



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

Research Report

The opinions, recommendations, and conclusions of the grantee are his own and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IREX or the US Department of State.

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1. Title of Research Proposal:

Original Title: "The Miniskirt or the Veil: Moderate Muslim Women Resisting Islamic Fundamentalism in Postsocialist Bulgaria."

New Title: "The Miniskirt or the Veil: Gender, International Aid, and Islamic Revivalism on the Edge of Europe."

2. Topic of Research

I am doing an ethnographic study of Bulgarian Muslim men and women (Pomaks) and their negotiation with newly imported Islamic practices from the Arab countries and Iran. My initial hypothesis is that women of a certain age (between 35 and 55), those who were largely raised under communism, would be leading the resistance against the assimilation of more fundamentalist Islamic traditions.

3. Relevance and Contribution to Field

While there is a significant body of literature on the role of women and Islamic fundamentalism in the developing world (Reed 2002; Gerami 1996; Howland 1999; Brink and Mencher 1997; Hawley 1994; Ask and Tjomsland 1998; Moghissi 1999; Shehadeh 2003; Bahramistash 2003; Yamani 1996; Badran 1995; Poya 1999), there has been very little research on European women's current resistance to fundamentalism in the post-socialist context.¹ Some scholars have argued that poor Muslim women gladly trade personal freedoms for the economic securities promised by radical Islam as form of resistance to global capitalism (Bahramistash 2003). But this hypothesis has yet to be tested in the post-socialist context where the preferable alternative to capitalism has historically been communism rather than religion (Nuerberger 2004). My research in Bulgaria fills an important gap in the literature by examining the ways in which moderate Bulgarian Muslim women, raised under the communist system with its dogmatic insistence on the equality of the sexes, are either resisting or embracing the influence of more radical forms of Islam in the region.

4. Approach and research methodology; list of research sites

This summer, I decided to take a four-pronged approach to the research question. The first was to conduct interviews with prominent members of the Bulgarian government and the Bulgarian Muslim leadership. Some of these interviews were formal, fixed-question open-ended-answer interviews, while others were merely conversations that developed naturally and where I gently guided the discussion toward the topics in which I was interested. I conducted about 15 formal and informal interviews which included members of the NGO community; one of Bulgaria's foremost scholars of the country's Muslim population; the Head of Cabinet of the Supreme Spiritual Council of the Muslims in the Republic of Bulgaria; a member of the Bulgarian Parliament and the former head of Bulgaria's state security services; a retired state security office who worked for over 30 years among the Muslims in the Smolyan region; and the Chief Regional Mufti of all of Western Bulgaria.

In addition to the interviews, I also collected and analyzed the written publications and web-based discussion forums aimed at Bulgarian Muslims. These included four monthly magazines: *Myusyulmanar* (in Turkish and Bulgarian), *Selyam* (in Bulgarian), *Mysyulmansko Obshtestvo* (in Bulgarian) and *Ikra* (in Bulgarian). All of these magazines are religious "lifestyle" magazines for Bulgarian Muslims. *Myusyulmanar* is the official publication of the Chief Mufti's office and has been published since the early 1990s. The other three are very recent additions and are only published in Bulgarian; *Selyam* was started in 2002 and *Ikra* and *Mysyulmansko Obshtestvo* began in January 2005. Finally, I look at the web-based discussion forums and the information available on the Bulgarian language website for Muslims: www.islam-bg.net.

The largest amount of my time, however, was spent doing participant observation in the three cities/villages of Madan, Rudozen and Chepintzi where the revival of more traditional forms of Islam seems to be the strongest in the Smolyan region. I spent

about 6 weeks living in Madan and Rudozem and interacting with the local populations on a daily basis. I visited all three mosques, and had many informal conversations with Christians, secular Muslims and devout Muslims alike.

Finally, I took over 300 digital photographs of the cities, people and mosques in the wider Central Rhodope area in order to document the changing architectural and clothing styles in the region.

5. Research findings and preliminary conclusions

After spending three months in Bulgaria and six weeks in the Rhodope region, I can say comfortably that there is clear evidence of foreign Islamic influences in the region. There is certainly a lot of foundation money swishing around into new mosques and in paying for Mosque-sponsored language classes and Koranic lessons. There are also young men and women who have gone abroad with full scholarships to either secondary school or university in Arab countries and have come back to Bulgaria with new Islamic traditions that are closer to Gulf Arab traditions than to Bulgaria's traditionally quite syncretistic form of Islam. Young women are increasingly wearing the hijab and there has been a recent flurry of publications targeted at Slavic Muslims. Furthermore, a casual analysis of mosque architecture reveals that newer mosques built in the region do not follow the architectural style typical of Bulgarian Muslim mosques.

What is most difficult to untangle at this point is the extent to which this "revival" of Islamic cultures is anything to worry about in the Bulgarian context. I found no evidence whatsoever of "training camps" or any institution that is doing anything closely akin to breeding potential "terrorists." On the other hand, I heard rumors of young men going abroad to fight for the larger Islamic *umma*, including in Bosnia, Kosovo and Iraq. There is also increasing tensions between the Bulgarian Christian and the Bulgarian Muslim communities as best evidenced by the recent election of a far-right party to the Bulgarian parliament. This party, called "Attack," is openly anti-Roma and anti-Turkish, and as the fourth largest party in the parliament has shifted the political landscape in Bulgaria dramatically. In my conversations with Christian Bulgarian in the Rhodope and in the capital, Sofia, the anti-Muslim sentiment has never been so pronounced. This could cause renewed ethnic tensions in the country which could have a destabilizing effect of not dealt with early.

Finally, there are considerable tensions between secular Muslims and the more devout members of their community. The more secular Bulgarian Pomaks actually use the word "fanatics" to refer to those who have recently become more faithful to Islamic traditions from abroad, and there is a fear that these "fanatics" will be the cause of renewed oppressions against the Pomaks on the part of the Bulgarian government. On the one hand, the government has a policy of respecting religious freedom, but on the other hand it is quite concerned with "national security." The tension of trying to

maintain these two goals is certainly being exacerbated by the resurgence of Islamic identity among the Pomak communities in the areas where I did my research.

I do not have any real conclusions yet, but I will be returning to the region for nine more months of field work and I hope that will be able to explain the motivations of individuals on both sides of the Muslim religious spectrum after that trip.

6. Future research agendas

I will return to Bulgaria in April 2006 to continue this research and begin writing the book. The title of the book will be: ***The Miniskirt or the Veil? Gender, International Aid, and Islamic Revivalism on the Edge of Europe.*** My future research agenda includes doing the interviews, participant observation, archival research and content analysis necessary to obtain the data for the chapters outlined below:

1. "Introduction." This short opening chapter will include the personal stories of the Pomaks and a description of research site intertwined with discussions of theories of the global spread of Islam and the role of gender in Islam.
2. "Islam, Inc." This is the big picture chapter that will include an examination on how international Islamic aid "reinvigorates" the Islamic faith of those in need. Beginning with the story of the construction of the mosque in Madan, the chapter will address the wider phenomenon of the creation of Koranic schools, the provision of job training and language lessons, and the rebuilding or renovating of mosques around the world. This chapter will also examine the total global flows of Islamic aid and that which specifically has come into Bulgaria, including examples of actual projects and programs in my fieldsites.
3. "Islam, Communism and Postcommunism." This chapter will first look at how Communist parties in the Soviet Union and the Balkan countries treated their Muslim populations, and then move to understand the different forms that Islamic revivalism is taking in the Central Asian republics and in Southeastern Europe in the postsocialist period. Within this context, the chapter will then turn to the unique situation of the Pomaks in Bulgaria, the politics of Bulgaria's much praised "ethnic model," and the important role of the Bulgaria's Turkish/Muslim party, the Movement for Rights and Freedom and its controversial leader Ahmed Dougan. All of background will be embedded within the personal experiences of Bulgarian Muslim men and women who lived through both the communist and postcommunist periods.
4. "Islamic Revivalism in Bulgaria." This will be an ethnographically rich chapter using day-to-day details of the lives of my informants to describe the specific forms that Islamic revivalism has taken in the Bulgarian context. In this chapter,

readers will get to know intimately the reasons and motivations that drive certain communities and individuals to embrace new cultural identities.

5. “Manly Miners: Communism versus Islam in the Construction of Masculinity.” A second primarily ethnographic chapter, this section will tell the story of the now-defunct mining company, Gorupso, and the complicated history of Madan and Rudozem in relation to the formation of local masculine identities among Pomak men. Once again, through the personal histories of individual men in the region, readers will gain understanding of what it means to be a man in the Slavic Muslim communities, and how definitions of masculinity have changed over time due to political, economic and religious shifts in society.
6. “The Politics of Hijab: Women and Islamic Identities.” The final chapter based almost exclusively on ethnographic data, this section of the book will explore the shifting definitions of Slavic Muslim femininity for different age groups of women within the community. Paying specific attention to the growing popularity of the headscarf for young women, this chapter will examine what Pomak women believe Islam can and cannot offer them as women, and why they are or are not attracted to a form of Islam that is perceived as being more restrictive of women’s rights.
7. “Conclusion: Why is this all happening now?” This final chapter will pull all of the previous chapters together to make some arguments about the future of Islamic revivalism and its implications for gender relations both in the postsocialist context and throughout the world.

7. Policy recommendations

At this point, I do feel it is a bit too early to make any concrete policy recommendations, but what I will say is that in Pomak communities where there is a developed or developing rural tourism industry, the influence of a more fundamentalist version of Islam seems less prominent. In Devin, I was told that the residents of the village of Yagodina regretted building a large mosque in the center of town because they felt it was bad for the development of tourism. Also, in Surnitza where there is a controversial Islamic school, the local residents and the mayor are all united against the school because it is bad for tourism in the town. In these rural areas, there is little hope of reviving local industries, in particular the mining industry. There are only two choices for local economic development: agriculture and tourism. In the cities of Madan and Rudozem there is almost no tourism development, and there is great potential. Tourism is ideal because it not only brings economic development, but it exposes the local populations to outside visitors from both other parts of Bulgaria and abroad.

So if I had to make one policy recommendation it would be to support the development of rural tourism in these areas.

Secondly, increase financial support to support moderate Islamic groups and publications in the country. They are vastly out-financed by the Saudi, Turkish, and Iranian foundations.

Finally, in my estimation the best NGO to work with on these issues is run by a scholar and anthropologist named Antonina Zhelyaskova who runs IMIR. She has the greatest local expertise on the issue of Bulgaria's Muslim minorities.

ⁱ Mary Buckley's excellent book, however, looks at the effects of resurgent Islamic Fundamentalism on women in the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia (Buckley, Mary. *Post-Soviet Women: From the Baltic to Central Asia*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Mary Nuerburger's 2004 book, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press) looks at the history of Pomak women in Bulgaria and their resistance to different attempts at assimilation away from Islam.

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