

# External Influences and Religious Particularism in the Balkans: the “Bulgarian Case”

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Received: 11.01.2022  
Available online: 20.06.2022

## Abstract

The article examines some of the contemporary external factors and processes influencing religious identity of all Bulgarian citizens who profess Islam (referred to as Bulgarian Muslims in the text). It analyzes the degree of religiousness of the Muslims in Bulgaria, tracing out the major characteristics and leading tendencies of this community. The article studies the strategic potential and foreign policy possibilities by which Turkey is capable of building up a prestige and trust within the Muslim community in Bulgaria. It analyzes some specific Turkish policies for “export” of religiousness towards Muslims in Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** Bulgarian Muslims, religious affiliation, external influences, Turkey

**JEL:** Z12, N34, F54

## Introduction

At the onset of the twenty-first century the realities we face require that concepts and approaches should be reconsidered. This is even more true when analyzing religious processes in modern and postmodern societies in a global, regional and national context. These processes are markedly vigorous in countries emerging from totalitarian regimes in which atheism has been forcibly imposed (such as the countries from the former Eastern bloc). The post-authoritarian states witness a pulsating emancipation of religious feelings and a strongly encouraged return to religious attitudes and practices. This calls into question the understanding that modern societies are evolving through secularization. This is a European paradigm that has its historical and essential foundation in the process

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of modernization of the old continent. However, in other continents, regions and countries (North Africa, Central and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, USA, Japan, etc.), modernization is not accompanied by secularization and there is definitely no dividing line between religion and politics. This challenges the universality of European modernization theories and leads to the emergence of new theoretical views. Jürgen Habermas, for example, speaks of a “post-secular situation”, referring to the conflict between the returning religion in public space and modern society (Habermas, 2004: 110, 126, 216). John Esposito defines liberal secularism as “one” worldview and opposes the understanding that it is a paradigm (Esposito, 2003: 98). Dale Aikelman and James Piscator also share the understanding that emerged in the 1990s that it is wrong to think that religious beliefs are dying out and that this delusion has many unpleasant consequences in modern times (Aikelman and Piscator, 2002: 35).

The connection between modernization and secularization definitely does not fit into the typical processes of the Islamic world in the 21st century. In this world religion is the main source of identity, values and attitudes. There is still no successful concept of revitalization of Islam, and according to some researchers, its revival began with the war with Israel (1967) and the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979) (Evstatiev, 2012: 28). Since the beginning of the new century, the topic of “Muslims” has even become global in the context of security, and not only there. Many questions are asked putting forward topics related to international economics and politics, to cultural and civilizational challenges, to interstate and interpergroup relations. This is due to events and processes that literally fill the public space and the world media: the terrorist attacks first on the Twin Towers in New York (2001), and then in many European capitals – Madrid, London, Paris, Brussels, Berlin and Istanbul; international military conflicts in Asia and Africa (in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen); the politics of world leading actors in the conflict regions, their interests and geopolitical ambitions.

How does the global process of re-Islamization affect the attitudes and identities (religious and ethnic) of Muslims in Bulgaria<sup>2</sup>? Does the revitalization of religion lead to particularism (extremely pronounced during the wars in the post-Yugoslav space)? What are the factors (internal and external) that can deepen the division in Bulgarian society along religious considerations? There are too many questions that cannot be answered comprehensively in the limited scope of this text. Hence, the narrower thematic focus of the article seeks to answer two questions: what are the external factors that influence the religious attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria in the 21 century; and what are the the implications of those factors for the formation and encapsulation of Islamic communities in the country.

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<sup>2</sup> In the present text, the term “Bulgarian Muslims” is used synonymously with the term “Muslims in Bulgaria” and it refers to all Bulgarian citizens who profess Islam. A major highlight of the present analysis is the internal differentiation typical of the whole Muslim community in Bulgaria, as well as the specific concepts that distinguish individual subgroups within this broader community.

In order to answer these questions, first of all, it is necessary to outline the essential characteristics of the religious attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria in the 21 century. It is even more important to dismiss popular public talk on the topic of “Muslims”, which relies on effective and hasty summaries and comparisons, eliminating the specifics of the “Bulgarian case”. Sharing these academic considerations and feeling socially responsible, an interdisciplinary research team examination of the long-term attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria. The research was conducted within the frame of two research projects (in 2011 and in 2016) led by Evgenia Ivanova<sup>3</sup>. Under the projects two national representative sociological surveys were conducted (800 in the first project and 1,200 in the second). The present article builds on the data from the qualitative and quantitative research conducted under the two projects.<sup>4</sup>

It is precisely these specific characteristics that make it important to emphasize the internal differentiation within the Bulgarian Muslims, where one can single out various subgroups such as ethnic Turks, Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (self-identifying ethnically as Bulgarians, Pomaks, Turks and Muslims) and Gypsy Muslims (self-identifying as Turks for the most part, but also as Roma). During the second project the term “Bulgarian-speaking Muslims” was adopted by the research team to distinguish between different groups of Muslims in Bulgaria. This term, though, does not bear any connotations to ethnic affiliation, because, although people from this group speak Bulgarian, they are ethnically different. “Gypsies-Muslims” is also a term that does not have a precise ethnic identification, because those it refers to, for the most part, identify themselves as “Turks”. More than 99% of them speak “Turkish” as their mother tongue and less than 1% “Roma”. The study of Muslim gypsies (included in the second project) is centered on the neighborhoods (ghettos) of several cities – Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Asenovgrad and Haskovo. In the 2016 quantitative survey, the distribution of the sample by subgroup is as follows: Turkish – 64%; Bulgarian-speaking Muslims – 24%; Gypsies-Muslims in the ghettos – 12%.

## Key attributes

First of all, it should be noted that due to the limited volume of this text the religious attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria and the leading trends within their communities are presented in fairly general terms. The universal “degree of religiosity” indicator was used as a baseline point. It should be immediately noted that within the five-year period between the two projects the dynamics of this indicator was weak and rather ambiguous. In the sociological survey in 2011, 28.5% defined themselves as “deeply religious”, while in 2016 some 20% did so (or 8.5% less). Another 3% can be added to this decline excluding Muslim

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<sup>3</sup> The research projects were jointly implemented with Alpha Research, a sociological agency with the financial support of New Bulgarian University and Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The author of the present text was part of the research team under the two projects.

<sup>4</sup> The results of the first survey (2011) are published and cited from Ivanova (2014). The results of the second survey are published on the website of Alpha Research Agency (2016).

gypsies, because they were not studied in 2011 and later on in 2016 “deeply religious” were only 17%. The figures clearly show that in the five-year period the number of Bulgarian Muslims (Bulgarian-speaking and Turkish) who declare themselves to be “deeply religious” has decreased. The conclusion is confirmed by the subgroup breakdown, where in 2016 45.5% of Muslim gypsies identified themselves as “deeply religious”, followed by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims – 29% and Turks – 12%. When comparing the degree of religiosity by income and age in the five-year period, this degree increases among the poorest and the youngest. These trends are confirmed by the results from the field studies carried out under the two projects.

The notion of dynamics is another important feature that stands out in the analysis of the degree and consequences of religious devotion among Muslims in Bulgaria. The underlying idea is that this is a process that starts at the beginning of the post-totalitarian transition, and develops over three decades with uneven dynamics of growth and decline. In the beginning this process attracted great interest since the prohibitions on religious practices were lifted and it was logical for many people to turn to deep values, such as religious ones. This is even more natural for Muslims, as Islam contains not only values but also provides to its followers norms for the daily life, way of life and attitudes to others. Therefore, the search for religion among Bulgarian Muslims at the beginning of the transition was very intense.<sup>5</sup>

This was the time of the decade-long conflicts in the post-Yugoslav space, which also had a religious dimension related to Islam. These conflicts were changing their geography, from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Macedonia and then to Kosovo, but maintained and even deepened the opposition between Christians and Muslims. They developed in close proximity to the areas inhabited by Muslims in Bulgaria and had their projections on them. From the beginning of the new century, the degree of religiosity began to be influenced by events with a wider geography, which caused the revitalization of Islam (as a religion and as a political movement) globally. It is a universal and long-term process that models the value system and daily practice of large and compact Muslim communities outside the Islamic world – in EU member states and the United States. Through the activated global Islam, ideas and values are “imported”, thus new arguments are “accumulated” that further validate the formation and defense of the religious identity of Muslims in Bulgaria and their separation from Christians.

This set of internal preconditions and external influences creates a certain temporal dynamics in the degree of religiosity of Bulgarian Muslims, in which it is evident that the conversion to religion is emphasized actively in the beginning, then subsides and is directed from external manifestation to its deeper (value) essence. The field research in the first project (2011) highlights the social significance of religion and the upward tendency of the

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<sup>5</sup> “In the 1990s, everyone rushed to the mosques. There were those who were thirsty for religion, and those who did so out of spite and because of the previous bans (male, 34, Dolno Dryanovo, 2011). As well as “Islam has developed a lot here. It has boomed. On the one hand, there is the Arab influence, on the other – the Turkish one” (male, 51, Madan, 2011). For more details see Hinkova (2013).

degree of religiosity among Bulgarian Muslims. For example, in most of the settlements inhabited by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, going to a mosque is perceived as an important obligation for the more prominent people (the mayor, the school principal, the doctor). However, this is not the case among the ethnic Turks, where there is a low level of religiosity and it is often said that going to a mosque takes place only “*from Bayram to Bayram*”.

Five years later (2016) it can be seen that the social significance of the religion has been preserved, again more pronounced among Bulgarian-speaking Muslims than among ethnic Turks. In both groups (less so in the Turks), however, the circle of young and educated people who openly declare their religious identity has expanded. They share Islamic values, adapting them to the modern way of life and their professional ambitions, without going to extremes and contradictions. The survey reveals also a change in the age distribution of the respondents whereby the share of the youngest (18-30 years), for whom religion is of great importance (i.e. they describe it as “very important”) increases. In five years, however, the outward display of religiosity, such as wearing headscarves, diminished but still continued to be seen as a symbol of faith. However, this is more typical for the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Among ethnic Turks, it is almost impossible to see a young woman with a headscarf. However, the attitude towards religion has become deeper and more related to tradition. The 2016 survey saw a more stringent observance of religious norms and rituals in everyday life and a more rigorous rejection of mixed marriages, and these are both forms of particularism.

According to the 2016 survey, the number of young people attending mosques also increases. They are more informed and educated on religious issues, which is also indicative of the deeper and more fundamental attitude towards religion. However, for the five-year period between the two surveys the attitude towards religion of the middle-aged group has become more pragmatic and distant. These findings are valid for Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Among ethnic Turks, there is an increasing tendency of not going to the mosque. During the field research, their imams said that even on Friday (the most important lunch service) mosques are not visited. It even turns out that some of the imams do not perform five services a day. Sociological data confirm these observations and also show the declining importance of religion among ethnic Turks. According to the 2016 poll, 7% of ethnic Turks say they pray “every day” (something that is mandatory in Islam). For comparison, 41% of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims and 40% of Gypsy Muslims answer they tend to pray on a daily basis.

The Muslim gypsies in the ghettos, which are included in the study in the second project, have the highest level of religiosity, reaching almost 100%. In 2016, 99% of them described religion as “important” and 89% as “very important”. If we compare with other subgroups – among Bulgarian-speaking Muslims religion is “very important” for 52%, and for 43% of the ethnic Turks. The high religiosity of Muslim gypsies is even more evident in the field research in the ghettos of Plovdiv, Pazardzhik and Asenovgrad, and it is not difficult to say that it definitely correlates to the low social and educational status of the respondents. They also have a stronger emphasis on the outward display of faith (beards,

veiling). According to the data from the sociological survey in 2016, some 5% of them believe that women must go out with their faces covered (with a burqa, niqab), while 3% of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims think so, and only 0.3% of ethnic Turks. There is also a literal and uncritical adherence to the texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith, and they are their only argument in defending their position. Information on religious topics is often searched on the Internet and is used uncritically due to low literacy. These characteristics definitely lead to increased isolation and manifestations of disintegration.

The above account allows summing up that the faith of different subgroups to varying degrees becomes outwardly differentiating from others (Christians), while inwardly uniting. This leads to the consolidation of the community, and the religious identity of "Muslims" gains more legitimacy, openly asserted even by people who are not deeply religious. The value dimension of Islam affirms its significance and this encourages the transition from ostentatious to deeper perceptions of religion. However, there is an intensified differentiation of Muslims as a community and their further distancing from other Bulgarian citizens.

One of the most characteristic contemporary interpretations of religious values among Muslims in Bulgaria is the perception of faith as a condition for success in life. This is very often stated by young and educated Muslims, and in the five-year period between the surveys their circle expands. Many Bulgarian Muslims openly and emphatically express a positive attitude towards the values and norms of Islam and firmly believe that if they follow them, they will have better chances of achieving success in life. This point of view is typical for most of the interviewees, but it is more common among Bulgarian-speaking Muslims than among ethnic Turks. It is shared by respondents belonging to the active generations (25 to 55 years), with a high educational and social status. Among Muslim gypsies, there is an even more frequent statement that adherence to Islam values should precipitate success in life. Many of the respondents share that their faith has helped them to give up vices – they no longer steal, drink and do not lead a "Bulgarian life", which they associate with their previous habits and behavior. The change in their habits after the adoption of Islam is also commented on by people outside their community, but the degree of distrust and distance from those "outsiders" is still high. They are rejected even by Muslims from other subgroups, as well as Islamic institutions, both secular and religious. This turns them into a closed and pronouncly particularistic community.

## **External factors**

In studying their influence on the religious attitudes of Muslims in Bulgaria, several emphases can be made regionally and globally. The first focuses on Turkey's influence as a significant regional player in Southeast Europe, through its traditional and geopolitical ambitions and capabilities. The second outlines the influence through the dynamics and religious dimensions of encapsulated and activated conflicts in the immediate vicinity of Bulgaria (post-Yugoslav space) or further – in the Middle East. The military dynamics in

the Middle East can fit into the global context of “import” of religiosity among Bulgarian Muslims, because it long-term revitalizes Islamic issues in the world, and through the media, social networks and international politics has a direct or indirect impact. Two more aspects can be highlighted in the global context. The first focuses on the impact of economic migration on Bulgarian Muslims. In its essence, it is a global process that affects all Bulgarian citizens. For Muslims, however, it increases more quickly and it has more specific influence, because it “opens” a traditionally encapsulated community in which family and clan are basic values (Hinkova, 2017: 66-77). Another global context is related to the education of the religious elite (imams) abroad (in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt) and its influence on Bulgarian Muslims. Similarly to economic migration, this is a consequence of open borders and the massive mobility of people in the global world. Through it, new attitudes take shape in the spiritual elite of the Muslims in Bulgaria, and through the elite their degree of religiosity is directly influenced. In both of these contexts, the contacts of the Bulgarian Muslims with the global Ummah are activated and through this a direct “import” of Islamic values and practices takes place.

The outlined emphases aim at the systematization of the external influences in the logic of the political science analysis. This approach also presents a wider opportunity to comprehend the “import” of religiosity among Bulgarian Muslims through various processes – strategic, political, economic and cultural. Due to the limited volume of the current text, only one of the regional highlights is considered, though in a very schematic way, namely the influence of Turkey. In fact, Turkey is the most active and most influential external factor that impacts the religiosity of Muslims in Bulgaria and there are various reasons for this. In addition to geographical proximity, Muslims in Bulgaria have strong historical and emotional ties to the Turkish state. Also, many of them have relatives who had moved to Turkey during the so-called “revival process” and then since the beginning of the post-communist transition. This makes their relationship with Turkey strong and sustainable, and henceforth the opportunities for influence and “import” of religiosity expand. Before considering its specific dimensions, it is important to generally outline those contemporary realities that strengthen Turkey’s influence on Muslims outside the country. They are actively present throughout time and have been “working” for the last three decades, which exposes a certain continuity, consistency and stability in Turkish politics.

One of the new realities is Turkey’s active policy in Southeast Europe, motivated by the fact that there are about 10 million Muslims living in other countries in the region who have specific ties to the Turkish state due to historical and religious reasons. Numerous diplomatic and economic initiatives have been implemented in the Balkan countries, and there are agreements on visa-free travel and transport projects.<sup>6</sup> The cultural element of Turkish initiatives in SEE (and in Bulgaria) fits into a broader foreign policy approach and seeks its motivation in Ottoman and Islamic identity. As a result, co-operation with religious organizations in the region has been strengthened, relying mainly on the Turkish

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<sup>6</sup> The Turkish foreign policy activity in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia has been particularly noticeable (cf. Hinkova, 2014).



International Co-operation and Development Agency (TICDA). The agency is a strong supporter of Islamic institutions in other Balkan countries (including Bulgaria) that takes up the restoration of Islamic monuments and the construction of new mosques, co-operation with the Office for Religious Affairs and the Turkish Ministry of Culture. This activity directly increases Turkey's influence among Bulgarian Muslims and builds trust and significant expectations for support and protection.

It is through trust that Turkey exerts direct influence on the religious identity of Muslims in Bulgaria. This influence is strong and resilient, though it is not unequivocal among different ethnic identities. Among ethnic Turks, it is naturally high and the direct connection of their religious affiliation with Turkey is clearly stated. For their imams, Turkey is a source of confidence and legitimacy, and they respect the spiritual education they receive there. For young and highly educated Turks, the link between Islam religion and Turkey is also natural. This position is also stated by people who are not deeply religious and expands the identification of "Muslims" in Turkish areas. Through this identification, the subgroup consolidates and draws a clear line of distinction from the Christians.

Turkey's influence on the religious identity of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims is much more complex and nuanced. The 2011 field research reveals that in the minds of older people, Islam is steadily identified with Turkey. Younger respondents also point to the "Islam-Turkey" relationship, but not all accept the mixing of religion with "Turkish". Reactions are mostly provoked by the use of religion to form the ethnic identity of "Turks" (cf. Hinkova, 2013). In 2016, Turkey's influence and intervention in the religious identity of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims continued to provoke dissatisfaction among some of them. Some imams, especially those who have graduated from Arab theological universities, have also sharply criticized traditional (Turkish) Islam. Others hold the opposite view and the differences are attributed mainly to their education – in the Arab countries or in Turkey and lead to a dispute over whether traditional (Turkish) or non-traditional (Arabic) Islam is closer to the source and which practice should be followed by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. Most of Muslim Gypsies identify themselves as Turks and religious identity among Muslim Gypsies is also very directly impacted by their trust in Turkey. There is also a strong influence of Arab Islam in this subgroup, so it is difficult to specify which religious practice is better preferred.

"Importation" of religiosity from Turkey is carried out most directly through the financing of Islamic educational centers (Islamic Institute in Sofia and secondary theological schools in Ruse, Shumen and Momchilgrad). In addition to their maintenance, the Turkish state provides for the staff of teachers, and their number changes over the years and definitely decreases. The formal basis for Turkish funding and interference in the religious education of Bulgarian Muslims is the Agreement between the Directorates of Religion of Bulgaria and Turkey, signed in 1998. However, the practice goes beyond specific agreements and the Turkish state bears a significant part of the cost of training Islamic religious figures in Bulgaria. The reasons for this can be found both inside Bulgaria and abroad. The analysis of the internal reasons brings to the fore the inadmissible absence of the Bulgarian state from the problems of the Muslim religion. Both financial support and clearly defined specific



policies are lacking.<sup>7</sup> External reasons include Turkey’s active policy and a well-developed strategy to support Muslims in all Balkan countries. They are provided with significant financial resources and are backed by active diplomatic support.

Turkish funding for religious education in Bulgaria is accepted with the approval of Bulgarian Muslims, but there are nuances over time. They are mostly manifested among Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, because with them the Arab foundations are more active and also provide funds for the training of imams. In 2011, dissatisfaction with Turkish intervention was much more pronounced. It is often stated by respondents who self-identify as “Pomaks” who do not speak Turkish. The 2016 field research in 2016 shows a decline in the level of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims’ dissatisfaction with Turkish interference in religious education. This is a consequence of the limitation and centralization (through the Chief Mufti’s Office) of financial support from Arab foundations. It is also influenced by the ever closer ties of the Bulgarian Islamic institutions with Turkey. The Turks believe that funding from Turkey is necessary and launch fairly pragmatic arguments – religious schools need funding, while the large number of Turkish teachers is explained by the lack of staff and emphasizes that it has decreased.<sup>8</sup>

Another line through which Turkey “brings” religiosity among Bulgarian Muslims is the sustainable and comprehensive financial commitments to religious institutions (the Chief and Regional Mufti’s Offices). In the field research in 2011, this commitment was commented on by all Muslims, while the Bulgarian-speaking ones expressed dissatisfaction with it. In 2016, the discontent had already subsided due to the trial in Pazardzhik against imams who graduated in Saudi Arabia and the increased Turkish influence on the Chief Mufti. It is through this influence that a large number of religious books published in Turkey are distributed and translated into Bulgarian. This is well received by Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, but there are respondents who also express dissatisfaction. There are also many instances of considerable criticism. The strong ties of Islamic institutions with Turkey are accepted with far more calm and less criticism by the ethnic Turks, which seems only natural. They share their satisfaction that due to Turkey’s the financial support, religious holidays are being organized with the participation of Muslims from all Balkan countries. Field research reveals that in some mosques (in areas inhabited by Turks) imams from Turkey are appointed who do not speak Bulgarian and preach in Turkish. The explanations of the district muftis are that there is a shortage of staff, and the local people are dissatisfied only because there is a difference in pay.

Influence from Turkey and “import” of religiosity among Muslims in Bulgaria happens also through political parties that are closely associated with the country – through diplomatic support and funding. For a long time this has been the Movement for Rights

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<sup>7</sup> The point of view of the Bulgarian Muslims was measured in the sociological survey in 2016. On the question of whether the state provides sufficient supports for the Muslim religion, 61% of respondents have no opinion; 10% believe that the aid is sufficient; 16% answer that it is insufficient, while according to 14% the state does not provide assistance at all.

<sup>8</sup> See fn. 7 above.

and Freedoms (MRF), and since the end of 2015 the preferences were “transferred” to the newly established DOST (Democrats for responsibility, freedom and tolerance). In 2011, this was received positively, with some nuances of criticism among Bulgarian-speaking Muslims. After the emergence of DOST, however, there is a stronger differentiation in the various subgroups and moderate dissatisfaction with Turkish interference in Bulgarian politics. This dissatisfaction is manifested mostly among the MRF’s political elite though disillusionment was mild among the MRF’s electorate. For most Bulgarian Muslims, the split in the MRF does not affect people’s attitudes towards Turkey. Public attitudes remain positive and the influence on religious attitudes is strong. However, those of the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims who identify themselves as Turks say they have a better attitude towards DOST leader Lyutvi Mestan, precisely because Turkey supports him. However, there is also dissatisfaction with DOST’s strong ties with Turkey. The interpretation of the DOST followers is quite different. They categorically deny that DOST is committed to Turkey to the extent that it is alleged. Thus they create a feeling that they are looking for excuses for the party’s pro-Turkish line. After the depersonalization of DOST as an active political entity in Bulgaria, the outlined differences of Muslims Bulgaria as an electorate remain very blurred.

When forecasting the influence of Turkey on the religiosity of Muslims in Bulgaria, its long-term and strong impact should be emphasized. Both go through very close contacts with a neighboring country, which are substantiated through emigrated relatives and acquaintances. In addition, there is a specific policy of influential Muslim Bulgarian political parties (MRF) and religious institutions (the Mufti’s Office and the Islamic Institute), which maintain close and active contacts with Turkey. They also consolidate Turkey’s impact and determine its longevity. However, its impact on Bulgarian Muslims is ambiguous (especially after the 2016 attempted coup in Turkey). A significant part of them, especially the younger and highly educated ones, are not subject to direct and strong influence and have a pragmatic attitude. Thus, the internal differentiation within the community is definitely modified and can reduce the direct “import” of religiosity from Turkey.

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