The ‘Bulgarian Ethnic Model’—Reality or Ideology?

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Abstract

The notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ has become part and parcel of the rhetoric of Bulgaria’s political elite. While often used to acknowledge the political participation of the Turkish minority, which has played a stabilising role in post-communist Bulgaria, the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ conceals other important aspects of ethnic relations in Bulgaria. The article considers three factors that render the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ problematic: the existence of racism, discrimination and exclusion; the issue of minority rights; and the popularity of nationalist parties.

BULGARIA’S PEACEFUL TRANSITION IN THE YEARS AFTER 1989 is often associated with the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’. This article explores the claims that are made on behalf of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ and how they relate to the reality of ethnic relations in the country. It is possible to distinguish three connotations commonly associated with the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’: the first relates to the country’s peaceful transition in the years after 1989, which sets it apart from developments in the former Yugoslavia; the second refers to the successful political participation of the Turkish minority which has played a stabilising role in post-communist Bulgaria; and the third is its association with traditions of ethnic and religious tolerance. It is this third connotation which has led some observers to describe the notion of a ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ as ‘an ideology’1 that feeds on the popular auto-stereotype of the absence of racism in Bulgaria (Bozeva 2000). This article explores how far the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ might conceal rather than illuminate the current status of minorities in Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ is often linked to traditions of ethnic and religious tolerance, in particular the rescue of Jews during the Second World War. In its comments on a report of the Council of Europe (CoE) European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, the Bulgarian authorities declared that ‘[I]tolerance and respect for diversity have been the basic values of Bulgarian society throughout the country’s long history’ (European Commission against Racism and

1Krassimir Kunev, Chairperson, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, interview with the author, Sofia, 5 April 2004.

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Intolerance 2004, p. 34). The notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ has become part and parcel of the rhetoric of Bulgaria’s political elite. In their pre-election platform of 2001, President Purvanov and Vice-President Marin declared that the ‘president shall . . . defend the Bulgarian ethnic model, which is founded on ethnic and religious tolerance’ (Republic of Bulgaria 2003, p. 7). In his address to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in April 2003, then Prime Minister Saxe-Coburg Gotha stated that ‘the “Bulgarian ethnic model” is an asset and an experience that we can share with others’. Even some parties of the political right, such as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (Внутренна македонска революционна организациона, have rhetorically embraced the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’.

The ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ is also evoked in the communication of the Bulgarian government to international human rights treaty bodies. The State Report on implementation of the CoE Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM) declared in April 2003 that

a successful model of inter-ethnic relations has been established in Bulgaria for the past 13 years, based on the principles of civil society and pluralistic democracy. Its essence consists in resolving minority problems through the maintenance of balance and harmony between the principle of integrating minorities in civil society and the principle of protecting their ethnic, religious and linguistic identity. (Republic of Bulgaria 2003, p. 3)

In its comments on the Opinion of the Advisory Committee on the implementation of the Framework Convention, the Bulgarian authorities stated in March 2005 that ‘this positive model . . . could serve as an example to other nations in the region and beyond’ (Republic of Bulgaria 2006, p. 2).

The notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ has also been put forward by Bulgarian social scientists. For example Antonina Zhelyazkova, one of the major experts on ethnic relations in Bulgaria, has commented that ‘there is something unusual or specific about the modes of ethnic cohabitation that have traditionally dominated Bulgarian political life’. Of course, she concedes, to describe Bulgaria as an ethnic idyll would be

too simplistic and misleading. At the same time, the relatively high level of religious tolerance and open-mindedness with regard to minority issues may be considered the main characteristic of the so-called Bulgarian ethnic model, setting Bulgaria apart from its troubled neighbours.

The emergence of the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ can be traced back to the beginning of the 1990s. In late 1989 and early 1990, Bulgaria seemed to stand at the
 verge of violent ethnic conflict. At that time, it was in Bulgaria rather than in Yugoslavia where many observers expected the outbreak of a civil war. On 29 December 1989, after Bulgaria’s long-term communist leader Todor Zhivkov had been ousted in November 1989, the communist regime reversed the assimilation measures it had applied to the country’s minorities, which had resulted in a mass exodus of Turks in the summer of 1989 and Bulgaria’s international isolation. The decision of 29 December 1989, however, was met with nationalist mass protests, which were orchestrated by local Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) leaders, security forces and some teachers, who organised themselves in newly set up nationalist committees and parties. A ‘Committee for the Defence of National Interests’ was set up, with regional committees throughout the country, demanding that the reversal of the previous assimilation policy should be put to the electorate as part of a countrywide referendum on the ‘national question’. Although the government maintained its decision to reverse the assimilation campaigns, concessions were made to the nationalists and only limited rights were granted to the country’s minorities in the post-communist constitution of 1991.

Further nationalist protests followed after the introduction of minority language education and measures to support minority rights were implemented very slowly. As the last of the European Union (EU) candidate countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), Bulgaria only signed the CoE’s Framework Convention in 1997, although this, too, remained domestically contested. A group of members of parliament (MPs) turned to the Constitutional Court to clarify if the Convention conformed to the constitution, arguing that there were no national minorities in Bulgaria and that the constitution excluded collective rights. On 18 February 1998, the Constitutional Court decided unanimously that the Convention did conform to the constitution (Konstitutionnen sud 1998) and the leading political parties agreed on its ratification in 1999.

In the course of the contested politics of minority rights a broad consensus emerged around the idea of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ and it came to be promoted by most political parties in the country. However, the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ seems to have been particularly propagated by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF, Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi), a party mainly representing the Turkish minority, that has been represented in every parliament since 1990, and forming part of government coalitions since 2001. The MRF noted in its 2001 programme that ‘Bulgaria has achieved a model for the solution of minority problems unique for the Balkans’, and considered this to be the ‘historical achievement’ of the MRF. A biography of Ahmed Dogan, the leader of the MRF since its formation in 1990, written by an MRF MP, considered the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ to be the ‘most important achievement of the Bulgarian transition’ and the ‘most important product our country can offer for the creation of a new model on the Balkans’ (Palchev 2002, pp. 97, 100). In March 2004, Ahmed Dogan received Bulgaria’s highest order, the Stara Planina (first class), for his ‘extremely great merit in building and preserving democracy, ethnic peace and a spirit of tolerance’. The current Prime Minister Sergei

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6‘Ire over Award for Dogan’, Sofia Echo, 2 April 2004.
Stanishev, from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP, Булгърска социалистическа партия), noted in his address to the 6th National Conference of the MRF in April 2006 that the role played by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms in maintaining ethnic peace and in the development of the Bulgarian ethnic model is beyond doubt, not only for me, but also for the majority of the Bulgarian citizens.7

There are various ways in which states can respond to ethnic and religious diversity. Principal approaches include assimilation, integration, or separation and exclusion (Eide 2004, p. 60). The protection of minorities can take two main forms: positive minority rights and anti-discrimination measures. These two approaches are complementary, as minorities face both exclusion and assimilation (Eide 2004, p. 64; OSI 2001, p. 16). In recent decades there has been a growing acceptance of minority rights in Western Europe, and largely in response to the collapse of the Soviet bloc new international minority rights standards emerged after 1989.

Main standard-setting texts include the Copenhagen Document, adopted by the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe8 in June 1990; the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities (UNDM), adopted by the General Assembly on 18 December 1992; and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, opened for signature by the Council of Europe (CoE) in February 1995. All three documents explicitly affirm state sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, territorially based minority rights, such as those granting the use of minority languages when dealing with authorities or for topographical indications, such as names of places or streets, have been gaining acceptance and are encouraged by the FCNM for territorially concentrated minorities. While it is difficult to judge which minority rights regime is most appropriate in a specific domestic context, the question of minority rights is increasingly recognised as a human rights problem, rather than a question that could be decided unilaterally by individual nation-states.

This article will discuss the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ in relation to four of the country’s minorities: Turks, Roma, Pomaks and Macedonians. The latest information on the ethnic diversity in Bulgaria dates from the census conducted in 2001. According to the official results, 83.9% of the population self-identified as ethnic Bulgarians, 9.4% as ethnic Turks and 4.7% as ethnic Roma (Национален статистически институт 2004). While the Roma are more dispersed throughout the country, Turks live mainly in rural communities in the north-east and south of Bulgaria. As in other countries of CEE the Roma are the most marginalised minority and are most affected by discrimination and socio-economic exclusion. As the census results indicate, Turks and Roma are Bulgaria’s largest minorities, although the Roma minority is assumed to be considerably larger than shown in the census. Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims), who live predominantly in compact settlements in the Rhodope mountains in the south-west of the country, were not listed as an ethnic group in the census results, although the Bulgarian state later conceded that 49,764 identified themselves ethnically as ‘Bulgarian Muslims’ (Република България 2006,)

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8This was renamed the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in 1995.
According to the census, there were 5,071 self-identified Macedonians, most living in the region of Blagoevgrad. However, there has been considerable reluctance to recognise the Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, and the 2001 census was the first since 1965 that listed Macedonians in the official results.

There seem to be at least three factors that render the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ problematic: the continued, but poorly acknowledged, existence of racism, discrimination and socio-economic exclusion; the almost complete absence of positive minority rights; and the electoral support of nationalist parties. The sections below will consider these three factors in turn.

Racism, discrimination and socio-economic exclusion

Despite the attention that has—at least nominally—been devoted in recent years to minority issues by international organisations and in the context of EU accession, the life conditions of members of minorities in many parts of CEE have not changed (Burton 2002, p. 9; Hughes & Sasse 2003, p. 26). Bulgaria adopted a comprehensive programme for the integration of the Roma minority (the Framework Programme) in 1999, and is one of the participating governments in the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015, which is being supported by a number of international organisations including the World Bank and the Open Society Institute. However, while the EU accession process has helped to put the integration of the Roma on the political agenda, domestic policy changes in CEE have often been of a token nature and not followed by implementation (OSI 2002). In the case of Bulgaria, this was acknowledged by the European Commission itself. In 2004, it concluded with regard to Bulgaria that for minorities ‘the situation on the ground has not evolved much’ (European Commission 2004, pp. 27, 140).

Why have Roma issues in CEE been so difficult to tackle? Even where the political will of governments exists, the scale and complexity of the challenges is immense. The problems of Roma communities are interrelated and amount to a ‘vicious circle’ of poverty and social exclusion (Ivanov 2000). With limited access to education, there is virtually no chance of gaining worthwhile employment, resulting in poor living conditions and a range of social problems, leading to limited access to education for the next generation. These problems are exacerbated by entrenched negative attitudes and discrimination in all spheres of life (Ivanov 2000).

In Bulgaria, most Roma continue to live in segregated neighbourhoods which, in urban areas, resemble ghettoes. Accommodation is frequently dilapidated and overcrowded and many Roma live in conditions that are not legally sanctioned. Many communities are located near garbage dumps and some are separated from the majority population through walls or fences, sometimes erected with municipal funding (OSI 2001, p. 94). Electricity and water have repeatedly been switched off for whole neighbourhoods in the past (Zoon 2001, p. 138). As in many other countries in CEE, most Roma in Bulgaria occupy the lowest socio-economic strata of society. An additional problem in Bulgaria is that the Roma, about half of whom live in rural areas, were excluded from the process of land restitution, since they had not owned land prior to collectivisation. According to a 2001 survey, Roma were 10 times more likely to be poor than ethnic Bulgarians (World Bank 2002, p. 16).
Roma face discrimination in all spheres of life in Bulgaria, including employment, education, housing and access to public goods and services. While negative attitudes towards other minorities in Bulgaria seem to have declined in the 1990s, anti-Roma prejudice has increased, and surveys have shown a significant degree of prejudice (OSI 2001, p. 80). Despite a raised level of awareness, negative reporting about Roma has remained widespread and they are often portrayed as thieves and criminals, a demographic threat and an obstacle to the country’s road to Europe (Lazarova 2002). Ognian Saparev, MP for the Coalition for Bulgaria (the parliamentary fraction of the Bulgarian Socialist Party), even argued in a newspaper article on 22 May 2003 that Roma should remain in the ghetto, illustrating the existence of anti-Roma prejudice among Bulgaria’s political elite.

Although data on criminal activity by ethnicity have routinely been gathered by the authorities, monitoring of discrimination in the criminal justice system has been lacking. Available evidence, however, shows that Roma suffer from discrimination at all stages of judicial proceedings, including higher than average rates of arrest and pre-trial detention, longer periods in pre-trial detention and harsher sentencing (OSI 2001, pp. 97–99). According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 65% of prisoners in Bulgaria in 2003 were Roma (United Nations Development Programme 2003). Roma and Turks also face problems in gaining access to lawyers and interpreters, as has been documented by a number of surveys between 1999 and 2003 (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2003, p. 7; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2000, p. 8; OSI 2001, p. 98). In addition, Roma have experienced ill-treatment during arrest and in custody. Between 1992 and 2000, at least 21 Roma have died in police custody or as a result of the use of firearms by law-enforcement officials (OSI 2001, p. 101). There has also been a number of ‘punitive’ or ‘preventive’ police raids in Roma neighbourhoods (OSI 2001, p. 101).

Roma in Bulgaria are the minority most affected by racial violence, which has dramatically increased since 1989. According to the Open Society Institute, a number of anti-Roma pogroms have been documented in Bulgaria. In most cases, village authorities condoned the attacks, there were no arrests, and the victims did not receive any compensation (OSI 2001, pp. 99–103). Racial violence in Bulgaria often went unpunished, especially when committed by law-enforcement officials. As the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination concluded in 1997, such crimes were apparently ‘not considered to pose a significant danger to public order’ (OSI 2001, p. 103).

Roma face widespread discrimination on the labour market and are strongly under-represented in the public employment sector, particularly at higher levels (OSI 2001, p. 110). Roma also face discrimination in access to social protection. To qualify, a number of criteria has to be met, most of which discriminate against Roma. In addition, payment of social benefits by the municipalities has often been delayed, especially where the beneficiaries were Roma (Zoon 2001). Recommendations of the Council of Europe to increase public awareness of the problems of racism and intolerance in Bulgaria (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2004, p. 17) have not been put

into action and were neglected in EU-financed programmes. The 2004 Regular Report was the first on Bulgaria that stressed the importance of combating ‘anti-Roma prejudice’ (European Commission 2004, p. 27), although activities in this direction did not play a prominent role in the pre-accession programmes.

According to the 2001 census, only 0.07% of self-identified Roma had higher education, compared to 11% of self-identified ethnic Bulgarians (Natsionalen Statisticheski Institut 2004, p. 204). Underlying this situation is the exclusion of Roma children from mainstream educational opportunities. The number of Roma children receiving education beyond the primary level is negligible and segregated Roma schools or classes are common. In 2003, about 70% of Roma children in Bulgaria learned in geographically segregated schools in Roma neighbourhoods (NCEDI 2003b). In addition, a disproportionate number of Roma children are sent to ‘special schools’, orphanages or other institutions. Throughout the 1990s, Bulgaria had the highest rate of children in residential care among all CEE countries, closely followed by Romania (UNICEF 2006). A survey conducted by the National Statistical Institute in 1999 found that 42% of children newly placed in institutions were of Roma origin (UNICEF 2001, p. 39). The above-mentioned evidence of exclusion of the Roma raises serious doubts about the notion of a ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ (Iliev 2001; Vassilev 2004, p. 40). In January 2004, Roma leaders noted that ‘the so-called Bulgarian ethnic model…has integrated only the Turkish minority’.10 This was also conceded to a certain degree by the Bulgarian authorities. The Action Plan on implementation of the Framework Programme of 6 October 2003 mentioned that ‘Bulgaria has built a successful model of inter-ethnic relations but still, the problem with the Roma integration has not found a permanent solution’ (NCEDI 2003a, p. 35).

While the continued existence of racism and discrimination is worrying in itself, it becomes even more so when not taken seriously by policy-makers, and a number of reports have concluded that Bulgarian governments have failed to fully acknowledge the existence of discrimination and racism (European Roma Rights Center 1997, p. 18; OSI 2002, p. 89). Petrova (2000, 2003, pp. 132 – 35) has identified various forms of denial, including presenting ethnic problems as socio-economic problems and stressing equal opportunities and equality before the law. These arguments can also be found in the rhetoric of Bulgarian authorities. In its comments on the report of the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, for example, the Bulgarian authorities maintained that the ‘[p]roblems encountered by many members of the Roma communities in CEE, including Bulgaria, are mainly socio-economic in nature’ (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2004, p. 35). This ambivalence in recognising the existence of discrimination undermines the implementation of existing anti-discrimination legislation.

The absence of minority rights

Although communist assimilation campaigns have been reversed in post-communist Bulgaria, positive minority rights have remained absent. For many years, even the

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existence of minorities in the country was not acknowledged by the state. This changed with the ratification of the Framework Convention in 1999, which can be regarded as an implicit acknowledgement that minorities exist in Bulgaria. While minority language education has now been reintroduced, teaching of other subjects in minority languages is so far not even subject to debate. In its Opinion on Bulgaria of May 2004, the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention found that the implementation of the Convention remained problematic with regard to the use of minority languages in dealings with administrative authorities (Council of Europe 2006). Positive minority rights in Bulgaria have thus remained much more restricted than in most other countries of CEE and more extensive minority rights than in Bulgaria have been established by all its post-communist neighbours. One reason for this is negative public attitudes. For example, a survey in March 2006 found that 63.4% of interviewed ethnic Bulgarians were opposed to members of minorities standing for the office of mayor and 69.3% were opposed to Turks being appointed as ministers, heads of regional administrations, or other higher state positions (Agentsiia Mediana 2006).

While Bulgaria has now embraced the notion that minorities exist in the country, it has not extended recognition to all minorities. The right to free ethnic self-identification has been denied to Pomaks and Macedonians. The Pomaks are an example of the continued legacy of the communist past and the over-riding importance of identification by powerful others in the context of state nation-building. Throughout the history of modern Bulgaria, they have faced numerous coercive assimilation campaigns, the latest being 1971–74. Since 1989, the dominant opinion of the Bulgarian establishment, the public and the media has not significantly changed. Pomaks continue to be viewed as ethnic Bulgarians, forcibly Islamised in the past. The 2003 State Report on implementation of the Framework Convention acknowledged the existence of ‘Muslims, whose mother tongue is Bulgarian’ (Republic of Bulgaria 2003, p. 15), but Pomaks were apparently not considered a national minority worthy of protection and they were also not represented in government bodies dealing with minorities (Council of Europe 2006).

Similar to the Pomaks, Macedonians continue to be considered as ethnic Bulgarians and the public and the media remain hostile towards expressions of Macedonian identity. Political parties of Macedonians have remained excluded from the political process (Rechel 2007). Little has changed in this regard since 1989, although since 2001 there has been a certain shift towards an official recognition of a Macedonian minority in Bulgaria, notably through the inclusion of self-identified Macedonians in the official results of the 2001 census. However, as in the case of the Pomaks, Macedonians were apparently not considered a national minority worthy of protection or representation. The Council of Europe Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention has encouraged Bulgaria to afford the protection secured by the Convention to both Pomaks and Macedonians (Council of Europe 2006), but this suggestion has been rejected by the Bulgarian authorities (Republic of Bulgaria 2006).

While some other CEE countries, such as neighbouring Romania, have institutionalised mechanisms for the political participation of minorities, post-communist Bulgaria has adopted constitutional and legal provisions aimed at preventing the political participation of minorities. Both the Law on Political Parties of April 1990 and the post-communist constitution of 1991 prohibit the establishment
of parties on a religious or ethnic basis. The new constitution contained a number of provisions aimed at preventing the political participation of minorities, most importantly Article 11 (4), providing that there ‘shall be no political parties on ethnic, racial or religious lines’. There does not seem to be any other state in CEE that has a similar constitutional provision (Eminov 1999, p. 36).

Bulgarian law creates serious problems for the formation of ethnically based political parties, including the mainly Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) which, as noted above, has been represented in parliament throughout the post-communist period. There have been several attempts at its prohibition. The most important case dated from October 1991, when 93 MPs from the constituent Great National Assembly asked the Constitutional Court to declare the MRF unconstitutional on the basis of Article 11 (4) and Article 44 (2) of the constitution. The petition was supported in November 1991 by 53 MPs from the regular National Assembly (Konstitutionnen sud 1992). The court reached a decision on 21 April 1992. While it did not consider the constitutionality of the MRF on the basis of Article 44 (2), with regard to Article 11 (4), a ‘non-verdict’ (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 1993) resulted in a rejection of the petition and the confirmation of the party’s constitutionality. Of the 12 judges, one was ill, six were in favour of banning the MRF and five against it. Because seven votes are required for affirming a petition for unconstitutionality, the petition was rejected and the party remained legal.

In the decision of the court, written by the five judges who rejected the petition, a party has an ethnic or religious basis according to Article 11 (4), when its programme, members, sympathisers, electorate and norms and ideas are confined to a certain group of citizens. The MRF was not found to be unconstitutional in this sense. In addition, the court noted that the party was open to all Bulgarian citizens, did not allow national chauvinism, Islamic fundamentalism and religious fanaticism among its members and opposed the idea of territorial autonomy in its programme (Konstitutionnen sud 1992). The decision of the court was accepted by all major political parties and had far-reaching implications for ethnic relations in Bulgaria. The MRF established itself on the political scene of the country, which contributed to the prevention of ethnic violence (Johnson 2002, p. 8). In the years after 1989, the MRF pursued a cautious, non-separatist and pragmatic course. It was opposed to the idea of cultural or territorial autonomy and for a long time did not even demand the recognition of the existence of ‘national minorities’ in the country. The participation of the MRF in the political life of Bulgaria helped greatly to reduce inter-ethnic tension (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 1995) and its moderation might have been ‘the single most important factor’ for the peaceful transition in Bulgaria (Johnson 2002, p. 21).

However, other, less influential parties representing the Turkish or other minorities have been denied participation in Bulgaria’s public life, including the Turkish

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Democratic Party (*Turska demokraticheska partiya*), the Macedonian party UMO Ilinden–PIRIN (*Obединена македонска организация Илинден–Партия за икономическо развитие и интегралност на населението*) [with reference to Article 44 (2) of the constitution], and the Democratic Roma Union (*Demokraticheni suyuz Roma*) (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 1993; Konstitutionnen sud 2000). Article 11 (4) has been criticised by UN treaty bodies (Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1992, Para. 278; Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination 1997; Human Rights Committee 1993) and the EU and CoE have asked Bulgaria to clarify its application (European Commission 2000, p. 22; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2000, p. 6). While an interpretation of the Constitutional Court in 2000 concluded that parties have an ethnic basis only when they restrict their membership to a particular ethnic, religious or racial group (Konstitutionnen sud 2000), the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention still found in 2004 that the article is ‘liable to cause unwarranted limitations of the right to freedom of association’ (Council of Europe 2006, p. 18).

While the predominantly Turkish MRF was found to conform with the constitution and became gradually accepted in the political life of the country, the Macedonian minority has faced the greatest resistance by the Bulgarian state when striving for political participation. Registration of UMO Ilinden was refused by the Blagoevgrad City Court on 12 July 1990 on the grounds that Article 52 (2) of the 1971 constitution prohibited organisations ‘whose activity is directed against the sovereignty, territorial integrity, or unity of the nation’ (Bell 1998, p. 195). On 29 February 2000, the Constitutional Court ruled that the new party UMO Ilinden–PIRIN, which had run with some success in the October 1999 municipal elections, receiving 5,838 votes, was unconstitutional, as it threatened Bulgaria’s ‘national unity’ in violation of Article 44 (2) of the constitution (Konstitutionnen sud 2000). The European Court of Human Rights, to which a complaint had been filed, found in October 2005 that UMO Ilinden–PIRIN’s dissolution constituted an interference with its right of association, in violation of Article 11 of the European Convention on Human Rights. In three more rulings related to the Macedonian minority in 2005 and 2006, the European Court of Human Rights found Bulgaria in violation of the right of association (in 1998–99) (ECtHR 2006a) and in violation of the right to peaceful assembly (in 1998–2003) (ECtHR 2005, 2006b). Despite these rulings, the negative attitude of Bulgaria’s authorities towards political organisations of Macedonians seems to have remained unchanged.

**Electoral support for nationalist parties**

A further factor that calls into question the salience of the Bulgarian ethnic model is the degree of support for nationalist parties and ideologies that oppose the granting of minority rights. In early 1990, several extreme nationalist parties emerged, including the Fatherland’s Party of Labour (*Otechestvena partiya na truda*), the Bulgarian National Democratic Party (*Bulgarska natsionalna demokraticheska partiya*), and the Bulgarian National Radical Party (*Bulgarska natsionalna radikalna partiya*). At this time however, these parties never gained significant political support. The Fatherland’s Party of Labour, which was primarily directed against Turkish political
representation, gained one seat in parliament in 1990 and 1991, two seats in 1994 thanks to an alliance with the BSP, and then disappeared from the political scene (Ragaru 2001, p. 300). This does not mean, however, that there was no nationalist electorate. Anti-minority rhetoric played a role in several electoral campaigns. Indeed, it can be argued that the main reason for the limited electoral success of the extreme nationalist parties in the early 1990s was that ‘the nationalist argument had already been appropriated by other catch-all parties’ (Ragaru 2001, p. 301). Both the two main parties of that period, the BSP and the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF, Suyuz na demokraticheskiti sili) were wary of the nationalist electorate, in particular as the reversal of communist assimilation campaigns had provoked strong nationalist protests.

A decline of nationalist rhetoric and the adoption of modest minority rights in the area of minority language education was the result of specific party constellations between 1991 and 1994, during which the MRF held the balance of power. While the election campaign in 1994 was the first in which nationalism did not play a major role, between 1994 and 1997 the BSP returned to power and progress in ethnic relations and minority rights stalled. More reform-oriented parties came to power in 1997 and in 2001. In 1997 the Western-oriented UDF won early elections, which were triggered by a severe economic crisis. In 2001, a new political party, the Simeon II National Movement (Natsionalno dvizhenie Simeon Vtori), surprisingly won the elections. It entered into a coalition with the MRF, which was the first time that representatives of the Turkish minority formed an official part of a post-communist government coalition.

However, a worsening of the political climate with regard to minorities occurred during the last parliamentary elections in June 2005. After the elections, the BSP (Coalition for Bulgaria, Koalitsiya za Bulgariya) under Sergei Stanishev, with 34% of the vote, formed a coalition government with the Simeon II National Movement (SNM) (22%) and the MRF (14%). However, the newly formed National Union Attack (Natsionalen suiuz Ataka) received 9% of the vote (i.e. the votes of 300,000 Bulgarians) raising concern about the potential rise of extreme nationalism (Economist Intelligence Unit 2007). Ataka is openly directed against the integration and political participation of minorities. The party is led by Volen Siderov, who has been described as an ‘overt anti-Semite and Holocaust denier’ (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2006, p. 20). In the presidential elections of October 2006, Siderov gained 21.6% of the vote in the first round and 24.1% of the vote in the second round of elections. While the electoral success of Ataka can partly be explained as a protest vote against the political establishment, the prominence of the themes of ethnicity and nationalism in its election campaigns could indicate the beginning of a backlash against the minority protection promoted by Western organisations. The open anti-minority rhetoric may also make it more difficult for the Bulgarian government to mobilise resources for the integration of minorities in future.

Conclusion

The notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ suggests that the predominant reason for the absence of ethnic violence in Bulgaria was the traditional tolerance of the
Bulgarian population. However, this article casts doubts about this assumption. The restraint with which the political organisations of minorities operated in Bulgaria is an important reason why an escalation of ethnic tensions could be avoided in the early 1990s. The participation of the MRF in the political life of Bulgaria helped greatly to reduce inter-ethnic tension and its moderation was one of the reasons for the peaceful transition in Bulgaria. In return for the acceptance by mainstream political parties, the MRF has avoided radical positions, resulting in an informal equilibrium (Sasse 2005, p. 32). There are also other reasons why Bulgaria has avoided the violent ethnic conflict that has taken place in other countries in South Eastern Europe. One of them was that the transition in Bulgaria has taken place in the context of an already established nation-state. In contrast, Yugoslavia was a federation of states and this provided the constituent republics with a blueprint for separation and independence.

In the years after 1989, racism and discrimination continued to exist in Bulgaria, hardly any positive minority rights were granted to the country’s minorities, and nationalism directed against minorities played a prominent role during several election campaigns. In all three respects, Bulgaria does not seem to fare any better than most other countries in CEE, although in some aspects it may compare positively to countries of the former Yugoslavia. While traditions of peaceful coexistence of Christians and Muslims exist all over the Balkans, they are not specific to Bulgaria and have often been confined to systems of cohabitation in mixed regions, with little formal acknowledgement and support for cultural or religious differences.

Post-communist developments in Bulgaria were characterised by the denial of minority rights and political participation rather than by a constructive dialogue with members of minority groups. The approach of the Bulgarian state to minority rights and the participation of minorities in public life could be characterised as ‘repressive tolerance’ (Marcuse 1965). It took until 1999 for the recognition of the existence of minorities in the country, and some minorities have still not been granted the basic minority right of free ethnic self-identification. The notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ seems to be particularly misleading when it implies a country free of racism and xenophobia—a claim which would be misleading for any country. As the case of the Roma illustrates most clearly in the case of Bulgaria, there continues to be massive problems of racism, discrimination and socio-economic exclusion.

The notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’, as used by the country’s major political parties, serves primarily political purposes. It seems to have been particularly propagated by the MRF and helps to justify its participation in the public life of the country. Most importantly, the notion of the ‘Bulgarian ethnic model’ has served the needs of the Bulgarian political elite because it sends a message to the European Union and other Western intergovernmental organisations claiming that Bulgaria has successfully ‘solved’ its minority problems and does not need any lessons in the protection of minorities.

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