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Regions, minorities and European integration:

Policy Paper on Muslim minorities (Turks and Muslim Bulgarians) in the South Central Region of Bulgaria

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Abstract. The objective of this paper is to assess the impact of the European regional policy and the European integration of Bulgaria on the political mobilization, social-economic status and the identity perception of two Bulgarian ethno-religious communities – Turks and Muslim Bulgarians (Pomaks). The paper is based on a case study, conducted in the Kardzhali and Smolyan districts of the South Central Region of Bulgaria. The case study report can be viewed on the EUROREG web page: http://www.eliamep.gr/eliamep/files/Bulgaria_case_study_revised.pdf

1. Introduction

The findings of the research are based on documents, statistical data, published studies, and an extensive **fieldwork**, conducted in several stages in the course of 5 months in 2005 in districts of Smolyan and Kardzhali, and during which **42 interviews with 44 persons** (Turks, Pomaks and Bulgarians, of which 17 females and 27 males) were conducted. Respondents were selected in accordance with the goals of the project and included **representatives of political, economic, civil and business circles**, involved with the issues of regional development and the role of the EU integration policies in the minority populated border regions.

The results of the fieldwork supplement the official data with information on how the minorities and the majority perceive the effects of the ongoing processes on the economic situation in the border regions, the practical aspects of the EU integration policy, the altered role of the local people and their prospects for the future in the EU.

Smolyan district (SD) and **Kardzhali district (KD)** are located in the Rhodope Mountains. Levels of economic development, employment, incomes, and living standards of the populations of the two districts are low compared to the rest of the SCR, or the country in general. Most of the municipalities (with the exception of the towns of Kardzhali and Dzhebel) **are considered as underdeveloped areas**.

The location of the KD and SD is exceptionally favorable for cross-border cooperation with Greece, which is highly relied upon to overcome the isolation of the two districts. The greatest problem at the moment is the absence of border check-points on their territory, despite the existing intergovernmental agreements.

The fast privatization in 1990s had a crucial effect on the local economy **in the regions inhabited by the Muslim minorities**. Unemployment increased drastically, especially after insolvent firms that traditionally employed large numbers of people (mining and ore processing industry) were closed.

According to the 1992 census, the prevailing part of the landless population in Bulgaria belonged to minorities. Statistical data reveal that the Turkish population in the Kardzhali region has largely restored its ownership over the land. However, Muslim Bulgarians come second after Roma as a community that does not own or owns an insignificant amount of agricultural land. The field research revealed that the aged Muslim Bulgarians in the region are usually very slow to start legal procedures for having their lands restituted. This attitude is partially caused by their unwillingness to face the bureaucratic administration, as well as by the fact that the agricultural plots are small and separated by large distances.

2. Legal, Political and Social Status of Minorities in Bulgaria

2. 1. Protection of Minority Rights in Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a party to a number of internationally-adopted conventions on human rights protection (including the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages). The level of minority rights respect and protection in Bulgaria is monitored by a number of non-governmental watchdogs concerned with human rights, and by international organizations.

Special provisions exist regulating the right of the members of the minorities to learn their mother language and to secure their religious rights. Turkish language can be studied under certain conditions (e.g. sufficient number of pupils) in both primary and secondary schools. The Turkish language and literature are taught at the Universities of Sofia and Shumen.

The main problem, however, is a **low education level of Muslim minorities**. Only 2.7 % of the Turkish population has a university education. Furthermore, it is disturbing that the share of those who do not even have primary education is 5.6%. This places Turks and Muslim Bulgarians at a **disadvantage in the labor market**, and is one of the reasons for the high levels of unemployment among them.

2. 2. Minority Participation in the Central and Local Government

After experiencing a cruel assimilation campaign under the Communist regime, the Bulgarian Turks united and mobilized. In 1990 a political party representing mainly their interests was formed – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF). Since its establishment, MRF has always been represented in parliament and became the third strongest party in Bulgaria in the 1990s.

After the surprising election victory of the National Movement for Simeon the Second (NMSS), led by the former King Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha in 2001, NMSS and MRF signed an agreement to govern together. As a result, **for the first time** since gaining its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, **Bulgaria had two ethnic Turks as ministers**. Under the NMSS–MRF government, Bulgaria became a NATO member (2004) and successfully completed negotiations for EU accession, signing the treaty of accession in April 2005.

After the last elections in June 2005, a three-party coalition (BSP–NMSS–MRF) was formed under the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) leader Sergey Stanishev. The MRF won 34 seats in Parliament – the greatest number since 1989 – and received two key ministries, which are directly related to the pre-accession funds: **the Ministry of Environment and Waters and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry**. In addition, for the first time **MRF has also a Deputy Prime-Minister** who is at the same time a Minister of Disaster Management Policy. MRF also received 16 deputy-minister posts and 5 posts of district governors.

Turks and Muslim Bulgarians are now well represented also on all levels of local government. The relationships inside the municipal councils are rarely politicized. Contradictions on ethnic grounds are even rarer. The field research found an astonishing unity of the municipal councilors from different political parties when voting on various initiatives, linked with the EU integration.

2. 3. Relations between the Bulgarian majority and the Turkish and Muslim Bulgarian minorities

Respondents in the fieldwork **described the relations between the Bulgarian majority and Turkish and Muslim Bulgarian minorities** in connection with the problems of regional development or participation in EU projects as **“partnership.”** The employment policies in state, NGO and business sectors alike are strictly based on professional qualities and not on ethnic or religious belongings. Having said that, a certain inequality does exist in the business and NGO sectors. In both, it seems that Bulgarians are more active, which could be partially explained by a generally higher level of education.

The basic reason for the generally good relations between the majority population and the Muslim minorities is the solidarity created by the common interest in improving the economic status of the region. Another factor frequently mentioned by the respondents is the long-standing tradition of peaceful cohabitation of various ethno-religious communities. On the other hand, some respondents – not only from the majority, but also from the Turkish minority – believe that many Bulgarians are leaving Kardzhali and moving to live in other parts of the country because of the policies of the MRF, which has occupied all power positions.

2. 4. Identities and Europe

For respondents, **“Europe” is inseparably linked with norms, laws, freedom of choice and better possibilities** for professional development. The qualities described as “European” are tolerance, responsibility, order, and higher quality of work.

Pre-accession programs are seen as **a first step towards acquiring the “European identity”** and “a sense that we are a part of Europe.” People who have worked on the EU funded programs are satisfied with their experience and the results they have achieved, and are proud that their activities have contributed to the development of their city and region. The rest are more skeptical.

Generally speaking, the field research outlined **two patterns of attitude towards** and perceptions of **EU integration. The optimistic approach** is found **amongst politicians** (both on local and central level), persons employed in municipal and district **administration, representatives of non-governmental and civil sector**, and among those individuals and **entrepreneurs, who participated in projects. People** (mainly from the private sector), who were **left outside of these processes are more pessimistic.** They worry that EU accession will not only bring positive developments, but also a danger: the higher quality and lower prices of products the Bulgarian producers will not be able to compete with.

3. EU Integration and regional development

The most important **external factor stimulating the democratic changes in Bulgaria** and directly influencing the development of the minority regions **is the European integration and the European regional policy** in particular.

Within the five-year period (2000–2004) Bulgaria needed to complete the accession negotiations, the country received support through the **PHARE, ISPA and SAPARD programs.** The increased funding from the EU necessitated concrete institutional and legislative changes.

3. 1. Implementation of the pre-accession funds in the South Central Region (SCR)

The Bulgarian administration has most experience with **the PHARE program**. The total budget of the program for Bulgaria is **2.4 million Euro** and contracts for **ninety-three projects** have been signed; 12,9% of the projects and 10,2% (245,619 Euro) of the budget funds have been received by the six regions of the SCR. The **Smolyan district has 2.2% of the projects** and has received **0.9% of the funds** (for the country) and the **Kardzhali district – 1.1% of the projects and the funds**.

There are no statistics on the implementation of the aid under the SAPARD program because the projects are individual and are accounted for under measures for the country as a whole. Bulgaria has been a party to the annual **SAPARD programs** from 2000 to 2003 inclusive, and the general **budget under these four annual programs has been 291.8 million Euro**, the contracts signed have been for **projects with the value of 234.8 million Euro**, while **the de-facto utilized funds** have amounted to **78.4 million Euro**. The projects from the **ISPA program**, which are realized, albeit only partially, on the territory of SCR, have the **value of 15 921.5 €**; in addition to that an ecologically oriented project is being implemented by the Smolyan and Kardzhali municipalities (24 471 and 14 547 Euro respectively).

Although the revival of the regional economic development, which started after 2001, roughly corresponds to the arrival of pre-accession funds to the region, not all interviewees are convinced that there is a direct link between the two. The main reason is that **few believe that the projects realized so far – mainly from the PHARE program – will have long-term effects** (“No long-term jobs are being created”). The fact is that the effect of pre-accession funds is negligible outside the local administration, NGOs and few businesses, which are involved in the work on EU funded projects.

3. 2. The effect of pre-accession EU programs on local administration and the non-governmental sector

The arrival of pre-accession funds to KD and SD has altered the roles of municipal (elected) and district (appointed by the central government) authorities. **The special attention given to the education and training** of people employed in the administration is a consequence of the fact that one of the main reasons for the small number of projects funded from pre-accession programs was **the lack of trained personnel** (both in terms of quantity and quality). Until recently the better-educated ethnic Bulgarian minority in Kardzhali and Smolyan districts was more active regarding these programs. A visible effort has been made lately **to increase the education level of administration employees belonging to ethnic minorities**. Local administrators are also being **trained** so they will be prepared **for the implementation of structural funds** and be familiar with the rules for strategic planning.

Numerous municipalities have established **special departments for Euro-integration** or hired experts who regularly follow information on forthcoming projects. The information from the government is spread also during the so-called “informative days” for employees of the district administration and through brochures. A very positive development is **a very good cooperation on projects between NGOs and municipalities**.

3. 3. Influence of EU pre-accession programs on SME and agricultural producers

The high degree of political mobilization of Turks in Kardzhali District was **not accompanied by the same degree of economic mobilization**. Notwithstanding the MRF’s concerns and efforts related to the district, the dominant part of the local population continues to rely on state

subsidies, tobacco growing, and small tailoring enterprises founded by Greek and Turkish businessmen.

The young individuals from Kardzhali district – both from the majority and from the minority – **prefer to work abroad** in Western Europe and mainly invest their money in real estate. **Only a small number of the local inhabitants start their own business.** The general impression is that the **Bulgarians are more active economically** – both in terms of founding small and medium sized enterprises, and in participation in European projects, regardless of the logical assumption that Turks have greater possibilities through MRF. Most probably this passive behavior is a result of the lack of enough trained specialists.

Despite the difficulties, respondents note that **participation in the EU programs raises the self-confidence** and prestige of the people. The effects of the pre-accession assistance are evaluated positively, but it seems that there are much **higher expectations for the structural funds.**

3. 4. Expected effect of Bulgaria's EU accession on the economic development of the region

The general opinion is that **Bulgaria's accession to the EU will have a predominantly positive effect** on the economic development of the country and the region in particular. This is due above all to two factors: **the introduction of "European norms" and the structural funds.** On the other hand, there are **serious concerns** that accession will also lead to **mass bankruptcy of small enterprises**, which do not meet the EU criteria for quality of production and working conditions. Even the expected rise of the standard of living is seen as an unfavorable factor for small-sized proprietors. The examples set forward are small textile manufactures, which are currently attractive for investors from neighboring Turkey and Greece mainly because of cheap labor.

4. Concluding remarks

1) Since 1989 both Muslim communities, **Turks and Muslim Bulgarians, have displayed strong political mobilization.** For Turks this mobilization is related to MRF, to which they have delegated almost unlimited rights to represent them on all levels of the legislative and executive power. The political mobilization of the Muslim Bulgarian minority is different. At first glance the failure of the attempts for the formation of a "Pomak" party (discussed in the State of the Art Report¹), and the absence of absolute confidence in MRF among the Muslims in the Smolyan District, are a result of the "absence of internal group cohesion", as frequently reported by the researchers. In addition, many Muslim Bulgarians are worried about the reaction of majority population if they get to close to what is perceived as being a "Turkish" party.

2) Notwithstanding the lack of concrete data on the effect of **the pre-accession funds**, it can be concluded that in Kardzhali and Smolyan Districts they **have led to the creation of a new administrative capacity, prepared to plan and manage the local economic policy;**

3) The representatives of both minorities, Turkish and Muslim Bulgarian, think that their **minority rights are guaranteed by the Bulgarian legislation and are respected**, despite the fact that some disturbing phenomena are noticed. They are convinced that there are supranational (European) power structures, which are not indifferent to the economic welfare of the minority regions and which could guarantee that their rights would be respected in the future as well.

¹ It can be viewed on <http://www.eliamep.gr/eliamep/files/State%20of%20art%20Bulgaria%20Final.pdf>

4) **The linguistic mobilization of the community is of less significance than the political one.** At the same time Turks and especially Muslim Bulgarians insist on the teaching of religion. **Religious education is considered extremely important** for the spiritual development of the young people, and for Muslim Bulgarians it plays an important role in contributing to the cohesion of the community and the formation of community's identity.

5) The overall impression is that all respondents representing the political and cultural elites, and the business circles, relate their future to their region and its economic and cultural prosperity. **The relations among representatives of the majority and the minorities, engaged with the issues of regional development and European integration, are characterized by a dominating spirit of cooperation.**

6) The respondents – both from the majority and from the minorities – have not openly displayed their ethnic, religious, and even party affiliation. This fact proves *per se* that the **ethnic and religious differences are still important enough to be silently omitted, although mutual tolerance is always emphasized.**

7) When asked how they visualize Europe and how they see their place in it, all respondents from the majority and from the minorities are unanimous on two issues: **Bulgaria has always been part of the European historical and cultural space**, and its citizens are Europeans. **Yet, they confess that they do not feel to be “real Europeans” as something is lacking** (the most frequently mentioned factors are the different attitudes towards labor and low incomes).

Recommendations:

1. Privileged status for underdeveloped border and mountainous regions:

The interviews revealed that the municipalities need additional resources in order to co-finance the PHARE and SAPARD programs in which they participate actively. Underdeveloped border and mountainous regions have been given a privileged regime, but this is yet to be accompanied by a set of genuine economic and social measures needed to attract investors and young, well-educated cadres. For example, enterprises from such municipalities should be granted tax cuts, which would increase investments from other parts of the country, or subsidies from the state funds for regional development.

2. Legalization of land ownership:

Unresolved situation regarding the legal documents about ownership of the land, especially in areas populated by Muslim Bulgarians, is an obstacle for both the development of the agricultural land market and of the long-term leases to farming companies. Bureaucratic obstacles need to be reduced and people should be provided assistance and encouragement to put their ownership documents in order.

3. Restructuring of the regional agricultural production:

The agricultural production in the region has to be restructured. The importance of traditional tobacco cultivation will continue to progressively decrease and farmers will have to shift to alternative agriculture, and especially to eco-production. In order to achieve this, they will need assistance in form of training, consultations, and funding/loans.

4. Increase of the education level and qualifications of local administrators:

Special attention should be given to appropriate training of local administrators so that they will be prepared for the implementation of structural funds and be familiar with the rules for strategic planning. A significant share of funding available to Bulgaria through pre-accession funds has not been utilized due to bad organization and low capacity of administrative staff. A serious effort needs to be made to improve the performance of relevant personnel to prevent similar scenario regarding the structural funds.

5. Establishment of special departments for Euro-integration and EU funded projects:

One of the visible results of the structural changes in municipalities and in district administration was the establishment of special departments for Euro-integration. Similar departments with trained, English-speaking personnel should be set up in these municipalities, which still do not have them. If this is not possible, another solution would be to hire experts to regularly follow information on forthcoming projects, and then forward the relevant information to all interested persons and institutions. External experts should be also involved in project preparation and implementation in cases when municipalities do not have the appropriate cadres.

6. Continuity of the work of the central and local administration:

All possible effort needs to be made to ensure the continuity of the work of the central and local administration in periods of political change following the central or local elections. The staff trained for work on the EU funds must be selected strictly on professional and not political criteria to avoid precious time being lost each time a completely new team needs to get familiarized with the work.

7. Better education of minority groups and creation of well-educated minority business elite:

Bulgarians in the ethnically mixed areas are in general more active economically – both in terms of founding small and middle size enterprises, and in participation in European projects. To a large extent, the passive behavior of Turks and Muslim Bulgarians is a result of the lack of enough trained specialists. The creation of well-educated local administrative and business elite from the minority communities should be encouraged and assisted.

8. Easier access to loans and co-funding for people working on EU funded projects:

Many people view SAPARD with skepticism as it is exceptionally difficult to secure 50% own funding. Such investment also involves a lot of risk. Loans with low interest rates and a longer paying off period should be made available for people, applying to EU funded projects.

9. Encouragement and support for CBC projects with Greece:

Support and assistance should be provided to regional municipalities, NGOs and enterprises in finding partners in Greece and establishing contacts. Central governments should do all in its power to accelerate the slow progress being made towards opening of two planned border-crossings between Bulgaria and Greece in the region.