

# MEMORY, HERITAGE AND ETHNICITY

## Constructing Identity among the Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians

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The community of Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians traces its origins as far back as the end of the eighteenth century. With the passage of time, it has decreased in number and changed its composition, but its members preserved a strong feeling of Bulgarian ethnic belonging. The article discusses the transformations of their ethnicity in a challenging historical context. How is ethnicity sustained at the margins of two nation states? How did the restrictive politics of the Turkish Republic towards non-Muslim minorities affect the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul? What is the role of religion and material heritage in the identity formation of the community at focus? These and related questions are discussed in the article.

*Keywords:* Orthodox Bulgarians, Istanbul, ethnicity, religion, material identity

### Introduction

This article studies the small Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul, which has its origins from the end of the eighteenth century. This is a tightly-knit and well-organized community, which currently consists of about 450 people. The following study aims at presenting and discussing processes of ethnic identification and community (trans)formation among its members, the bulk of whom were born and socialized in Turkey, have never lived in Bulgaria, do not have Bulgarian citizenship, yet, define themselves as Bulgarians. What are the means of constructing ethnicity outside the borders of one's "own" nation state, without employing the instruments of national policies (education, media, citizenship) and in the context of competing, even rival, national ideologies? To what extent does ethnicity

rely on material anchors (places, buildings, cultural monuments, churches, etc.)? How does ethnicity intertwine and interact with citizenship, nationality and religious belonging?

The discussion of these and related questions draws upon anthropological fieldwork conducted in Istanbul between 2010 and 2013 in the form of several short research trips.<sup>1</sup> On two of these trips I was accompanied by anthropology students from the New Bulgarian University. The study is based on 12 in-depth interviews and a few shorter ones with community representatives, as well as on participant observation. Most interviewees are between 40 and 75 years old – the generations that make the bulk of the community. Younger people rarely showed up at the community gatherings I and my students visited (many study abroad), do not speak Bulgarian, or

were reluctant to take part in the study. Most of the interviews and observations took place at the Bulgarian Exarchate House, which is the major centre of the community's activity, as well as at a few more Bulgarian sites in the city. We were also invited to the work places of some of our interlocutors. Nobody invited us to their homes; obviously our interviewees felt more comfortable to meet us at the premises of the Exarchate where they gather and act as a community.

Istanbul-based Bulgarians have scarcely attracted scholarly attention. A notable exception is Darina Petrova's monograph (Petrova 2000), which presents a historical and ethnographic study of this community inspired by her immediate contacts with its members between 1995 and 1998. A number of publications (Zhechev, undated; Temelkov 2005; Hristov 2009) is dedicated to the Bulgarian sites in Istanbul – to buildings and churches of cultural and historical value closely related to the history of the Bulgarian Christian community in the megalopolis. They, however, pay little attention to the community itself, which remains little known among the wider Bulgarian public. Similar is the situation in Turkey, where Orthodox Bulgarians are not recognized as a minority and are only sporadically discussed in scholarly works (cf. Andrews 1989; Ozil 2013).

Hereafter, I regard ethnicity after Fredrik Barth as a dynamic category of self-ascription of the individual to a certain ethnic group, which surfaces in the process of interaction between ethnic groups. The present case study confirms to a great extent Barth's thesis that ethnicity does not depend primarily on the cultural traits which can be used selectively in different situations to express ethnic identity (Barth 1969). Nevertheless, the case study reveals that ethnicity "needs" material artefacts and cultural practices to achieve objectification and posit tangible attributes for the community. These material manifestations of ethnicity serve simultaneously as warrants against potential contestation of their Bulgarian identity and give evidence of a particular expression of the "Bulgarian-ness" which they carry.

In the following discussion I will try to define the categories and meanings through which Istanbul-

based Bulgarians characterize their ethnicity by, firstly, presenting a succinct historical overview of the community's formation and of its current situation. Secondly, I will discuss different configurations between ethnic identity, citizenship and nationality, which derive from the cultural and political connections of this community with two nation states. Thereafter I will analyse how Istanbul-based Christian Bulgarians construct and perform their ethnic belonging by tying it to religion and specific "lieux de mémoire" (Nora 1999).

### **The Bulgarian Orthodox Community in Istanbul: Past and Present**

In this section I will briefly discuss the historical formation of the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul, as well as its current situation in terms of demography and social characteristics. The major question underlying this description is about the resilience of their Bulgarian identity in the face of pressures to assimilate and demographic decrease.

#### *Historical Background*

Bulgarians started migrating in large numbers to Istanbul during the eighteenth century. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the city was already a centre of a large and well-organized Bulgarian colony.<sup>2</sup> This was the period of the so-called Bulgarian Revival – a time of rising national awareness and struggles for national liberation, which ended in 1878 with the formation of the Bulgarian nation state (Daskalov 2004). The colony consisted of people of diverse social backgrounds. The majority of its members were craftsmen (Petrova 2000: 63) but there were also wealthier members of the emergent bourgeoisie, some of whom became proponents of the new national ideas on the Balkans (Jelavich 1983a: 191). By the mid-nineteenth century Istanbul had become one of the centres of the Bulgarian national liberation movement.

An important part of this movement at the time was the struggle for an autonomous Bulgarian church, independent from the Constantinople Patriarchate. The Bulgarians in Istanbul played a major part in this struggle. Their efforts led to the forma-

tion of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870<sup>3</sup> (Jelavich 1983a: 350; Petrova 2000: 13, 81). The Exarchate soon became an organizational centre not only for the Bulgarians residing in Istanbul but also for those from other regions of the Empire. It opened many churches and schools, entering into direct conflicts with the Greek-dominated Patriarchate over disputes of spiritual and political influence. In certain places, for instance in Macedonia, these conflicts were especially severe.<sup>4</sup>

The Bulgarians in Istanbul formed associations around the Exarchate, church and school boards, and different charity organizations, among which was the Radost (Joy) charity association, founded in 1876, which is preserved to this day and is known as the “women’s association.” The community was consolidated around various initiatives related to the building of a church, the opening of schools, public libraries and culture clubs. A number of newspapers, journals and books were published in the city in Bulgarian during the Revival period (Petrova 2000: 31).

This numerous and prosperous Bulgarian community in Istanbul diminished significantly during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. With the foundation of the Bulgarian state in March 1878, a large part of its members returned to their places of origin. Only those who had come from the geographical region of Macedonia, which remained within the borders of the Ottoman Empire until 1913, stayed in Istanbul. The internal migration of Bulgarians from Macedonia to Istanbul continued in the next decades, spurred under the influence of different historical events and processes. The attempts of Greek, Bulgarian and Serbian nationalism to share and appropriate the region of Macedonia and their struggle for domination – which obtained different forms: military coercion, assimilation through the institutions of the church and school – pushed many people away from their home villages (for a more detailed discussion, see Jelavich 1983b: 96; Roudometof 2001; Adamir 1992). The Ilinden Uprising of 1903, which was an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow Ottoman rule, and the two Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, caused new migration waves – some of which were directed overseas, to the USA and Canada, yet at the

same time a number of them were in the direction of Istanbul. After the Second Balkan War of 1913, Macedonia was divided into three parts, between Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria. The largest of those, the so-called Aegean Macedonia, remained under Greek governance. The assimilatory pressure of the Greek authorities against the Slavic-speaking population (Mazower 2000: 135–152), coupled with the economic ruin of the region, spurred continuous migrant waves throughout the following decades and some of them were directed to Istanbul. In this way in the aftermath of 1878 as the city was vacated by Bulgarians whose birth places fell within the borders of the new Bulgarian state, in their place appeared Bulgarian-speaking migrants coming mostly from rural Aegean Macedonia.

In 1913, the Ottoman authorities undertook a campaign for forceful ethnic cleansing in the region Thrace. Even if this campaign is by far lesser known than the exiling and violence against the Armenian and Greek minorities, it led to the killing or exile from their birth places of about 300 000 Bulgarians who sought refuge in Bulgaria (Stoyanova 2013; Miletich 2013). The few Bulgarians from towns such as Edirne and Lozengrad (Kırklareli)<sup>5</sup> subsequently settled in Istanbul (Petrova 2000: 61). In this way, for a relatively short period of time at the beginning of the twentieth century, the composition of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul changed completely, on the most part comprised by Macedonian Bulgarians (as their contemporary descendants define themselves) and by descendants of Bulgarians from Eastern Thrace.

### *The Bulgarian Sites in Istanbul*

Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bulgarian colony in Istanbul has left many material traces and artefacts, including buildings, churches and other property. These places are the site of interaction for the present-day Bulgarian community in the city and play an important role in constructing and articulating their ethnic identity. They are defined as Bulgarian (Zhechev, undated; Temelkov 2005; Hristov 2009) on the grounds that they were established and built with the means and resourc-

es of the old Bulgarian colony in Istanbul and had been maintained subsequently with the means and resources of their descendants, as well as with the assistance of the Bulgarian state and Bulgarian charity initiatives. According to the legal provisions in Turkey, they have the status of *vakıf*, that is properties expropriated indefinitely, and the income from them is used for charitable purposes. They are managed by foundations set up specifically to this aim following the current legal frameworks. Some of the properties are listed as monuments of cultural and historical value in Turkey and as such fall within the domain of other legal provisions, which are in place for the preservation of cultural heritage, requiring the preservation of their original appearance and conservation as architectural monuments (Petrova 2000: 101). Some of these properties are managed by the Foundation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Churches in Turkey, recognizing in this way their status of Bulgarian properties. Other properties have been lost or ruined. The Foundation itself and especially its management board (known among community members as “the church board”) is the primary organizational core of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul, leading its varied activities and contacts.

The list of the Bulgarian sites in Istanbul starts with the Exarchate House in Şişli – the place where every Sunday, with the exception of the summer months, most of the members of the community gather and conduct different meetings, events and celebrations. St. Ivan Rilski Chapel where Sunday mass takes place is situated in the complex. St. Stephen Church, also known as the “Iron Church,” on the shore of the Golden Horn is by far the most popular of the Bulgarian sites. Built in 1898, it marks the highest peak of achievement in the efforts of the Bulgarian colony in Istanbul to have a church of their own. Opposite the church is the Convent, which was built in 1859 and used to house a primary school. There is also a small Bulgarian cemetery in Şişli, where in 1921 the church St. Dimitar was built. The community members keep the memories of other Bulgarian historical sites in the megalopolis, such as the Bulgarian middle school in Beyoğlu, which was demolished, and the former Bulgarian

hospital, completed in 1899 and later expropriated by the Turkish state. The list of Bulgarian sites in Turkey is completed by two churches in Edirne – St. George and St. Konstantin and Elena.<sup>6</sup> All these buildings of cultural and historical value are managed by the Foundation and maintained with financial aid from the Bulgarian and Turkish authorities, as well as with donations by colony members. The latter regard them as belonging to their community, as testimony to its past, its origins, and ethnic roots.

### *Demographic and Social Characteristics of the Community*

The political developments on the Balkans since 1878 have deeply affected the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul in terms of the points of origin of its members and of their number. Alongside in-bound migrations mentioned above, there were also out-bound migrations to various destinations. Many of the emigrants went to Bulgaria, especially after the Second Balkan War and the First World War. After the Second World War, people of the community migrated mostly to the USA, Canada and Australia (Petrova 2000: 116–119).<sup>7</sup> The process of external migration continued after the 1950s and the community’s growth rate became contingent entirely on birth rate. The result is that within a short span of time the number of community members has dramatically decreased. The estimated number of the colony members today is less than 450 people.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for the rapid decrease of this community can be sought in emigration and low birth rate; they on their part are conditioned on the restrictive policies of the Turkish Republic towards non-Muslims and the tense bilateral relations between Turkey and the communist regime in Bulgaria between 1945 and 1989.

The dwindling numbers have affected the average age of the community members, which is quite high. As one of my interlocutors said with bitter irony: “Those in their 60s are the youngsters” (male, born 1939, Foundation employee). Low birth rate is to an extent related to social prestige for the members of the community and at the same time a result from the limited opportunities for realization of a Christian

minority group in the context of the Turkish nation state. The model of the two-child family prevails since the 1960s, but even then, families with one child were not rare; over the past decades the number of single-child families has been increasing.<sup>9</sup> Low birth rate, together with the continuing emigration of the young, has in practice already put the Bulgarian Orthodox Istanbulites in a situation of demographic crisis.

The community has also changed its social characteristics in the course of time. The ancestors of its present-day members were mostly peasants who in the context of the big city changed their occupations to different crafts – milkmen, gardeners, bakers, butchers, etc. The second and the third generation continued to develop the family businesses, while some of them changed into other spheres – jewellery, trade, industrial production, and fishery. Among the youngest generation, there are also lawyers, teachers, doctors, engineers, architects, and tourist agents. Very few of the former businesses are preserved now. What persists, however, is that most of the community members work in the private sector. This is the result of the legal limitations placed on the employment of non-Muslims in Turkey, for example the 1926 Law of Government Employees and Law No 2007, allocating a number of occupations exclusively to Turkish citizens (Cagaptay 2006).

The levels of educational qualifications grow with each generation. Until 1972, there was a Bulgarian school in Beyoğlu neighbourhood. Since 1928 minority schools in Turkey were designated as foreign (Petrova 2000: 158). Thus, those community members whose parents had Bulgarian citizenship at the time had the chance to go to this school, where they studied Bulgarian language and history. Those whose parents were Turkish citizens, were not entitled to do so. The younger generations lost the opportunity to develop their literacy in the Bulgarian language and the only milieu in which they learn and practice it is that of the family. It is only the vernacular that is spoken there. Some individuals develop their Bulgarian language skills by reading books, newspapers, and watching Bulgarian TV. The younger generations who study and practice Turkish at school, and more widely in society, have a very

limited usage of the mother tongue. The result is that most of the young community members barely speak Bulgarian and mostly in dialect form. Being schooled in Turkish, however, widens the range of possibilities for university admission and studies.

The better part of the generations from the 1950s and 1960s, possess good educational background – completed secondary school, often language high schools or colleges. Those who have completed higher education degrees among them are very rare though. The younger people have higher educational ambitions. Among them many study foreign languages and continue their education at universities in Europe and, occasionally, in Bulgaria.

Irrespective of their level of education, it is customary for the women in the community not to work after they get married. Being housewives is especially prominent among those who are in their 70s, 60s, and 50s. Among the younger female members of the community higher prestige is associated with the model of the working woman.

The people from the Bulgarian community in Istanbul self-identify as averagely well-off. They live in neighbourhoods such as Şişli, Kadıköy, Levent, Tarabya, Maslak, Etiler, Yeşilköy and others. Several of them who run successful businesses (such as production of plastic packaging and trade in diamonds) are in the higher income bracket, own property in different parts of Turkey or abroad (Greece, Bulgaria), and live in houses along the Bosphorus. About a dozen elderly people, on the other hand, are on the verge of poverty and sustain themselves entirely with the assistance of the community. By comparison with the middle class in Bulgaria, the representatives of the Bulgarian colony in Istanbul appear rather well-off, but they are not positioned as high on the social ladder in Turkey.

The people from the Bulgarian community display an affinity to a more modern and secular way of life, which finds its expression in choice of dress, furniture, schools, family pattern, and gender roles. They are very well integrated in the Turkish society, speak Turkish fluently and apart from their religious customs and specific community activities, they lead the life of average secular middle-class Turks.<sup>10</sup>

The decrease in the numbers of community members is a trend that raises anxieties among them. This trend is exacerbated due to the increasing mixing of ethnic Bulgarians in Istanbul with members of other ethnic communities through marriage. Marriages across ethnic lines were rare among the elderly members of the community because the families and other community members used to disapprove of them. “Earlier it was like something awful to marry an alien. Now they get married to locals, Germans, French, Italians, Greeks” (female, born in 1942, housewife). The way of life in the past also contributed to endogamy. The community was mostly concentrated in a few neighbourhoods. Its members were tightly linked in different spheres of life – work, leisure, religious and other holidays. The Bulgarian school used to create a stable context for meetings and establish relationships among the young. Several favoured by the community high schools kept these contacts and relationships in place. To this day, endogamous marriages are preferred and valued by the community members, but the opportunities for these have become limited. The diminished membership of the community has reduced the range of potential marriage partners significantly, all the more so because most families are already related by blood or marriage. It is the dispersal across different residential areas, but mostly the schooling in Turkish educational institutions, which has led to the loosening of ties among the younger generation within the community and to the increased contacts with people of different ethnic or religious origin. Access to university education and the widening of the scope of professional career paths, intensify further the contacts outside the community. Mixed marriages occur increasingly and with them the philosophy of the community changes as well. The norm already includes marriages with other Christians, especially with Orthodox Christians, and this change is being justified by community members in terms of cultural proximity. There are also intermarriages with Turks, but the community members speak of them as exceptions. In a few cases partners are found in Bulgaria. Given the trend for the younger genera-

tion to study abroad, the possibilities for ethnic and religious exogamy are increasing.

Some community members see mixed marriages as a reason for loosening the ties with the community and its traditions. As a whole, however, neither political turbulences, nor negative demographic trends have weakened the sense of ethnic belonging of the Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians, which remains strong to this day.

### **Between Two States: The Impact of Ethnic Policies**

The life and constituency of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul has been shaped on the verge between two nation states, two societies, and two dominant ideologies. In this section, I will discuss how ethnic policies of the Turkish Republic and the shifting relations between Bulgaria and Turkey in the twentieth century have influenced and shaped the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul. I will focus in particular on the following issues: citizenship, politics towards non-Muslim minorities in Turkey, and the impact of Bulgarian-Turkish relations.

#### *Citizenship and Ethnicity*

The constituency of the Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarian community in terms of citizenship has been diverse and fluctuating. Until the establishment of the Turkish Republic they were all subjects of the Empire. The formation of the Principality of Bulgaria attracted many of them to emigrate and become Bulgarian nationals. Those who remained within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire got the right to fight on the side of Bulgaria during the First World War, in which the two states were allies. After the war all participants returned to Istanbul carrying passports issued by the Bulgarian authorities, which listed their family members as well (Petrova 2000: 120–121). They were treated by the Turkish authorities as foreigners and as such they were deprived of a number of privileges available for Turkish nationals, regarding employment, freedom of travel, ownership of newspapers and magazines, foundation of ethnic and religious organizations

(Cagaptay 2006: 69–75), and real estate purchase. Under these circumstances, Bulgarian citizenship was no longer an asset and many opted for Turkish citizenship. This became a common practice especially after the Second World War, when Bulgaria and Turkey became ideological opponents. Turkish citizenship could also be acquired through marriage with Turkish nationals from within the community. “Until 1950, for example, if the parents were Bulgarian subjects and if the child was born in Turkey, /s/he automatically became a Bulgarian subject. ... [L]ater a law was passed, if the parents were Bulgarian subjects but the child was born in Istanbul, in Turkey, /s/he became a Turkish subject” (female, born 1942, housewife). Today the community consists almost entirely of Turkish citizens, some of them with dual citizenship – a status available since 1990.

In the first decade of the twentieth century the Ottoman Empire underwent a process of accelerated Turkification in the public sphere (Jongerden 2009; Güven 2011; Cagaptay 2006), which entailed the positing of Anatolian peasants as the core of the Turkish nation (Gellner 1997: 240) and the forging of ties of loyalty to the cradle of this nation – Turkey. Turkification of society was synchronized with the aim of the national state to parallel political unity with cultural such. This was part of the Kemalist project to modernize the country. Even though modernization also included secularization of the public sphere, the traditional formula of equivalency between Turk and Muslim was kept – in this every Muslim is recognized as a Turk, while non-Muslims can only be Turkish citizens (Lewis 2002: 357; Cagaptay 2006: 77). This incorporation of nominal Islam into the notion of “Turkish-ness” and “Turkish culture” has set the ground for differentiated state policies towards Muslim and non-Muslim minorities in the formative years of the Republic (1920s–1930s), which have long-lasting effects. Bulgarians were not a recognized minority in Turkey (Jelavich 1983b; Petrova 2000: 66) but they were subject to the restrictive policies of the Turkish state towards non-Muslims. Non-Muslims were marginalized and their rights were restricted (see Cagaptay 2006 for details). On the one hand, ethnic policies intensified

emigration – at the point of establishing the Turkish state the predominant part of its non-Muslim population was already outside its borders. On the other, non-Muslim minorities were largely excluded from the national project on the basis of their cultural “Otherness” (Gellner 1997: 242; Kasaba 1997: 38–39; Zürcher 2004).

### *Ethnic Politics in Turkey*

Several forms of Turkish policy towards non-Muslims have seriously affected the lives and identity of the Istanbul-based Bulgarians. One of the laws that influenced the identity of this community directly was the 1934 Law on family names (Türköz 2007). This law stipulated that all Turkish nationals get registered with new, well-sounding Turkish family names. In its essence, the law served the purposes of Turkification. According to Soner Cagaptay, “the act aimed to force the citizens to have their last names recorded, so that they could be screened for Turkishness” (Cagaptay 2006: 62). Thus for example, registry was not permitted when these names were not Turkish, or did not sound Turkish (ibid.). As a result, in the Bulgarian colony many would have a Turkish or Turkish-sounding name on their identity cards for official purposes, but among community members they would be known by another, their Bulgarian name (for example, Argir Lalkov has become Argir Gülcü, Kopanov has become Kopano, Liazev – Liaze, etc.).

Other laws posed limitations on the economic welfare of non-Muslim communities in Turkey. There were regulations that limited the spheres for professional realization of non-Muslim minorities and for many decades, they shaped the professional makeup of the Bulgarian Orthodox community, which earned its living mostly through practicing crafts, small-scale trade, small businesses and employment in private or foreign firms.

Another law from 1942, the Wealth Tax, “aimed to redistribute the capital that was unequally ... distributed during the WW2 period. As non-Muslims were well ahead in status, wealth and business this tax aimed to exacerbate their situation and make Muslims gain wealth. ... Non-Muslims had to pay

ten times more” (Duru 2009: 9–10). According to some sources, non-Muslims paid in tax about 75% of their income (Kasaba 1997: 28). All these laws seriously affected the existence of non-Muslims in Turkey and spurred waves of emigration, including Bulgarians from Istanbul.

The exclusion of non-Muslim minorities from the national project can be seen in different manifestations of hostility and even violence against them. The most telling example is the pogrom of September 5–6, 1955 (Duru 2009; Güven 2011; Türköz 2007). Against the background of the Cyprus crisis, it erupted in relation to a rumoured bomb attack in the birth house of Atatürk in Thessaloniki and resulted in mass mob attacks against shops and houses of Greeks in Istanbul. Other non-Muslims were also faced with those attacks, including Bulgarians. Many of their shops were totally ruined. The subsequent arrests of the participants in the riots notwithstanding, the lack of effective sentences in the aftermath left the impression that the attacks were tolerated by the authorities. However, my interlocutors recall that their Turkish neighbours did not participate in the pogrom but tried to help. The pogrom was followed by mass emigration of Istanbul-based Greeks. There were some Bulgarians who followed this example as well, especially those who had Greek spouses.

### *The Impact of Bulgarian-Turkish Relations*

The fate of the Bulgarians in the Turkish megalopolis depended to a great extent on the shifting relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. Thus, the period of the Cold War was not favourable for them due to the ideological polarity between Bulgaria and Turkey. Before the closing of the Bulgarian school in 1972, history and geography textbooks were often confiscated by the authorities since they presented a to them unacceptable interpretation of the past. The access to the Bulgarian press and media also became more limited. The situation was very complicated after the coup of 1980, which banned all public organizations and associations in Turkey. After it was banned, Radost charity association could only resume its activities some ten years later (Petrova 2000: 99).

The Bulgarians in Istanbul faced especially negative attitudes on behalf of the Turkish authorities in the second half of the 1980s. These were related to the assimilatory campaign of the Bulgarian communist government towards ethnic Turks in Bulgaria, which resulted in the mass exodus to Turkey of over 300,000 people in the summer of 1989.

The ethnic politics of the Bulgarian nation state also have a bearing on the situation of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul. With the formation and the consolidation of the Bulgarian state, the cultural and educational influence of Bulgaria gradually subsided, particularly with the suspension of Bulgarian citizenship for the members of the community (see also Petrova 2000: 64). In the context of the ideological polarity between Bulgaria and Turkey during the Cold War period, the Turkish authorities were not the only ones who regarded the Bulgarians in Istanbul negatively. As a matter of fact, Bulgarian authorities also regarded them with suspicion as potential conduits of alien ideology and foreign national interests. The existence of the colony was hardly discussed and it remained widely unknown to the Bulgarian public until the 1990s. Some of the reasons for this could also be sought along the lines of the origin of the community members. Their roots in Aegean Macedonia made them unsuitable for recruitment to the Bulgarian national idea and they remained beyond its margins even though the activism of the Istanbul-based Bulgarians in the second half of the nineteenth century and especially the achievement of church independence have been key moments in the national narrative since the formation of the Bulgarian nation state.

Contacts with Bulgaria have become more dynamic since the 1990s. The community maintains constant contacts with the Consulate General of the Republic of Bulgaria in Istanbul and through the Consulate with the Bulgarian government. The members of the Board are regularly invited to formal consular celebrations of national holidays. During diplomatic visits high ranking government officials always make a point of meeting members of the colony. The Bulgarian government officials regard the colony as their mediator with the Turkish officials



with respect to the management of the Bulgarian properties in the neighbouring country. They also provide subsidies for the maintenance of the properties. The latter are the link between the state and the community, even if they are also a point of some tension. The present-day community members think of themselves as the true heirs of the accomplishments of the Istanbul Bulgarians from the nineteenth century. The current Board of trustees, however, has well-balanced relations both with Bulgarian and Turkish government officials and manages with their support to maintain the physical and legal preservation of the Bulgarian properties in Turkey.

### **The Making of Ethnicity**

The question comes to the fore of how these Turkish citizens who self-identify ethnically as Bulgarians construct and express their “Bulgarian-ness.” What are indeed the grounds on which people who were not born in Bulgaria, have not lived there, and whose ancestors were not born there, self-identify as Bulgarian? In trying to shed light on these questions, I will, first, outline the variability of ethnic categories, second, discuss the way in which the Bulgarian Christians in Istanbul express their ethnicity, and, finally, describe the organization of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul.

#### *“Bulgarian-ness” as a Variable Category*

Ethnicity is often defined as a form of social organization based on biological ties, shared culture, and a common field of communication and interaction (cf. Barth 1969: 10–11). Different theories of ethnicity bring to the fore different aspects of this complex category. Here I would like to point out its situational and contextual character (Okamura 1981). It is in line with Fredrik Barth’s view that group membership outlined by self-ascription and ascription by the others has a pivotal role in defining ethnic groups, whereas cultural specifics are rather variables, used selectively in different situations for approving or denying group membership. “In other words, ethnic categories provide an organizational vessel that may be given varying amounts and forms of content in different socio-cultural systems” (Barth 1969: 14).

This implies that the same ethnic categories can be defined variously not only by differing actors but by the same actors in different socio-political contexts and situations of interaction.

The term “hollow category” (Ardner 1989) helps to understand the fluid character of ethnicity. Ardner specifies that the hollowness of these categories does not denote meaningless, but amplexness in terms of taxonomic space (ibid.). The term is introduced to account for the image of an ethnic group as seen and reinvented by its neighbours. I will extend it here to include also the self-definitions of the members of the ethnic group. Different groups of people may identify themselves as belonging to the same ethnic category, filling it with dissimilar meanings. Thus, for example, Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians define their ethnic identity differently from Bulgarians in Bulgaria, putting the stress on certain “indicators” of “Bulgarian-ness” and neglecting others. Dimitrios Theodossopoulos explains that the variability of an ethnic category depends upon “multiple meanings, organized in private or nationalist cosmologies, influenced by myths of origin, histories of the nation, personal memories and encounters with the Other” (Theodossopoulos 2013: 6).

Thus, the Istanbul Bulgarians of today base their self-identification on particular criteria, because of their specific situation as an urban minority. Perhaps the most important factor that has shaped the way they express their ethnic identity is the fact that they remain almost entirely outside the nation-building processes in Bulgaria and do not possess the dominant idiom of the nation, “employed by the surrounding educational, economic and administrative bureaucracy” and “mastered only through formal education” (Gellner 1997: 239–240). In fact, in a historical perspective they share elements from the dominant discourse of the Bulgarian nation, more specifically the part that relates to the activities of the nineteenth-century community – the struggle for an independent Bulgarian church and secular education in the Bulgarian language. The Exarchate in its capacity of leading institution of Bulgarian Orthodoxy remained in Istanbul for decades after the establishment of the Bulgarian nation state and

continued to spread its leading influence for the religious, educational and national awakening over the geographical territory of Macedonia, competing with the influence of the Greek Patriarchate. It is precisely in this period of nationalist clashes that the national consciousness of the ancestors of today's members of the Bulgarian colony was formed. For them it was such an important cultural capital that they sought to preserve it after emigrating to Istanbul and pass on to their descendants. The ties with the Exarchate and the consolidation of the community around it assisted in the process of achieving and preserving this self-awareness for generations to come against the background of an increasing distancing (cultural and political) from Bulgaria and a life in a "foreign" nation state.

The influence of the grand narrative of the Bulgarian nation upon the members of the community is rather limited (mostly relying on their former education at the Bulgarian school, which employed textbooks imported from Bulgaria) and practically non-existent in the younger generation. Interviews reveal that the people from the community know very little about national heroes, the history and geography of Bulgaria, while their knowledge mostly revolves around the history of the Exarchate, the fate of the Bulgarian sites and communities in Turkey, as well as their own impressions of places they have visited in Bulgaria. On the whole, they do not celebrate Bulgarian national holidays, with the exception of those celebrations at the Consulate General of the Republic of Bulgaria in Istanbul to which they are invited. Certain key moments of the grand narrative of the Bulgarian nation are also unfamiliar to them. Besides, they are also often incompatible with their current life conditions. What I have in mind here is the ideological construct of the "Turkish yoke" which is employed to this day in official historiography and everyday discourses in Bulgaria to designate the centuries of Ottoman dominance as well as the image related to it of the Turks as the epitome of the national enemy.

Arguably, Bulgarians in Istanbul remained on the margins of the national process and grand narrative of the Turkish nation, too, insofar as they belong to

an unrecognized minority, which cannot find its place within this imagined community and are socialized outside the Turkish educational system.<sup>11</sup> As a whole, this is a community that constructs its identity between two countries and on the periphery of two nations. It self-identifies as Bulgarian but it fills this designation with specific content, which reflects the influence of both state policies and national ideologies.

### *Markers of Ethnicity*

Which are the specific cultural characteristics that, according to the Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul, embody their ethnicity? Anthony Smith defines six main attributes of the ethnic group: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture (such as language, religion, custom), an association with a specific "homeland," and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population (Smith 1991). The variability of ethnic categories implies that each of these markers can be given different significance in any particular case of expressing ethnic identity. Thus, whereas Bulgarians in Bulgaria give primacy to such things as the place of birth (homeland) and mother tongue in defining their ethnic belonging,<sup>12</sup> Istanbul Bulgarians fully or partially disregard these criteria as they may rather make their ethnicity look doubtful. Instead, they build their ethnic identity on religious affiliation and their relation to the Bulgarian historical sites in Istanbul – criteria that bear relatively little or no relevance to the identity construction of Bulgarians in Bulgaria.<sup>13</sup>

Mother tongue is a fluctuating marker of their ethnicity, insofar as not all of them are fluent in it and their linguistic competence in Bulgarian decreases with the younger generations. As a rule, the people of the colony say that their mother tongue is Bulgarian or Macedonian, of which they think in terms of a Bulgarian dialect: "I speak what is also called Macedonian, but to me this is a dialect which is of the same origin as the Bulgarian language. I don't distinguish between them at all" (male, born 1963, engineer). They think in similar terms of the category "Macedonian" and understand it as a re-

gional identity, which can be placed within Bulgarian ethnic identity. "Bulgarians from Macedonia" is the standard definition they give of their ethnicity, or as one of the interviewees explained: "Our grandfathers from whom we inherited the feeling of belonging identified themselves as Bulgarians. For them Macedonia was only a geographical concept" (male, 67, former Italian language school principal).

Istanbul-born Orthodox Bulgarians are much more definitive when they posit their religious belonging as a marker of their Bulgarian ethnicity. Orthodox Christianity is a salient feature, which distinguishes them as a community and which unites them in their everyday practices. In this respect, they come close to Bulgarian national ideology, which acknowledges the leading role of the church in the movement for national awakening and liberation. Official discourses in Bulgaria, especially in the period of state socialism, delineate religion understood in terms of faith from the institution of the church. It is the latter, through its role in the past, that is accepted as one of the primary driving forces leading to national self-definition. For Istanbul Bulgarians religion is the core around which they build their community life. Religious holidays as well as the Sunday services are the basic celebratory moments when community members gather for joint activities. The religious gatherings have a pronouncedly social function. After the religious service community members meet and socialize with one another. Younger members of the community attend these services rarely since they either study abroad or prefer to socialize elsewhere.

It is religion that charters the paths for establishing connections outside the community, including governing the choices of acceptable mixed marriages. It is other Orthodox Christians, among them the Greeks as most numerous and a legally recognized minority, who are regarded by the colony as closest in cultural terms. Many community members are fluent in Greek because of their contacts in the city as well as abroad. The number of mixed marriages with Greeks is increasing and they already fall within the norm since they are based on religious endogamy.

However, there is a significant change in the attitude to the Patriarchate and the Greek community if we compare it to the past when the Ecumenical Patriarch and Greek church officials were regarded as the primary opponents of the Exarchate due to their attempts to establish a stronghold of cultural influence in the regions of Macedonia and Thrace. Nowadays the colony maintains a much closer relationship with the Ecumenical Patriarchate than with the Bulgarian one.

These associations of the Bulgarians of Istanbul with the Greek community in the city and the Ecumenical Patriarchate do not occur solely as a result from shared religion and perceived cultural proximity. They are also contingent upon the ways in which the colony is categorized within society in Turkey: since its separate minority status has not been recognized, it is unofficially included in the formally recognized non-Muslim minorities among which the Greek one is the most visible. Evidence for this may be found with regard to official policies and laws, also in everyday contacts and practices, as well as when dramatic historical events occurred, such as the 1955 pogrom.

Besides religion, what also plays a significant role in the construction and expression of the identity of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul is the Bulgarian properties and places in the city. They are the characteristic which renders the community visible, especially in its contacts with the Bulgarian and Turkish state officials, and which distinguishes them from other non-Muslim communities. The Bulgarian sites, especially the Exarchate house with the St. Ivan Rilski Chapel, the St. Stephen Church, and the Bulgarian cemetery, are the material expression that anchors the identity of the community. Seeing themselves as direct heirs of these places, and by association as heirs of the people who founded them and were active there, Istanbul Bulgarians present themselves as directly linked to a community with a historically recognized status and contribution. They associate themselves with some of the leaders and activists in the movement of the Bulgarian Revival who lived and worked in Istanbul during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this way,

they invest their own life stories with deep historical meaning and posit indisputable arguments for their Bulgarian belonging. The role of the sites in constructing the colony members' ethnicity is so central that their case presents an excellent example of a "material identity" (Donnan 2005). Historiographical accounts and life histories about the past and present of the colony and its individual members obtain special significance and effect when told in the landscape where they live and act. The narratives describing the colony members' experiences, in Hastings Donnan's words, "derive much of their emotional intensity from their 'situated transmission,' by being 'spatially anchored' to and told alongside the material traces of the past event recalled..." (op. cit.: 96).

#### *Organizational Dimensions of the Community*

Bulgarian properties in Istanbul serve as facilitators for the self-organization of the community. The Foundation is the structural centre around which the community is disposed. The Board of trustees gathers on a weekly basis to discuss and conduct ongoing activities. They are responsible for the maintenance of the properties, payment of bills and taxes, construction works, fundraising, organizing events and celebrations, representative functions, charity events, etc. The means necessary for the functioning of the managerial board, for staff salaries, including covering the daily expenses for the current priest and the widow of the former one, are collected through membership fees, income from the selling of candles, souvenirs and books, as well as from donations. Since 1990, they have been receiving an annual subsidy from the Bulgarian state. Members of the Board serve a four-year term. The new board is elected by direct voting among all community members. Participation in the Board as well as the position of its President is regarded as very prestigious. This organization creates opportunities for socialization within the community, which complements socialization in society at large. Outside it community members may have limited prospects for social realization (because of their minority position), but their work in and for the Foundation and the prospect of rising

in the ranks within the community's hierarchy give them the opportunity to compensate for these limitations and gain social recognition. What is more, work in the Foundation provides venues for contacts with Turkish and Bulgarian authorities, with high-ranking officials from the Ecumenical and Bulgarian Patriarchates, etc., which raises the profile of its members outside this narrow local community. All these considerations come into play to explain the degree of competitiveness which exists among members of the colony, especially among men, when they apply for these prestigious positions.<sup>14</sup> The people who get elected have the opportunity to accomplish something for the community and they are often the ones who contribute significantly to financing its activities.

The efforts invested in maintaining and developing Bulgarian monuments of cultural and historical value in Istanbul by the members of the Foundation and the entire colony intensify further the existing links between the social and the topos. The Bulgarian properties in Turkey form the basis of the colony's cultural capital – they represent and materialize its past, its inheritance and traditions but also its present. They are the source of accumulating social capital as well – in the contacts with Turkish government and city authorities, with Bulgarian government officials, representatives of the clergy, businessmen, etc. It is because of this that people of the colony display considerable zeal as well as a certain degree of jealousy with regard to the activities involved in taking care of these sites. Without contesting the rights of the Bulgarian state in this respect, they think of themselves as the legitimate heirs to the Bulgarian places in Istanbul and project equivalences and direct connections between themselves and the builders of those places, that is the very core of the Bulgarian nation – its founders. These are the terms which the Bulgarians in Istanbul deploy to prove their right to call themselves Bulgarians, even if they do not share the same knowledge, cultural and social experience and the same repertoire of identification characteristics as the Bulgarians in Bulgaria. Today, the lack of feelings of affection towards Bulgaria as "the land of the Bulgarians," as

well as of belonging to the Bulgarian nation, is thus substituted by the affection and commitment to the Bulgarian sites in Istanbul. The latter are the most eloquent symbols and material evidences of the Bulgarian disposition of the colony.

## Conclusions

In this article, I offered a discussion of the Istanbul-based community of Orthodox Bulgarians: the circumstances leading to its formation and subsequent transformations, the ways in which its members construct and articulate their ethnic belonging, the influence of factors such as citizenship, religion and politics of ethnicity. The specifics of this community is entailed in its members' self-identification as Bulgarians, which they have shaped outside the mainstream of the Bulgarian national process. Finding realization in a foreign national milieu, Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians also remain outside the Turkish national project or rather occupy in it the tricky position of an unrecognized non-Muslim minority which is faced with restrictive and assimilatory policies and practices across time. Existing on the border between two nation states and societies, the community has consolidated and organized itself developing its specific cultural identity. The members compensate the lack of connection with Bulgaria – such as citizenship, territorial affiliation, language competence, and knowledge of the country's history, geography, politics and culture – by emphasizing other attributes, which become fundamental symbols of “Bulgarian-ness.” Among them the most prominent are Orthodox Christianity and cultural and historical monuments, that is the so-called Bulgarian sites in Turkey. These two components are in fact intrinsically linked by the historical narrative of the Bulgarian national movement and especially by those events and processes in it that are related to the struggles for an independent Bulgarian church. Istanbul, where the Bulgarian Exarchate is established, is at the centre of these struggles, yet its activities tightly link the city to the region of Macedonia – the point of origin of the current members of this community, and to the Bulgarian national idea. The case of Istanbul-based Bulgarians is indicative of the im-

portance of territory and space in the construction of ethnicity. The lack of a real connection to the territory of Bulgaria is replaced by establishing a close connection with places that are an important part of the historical topography and cultural heritage of the Bulgarian nation. These places constitute the core symbolic capital of the community. Their status of monuments of cultural and historical significance elevates the role of the community, which takes care of them to the status of an important mediator between the Bulgarian and the Turkish states. Even if their in-between position does not make the life of Istanbul Bulgarians any easier, it facilitates the process of preserving their unique features. At the same time the demographic tendencies, such as the low birth rate, high rates of emigration and increasing mixed marriages, lead to the gradual diminishing of this community and may result in its disappearance. The rate with which its membership decreases is so high that the possibility of its total disappearance is a realistic prospect.

## Notes

Acknowledgements: The study from which the present paper arises became possible thanks to the financial support of the Science Fund of the Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria as well as of the Strategic Fund of the New Bulgarian University – the bodies which awarded the projects “Re-settlers and Migrants on the Two Sides of the Bulgarian-Turkish Border: Heritage, Identity and Cultural Interactions” (2009–2012) and “Anthropological Study of Istanbul-based Bulgarians” (2011–2013) respectively. I express my gratitude to the anthropology students who worked with me in the latter project. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the people from the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul who shared their experience and views with us. Milena Katsarska helped me with the English translation of the text and I appreciate her work. I would also like to thank the two reviewers of *Ethnologia Europaea* for their valuable comments on a previous version of this article.

- 1 I made six individual expeditions and two in which I supervised a team of anthropology students. Part of the observations and interviews are published in Elchinova (2013).
- 2 Even though “colony” is not the most correct term in this case, I use it here as it is how the people of the community speak of themselves.

- 3 The Exarchate remained in Istanbul until 1913 with the aim to keep its influence among the Bulgarian population of Macedonia, which remained within the boundaries of the Ottoman Empire after the foundation of the Principality of Bulgaria in 1878. After it was moved to Bulgaria, an Exarchate vicarage operated in Istanbul until 1956. Nowadays the Exarchate house is still preserved and serves as a community centre of the Bulgarians in the city.
- 4 For further details on the antagonism between the Bulgarian Exarchate and the Constantinople Patriarchate during the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, see for example Jelavich (1983); Roudometof (2001); Adanir (1992).
- 5 These are towns in north-western Turkey.
- 6 In 2011, in the context of debates on Turkey's accession to the EU, the state authorities passed a decree allowing religious minorities foundations to claim back property, forcefully taken from them in the past ([http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc\\_news?disp3\\_l205402795\\_text](http://www.loc.gov/lawweb/servlet/lloc_news?disp3_l205402795_text)). This refers to properties declared before 1935 when the Law on religious foundations was passed. According to officials at the Consulate General of the Republic of Bulgaria in Istanbul, the Foundation of the Bulgarian Orthodox Churches in Turkey can appeal for 53 former Bulgarian properties. If applications are successful, the options are either to get back the property or, in case it has been sold to a third party, to receive financial compensation for it. In early 2015, the Foundation got back the building of the old Bulgarian high school for boys in Edirne.
- 7 As a result of the migrations, Istanbul-born Bulgarians are now dispersed across the globe. Almost every family has or used to have relatives in the USA, Canada, Australia, Bulgaria or Greece. Migration continues today, especially among young people who go to study abroad and often do not come back.
- 8 The estimates are made by the administrative director of the Foundation who keeps a record of the living members of the community by the year of birth. There is official statistics from 1958 when the total number of community members was 1,218, of which 69% were re-settlers from Aegean Macedonia, 18% from Vardar Macedonia, 6% from Western Thrace, and another 6% from Bulgaria (Petrova 2000: 122). As the figures reveal, community members have reduced thrice during a period of 65 years.
- 9 When discussing the possibility of opening a Bulgarian language school in Istanbul with the Consular General of the Republic of Bulgaria in 2012, he mentioned that there were only 21 children in the colony.
- 10 The focus in this article is on their strategies of ethnic identification. In the diverse social landscape of Istanbul, however, the members of the Bulgarian colony engage in other discourses of identity in which they self-define as modern, secular, urban, "real Istanbulites" (whose parents and grandparents were also born in the city) as opposed to the majority of inner migrants to the city who are of a traditional, religious, and rural background.
- 11 The situation is different among the younger generations; they are socialized and formed entirely under the influence of standard Turkish education and the media in Turkey.
- 12 The place of birth and the mother tongue are for example major criteria for receiving Bulgarian citizenship. When people born outside Bulgaria apply for Bulgarian citizenship, they have to prove Bulgarian ancestry. Being born in Bulgaria is not always sufficient and it may be accompanied by testing the applicant's competence in the Bulgarian language. For the Bulgarian Istanbulites the place of birth, which lies outside the boundaries of Bulgaria, and the low level of command of the Bulgarian language are not convincing evidences for their "Bulgarian-ness."
- 13 Orthodoxy is a factor of ethnic identification for Bulgarians in Bulgaria, too, but not as much as it matters for Istanbul Bulgarians. The latter actually prove their Bulgarian origin when applying for citizenship by presenting baptism certificates issued by one of the churches that used to be under the umbrella of the Bulgarian Exarchate in Istanbul.
- 14 By the summer of 2012, only one woman has served two mandates as a member of the Board of trustees. Women are expected to be active in Radost charity association.

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