Impact of International Contacts on Muslim Cultural Practices in Bulgaria

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by

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ABSTRACT

This manuscript offers an insider investigation of an understudied area within the lives of those who live in Bulgaria. Post-communism Bulgarian Muslims like the Pomacks, or those with Turkish or Roma backgrounds, began to witness re-established links with the wider Muslim world through various Islamic NGOs or foreign government influence, an example being the diplomatic agreement between Bulgaria and Turkiye and the creation of Islamic schools. The research within this manuscript hopes to answer whether these links have continued and if they have influenced the behavior of the Muslims who were in contact with them. It is seen in specific communities that these links have caused further pious behavior, like young women wearing the hijab, within Bulgarian Muslim communities, but are these increased behaviors isolated instances, or is there a genuine link between these communities receiving interest and work from these Islamic NGOs or foreign government influence?

INDEX WORDS: Bulgaria, Muslims, Islamic NGOs, Foreign Governmental Influence, Turkish Government, Bulgarian National Government, Grand Mufti's Office

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DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to all my friends and family who have supported me throughout my education, especially while completing my master's. Without their love and support, I would not have been able to complete my education as smoothly as possible and as quickly as I have been able to. I want to thank a couple of people in my life, starting with my grandmother, Natasha Sandeva, for her support and wisdom during the thesis process despite not completely understanding how it all works. I genuinely appreciate her hope for me to achieve higher education. My mother dealt with every upset mood and the frustrating moment I had, from trying to get the topic approved to finding data and writing it. Without her words of encouragement and tranquility, I do not know if I would have been able to write this dedication. My aunts pushed me to continue during my frustration and reminded me that at the end of the day, what matters is that I put my all into my work and education so that I can be proud of myself and what I have accomplished. My best friend Noor, who probably received the bulk of my frustration and annoyance when I faced difficulties, let me rant without making me feel stupid, even if it was over something minuscule, as well as providing a helping hand with my edits and whatever else I needed. Finally, I want to dedicate the rest of this section to Allah SWT, Al-Wadud, Al-'Aleem, and Al-Saboor. Without my creator, I would genuinely not have the luxury of even completing higher education, as he has willed my path. I felt his love and guidance the most during this process, which I truly will cherish and honor for the rest of my life (Insha'Allah), and I hope that I never waiver from his path as he is the best of providers and generosity. With all of the nights, I cried into my prayer mat and made endless dua during the process of writing this thesis, I would not have changed any of it in the entire world as it has taught me the value of Sabar (patience), something I genuinely forget at times and need to remember as it is one of the best values to have which Allah SWT has shown me. The saying

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a project dedicated to understanding the lives of Bulgarian Muslims and how reconnecting to Islamic NGOs and foreign governmental influence has affected their understanding of Islam and how they practice the religion. This manuscript will first explain the set-up of the project through its purpose and then the research method. Next it will go into the historical context of Islam in the country which is needed before looking into the data, especially the communist period in Bulgaria's history and its connection to Islam. Finally, we will investigate some data that will give us the answer to the question posed; by looking at how these influences have affected Bulgaria as a whole.

The interest to research the question comes from a multitude of reasons, one being the results of the World Value Survey that looked at the importance of religion in the lives of Bulgarians. This survey asked individuals from various religious denominations how important religion was in their lives across three time periods: 1994-1998, 2005-2009, 2017-2022. The results, included in Appendices A and B, reveal a compelling pattern. Among Muslims in Bulgaria, there has been a steady increase in religiosity over time. The proportion of respondents who considered religion "very important" rose from 25% in the 1990s to around 41% in the most recent wave, while those who considered it "rather important" consistently hovered around 40%. Combined, these figures indicate that approximately 80% of Muslim respondents in the latest period regard religion as an important aspect of their lives. This growing religiosity, especially when contrasted with earlier decades shaped by secular communist policies, raises important questions about Islam more as a cultural identity under communism, the data suggests a revival of religious consciousness prompting further investigation into the role of institutional and transnational influences in shaping contemporary pious behavior.

1.1 Project Purpose

My research will address the question: How has the re-establishment of links with the wider Muslim world influenced the lives of Muslims in Bulgaria? I believe that the re-established links to the broader Muslim world have altered the behavior and identity of the Muslims in Bulgaria. This research will focus on one set of independent and dependent variables. The independent variable is re-established links to the broader Muslim world, and the dependent variable is the altered behavior and identity of Bulgarian Muslim communities.

The rationale for exploring this question lies in the unique experiences of Muslims in Bulgaria, predominantly ethnic Bulgarians. Their journey in balancing cultural practices with religious identity presents a rich area for examination. The research will not solely focus on ethnic Bulgarian Muslims, but also on those of Turkish and Roma descent. While examining certain areas would provide us with closer data on how the influence affects those areas, but most of the data that is valuable examines how the influences have affected Bulgaria overall like within the national government.

I hypothesize that the dynamics of closer links to the broader Muslim world have prompted many Muslims in Bulgaria, to adhere more closely to the tenets of their faith, moving beyond a primarily cultural interpretation of their religion. Establishing the link hypothesized above will open the door to deeper research into the implications of re-established relations on religious communities, specifically Muslim communities, and sheds light on how these transformations affect their identity and interactions with other religious groups in Bulgaria. A comprehensive understanding of Muslim communities in rural settings in turn this can pave the way for more effective integration strategies, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect in Bulgaria's diverse religious landscape. By exploring these dynamics, we can contribute to a more inclusive dialogue about identity, faith, and community cohesion in Bulgaria today.

My methodology for this thesis is to first understand the historical context of the Muslim community in Bulgaria by using primary sources. These sources will explain the historical context of religious dynamics and how nationalism, as well as other political ideas, played a role in the identity of Muslim Bulgarians. This will be followed by an examination of the nature of the re-established links rural Muslim Bulgarian communities have with the wider Muslim world and how those links affected them in the post-communist period. Finally, I will look to see if these links have continued recently and if the implications of altering behavior and religious identity that occurred with the links have also continued.

The specific measurements I will utilize throughout this research are for my independent variable, the number of NGOs or foreign governmental influence that concentrate on Islamic education within these communities there are, and for the dependent variable, which is the increase of pious religious behavior, that includes mosque attendance, as well as interest in Islamic literature and education. To measure the change in pious religious behavior I will collect and analyze various media by organizations like the Grand Mufti's office and their publications called Мюсюлмани (Muslims), as well as media from "Bulgaria News Agency". Some data will also come from intergovernmental relations like the one between Turkey and Bulgaria in the 1990s to help fund Islamic schools and education. By engaging with various primary sources, I hope to uncover the nuances of how cultural globalization, specifically re-established links with the wider Muslim world, shape religious practices and how these communities navigate their identities in a rapidly changing world. This thorough examination will contribute to a deeper understanding of the intersections between faith, culture, and identity in Bulgaria today.

1.2 Research Design

The central hypothesis of this thesis posits that the reinvigoration of ties between Bulgarian communities and the broader Muslim world, will lead to an increase in the practice of

Islam among Bulgarian Muslims. Specifically, it is anticipated that as these re-established connections deepen, a greater number of Muslim Bulgarians will adhere more closely to Islamic tenets and practices.

This research will focus on examining Bulgaria as a whole, rather than concentrating on specific provinces. By analyzing the country in its entirety, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the broader dynamics at play across diverse regions. The study will explore the role of NGOs and foreign government influence throughout Bulgaria, with particular attention to the impact these organizations may have on Muslim communities, which are ethnically diverse, including Bulgarians, Turkish, and Roma populations. This approach allows for a national perspective on how pious behavior may be influenced by these external actors, rather than limiting the scope to a few select areas. As all three of these communities, Turkish and Roma- are experiencing the effects of re-established connections with the broader Muslim world, the exclusion of any one of these groups would result in a significant loss of crucial data pertinent to the central thesis of this research. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how inter-ethnic dynamics, regional context, and religious revivalism influence the observance of Islam in these provinces.

My independent variable will be the number of NGOs or foreign governmental influence that concentrate on Islamic education within these communities, the dependent variable will be thechange in pious religious behavior (e.x. mosque attendance, and interest in Islamic literature/education). These will be measured by collecting and analyzing various media like local news, such as “Bulgarian News Agency” as well as the publications from the Grand Mufti’s office. The shift in behavior would be categorized by seeing the younger generation opting for faith-based education compared to the older generation opting for secular education. Other examples would be seeing a trend in more Muslims attending the mosque.

2 HISTORY BEHIND THE INFLUENCE

The history of Islam in Bulgaria is deeply intertwined with the nation's diverse cultural and religious landscape. Introduced during the Ottoman period, Islam has significantly shaped the country's social and political fabric for centuries. The presence of the Muslim population in Bulgaria has had both periods of flourishing and oppression, with the religion evolving through multiple historical stages. A significant chapter in this history is the period of communist rule (1946-1989), when the state sought to suppress religious expression, including Islam, as part of its broader efforts to impose atheism and control religious institutions. This section explores Islam's trajectory in Bulgaria, focusing on its experiences and transformations during the communist era. This section will also include a literature review that provides us with a history of what Islamic NGOs and foreign governmental influences have had within Bulgaria.

2.1 Historical Context

Islam’s history in Bulgaria is intricately linked to the rise and expansion of the Ottoman Empire, which began in the 14th century. Following the Battle of Nicopolis in 1396, where the Ottomans decisively defeated the Crusader forces, the Ottoman Empire gradually established dominance over the Bulgarian principalities. This marked the beginning of a significant cultural and religious transformation in the region, with the Ottomans asserting political control and spreading their religious and cultural practices across the land. As Ottoman rule solidified, many Bulgarians converted to Islam, influenced by various factors, including social and economic incentives, the promise of upward mobility, intermarriage, and sometimes the desire to avoid heavy taxation imposed on non-Muslims.[1]

[1] Petya Nitzova. *Islam in Bulgaria: A Historical Reappraisal*. Nationalities Papers, 2008.

Islamization was not sudden but gradual, occurring over several centuries. In many cases, it involved establishing Islamic institutions and integrating Islamic practices into daily life. The 15th and 16th centuries established numerous mosques, madrasas (Islamic schools), and religious institutions throughout Bulgaria, particularly in major urban centers like Plovdiv, Sofia, and Varna. These cities became hubs of Ottoman administration and culture, with mosques and other Islamic architecture dotting the landscape. The architecture of this era, clock towers, left a legacy that can still be seen today in places such as the Banya Bashi Mosque in Sofia and the Dzhumaya Mosque in Plovdiv.

Despite the deep-rooted presence of Islam, religious and cultural dynamics in the region began to shift over the centuries. By the 19th century, a growing sense of Bulgarian national identity emerged, fueled by the desire for independence from Ottoman rule. The rise of national movements and the intellectual awakening of the Bulgarian population emphasized Orthodox Christianity as a central element of Bulgarian identity. This period witnessed an uprising, including the April uprising of 1876 and broader efforts to reassert Bulgarian cultural and religious heritage. The Orthodox Church became a symbol of resistance to Ottoman domination, while Islam and Muslim communities were increasingly seen as associated with the Ottoman Empire.[2]

The decline of the Ottoman Empire and the eventual liberation of Bulgaria in 1878 following the Russo-Turkish War led to significant changes in the Muslim population. 1908, Bulgaria declared complete independence, and the formal end of Ottoman control brought new challenges for the remaining Muslims. Many Muslims, particularly ethnic Turks, migrated to the newly established Turkish Republic, while others, including the Pomaks, chose to stay. They

[2] EMINOV, ALI. "ISLAM AND MUSLIMS IN BULGARIA: A BRIEF HISTORY." *Islamic Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2/3, 1997, pp. 209–41. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23076195. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

were left to navigate their status as a minority within a newly formed nation that was overwhelmingly Christian and focused on consolidating its Orthodox Christian identity.

The 20th century brought further complications for the Muslim community in Bulgaria. Under Communist rule from 1944 to 1989, the regime imposed a state-sponsored policy of atheism and sought to suppress religious practices across all faiths. For Muslims, this meant restrictions on the construction of mosques, the public expression of Islamic rituals, and religious education. The government also pursued forced assimilation policies, attempting to Bulgarianize Muslim communities through name changes, especially for the Turkish minority, in a campaign known as the "revival process" of the 1980s. These are just a few examples during this time. These policies led to tensions between the Muslim population and the state, as well as deep divisions within the Muslim communities themselves.

Today, Muslims make up about 10-15% of Bulgaria's population, primarily consisting of ethnic Turks, Pomaks, and Roma. Despite the historical challenges, the Muslim community continues to maintain its identity within the predominantly Orthodox Christian country. Muslims in Bulgaria celebrate their heritage through cultural events and religious observances, as well as by preserving mosques, Islamic schools, and community centers. While Bulgaria has become a secular state, the presence of Islam continues to influence its cultural and social landscape. The history of Islam in Bulgaria thus illustrates a complex and multifaceted narrative of coexistence, conflict, adaptation, and resilience, with ongoing dialogues about national identity and religious diversity shaping the country's modern social fabric.

2.1.1 Communist Period of Bulgaria

A deeper look into the communist period in Bulgaria, which spanned from 1946 to 1989, the Muslim population faced severe repression as the government sought to implement a strict policy of atheism and control over religious life. The Communist Party, following Soviet-style

policies, viewed religion as a threat to the socialist state and sought to limit its influence in society. The Muslim population in Bulgaria, which was primarily composed of ethnic Turks, Pomaks (Slavic Muslims), and some Rome, endured considerable restrictions on their religious and cultural practices.[3]

Under the rule of the Bulgarian Communist Party, religious institutions were tightly controlled, and religious leaders, including Muslim clerics, were either removed from their positions or forced to conform to state ideology. Mosques were closed, and the government sought to remove any public expression of Islam, limiting the ability to practice the faith openly. The state also systematically purged religious symbols from public life, including preventing the wearing of religious clothing, such as the hijab, and restricting access to religious education.

One of the most notable episodes of persecution during the communist period was the "revival process" (also known as the name-changing campaign) between 1984 and 1989. This campaign targeted the Turkish-speaking Muslim population, who were primarily ethnic Turks and Pomaks. To forcibly assimilate them into Bulgarian society, the government mandated that they adopt Bulgarian names and abandon their traditional Turkish or Arabic names. The campaign led to widespread resentment and anger among the Muslim population but also fostered a sense of resistance and solidarity within the community. Many people refused to comply with the name changes, leading to protests, arrests, and violent clashes with the authorities.

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[3] Arndt, Marco. "MUSLIMS IN BULGARIA: DEGREE OF INTEGRATION, POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND SOCIAL STATUS OF THE TURKISH, POMAK AND ROMA PEOPLES." *MINORITIES – SOCIAL POSITION AND POLITICAL REPRESENTATION*, edited by Gerhard Wahlers, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2013, pp. 6–20. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep10112.4. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

In addition to the direct persecution, the Communist regime promoted the forced secularization of society, targeting religious institutions, including mosques, and using propaganda to present the religion as backward and counterproductive to socialist progress; Islamic religious education was banned, and children were encouraged to attend secular schools that emphasized Marxist-Leninist ideology. Muslims were also subjected to economic and social discrimination, with many facing barriers to specific jobs or higher education opportunities based on their religion.

Despite these widespread efforts to suppress Islam and other forms of religious practice, many Bulgarian Muslims found ways to maintain their religious identity, albeit in secret. Religious rituals, such as prayers and fasting during Ramadan, continued within families and communities despite the official pressure to abandon such practices. In some cases, underground religious gatherings took place, where people would meet in private homes to engage in religious observances or to listen to clandestine religious leaders.

The fall of the communist regime in 1989 marked a turning point for Muslims in Bulgaria; with the collapse of the Soviet-aligned government, many Muslim communities regained the freedom to practice their faith openly. However, the long period of state-imposed secularism and cultural assimilation left lasting scars on the Muslim population, and their religious and cultural expression remained more subdued than before the communist period. The legacy of repression during the communist era continues to influence the religious and cultural dynamics of Bulgaria's Muslim communities today.[4]

[4] Ibid

2.2 Literature Review

The dynamics of Muslim communities in Bulgaria, particularly among Turkish-speaking Muslims, Pomaks (ethnic Bulgarians), and Roma Muslims have been significantly shaped by both local and global forces. While historical legacies such as Ottoman rule and national assimilation policies remain influential, globalization has played an increasingly prominent role in shaping the religious, cultural, and political identities of Muslims in Bulgaria. The re-establishment of links with the wider Muslim world has facilitated the spread of Islamic ideas, practices, and networks, which have, in turn, impacted the way Bulgarian Muslims engage with their faith, ethnicity, and political rights. This literature review examines how those links have contributed to further developing Islamic identity and practices within Bulgaria's Muslim communities and how these dynamics intersect with local and national factors.

The Role of Re-established Links with the Wider Muslim World

Globalization has increasingly facilitated the movement of people, ideas, and technologies across borders, creating new opportunities for the development of Islamic communities worldwide, including Bulgaria. Ghodsee explores this theme in her work *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe* and provides a comprehensive examination of how global Islamic networks have affected Muslim communities in the post-communist era, including Bulgaria. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of global Islamic movements allowed Bulgarian Muslims to reconnect with broader Islamic networks, particularly with Turkey and Middle Eastern countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia. This process of "Islamic globalization" (re-establishment of links with the wider Muslim world) has enabled Bulgarian Muslims to access new forms of religious education, religious media, and online platforms, all of which have reshaped their engagement with Islam. The globalization of Islam, through both transnational Islamic institutions and digital platforms, has provided Bulgarian Muslims with new tools for

religious expression, from online fatwas to virtual mosques, offering them a sense of solidarity with Muslim communities worldwide.[5]

Similarly, Brunnbauer in *The Perception of Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece: Between the 'Self' and the 'Other'* explores how globalization has influenced the perception and self-perception of Bulgarian Muslims. While many Bulgarian Muslims face discrimination or marginalization based on their religious identity, global Islamic networks provide them with a sense of belonging to a larger Muslim ummah (community). This sense of global solidarity helps Muslims in Bulgaria navigate the challenges of living in a secular, ethnonational society. Brunnbauer's work points to the role of diaspora communities and the global Islamic political landscape in shaping how Muslims in Bulgaria engage with their religious identity and political rights. [6]

The Impact of Global Islamic Networks on Religious Practice

The spread of global Islamic norms and practices, mainly through transnational media and religious institutions, has led to significant changes in the way Bulgarian Muslims engage with Islam. Erolova, in *"Cases of Contemporary Re-Islamization among Roma in Bulgaria,"* examines the resurgence of Islam among Roma communities who had previously converted to Christianity. The global influence of Islamic revival movements has played a key role in the re-Islamization process. Roma Muslims in Bulgaria have increasingly turned to global Islamic

[5] Ghodsee, Kristen. *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe*. Princeton University Press, 2010.

[6] Brunnbauer, Ulf. "The Perception of Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece: Between the 'Self' and the 'Other.'" *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 1, Apr. 2001, pp. 39–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000120050541.

networks for religious education and guidance, using social media platforms and satellite television to access religious content and connect with religious leaders in Turkey and the Middle East. This process of religious revival is seen not only as a return to traditional practices but also as a means of asserting cultural identity and solidarity in the face of social exclusion. Globalization or re-establishment of links with the wider Muslim world, through the spread of religious content and practices, has therefore enabled these Roma Muslims to reconnect with their Islamic heritage and redefine their social and religious roles in contemporary Bulgaria.[7]

Kucukcan, in *"Re-Claiming Identity: Ethnicity, Religion, and Politics among Turkish-Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece, "also* touches on this theme by discussing how the re-established links have facilitated the development of Islamic identity among Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria. Kucukcan explores how Turkish Muslims have benefited from transnational ties with Turkiye, which offers religious resources, educational opportunities, and political support. These ties have allowed Turkish Muslims to strengthen their sense of identity, reassert their religious practices, and engage politically on both local and international levels. In this context, the global Islamic revival has played a crucial role in empowering Muslim communities in Bulgaria to advocate for religious freedoms and minority rights.[8]

Political Mobilization and Global Islamic Movements

[7] Erolova, Yelis. "Cases of Contemporary Re-Islamization among Roma in Bulgaria." *Romani Studies*, vol. 31, no. 2, Dec. 2021, pp. 211–30. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.3828/rs.2021.11.

[8] Kucukcan, Talip. "Re-Claiming Identity: Ethnicity, Religion and Politics among Turkish-Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, vol. 19, no. 1, Apr. 1999, p. 49. *EBSCOhost*,research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=e15bb4d6-dbe1-3b4d-af43-8cc69e5d9181.

Re-establishing links with the wider Muslim world has played a role in the political mobilization of Muslim communities in Bulgaria. The increasing global attention to Muslim rights and the political resurgence of Islamic movements worldwide have provided Bulgarian Muslims with new avenues for political engagement. Çetinkaya, in "Atrocity Propaganda and the Nationalization of the Masses in the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan Wars," highlights the historical relationships between politics, religion, and national identity in the Balkans. This means that the global rise of nationalist and religious ideologies that were present during the Balkan wars has continued to influence both the Balkan states as well as the Muslim communities. The Muslim communities use these ideologies to shape how they relate to national governments today. The increased visibility of Muslim communities in Bulgaria, both locally and through global media, has allowed them to engage in broader discussions on minority rights, religious freedoms, and the political role of Islam in secular states.[9]

Koinova, in her study of *"Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria,"* similarly touches on this theme and how globalized Islamic movements have enabled Bulgarian Muslims to assert their political rights. By drawing on international human rights frameworks and the support of transnational Islamic organizations, Bulgarian Muslims have been able to more effectively challenge political exclusion, demand more excellent representation, and protect their religious freedoms. The globalization of political Islam, mainly through organizations such as the Organizations of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and other international advocacy groups, has

[9] Çetinkaya, Y. Doğan. "ATROCITY PROPAGANDA AND THE NATIONALIZATION OF THE MASSES IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE DURING THE BALKAN WARS (1912–13)." *International Journal Middle East Studies*, vol. 46, no. 4, Oct. 2014, pp. 759–78.

allowed Bulgarian Muslims to engage in broader political debates about the role of Islam in modern society and the rights of minority religious communities.[10]

Globalization, Social Media, and Religious Expression

The role of social media in the globalization of Islam cannot be overlooked. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have become crucial tools for expressing Islamic identity and sharing religious practices, particularly among younger generations. Lubanska's "*Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes"* touches on the changing role of religion and religious expression, noting that younger Muslims in Bulgaria, especially women, use social media to challenge traditional gender roles and religious expectations. This digital space provides a platform for Muslims to engage with global Islamic discourse and assert their identities in a society that often marginalizes their religious practices. The ability to connect with Muslims across the globe allows Bulgarian Muslims to not only affirm their faith but also to reimagine it in ways that align with contemporary global Islamic movements.[11]

Growing Closer to Islam

The literature on Muslims in Bulgaria demonstrates the profound impact of globalization on the development of Islamic identity and religious practices among Bulgarian Muslim communities. Global Islamic networks, religious media, and political movements have played a significant role in empowering Muslims in Bulgaria to reclaim their religious and ethnic identities, assert their political rights, and navigate the challenges of living in a secular,

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[10] Koinova, Maria. "Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria." *Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2, Jan. 1999, pp. 147–58. cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/45905.

[11] Lubanska, Magdalena. *Muslims and Christians in the Bulgarian Rhodopes. Studies on Religious (Anti)Syncretism*. 2015, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110440003.

ethnonational society. Re-established links with the wider Muslim world have given these communities the tools and platforms necessary to strengthen their faith, connect with a broader Muslim Ummah, and engage in political advocacy for religious freedoms and minority rights. As Bulgaria continues to integrate into the European Union and globalized networks, the role of Islam and its connection to broader global Islamic movements will remain central to understanding the dynamics of Muslim identity in the country.

3 THE INFLUENCE AND THE OUTCOME

To understand the impact of Islamic organizations on Bulgaria, it is crucial to examine the available data that highlights their cultural, social, and political influence. This section explores key datasets, reports, and studies that reveal the extent of Islamic organizations' involvement in various aspects of Bulgarian society, from local communities to national policies. By analyzing these sources, we can better assess the nature of their influence and the implications for Bulgaria's multicultural landscape.

Before introducing the data, it is important to note a clarification regarding the study's variables. Initially, I identified the presence of NGOs and foreign government involvement as the independent variable. However, due to the significant decline in NGO activity around 2015, at which point the Bulgarian national government, began assuming responsibility for Muslim affairs, direct measurement of this involvement became limited. Despite this, the influence of these organizations can still be observed indirectly through their past and present collaborations and institutional links with the Grand Mufti's office, which remains the central authority on Muslim affairs in Bulgaria. Thus, the continuing impact of earlier transnational engagements is evident in the initiatives and behaviors promoted by this institution.

3.1 Shaping Bulgaria: The influence of Islamic Organizations

While looking at the beginning of Bulgaria's post-communist era, we see that various Islamic organizations influenced various aspects of Bulgarian society, like Organizations of Islamic Cooperation and pushing Muslims to engage in political dialogue regarding the rights of Muslims. Despite the successes of those organizations, around 2015, many of them had left, and the Bulgarian national government started to take up the roles the organizations held before. Leaving the primary influence being the Grand Mufti's office.

We have seen that the Bulgarian national government has started financing and supervising Islamic Education. The Bulgarian News Agency reported this from a meeting between the Prime Minister in 2024 Glavchev and the Grand Mufti's office. "He expressed principled support for joint initiatives teaching children about different cultures and customs. The functioning of the three religious schools of the Grand Mufti's Office in Momchilgrad, Shumen, and Ruse was also discussed. They provide education according to programs approved by the Education Ministry, and the Ministry supervises their activities through the regional education departments." They also report opening a new educational institution in Sofia and accreditation of higher Islamic education. [12]

As discussed with the Prime Minister, the importance of these religious schools, the opening of new educational institutions, and the accrediting of higher Islamic education shows that more Muslim youth will base their education around religion instead of going to the country's secular, specialized high schools. This is important as these religious schools and programs revolve around teaching the Quran, Islamic history, Arabic, and other fundamentals of the religion. These are subjects taught even in Islamic schools within the states that bring the students a closer understanding of the religion, and students with this type of foundation are more likely to continue following the religion properly instead of using it more as a cultural identity.

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[12] "PM Glavchev Meets with Grand Mufti of Bulgaria." *Bulgarian News Agency (Bulgaria)*, sec. News, 9 May 2024. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=WORLDNEWS&req_dat=9402B3398311416C82FB917951A39274&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/198F736BC565B2D8. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

The final report from the Bulgarian News Agency reports that on March 10th of, 2025, 300-350 people attended the traditional iftar dinner this Ramadan at the Banya Basi Mosque. While the reporter was talking with the Regional Mufti mentioned that during Friday evenings, Weekends, and the last 10 days of Ramadan, even more people attend the Mosque for prayer and to break their fast.[13] This is extremely important, as there are many Muslims who do not observe Ramadan when they are not connected or follow the religion genuinely. In 2011, the New Bulgarian University reported that 41% of Muslims in Sofia have never been to a Mosque.[14] Now, while there has not been an update to the report done by the University, 300-350 people attending the Mosque is a good step forward to more individuals visiting the Mosque more regularly.

Following the reports from the Grand Mufti's Office, we see that for the last 3 months, the Grand Mufti's Office has published various Islamic literature translated into Bulgarian, those being three volumes of the Tafsir (Explanation, commentary, context, and interpretation of each Surah in the Quran), explanation about Zakat (required charity Muslims must pay), like what it is, and how much is required, and the first and second volume of "Sahih al-Bukhari" (The first

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[13] "300 to 350 People Attend Traditional Iftar Dinner at Sofia's Banya Mosque Every Evening." *Bulgarian News Agency (Bulgaria)*, sec. News, 10 Mar. 2025. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*, https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=WORLDNEWS&req_dat=9402B3398311416C82FB917951A39274&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/19F3F71A3A313F50. Accessed 23 Mar. 2025.

[14] Wikipedia contributors. Islam in Bulgaria - Wikipedia. 23 Mar. 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_in_Bulgaria#Demographics.

collection of Hadiths (teachings and saying of the Prophet Muhammed), which was compiled by the scholar al-Bukhari). The relevance of publishing these pieces of Islamic literature in Bulgaria shows that there is a desire amongst Muslim Bulgarians to expand their knowledge of Islamic aspects. The use of the Tafsir allows one to grow a closer connection to the Quran and better understand the lessons that the Quran tries to teach. While Zakat is a pillar of Islam, many Muslims like me do not fully understand when it is given, how much, and other aspects of it. So, to have a piece of literature to clarify this pillar shows how some are taking steps to better their religious actions. Finally, having access to the teachings and sayings of the Prophet allows Muslims to learn how they can better balance their daily lives with their religious duties. For example, when traveling, Muslims can shorten and combine their prayers, which are discussed in the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet.

Since at least 2014, the Grand Mufti's office has actively contributed to the religious and moral education of the Muslim community through the publication of the magazine Мюсюлмани (Muslims). This publication provides a connection to the Muslim identity of the readers by providing information in both Bulgarian and Turkish. This periodical serves as both a theological and cultural platform, offering detailed explanations of Quranic verses (Ayat), full interpretation of Surahs, and narrative stories designed to convey core Islamic values such as compassion, social justice, communal responsibility locally and internationally, and respect for others. Through this publication, the Grand Mufti's office not only fosters a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings but also plays a vital role in the post-communist revival and the re-establishment of Islamic identity within Bulgaria's Muslim population. Across the issues published between May 2014 and August 2024, several recurring themes emerge. These include the promotion of transnational ties with Muslim-majority countries through travel and educational exchanges, the application of Islamic values in contemporary daily life, and the

organization of courses and competitions centered on Quranic recitation and foundational Islamic knowledge.

The 2014 edition of the magazine includes five excerpts that highlight the connection that the Grand Mufti's office has been trying to cultivate a connection between Bulgarian Muslims and the broader Muslim world. Notably, the August issue features a comprehensive article guiding Bulgarian Muslims toward Muslim-majority countries that offer Halal travel opportunities.[15] It also discusses collaborative educational programs between Bulgarian Muslims and Institutions in Turkey.[16] Further examples of transnational engagement appear in the 2017 editions, which include multiple references to diplomatic meetings with ambassadors from Muslim countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Palestine, and others.[17] These meetings encompass various things like the invitation to conferences and starting up partnerships or other work between the Grand Mufti's office and those countries. These issues not only report on these diplomatic encounters but also cover news related to other Muslim communities in the Balkans, including those in Croatia and North Macedonia.[18]

In July of that year, the magazine reported on joint initiatives with countries such as Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia to distribute food packages to impoverished communities during Ramadan.[19] The publication has also documented forums and intercommunity dialogues with Balkan Muslim populations, notably in Sarajevo, Bosnia. More recently, the 2024 issues

[15] Мюсюлмани, August 2014, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

[16] Мюсюлмани, September 2014, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

[17] Мюсюлмани, March-November 2017, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

[18] Ibid

[19] Мюсюлмани, July 2017, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

have focused extensively on Palestine, emphasizing the religious and political significance of regions such as Jerusalem and the moral imperative to support Gaza.[20] These articles highlight both advocacy efforts and general aid, such as the provision of Ramadan meals for residents in Gaza. Additionally, recent editions mention agreements concerning the exchange and dissemination of Islamic literature, one example being with Egypt.[21]

Several articles within the publication regardless of year delve into the integration of Islamic values into everyday life, frequently drawing upon the life and teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), his companions (Sahaba), and his family (Ahl al-Bayt).[22] These narratives are used not only as historical references but also as moral and spiritual framework that guide readers in navigating contemporary challenges. One particularly illustrative example is the story of Hafsa bint Umar, one of the Prophet's wives. Her story, as recounted in Islamic tradition, centers on an episode involving jealousy and its consequences, which led to divine revelation addressing the issue. This incident is reflected in Surah At-Tahrim, which serves as a profound reminder to believers about the spiritual and social dangers of jealousy. The Surah encourages self-reflection, sincere repentance, and the maintenance of trust and harmony within familial and communal relationships. Through this example, the publication demonstrates how Quranic narratives remain relevant and instructive for addressing interpersonal dynamics today.

In addition to these historical examples, the publication frequently explores how Islamic principle can be applied in modern contexts. Articles emphasize the significance of active and

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[20] Мюлюмани, January-August 2024, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

[21] Ibid

[22] Мюсюлмани, May 2014, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

conscious parenting as a means of instilling a strong religious identity in Children. Being present in a child's life is portrayed as not merely a social or emotional responsibility, but as a religious duty that ensures the transmission of core Islamic values such as prayer, discipline, compassion, and moral integrity. The importance of education is also a recurring theme, framed as a foundational element of Islamic life. This is grounded in the well-known Quranic imperative to "read" (Iqra), the first word revealed to the Prophet Muhammed, which underscores the central role of literacy, learning, and intellectual development in Islam. Education is presented not only as a means of personal empowerment but as a spiritual obligation that enables Muslims to better understand their faith and fulfill their societal responsibilities.

The 2017 edition of the magazine is particularly focused on the role of Islamic values within the family unit.[23] It offers practical guidance on how parents can incorporate religious practices into the daily routines of their children. One such article provides step-by-step advice on fostering consistent prayer habits in young children, including suggestions for age-appropriate encouragement, modeling behavior through parental example, and creating a positive and nurturing spiritual environment at home. These discussions are aimed at equipping Muslim families with the tools to cultivate a religiously conscious lifestyle, ensuring that Islamic values are not only taught but also lived and experienced within the home.

Despite a decrease in organizations within Bulgaria, the ones that have stayed and the National government picking up the efforts of the organizations that departed, there are still efforts to reeducate and influence Muslims to adhere closer to the religion. This is proven by the increase in educational spaces, programs, and literature and the increase in those visiting

[23] Мюсюлмани, February-November 2017, *Republic of Bulgaria Muslim Denomination Grand Mufti's Office.*

mosques for prayer. With both the increase in education and Mosque attendance, it seems that there is a correlation between organizations influencing pious behavior.

3.2 Final Analysis

This research set out to examine whether the re-establishment of links between Bulgarian Muslims and the wider Muslims world has resulted in an increase in pious behavior. In the early post-communist era, Bulgaria experienced a surge of activity from transnational Islamic organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. These entities played an important role in reintroducing religious practices and advocating for Muslim rights, including encouraging political engagement. However, their presence diminished around 2015, at which point the Bulgarian national government began to assume many of the responsibilities previously managed by these organizations. As a result, the Grand Mufti's office emerged as the central institutional force shaping Islamic life in the country.

Over the past decade, the Grand Mufti's office has significantly expanded it religious, educational, and cultural outreach. Most notably, its magazine Мюсюлмани has served as a key platform for fostering religious knowledge, promoting moral and spiritual values, and reinforcing transnational connections. Through detailed Quranic interpretations, moral stories based on the life of the Prophet and his companions, and articles encouraging the integration of Islamic values into everyday life, the publication has cultivated a deeper Islamic consciousness among its leadership. The themes of social justice, charity, family, education, and communal responsibility, both logically and globally, recur consistently throughout its issues.

Importantly, the magazine also demonstrates active efforts to link Bulgarian Muslims with the broader Muslim world. This is seen through travel guides for Halal tourism, joint educational programs in Turkiye, interfaith conferences, diplomatic meetings with ambassadors from Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine, and collaborative humanitarian efforts with countries such as Kuwait,

Saudi Arabis, and Egypt. The regular discussion of shared concerns, such as the importance of supporting Gaza or hosting Pan-Balkan dialogues, reveals an enduring transnational Islamic consciousness that transcends national borders.

In parallel to these outreach efforts, the Grand Mufti's office and the Bulgarian government have expanded institutional support for Islamic education. Between 2014 and 2024, there has been a significant increase in the number of Quranic courses offered, up to 700 in a single summer, and a corresponding rise in Quran recitation and Islamic knowledge competitions. Government-backed religious schools have also become more prominent, with official support and supervision from the Ministry of Education. The recent accreditation of higher Islamic education and the opening of new institutions in Sofia highlight a shift in educational priorities, providing Muslim youth with faith-centered alternatives to secular schooling.

These developments point to a notable transformation in the religious landscape. In particular, the increase in mosque attendance during Ramadan, such as the 300-350 individuals reported at the Banya Basi Mosque in 2025, indicates a tangible rise in religious observance. This is a significant change when compared to 2011 statistics from the New Bulgarian University, which found that 41% of Muslims in Sofia had never attended a mosque. While more comprehensive data is needed to draw definitive conclusions, the available evidence suggests that these institutional, educational, and cultural efforts are having an impact on religious behavior.

Moreover, the recent publication of key Islamic texts, such as volumes of Tafsir, detailed guides on Zakat and Sahih al-Bukhari, further reflects the community's growing engagement with foundational Islamic knowledge. These texts not only provide theological clarity but also equip Muslims with practical tools for living more observantly. For example, the Tafsir helps

believers interpret divine guidance in daily contexts, while the Hadith collection bridge the gap between spiritual teachings and everyday practice.

Taken together, these findings affirm the original hypothesis: the re-establishment of transnational Islamic ties and strengthened role of domestic institutions, particularly the Grand Mufti's office, have contributed to a measurable increase in pious behavior among Bulgarian Muslims. This piety is expressed not only in formal religious observance, such as prayer and fasting, but also in the pursuit of religious knowledge, moral education, and community participation. While the departure of many external organizations initially posed a challenge, the void they left has largely been filled by homegrown initiatives that remain deeply connected to the broader Muslim world. Thus, Bulgaria’s post-communist Islamic revival continues to evolve through a blend of national institutional support and transnational religious engagement.

4 CONCLUSION

The post-communist Islamic revival in Bulgaria reflects a complex yet deliberate redevelopment of religious identity, in which the Grand Mufti's office has played a critical role. As transnational ties with the wider Muslim world have grown stronger, particularly through educational partnerships, diplomatic engagements, and the spread of Islamic literature, evidence suggests a corresponding rise in piety among Bulgarian Muslims. This transformation is visible in the increasing participation in Quranic education, mosque attendance, Ramdan observance, and interest in theological texts, all of which signify a move beyond cultural affiliation toward a more informed and practice-oriented religiosity.

Though international organizations initially drove much of this religious reawakening, their gradual retreat has left national institutions like the Grand Mufti's office, with support from the Bulgarian government, to sustain and deepen this revival. The state's endorsement of Islamic schools and the expansion of faith-centered educational alternatives have institutionalized Islam within Bulgaria's pluralistic framework, enabling a generation of Muslims to receive structured religious instruction. The Grand Mufti's longstanding publication of Мюсюлмани (Muslims), with its emphasis on Quranic interpretation, moral guidance, and community connection, complements these efforts by shaping both the intellectual and spiritual lives of its readers.

Overall, these developments affirm the hypothesis that renewed links with the broader Muslim world have not only reinforced religious identity but have also fostered greater piety within Bulgaria's Muslim community. The intertwining of global Islamic thought and local practice has created a religious culture that is increasingly reflective, participatory, and resilient in the face of modern secular pressure.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

A006.- Important in life: Religion

	Do not belong to a denomination			
Do not belong to a denomination	1994-1998	2005-2009	2017-2022	Total
Very important	5	8	11	8
Rather important	11	13	21	16
Not very important	31	38	38	35
Not at all important	48	38	27	37
Don´t know	5	3	2	4
No answer	-	-	2	1
(N)	355	140	403	898

	Roman Catholic			
Roman Catholic N=26 Weighted results	1994-1998	2005-2009	2017-2022	Total
Very important	15	-	68	39
Rather important	46	100	18	35
Not very important	15	-	9	12
Not at all important	23	-	5	14
(N)	13	1	12	26

	Protestant			
Protestant N=12 Weighted results	1994-1998	2005-2009	2017-2022	Total
Very important	33	100	64	57
Rather important	33	-	36	27
Not very important	17	-	-	8
Not at all important	17	-	-	8
(N)	6	3	4	12

	Orthodox (Russian/Greek/etc.)			
Orthodox (Russian/Greek/etc.)	1994-1998	2005-2009	2017-2022	Total
Very important	19	17	22	19
Rather important	30	33	44	37
Not very important	34	33	24	29
Not at all important	14	14	8	11
Don´t know	4	3	1	2
No answer	-	-	2	1
(N)	560	725	922	2,206

Pt. 1 of World Value Survey regarding the Importance of Religion in one's life

Appendix B

	Jew		
Jew N=2 Weighted results	1994-1998	2005-2009	Total
Very important	100	-	48
Not very important	-	100	52
(N)	1	1	2

	Muslim			
Muslim N=445 Weighted results	1994-1998	2005-2009	2017-2022	Total
Very important	25	38	41	35
Rather important	44	43	39	42
Not very important	20	16	16	17
Not at all important	6	2	3	4
Don´t know	6	1	0	2
No answer	-	-	0	0
(N)	126	112	207	445

	Hindu	
Hindu N=3 Weighted results	1994-1998	Total
Very important	33	33
Rather important	33	33
Not very important	33	33
(N)	3	3

	Buddhist	
Buddhist N=2 Weighted results	2005-2009	Total
Rather important	50	50
Not at all important	50	50
(N)	2	2

	Other Christian (Evangelical/Pentecostal/Fee church/etc.)	
Other Christian (Evangelical/Pentecostal/Fee church/etc.)	2005-2009	Total
Rather important	100	100
(N)	1	1

	Other	
Other N=4 Weighted results	2017-2022	Total
Very important	67	67
Rather important	33	33
(N)	4	4

Pt. 2 of World Value Survey regarding the Importance of Religion in one's life

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