 484k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 7.

35 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 65; DA-Varna, f. 163k, op. 1 a.e. 4 (minutes no. 3); DA-Varna, f. 519k, op. 1 a.e. 2 l. 71–73; DA-Varna, f. 519k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 45–46.

36 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 2 l. 32.

37 DA-Varna, f. 717k, op. 2 a.e. 2 l. 31; DA-Varna, f. 78k, op. 1 a.e. 8 l. 108.

38 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 1. 29–30, 68; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 6 l. 61–63; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 20 l. 13–14, 45–56; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 23 l. 28–29; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 13 l. 4–5; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 25 l. 16–18, 36–37; DA-Varna, f. 484k, op. 1 a.e. 5 l. 3; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 12 l. 12–13, 19–25; DA-Varna, f. 484k, op. 1 a.e. 5 l. 24.

39 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 18 l. 30; DA-Varna, f. 105k, op. 1 a.e. 146 l. 470.

40 DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 17; DA-Varna, f. 87k, op. 1 a.e. 16 l. 45–48.

41 DA-Varna, f. 779k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 2–3; DA-Varna, f. 163k, op. 1 a.e. 2 (minutes no. 1).

Turkish Muslims. In this case, each group had one councilman. Thus, there were eleven Bulgarians and one Turk in the Cherkovna Rural Council. They were elected by delegates – in 1892, there were 3,251 villagers in the Cherkovna commune and 58 delegates elected the twelve members of the rural council.<sup>42</sup> The Muslim community could organize significant support for its representatives during the local elections, especially in towns. For example, in May 1893, in an election in Plovdiv with 53 candidates, two Muslims were elected (the Ibrahimov brothers: Riza and Mehmed) to positions among fourteen the councilmen. Each brother gained approximately 4,700 votes, which gave them the sixth and seventh placements.<sup>43</sup> There were 36,033 inhabitants of Plovdiv at that time.<sup>44</sup>

The local elections in the multiethnic territories were different than the parliamentary ones, though this was mostly the case in the northeastern parts of the country. During the elections to the Bulgarian parliament, the National Assembly, there was rivalry between the political parties in which there were Bulgarians and Muslims, but in the case of the commune councils, the ethnic and religious differences had their importance for representation. This is illustrated by the elections to the city council of Varna in which Bulgarians, Turks, Greeks, and Armenians competed against each other.<sup>45</sup> Local elections could also be used as a form of manifestation of the attitude of the population towards the Bulgarian state, as happened after the War of 1877–1878, when the Muslims and the Greeks boycotted the elections to the city council of Varna.<sup>46</sup>

The key question related to the presence of Muslims in the Bulgarian local government was language – most of the Muslims in Bulgaria were Turkish and did not know Bulgarian. After the emergence of the first commune councils, there were some proposals that people who did not know Bulgarian should not be councilmen. This was motivated by the practical problems posed by organizing the meetings and preparing the minutes in multiple languages.<sup>47</sup> However, it was not as much of an obstacle as it might seem. In the multiethnic councils, after the presen-

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42 DA-Varna, f. 158k, op. 2 a.e. 105 l. 3, 12, 23.

43 *Balkanska zora* 4, No 907, 6 May 1893, p. 2; *Balkanska zora* 4, No 907, 20 May 1893, p. 2.

44 Stoyu N. SHISHKOV, *Plovdiv v svoeto minalo i nastoyashte. Istoriko-etnografski i politiko-ikonomicheski pregled* (Plovdiv: Fond. Balkanski kult. 2016), p. 157; Mihail SARAFOV, “Naselenieto v Knyazhestvo Bŭlgariya po trite pŭrvi preobroyavaniya,” *Periodicheshko spisanie* 41–42 (1893), pp. 785–786.

45 *Svobodna Bŭlgaria* No 13, 25 April 1881, p. 2.

46 Borislav DRYANOVSKI, *Istoriya na Varna*, vol. 3: 1878–1944 (Varna: Slavena, 2015), pp. 282–283.

47 DA-Varna, f. 19k, op. 2 a.e. 5 l. 1–2.

tation of the subject of the meeting in Bulgarian, it was summarized in Turkish, then there was a discussion in which non-Bulgarians could participate with the help of an interpreter. Finally, there was a vote.<sup>48</sup> In rural councils, where there were only Turkish Muslims, they ignored the law about Bulgarian as the only official language of the state and only worked in Turkish.<sup>49</sup>

The Muslim local government officials – like the Bulgarian ones – were involved in party arrangements and were frequently elected due to clientelism or nepotism.<sup>50</sup> During the government of Stefan Stambolov, the norm was to dismiss officials or councilmen, also the Muslim ones, on the charge of Russophilia or cooperation with the opposition. This kind of situation could also arise after a party rival who applied for a position or wanted it for his associate promulgated denunciations of an official.<sup>51</sup> At that time, in Silistra the key role was played by Hadzhi Yahi Yumerov, a Tatar politician close to Stambolov (and after that to the next prime minister, Konstantin Stoilov), who was regularly elected as parliamentary deputy or to various local posts.<sup>52</sup> In March 1897, the journal of the Democratic Party, *Zname*, reported that he was the “master and ruler of Silistra” and thanks to his influence in Sofia he was able to replace the Muslim assistant to the county governor of Kurt-Bunar (Tervel): Kurti Seliametov was supplanted by Yumerov’s brother.<sup>53</sup> When there was rivalry between members of the same party or between different parties, Muslim candidates for mayors and councilmen were accused of specific things. In December 1896, the People’s Party (*Narodna partiya*) put up Hazdhi Alish from Bansko as a candidate to the Rural Council of Lăzhene in the Rhodopes Mountains. *Zname* formulated a number of accusations against him: according to the journal, his sons had avoided military service and declared themselves as Ottoman citizens, and one of them had even participated in the Babyak

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48 DA-Varna, f. 717k, op. 2 a.e. 1 l. 9, 32, 45, 106, 117.

49 DA-Varna, f. 852k, op. 1 a.e. 7 l. 3, 6, 40, 56, 63; DA-Varna, f. 659k, op. 1 a.e. 1 l. 3–4; *Dărzhaven vestnik*, god. XII, br. 43, 24 February 1890, p. 3.

50 Tsentralen dŭrzhaven arkhiv v Sofia (furthermore TsDA), f. 159k, on. 1 a.e. 147 l. 30–31; NBKM-BIA, f. 63k, op. 8 a.e. 99 l. 1189, 1365, 1369; *Balkanska zora*, god. IV, br. 907, 6 May 1893, p. 2; br. 925, 2 June 1893, p. 3. On the clientelism in Bulgarian politics at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, see: Krzysztof POPEK, “*Turecka opończa, belgijska peleryna*”. *Obraz państwa bułgarskiego w twórczości satyrycznej przełomu XIX i XX wieku* (Kraków: Historia Iagellonica, 2016), pp. 128–155.

51 *Stefan Stambolov. Lichen arkhiv*, vol. 3, pp. 176, 421, 473; *Stefan Stambolov. Lichen arkhiv*, vol. 4, pp. 430–431.

52 DA-Varna, f. 827k, op. 1 a.e. 13 l. 1.

53 *Zname* 2, No 89, 12 March 1897, p. 3.

revolt (it was the rebellious region of the Rhodope Mountains, finally pacified in 1891 by the Bulgarian army).<sup>54</sup> Hadzhi Alish was called “an agent in the service of the Sublime Porte” who allegedly compiled reports on the cooperation between the government in Sofia and the Macedonian activists, even personally organizing the attacks against *chetniks* on the border with Macedonia. He was also called a “bandit”.<sup>55</sup> This example shows how typical accusations were formulated against the Muslim local politicians by their opponents.

The bane of Bulgarian politics, including local government, was corruption, traditionally called *baksheesh*, in which Muslims were also involved. Officials treated their post not as public service, but as a business; the line between public and private money was blurred. For example, three of the ten disciplinary cases against mayors in the Varna District in 1891–1892 concerned Muslims who were accused of defalcation of a total of 898,10 levs.<sup>56</sup> These were not isolated cases. The accusations against Muslim *muhtars* were related not only to defalcation but also to the unlawful increase of salaries of local officials or corruption. When disciplinary proceedings began, the mayor was suspended and his duties were taken over by an assistant or a deputy.<sup>57</sup> If the charges were proven in court, the most common penalty was imprisonment and a fine to cover the budget losses.<sup>58</sup> In cases of Muslim assistants or a mayor’s representatives delegated to a village, charges usually resulted in dismissal without starting the disciplinary procedures.<sup>59</sup> As can be the case in a young democracy, the elections were also not free from misdeeds and fraud, in which Muslim local government officials (*muhtars*, mayor’s assistants, representative to a village) also participated.<sup>60</sup> For example, in December 1901, the former *muhtar* of Turk Arnautlar (today: Belogradets, Varna District) and his assistant, who were both Muslims, were charged with falsifying the commune elections by adding additional ballots.<sup>61</sup>

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the first Muslim attempts to become independent from Bulgarian parties and to create their own lists; however,

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54 See more: Krzysztof POPEK, *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912* (Kraków: Historia Jagellonica, 2022), pp. 149–153.

55 *Zname*, god. II, br. 65, 14 December 1896, pp. 3–4.

56 DA-Varna, f. 717k, op. 2 a.e. 2 l. 52–53.

57 DA-Varna, f. 659k, op. 1 a.e. 1 l. 3–4, 17–19, 32–41; DA-Varna, f. 163k, op. 1 a.e. 1 (resolution 22); DA-Varna, f. 163k, op. 1 a.e. 2 (minutes no. 12).

58 DA-Varna, f. 519k, op. 1 a.e. 4 l. 1.

59 DA-Varna, f. 163k, op. 1 a.e. 1 (minutes of 6/19 October 1901).

60 *Nezavisimost* 5, No 23, 15 November 1880, p. 3; *Nezavisimost* 5, No 43, 18 February 1881, p. 5.

61 DA-Varna, f. 659k, op. 1 a.e. 1 l. 3–4, 17–19.

this phenomenon was typical only of the local elections, and the plans to create a Muslim parliamentary party in Bulgaria were not realized until the 1990s. In February 1912, the Muslims put up an independent candidate in the municipal election in Plovdiv – he gained 156 votes, which was not enough to get to the city council (191 were needed). In that year, the Muslims succeed in Peshtera with 188 votes, which was the third score after the Democrats (562) and the coalition of Liberal and Conservative parties (Tonchevists, Radoslavists, Narodniaks, and Stambolovists – 411). In Varna, the Muslims got 455 votes, which was the fifth score after the ruling party (Democrats), Tonchevists, Radoslavists, and Communists. The Muslim candidates also succeeded in Orahanie (Botevgrad), where they got 103 votes – it was the third position after the Narodniaks and Social Democrats.<sup>62</sup>

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In historiography, especially in Turkish and Western literature, we can find opinions that the Muslims in Bulgaria were oppressed after the collapse of the Ottoman rule. Of course, there were many examples of discrimination of that population related to the questions of remigration after the War of 1877–1878, agrarian reforms and expropriations, and brutal pacification of the resistance in the northeast and the Rhodopes.<sup>63</sup> However, the relations between the Bulgarian authorities and the Muslims were not only negative. The activity of the Muslims in the local government on the commune level was an example of peaceful ethnic relations in Bulgaria, although the situation also was not black and white. On the one hand, the Muslims were insufficiently represented, their position in the city councils was marginalized, and they were accused of treason and connections with the Ottoman authorities; they also needed to deal with the problem of corruption and clientelism. On the other hand, special Muslim officials were nominated as assistants to

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<sup>62</sup> *Volya* 2, No 37, 14 February 1912, pp. 2–3.

<sup>63</sup> See: Krzysztof POPEK, “‘To Get Rid of Turks’: The South-Slavic States and Muslim Remigration in the Turn of 1870s and 1880s,” in *Crossroads of the Old Continent. Central and Southeastern Europe in the 19th and 20th Century*, ed. Krzysztof POPEK – Michał BALOGH – Kamil SZADKOWSKI – Agnieszka ŚCIBIOR (Kraków: Petrus, 2021), pp. 63–85; Krzysztof POPEK, “De-Ottomanisation of Land: Muslim Migrations and Ownership in the Bulgarian Countryside after 1878,” in *Turkish Yoke or Pax Ottomana. The Reception of Ottoman Heritage in the Balkan History and Culture*, ed. Krzysztof POPEK – Monika SKRZESZEWSKA (Kraków: Nowa Strona, 2019), pp. 85–110.

a mayor or as mayor's representatives delegated to a village as a nod of acknowledgement to the Muslim community, and some of the rural councils in the northeast were dominated by Muslim representatives. This situation was similar in many ways to how it had been in the Ottoman Empire where Christians were isolated from the central government, but – especially after the Tanzimat reforms – they could still be represented at the commune level. These structures inherited the pathologies described above. The model adopted by the state of Bulgaria would not have been possible to implement without the centuries-long tradition of komshuluk, which was became one of the most important positive factors shaping ethnic relations in the Bulgarian lands after 1878.

## SUMMARY

The modern Bulgarian state, created in 1878, was ethnically and religiously heterogeneous. In 1881, 26 % of the country's population were Muslims (527,000) and in 1910 it was 14 % (602,000). Despite that, Muslims did not hold any posts in Bulgaria's central administration, nor did they generally occupy them at the level of districts (*okrag*) and counties (*okoliya*). However, the situation was different in commune (*obshtina*) governments. Muslims were represented in the councils in cities and villages in the northeast of the country and the Rhodope Mountains (the areas where they were concentrated) and had the opportunity to play an important role in making decisions on key issues related to local finance, infrastructure and education together with Bulgarians. In some cases, they managed to efficiently participate in the functioning of local governments, while in others they played only a symbolic role. On the one hand, the Muslims were not sufficiently represented, their position in the city councils was marginalized, in the political rivalry they were accused of betrayal and connections with the Ottoman authorities, and they also needed to deal with the problem of corruption and clientelism. On the other hand, special officials were elected as Muslim assistants to a mayor or as mayor's representatives delegated to a village as a nod of acknowledgment to acknowledge the Muslim community, and some of the rural councils in the northeast and in the Rhodope Mountains were dominated by Muslim representatives. This situation was similar in many ways to how it had been in the Ottoman Empire, where Christians were isolated from the central government but could be represented at the commune level. These structures inherited some pathologies. The model adopted by the state of Bulgaria would not have been possible to implement without the centuries-long tradition of *komshuluk*, which became one of the most important positive factors shaping ethnic relations in the Bulgarian lands after 1878. The paper is based on the author's original studies of materials found in the State Archive in Varna, as well as on the press from this period, examined using the case study method.



