

**MINARETS AND MINISKIRTS:
DEBATING ISLAMIC DRESS IN CONTEMPORARY
BULGARIA**

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Executive Summary

This article examines Bulgaria's recent post-socialist history, and sees the headscarf controversy as a window on to the growing conflicts between Bulgaria's traditional Muslim communities and the new Saudi-influenced believers, as well as the renewed tensions between the Pomak/Muslim minority and the majority secular Orthodox Christian majority. In both cases, women's bodies were becoming the terrain upon which these battles were being played out. Women's "modesty" and women's "freedom" were the tropes deployed to justify the superiority of one worldview over another. On both sides of this debate, the irrationality or immorality of the opposite position was identified with the clothing choices of the women: the headscarf (*hijab*) and loose gown (*jilbab* or *shamiya*) for the Muslims and the miniskirt for the Orthodox Christians and atheists. Although the author has been studying Bulgaria for over ten years, specific research for this article is based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bulgaria between 2004 and 2007, as well as formal interviews with Bulgarian politicians and leaders in the Muslim community.

Introduction

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 1,000 recent Christian converts to Islam. A 2005 "Live Dialogue" session on the Qatar-based IslamOnline.net website 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.¹ 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 was relatively peaceful. Although ethnic conflicts wracked the country's Western Balkan neighbors, Bulgaria's Slavic Christian and Turkish Muslim populations managed to co-exist without any violent conflicts after the coming of democracy in 1989. Indeed, Bulgaria was often considered the island of stability in the Balkans. The

¹ "Eastern Europe's Muslims: Prospects and Challenges," *Islam Online*, <http://www.islamonline.net/livedialogue/english/Browse.asp?hGuestID=rbQxt5> (accessed 7 June 2007).

“Bulgarian ethnic model” of including the Turkish minority party in almost every post-socialist government was held up as a democratic ideal. This “ethnic model” meant the permanent political inclusion of Bulgaria’s Muslim minorities and a continued state commitment to religious and ethnic pluralism in order to check the power of would-be Bulgarian nationalists.²

“Eastern Aid” and its Impact

In the first years of the twenty-first century, however, there was an influx of new interpretations of Islam in the country, partially financed by “Eastern Aid”³-- Islamic charities largely from Gulf Arab states such as Saudi Arabia. These charities were supporting the promotion of “proper” Islam by Bulgaria’s Muslims, whose practices and beliefs were considered corrupt by their long contact with Christianity and communism. Although these charities had been active in Bulgaria since the early 1990s, beginning in 2004, a handful of foreign-funded but locally-run Islamic nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) began operating in Bulgaria to specifically advocate for the religious rights of Muslims who chose to follow the “new” interpretations of Islam.

Beginning in 2005, the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks)⁴ were targeted with new Islamic publications, seminars, lectures and charitable projects aimed at enticing them to embrace a “purer” or “stricter” form of Islam, one in which the *hijab* was mandatory for Muslim women. Those who did not cover themselves were threatened with divine punishments. It

² For a detailed description of this model from the point of view of Bulgaria’s Turkish minority, see Ivan Palchev, *Ahmed Dogan and the Bulgarian Ethnic Model* (Sofia, 2002).

³ Kristen Ghodsee, “Examining ‘Eastern’ Aid: Muslim Minorities and Islamic Nongovernmental Organization in Bulgaria,” *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2005).

⁴ For some Bulgarian Muslims, the term “Pomak” is considered derogatory, but in the regions where I did my fieldwork between 2004 and 2007, the non-Turkish, non-Roma Muslims referred to themselves as “Pomaks” and believed that using the term “Pomak” might allow them to establish for themselves a separate ethnic identity.

should be no surprise then that 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.

This article examines Bulgaria’s recent post-socialist history, and sees the headscarf controversy as a window on to the growing conflicts between Bulgaria’s traditional Muslim communities and the new Saudi-influenced believers, as well as the renewed tensions between the Pomak/Muslim minority and the majority secular Orthodox Christian majority. In both cases, women’s bodies were becoming the terrain upon which these battles were being played out. Women’s “modesty” and women’s “freedom” were the tropes deployed to justify the superiority of one worldview over another. On both sides of this debate, the irrationality or immorality of the opposite position was identified with the clothing choices of the women: the headscarf (*hijab*) and loose gown (*jilbab* or *shamiya*) for the Muslims and the miniskirt for the Orthodox Christians and atheists.

For the ethnic Bulgarian and Bulgarian Orthodox majority, the Islamic headscarf on women represented Bulgaria’s troubled past under the domination of the Ottoman Empire, which many Bulgarians blamed for their delayed integration with Europe and the West. Many believed that Islam was a backward, anti-modern religion and they feared continued exclusion from the West because of the legacies of Ottoman rule in Bulgarian culture. Everything negative about their country – corruption, poverty, underdevelopment, and so forth – had historically been blamed on the Turks and their Islamic empire. As a new member of NATO and the European Union, Bulgaria was struggling to leave its “Eastern” past behind it, and the sudden resurgence of Islam in Bulgaria was viewed as a threat to this goal. Thus, a woman or girl in a headscarf or Islamic gown was never simply making a fashion statement, but embodied the “backwardness”

of the East and its supposed subjugation of Muslim women.

On the other side, to the newly devout Muslims, the Bulgarian women in miniskirts and visible thong underwear represent all that was morally decadent and corrupt about the West. Newly devout Muslims were angered by the many injustices that liberal democracy and capitalism had wrought on the Bulgarian population. They were critical of the individualism, materialism and lack of solidarity that characterized the previous two decades of their country's history.

Included in their grievances were the break-up of families, the high rate of drug use and delinquency among youth, and the concomitant increase in crime and poverty in local communities, exacerbated by high rates of unemployment. Women's provocative dress had become a marker for all of these legitimate concerns, and controlling women's bodies was an avenue through which Bulgarian Muslims imagined that they could effect real political changes.⁵ Framing the controversy over the headscarf as the first serious post-socialist test of Muslim religious rights may have been a strategic act of Bulgaria's new Muslim leaders to force the government to state a clear policy on religious rights before it joined the EU in January 2007.

Although the author has been studying Bulgaria for over ten years, specific research for this article is based on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bulgaria between 2004 and 2007, as well as formal interviews with Bulgarian politicians and leaders in the Muslim community. Furthermore, the article relies heavily on the textual analysis of Muslim publications written by Bulgarians for a Bulgarian-speaking audience. These include Islamic books, magazines, brochures, and websites aimed at introducing a more "orthodox" (or

⁵ A good example of women's bodies being used as political tools by the socialist state is Gail Kligman's fascinating study of prenatal policies in Romania: *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley, 1998). See also Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, 1996); Susan Gal and Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Gender After Socialism* (Princeton, 2000).

scripturalist) form of Islamic practice among the traditional Hanafi Sunni population.⁶ Within these publications, there are a disproportionate number of articles that specifically demand women's modesty in both behavior and dress. A close examination of these texts reveals how the right to display or hide the woman's body had become markedly politicized by 2006, coinciding with larger European debates about the future of Islam on the Continent.

Headscarves in Homeroom

The controversy started in early 2006 when a teenager attending the Karl Marx Professional High School for Economics in the city of Smolyan became convinced that in order to be a true Muslim she must wear the *hijab*. This 15-year-old befriended another student, a like-minded young woman who had also embraced a more "orthodox" version of her family's faith. Although both girls came from Bulgarian Muslim families, neither of their mothers wore the headscarf nor had their families embraced the "purer" form of Islam being advocated in the Rhodopi Mountain region near the Greek-Bulgarian border. Despite this, the two girls added headscarves to their mandatory red and black school uniforms. The principal 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 were sent home.

But the girls were not going to give up so easily, and they filed complaints against the

⁶ The key Islamic media sources influencing the Pomaks in the region where I did my fieldwork were the locally produced magazines *Ikra* and *Myusulmansko Onshtestvo*, and the websites www.islam-bg.net and www.oirk.org. All of these publications tried to "correct" the laxity of Islamic practice in the region by emphasizing the imperatives of attending Friday prayers (for men), observing Muslim dietary restrictions, refraining from alcohol and tobacco, as well as eradicating local religious practices considered un-Islamic such as fortune-telling, the carrying of amulets, the visiting of the graves of local Muslim "saints," or the celebrating of the Prophet's birthday. Interestingly, the Bulgarian government closed down the www.islam-bg.net website in February 2003 because it was deemed a threat to national security and public order. See *Agence France Presse*, "Bulgaria busts two radical Islamic Internet sites," 20 February 2007; *Novinite.com*,

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. The girls were obstinate, and it was not long before a local (but foreign-funded) Islamic nongovernmental organization interceded on their behalf and lodged an official complaint directly with the Ministry of Education. Invoking Article 13 of the 1991 Bulgarian constitution which states that “religious institutions shall be separate from the state,”⁷ the Minister replied that Bulgarian education was “secular” and, adopting the terminology of the French, claimed that conspicuous religious symbols had no place in the classroom.

The constitution also guaranteed religious freedoms, and the Minister of Education further argued that there were three accredited Islamic high schools in Bulgaria where the girls could receive a secondary school education (which was not mandatory) and wear their headscarves without contradiction. He claimed that it was not a violation of their religious rights if the girls insisted on wearing their headscarves to a school to which they voluntarily applied and attended, knowing beforehand of the uniform requirement.

The NGO, the Union for Islamic Development and Culture (UIDC), was an organization started in 2004 with links to the Bulgarian chapter of the Saudi World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY).⁸ The UIDC’s Pomak leaders had all obtained extensive religious education in Jordan, and had brought back to Bulgaria with them what they considered to be a “purer” form of Islam, one that aimed to unite Bulgarian Muslims with the supranational community of Muslim

⁷ “4 Arrested for Incitement to Radical Islamism in Bulgaria,” 20 February 2007, http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=76956 (accessed 25 February 2007).

⁸ Article 13(2) of the Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria, available at <http://www.parliament.bg/?page=const&lng=en> (accessed 23 November 2007).

⁸ WAMY is registered in Bulgaria as the foundation Al-Nedua and is chaired by a man who shares ownership in a company called Brothers Trading with the leaders of the UIDC.

believers (the *ummah*) and liberate them from their local “heterodox” traditions. Part of their stated mission was to protect the religious rights of these newer “purer” Muslims. The UIDC proceeded to file a complaint with the newly established national Commission for the Protection against Discrimination (KZD).⁹ They claimed that the Bulgarian government had a responsibility to uphold the democratic principles it had embraced after the collapse of communism in 1989, including the freedom of religion.

Pictures of the two girls in their headscarves and long Islamic *jilbabs* became ubiquitous in the national media; radio interviews, television shows and internet forums were all focused on the issue of the headscarf. A Bulgarian nationalist 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 patriotic cord with many Bulgarians who were looking for someone to blame for nearly twenty years of political and economic “transition” that had seen an erosion of living standards for the majority of the population.

For the first time in their almost two decades of peaceful post-socialist history, Bulgarians (the majority of whom are at least nominally Orthodox Christian) 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 national 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, all just six months before Bulgaria was

⁹ See “Law on the Protection against Discrimination,” available in English at http://www.stopvaw.org/sites/3f6d15f4-c12d-4515-8544-26b7a3a5a41e/uploads/anti-discrimination_law_en.pdf (accessed 21 December 2007). The chairperson and members of the KZD are official appointments of the ruling party in parliament and theoretically has the power to make legally binding decisions.

scheduled to join the European Union.

For many observers, there were striking similarities between the Bulgarian and French headscarf cases, with both European Muslim minorities mobilizing the language of freedom and human rights to advocate for Islamic dress in public schools. But reading the headscarf case in Bulgaria as a replay of the 2003-2004 French headscarf affair¹⁰ in the Eastern European context would miss the important ways in which the Bulgarian case differed.

First, the Muslim community in Bulgaria was not an immigrant community, but rather the indigenous descendants of Turkish, Roma and Slavic Muslims who had been in the country for centuries. Second, the modern presence of Islam in Bulgaria was not the result of a Christian imperialist project in Muslim lands (as in France), but a remnant of the country's 500-year colonization by a Muslim, Ottoman Empire.¹¹ The Bulgarians' desire to ban headscarves might be analogous to something like the Algerians wanting to ban baguettes; it might seem silly and unnecessary, but one can understand why it might be of national significance to do so (and certainly no less assertive than "freedom fries" or "freedom toast").

Third, the majority of Bulgaria's Muslim minority was ethnically Turkish and their "mother" country, Turkey, was still a decidedly secular republic in 2006 that had a sweeping headscarf ban already in place. Fourth, Bulgaria's geopolitical position vis-à-vis the international community was weak and the Bulgarians had been subjected to more than fifteen years of aggressive American "democracy assistance" since the end of the Cold War. As a recent member of NATO and the home of America's new permanent military bases in East

¹⁰ The French case resulted in legislation banning conspicuous religious symbols in public schools. See John Bowen, *Why the French Don't Like Headscarves* (Princeton, 2006); Joan W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil: Banning Islamic Headscarves in French Public Schools* (Princeton, 2007).

¹¹ Although Guyatri Spivak argues that the Ottoman imperialism was qualitatively different (and therefore somehow more acceptable) than Western European imperial projects, most Bulgarians would not make allowances for these fine

Europe, the Bulgarian government was vulnerable to U.S. interference in its internal affairs, particularly with regard to the protection of what many Americans believe to be the “first freedom” of “religious rights.”¹²

In particular, after the passage of the 1998 International Religious Freedoms Act, the country was put under increasing pressure to liberalize its law regulating religion, and there was both direct and indirect interference in the legislative process by the American diplomatic mission in Bulgaria when a draft law proposed was not to the U.S.’s liking.¹³ Thus, Bulgaria in

scholarly nuances. See Gayatri Spivak, “The Question of Cultural Studies,” in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, 1993).

¹² See Testimony of Congressman Frank R. Wolf, Hearing on International Relations Committee, Hearing on Religious Persecutions, 9 September 1997; 1998 Freedom from Religious Persecution Act of 1997, Part 1 – Administration witnesses, Hearing Before the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives, 105th Congress, First Session, 9 September 1997, Washington DC, U.S. G.P.O.; testimony of Dr. Richard Land (President, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, Southern Baptist Convention), S. 1868: The International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, Hearings before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 105th Congress Second Session, 12 May and 17 June 1998, Washington DC: U.S. G.P.O., 1998, p. 42; Donna Cassata, “Congress Enters Uncharted Territory with Bill on Religious Persecution,” *CQ Weekly*, 13 September 1997: 2121; Frank Wolf quoted in Mile A. Pomper, “The Religious Right’s Foreign Policy Revival,” *CQ Weekly*, 9 May 1998: 1209; “United States Policies in support of Religious Freedom: Focus on Christians,” U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, 22 July 1997; Grace V. Smith, “Forum: Rethinking the First Freedom,” Heritage Foundation, 13 March 2006, www.heritage.org/press/commentary/ed031306b.cfm (accessed 21 December 2007).

¹³ The 2002 Denominations Act was opposed by the U.S. government (after the passage of IRFA) and local human rights organizations because it was considered worse than the communist law governing religion. In this law, which went through multiple drafts and took over three years to be passed, the national security provision was reaffirmed and the government Directorate of Religion Denominations (established by the communists) was not abolished. All religious groups were still required to register with the state if they wanted to engage in public activities, and the state reserved the right to refuse registration to religious groups based on its own internal criteria. Finally, the status of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) was further reified by exempting it from any of the formal registration procedures imposed on all other denominations, and affirming its status as the official religion of Bulgaria with Maxim as its Patriarch. See Krassimir Kanev, “The New Bulgarian Religious Law: Restrictive and Discriminatory,” *European Yearbook of Minority Issues* 2, no. 3 (2002): 655-673; Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, “Address against the pending approval of the final version of the draft Denominations Act,” 14 November 2000, www.bghelsinki.org/index.php?module=news&lg=en&id=275 (accessed 2 February 2007). The U.S. Embassy in Bulgaria—and particularly the Democracy Program of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—actively lobbied parliament against the various drafts of the law, and managed to delay the voting on the legislation during one session of parliament by requesting that it be sent out for review by the Council of Europe while the Americans continued to organize opposition to the law by local religious groups and human rights organizations. Official statements against the law signed by a laundry list of “new religions” in Bulgaria (including the Unification Church and the Hare Krishnas), as well as public protests, were either directly or indirectly supported by the Americans. Having given over half a billion dollars in foreign aid to Bulgaria since 1989, the American embassy had a lot of power and influence over the Bulgarian government. See “Democracy and Partnership 1989-2003,” Embassy of the United States in Bulgaria, sofia.usembassy.gov/iv_democratization.html (accessed 20 January 2007). When the law was finally passed, the U.S. Embassy flexed its diplomatic muscle to put pressure on the Bulgarian President, Georgi Parvanov, to veto the bill, which he ultimately refused to do. “Bulgaria: International Religious Freedom Report 2002,” U.S.

2006 was under a wholly different set of pressures informed by a radically different colonial history than France in 2003.

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.¹⁴ 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).¹⁵ These Pomaks had close connections with Saudi and Jordanian Islamic influences, 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, although both high school students came from Bulgarian Muslim families, they were raised with a locally defined “traditional” form of Islam until their contact with the leaders of the new NGOs. Neither of the girls’ mothers wore the headscarf, and members of their own communities felt that the girls were being manipulated

Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor,
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2002/13925.htm> (accessed 21 December 2007).

14 See, for instance, “Reshavat dali momicheta ot PGE da nosyat zabradki v uchilishte,” *Otzvuk*, 26-28 June 2006, Smolyan No. 50 (1100): 6; Anita Cholokova, “Momichetata ot PGE: Nie ne harushavame nichii prava, da ne narushavat i nashite,” *Otzvuk*, 26-28 June 2006, Smolyan No. 50 (1100): 6; Zarko Marinov, “OIRK zloupotrebilo c uchenichkite ot PGE,” *Otzvuk*, 3-5 July 2006, Smolyan No. 52 (1102): 8; Valentin Hadzhiev, “Zam.-Minister im razreshil zabradkite prez 2003-a,” *24 Chasa*, 28 June 2006, vol. 16, no. 176 (5328): 10; Tanya Petrova, “Religioznite simboli s ogranicenya upotreba,” *Sega*, 13 July 2006, vol. 9, no. 162 (2652): 15; “Zabradki sreshtu krustcheta,” *Politika*, 7-11 July 2006, no. 116: 48; Nikolai Tonchev, “V Evropa nyama myasto za zabradki,” *Duma*, 1 July 2006, vol. 17, no. 152 (4457): 10; Rumiana Buchakova, “Prebrazhdat momicheta s beli shamii,” *Plovdivski Trud*, 28 June 2006, vol. 9, no. 127 (2249): 1; “Zabranjavanat feredzhetata v uchilishte, DPS e protiv,” *Ataka*, 26 June 2006, vol. 1, no. 211: 6; Kiril Borisov “S shamia na uchilishte,” *168 Chasa*, 23-29 June 2006, vol. 17, no. 25: 20; “Novite uchenicheski uniformi v Smolyan,” *Ataka*, 30 June 2006, vol. 1, no. 25: pg. 2; Valentin Hadzhiev, “Bez feredzhetata v uchilishtata,” *24 Chasa*, 25 June 2006, vol. 16, no. 174 (5526): 5.

15 However, it is important to note that this is contested by some of the Saudi-influenced Pomaks who believe themselves either to be a completely distinct ethnic group or the descendants of Arabs who settled in the Rhodopi before Tsar Boris I Christianized the Slavs in the 8th century, a very controversial position to mainstream Bulgarian historians. See Petya Kabakchieva, “From Local to Regional Identity: The Possible Construction of ‘Cross-Border’ Regional Identity – Case Study of a Border Region, Smolyan,” Nexus Research Project paper, unpublished, synopsis at www.ceu.hu/cps/bluebird/rg/see/see_prog_2001jun.pdf (accessed 30 December 2006); Maria Todorova, “Identity (Trans)Formation Among the Pomaks in Bulgaria,” in *Beyond Borders: Remaking Cultural Identities in the New East and Central Europe*, eds. Lazlo Kurti and Juliet Langman (New York, 1997), pp. 63-82. Interestingly, the Czech Slavicist P. Shafarik also mentions the theory that the Pomaks are descendants of the Arabs in his 1842 book on Slavic popular history, see

by external Islamic influences in the region.¹⁶

In fact, the Smolyan region where the two girls lived was increasingly under the influence of NGOs such as the UIDC with their links to the international Islamic Saudi charities (as opposed to other regions in Bulgaria where Turkey was the traditional patron state of Bulgaria's Muslim communities).¹⁷ The settlements in the Rhodopi Mountains were mostly in remote enclaves and had historically been very rural and cut off from the main currents in "modern" Bulgarian society. During the forty-five years of communism, the region became even more isolated because of its proximity to the border with capitalist NATO-allied Greece, and therefore fell into a heavily militarized zone where police strictly controlled internal movements.

Because of the region's seclusion, the traditional forms of Bulgarian Islam here were relatively less influenced by outside events, particularly the communist assimilation campaigns. Bulgarian Islam, like other forms of Balkan Islam, was steeped in rather syncretistic local traditions due to its centuries-long contact with both Christianity and Sufi mystical orders.¹⁸ Add to this, forty-five years of communist attempts to eradicate religion and to assimilate Muslim minorities,¹⁹ and you have a further "dilution" of what the leader of the UIDC would consider "pure" Islam.

Thus, after 1989, most Bulgarian Muslim populations emerged with few "pure" Islamic practices and retained only a strong sense of cultural identity as "Muslims."²⁰ This was the

P. Shafarik, *Slavianski Narodpis* (1842), cited in Stoyan Raichevsky, *The Mohammedan Bulgarians (Pomaks)* (Sofia, 2004), p. 15.

¹⁶ Author's interviews in the region in 2005-2006.

¹⁷ Kristen Ghodsee, "Examining 'Eastern' Aid: Muslim Minorities and Islamic Nongovernmental Organization in Bulgaria," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2005).

¹⁸ Albena Shkodorova, "Discover: Bulgaria's Sufi Heritage," *Balkan Investigative Reporting Network*, 7 December 2005, <http://www.birn.eu.com/en/45/130/1864/> (accessed 21 December 2007).

¹⁹ Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca, 2004).

²⁰ Kristen Ghodsee, "Men, Mines and Mosques: Gender and Islamic Revivalism on the Edge of Europe," Occasional

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 these Saudi influences, particularly with regard to the behavior and dress of women, could be found in foreign-funded but locally produced 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 did not comply with the more strict interpretation of Islamic teachings. More importantly, they invoked the immodest fashions of non-Muslims as a standard from which moral women should desire to escape.

This extended quotation is from an article in *Myusyulmansko Obshtestvo* (Muslim Society), the magazine published by the UIDC, the same 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 a 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 message 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.²¹“

Similar types of arguments appeared in the magazine *Ikra*, a publication from Madan, a town just twelve kilometers away from the girls’ home city, and the site of 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 would face divine punishment if they did not obey. An article titled “The Veil: A Categorical Imperative” lays out a strict Islamic dress code for Muslim women:

“Guarding the virtue is one of the major tasks for both men and women. A veiled woman will not attract the eyes and hearts of the men around, as they [the men] are forbidden to look. Just as one must not do forbidden things, so one must not provoke them... What parts of the body shall be covered? The whole body, except for the hands and the face. The hair must be covered completely. The over-garment is ankle-long and its sleeves leave only the hands exposed. It is a two-piece garment: the one covers the hair, neck, shoulders and bosom and the other covers the whole body... The over-garment averts bad rumor and consequence in this world and will protect against the Fire in the World Beyond. It should be known that when the Almighty asks the question, “Why didn’t you cover your body in your earthly existence?” it will be very difficult for a woman to give an answer.²²“

Yet another article in a different issue of *Ikra*, “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 do not, and warning that there

²¹ Asya Raad, “Skromnostta kato osobenost na Islyama,” *Mysusyulmansko Obshtestvo*, Year 2, No. 2, 2006: 28-29. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Bulgarian to English are by the author.

²² Fatme Musa Ali, “Pokrivaloto – Edna Kategorichna Zapoved,” *Ikra*, Year 2, No. 17, 2006: 31-33.

will be consequences for those who “expose their beauties:”

“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 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....²³”

These articles, published in Bulgarian and circulated in the region where the girls lived, combined with regular lectures and seminars held by Islamic NGOs working among the Pomaks, 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 on Bulgarian society. Another article in *Ikra* argued that “regardless of the advances in women's rights, women in Western and Westernized societies are still subjected to and forced to see themselves as commodities to be bought and sold.”²⁴ According to this same article, Islam was the only true path to equality between men and women: “Islam is the final religion and therefore, our last real chance. The high level of responsibility encourages humanity to raise itself above unhealthy emotions and underdeveloped instincts. Once we succeed in that challenge, then and only then, will humanity

²³ Selve Hodzhova, “Nachin na Povedenie na Myusyulmankata,” *Ikra*, Year 1, No.12, 2005: 21-22 (author's emphasis).

²⁴ “Zhenite, koito mogat da se kupyat,” *Ikra*, Year 12, No. 16, 2006: 11-13.

be strong enough to implement equity for all.”²⁵

This emphasis upon new dress requirements for women was starkly at odds with mainstream Bulgarian fashion for women. In fact, local fashions for women in Bulgaria in 2006 were the polar opposite of the modesty promoted by Islam. In Bulgaria and perhaps in post-socialist Eastern Europe in general, clothing styles for women were quite provocative 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 Bulgarian women had mastered the art of always bending at the knees. If pants were worn, they were often cut as low as anatomically possible, and after 2003, combined with visible thong underwear for the ubiquitous “whale tale” look. 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 into small towns in the Pomak regions via 24-hour Bulgarian *chalga* (pop-folk) music channels. On stations such as Vesselina TV and Payner Planeta, silicone-enhanced, bottle-blond *chalga* singers crooned and danced their way through five-minute video clips in the skimpiest of outfits, and 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 summers when I did my fieldwork, 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, many local women explained to me that provocative “European” dress with short

²⁵ Ibid.

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*), many 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 Mountain region of southern Bulgaria dressed like Bulgarian women in small towns throughout the country. 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 in the region. 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. This 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.

Gender Equality versus Religious Rights

On both sides of this debate in Bulgaria, the devout Muslims and the secular Christians and Muslims employed liberal rights discourses to further their claims, pitting religious rights against women's rights. 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 secular or traditional Muslims and their newly devout co-religionists. More importantly, 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 fact, the issue of equality between men and women would be one of the key factors in the debates. On June 17, 2006, the two students and a representative of the Islamic NGO, the UIDC, appeared before the KZD in Sofia to give testimony in support of their complaint. The following is an excerpt from the transcript of the hearings. Selvi Shakirov was the Deputy Director of the UIDC. Irina Muleshkova was a member of the antidiscrimination commission and the Chairperson of the committee hearing the case:

Selvi Shakirov: ...The headscarf for the woman in Islam is not a religious symbol; it is a religious dogma. And when a girl, a woman, is convinced of the essence of the Islamic religion, she makes the decision to put on such clothing with desire and conviction. And this right should not be denied to this individual whoever she is. This right should exist, and she should be allowed to have it, I am saying again, so that we don't hurt her dignity, feelings, convictions, religion, etc.

Irina Muleshkova: I would like to ask you, is there special clothing for men, which is also worn by inner conviction?

Shakirov: No.

Muleshkova: There isn't. A second question: Are men and women equal?

Shakirov: Yes.

Muleshkova: In what sense?

Shakirov: That everyone is “equal in front of the law,” as they say.

Muleshkova: Are they only equal in front of the law?

Shakirov: Yes.

Muleshkova: There is no equality in front of God? Is this how I should understand you?

Shakirov: Of course there is. But in Islam, the difference between man and woman – there is a physiological, there is also psychological difference, and Islam defines norms for both men and women. There is such a norm in clothing, which is subject to the voluntary choice and conviction of the specific woman or girl – she herself can make a choice. When she is convinced... That is it. And I believe that right now we are not somewhere where we are judging the Islamic religion. These are things that are very deep and those who want to get to know this religion can do it. And I am saying again, the personal freedom of the individual is to choose for himself, to decide what is good, and when he is convinced [of what is good], to be given this freedom.²⁶

In this brief exchange, Shakirov, a Pomak who studied in Jordan, starts by claiming that wearing a headscarf is necessary for Islamic women and that they should have the right to choose to wear it once they have the “conviction” to live their lives in accordance with the precepts of the Koran. When questioned about whether or not men and women are equal in Islam, he becomes defensive and argues that the purpose of the commission is not to judge Islam, but to guarantee the individual rights of the girls in question, because religious freedoms are guaranteed under the Bulgarian constitution. Banning headscarves is a violation of religious rights.

For her part, Irina Muleshkova – a law professor who worked with women's NGOs for fourteen years – was no doubt well informed of the international precedents regarding

²⁶ Commission for Protection against Discrimination, *Reshenie*, No. 37, Sofia, 27 July 2006. Translation from the

headscarves. By asking Shakirov whether men and women were equal in Islam, Muleshkova was drawing attention away from the question of individual rights and toward the broader societal goal of “gender equality,” which various courts around Europe as well as the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) had mobilized to uphold other headscarf bans. In the case of *Sahin v. Turkey*,²⁷ the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg upheld the Turkish headscarf ban partially because “gender equality” was “recognized by the European Court as one of the key principles underlying the [European] Convention [on Human Rights] and a goal to be achieved by member States of the Council of Europe.” The court also invoked the *Dahlab v. Switzerland* case²⁸ and asserted that the headscarf “appeared to be imposed on women by a precept in the Qur’an that was hard to reconcile with the principle of gender equality.”²⁹ In France, the headscarf ban was also partly justified in terms of upholding gender equality.³⁰

But Shakirov’s argument disregarded this question of equality and returned in the end to the question of “choice,” using the liberal “rights” language employed by governments and activists that opposed headscarf bans in Western Europe. For instance, in a 2004 speech at the European Social Forum entitled, “Hijab: A Woman’s Right to Choose,” Salma Yaqoob emphasized the importance of free will and choice with regard to the French ban on headscarves.³¹ The motto of the British-based Assembly for the Protection of the Hijab (Pro-

Bulgarian by Tanya Todorova, the author’s Bulgarian research assistant at Bowdoin College.

²⁷ European Court Of Human Rights, *Leyla Sahin v. Turkey*. (*Application No. 44774/98*) Judgment, Strasbourg, 29 June 2004, paragraph 107.

²⁸ European Court of Human Rights, *Dahlab v. Switzerland*. (*Application No. 42393/98*, ECHR 2001-V).

²⁹ European Court Of Human Rights, *Leyla Sahin v. Turkey*. (*Application No. 44774/98*) Judgment, Strasbourg, 29 June 2004.

³⁰ John Bowen, *Why the French Don’t Like Headscarves* (Princeton, 2006), pp. 208-41; Joan W. Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, 2007), pp. 151-74.

³¹ Salma Yaqoob, “Hijab: A Woman’s Right to Choose,” lecture delivered at the European Social Forum, <http://www.naar.org.uk/newspages/041022.asp> (accessed 28 January 2007).

Hijab) also focuses on individual liberty: “Hijab: Our Freedom. Our Choice. Our Right.”³² The website includes an informational leaflet called “Hijab: Know Your Rights” which quotes the relevant passages from the European Convention on Human Rights and instructs women that: “It is important to know your rights in order to be able to uphold them.”

American NGOs such as Human Rights Watch (a corporate sponsor of Pro-Hijab), also stated publicly that the French law banning the hijab in schools violated “the rights to freedom of religion and expression,” further explaining that the law was based on the false premise that Muslim women could not choose what was in their best interests.³³ The local Bulgarian affiliate of Human Rights Watch, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, also claimed that banning Muslim women from wearing the headscarf was a violation of their constitutional right to religious freedom.³⁴ From the “pro-choice” point of view, religious freedoms are not incompatible with state commitments to uphold gender equality or, indeed, any other type of “human right,” but should be given priority and in practice tend to trump other types of “rights” that require state interventions to guarantee.³⁵

But the Bulgarian government did not agree. 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,” that is, the potential for instigating ethnic unrest. The head of the KZD, a Bulgarian Turk, supported

³² This organization was founded by the Muslim Association of Britain, but lists a broad range of corporate sponsors. The website is in French, Dutch, English and Arabic and promotes a more “orthodox” form of Islam similar to the one coming into Bulgaria from Saudi Arabia and Jordan. See www.prohijab.net (accessed 23 November 2007).

³³ Human Rights Watch, “France: Headscarf Ban Violates Religious Freedom,” <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/02/26/france7666.htm> (accessed 28 January 2007).

³⁴ Author’s interview with Dr. Krassimir Kanev, Chairman of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, in Sofia in July 2006.

³⁵ It may be that large international NGOs tend to work primarily in opposition to states and are therefore more likely to advocate for the types of rights that are less likely to require lobbying the state to pass legislation to uphold them. Since religious communities tend to be fairly autonomous and have their own international sources of funding independent of the state, in many cases it is easier to advocate for a state to merely leave its religious minorities alone

the decision, and public opinion was solidly behind it. The KZD relied on two key arguments in its written decision. The first was that Bulgarian education was “secular,” and the second was that the state had a duty to uphold women’s rights. The decision cited two paragraphs from a Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 2005 Resolution (#1464), “Women and Religion in Europe.”³⁶ 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 such as physical or biological differentiation based on or attributed to religion. They must fight against religiously motivated stereotypes of female and male roles from an early age, including in schools.³⁷

Clearly, the Bulgarian Commission understood that claiming to defend women’s rights was exactly the language that it needed to justify its decision and avoid a lawsuit in the European Court of Human Rights. Its argument may have been used to cloak underlying anxieties about the growing influence of foreign-funded Islamic NGOs. But certainly the idea of protecting women’s rights was popular and desirable to most Bulgarians, Christians and Muslims alike.

The events that followed the decision did not put the matter to rest. The UIDC consulted the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee with an idea to appeal the decision to the Constitutional Court or the ECHR. They were told that they would have had a better case if the girls filed the complaint on their own behalf.³⁸ They paid their fine and decided not to pursue the issue further. About a month later, a medical university in Plovdiv was faced with a similar situation when over 100 tuition-paying nursing students from Turkey said that they would attend school in

rather than lobbying already hostile parliament to guarantee paid parental leaves.

³⁶ Commission for Protection against Discrimination, *Reshenie* (Decision) No. 37, Sofia, 27 July 2006.

³⁷ “Women and Religion in Europe,” Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Resolution 1464 (2005), <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta05/ERES1464.htm> (accessed 30 January 2007).

Bulgaria only if they were allowed to wear their headscarves to classes. The students were trying to escape the Turkish headscarf ban, but the rector of the University decided to forgo the much-needed income and banned headscarves on campus, using the Smolyan case as a precedent. While this was happening, the Minister of Education floated the idea of legislation that would ban all religious symbols in schools, including small crosses, in order to prevent a repeat of the French headscarf affair. The idea of banning all religious symbols was met with popular outrage and led one national daily newspaper to host an internet forum entitled, “Who would ban wearing a cross in a Christian country?”³⁹

Although no legislation was formally passed, there was a consensus that there would be some sort of official government policy regarding religious symbols in schools. There was also a verbal order which was allegedly given by the Minister of Education to the regional inspectorate of Education in Smolyan advising all schools in the Smolyan *oblast* that headscarves should not be worn to classes, and that any schools found violating this policy would be subject to sanctions. This verbal order applied to all schools, even those without a formal uniform requirement. Any girls wishing to wear headscarves and to continue their education could do so by distance learning, where they studied at home and only came to the school for the exams. This new policy had immediate impacts in the Rhodopi in the Smolyan region where there was already a high concentration of girls wearing the headscarf. Local school directors reluctantly enforced the new requirements.

As a result of the new policy, there were several new complaints filed with the anti-discrimination commission, this time by the girls and their families. These complaints were

³⁸ Author's interview with Dr. Krassimir Kanev, President of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, March 2007.

³⁹ Sega Internet Izdanie, “Koi zabranyava noseneto na krast v hristiyanska darzhava?” 31 August 2006, www.segabg.com (accessed 19 September 2006).

made against the advice of the Chief Mufti's office and the regional Muftiship in Smolyan, who feared that the new cases would be struck down once again, hastening the need for legislation banning the headscarf altogether.⁴⁰ But in interviews I conducted with key Muslim leaders in March 2007, it appeared that the Pomak religious leaders' position on the headscarf was hardening and that they were becoming increasingly frustrated and critical of mainstream Bulgarian society.

Their arguments seemed to revolve around two seemingly contradictory points: that headscarves were not merely a symbol but a religious dogma and alternatively that headscarves should be treated like a fashion. On the first point, the regional Mufti of Smolyan, Hairaddin Hatim, explained, "The headscarf is not a symbol like a cross. A Christian woman chooses to wear the cross, but it is not a sin before God if she does not."⁴¹ It is mandatory for a woman who embraces Islam to wear the headscarf. It is not a symbol, it is religious dogma." Hatim argued that headscarves did not simply allow women to display their faith, but they were part of a personal relationship with Allah. Banning the headscarf was thus a fundamental violation of religious rights because it prevented women from freely practicing their religion by doing something that hurt no one else.

On this point, he was particularly adamant, claiming that the headscarves were just a piece of clothing like any other piece of clothing. "It would be like the government deciding to outlaw Chanel, and mandating that all people now have to wear Armani. Would it be fair to the people who prefer the fashion of Chanel to make them wear Armani?" This question of fashion inevitably led to a discussion of miniskirts and the typical Bulgarian woman's preference for

⁴⁰ This point and those in the following paragraphs are drawn from the author's interview with Hairaddin Hatim, Regional Mufti of Smolyan in Smolyan in March 2007.

provocative dress. “Personally, I do not like women who wear short skirts or when I see a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl walking around almost naked. It is offensive to me, but there is nothing I can say about it. How can that be allowed and not a headscarf? Why is a naked woman less offensive than a dressed one?”

In a separate conversation, Arif Abdullah, the president of the UIDC, would also invoke the impropriety of miniskirts in his defense of the headscarf. “You see girls on the streets with skirts up to here,” he explained, placing the side of his right hand at the top of his thigh. “Many people find it inappropriate, but there are no regulations banning short skirts in schools. Go to any secondary school without a uniform and see how the girls are dressed. They can choose their own clothes, so why can they not choose to dress in a modest way?” In an earlier interview, the deputy chief mufti, Vedat Ahmed, had also asked me if headscarves would be banned if popular singers and movie actresses starting wearing them. “Girls want to follow the fashion. Why can’t the headscarf be seen as another fashion?”⁴²

The interesting thing about these arguments was the contradiction inherent in asking why headscarves cannot be treated as another fashion while at the same time claiming that they are mandatory for Muslim women. There is no other fashionable piece of clothing in Bulgaria that would be considered mandatory for any man or woman, and certainly the wearing of miniskirts was not imposed on women by the secular authorities. But to the leaders of the UIDC and the other local clergy, the primary concern was with the idea of “choice”: a woman’s right to embrace a form of their religion in which the appropriate “fashion” is set by spiritual leaders with links to Saudi Arabia rather than by French or Italian designers based in Paris or Milan.

⁴¹ This is an interesting distinction and points out why the cross is disanalogous to the headscarf, while the Jewish kippah or the Sikh turban is not.

⁴² Author’s interview with Vedat Ahmed, Deputy Chief Mufti of all Bulgarian Muslim, August 2006.

Conclusion

What is clear from these debates and the discourses about women's ability to choose how they want to dress is that women's fashion had ceased to be only about individual preferences for certain styles. Instead, ideological allegiances to "pure" Islam, to traditional Bulgarian Islam, or to Orthodox Christianity were being inscribed into mere pieces of cloth. Rather than dealing directly with the challenges of maintaining tolerance in a multi-cultural and multi-religious society, both sides began waging a proxy battle through the debate about women's bodies and whether or not they should be exposed. What was most interesting in these debates in Bulgaria was the way in which Muslim women were not only being told that they must adopt a "positive" religious symbol (the headscarf), but also that they must reject a negative symbol of the corrupt and overly-permissive mainstream Bulgarian society (the miniskirt).

As of June 2007, the number of young women in Bulgaria wearing full *hijab* continued to increase even as the government seemed determined to outlaw religious symbols in schools. Whatever happens in the end, there is no doubt that the headscarf "affair" in this new EU member state opened yet another front in the ongoing struggle to combine Western tolerance and religious pluralism with the increasingly orthodox "corrections" to historically moderate forms of European Islam. And Bulgaria, which has always been a crossroads between East and West, a place where Islam and Christianity have co-existed in relative peace for centuries, will be an important testing ground for these issues, and deserves much closer attention that it has hitherto been afforded.