

ASSOCIATION FOR CULTURAL INTERACTION

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Background document to:

*Working session XII-XIII (Rights of persons belonging to national minorities, including:
Address by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities; National minorities;
Preventing aggressive nationalism, racism and chauvinism)*

The rights and circumstances of the Turks in Bulgaria

After the Liberation of Bulgaria, a process of consolidation of the Muslim-Turkish minority began within the Turkish population that remained within the boundaries of the Third Bulgarian State during the second half of XIX century.

The minority rights of the Muslim community were proved on the grounds of some international and bilateral agreements such as the Berlin Treaty (1878), the Istanbul Protocol (1909), the Peace Treaty of 1913, which were signed between Bulgaria and Turkey and these rights were strengthened as well by the Bulgarian legislation, especially the Tarnovo Constitution. They defined the basic civil, cultural and religious rights.

Under these new conditions the Turkish-Muslim minority started to create its cultural and religious institutions, thanks to which it preserved and developed its identity. Above all things, the religious and educational institutions were restored and expanded. They began to adopt in time Bulgaria as their motherland and felt members of the state. They show consideration to its culture, values and traditions.

Towards the mid 40-ies of XX century a new period began in the history of the Bulgarian nation as well as in the history of the Muslim minority that was the period of the totalitarian regime over the Muslim minority which dominated the idea for the ethnic clearing and the assimilation trends.

From the beginning of the 60s, the regime introduced a drastic change in its policy to the minorities. Under the pretext for "integration" of Turkish minority within the Bulgarian nation, its ethnical, cultural and religious peculiarities were gradually restricted. In the 70-ies the regime started the so-called process of regeneration, which was a special way of ethnic assimilation.

The culmination point of the "regeneration process" was the campaign for a forcible change of the names of the Turkish population as the campaign took place in the end of 1984 and the beginning of 1985.

In 1989 democratic movements started the changes in the country. In the so originated situation, the Totalitarian regime tried to alter the policy of assimilation by the next following ethnic cleaning, as it expelled a few thousands Turks to western countries, opened the border with Turkey and provoked the "great trip". Over 350 000 people left their homes.

The "regeneration process" with its anti-human nature created serious social-economic and political problems. Above all, drove a wedge between Bulgarian nation and Turkish minority and created the ethnic tensions.

Changes occurred in the life of the Muslim minority in the transition to democracy period. Their political, religious and partially cultural rights began to be restored in accordance with some of the International Treaties that Bulgaria ratified and in accordance with the Constitution from 1991. These documents referred mainly to the political and religious rights.

Notwithstanding, today we are beset with so many problems exercising our rights. In our opinion appropriate conditions for exercise these rights haven't been provided. There are not real conditions for preserving the ethnical, religious and cultural identity. Frequently some circles qualify the demands for full rights and fundamental freedoms as an expression to separate the minorities.

Bulgaria has international commitments with respect to the protection of minorities. However the Turks of Bulgaria are not regarded as a national minority, in view of the acquis and practices of the UN, the Council of Europe, OSCE and OSCE/ODIHR.

I'd like to state here that the Turks in Bulgaria do not want any privileges, but only the rights that are given in the relevant international documents related to minority rights, as well in the Constitution.

In this regard I offer to your attention this report, which explains some of the most important and urgent demands of the Turkish-Muslim minority. We consider the following cases, emphasizing that they are not the only ones which expect their favorable decision.

1. In education, especially at primary and secondary school:

The students and parents face challenges about full value studying mother tongue in the public schools for 20 years. The education about mother tongue is underlying in the current Constitution and Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. According to the study conducted by IMIR (International Minority and Intercultural Relations Center)¹ in connection of the forthcoming passing of the new Preschool and School Education Act (PSEA), the authorities are not strong-willet to fully implement the Public Education Act for mother tongue studying. The Ministry of Education doesn't have any special regulations for teaching mother tongue. This hinders studying mother language in public schools. The statistics show that the number of students studying mother tongue has decreased from 56 000 to 10 000 for the last ten years on account of the above mentioned reasons.

Currently mother language education of Turks has been implemented owing to the personal concept of the parents, headmasters, teachers and school inspectors in the public schools.

¹ IMIR's study on "Educational Problems of Turkish Children in Bulgarian Schools (Fieldwork, analysis and recommendations to the preschool and school education act): <http://www.imir-bg.org/index.php?do=research&submenu=researchcurrent>

Furthermore, the number of textbooks is insufficient and low quality, which is too old, published about twenty years ago, as well as problems with the curriculum, and that the mother tongue education is optional subject at four hours weekly in the elementary school. The specialists equalize the mother tongue education to the vocational training, as well as this would obstacle to master the Bulgarian language, which is illogical.

Turks in Bulgaria would like to study and use the mother language accordingly to International Law and the Constitution of our country.

2. *Contents of the textbooks in the school curriculum:*

A very serious problem is the image of Turks in the school curriculum, particularly in the books of literature, history and literature textbooks which are studied at school from tender age. Bulgarian public opinion is led to believe unanimously that during the Ottoman rule the Bulgarian people were subjected to slavery by the Turks or Muslims. Examples of atrocities and tragedies caused by Turks are given in the poems, narratives, history textbooks and etc.

The experience shows that the question about Turks is raised students first remember the evil oppressors and that the most dangerous enemy is a Turk or a Muslim. In the textbooks history of Bulgaria is presented in a parochial manner, accordingly the narrative regarding the Ottoman rule in Bulgaria and the subsequent Bulgarian-Turkish relations is quite prejudicial taking into account the nation building process. Not surprisingly it helps forge a negative image of Muslims or Turks in the society. As a result, Bulgarian public opinion is led to believe unanimously that Ottoman rule which was exercised by the Turks brought nothing but slavery to Bulgarian lands.

Studies conducted by many independent research agencies, including Open Society Institute, International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations, even by Commission for Protection Against Discrimination (National Point of Contact of ODIHR/OSCE)² show that the school curriculum does not promote multiculturalism, which traditionally exists on the Balkans and the mixture of cultures, majority of Muslims in Bulgaria are subject to discrimination notwithstanding they are loyal citizens and want to live in peace with their fellow-citizens professing other religions. When this ethnic diversity is not taught, all that brings misunderstanding and hatred. Mythologies of national history promoted by mass media, circulated on the book market, filmed in countless documentaries and featured films further stoke anti Muslim sentiments.

This is why, in schools and within school curricula, it is important for portrayals of Turks and Muslims, as well as all ethnic groups and their adherents to be accurate, fair and respectful. A number of international instruments set out that education are intended not only to provide strictly academic or technical training but that it should also inculcate such values as human rights, tolerance, pluralism, anti-racism and international and inter-communal harmony. On another level, a good practice in developing curriculum related to minorities is that the curriculum should be developed with the active participation of bodies representative of the minorities in question. Schools should seek to provide opportunities for discussion about stereotypes and portrayals of Turks and Muslims.

² Report of the Commission for Protection against Discrimination (NPC) became public known in August 2012, which provoked anger among nationalistic disposed politicians and historians.

3. Discrimination in employment:

In employment systematic or structural impediments exist in national and local government, educational institutions, the police and the armed forces. Symptoms of increasing trend discrimination are visible at all levels. At the political realm some political parties are explicitly inciting hatred against Muslims. At the administrative level lack of any middle level, let alone high level, Turks official at the echelons of bureaucracy, police, armed forces, judiciary, constitute manifestations of discrimination against Turkish minority. Yet people with the mentality of the previous regime lay down rules in the governmental and public institutions. Some influential circles attempt to identify Turks as enemies of the state and the nation which are completely groundless. They are an updated approach familiar to us from the not too distant past.

Bulgaria ratified relevant International Convention for abolition of all kinds of discrimination. It has enacted a special Act on Protection from Discrimination. Actually, state of affairs vis a vis ethnic minorities suggest that the latter are subject to discrimination.

4. “Revival process” for geographical places

Attempts of local municipal councils to change Turkish topographical names, constituting a breach of the *acquis* of the Council of Europe in this regard. This is a peculiar “regeneration process” that this once touches not the names of people, but the names of objects. This presents a political break into the natural territory of the language and has an effect on the ethnical tolerance of the multi-cultural society in Bulgaria. Most of these geographical objects have never had other names in the history. Similar attempts at local councils to adopt controversial resolutions on historical issues, containing a selective reading of history. It also means denial of the history. Some of these municipal councils are in Sliven, Ruse, Burgas, Varna, Stara Zagora towns. It indicates that the levels of racism and intolerance against everything associated with Turks are very high. This process is very danger and may provoke new dividing line in the society.

Such initiatives reduce citizens’ trust the state and its institutions. They feel insulted, repelled and alienated.

We have always been conscientious, loyal and dedicated citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria and do not deserve that neglectful and sometimes even threatening attitude. Therefore, we sincerely hope that you take the necessary steps for a further study, analysis and identification of the substance of our allegations.

In conclusion, I will add that Turkish and Muslims in Bulgaria have always been peaceful, hard-working, tolerant and honest citizens of their country. We comply with the laws of the country and we are open for dialogue and positive development in every constructive direction. Our demands are dictated by our need and desire to develop and provide better conditions for the Turkish-Muslim community for development in minority rights aspect, which is a necessary condition for good co-existence of citizens of different ethnic and religious groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Encourage the Bulgarian authorities:

- To implement the Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, as well as other relevant international instruments that have been adopted at the universal or regional level and those concluded between individual States;
- To implement the International Convention for abolition of all kind of discriminations, as well as the other commitments on elimination of discrimination, racism and intolerance and the Law for Protection from discrimination. Closely observe the discriminatory and intolerant actions committed by far right nationalistic parties and formations;
- To take effective measures, including the adoption, in conformity with constitutional systems and international obligations, of such laws which can be necessary to provide protection against any acts that constitute discrimination, racism, incitement to hatred etc.;
- Take measures to fully implement the Public Education Act for mother tongue studying and adopt special regulations for teaching mother tongue;
- Make efforts to observe the process and combat intolerance and discrimination in employment in national and local government institutions.

OSCE/ODIHR:

- Bulgaria ratified the International Convention for abolition of all kind of discriminations. Passed a special law for Protection from discrimination. In actual fact, discriminatory actions against religious and ethnical minorities happen very often. OSCE to suggest specific measures of surmounting of the Discrimination, Racism, anti-Semitism, intolerance, xenophobia and hate crimes;
- OSCE to express the position on the forthcoming passing of the new Preschool and School Education Act and studying mother language in the school;
- OSCE to observe closely the process of combating intolerance and discrimination against Turks and Muslims.
- OSCE to observe closely the process of implementing the commitments of the International documents on minority rights
- To suggest specific measures of surmounting racism, intolerance and discrimination, including bias motivated incidents committed by nationalistic parties and formations.