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The 1989 Settlers from Bulgaria in Turkey:
From Forced Migration to a Transnational Mode of Life
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In the summer of 1989, the Bulgarian society was shaken by one of the most dramatic events in its modern history – the exodus of Bulgaria’s Turks to Turkey. From June through August, between 320 000 (Dimitrova 1998: 79) and 369 839 (Stoyanov 1998: 213-214; Kanev 1998: 112) people of all ages crossed the Bulgarian-Turkish border, leaving behind their homes and property. This massive population transfer had enormous effects in all spheres of Bulgarian society. Its impact was even bigger on a local and individual scale: entire regions densely populated by ethnic Turks were significantly reshaped and the lives of so many people were turned upside down in result of the exodus. Political analysts tend to view the exodus as one of the major reasons for the end of state socialism in Bulgaria, which followed in a couple of months. The change of the political system brought back around 154 937 people by the end of the same year (ibid.). Yet, a considerable number of approximately 200 000 Bulgarian-born Turks permanently settled in Turkey, forming sizeable communities in the cities of Bursa, Izmir, Istanbul, Çorlu, Edirne, Ankara and others.

The 1989 exodus produced ethnically specific migrant cohorts, as it involved only members of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. Therefore, the reasons for it are to be sought in the politics of the ruling regime towards the biggest minority group in the country. The immediate context of this mass migration was the so-called ‘Revival process’ - a large-scale assimilation campaign, instigated by the Bulgarian communists against the ethnic Turks at the very end of 1984. Its name alluded to one of the most significant periods in Bulgarian history, the National Revival period during the second half of the nineteenth century. This was the time of formation of the national idea among the Bulgarians, when the intellectual elite struggled for and achieved ecclesiastic autonomy, lay education in the Bulgarian language, and, eventually, liberation from Ottoman rule. The nineteenth-century Revival period is a central concept in Bulgarian historiography and national mythology, signifying the re-birth of the Bulgarian nation and statehood after five centuries under the Ottomans. Its interpretations have reinforced the image of the ‘Turks’ as the national enemy: the Ottoman domination is persistently referred to as the

‘Turkish yoke’ and the ‘Turkish’ conquerors are described as having imposed their rule by excessive violence, destruction and death. Under state socialism, the image of the ‘villain Turks’ was saturated with new ideological interpretations, in which Turkey had become the epitome of the ideological enemy, namely of the ‘imperialistic bloc’. In the beginning of the 1980s there was a series of commemorating celebrations (Gaille 1996: 209-210), the most important of which was the 1300th anniversary of the creation of the Bulgarian state. In their context, the ideology of the ‘Revival process’ was worked out, based on the idea that the Turks in Bulgaria were actually of Bulgarian origin, descendants of people who had been forcefully Islamicised and Turkified during the dark age of Ottoman rule. The communist party announced its willingness to welcome them back into the big family of the Bulgarian nation.

The politics of the ‘Revival process’ was aimed at the identity transformation and, ultimately, the Bulgarisation of the Turkish minority, which was announced to be a voluntary act but in fact was carried out through discrimination and restriction of the human rights of many Bulgarian citizens of Turkish and Muslim background. The campaign started with the administrative change of the names of the ethnic Turks and developed in other restrictive measures, which abused not only the constitutional rights but also the dignity of those affected by them.

The replacement of the names of Arabic-Turkish origin with ‘Bulgarian’ names was inflicted upon some 900 000 people (among which 180 000 Roma). This kind of action towards the Muslim population in the country had a history (Kanev 1988: 84-85) and was an important part of the socialist politics of national identity during the 1970s-1980s. Central in this politics was the concept of the socialist nation, depicted in ideological discourses as united and homogeneous, free of any divisions along ethnic, religious, gender or social-status lines (cf. Gaille 1996: 193). All the socialist citizens of the state had to be equally integrated by the socialist ideas and lifestyle. However, the reality was quite different: there were striking distinctions between the ethnic majority and certain minority groups (Roma, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, Turks), between the industrial centres and the peripheral rural areas. Despite the overtly discriminating and oppressive nature of the ‘Revival process’, the communist authorities tried to propagate it as something positive: those ‘reborn’ were to obtain equal status with the national majority and thus raise their own social status. (It is worth-mentioning though that equality under state socialism meant not only allegedly equal access to resources but also equally

restricted rights for all the citizens who did not belong to the ruling elite). In fact, the campaign was aimed at justifying the nationalist ambitions of the regime towards the homogenisation of the Bulgarian nation, disguised in the rhetoric of social equality.

In addition to re-naming, other measures were implemented to strengthen the Turks' integration through assimilation. These included the consequent change of names in identification documents, medical records, school diplomas, birth and death certificates, gravestone inscriptions; the ban to speak Turkish in public; the ban to wear traditional Muslim garment, especially women's veils and baggy pants (*'shalvars'*), the ban to perform Muslim rituals, particularly circumcision and religious funerals; the separate Muslim and Christian cemeteries were merged together and religious funeral rituals were altogether replaced by a standardized secular ceremony; public gatherings of groups bigger than 8-10 persons were forbidden. To suppress possible resistance, the authorities mobilized the police and army to enforce its measures. Those who openly opposed those measures or were suspected for organizing resistance, were interned or imprisoned; the most dangerous for the regime individuals were expelled to Western European countries like Austria, Sweden and Germany. There were local clashes between the Turkish population and the police and army, which ended with human casualties. Other lives were lost in various acts of violence between civilians, including terroristic acts. The real number of those who were killed, imprisoned or suffered from other forms of violence during the years of the 'Revival process' remains unclear up until today. The whole campaign was held in secret from the wider Bulgarian public and what was going on was blurred and distorted by the official propaganda. Any form of criticism or resistance, coming from among the Turkish minority or the Bulgarian public, had been suppressed quite effectively by the authorities. Not surprisingly then, the loudest voices against this despicable discrimination came from outside, on behalf of the international community (Amnesty International 1986; Helsinki Watch 1987, 1989). Failing to achieve the planned smooth assimilation of the Turkish minority, the regime tried to get rid of those 'unreliable' citizens by causing the so-called 'big excursion' (the name derived from the fact that the Turks were allowed to leave Bulgaria on tourist visas).

The politics of the 'Revival process' and the exodus that followed led to the division and destabilization of the Bulgarian public. By combining oppression, violence, conspiracy, rumour and disinformation, the ruling communist party provoked intense feelings of fear and uncertainty

among the entire population of Bulgaria, regardless of ethnicity and social status. Where ethnic frictions did not exist and ethnic difference was not even perceived, the fear stroke by official politics had increased the level of ethnic tension and exacerbated numerous relationships – between neighbours, colleagues, friends, and even family members. By stirring feelings of fear, uncertainty and perceived danger, the ruling class intended to distract public attention from the failures in its politics and to strengthen its power. It was exactly that atmosphere of affronted dignity and abused human rights, of fear for the future and hostility heated up by the official propaganda, which pushed so many people away from home after the opening of the Bulgarian-Turkish border.

In fact, the exodus was very much a consequence of the clash between two rival political regimes and their respective national ideologies – of the Bulgarian and the Turkish state. When in May 1989, the Bulgarian state and party leader Todor Zhivkov stated that those who felt Turks should have the opportunity to go to their ancestral land and appealed to the Turkish president to provide open access for them, and when sometime later the Turkish authorities responded to that appeal, both sides did so very much under international pressure. But they also acted in congruence with their own nationalist projects: whereas the regime in Bulgaria aimed to reduce the size of the biggest minority and to ultimately achieve a socially and culturally homogeneous society, the Turkish authorities followed their strategy of integrating the ‘ethnic kin’ (Parla 2007: 162) and consolidating the Turks worldwide in the name of the Motherland (*Anavatan*).

To describe the 1989 exodus of Bulgaria’s Turks solely as a result of political pressure and discrimination would be, however, only a partial explanation of its driving forces. Many of those who left simply caught the opportunity to leave Bulgaria for the first time in their lives and to settle in the world behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ – in their imagination a world of limitless prosperity and democracy. Prior to the beginning of the mass emigration, the citizens of socialist Bulgaria needed to have exit visas in order to travel abroad, which were not at all easy to obtain. The state introduced a new type of international passports, liberalizing somewhat border-crossing, exactly for the Turkish migrants in the summer of 1989. This act increased very much the size of the outflow to Turkey.

Another fact is also to be taken into consideration to understand the massive nature of the exodus. For their bigger part, the Turks of Bulgaria maintained at the time the structure of the extended family: people of at least three generations used to live together in the same household,

strong networks of cooperation existed between close kin and neighbours. Thus, the decision of one family member to leave more often than not urged other close relatives to join in. Likewise, the departure of many people in a village motivated other people to leave too – nobody wanted to stay in a desolate place.

The demise of state socialism brought about the restoration of the rights and freedoms of the Bulgarian-born Turks. It also increased the opportunity for all Bulgarian citizens to travel abroad. Migration to Turkey continued on a large scale but for other reasons. Since most of the 1989 migrants settled together with other family members and/ or people from the same settlement or region of origin, this led to the formation of kinship and local networks which had been enabling further migration in the following two decades (Parla 2007; Elchinova 2005). Today, most of the 1989 settlers have dual citizenship and regularly cross the border in both directions and for various purposes: for holidays and political elections, to visit elderly relatives and on vacation, to study or to develop trans-border businesses and occupations. People who were expelled from home by the hostile communist politics enjoy today the benefits of a transnational lifestyle. Their adaptation to the host society, however, was not an easy one, and their lives remain deeply influenced by the experience and memory of the exodus.

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