

# MOVEMENTS FOR ISLAMIC REVIVAL AND ETHNIC CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG RURAL BULGARIAN MUSLIMS IN THE POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD

*An NCEEER Working Paper by*

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## **Executive Summary**

Based on the author's NCEEER-funded fieldwork in 2012-2013 in Bulgaria, this working paper discusses and compares two contemporary social movements among Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks): an Islamic revival movement and a movement for ethnic consciousness. I describe the processes -- repression of Islamic practice and identity, Christian hegemony and Islamophobia -- that have given impetus for religious and ethnic revival. Both movements are grassroots, glocal political movements. Despite Bulgaria's media representation of Pomaks as a passive, homogenous population ripe for "conversion" to radical Islamic sects due to their isolation and backwardness, today native Pomak intellectuals are engaged in religious and ethnic self-determination, and are engaging their communities through local, live events and online networking in social media.

## **Introduction**

While Bulgaria's media represent Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks) as a passive, homogenous population ripe for "conversion" to radical Islamic sects (imported from Saudi Arabia) due to their isolation and backwardness, today native Pomak intellectuals are doing the difficult work of self-determination in terms of religion, culture, and ethnicity. These processes – religious revival and development of ethnic consciousness – reverse the trend of ingrained habits, evolved over many generations, of Pomak communities either to choose a primarily local (village) identity to preserve tradition and identity, or to assimilate into the higher status mainstream. For a century, the culture and education system in which they live has taught them that they are not different than the surrounding majority: in Bulgaria, Pomaks are viewed as Bulgarians.

In the context of this century-long climate of assimilation and repression, Pomaks are defining their identity using creative, unofficial means: through self-promoted exhibits, self-published books, and self-organized performances run by self-taught intellectuals. Religious leaders, including those not sponsored by the official Islamic network, are activating revival of Islamic belief through classes, lectures, and performances. Both the religious reconstruction movement and the ethno-religious identity movement are now using online social media to create networks, debate important topics, organize and memorialize events, educate constituents, and attract new members. New cultural connections and new channels of communication have allowed not only official leaders and educated intellectuals but also unofficial leaders and self-taught individuals to pursue their own knowledge and interests. Islam has become more egalitarian and open; people are choosing to determine their own identities in a “glocal” society - both linked globally, and also heavily oriented toward local tradition, economy, and community.

These two self-driven movements –the Pomak ethno-religious identity movement and the Islamic revival or Islamic piety movement -- share some constituents, attend some of each other’s events, and connect on social media, but by and large do not overlap in their goals. Leaders of Islamic revival adhere to the Islamic ideal of unity in the *ummah* [Islamic community] and most are against what they consider nationalistic movements. Nonetheless, where religions leaders deem events to have a Muslim character or where events support and promote an Islamic identity, they do participate actively. For their part, leaders of the Pomak identity movement maintain connections with Islamic leaders and support their activities. At this point, participants of these movements do not comprise a majority of the Bulgarian Muslim population in an given area, but interest is growing, in part due to widespread disillusionment with the Bulgarian government, the difficult economic situation, rampant discrimination, desire for a corrected historical record, and desire for a personal relationship to Islam. Muslims are not “being converted” to Islam/radical Islam, but rather are both embracing their much-maligned heritage and also choosing to understand something new (for them) about that heritage.

In this paper, drawing on five and a half months of ethnographic fieldwork in Bulgaria in 2012-13, I describe that heritage and the Islamic and ethnic revival movements that have drawn on it and also moved away from it. <sup>1</sup>

## **Islamic Heritage in Bulgaria**

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by National Council for East European and Eurasian Research (NCEEER), American Councils for International Education (ACTR/ACCELS), and University of Colorado. During the research period I studied intensively two large village communities (Draginovo and Breznitsa) and spent between one-half day and five days in 20 others (villages of Erma Reka, Startsevo, Debren, Pletena, Bukovo, Lazhnitsa, Pashovi, Grashevo, Trigrad, Ribnovo, Dubnitsa, Yakoruda, and Varbina, and cities of Nedelino, Kostandovo, Velingrad, Smolyan, Madan, Rudozem, and Chepintsi.), all located in South West/South Central Bulgaria in traditionally Bulgarian Muslim territory. I also visited villages and cities with significant Pomak populations in Turkey and Greece. I attended cultural events and conducted interviews with local people, including cultural, political, and religious intelligentsia (unofficial and official cultural leaders), members of local folklore performing groups, and people I met randomly or was introduced to.

Islamic heritage in Bulgaria is characterized by syncretism (Norris 1993, 265; Sugar 1977, 53-54). Mary Neuburger points out that under the Ottomans cultural lines were blurred due to intermarriage, intermixing, as well as "hybridized coexistence": "neither Muslim nor Christian beliefs and rites were necessarily brought into strict conformity with the dogmas and rituals of established religious authorities" (Neuburger 2004, 28). Both belief systems were based upon pre-existing folk practices and beliefs that focused on ensuring fertility and abundance of people, land, and animals. Oral culture predominated, and there was very little "follow-up" instruction in Islamic practices and doctrine among the converted (Norris 1993, 264).

In post-Ottoman Bulgaria, Christianization campaigns of 1912 and 1942, and the communist "Rebirth processes" of the 1950s through 1980s, weakened the public practice of religion and performance of religious identity. The "Rebirth process" in particular included campaigns against Muslim dress, religious practice, and use of Turkish language. Men were coerced into giving up the fez and the turban, and women could only wear headscarves and *shalvari* in the privacy of their homes. All signs of religiosity had to be hidden. Those who wished to have a livelihood in communist society had to submit to assimilation: for example, as part of the agricultural collectivization campaign, Muslims were expected to raise pigs along with everyone else. Names of Bulgarian Muslims were forcibly changed to non-Muslim ones; those who resisted were sent to prison. Many mosques were forced to close; since the Bulgarian Constitution maintained a clause about religious freedom, each region had one open mosque which, theoretically, inhabitants could attend, but often attendance was inconvenient at best. People who were observed using Turkish language were punished, Muslim gravestones and entire graveyards were destroyed, and religious books in Turkish and Arabic had to be hidden to avoid confiscation. Party members perceived Islamic practice as being superstitious, backward

and potentially “unhealthy” to Bulgarian socialist society, due to their fears that Muslims were prone to Islamic fundamentalism and/or loyalty to Turkey, and might harbor desires for eventual territorial autonomy and secession. Certainly there was also the underlying sense that the presence of Muslim culture brought Bulgaria back into the Ottoman sphere of influence and away from Western Europe, which the Communists saw as the appropriate model for progress and secularization (Neuburger 2004, 68-72; Rice 1994, 180-81; author’s fieldwork interviews).

As a result of these coercive and highly repressive state policies, Muslims undertook a variety of strategies for survival and to maintain dignity, tradition, and belief. During successive waves during the twentieth century, many Muslims, whether they considered themselves Turkish or not, emigrated to Turkey. For those who stayed in Bulgaria, the choice was to assimilate or become secretive about religious matters. Islamic practice went underground, into the private realm of the home, the family and trusted friends. The official Muslim clergy generally served the interests of the state, but many people made use of unofficial Muslim leaders, whose practice was kept secret from government official. According to one Communist party estimate in 1958, there were 1,860 “official” hodjas in Bulgaria, but thousands of unofficial hodjas working in villages (Neuburger 2004, 71).

This lapse into survival mode or crypto-mode affected the level of knowledge of Islam, and hampered its transmission. Islamic literacy (the ability to read the Qur’an and Hadiths) did not grow as was the trend in other Islamic societies during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (such as Turkey post-1949 or Egypt); rather, it diminished or was wiped out. As Kristin Ghodsee has described the situation, Islam in socialist Bulgaria, like Islam in Soviet Central Asia, “remained part of the fabric of everyday cultures, rather than an objectified system of beliefs distinguishable from local custom” (2010, 14).

After the fall of socialism in November, 1989, Muslims fought for and received the right to change their names back to their Muslim names, and many did so. Mosques were gradually restored or rebuilt, and new mosques were built. The project of rebuilding Islam, of making it a chosen practice with free, widespread access to sacred texts, began. As Ghodsee has characterized it, Islam in Bulgaria is extremely heterogeneous, and certainly there has been no unanimous movement for reconstructing Islam (2010, 14). Rather, even in a single village or town one can perceive multiple viewpoints and competing influences. And, throughout this process of objectification, the traditional Islam of local embodied practices<sup>2</sup> remains part of the background, chosen to varying degrees by individuals, never rejected wholesale, but sometimes given a secondary role and/or practiced only selectively.

In interviews, Bulgarian Islamic activist leaders said that their mission was both made harder and also more urgent by the prevailing Islamophobic climate in Bulgaria, which entered the mainstream culture as a discourse especially following September 11, 2001. The government and media are the main perpetrators of this discourse.

### **Islamophobia, Christian Hegemony, and Bulgarian “Tolerance”**

The national level of tolerance of ethnic difference has fluctuated throughout the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, but treatment of Muslims has never been exemplary, despite Bulgaria’s cultivating a reputation of egalitarianism post-1989. In the period of EU accession and beyond, Bulgaria has walked a thin line as it both fulfills EU dictates regarding minorities’ rights, including the rights of the Muslim minorities, and also continues to develop nationalist ideological objectives, including promotion of the association between

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<sup>2</sup> Ghodsee, following Asad, defines traditional Islam as not a “fixed and stagnant ritualistic practice of the faith but rather one where the legitimacy of the interpretations of Islamic belief and practice is rooted in local histories.”(2004, 17).

Bulgarianness and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. In the Bulgarian case questions of Orientalism, Europeanness, and tolerance are brought to the fore in complex, and often contradictory, fashion.

The myth of Islam as a backward, anti-European force within Bulgaria has a long history, dating back to post-Ottoman independence (Neuburger 2004). The contemporary incarnation of this myth specifies that post-communist Islamic revival has been imported from abroad, through the efforts of Arab organizations with ties to terrorism. At present in 2014, news reports constantly rekindle fears that Islam's flourishing or growth is synonymous with importation of foreign, radical, violent ideologies. They imply that Islam is not Bulgarian and not European, and its foreign-imported extremism is not compatible with Bulgarian and European values.

Paradoxically in this context of widespread Islamophobia, the rhetoric of many post-communist Bulgarian political leaders has emphasized the nation's ethnic and religious "tolerance" and support of minorities. The "Bulgarian ethnic model" is supposedly Bulgaria's unique approach, distinguishing it from former Yugoslavia where the post-communist transition ended in wars along ethnic-religious lines (Rechel 2007). Bulgaria has indeed fulfilled the demands of the EU in protecting minority rights.<sup>3</sup> Yet implementation has lagged behind legislation: discrimination against Roma, Bulgarian Muslim, and Turkish Muslim minorities is widespread and goes unacknowledged by government leaders. In the case of the Bulgarian-speaking Muslims (Pomaks), the Bulgarian government still has not recognized them as a minority, due to the widespread belief that they are Bulgarians who were forcibly Islamicized (Rechel 2008, 2007). While the Bulgarian constitution, adopted in 1991, guarantees the right to religious freedom, it gives priority to Orthodox Christianity, declaring it to be "the traditional religion in the Republic of Bulgaria" (Bulgaria 1991). Government institutions and mainstream culture treat the Bulgarian Orthodox Church as the "embodiment of national values"

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<sup>3</sup> For example, by adopting the Law on Protection against Discrimination in 2003.

(Kalkandjieva 2014, 62). Thus, as in much of Europe, secularism in Bulgaria is “Judeo-Christian” in character: Christianity is assumed to be the foundation of society’s values, morals and culture. This brand of secularism, involving a deep-seated pattern of Christian hegemony, is not an anomaly in Europe, but goes hand in hand with being Western and democratic (Hurd 2008, 5-6).

In Bulgaria today the systemic hegemony may be seen in cultural phenomena such as the building of churches in Muslim villages, the naming of schools in Muslim villages (as well as the villages themselves) after Christian saints (most prominently, St. Cyril and Methodius), the ubiquitous portraits of Christian saints on the walls of schools and government offices, the national celebration (since 1992) of a “Day of the Bulgarian Awakeners,” Nov. 1, devoted to national leaders (including Orthodox monks or clerics) who fought against the Ottoman presence and for the development of a Bulgarian national consciousness. For the holiday all schools hold assemblies at which students perform poems and other works celebrating these figures. At the many mainstream folk music, dance and national costume festivals, officials praise the preservation and transmission of “Bulgarianness,” and indigenous expressions of Pomak /Muslim culture are welcome only when they are viewed as representations of “ancient Bulgarian folklore.”

In more openly sinister fashion, Islamophobia has taken the form of persecution of Bulgarian Islamic leaders. In September 2012, 13 imams were arrested and charged in Pazardjik District Court with spreading radical Islam in Bulgaria. The trial against them came to a close March 19, 2014: all thirteen were convicted of preaching antidemocratic ideology and sowing religious hate. The prosecution maintained they spread literature with a Salafist ideology, met with foreign Wahhabi representatives, and took a firm line on religious questions in the

community (for example, insisting on conformity with Islamic burial rites and refusing to bury Muslims with non-Muslim names). The trial has been decried by Bulgarian Muslim leaders and other observers as an attempt to discredit Islamic leaders, scare Muslims, and divide Muslims and Christians in the country (mediapool.bg 2014; Metodieva 2014; Girginova 2014).

Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji, called as a witness for the trial, said, "there is no such concept as radical Islam. The Shar'iah means law; in Bulgaria there is law. Salafism does not mean anything frightening or dangerous, it is purely and simply a current [within Islam]" (News.bg 4 July 2013). In making reference to Shar'iah and mentioning that Bulgaria's Muslims follow Bulgaria's law, Hadji countered one of the common fears of Europeans about Muslims: that they respect Shar'iah law more than democracy (van Dijk and Bartels 2012, 468). He also showed his own tolerance and respect for Salafism, one of the unofficial currents in Bulgaria today.

The trial is not the first such instance of Muslim persecution. Hasan Ademov, a representative of parliament from the Movement for Rights and Freedom party, defended the Bulgarian practice of Islam from accusations of radicalism in 2010: "Muslim society has many times affirmed that traditional Islam is not accepting of radicalism. Every attempt at vague, unproven accusations of fundamentalism creates a feeling of alarm in Bulgaria and a climate unsafe for unification. It creates the sense that in this country Muslims are treated as foreigners in their own homeland" (mediapool.bg 2014).

This Islamophobic climate is made worse by the media, in particular nationalist cable television stations such as SKAT and Alfa, who search for and publish stories that can be construed as evidence of Islamic radicalism. In one televised report in fall of 2012, for example, a SKAT journalist asked students in an Islamic high school whether they were taught the

meaning of *jihad*, and when they answered in the affirmative, she offered this as proof that they were radical Islamists. Journalistic accounts have asserted that the economic poverty and historic isolation of local populations predisposes them to acceptance of Wahhabi Islam; news articles have stated that whole villages are being ‘converted’ by force (Deliso 2007; Bulgaria News Agency 2009).

According to multiple verbal accounts, discrimination is widespread and goes unacknowledged by government leaders. Hate crimes (often graffiti and vandalism of mosques) and anti-Islamic protests occur frequently (e.g. Vesti.bg 2011; Blitz 2013; Plovdiv24.bg. 2014). The populist-nationalist political party Ataka, founded in 2005, which uses anti-Muslim rhetoric, has emerged as one of the four most powerful players in the Bulgarian political scene (Ghodsee 2008).

### **Muslim Reactions**

The transitions to democracy and EU membership have offered many benefits to Muslims in Bulgaria, but also many challenges. Most prominently, since 1989 Muslims have benefited from freedom of religion and the right to return their Turkic-Arabic names. Furthermore, Muslims made use of Bulgaria’s membership in the Council of Europe (since 1992) to address perceived violations of secularist principles in Bulgaria. Both sides of a contested case regarding the appointment of the Chief Mufti in 1992 appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, and both won their cases: two political parties in the Bulgarian government were judged to have inappropriately influenced religious affairs (Merdjanova 2013; Terziev 2004).

Globalization has been both a difficult reality to negotiate and also beneficial for Bulgarian Muslims. Muslims living within a context of Western commercial and popular

cultures have needed to make difficult choices about their own and their children's dress, livelihood, education, and mores. Meanwhile, globalization and mass communication facilitate a stronger connection to the global *ummah* and access to Islamic resources from abroad. This aspect of globalization has resulted in a significant fragmentation of religious authorities within Bulgaria (Merdjanova 2013). The state-sanctioned hierarchy of official religion comprises one set of authorities, while other, non-traditional authorities have the opportunity to cultivate their own power through foreign connections and by networking both in person and on social media.

Rampant Islamophobia, especially after September 11, 2001, has been one of the significant challenges for Bulgarian Muslims; responses have varied widely, including, on the one hand, some Muslims converting to Christianity,<sup>4</sup> and young people re-taking Christian names to avoid identification as Muslims. Some Muslims, sensitive to the possibility that their words will be misconstrued, taken out of context, misreported, or falsified, have withdrawn into their communities, refusing to speak with outsiders. This climate affected my work in Bulgaria: some pious Muslims were reluctant or unwilling to speak with me (they accused me of “working for somebody”) and several refused to allow me to record conversations (although I was able to take notes). Some gave me glib answers to questions pertaining to affiliations with foreign Islamic organizations, use of donations from foreign Islamic organizations to build mosques and sponsor programs, etc.

Besides those turning away from their heritage or turning inward to their communities, there are many Bulgarian Muslims who are seeking either more active Islamic practice or cultural expression of their heritage. Islamic piety has become a chosen lifestyle in Bulgarian Muslims towns and villages, with a small but significant minority choosing a life centered on

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular the claims of Father Boyan Saraev to have converted “thousands” of Bulgarian Muslims to Christianity through his organization St. John the Baptist Movement for Christianity and Progress. Bairiamova 2000.

Islam.

### **Islamic Revival Movement**

The Bulgarian media would have the public believe that many of Bulgarian Muslim communities have embraced fundamentalist Islam wholesale, and that foreign Islamic organizations are paying local women to wear headscarves and are working to wash the brains of the younger generation. This is far from the truth in the Muslim communities I visited.<sup>5</sup> I observed that those who participated in religious events were genuine believers who had chosen to deepen their practice and increase their knowledge of their religion. Piety became part of their local identity; they were known for it, and were proud of this identity. While a few women in select communities complained to me of peer pressure to wear headscarves, the choice to practice Islamic piety was unequivocally viewed as a personal matter, driven by inner conviction.

This vision of Islamic piety as a personal choice is new. Rather than comprising a set of community standards that one is born into, instead Islam is chosen and transmitted horizontally, among social equals. The social groupings that it forms are no longer necessarily synonymous with family or local groups, but are constituted by common interests and beliefs (Göle 2011, 98-99).

In most communities, Islam and Islamic piety are generally well regarded and may even be a source of prestige (Ivanova 2011). Still, the number of regular participants in religious events is fairly small; I estimate the rate of visible, active participation (regular attendance of mosque or classes) to be between 2 and 10% of the population in any given village (bearing in mind that in most communities women do not regularly attend mosque). In surveys of 864

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<sup>5</sup> Ivanova 2012 also confirms that it is almost certainly not true.

Muslims<sup>6</sup> conducted in 2011 by a team from New Bulgarian University, 32.2 percent of Pomaks, called themselves “deeply religious,” and 11.5 percent said they believe there is only one true religion (another 20 percent say there is only one true religion but admit certain basic truths in the other world religions).

These numbers are growing: organized activities attract more and more participants. For example, in Muslim villages there are programs for children to study Islam and the Qur’an after school and during the summer. The Grand Mufti’s office counted 700 such courses in 2014, while in 2005 there were fewer than 250 (Grand Mufti 2014). These classes put on periodic *hatim dua* events, which are demonstrations of students’ reciting of passages from the Qur’an in Arabic, singing of religious songs, reciting of religious poetry, and performance of skits demonstrating religious principles. The classes I observed involve the painstaking study of Arabic script and phonetics, the conventions of Qur’an reading in Arabic (which is considered a sacred activity), and memorized sayings, poems, and plays in Bulgarian. These educational activities are usually funded (at a low rate – often the teachers are simply older students) by the office of the Grand Mufti.

Although funding for Islamic revival in Bulgaria has come from Middle Eastern sources, is it not the case that Islam is being imported wholesale from abroad. Funds for Islamic revival have come from Arab organizations through locally registered businesses and charities (Ghodsee 2010: 142, 155), and many of the younger generation of Bulgarian Islamic teachers studied in Saudi Arabia and /or Jordan (Ghodsee 2010: 151, 153). But while foreign (in contemporary Bulgarian parlance, ‘Arab’) influences may indeed be felt in Bulgarian Muslim villages, the forms of revival that are currently being practiced are diverse outgrowths of the processes of

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<sup>6</sup> Muslims comprise 10 percent of Bulgaria’s population (577,139 out of total population of 5,758,301). Natsionalen statisticheski institut, 2011; the exact population of Bulgarian-speaking Muslims is not known, but estimates put it at 200,000-300,000 (Neuburger 2004, 2-3; Todorova 1997, 70-71; Zelengora 2013).

post-communist Islamic reconstruction. Rather than being simply implanted, Islam has evolved *in situ*, and today's Bulgarian Islam is richly multi-voiced.

The leaders of Islam's reconstruction among Bulgaria's Muslims today tend to be either middle aged people whose families were religious and were repressed during the Communist era, or younger people, now in their 30s and 40s, who came of age soon after the repressions were lifted, and so were able to take advantage of increased opportunities to study Islamic texts. Some of them studied Islamic theology in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, or Turkey; others received their education in Bulgaria, at the theological high schools or college.<sup>7</sup> As during the communist era, community religious leaders may be divided into those with official and unofficial status: the Grand Muftiate of Bulgaria employs some, while others are paid by donations from constituents and foreign partners. However, there is not a firm dividing line in practice; affiliations are somewhat fluid and situational. Still, there are significant tensions between the official and unofficial cadres, and often these fall along generational lines, with the official cadres often being associated with the older generation.

As an example of diversity in Islamic leadership, we may consider two unofficial village Islamic leaders who occupy opposite ends of an imaginary spectrum in the "new Islam."<sup>8</sup> A middle-aged female leader of Islamic courses for women in a large village is fond of emphasizing choice and a self-driven journey; in her classes she welcomes a multiplicity of sources and authorities. By contrast, a nearly-40-year-old imam in a small mountaintop village highlights the self-contradictory elements of the old Islam, and advocates a simplified and purified practice based upon authenticated sources from the divine revelations of the Prophet or

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<sup>7</sup> In Shumen the high school was first open 1922-1949 and reopened in 1990, and in Momchilgrad, the high school was opened 1991 for boys, 2001 for girls. The High Islamic Institute in Sofia opened in 1998.

<sup>8</sup> See expanded discussion of these two leaders in Olson, "The Multiple Voices of Bulgaria's Unofficial Islamic Leaders," *Negotiating Islam(s): State, Religion and Religiosity in Contemporary Balkans*, Edited by Arolda Elbasani (EUI) and Olivier Roy (EUI), under review.

from those close to the Prophet – thus, taking a Salafist approach to Hanafi Islam. He emphasizes correctness of action as a measure of belief (orthodoxy), while his counterpart is tolerant of differences within Islam. Yet both would be termed proponents of ‘Arab Islam’, or ‘new Islam’ by some Muslim neighbours, and likely, ‘Islamic fundamentalists’, or proponents of ‘radical Islam’ by surrounding Bulgarians. Within those labels, it is important to see how underlying philosophies, approaches to sacred textual traditions, generational belonging, and personal styles yield divergent approaches within Bulgarian Islam.

These two teachers are united by their desire to describe and enact a reality-based value system for their constituents. They speak of, perform and embody their own vision of Islamic values so as to allow their students, adult and young adult Bulgarian Muslims, to make informed choices in the context of a chaotic world. They wish to make sure that Muslims do not take the path of least resistance dictated by a cultural climate inhospitable to Islam. In order to truly be a Muslim, they teach, one must carve out one’s individual path with pride in one’s heritage, belief, and lifestyle choices. Such goals in religious leaders may be typical of a period of social upheaval and transition, and are characteristic of religious revival with an orientation towards piety.

The notion of piety places emphasis squarely within the personal realm of the believer. Yet the practice of piety, too, is political work. As the work of Saba Mahmood has shown, the performance of piety involves the exercise of agency: "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms" (2005, 15). The personal, embodied areas of life that piety occupies are often considered separate from the realm of politics, but in fact they *are* political (2005, 34-35).

## **Bards and Blogs: Participatory Politics of Contemporary Bulgarian Islam**

To the extent that it is self chosen, and also oriented towards broader acceptance, visibility, and contemporary viability of Islam, Bulgarian Islamic revival is a grassroots political movement. It is Islamist, or tending to Islamism, in that it seeks Islamic solutions to political, economic, and cultural stresses of modern life (Martin and Barzegar 2010, 2). Those solutions are not the violent ones repeated continually in the press under the heading of Islamism; nor are they necessarily the overtly political ones of, for example, voting. Instead, these are lifestyle choices that represent a commitment to Islam (Emmerson 2010, 28 -29).

Who is choosing a commitment to Islam in Bulgaria today? Among those who did not grow up with a religious parent (i.e. no direct transmission), some are initially drawn by curiosity due to their inherited consciousness of being Muslim. Even today, many people in insular village communities lack specific or definitive knowledge about Islam or Islamic rites and prohibitions; yet they grow up with an undeniable feeling and consciousness of being Muslim. Drawing upon this feeling, local Imams and other teachers work to bring a spark of desire for knowledge. The spark is transmitted not only directly, intentionally, from teacher to student, but also indirectly, socially, among members of the same generation: through such face to face means as everyday conversation, and through the online sharing of videos, songs, blogs, and text/image combinations (memes) on social media. On the World Wide Web, believers and seekers debate Islamic philosophy and practices as well as current events and politics in blogs and discussion forums with thousands of participants. Believers actively seek material and pass this material among friends both online and in person (for example, I witnessed a guest bring a url of a Bosnian video, scrawled on paper, to hosts in a Muslim village home), making this a glocal (both global and local) phenomenon. This modern Islam, then, is not only multi-voiced but also

egalitarian, based heavily on the tastes and interests of grassroots constituents.

Using their computers or smart phones, Bulgarian Muslim villagers share on social media videos not only of their own local folk groups and Bulgarian pop singers, but also “*iliah*” sacred songs in Turkish or Bosnian. Like the pop videos, these religious music videos are made by professional groups and have extremely high performance values. Usually the visuals reinforce the spiritual values that are meant to be conveyed; often they are posted with Bulgarian subtitles. One video, for example, features close up, profile and group shots of the impeccably coifed young male members of the group “*Rejjan*” choir of Sarajevo, Bosnia, singing a lush instrumental and vocal arrangement of a newly composed *iliah* in Bosnian about Ramadan. In the video, shot in the halls of a historic Sarajevo building, the singers never look directly into the camera and never smile, but look away, slightly downwards or upwards, as if to suggest that they are engaged in deep spiritual meditation (Hor “*Rejjan*” 2007). The musical styling (including the *hijaz* scale, melismas and melodic contours) is suggestive of Ottoman influences while at the same time relying heavily on an electronic pop sound. As of August 2014 the video has more than one million hits; the version with Bulgarian subtitles has more than 2,000 views.

At community events such as religious holidays or *hatim dua* recitals, religious leaders engage Bulgarian professional musicians to perform and clergy and unofficial religious leaders to speak – not only in mosques but also in public spaces such as village squares and government-controlled auditoriums (“*chitalishte*”). Such events abounded during April, which is celebrated as the month of the prophet Mohammed’s birth. In 2012-13 one musical group in particular, Vest [News], played at most Islamic religious events in Southern Bulgaria. They play a new (for Bulgaria) genre of music: religious folk-rock, using synthesizer and an Ottoman lute (*saz*). The lyrics, sung in Bulgarian, are simplistic and repetitive. Their style is very different than that of

the Bosnian iliahi choirs: the sound is much closer to rock than to Orientalist folk, the vocals are not melismatic and tend to use Western, not Arabic/Oriental musical modes. Vest's musicians include the former and current Imams of the town of Madan, one of the centers of the Bulgarian Islamic piety movement. For now, the Islamic folk-rock phenomenon has not caught on: currently, Vest has no imitators, and their videos are not actively shared on social media. To be sure, the Bosnian iliahi are more musically distinct within a European context, and the genre has a longer history of being developed: it began to be popularized through media and organized concerts in 1989-90, when Bosnian leaders used it for political purposes to encourage Bosnians to embrace their heritage (Lausevic 1996). In Bulgaria the spreading of iliahi has not been organized in top-down fashion; instead, its popularity is purely a grassroots phenomenon.

Let us Get to Know Islam (Da opoznaem Islyama), a "closed" forum (i.e. an applicant must be accepted by the group's administrators) on Facebook with nearly 12,000 members as of August, 2014 often features postings regarding interpretation of Islamic practice and doctrine, as well as religious, cultural and political videos and memes (although memes are controlled by the administrators so that they do not clog up the list; the emphasis is on thoughtful and informative debate). The participants are active and there is discussion of most every posting, often with 20-40 comments and sometimes 200 and more. Lay members post questions about aspects of Islam they want to understand better, and more authoritative posters, such as Ali Hayraddin, a former mufti and one of the 13 imams recently convicted of anti-Bulgarian activity, answer these posts or initiate discussions of their own on points of Islamic doctrine. Recent subjects of discussion included the question whether it is permitted for Muslims to marry minor girls; how men should dress for mosque and how imams should dress; what are the rules for divorce in Islam and how have these changed over the centuries; what is and should be the role of Wahhabism in world

politics; Islamic sects and infighting within Islam; how to practice Kurban (sacrifice) as a vegetarian; whether Muslims should participate in Bulgarian holidays such as Baba Marta (on which Bulgarians wear “martenitsi,” symbols made of red and white thread, to celebrate the beginning of spring). With each of these discussions multiple opinions were communicated; even if there was a majority opinion, often at least one or two minority opinions were expressed.

One discussion initiated in August 2014 by a layperson asked whether group members thought the five-times-daily *namaz* prayer was worthwhile in modern life, and whether doing it simply as a formality would make one a better person or bring one closer to God. A robust discussion ensued, with more than 200 comments from 27 participants, composed of 19 men and 8 women, and including at least two Imams. Former mufti Hayraddin told the questioner that the five-times-daily prayer practice should be performed not as a formality, but as a true prayer, communicating with God; he also cited several passages from the Qur’an. Later in the discussion, a female poster, who identified herself on Facebook as having received a degree from the University of National and World Economy in Sofia in 2011, quoted Hayraddin and added a pronouncement of a traditional modest Muslim stance, “And still Allah knows best, we are not the ones who should judge anything.”<sup>9</sup> Most of the participants, far from refraining to pronounce judgment on the issue, offered their own opinions and experiences freely.

Like these two posters, many listed their residence as within Bulgaria and were well-educated, judging by their articulate self-expression and use of Standard Literary Bulgarian; at least one person hailed from Greece and wrote Standard Literary Bulgarian in Latin characters (suggesting he had lived or traveled in Bulgaria). One poster listed his residence as Bulgaria, but did not show a full command of written Literary Bulgarian: he did not observe proper word divisions and used no punctuation, and on top of this tended towards flaming. This poster’s

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<sup>9</sup> “И все пак Аллах знае най-добре, не сме ние, които трябва да съдим за каквото и да е.”

grammar and “tone” were commented on by two other participants (he was asked to learn grammar and adopt a tone better befitting of a Muslim), suggesting the educational standards of the list are high.

By setting tolerant and respectful standards for discussion, by creating a public space in which women and people of various social groups and different levels of Islamic knowledge participate as equal partners in discussion, the group is performing a newly articulate and participatory version of Islam that hearkens back to the ethical roots of the religion. Islam is by its very nature egalitarian: each believer is equal before God, although the social structure of Islamic communities has historically been patriarchal and hierarchical (Barlas 2002). Debate, with rules and customs about proper expression of views, has traditionally been part of Islamic practice. One may see this today in the example of the Al Jazeera network of Qatar, which features vigorous debates between Muslim and non-Muslim public figures (Martin and Barzegar 2010, 7-8). In Bulgaria as in many parts of the world today, the grassroots practice of Islam embraces and encourages believers’ own activism and agency.

The revival practices named above are, at their core, political. When leaders offer quasi-pop versions of Islamic music to constituents, it is as if they are saying, ‘Listen to something Islamic rather than to the harmful and decadent pop music produced by Bulgarian producers.’ The critique of Westernized Bulgarian pop music was something I heard multiple times from Islamic leaders, although a search of many young believers’ Facebook pages revealed that they were not as likely to reject it out of hand. Instead, they were more likely to include in their “likes” both Islamic and non-Islamic pop music selections. What is important here is not strict adherence to a doctrine, but claiming and performing a religious identity, even if that identity is conceived in terms of diverse influences. When multiple Islamic voices engage in public debate

over contemporary social practices and phenomena (such as weddings, holidays, or divorce), they do so *as Muslims*. If they live in Bulgaria, by this practice they are defining themselves and their views against the mainstream secular or Judeo-Christian identities offered to them by their societies; this self-definition as part of a collective identity is a political act.

While I have said that religious revivalists in Bulgaria do not, by and large, adhere to the views of the Pomak ethno-religious revivalists, the two movements have much in common, including their politicization and their use of the internet, as will become clear below.

### **Pomak Ethnicity Movement**

In Bulgaria there are many Muslim intellectuals who carry out some forms of activism associated with their ethnic-religious self-identification. Some aim to educate Pomaks about their origins, history and traditions. For example, some villagers have written books or made videos about folklore, everyday life, or specific traditions of their village, or about aspects of the history of Pomaks. Others have created exhibitions of old photographs or objects from daily life. They are self-taught: before 1989, the Communist government discouraged all expressions of separate ethnicity. After 1989 these policies were reversed, but the education system still taught (and still today teaches) that Pomaks are Bulgarians by ethnicity. Many of these Pomak intellectuals came to these activities in middle age, after their own experiences with discrimination or lack of recognition. Only a few of these intellectuals are official employees of the government-funded “chitalishte” system of village cultural centers; most are unofficial cultural leaders.

In the face of a hegemonic Judeo-Christian mainstream culture, unofficial Pomak intellectuals are engaged in developing a group consciousness. They are creating a discourse of Pomak ethnicity by discovering and sharing stories and images representing what they are and

what they are not. In much of the literature on ethnicity and nations, theorists such as Benedict Anderson, Anthony D Smith, Walker Connor, and Monserrat Guibernau have emphasized the subjective aspects of belonging. Connor points out that the feeling of being ancestrally related “Need not, and *in nearly all cases will not*, accord with factual history”(Connor 1994, 202), since nearly all peoples have undergone mixing with people of various ethnic origins. Guibernau writes: ”For this reason, what matters [in this process of developing a national consciousness] is not chronological or factual history but sentient or felt history.”(135)

Here I outline some of the ways that *felt* history is being articulated, symbolized, performed, and promoted by the “alternative elite” (Guibernau 2004, 134) of the Pomak minority. In order to get at the degree to which history and difference are *felt*, it is helpful to think about the distinction between hot and cold nationalities introduced by Martin Ehala and Anastassia Zabrodskaia in their study of Baltic states and minorities (2013). In a case such as that of the Pomaks, with strongly conflicting interpretations of history, perceptions of illegitimacy on both sides, perceptions of instability, and widespread feelings of deprivation and discrimination, we may describe the emotions of ethnic belonging as ”hot.” (Ehala and Zabrodskaia 2013, 3-5).

Social media, in particular the use and production of videos and photo compilations of old photographs, folksong performances, and the like, provide essential fuel for this burning emotional attachment. They are the means by which collective memory is created and spread. They reflect and make visible, audible and experienceable a series of arguments characterizing Pomak history and culture – arguments which are also being articulated in self-published books and in internet forums and social media. How does the Pomak elite characterize and define this ethnic group?

- Territory: Pomaks live in Northern Greece and Northern Turkey; in Bulgaria, the Pomaks most identify with the southern part of the country, the Rhodope mountains and the East side of the Pirin mountains, although Pomaks reside in the Teteven region as well. Many would include the Gorani (Torbeshi) people as “brother people” or Pomaks under a different name. They inhabit the Gora region, the Shar Planina highlands – in Western Macedonia, as well as southern Kosovo and Eastern Albania (HRW, 1996, 80; Poulton 1998, 16; Koinova 1999; Mekhmed 2007).
- History: the mainstream Bulgarian interpretation of Pomak history leaves very little room for a desirable self-determination by Pomaks, since it forces them to either be traitors (if one accepts the theory that they accepted Islam willingly) or victims (via the theory that they were converted to Islam against their will). Caught between a rock and a hard place, the Pomak activists of Bulgaria tend to adhere to one of several alternative theories of the origins of the Pomaks. One theory is that the Pomaks were originally Bogomils and Paulicians (both of which are sects of Christianity), and, because of the similarities between Bogomilism and Islam, under the Ottomans they converted to Islam more readily than did those who were Orthodox Christians (Mehmed 2007). According to another set of theories, the Pomaks were Muslim prior to the Ottomans’ incursion into the Balkans. One such view has it that Pomaks were originally Thracians and were converted by early Islamic missionaries; another that they were Arab immigrants (Mollov 2012, Dorsunski n.d.). The radical difference between the mainstream

and the alternative historical explanations is indicative of a high degree of conflict on this point.

- Language: many leading Pomak activists claim that their mother tongue is the Pomak language (not Bulgarian). They point to the many vocabulary differences between their language and standard literary Bulgarian (more Turkisms and borrowings from Arabic). Misusing standard linguistic concepts, such as “language group,” some claim that their language is not Slavic. Also, in violation of the linguistic concept of dialect, they often claim that they all speak one language, despite the fact that their spoken language often differs significantly in terms of phonetics, vocabulary and grammatical features from region to region and even from village to village. Some call this language Pomashki, others extend it to include Gorani language and call it “Nashenski” after the ethnonym the Gorani use for themselves, “Nashentsi.” Their radical claims and practices, disregarding academic practice, again bespeak the heated, conflictual nature of the discourse.
- Culture: Many of the Pomak intelligentsia use folklore to show a cultural difference from the mainstream and similarity with the Gorani. Religious tradition is also part of the cultural argument since this is an ethno-religious minority.

The publisher of many of the works on Pomak history cited in the paragraphs above is the non-governmental organization European Institute Pomak. EI Pomak was officially registered as a cultural organization in Smolyan, Bulgaria in September, 2012 (<http://en.eipomak.eu/>). Despite its status as a non-political organization, it has been undertaking political actions which have never before been performed in the name of “Pomaks” in Bulgaria. These include: lobbying for

recognition of Pomaks as an ethnic minority in Bulgaria (Mollov et al, 2013); campaigning for election as representatives to Bulgaria's Parliament; organizing villagers to protest against unfair social and economic policies; strengthening ties with scholars and political activists in Bosnia, Macedonia, Kosovo, Greece, Turkey, and Russia; publishing manifestoes, memoirs, histories, and ethnographies (e.g. Mollov 2012, Dorsunski n.d., Redzhepov 2012); employing a journalist to report on their activities online (<http://europomak.com/>); holding press conferences and participating in debates on Bulgarian TV; and writing letters to European and American diplomats. These efforts are not always “successful”: none of their members came close to being elected in May 2013, Western diplomats often ignore them, and two of their published books have received scathing reviews (e.g. Zhelev 2012, Alekova 2013). Nonetheless, they are succeeding in increasing visibility of their group, palatability of the term “Pomak” for Bulgarians (due to increased exposure and informal education), and exposing Bulgarians (including Muslims themselves) to the very idea that Pomaks, traditionally seen as downtrodden underdogs, can organize, make demands, and exercise rights.

Besides its public activity, this group organizes secret and/or private activities such as meetings, roundtables, and small conferences. In interviews and online publications, their leaders maintained that they are often summoned by the police for questioning (Plovdiv-online 2012), and that members have lost their jobs and had illegal limitations placed on their business activities. Reporting such violations of human rights to government officials has not yielded results. In response, EI Pomak has publicized these outcomes – on Facebook, websites, and in letters to foreign diplomats – as ineffectual attempts to frighten them. According to EI Pomak’s leaders, some of the group’s members and functions remain underground so as to protect those members who, due to family and/or financial responsibilities, are not able to take professional

risks.

Keeping activities secret from the Bulgarian Security Police (DANS, State Agency for National Security) thus becomes part of the modus operandi of this group. Its leader boasted to me that the group has its own informal security network (which, in a play on words, he called PANS, i.e. Pomak security agency), which is more effective and savvy and has better-placed domestic and foreign sources than the official DANS. In spring 2013, EI Pomak leaders were planning a by-invitation-only pilgrimage to a religious monument (the grave of a Muslim saint, i.e. the *teke* of Enikhan Baba) with some of their Turkish Pomak activist counterparts, and were proud of the idea that DANS would not be aware of their activities. Thus, the relationship between government and this NGO is reminiscent of dissident - government relations under Communism, with the difference that this group does not characterize itself as helpless victims of an all-powerful regime, but rather views its foreign contacts as a means to increase its self-sufficiency and power domestically.

Besides this NGO, self-taught intellectuals are also conducting grassroots development of Pomak cultural and historical knowledge and consciousness. Such activist work is being carried out mostly in the Muslim villages surrounding the Southern Bulgarian town of Gotse Delchev. The Muslim villages near Velingrad and Smolyan tend to be less active in this regard, although there are intellectuals in those areas who have interest in these topics. One man from Breznitsa (Gotse Delchev region) authors numerous posts on Facebook about songs, traditions, legends, and individuals from his village (he has 1,944 “friends” or followers, and often posts on groups with 2,000-6,000 or more subscribers). He and his sons have made videos and photo essays. He has established and maintains connections with prominent Pomak cultural leaders in other Balkan countries, including Macedonia, Kosovo, Turkey, and Greece, and travels to these

countries regularly with the village's several folk ensembles. He has been responsible for bringing borrowings of folksongs from Macedonia and Kosovo into the repertoires of local musicians and ensembles in Bulgaria. While he holds no official post and works sporadically doing construction in Sofia or Western Europe, he is a moral leader and a strong advocate for his community. For example, he has been the driving force behind several successful protests in his village, over local issues. One of the protests was over permission for local children to travel to present village folk songs in Turkey; another was over the appointment of a school principal who was alleged to have a criminal background. As may be said of many Pomak community leaders, this individual's activities are largely part of what he calls the "underground" – neither officially sponsored nor recognized by institutions.

As with the Islamist grassroots work, the Pomak ethnicity movement conducts its organizing both face-to-face and online. The numbers of participants are smaller than in the religious movement, but there are similar forums where individuals socialize, share videos and memes, and engage in debate. The Pomaks' use of the web began in 2007, with the creation of Pomak.eu, an online forum. Today, this forum is not terribly active: it is getting from 0 - 5 posts a day total, however it has a rather large membership, 7,924 members. Much more active are the numerous social networks and pages on Facebook, the sharing method of choice. There are open groups on Facebook, such as: pomak.bg with 875 members, Pomak- European Institute with 932 members, Pomashka muzika [Pomak music] with 688 members, Rumelija Torbeski kulturno-naucen centar [Rumelia Torbesh Cultural Center] with 2,279 members, Pomak Culture & Arts with 2,127 members. Closed groups include Az sum pomak I haesvam da me narichat taka [I Am a Pomak and I Like To be Called That] with 2,123 members, Traditsii, kultura I istoria na

Pomatsi, Torbeshi I Gorani [Tradition, culture and history of Pomaks, Torbesh and Gorani] with 923 members, Restelica [name of the largest Gorani village in Kosovo] with 6,314 members, etc.

In these forums Pomak activists discuss and critique how current events are presented on the news media, issues of Bulgarian national and regional politics relating to Pomak concerns, and how Pomak folklore is performed and framed at national festivals. Recently on “I Am a Pomak and I Like To Be Called That” there was a discussion of an improper ethnonym used in an announcement for a folklore festival: it employed the term *bulgaromohamedani* [Bulgaro-Mohamedans] instead of the preferred term, Pomaks, or the acceptable term, Bulgarian Muslims. A robust discussion occurred over the costumes that village ensembles from the Gotse Delchev region wore at the national Pirin Pee [Pirin Sings] folk festival in August, 2014. The commenters included one man who is a sort of self-appointed ethnographer for his village, who commented on the differences between contemporary presentations of folklore and traditional costumes from 100 years ago. Other participants contributed old and recent photographs illustrating differences in costumes. The consensus was that most contemporary folk ensembles from Pomak villages do not make an effort to represent their distinct traditions, and simply wear the most readily available costumes; only one village, Breznitsa, had made a distinct effort to replicate older local costumes. One member criticized the folk festivals for what he termed “cultural vandalism,” i.e. plagiarism of Pomak folklore by professional national ensembles, which is a continual point of complaint on these forums

Compared to the activity on "Let Us Get to Know Islam," this was not a grassroots debate, but an exchange of informed opinion between activists and a few who were simply interested in this discussion. Like the discussion on prayer examined above, it was similarly composed of educated participants: there were 33 comments by 9 participants, at least two of

whom were leaders or consultants for folklore activities, and at least three-quarters of whom had had some university education; but it lacked the additional participation of less educated or less informed voices. On the Pomak forums other posts, such as shared videos or comments on popular Pomak songs are more oriented towards the uninitiated, and receive greater participation through “sharing.” The topics that receive the most debate involve the history of the Pomaks, and here the number of posts can reach 200 and more, and can include less educated participants. In general, the Pomak ethnicity movement cannot claim nearly so large a following as the Islamic revival movement; only a few of its members approach this activity with the verve characteristic of those committed to Islamic piety. Nonetheless, these native, homegrown intellectuals are creating an alternative discourse and educating a generation, as evidenced by such regional cultural phenomena (in the Muslim communities surrounding Gotse Delchev) as the increased acceptance of the ethnonym “Pomak,” the broad popularity of Gorani folk music, and the broad acknowledgement of a “brotherhood” connection between the Gorani and Pomak peoples.

Historically marginalized and pushed away from intellectual professions, Pomaks have not been able to develop a native viewpoint within the Bulgarian academy. Today Pomak villages and towns are home to native, autonomous intellectuals with distinct, alternative ideas about their religion, identity, history, politics, and ethnicity. Unofficial community leaders are embracing new opportunities outside of the Bulgarian academic mainstream: they are using social media and self-publishing opportunities to publicize their own intellectual material. The result is a body of unregulated, unsophisticated yet intriguing literature on Pomak life, traditions, and history. While this body of work expresses a broad diversity of opinions, there is increasing agreement among these intellectuals that they must work together on political, economic, and cultural fronts in order to improve Pomak people’s daily lives and future prospects. The

movement for Pomak rights will continue to be politically active and, as it distinguishes itself from the Movement for Rights and Freedom (Bulgaria's "minorities" party since 1990), will likely continue to raise important issues and realize goals, even if it does not achieve desired signs of political success (election or inclusion of "Pomaks" as a protected category).

### **Conclusions:**

The dual movements for Muslim religious and ethnic self-definition in Bulgaria work in parallel, yet mostly separate fashion to recharge and activate communities whose modus operandi for generations was to ignore the outside world. To come to terms with one's identity necessarily means to grasp oneself in relation to others; both of these movements are defining their territory and their terms by criticizing contemporary practices and differentiating themselves from the Bulgarian mainstream. In the case of Islamic revival, there is a distinct move away from traditional folk Islam and towards self-chosen piety, expressed as a personal and group activity and identity. Nonetheless, folk activity is not entirely left behind: newly composed Islamic music retains traditional elements (a single instrument in the Bulgarian case, and a whole genre in the Bosnian case); and Islamic activity online generates its own newly composed folklore (music, memes). With Pomak ethnicity, on the other hand, there is a move towards a reconstruction of folk tradition, for tradition supplies the material to symbolize ethnic self-consciousness. The goal is not nostalgia for its own sake, but rather to create a living culture (an experience of culture) which can symbolize ethnic values and give rise to ethnic pride. The fact that this ethnicity is based upon religion adds an additional interesting dimension to this comparison. For a few Pomak activists, Islamic piety is part of their chosen identity; for the majority, however, while religious *belonging* is highly important and must be represented

symbolically (say, by choice of dress or name), piety itself is entirely dispensable.

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