

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I will address the topic of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in the interwar period through the interpretive lens of the “linguistic” or better “alphabetic” rights,¹ placed in the context of the “Latinization” processes taking place in the wide Eurasian space, as well of the post-imperial sociopolitical dynamics.²

To this aim, I describe the interesting and little known case of the writing practices of the Turkish community in Bulgaria in the period between the two world wars. In particular, I take into account the repercussions of Atatürk’s alphabetical reform in Bulgaria, demonstrating how the adoption of the Latin alphabet in Turkey represented a significant challenge for the country, triggering the fears of both the Bulgarian authorities and of the more conservative factions of the local Turkish community. In this context, I analyze the attitudes towards the Arabic and the Latin alphabet employed to write the Turkish language in the Balkan country, illustrating the reasons for the prohibition of the Turkish Latin alphabet, in an unprecedented combination of interests between Bulgarian authorities and Islamic religious leaders. I will try to show how in that specific historical moment, writing systems, far from being “neutral” communication elements, lent themselves to various manipulations of an ideological and political nature.

My paper does not intend to represent a comprehensive contribution to the analysis of the complex subject of this community’s religious or political identity, but

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¹ See on the topic *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, (ed.) Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin 1994.

² See Valeri Stoyanov, “Die Türkische Minderheit Bulgariens bis zum Ende des Zweiten Weltkrieges”, *ВАЛЕРИСТИКА ПОЛИХИСТОРИКА-2. Избрани приноси към гранични области на историята*, Институт за исторически изследвания при БАН, Sofia 2011, pp. 349-373.

it rather aims to shed light on the limitations faced by the Turks of Bulgaria in terms of their linguistic rights in a period when other communities in Southeast Europe were encountering similar difficulties.³

Keywords: Turkish Latin Alphabet, Turks of Bulgaria, Turkish Literacy in Bulgaria, Turkish Newspapers in Bulgaria, Arabic Alphabet.

İKİ SAVAŞ ARASI DÖNEMDE BULGARİSTAN'DAKİ TÜRK TOPLULUĞUNDA LATİN VE ARAPÇA ALFABELER ARASINDAKİ ÇATIŞMA

ÖZ

Bu makalede iki savaş arası dönemde Bulgaristan'daki Türkler konusunu ele alacağım. “Dilsel” ya da daha doğru söylemek gerekirse “alfabetik” hakların yorumlayıcı yaklaşımını kullanacağım ve onları ve “post-emperyal sosyopolitik dinamikleri” ile ilişkilendiren geniş Avrasya alanında yer alan “Latinizasyon” süreçlerine yerleştireceğim.

Bu amaçla, Bulgaristan Türklerine ait yazı pratiklerinin ilginç ve az bilinen durumunu tasvir ediyorum. Özellikle de Atatürk'ün alfabe reformunun Bulgaristan'daki yansımalarını ele alarak Türkiye'nin Latin alfabesine geçişinin bu Balkan ülkesinde gerek Bulgar otoriteleri gerekse yerli Türk topluluğunun en muhafazakar kesimleri tarafından korkuları tetikleyen kabul edilmesi zor bir olay olduğunu göstereceğim. Bu bağlamda bu Balkan ülkesinde Türk dilini yazmak için kullanılan Arap ve Latin alfabelerine yönelik tavırları analiz ederek, Bulgar otoritelerle İslam alimleri arasındaki alışılmadık çıkar kesişmesinde, Latin-Türk alfabesinin yasaklanmasının nedenlerini ortaya koyacağım. Bu dönemde, “nötr” iletişim öğeleri olmaktan çok uzakta olan yazı sistemlerinin, ideolojik ve politik türden manipülasyonlara açık olduklarını göstermek çalışacağım.

Makalem, bu topluluğun dini ya da politik kimliğinin karmaşık konusunun analizine kapsamlı bir katkı sunmayı amaçlamamaktadır. Fakat daha çok, güneydoğu Avrupa'daki diğer toplulukların benzer zorluklarla karşılaştığı bir dönemde, Bulgaristan Türklerinin dil hakları bakımından karşılaştıkları sınırlamalara ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Latin Alfabesi, Bulgaristan Türkleri, Bulgaristan'da Türk Okuryazarlığı, Bulgaristan'daki Türk Gazeteleri, Arap Alfabesi.

³ As in the case that I will later discuss of the education policies for the Slavophone minority in Aegean Macedonia, Greece in the 1920s.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Introduction

Since the beginning of the disintegration of the Ottoman power on the Balkans and the subsequent processes of nation building in the region, many cultural symbols have been used by the “post-imperial” actors in the attempt of creating a more homogeneous “identity” of the new nation states, while others started to be “removed”. In particular, the Arabic alphabet began to disappear from the areas where it had been present for centuries as the writing system of dominant authorities, being further replaced with the Latin one in Turkey as considered incompatible with the modernization aims of the new Republic.

At the same time, interesting debates started taking place in the Balkan countries, influenced by the developments in matters of language in the USSR, regarding the possibility of switching to the Latin script.⁴ This perspective clashed nevertheless with the strong opposition of the cultural elites of the countries involved (Bulgaria and Greece in particular).⁵ If on the one side such refusal can be interpreted as the willingness of retaining the links with a historical tradition of writing (Cyrillic and Greek alphabets), on the other it could have also been motivated precisely with a need of distinction from the new policies in matter of script active in neighbouring Turkey.

With regard to this, it is particularly significant to analyze the attitudes present in Bulgarian official rhetoric towards the writing systems of other communities, with which the “post-imperial” country was inevitably forced to confront itself. It is therefore appropriate to turn our attention also to the linguistic and “alphabetic” policies towards the minorities in question, taking into account the relevant laws, decision-making processes, and any links with the power structures of the country. The intention of this type of investigation is devoted to the search for ideological, “extracultural” elements associated with languages and writing systems, disguised within rhetoric and narratives that are intended to support precise historical identity constructions and affirmations.

⁴ Richard Oliver Collin, “Revolutionary Scripts”, *Culture and Language: Multidisciplinary Case Studies*, M. Morris (ed.), Peter Lang, Frankfurt 2011, pp. 29-67.

⁵ See Giustina Selvelli, *L'ideologizzazione degli alfabeti in Bulgaria e Croazia nel periodo post-imperiale e post-socialista* (The ideologization of the alphabets in Bulgaria and Croatia in the post-imperial and post-socialist period), Ph.D Dissertation, University Ca' Foscari of Venice 2017.

1. The Context of “Latinization” across Eurasia

As already mentioned, the proposal of adopting the Latin alphabet for the transcription of the Bulgarian language met with a rather compact opposition in the country and the project was completely abandoned since the 1930s. This event coincided with a drastic change in the alphabetic policies in the Soviet Union, where the “Latinization” reforms mainly aimed at the Muslim and Turkic communities of the country⁶ were suddenly reversed by a “Cyrillization” policy.⁷ However, in Bulgaria the controversy over the presence of the Latin alphabet in the country did not end at all here. In fact, these debates had a serious impact on the writing practices of the Turkish minority residing on Bulgarian territories, which faced significant changes at a socio-cultural level following the end of the Ottoman Empire and the proclamation of the Turkish Republic in 1923.

Interestingly, as Clayer⁸ points out, there are some relevant, earlier testimonies on the practice of transcribing the Turkish language with the Latin alphabets in the Balkan Peninsula. The author refers to the case of some Balkan printers who understood the convenience of using the Latin alphabet to transcribe the Turkish language long before it became the official norm for that language. In fact, already a few years before First World War, some newspapers printed in Latin characters appeared in the Balkan provinces of the Empire. An example of such interesting practices is the *Esas* newspaper printed in Monastir, now Bitola, in Macedonia, in 1911. This publication consisted of two pages in Arabic and two in modified Latin characters for the Turkish language.⁹

Not just in Turkey, but also elsewhere, the adoption of the Latin alphabet was accompanied with a desire for modernization, marking a clear break with the previous political/religious history and system. This was the case, for example, of Albania, where the Latin alphabet was imposed by an

⁶ But not exclusively: also non-Muslim communities in Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Russia were involved.

⁷ Paul B. Henze, “Politics and Alphabets in Inner Asia”, *Advances in the Creation and Revision of Writing Systems*, J. Fishman (ed.), Mouton, The Hague 1977, pp. 371-420.

⁸ Nathalie Clayer, “Le premier journal de langue turque en caractères latins: *Esas* (Manastir/Bitola, 1911)”, *Turcica*, 36, 2004, pp. 253-264.

⁹ As in the case of the transcription of the Turkish language in Armenian and Cyrillic characters, these testimonies are still little explored and enhanced in the history of both Turkey and the Balkan Peninsula.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH
COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

official decree already in 1908, and to a certain extent also that of Malaysia and Indonesia.¹⁰ The complete “Latinization” of the Turkish writing system allowed people to learn and write the language more easily, but the reasons behind Atatürk’s decision were both linguistic and political.¹¹ The removal of the Arabic writing system was strongly rejected by conservative and religious elites in the country,¹² who viewed the Latinization of the alphabet as a potential risk due to the separation of Turkey from the wider Muslim community. In their opinion, by replacing the Arabic script with a “foreign” one (that is a Western one) the traditional sacred religious communities were going to face relevant difficulties that would have threatened their unity across the Islamic world.

Other actors declared themselves against Latinization calling into question practical reasons: perplexities were expressed regarding the choice of a Latin-based writing system which could be really suitable for the transcription of Turkish phonemes. In this context, some suggested that a better alternative could be to modify the Arabic alphabet, introducing extra characters to represent more effectively the Turkish vowels. A similar work had already been realized to some extent some time earlier in the territory of Bosnia and Herzegovina (under Habsburg domination), when, Džemaludin Čaušević had reformed the “arebica” writing system (Arabic characters used to write the Bosnian Slavic language) through the addition of extra characters and diacritics to mark the letters that were not present in the Ottoman script¹³. This writing system was employed to print many works even after the end of the First World War, until the early 1940s.

¹⁰ Hans H. Wellish, *The Conversion of Scripts. Its Nature, History, and Utilization*, John Wiley & Sons, New York-Chichester-Brisbane-Toronto 1978, p. 44, and Ibrahim, Norhasira, “Jawi Script in Hadith Literatures in Malaysia: Issues and Challenges”, *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research (IPEDR)* Vol. 3 (2015) IACSIT Press, Singapore, pp. 94-98.

¹¹ Collin, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

¹² Lewis, Geoffrey, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2002, here p. 27.

¹³ See Werner Lehfeltdt, “L’écriture arabe chez les slaves”, *Slavica Occitania*, 12, 2001, pp. 267-281, and Giustina Selvelli, “Caratteri arabi per la lingua bosniaca. Caratteri arabi per la lingua bosniaca. Esempi di scrittura fra influssi ottomani e riappropriazioni locali” (Arabic Characters for the Bosnian Language. Writing examples between Ottoman influxes and local reappropriations), *Contatti di lingue - contatti di scritture. Multilinguismo e multigrafismo dal Vicino Oriente. Antico alla Cina contemporanea*, (eds) D. Baglioni, e O. Tribulato, Edizioni Ca' Foscari, Venezia 2015, pp. 197-218.

In 1926, however, when the Turkic republics of the Soviet Union adopted the Latin alphabet, an important precedent took place, which became a strong weapon in the hands of the supporters of the Latinization reform in Turkey. The question was therefore raised at the governmental level in the same year through a proclamation of the Ministry of Public Education, to which the press responded favorably.¹⁴

2. The Ambivalent Reactions to the Alphabet Reform in Bulgaria

Predictably, also among the Turkish community of Bulgaria,¹⁵ the alphabetical reform of Atatürk was not welcomed by everyone with benevolence and enthusiasm. Indeed, the most conservative elites and factions, such as the Islamic authorities and the most rigorous believers, harshly criticized the adoption of a new writing system. In line with the reactions that had taken place in Turkey,¹⁶ they considered the element of the Latin alphabet as a threat to the integrity of the Islamic community and above all to the historical continuity of a tradition of writing that was inserted in the context of the Ottoman cultural and spiritual World.¹⁷ This was the position of the *mufti* office in the capital Sofia, while on the contrary the association of the Turkish teachers of Bulgaria expressed a great support for the introduction of the Latin alphabet.¹⁸ Already in the early years of the Turkish Republic, at the time when Kemalist and Islamic ideas were bitterly colliding, the Turks of Bulgaria had founded an organization called *Turan*,¹⁹ inspired by the directives emanating from the new authorities of Ankara (1926). Officially registered as an association for youth, sport and culture, *Turan* was actually engaged in the propaganda of Kemalist ideology, and published a

¹⁴ Société des Nations, *L'adoption Universelle des caractères latins. Institut international de coopération intellectuelle*, Librairie Stock, Paris 1934, p. 122.

¹⁵ According to the census, in the year 1920, the Turkish community in Bulgaria corresponded to 10,73% (520.339 people) of the total population in the country (4.846.971). See: Irwin T. Sanders, "The Moslem Minority of Bulgaria", *The Muslim World*, Volume 24, Issue 4, October 1934, pp. 356-369, here page 356, and Stoyanov, Valeri, *op.cit.*, p. 353.

¹⁶ See Avram Galanti, *Arabi Harfler Terakkimize mani değildir*, Hüsn-i Tabiat Matbaası, Istanbul 1927, pp. 8-13, Translit. By Fethi Kale, Bedir Yayinevi, Istanbul 1996.

¹⁷ In the Turkish context, it should not be surprising that the older generations continued to use the Arabic alphabet in private correspondence and in their journals until the 1960s. See for example: Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, I. B. Tauris, London-New York 2004, p. 189.

¹⁸ See Ibrahim Yalamov, *История на турската общност в България*, IMIR, Sofia 2002, pp. 181-191.

¹⁹ See Ina Merdjanova, *Rediscovering the Umma: Muslims in the Balkans between Nationalism and Transnationalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013, p. 15.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH
COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

newspaper bearing the same name.²⁰ This newspaper, together with the periodical called *Deliorman*, constituted the main press channel in Bulgaria that supported the Republican government in Turkey. In opposition to these print media, the most religious factions of the Turks of Bulgaria published their newspaper called *Medeniyet*, which carried out forms of “counter-propaganda” against Atatürk’s reformist and modernizing views.²¹

During the immediate post-war years, among the common Bulgarian audience the widespread opinion prevailed that the Turks of the country could constitute a powerful tool in the hands of the authorities in Ankara. Nevertheless, until 1923, this community enjoyed a relatively easy period of its history. A confirmation of this for example comes from the fact that about ten Turkish deputies were present in the Bulgarian Parliament, and that the minority benefited from large freedom of press²² and education in the mother tongue. However, after the coup that took place on June 9, 1923 deposing Aleksandar Stamboliyski’s government, and with the subsequent arrival of Aleksandar Tsankov in power, the number of Turkish deputies dropped from ten to five, and later, to four only.²³

In the following years, the pro-Kemalist newspaper *Deliorman* insisted in its articles on the fact that the Turkish minority in Bulgaria constituted a “national minority”, and not a “religious” one. In the *Deliorman*’s view, in a period of great modernization processes, and especially in conjunction with the discussion of the problem of national minorities by the League of Nations,²⁴ to describe the Turks of Bulgaria as a “Muslim minority” instead of “Turkish minority in Bulgaria” constituted an outrage to the new Turkish republican identity. The fact that the community was denominated through religious elements of identification constituted in this view a transgression towards the national rights of the Turkish

²⁰ See Stoyanov, *op.cit.*, p. 365.

²¹ See Stoyan Shivarov, “Bulgaristan’da Muhafıza Edilen Osmanlıca Gazeteler. Durumu, Katalog ve Dijital Çalışmaları”, *Balkan Ülkeleri Kütüphaneler Arası Bilgi-Belge Yönetim ve İşbirliği-Sempozyum Bildirileri*, Trakya Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü, Edirne 2008, pp. 133-139.

²² See Alexandre Popovic, “The Turks of Bulgaria (1878-1985)”, *Central Asia Survey*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1986, pp. 1-32, here p. 12.

²³ See Haykaram Nahapetyan, “The Turks of Bulgaria, the 5th Column of Ankara”, *21st Century*, No 1, 2007, pp. 33-49.

²⁴ Jacques Fouques Duparc, *La protection des minorités de race, de langue et de religion. Étude des droits des gens*, Dalloz, Paris 1922.

community, which at the time amounted to as many as 750.000 people.²⁵ The newspaper defended thus the idea that no one except the Turks could interfere in the affairs of the community.

In historical and political terms, the explanation for such definition can be clarified by recalling the fact that Bulgaria had signed the so-called “Treaty of Friendship with Turkey” in 1925. In this document, the Turkish community in Bulgaria were defined through religious affiliation as “Muslim minorities”.²⁶

3. The Limitations to the Use of the New Turkish Alphabet in Bulgaria

The adoption of the Turkish alphabetical reform exercised immediate repercussions on the development of the religious, cultural and educational destinies of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. Although there were great restrictions imposed by the Bulgarian authorities in their contacts with Turkey, the community depended until then to a large extent on the ideological choices of the neighboring country.²⁷ Particularly interest is the fact that the Turks of Bulgaria were the first community to adopt the new alphabet outside of Turkey. We can indeed remember the case of the newspaper, *Yenilik*, published in Jambol, which began to be printed entirely in the new Turkish alphabet on October 13, 1928, some weeks before the alphabetical reform officially entered into force by law in Turkey.²⁸

As expected, the most reformist components of the Turkish community in Bulgaria considered it appropriate to adapt to what was

²⁵ Information quoted in Bilal N. Şimşir, *The Turks of Bulgaria. 1878-1985*, K. Rustem and Brother, London 1988, pp. 57-58.

²⁶ See “Protocol B”, in: “Treaty of Friendship between Bulgaria and Turkey, signed at Ankara”, October 19, 1925. In: League of Nations, *Treaty Series*, Vol. 54, 1926, pp. 127-133.

²⁷ By virtue of the peace treaties signed under the aegis of the League of Nations, in particular the 1919 Neuilly Treaty, in which Bulgaria had its own sub-section called “The Protection of Minorities” (Treaty of Neuilly, Section III, subsection IV, articles 49-57). Nonetheless, the adoption of any school material coming directly from Turkey was always discouraged, and even in the years of the Agrarian government of Stamboliyski (1919-1923), who expressed a much more “enlightened” and tolerant policy towards minorities in the country, the direct “supply” of textbooks by Turkey was prohibited. It was feared that the books brought from Turkey contained elements of Turkish chauvinistic and nationalist extremism. See Şimşir, *op.cit.*, pp. 36-38.

²⁸ See Şimşir, *op.cit.*, p. 95 and 103.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH
COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

happening in the neighboring country, where the new writing system was about to be adopted at an official level and be employed also in school education. This is the reason why representatives of the teachers' unions took care and engaged in creating appropriate textbooks for the Turkish pupils in the Bulgarian schools. This was a necessary action to take, since Bulgarian law prevented the community from receiving any teaching material directly from Turkey.²⁹ With this purpose, already in the late summer of 1928, some of the school representatives were sent on a mission to Edirne, the first Turkish city after the border, in order to familiarize themselves with the new alphabet that they would have employed to educate the Turkish population of Bulgaria. On their return, they strove to produce a new manual for the instruction of pupils. That is how a spelling book bearing the title "Türk alfabesi" was published in a publishing house in Haskovo thanks to the work by Ahmet Sükrü, one of the teacher representatives of the Turkish school of the city of Plovdiv - Filibe.

This had not been an easy task: while printing this abecedary, there were technical impediments in the rendering of the two Turkish letters: <ş> and <ğ>. These characters were indeed not available in the Bulgarian printing houses and some creative solution had to be found. The problem was later solved by adding a comma or a question mark to the lower part of the letter <s>, and a higher comma to the letter <g>.³⁰ However, the enthusiasm of the Turkish teachers' associations in Bulgaria was roughly interrupted by an unforeseen evolution of the situation in the country. In the context of a persistent opposition between the "reactionary" and "reformist" parties³¹ within the local Turkish community in reference to the writing innovations, the Bulgarian authorities reacted with an unexpected move, by taking the defense of the most conservative positions. The Bulgarian government gave its official support to the Turkish conservative faction, most probably with the intention of breaking the delicate bonds of the community with Turkey itself.³²

²⁹ See Mila Mancheva, "Image and Policy: The Case of Turks and Pomaks in Inter-war Bulgaria, 1918-44 (with special reference to education)", *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 12:3, pp. 355-374, here p. 367.

³⁰ See G. Stăršenov, *S Ръководство за изучаване турски език с новата турска азбука: Пълна граматика с турско-български речник*, Rahvira, Sofia 1933.

³¹ See Yonca Köksal, "Turkey's Foreign Policy towards Bulgaria and the Turkish Minority (1923-1934)", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 2014, pp. 175-193, here p. 192.

³² See Şimşir, *op.cit.*, p. 96.

In this way, Bulgaria stood on the side of the defenders of Islam, against the modernist ideological line that Turkey was carrying out through its numerous cultural, economic and social reforms.³³ It is easy to interpret the Bulgarian government's position by recognizing its desire to divide as much as possible the Turkish community in Bulgaria, and at the same time keeping it distant from the news, thoughts and influences of what was happening in Turkey and beyond³⁴. The Bulgarian move was directed to a certain extent even against the "Turanic" thought, quite widespread in those years, which exalted the link between all peoples of Turkic origin, up to the Caucasus, Russia and Central Asia.³⁵ Clearly, the idea of an uninterrupted chain of Turkic peoples from Europe to Asia, united by the employment of the same Latin alphabet also frightened the Bulgarians, even before the Russians, who ten years later would have changed their "Latinizing" alphabetic policy into a "Cyrillizing" one precisely because of this concern.

In addition to this, the role of anti-Kemalist political refugees from Turkey should also be emphasized. In fact, many asylum applications were welcomed in this period by the Bulgarian government. These Turkish refugees actively promoted forms of resistance to Atatürk's innovations and in the new Bulgarian environment they were given full legitimacy to defend and carry on their political views. The beginning of the era of great changes and reforms in Turkey had therefore some interesting repercussions in the neighbouring country, where its developments were met with quite some difficulty. The national rhetoric viewed such events often with suspicion and fear, and perceived them as a threat of Turkish expansionism and even possible "assimilationism".³⁶

³³ Furthermore, as Ina Merdjanova recalls, "The Islamic community retained its waqf properties, and the Shari'a courts were never officially abolished in Bulgaria, as they were in Turkey in 1924. In 1928-36, the state supported the appointment as chief mufti of Hussein Husnu, an outspoken propagator of anti-reformist and anti-Kemalist ideas". In: *op.cit.*, pp. 15-16.

³⁴ See Safran, William. "Nationalism", *Handbook of Language & Ethnic Identity*, (eds) A. J. Fishman, O. Garcia, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 77-93, here p. 85.

³⁵ See Kemal Karpat, *Studies on Turkish Politics and Society*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2004, p. 737, and Stoyanov, *op.cit.*, pp. 363-364.

³⁶ See Fatme Muyhtar, *The Human Rights of Muslims in Bulgaria in Law and Politics since 1878*, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Sofia 2003, p. 30. Nevertheless, in the Bulgarian press, there were also expressions of enthusiasm towards Atatürk's reforms.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

A week after the introduction of the alphabetical reform in Turkey,³⁷ the Bulgarian ministry of national education affirmed through an official communication that the employment of Latin characters in the instruction of the local Turkish population was prohibited. Such sudden move was partly due to the pressures made by the most conservative representatives of the Turkish community. Following this event, the teachers' association publicly protested against the decision, and in their battle found the support of the Turkish members of the Bulgarian parliament. The fact also had strong resonance on the media of the Turkish Republic: many articles appeared on the topic, claiming that the Bulgarian authorities were supporting the Islamic "fanatics" in their country, fomented by a group of fugitives from Turkey.³⁸

Following the continuous requests made by the Turkish reformist representatives, between the months of November and December 1928, the Bulgarian education ministry Naydenov decided to meet the demands of the local Turkish community. A circular was finally issued on January 14, 1929, which gave permission to hold education in the Turkish schools of the country through the new Latin alphabet. However, this would not have been the end of the controversies over the Turkish alphabet in the country.

4. The Development of the Question among the Turkish Community in Bulgaria

Following the decision of the Bulgarian government, the Turkish press in Bulgaria gradually introduced the new alphabet, with the exception of the main organ of the conservative factions, *Intibah*, which continued to publish its articles in Arabic characters exclusively. After the Latin alphabet was adopted in the schools of the Turkish pupils in 1930, the Bulgarian education ministry even went so far as to prohibit the use of Arabic writing in education, in accordance with what was happening in Turkey. In fact, from the month of June of 1930, the Arabic alphabet was completely banned, and its use made subject to penal sanctions.³⁹ In short, it seemed that the struggle between the two alphabets had ended with the victory of the Latin one, after two years of controversy and disputes over the cultural and educational fate of the Turkish community in Bulgaria.

³⁷ That is on 10 October, 1928.

³⁸ See Şimşir, *op.cit.*, p. 99.

³⁹ See Société des Nations, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

However, after the coup of 19 May 1934 and the establishment of the military government of Kimon Georgiev, the “alphabetic” situation for the Turkish minority was once again overturned. Indeed, the new government reintroduced the teaching of the Arabic alphabet in schools by banning the new Latin script, supporting such decision with the official motivation that Muslim communities should be encouraged to develop the ties with their religion.⁴⁰ As an immediate consequence, all Turkish newspapers written in the new alphabet were forbidden, and the Turkish intellectuals who defended the Latin alphabet persecuted or forced to flee.⁴¹ The minority press was almost completely suppressed: during the first year only, ten community newspapers ceased their publishing activities, including the most influential ones such as the previously mentioned *Deliorman* and *Turan*. These newspapers were in fact accused of spreading Kemalist ideas and Turkish-nationalist propaganda, in what was denounced as a threat to the integrity of the country. Therefore, the only periodical publications of the Turkish community that survived the suppression was the press of Islamic character such as *Medeniyet* and *Açık Söz*, both written in Arabic characters. Another example was the newspaper *Hakikat Şahidi*, which was the organ of the Protestant missionaries in the country and which, curiously, employed the Arabic characters in its articles.⁴² Not surprisingly, the pro-Kemalist organization *Turan*, which disseminated secular and liberal ideas, was dissolved and its activities strictly prohibited in 1936.

As already mentioned, the explanation for such moves of the Bulgarian government can be found in its interest for mobilizing the anti-Kemalist forces in the country with the aim of reducing the influence of Ankara’s reformist ideologies on Muslims of Bulgaria. Because of this, a campaign against Kemalism and progressivism was favored, even when this corresponded to the promotion and imposition of an Islamic education for the Turkish minority in the country. By virtue of this, the spread of religious publications, conferences and other activities was supported among anti-Kemalist Muslims of Bulgaria. This was realized, among other things, by encouraging the activities of the anti-Kemalist organization *Obštество za*

⁴⁰ See Çiğdem Balım, “Turkish as a Symbol of Survival and Identity in Bulgaria and Turkey”, *Language and Identity in the Middle East and North Africa*, (ed.) Y. Suleiman, Curzon Press, London 1996, p. 104.

⁴¹ See Şimşir, *op.cit.*, p. 104.

⁴² See Shivarov, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

*zaštita na mjušljumanskata religija*⁴³ (Society for the Defense of the Islamic Religion), founded in 1934.⁴⁴

In such restricting environment, teachers and government informants visited Turkish schools to monitor and report any attempt to disseminate Kemalist ideas among pupils and students.⁴⁵ In relation to this, Muslim education and religious activities were encouraged, but only in order to reduce the penetration of Kemalist propaganda, at the service of Bulgarian nationalist goals.⁴⁶ The reason why the Kemalist activities were so strongly feared is connected to a specific kind of Bulgarian “paranoia”. The authorities of the country were not excluding the possibility that Turkish agents could be preparing actions aimed at expressing some “neo-imperialist” ideologies. The fear concerned the Southern part of Bulgaria that was inhabited by a consistent Muslim population and was culturally linked to Turkey: this region could be transformed into a “Turkish” enclave that the country could have at a certain point some decided to annex.⁴⁷ Moreover, especially between 1923 and 1934, Kemalism was associated by the various right-wing Bulgarian governments with communist thought and ideology that they were trying to eradicate from the country.

5. The Problematic Status of Turkish Education and Literacy in Bulgaria

In the period when the old Arabic alphabet was reintroduced into the school education of Turkish pupils, the rights of this community were increasingly violated, especially those linked to their writing practices and their literacy perspectives. This situation remained unchanged for a few years until, after several efforts and repeated attempts made by the most reformist exponents of the Turkish community in the country, the Bulgarian government was finally convinced and authorized the teaching of the Turkish Latin alphabet. The event was formalized through a circular dating to 12 April

⁴³ Общество за защита на мюсюлманската религия.

⁴⁴ See Yalamov, *op.cit.*, pp. 232-34.

⁴⁵ See Richard J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge London and New York 1997, p. 163.

⁴⁶ See Wolfgang Höpken, “From Religious Identity to Ethnic Mobilization: The Turks of Bulgaria Before, Under and Since Communism” in *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, (eds) H. Poulton & S. Taji-Farouki, Hurst & Company, London 1997, pp. 62-63.

⁴⁷ See Muyhtar, *op.cit.*, p. 31 and Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria*, Cornell University Press, London 2004, p. 45.

1938. Despite this apparent success, the educational situation remained disastrous, due to the limited material conditions in which the same alphabet was taught. In the past two decades, in fact, because of the discriminatory policies of the Bulgarian government, the number of schools with Turkish teaching had drastically reduced, amounting to only a quarter of those previously active. We can point out that in 1934 less than 20% of Turkish males over the age of seven were able to read and write, while almost eighty percent of Bulgarians were literate.⁴⁸ According to official Bulgarian statistics, there were 1700 schools for the Turkish minority in the years 1921-1922, but only 540 remained active in 1936.⁴⁹ The Turkish population, however, had not diminished in the number of its members: according to census data, it had even grown between 1920 and 1934, from 520.339 people to 591.193.⁵⁰ In the course of the 1940s, the remaining Turkish schools were little more than 400. Perhaps most surprising is also the fact that, starting from the school year 1937-8, six hours of compulsory Arabic writing were included in the weekly program of instruction in the Turkish schools of the countries starting from the first grade.⁵¹

The period between 1934 and 1944 represented thus what we can define as a “black decade” for the educational and literacy matters of the Turkish community of Bulgaria. Pupils were forced to learn an anachronistic alphabet that undermined their literacy progresses in a long-term perspective, as well as the natural development of their culture and education. We must underline that this fact had also important consequences in the interruption of the community’s social evolution and its ties with Turkey, preventing the further cultural developments in terms of modernization and exchange of new, progressive ideas. We can assess how such discriminatory policies against the Latin alphabet by the Bulgarian government represent a clear expression of the willingness of carrying out a policy of “ethnic exclusion”. This attitude can manifest itself in different forms, corresponding to varying

⁴⁸ See Ali Eminov, “The Nation State and Minority Languages”, in: *Of All the Slavs My Favorites: In Honor of Howard I. Aronson*, (eds) V. A. Friedman and D. L. Dyer, Indiana Slavic Studies 12, 2001, p. 160.

⁴⁹ See Şimşir, *op.cit.*, p. 122, and Muyhtar, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

⁵⁰ Bulgarian Census: *Преброяване на населението и жилищния фонд в Република България*, Национален статистически институт.

⁵¹ See Charles L. Glenn, *Educational Freedom in Eastern Europe*, Cato Institute, Washington D.C. 1995, p. 73.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

levels of intolerance towards national minorities.⁵² According to the international law of that moment, the minorities of the European states had to be granted a series of cultural, linguistic and religious rights⁵³ as well as political rights that had emerged from the Peace Treaties after First World War.

As examples in this sense we can name the right for a community to establish its own associations and organizations for the promotion of its culture, the right to publish books and magazines in its own language, the right to have newspapers and media in its own language and the right to participate in the education in the mother tongue.⁵⁴ In this case, similarly to what had happened in 1925/1926 to the Slavophone minority of Aegean Macedonia in Greece,⁵⁵ one can observe an evident situation of violated linguistic and cultural rights, or better said, of denied “alphabetic rights”. In this sense, the association with the so-called “Abecedar case”⁵⁶ of a few years earlier, which had caused so much scandal in the Bulgarian audience because of the imposition of the Latin script to a community that was Orthodox (and therefore linked to the Cyrillic alphabet) comes spontaneously⁵⁷.

6. The Post-imperial Factor in Bulgarian Nation Building Process

In the period from the late 1920s to the end of the 1930s, the Arabic alphabet continued to occupy a dominant position in the culture of Turkish minorities in Bulgaria. This process went in parallel with the strengthening of

⁵² See Rossalina Latcheva, “Nationalism versus Patriotism, or the Floating Border? National Identification and Ethnic Exclusion in Post-communist Bulgaria”, *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Fall 2010, p. 202.

⁵³ See Fouques Duparc, *op.cit.*

⁵⁴ See Latcheva, *op.cit.*, and B. Rechel, “Bulgaria. Minority rights ‘light’”, *Minority Rights in Central and Eastern Europe*, (ed.) B. Rechel, Routledge, London-New York 2009, pp. 77- 89.

⁵⁵ See Iakovos D. Michailidis, “Minority Rights and Educational Problems in Greek Interwar Macedonia: The Case of the Primer ‘Abecedar’”, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 14-2 (1996), pp. 329-343.

⁵⁶ See also Selvelli, 2017, *op.cit.*, pp. 29-65.

⁵⁷ Another case is the one of the minorities’ rights during Communism, whose educational institutions suffered difficulties and restrictions, as the case of the Armenian community of Plovdiv. This minority still remembers the dark times when its Tiutiundjian school was closed and the teaching of the Armenian alphabet interrupted. The effects of this break in the continuity of the transmission of the written language can still be seen today, after more than 40 years. See Selvelli, Giustina, “Alphabet and Writing in the Armenian Diaspora of Plovdiv. Anthropological and Sociolinguistic Perspectives”, *Mediterranean Language Review*, Vol. 22, Harrassowitz Verlag, Heidelberg, pp.157-188, here p. 168.

religious education and of the power of Islamic representatives.⁵⁸ It was thus a clear paradox if we consider the changes that had already been taking place in neighbouring Turkey for many years. To some extent, the Bulgarian government promoted divisions and bitterness among the members of the Turkish community in the country and with Turkey, favoring the Arabic alphabet with the aim of creating tensions and at the same time halt the development and natural course of the minority's writing history. Illiteracy was seen as a useful element for breaking up the crucial links with Turkey, while Kemalism and intellectual development assumed the opposite value, as they promoted relations with a country seen as the successor state of the former enemy. In short, if in Turkey the alphabet reform had been promoted as a way to redeem the Turkish people from the negligence of the previous Ottoman rulers and was fundamental in the creation of a new identity oriented to the West, in Bulgaria precisely for these reasons it was seen as a potential threat to Bulgarian national integrity.

We can state how the Ottoman "post-imperial" factor and the international "modernization" background constituted two equally significant elements in the definition of the Bulgarian government's policies towards "alphabetic", and more widely language issues within the country. The so-called "imperial legacy"⁵⁹ embodied a fundamental factor in the early years of the formation of the Bulgarian state, determining the options and limitations adopted in the field of policies towards minorities. In this sense, in Bulgaria, the policies of the government towards the Turkish minority developed in various phases according to criteria of "indifference", "tolerance" and later also according to attempts at "assimilation".⁶⁰

These trends became part of Bulgaria's journey towards modernity, characterized by a painful relationship with its Ottoman past, in the attempt to "emancipate itself" culturally from an unwanted heritage. This was realized by developing a national identity that had to be positioned in accordance with the terms of reference of "East" and "West", which in the post-Ottoman view corresponded to visions of "backwardness" and "progress" respectively.⁶¹

⁵⁸ See Stoyanov, *op.cit.*, pp. 365-6.

⁵⁹ Yonca Köksal, "Minority Policies in Bulgaria and Turkey: The Struggle to Define a Nation", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2006): pp. 501-521 and *Imperial Legacy. The Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East*, (ed.) C. L. Brown, Columbia University Press, New York 1996.

⁶⁰ See Köksal, *ibid.*, p. 501.

⁶¹ See Latcheva, *op.cit.*, p. 188.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

This process of rewriting the nation, and a new identity narrative, had to clash with the presence of some cultural groups that reflected a sort of “uncanny”⁶² hybridity, since they questioned the alleged “homogeneity” of the Bulgarian people, as well as its Christian tradition. Such feature was particularly ascribed to the Turks, Pomaks and Muslim Roma.

The widespread presence of nationalist sentiments throughout the nineteenth century had imposed the idea that ethnic homogeneity was a decisive factor for the progress of a country. It is in this view that we can inscribe the processes of selectively “removing” from the public space the traces of a past of foreign domination. This took shape for example in the destruction of some symbols of Ottoman cultural memory: the old gravestones in some cemeteries in areas with significant Turkish presence, still written with Arabic characters and finely decorated, were devastated and desecrated on several occasions during the twentieth century. Others bearing Turkish or Arabic names were instead simply replaced.⁶³

In general, the Ottoman Turkish heritage in Bulgaria never benefited from any particular protection, and as a result there are very few inscriptions left in the cities of the country in this historical writing system that was integral part of their history.⁶⁴ Therefore, the policies in favor of the education in the Arabic alphabet for the Turkish minority did not reflect the historical or cultural defense of this script in the country. At different stages in the history of the twentieth century in Bulgaria, the dominant rhetoric claimed that the oldest traces of the former imperial culture had to be destroyed.

⁶² Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, Columbia University Press, New York 1991.

⁶³ As a Turkish writer of Bulgaria Zejnep Ibrahimova recalls in an interview: “Старите турски гробища обикновено са дялани камъни, завършващи отгоре с чалми. Тези камъни са много стари и по някои от тях имаше османски надписи. (...) Искаха да оставят селата без гробища, т.е. без история.” (“The old Turkish cemeteries are usually hewn stones ending on top with a “headgear”. These stones are very old and some of them have Ottoman inscriptions. (...) They wanted to leave the villages without cemeteries; without history”) in: Daniela Gorčeva, “Зейнеп Ибрахимова Помня студа и страха, които бяха сковали всичко - и пътищата, и душите ни”, in: Диалог, Amsterdam 2009, n. 50, pp. 7-11, available online: http://liternet.bg/publish19/d_gorcheva/zeinep.htm (last access: 31/15/18). See also Elena Marushiakova, Veselin Popov, “Muslim minorities in Bulgaria”, *Migration and Political Intervention: Diasporas in Transition Countries*, (ed.) Jochen Blaschke, Parabolis, Berlin 2004, p. 23.

⁶⁴ See for example Bernard Lory, *Le sort de l'héritage ottoman en Bulgarie. L'exemple des villes bulgares 1878-1900*, Isis, Istanbul 1985.

In addition to this, as a result of this willingness of removing entire parts of the country's own past, very few Ottoman newspapers issued on the territory of the Bulgarian principality and Eastern Rumelia of the last decades of the nineteenth century have been preserved until today. Unfortunately, some series and editions that would be of extremely important value for Ottoman, Balkan and Bulgarian historians have been completely lost.⁶⁵

Conclusions

From a historical point of view, the vicissitudes experienced by the Turkish writing systems in Bulgaria proved to be quite noteworthy. The situation of conflicting coexistence of the Latin and Arabic alphabets was representative of the different "alphabetic ideologies" and the different identity conceptions and dynamics of power active in this delicate post-imperial and post-war moment in the Balkan country, involving both Bulgarians and Turkish actors. Extremely significant is in this respect the case of the conservative and anti-Kemalist publications which, in opposition to the persecutions they were subjected to in Turkey, continued to be published in Bulgaria with the employment of Arabic characters (hence in Ottoman Turkish) until 1943. These probably represent a unique example in the former Ottoman Empire, which surpasses the record of the Sanjak of Alexandretta (today's Turkish province of Hatay), under French sovereignty at the time of the alphabetical reform of Ankara, where local newspapers in Turkish language adopted the Latin alphabet only in 1934. In the Turkish context, it should not be surprising that the older generations continued to use the Arabic alphabet in private correspondence, and in their journals until the 1960s). In a sense, Bulgaria remained a sort of "oasis" for the Arabic alphabet in the Balkans, since the new Latin alphabet had been adopted by the Turkish community in Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia.

For what concerns the legal implication of the question, in general terms, we can remind how usually a society allows minorities to use their languages if they do not pose a threat to the dominant culture and its values; it can also consent to the teaching of these languages in a selective way, as was the case of the Turkish community in Bulgaria whose right to literacy in the new Latin alphabet was denied. In this case, the exponents of the community in question were seen as defenders of a system of values that is in

⁶⁵ See Shivarov, *op.cit.*, p. 135.

THE CLASH BETWEEN LATIN AND ARABIC ALPHABETS AMONG THE TURKISH COMMUNITY IN BULGARIA IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

contrast with that of the state. This justification was employed by the Bulgarian government at various times between the 1920s and the 1930s to defend its decision to isolate its Turkish population from the influences of modernization and secularist tendencies that were so strongly active in Atatürk's Turkey. To a certain extent, the varying Bulgarian policies towards the writing practices of the Turkish population represented a case of ethnic discrimination, as the community's linguistics and fundamental rights to education in the mother tongue, or rather in the new alphabet were repeatedly violated.

The problem concerning the rights and integration of Turkish minorities was certainly not solved after the Second World War with the advent of Communism. In particular, for what concerns the linguistic and alphabetic questions, it is important to remember that for a period of time during Communism, the Koran itself was no longer available in Arabic, but exclusively in its Bulgarian translation, and the same periodical press of the minority could only be published in the language of the majority.

Regarding the most critical period before the collapse of Communism, the limitations to the literacy rights of the Turkish community had very serious repercussions on the writing practices of the population, especially on those of the younger generations. In one of his articles, scholar Ali Eminov illustrates the significant case of one of his relatives who, in the most intense years of the assimilation policies towards the Turkish minority, wrote in the Turkish language but with the employment of the Bulgarian Cyrillic alphabet. Since Turkish children at the time knew their mother tongue only at an oral level and were taught at school to write with the Cyrillic alphabet exclusively, it is not surprising that cases like these could occur frequently, despite the efforts of the family in teaching their children the Turkish Latin alphabet. Furthermore, there were other minority groups in the country whose educational institutions suffered a similar fate, as in the case of the Armenian community of Plovdiv, which still remembers the dark times when its school was closed and the teaching of the Armenian alphabet interrupted. The effects of this break in the continuity of the transmission of the written language can still be seen today, after more than 40 years.

GIUSTINA SELVELLI

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