



## **On the Margins of Two States: Flexible Self-identification Strategies of Bulgarian Muslims in Spain<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract:**

The main focus of the paper is the relationship that Bulgarian Muslim migrants in Spain have developed with the two states in which they are simultaneously entangled through their migration. This group, often referred to as 'Pomaks' have developed a specific relationship of detachment and a tactic of circumventing the Bulgarian state; the paper shows how they have stopped expecting support or creation of opportunity structures by the state, finding their own ways of survival through migration.

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### **Introduction**

As a researcher of Bulgarian Muslim migration to Spain I ended up in Tafalla, a small town in Navarra with a large number of migrants coming from one particular village in Bulgaria. During the first few weeks of my stay there I was completely puzzled and often felt lost among the many people I got to know. Eventually I started to realize that the number of people I knew was three times (even four times) less than I thought in the beginning. This was due to the fact that Bulgarian Muslim migrants in Tafalla have about four different ways to present themselves, depending on whom they do it for. They have a Bulgarian name, they have a Muslim name, they have a local kin name, and they have a regular Bulgarian kin name. The longer I stayed, the less I was a regular outsider who only gets to learn the Bulgarian name and kin position (as most Spanish do), and the alternative names were gradually revealed as well as the kin positions (as an insider). I fell into the liminal position of semi-outsider/semi-insider. So, once I was introduced

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to an elderly woman by her son (whom I already knew). She introduced herself with her Bulgarian name while shaking my hand, but her son interrupted her; “It’s all right, you can tell her your real name. She’s ok with that, she knows.” What does this double-naming strategy mean, and where does it stem from? This is what I will try to explain in the following paper.

My main focus here is the relationship that Bulgarian Muslim migrants in Spain have developed with the two states in which they are simultaneously entangled through their migration. The Bulgarian Muslims, who are also often referred to as Pomaks, are a group with flexible boundaries and situational self-identification. They are most broadly defined as ethnic Bulgarians who are Muslim by religion. Rough estimations show that they comprise about 3 % of the Bulgarian population, and are the third largest minority in the country, besides the Bulgarian Turks and the Roma. However, they do not have a legal minority status, even though they have specific religious and cultural traditions which distinguish them both from the Christian Bulgarians and the Muslim Turks. In my research I have turned my attention to them because they represent a very clear example of how various categorizations, mostly state ones, but also of other social groups, can shape the self-identification of certain people, and also how the change in the context through migration might result in transformations of self-identification and self-representation.

The particular group of Bulgarian Muslims I am researching have migrated to Spain over the last 7-8 years. Beyond the usual aspects of a transnational life, stretching over two localities/two states, entangled in various institutions and actors spanning over a transnational social field, there is something which makes the Bulgarian Muslim migration more interesting. It is their specific position of semi-insiders/semi-outsiders in their place of origin, where they have developed a long ambivalent relationship with the Bulgarian nation state, which is further complicated by another ambivalent position in their place of settlement, where they are simultaneously labour migrants, Muslims and EU citizens. Therefore, here I look at the interactions and conjunctions between official state-proposed, enforced, institutionalized categorizations and the everyday enactments, appropriations, or evasions of such categorizations by Bulgarian Muslim migrants and how they are transformed in the context of migration. Using this case I seek to tackle the issue of repositioning the group identities of economically and culturally dominated minorities.

Theoretically my research is placed at the intersection of three analytical fields. The first is transnational migration, in particular the aspect of simultaneous incorporation in the place of origin and place of settlement (see Basch et al. 1994, Glick-Schiller and Basch 1995, Glick-Schiller and Levitt 2004, Levitt 2001). Second, I use new citizenship theories which transcend the formal and normative aspect of the concept and instead focus on alternatives like flexible or social citizenship (see Bauböck 2003, Glick-Schiller and Caglar, forthcoming, Ong 1999, 2006). Finally, I use the framework of the relational and constructivist approaches towards identity/identification (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, Brubaker 2004, Jenkins 1995).

My study is based on a continuous ethnographic research of the Bulgarian Muslim migrant community, which stretches over two places: a village in Bulgaria which has substantial migrant population in Spain, and a small town in Spain, where most of the migrants are concentrated. I have spent extended periods of time since last September in both places and my research is still ongoing.

### **The Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria – historical overview of state categorizations**

The majority of the Bulgarian Muslim population lives in the Rhodopi mountain region in Bulgaria<sup>2</sup> and is estimated to be approximately 250 000 people (Konstantinov 1997; Tomova 2000)<sup>3</sup>. The question of their categorization and naming has gone through several stages of political contestation which has turned them into a social group with unstable and flexible identification, defined by its existence on the margins of other groups. This has placed them in a position of “ethnic marginality” (see Karagiannis 1997) with no internal coherence or a clearly expressed sense of communal belonging. At present they are most broadly defined from the outside (i.e. in state definitions and by other ethnic and religious groups) as ethnic Bulgarians who are Muslim by religion. This contrasts other Muslims, like Turks, who are ethnically and linguistically Turkish, or other Bulgarians, who are Christians.

What is more, as a group with no clearly expressed claims for specific ethnic difference their official group existence has largely depended on the actual directions of the nation-state project of Bulgaria, which produced and imposed on them different categories in different periods over the last century, thus tossing them between perceptions as the “self” of the nation, which needs to be assimilated back (and christianized/bulgarianized), and the “other” of the nation which has to be excluded and differentiated (turkized). The Bulgarian state had applied its assimilation policies several times over the last century aiming to remove all the semiotic codes of Muslim identity like names, clothes, rituals, mosques (Creed 1990, Eminov 1990, Konstantinov 1992, Mihaylova 2003). My respondents remember at least three campaigns that attempted to “Christianize them”, and one to “turkize them”, with the biggest and most violent assimilation campaign taking place in 1972.

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<sup>2</sup> Similar Slavic speaking Muslim population lives also in Greece, Macedonia, Albania, and Turkey. Their status and name varies from country to country according to the different national politics towards minorities. (Brunnbauer 1998, Georgieva 2001).

<sup>3</sup> There is no official census about the number of the Bulgarian Muslims, since in the census such category is non-existent. Thus estimations are being made from approximate calculations of the number of Muslims living in the non-Turkish part of the Rhodopi Mountain, or through cross calculations of census data looking at the number of Muslims (religious category) and the number of Bulgarians and others (ethnic category), excluding the Turkish and Roma ethnic minority. The non-existence of a distinct category in the census is another demonstration of the “silencing” of their difference and their place simultaneously in- and outside the nation.

After 1989 the assimilation policies were terminated and many Bulgarian Muslims have returned to their Muslim names, most of the old people started wearing their traditional clothes, mosques were rebuilt and religious practices were restored (not without the help of Saudi and Turkish foundations). However, the Bulgarian Muslims still did not get any kind of minority recognition, and were categorized by the state only through their religious difference from the majority, which obscured their cultural differences and stimulated an ethnically even more marginal position. Moreover, the structural discrimination against members of the Muslim minorities continued (Eminov 1990, Bates 1994), and widespread prejudice and negative stereotypes have persisted over the years until today (Pilbrow 1997).

At the same time, the state practically withdrew from the whole region. The deindustrialization (with mines and factories being closed) and falling apart of agricultural cooperatives led to a very high unemployment rate and a general impoverishment of all Bulgarian Muslims over the last two decades (Tomova 2000). This was complemented by the lack of ways for political participation and group claim-making both during socialism and after 1989. The main consequences of the intensive and thorny relationship with the Bulgarian state have been, according to Mihaylova (2003:54) “re-peasantization, re-marginalization and out-migration” of the Bulgarian Muslims, which also lead to a rhetoric of poverty and abandonedness (see also Tomova 2000).

### **The Bulgarian Muslims in Spain –potential categories and their transformations**

For the reasons listed above, I explore mass migration not only as an attempt for overcoming economic hardship, but also as an escape from the social and economic marginalization and disenfranchisement. Ironically, while Spain is offering better economic conditions (higher and more secure income), it places the Bulgarian Muslims in yet another marginal and ambivalent position. Immigrants, even though legalized and often regularized, are not part of the nation, and do not have the right for a minority status. They are conceived as the stranger in Simmel’s definition, who “comes today and stays tomorrow” (1950:402). This turns them into an immanent part of the social space, but still differentiates them from the real insiders. On top of that, they are not only immigrants, but also Muslims, which might evoke negative connotations of terrorism and fundamentalism in the European space. Similar to many other European countries, in Spain there is a xenophobic attitude which is particularly directed towards Muslim migrants (ECRI 2003).

However, Bulgarian Muslims are not Muslims in Europe, but Muslims of Europe, who have to cope with the process of both migration and EU integration. By Muslims of Europe I refer to the fact that with Bulgaria’s accession to EU over 1 million Muslims (Turks, Bulgarian Muslims and Roma) who are Bulgarian citizens became European Muslims. This has added the largest number of “indigenous” Muslim population (as opposed to the first or second generation of migrants) to

the EU population. Thus being EU citizens, immigrants and Muslims at the same time, differentiate Bulgarian Muslims from other categories of population in Spain in various ways: from other Bulgarian immigrants (for being Muslim), from Ecuadorian and other out of Europe immigrants (for being EU citizens and Muslim), from North African immigrants (for being European Muslims), and from all local Spanish population (for being both immigrants and Muslim). However, all these differentiations are potential and can be enacted in various degrees.

In addition, over the last 10 years the status of Bulgarian immigrants in Spain and the different procedures for legalization and regularization have gone through several changes due to Bulgaria's transformation into accession country after 2001 and into an EU country after 2007. Before 2001 Bulgarian citizens needed an entry visa which was usually single entry for a short period of time and was rather complicated to get. Between 2001 and 2007 a three months visa-free-stay in any Schengen country was introduced. This new regulation led to the intensification of migration flows to Spain. Thus the change in status from unwanted immigrants into future EU citizens immediately resulted in the change of practices. Consequently, Bulgaria's accession into EU in 2007, made it much easier than before for migrants to enter other EU countries (and Spain in particular), spend unlimited time there<sup>4</sup> (as opposed to the previous 3 months limit), and acquire work contracts from employers (which was much harder to be arranged before, even with the explicit desire of the employer to legalize the employee).

Bulgarian citizens became EU citizens, even though they still do not have full rights in Spain.<sup>5</sup> These kinds of regulations placed the Bulgarian Muslim migrants in a much more favourable position in comparison to other non-EU migrants, while at the same time still applying certain categories of non-citizens with restricted rights, which differentiates and inferiorises them in comparison to other EU citizens from the older member states. In what follows, I will demonstrate how a group of Bulgarian Muslim migrants adopts and plays with the different categories at hand which they have been imposed upon both in Bulgaria and in Spain.

### **The two research sites - Brushlyan<sup>6</sup> and Tafalla**

The ethnographic study of this project is based in two sites – one in Bulgaria, one in Spain, connected through the flow of migrants from a Bulgarian Muslim village to a small town in the municipality of Navarra. The Bulgarian Muslim village, Brushlyan, is in South Western part of the Rhodopi mountains, near to the Greek border, in a region where mostly Bulgarian Muslims

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<sup>4</sup> Spending unlimited time in Spain is possible after an address registration and residence registration for a residence permit, which however is a very easy and quick procedure (as compared to other EU countries), costs nothing and all the Bulgarian Muslims migrants who now enter Spain immediately proceed to obtain the residence permit.

<sup>5</sup> For example, there is a 2 years transitional period which restricts free movement of workers from Bulgaria to Spain for the purpose of taking up a job, thus requiring from Bulgarians to still obtain a work permit in order to take a job.

<sup>6</sup> The name of the village in Bulgaria is fictional on the request of my respondents who wished for maximum anonymity. The same is valid for the personal names, used in the rest of the paper.

live. Due to the lack of employment and the unfavourable employment conditions international migration seems to be the most feasible solution for many people to find not only a new means of living, but mostly to save some money. At present at least one quarter (including children) of the 2000 inhabitants of Brushlyan is living and working in Spain, concentrated in the region of Navarra.

Migration to Spain, and more particularly to the small town of Tafalla, municipality of Navarra (ca. 11000 inhabitants) has been network-based chain migration, which started approximately 9 years ago, with several waves of more intensified new-comers. The networks being used are based on strong ties of family and kin rather than on weaker ties of the religious or ethnic group. The different stages of migration – from decision making, through initial settling and finding accommodation and employment, assistance with administrative procedure, small loan, to everyday social life – are confined within the kin circle.

Men usually work in the construction sphere or as drivers. Many of them now are regularised with contracts, social security etc. Women more often work as domestic aid (cleaners or nannies), where they work without contracts, or in restaurants or hotels, where they are normally regularised (which however is much less often). The social life among migrants is closed in the village community and is still even more limited to the narrow kin circle. Migrants from Brushlyan do not communicate with Spanish people or with migrants from other countries. By now the village community concentrated in Tafalla is so large that people say they feel as if they were not socially in Spain.

### **The double-naming strategy**

One of the main findings, of which I gave an example in the beginning of this paper, is that Bulgarian Muslim migrants have adopted an even more flexible and situational identification than in Bulgaria. This is manifested in the clearly double-identification strategy, expressed in the complex name shifting which they constantly apply while in Spain. Most migrants, if not all of them, have two names - one Muslim and one Bulgarian. The Bulgarian name is used in their documents and to present themselves to outsiders like Spanish people and people like me (at least in the beginning). Among each other, however they use their Muslim names. Children are rigorously thought to present themselves in public (kindergarten or school) with their Bulgarian name, while they are allowed to use the other name at home. An interesting example of this is a child who was asked to write his name with Cyrillic letters, i.e. in Bulgarian,<sup>7</sup> and he started writing his Muslim name. When asked why, he explained: “Well, in Spanish, I’m Kristian, but in Bulgarian I’m Mehmed, right?” Thus the differentiation of the two names for children is related

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<sup>7</sup> Since January 2008 there is a municipality funded initiative for learning Bulgarian designed for Bulgarian migrants’ children. There is a Bulgarian teacher who teaches 2 hours per week children aged 7 to 14 to write and read in Bulgarian. This is where the described examples took place.

no only to the opposition home-outside world, but also to the language. Another option is that, in the case of children who were born either in Spain or in Bulgaria, after their parents first arrived to Spain, they receive only a Bulgarian name which sounds more universal and can pass both as Bulgarian and as Spanish name (like Martin or Daniel).

This duality of the name is preserved from the period before 1989, when for almost 20 year after the last assimilation campaign people had two names - one official for the documents and for the wider society, and one domestic name (the Muslim one) for the insiders of the community. Nevertheless, as soon as the assimilation policies were terminated in 1989, many returned back to their Muslim names, while others preferred to go on with the double-naming strategy. In everyday life, when working outside the region of the Rhodopi mountains, most people would present themselves with their Bulgarian name, even if their documents have the Muslim name. Interestingly enough, recently when people from Brushlyan started migrating, more and more people have changed yet again their names back to the Bulgarian version (which includes a lot of administrative hustle). The explanation given by migrants is that they do not want to be treated differently in Spain, they simply want to be like the rest of the Bulgarians. In this respect, Spain offers the Bulgarian Muslim migrants the opportunity to reinvent themselves, to “start from scratch” and acquire uniformity with the rest of the Bulgarians.

The double-naming strategy is also accompanied by concealing all other signs of their Muslimness, such as clothes, celebration of holidays etc., from the Spanish. When older women who normally wear their traditional Muslim clothes in Bulgaria come to Spain, they change to trousers and remove their head scarves. “When I decided to go to Spain to help my son with his children, I went for a new passport with the Bulgarian name, and bought a pair of trousers,” a 60-year-old migrant told me. At the same time, holidays and fasting periods are being kept, some of the men (few but still some) even go to the mosque in the nearby Pamplona on big holidays and when a child is sick, people go for prayers to the imam.<sup>8</sup>

What Bulgarian Muslims in Tafalla say en passant when talking about their situation in Spain is usually related to the rights they have as Bulgarian and EU citizens. They like to juxtapose themselves vis-à-vis other migrants from Latin America or Northern Africa, and point out their own privileged position. At the same time, when referring to their position in Bulgaria, the following quote is more than representative for the general attitude: “In Bulgaria they (the other Bulgarians) know we are Pomaks, they know we are Muslims and they don’t treat us as equals. Here we are as everybody else. There is no difference between you and me here,” a 33-year old woman explained.

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<sup>8</sup> Another interesting detail is that there is an imam from the village who is also a labour migrant in Tafalla, working in a bakery. Even though he is not a full-time Imam at present, he is performing an intermediary service between the imam in Pamplona and the Bulgarian Muslims, and also serves for all kinds of smaller spiritual needs of the migrants in Tafalla.

The official position which Bulgarian Muslim migrants have been allotted by the Spanish state at present is of EU citizens with fewer rights than citizens of older EU countries. In this sense they are still immigrants who do not have full citizenship rights and need to go through certain procedures for obtaining a work permit, could be discriminated in the labour market on the basis of lack of working documents and risk immediate dismissal if caught working without documents. However, both Spanish institutions and Spanish citizens do not have the knowledge of the specifics of Bulgarian Muslims and in this sense they treat them indiscriminatorily like the rest of the Bulgarian citizens. Bulgarian Muslims are not seen as different either administratively or socially. They are granted a kind of “sameness” which they cannot fully enjoy in Bulgaria.

In this sense, even though the Spanish state places them in the marginal position of immigrants with no full rights, it empowers them in the sense of granting them anonymity and an opportunity of re-invention. At the same time the Bulgarian state categorizes them as citizens with equal rights, but the social context and the economic conditions marginalizes them and condemns them to a status of difference they don't necessarily wish for. There is an apparent paradox here: Bulgarian Muslims are able to achieve Bulgarian status and recognition as Bulgarians only outside Bulgaria. In this sense, immigration grants them a space of freedom which they have not benefited from in their home state.

At the same time, while sustaining and reproducing the village community migrants more and more differentiate themselves from the group of other Bulgarian Muslims through this duality. In this sense, their position of Muslims of Europe is not acted out explicitly. Furthermore their migratory experience transforms their relationship with other Bulgarian Muslims at home and the very idea of what is to be a Bulgarian Muslim. I would suggest that due to migration into a different social context where they are not recognizable and socially labelled in the same way as at home, many Bulgarian Muslims start to downplay their cultural specificity and their Muslim identities in order to stress their Europeanness. However, this contributes to the broader process of fracture and fragmentation of their “community” in Bulgaria. Being categorized in different ways by the receiving state and the social milieu there created a potentially different relational setting for their self-identification. At the same time this also developed a feeling of independence and empowerment from the home state (both practically and ideologically). However, this process might have more profound transformations of the sense of belonging not only for the migrants themselves, but also for those who are tightly interconnected with them and are part of the same social field at home.

### **Concluding remarks**

In conclusion, I would like to mention a few thoughts on the relationship which Bulgarian Muslims have developed with the state. The Bulgarian Muslims from the Rhodopi mountain



region have developed a specific relationship of detachment and a tactic of circumventing the Bulgarian state. They stopped expecting support or creation of opportunity structures by the state, finding their own ways of survival through migration. Thus a disenfranchised, disempowered group has found self-empowerment through migration that resulted in a self-reliance and “self-made man” rhetoric on the migrants’ part. However, by imposing certain categories (either by labelling them or by silencing their differences) and adopting particular policies, the two states – Bulgarian and Spanish - continue to influence the everyday experiences of the Bulgarian Muslim migrants, and ultimately their self-identification and sense of group belonging. Hence their existence on the margins of the state/s that migration reinforces through their entanglements in two social contexts, both of which are unwilling to offer a place in the centre.

Moreover, if Bulgarian Muslim migrants indeed imagine the state as a limited, almost absent, set of institutions which do not respond to its members’ needs, and subsequently if they see themselves as managing their own lives, this opens up a space for further ethnographic investigation of the neoliberal technologies which require populations to be free, self-managing, and self-enterprising individuals, thus “reorganizing the connections among the governing, the self-governed, and political spaces” (Ong 2006:14).

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