



NEWSNET

News of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies

HEADSCARVES IN HOMEROOM: Women's Islamic Dress in the "New" Europe

Kristen Ghodsee¹, Institute for Advanced Study and Bowdoin College

When Bulgaria joined the European Union on January 1, 2007, it became the first member country with a large autochthonous Muslim population. Unlike the primarily immigrant populations in Germany, France or the United Kingdom from Turkey, North Africa or South Asia respectively, Bulgaria's Muslim minority has existed in the country for centuries. According to the 2001 census, Muslims made up about 12 percent of a population of 7.9 million. But the Chief Mufti's office in Sofia (the spiritual authority of the Bulgarian Muslim denomination) claimed that this number was too low and that by 2007, Muslims in Bulgaria accounted for at least 20 percent of the population, including 1000 recent Christian converts. A 2005 "Live Dialogue" session on the Qatar-based IslamOnline.net web site called "Eastern Europe's Muslims: Prospects and Challenges," however, asserted that Bulgaria had 2.5 million Muslims, bringing the percentage up to almost a third of the total population.² The actual number is difficult to determine before the next census, but the differential birth rate between Bulgarian Orthodox Christians and Muslims, as well as the growing popularity of Islam among non-Muslims, means that this percentage will continue to increase as the twenty-first century wears on.

Although Islam has had a long and contentious history in Bulgaria, the period following the collapse of communism in 1989 has been relatively

peaceful compared to the ethnic conflicts that have wracked the country's Western Balkan neighbors. Indeed, Bulgaria has often been called an "island of stability in the Balkans." The "Bulgarian ethnic model" of including the Turkish minority party in almost every postsocialist government was held up as a democratic ideal. Beginning in 2004, a handful of new Islamic nongovernmental organizations began operating in Bulgaria in order to advocate for the religious rights of Muslims. Over the last five years, the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) have been targeted with new Islamic publications, seminars, lectures and charitable projects, partially financed by "Eastern Aid"³—Islamic charities from the Middle East that have supported the rediscovery of "proper" Islam by Bulgaria's Muslims whose practices and beliefs were considered to be corrupted by their long contact with Christianity and communism. These charities strive to entice the indigenous Muslim population to embrace a more orthodox form of Islam, one in which headscarves were mandatory for women. The first issue to cause a national furor in the country was the question of whether devout Bulgarian Muslim girls would be allowed to wear these headscarves in public schools. Just two years after the French government banned ostentatious religious symbols in public schools, it looked like similar legislation would be passed in Bulgaria. This ar-

continued on page 2

<i>Headscarves in Homeroom: Women's Islamic Dress in the "New" Europe</i> , Kristen Ghodsee	1
News from AAASS	7
Personages.....	8
Publications	11
<i>New Orleans and the Great River</i> , William Craft Brumfield	13
Call for Papers for the AAASS 40th National Convention in Philadelphia, PA.....	17
Preliminary Program for the 39th AAASS National Convention in New Orleans, LA.....	insert
2007 Membership Form	27
2006–2007 Graduates in Russian, Eurasian, and East Asian Studies.....	29
Library and the Internet News.....	37
News from AAASS Affiliates.	39
<i>Old Wine with a Spritz? Some Findings from Recent Research on the "Art of the Lecture,"</i> Michael C. Hickey	41
News from AAASS Institutional Members.....	47
Scholars' Network.....	48
Calendar	50
Index of Advertisers.....	50

ticle looks at the headscarf controversy and demonstrates women's bodies are becoming the terrain upon which the battles between Islam, Christianity, atheism and secularism are being played out. Women's "modesty" and women's "freedom" are the tropes deployed to justify the superiority of one world view over another. In all cases, the right to dress and to display or hide a woman's body has become markedly politicized and may be the first sign of a brewing social storm around the place of Islam in Bulgaria today.

Islam at the Karl Marx Professional Gymnasium

In early 2006, Fatme, a teenager attending the Karl Marx Professional High School for Economics in southern Bulgaria decided she wanted to live her life by the precepts laid out in the Holy Koran. The 15-year-old befriended Michaela, a like-minded young woman who had also embraced a more orthodox version of her family's faith. One day the two girls showed up to class draped in headscarves in addition to their mandatory red and black school uniforms. The principal of their school told them they were in violation of the school's uniform policy and that they must remove the headscarves. They refused. They were told that they were not allowed to attend school unless they complied. They did not and were sent home.

But the girls were not going to give up that easily and filed complaints against the director of the school with the authorities in the small city of Smolyan. For a while the case bounced around at the local level, and the regional inspectorate of the Ministry of Education eventually upheld the decision of the school, claiming that religious symbols do not belong in the secular classroom. The girls were obstinate, and it was not long before a local (but foreign-funded) Islamic nongovernmental organization (NGO) interceded on their behalf and lodged an official complaint directly with the Ministry of Education. The Minister replied that Bulgarian education was secular and conspicuous religious symbols had no place in the classroom. The NGO was led by young Muslim Bulgarians who had studied in Jordan and promoted a more orthodox form of

Islam than was traditional for Bulgarian Hanafi Sunnis. They proceeded to file a complaint with the newly established national Commission for the Protection against Discrimination (KZD).⁴ The Islamic NGO claimed the girls' constitutional right to freedom of religion had been violated, and that Bulgaria had a responsibility to uphold the democratic principles it had embraced after the collapse of communism in 1989.

Pictures of the two girls in their headscarves and long Islamic gowns were splashed across the national newspapers, and soon a media frenzy ensued about "Islamic fundamentalists" in Bulgaria. A right-wing party seized upon the issue and opportunistically stepped up its protests outside mosques, gathering signatures for citizens' petitions to silence the call to prayer in cities across Bulgaria. Their anti-Muslim rhetoric struck a nationalist cord with many Bulgarians. For the first time in almost two decades of peaceful postsocialist history, Bulgarians (the majority of whom are at least nominally Orthodox Christians) were faced with a religious dilemma that challenged their own still tenuous commitment to the precepts of liberal democracy. The headscarf case and the overwhelming outcry against the two girls forced the Bulgarian government into the uncomfortable position of having to adjudicate the potentially explosive issue of "religious rights" for Muslims both before the inquisitive eyes of the Western powers and in the court of public opinion, just six months before Bulgaria was scheduled to join the European Union.

In the summer of 2006, the antidiscrimination commission's announcement that it would consider the headscarf case ignited a heated national debate, and more details of the case emerged daily in the press together with passionate editorials on both sides of the issue.⁵ The two women, and the members of the NGO that represented them, were Slavic Muslims (or "Pomaks"—the descendants of ethnic Bulgarians who converted to Islam during the Ottoman era).⁶ These Pomaks had close connections with Arab Islamic influences (through their education in Jordan), and this was taken as evidence of their adherence to a more "radical" form of Islam, one that was perceived as distinctly foreign

to Bulgaria. Indeed, both students came from Bulgarian Muslim families, they practiced a more moderate form of Islam until they began studying with the foreign-educated Pomak leaders. Neither of the girls' mothers wore the headscarf, and members of their own communities felt that the girls were being manipulated by external Islamic influences in the region.⁷

In fact, the region where the two girls lived was a part of Bulgaria that was increasingly under the influence of local religious leaders funded by international Islamic charities from the Arab world (as opposed to Turkey, which is the traditional patron state of Bulgaria's Muslim communities).⁸ Bulgarian Islam, like other forms of Balkan Islam, has a history of being rather syncretistic due to its long contact with both Christianity and Sufi mystical orders.⁹ Faith had always superseded practice and Bulgarians/Turks were relatively lax with regard to strict Islamic customs such as fasting, avoiding pork and alcohol, or covering their women. Furthermore, Bulgarian Muslims engage in certain practices that many Arab Muslims consider to be forbidden innovations, such as the worshiping of Muslim saints at local shrines, the purchasing of amulets for love, health, protection, etc., or the celebration of the Prophet Mohammed's birthday. Add to these forty-five years of communist attempts to eradicate religion and to assimilate Muslim minorities,¹⁰ and you have a further dilution of Islamic rituals and practice. Thus, after 1989, most Bulgarian Muslim populations emerged with few "pure" Islamic practices and retained only a strong sense of cultural identity as "Muslims."¹¹ This was the condition that international Islamic charities hoped to rectify, particularly after the outbreak of the Bosnian war in 1992, when the rest of the Islamic world rediscovered their Muslim brethren in what remained of the collapsing "Second World."

Evidence of more orthodox influences, particularly with regard to the behavior and dress of women, could be found in locally produced but foreign-funded Islamic magazines published in Bulgaria specifically for the Pomak population beginning in 2005. Many of the articles stressed the moral duty of women to obey Allah and not provoke

the attention of men. But they also emphasized the sinful nature of remaining uncovered and warned that there would be divine sanctions against women who do not comply with the stricter interpretation of Islamic teachings. This extended quotation is from an article in *Myusyulmansko Obshtestvo* (Muslim Society), a magazine published by the NGO that filed the complaint on behalf of the two girls. It demonstrates the kind of language used to convince Pomak women to wear the *hijab*.

Today when young women can be seen in the streets dressed in clothes that barely cover their underwear (and this is taken as normal), when the lifestyle lures women to appear as sexually attractive as possible, when girls and women are disappointed if no one turns their head to look at them, women who do not want to behave in this manner are looked down upon as abnormal. This is an offending case of discrimination. Indeed there are a great number of girls and women who are modest by nature, who do not want to expose themselves and who do not feel miserable if leering eyes are not fixed upon them. Strange as it may seem, wearing the *hijab* is one of the problems that society has thrust upon girls and women who profess Islam and who want to change the "dress code" and use the headscarf. Ironically, these modest and shy women have to feel uncomfortable for having changed their previous habits of attracting excessive attention. To choose to wear the *hijab* often provokes surprise (especially from people who happen to know you) and questions as to why you feel you are "better" or "holier" than the others, or why you want to have the appearance of an Arab or Pakistani woman...

...The clothes that a Muslim woman wears are not punishment or ordeal; they give her chance to look noble and lady-like without any arousal of carnal appetites. The "veiled" women are not necessarily innocent girls. They can be mothers of big families and women who are married and remarried. The *hijab* is not an attribute of fake modesty. It delivers a certain mes-

sage to people. First, the message is that the woman has decided to submit all aspects of her life to the will of God; and second, that she wants to be judged on the basis of her virtues and deeds and not her beauty, elegance and sex appeal.¹²

Similar types of arguments appeared in the magazine *Ikra*, a publication from a town just twelve kilometers away from the girls' home city, and home to the largest mosque built in Bulgaria since 1989. The magazine published a series of articles extolling the virtues of Islam for women while at the same time threatening that they will face divine punishment if they do not obey. An article titled "The Code of Conduct for the Muslim Woman," repeats the same imperatives about women's clothing, emphasizing that women who dress appropriately are more precious and valuable than those who "expose their beauties," and warns that there will be consequences for those women who do not comply:

A Muslim woman must cover her body... However this is not to be interpreted as an approval to wear tight or gossamer clothes!... When a woman goes out in the street dressed in a garment of which Islam approves, she will not provoke lechery because the Islamic dress code recommends loose garments that do not suggest the shape of the female body. A woman abiding by the Islamic dress code can be compared to a sealed letter, the contents of which will be disclosed only to the addressee. A woman wearing light clothes can be compared to an announcement that can be read by anyone.... We are eyewitnesses of the decadence of society and of the corruption of moral values... In order to protect the Muslim woman, Allah commanded that she should stay at home earnestly and with dignity and that *she should not go out uncovered like the women in the pre-Islamic time of ignorance and that she should*

continued on page 4

The School of Russian and Asian Studies

Join us in Russia and Central Asia for

- **Russian as a Second Language** for all levels.
- **Feature Study Abroad** programs with coursework ranging from art history to international relations and business.
- **Internships** in museums, newspapers, consulting firms, NGOs, and other organizations.
- **New and expanding! Travel Services** - visa support, train tickets, accommodation, and more.

Call or write for a catalog and visit our website for a wealth of information on travel and study in the former Soviet Union.



www.sras.org
study@sras.org
1-800-55-RUSSIA

not expose her beauties.... Hopefully you understand the situation that a woman would face if she shuts her eyes and plugs her ears before these words. Let both men and women know that there is a path to follow and those who go astray shall be punished accordingly... [my emphasis]¹³

These articles, combined with regular lectures and seminars held by Islamic NGOs working among the Pomaks, certainly contributed to the increased number of young women wearing the *hijab* between 2004 and 2006. For those who promoted it, the *hijab* symbolized a kind of moral superiority over the decadent influence of the West. This importation of new dress requirements for women in terms of the mandatory wearing of headscarves and modest, loose clothing with only the hands and feet visible was starkly at odds with mainstream Bulgarian fashion for women. In fact, local fashions for women in Bulgaria were the opposite of the modesty promoted by Islam. In Bulgaria, and perhaps in postsocialist Eastern Europe in general, clothing styles for women were quite provocative even by American standards. For young women in particular, necklines often plunged over demi-cup push-up bras. The most popular skirt length barely touched the very top of the thigh, and if pants were worn, they were often cut as low as anatomically possible, and after 2003, combined with visible thong underwear. Exposed abdomens were par for the course in the summer. Other popular looks in the bigger cities were the sheer blouse without a bra, or the white pants or skirt with dark lacy lingerie visible underneath.

All of these provocative fashion options for women were broadcast out of the big cities and into small towns in the Pomak regions via 24-hour Bulgarian *chalga* (pop-folk) music channels. It was from popular artists like Desislava, Maria, Gergana, and Anelia that most young women, both Christian and Muslim, took their fashion guidance. On the streets of Pomak cities in the summer, the vast majority of women were not covered and a good subset of those were dressed in what they considered to be the latest fashion – whether it was bare midriffs or exposed g-strings.

In fact, provocative “European” dress with short skirts and high heels was a symbol of urbanity, of those who did not work in agriculture. In a culture where the word “villager” was equated with uncultured backwardness and stupidity for both men (*selenin*) and women (*selenka*), young Pomaks were keen to avoid any association with their rural roots, particularly since many of the Muslim regions were relatively impoverished. Perhaps one result of this was that some Pomak women dressed even more provocatively than the already quite liberal style of dress common for Bulgarian Christian women. Thus, in 2005 at least, the majority of women in the Muslim towns in the Rhodopi dressed like Bulgarian women in small towns throughout the country, and women’s fashion had not yet become the marker of a Muslim town versus a Christian one.

If the new Islamic fashion was at odds with mainstream “European” dress, it was also at odds with traditional Pomak dress for women. Older Pomak women typically wore a long colorful printed dress (*fustan*) with an apron (*mendil*) and a colorful headscarf (*kurpa*) tied loosely under the hair or beneath the chin. There was usually some hair visible above the forehead (like the scarves worn by the stereotypical “*babushka*”). On the other hand, the younger women and some older women embracing the new Islamic dress code tended to wear a monochrome gown (*shamiya*), long button-front over-dress (*manto*), or simply modest “regular clothing” with a single-colored, larger headscarf (*zabradka*) that completely covered the hair and neck. The new way of dressing was often called the “Arab style” (*arabski stil*) by women who preferred traditional Pomak clothing. In fact it did not represent the Islamic dress of any one foreign country, but was a local interpretation of what “proper” Muslim women should wear.

Thus, as the case moved forward in the Commission for the Protection against Discrimination (KZD), there were many levels of tension involved in the question of whether the two girls would be allowed to wear their headscarves in public school: both between Christians and Muslims and between moderate/secular Muslims and their newly devout co-religionists. More im-

portantly, there was the question of the role of women in Islam, and whether these new practices could be reconciled with the Bulgarian government’s commitment to uphold gender equality. In the hearings before the commission the Muslims claimed that religious rights should take precedence over all other concerns while the members of the commission were preoccupied with equity between men and women. But this debate over women’s religious rights versus their relative “emancipation” was not debated using abstract principles, but was distilled down to the Manichean dichotomy between the miniskirt or the veil.

On July 27, 2006, the KZD found in favor of the Ministry of Education and fined all parties for previously allowing the two girls to wear their headscarves to school. They even fined the Islamic NGO for inciting “discrimination” by bringing the complaint forward in the first place. The head of the KZD, a Bulgarian Turk, supported the decision, and the Islamic NGO decided not to appeal the case. Public opinion was solidly behind the decision, and a subsequent headscarf case at a medical university in Plovdiv also ended in a ban on religious symbols using the Smolyan case as a precedent. The KZD relied on two key arguments in its written decision. The first was that Bulgarian education was “secular,” and that there should be no religious symbols in schools (even those for men). The second reason was that the state had a duty to uphold women’s rights, because they believed that the headscarf symbolized women’s submission to men and the inability of men and women to freely share public spaces.

The Bulgarian decision to ban headscarves cited two paragraphs from the European Parliament 2005 Resolution #1464, “Women and Religion in Europe.”¹⁴ The first paragraph reads:

It is the duty of the member states of the Council of Europe to protect women against violations of their rights in the name of religion and to promote and fully implement gender equality. States must not accept any religious or cultural relativism of women’s human rights. They must not agree to justify discrimination and inequality affecting women on grounds

