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Politics of Ethnicity and
Security in Bulgaria

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POLITICS OF ETHNICITY AND SECURITY IN BULGARIA

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Following the end of the cold war, Bulgaria found itself free to conduct an independent foreign policy which did not necessarily translate into more security. The predictable bipolarity turned into a highly volatile and unpredictable environment where risks and threats are muted and difficult to detect, yet there is a sense that they are multiple and inevitably dangerous. A painfully slow and ineffective reform, leading to a perceived loss of personal security exacerbated the already existing perception of external threats. The raging war in the former Yugoslavia became a constant reminder that there was no immunity to unexpected violence.

Daniel Nelson argues that "security is the dynamic balance between threats and capacities."¹ While in the past external powers have provided Balkan countries additional capacities to counter threats, the post cold war era created an environment rich in threats with which the Balkan states have little capacities to deal. Grave economic conditions, an unraveling social security system and democratic institutions desperately trying to prove their viability in post-totalitarian conditions have created an environment ripe for nationalist appeal.²

This paper investigates the relationship between ethnic politics and perceptions of external threats in Bulgaria. While external factors have long been recognized to have effects on perceptions of threats in Bulgaria, little has been done to analyze the way domestic politics, and particularly ethnic politics, interact with the perceptions of external threat. External developments have always had a disproportionately great impact on Bulgarian domestic stability. In the first post-1989 years

¹Daniel N. Nelson, "Creating Security in the Balkans," in Regina Cowen-Karp, ed., *Central and Eastern Europe: The Challenge of Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 155.

²Jack Snyder defines it as praetorian politics--the inability of still weak democratic institutions to channel the exploding energies of increased political participation in constructive directions. See Snyder, "Nationalism and the Crisis of the Post-Soviet State," in *Survival*, Spring 1993.

the country has been domestically unstable in a fluid and volatile international context, and the interaction of these two factors will determine both its democratization and national security. The paper analyzes the relationship between the Turkish minority and the Bulgarian majority in the realm of domestic politics and the changing security concerns of the society. A short section examines the role of the Macedonian question and its impact/nonimpact on the security environment in the country.

The Turkish Problem

By far the largest minority, ethnic Turks, are just another residual of the legacy of the Ottoman Empire which ruled the land of contemporary Bulgaria for five centuries.³ The origin of Bulgaria's Turks is a hotly disputed issue. The Turks and many scholars argue that they are descendants of the Ottoman Turks who settled on this land between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries. Others maintain that they are in fact ethnic Slavs who were forcibly or otherwise converted to Islam and adopted the Turkish language and culture. One might argue that the issue is but an academic one and what matters is that these people consider themselves to be ethnic Turks. In the Balkans, however, almost every dispute between peoples is heavily based on differing interpretations of history, which in its turn has major impact on contemporary politics.

Bulgaria's Turks are concentrated and constitute a majority in the Northeastern and Southern parts of the country. The first census, taken a year after the Bulgarian state was established in 1878, showed that the Turks comprised almost 20 percent of the population. Bulgarian independence meant an end for the Turks of their dominant position in the country. Deprived of land and privileges most of the well-to-do Turks left although the great majority remained. Obviously, the fact that the Bulgarian principality continued to be under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire provided this group with a certain degree of security. Subsequent migration waves kept the number of Turks at a level of just below 10 percent thus offsetting their higher natural growth.⁴ These

³1992 December census shows that out of a total population of 8,472,724 citizens, 822,000 (9,7 percent) are Turks. See *Supplement to the RFE/RL Research Report*, 13-16 April 1993.

⁴For a discussion on migration processes in Bulgaria see John Georgeoff, "Ethnic Minorities in the People's Republic of Bulgaria" in George Klein and Milan J. Reban, eds., *The Politics of*

movements were as much result of the usual consequences of being a minority in the Balkans as of the rise of Turkish nationalism and its drive to make Turkey a nation-state. Kemal Ataturk supported the idea of a common Turkish identity which was supposed to replace the old Muslim identity left from the Ottoman Empire. Bulgaria's Turks found the new national ideology appealing and with time developed a feeling of belonging to the Turkish nation. The politics of a newly independent Bulgaria helped this process as well. The nascent democracy, frequently engulfed in political turmoil and international conflicts as well as sometimes exploding nationalist fervor and passion (although not necessarily aimed at Turkey or the Turks), did not provide an appropriate environment for the full incorporation of Turks into the society. Although they participated in local politics and chose their own representatives in the Parliament, Turks frequently found their political and social rights curtailed by governmental decisions. In this dilemma, their fate was not unique in the Balkans.

Following the communist takeover of Bulgaria in 1944, in line with Soviet practice, the Constitution of 1947 recognized national minorities and the government adopted a policy of promoting minority rights. Educational and cultural opportunities were provided and efforts were made to integrate these minorities into the state and party apparatus. Even in this short period, however, many Turks preferred to leave the country. Their emigration was facilitated by bilateral agreements between Turkey and Bulgaria. Gradually the communist regime reversed its policy and curtailed most of the collective rights the Turks previously enjoyed, culminating in the adoption of the Constitution of 1971 which makes no specific reference to national minorities although it refers to "citizens of non-Bulgarian origin." Official speeches and statements emphasized the unitary character of the state and spoke of a unified socialist nation.⁵ In fact, in the 70s and early 80s the Communist regime showed signs of increasing reliance of nationalist rhetoric as a way to legitimize its rule. This process culminated in a campaign of forcible assimilation of Turks in 1984-89.

The regime's campaign was nothing that would surprise a student of the region. Similar policies had been pursued in other parts of the Balkans as well. What was unique this time was the

Ethnicity in Eastern Europe (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 49-85.

⁵On the nature of Bulgarian nationalism after 1944 see Maria Todorova, "The Course and Discourse of Bulgarian Nationalism" in Peter Sugar, eds., *Eastern European Nationalism in the Twentieth Century* (Washington: The American University Press, 1995), pp. 55-103.

scale of the process and the level of pressure brought upon the Turks. There are still questions as to why Todor Zhivkov's regime resorted to this form of minority repression that proved to be one of the biggest miscalculations of any communist government in Bulgaria. The early 1980s marked the end of the most successful period of the communist regime in terms of economic growth. However by 1984 Bulgaria entered a period of economic stagnation and social despair. A developing sense of apprehensive disorientation on the part of the elite might have contributed to this desperate move as a move of a nationalistic diversion.

However the regime's move also should be considered in a regional security context. Ever since assuming power, the Bulgarian communists had been rather ambivalent about their policy toward the Turkish minority. The recognition that as a minority it should be granted certain collective rights was mixed with apprehensions about the rise of a Turkish national consciousness which, in the ideological context ran counter to the declared intention of building a socialist class identity, and in the Cold War context, endangered Bulgaria's security. The Cold War significantly affected Bulgarian-Turkish relations and the period 1946-53 was marked with dangerous confrontation between the two countries including military maneuvers along the border, violations of the airspace by both states, and border skirmishes. What is more important, the Bulgarians insisted that the Turkish government was conducting undercover operations among the Turks in Bulgaria. Accordingly, the communist regime adopted the policy of allowing all Turks to emigrate should they wish to do so. The Turkish government, however, fearful of a mass wave of emigrants, imposed restrictions and limited the number of Turks entering the country.

During the mid-1960s in general relations relaxed between the two countries, and the Bulgarians pressed for a bilateral agreement that would regulate emigration of Bulgaria's Turks. An agreement which allowed for the emigration of all Turks whose relatives left for Turkey in 1952 was concluded in 1968. The bilateral relations, however, once again deteriorated after the 1971 coup in Turkey.

The Bulgarian government had also paid close attention to the fate of Cyprus.⁶ As early as

⁶Jordan Baev, *Voennopoliticheskiye Konflikty sled Vtoraya Svetovaya Vojna i Bulgariya* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na Ministerstvom na Otbranata, 1995), pp. 141-174.

1966, the government voiced apprehension about a Cyprus-like crisis in Bulgaria.⁷ That the Turkish governments continued to press for discussion of the "Turkish national minority" problem confirmed the worst fears--i.e., that Turkey had its own designs on Bulgaria. In the Bulgarian opinion, the 1968 agreement had resolved the issue of the Turkish minority. Even more troublesome, there appeared to be a rising of Islamic fundamentalism and Panturkism in neighboring countries. The communist regime observed Rauf Denktaş's statements, Muslim resistance in Kosovo, and Islamic rhetoric in Turkey with growing nervousness. During the 1982-83 meetings between Todor Zhivkov and the Turkish President, Kenan Evren, the issue of the Turkish minority was once again brought up by the Turkish side. In late 1983, the Cypriot Turkish community declared its own state in the northern part of the island.

Another factor that contributed to the growing fears in Bulgaria had to do with the relationship of demographics and economics to security. Turkey was growing in population and power. While Bulgaria reflected the typical result of an industrial society in the form of a stagnant, if not negative natural population growth, conversely Turks in Bulgaria like those in Turkey maintained relatively high birth rates and growth. Turkey's population was already seven times that of Bulgaria and its economy was growing at remarkable rates. The Bulgarian Turks therefore, it was thought, could become the fifth column for an aggressive Turkey in the future. Events in Cyprus only exacerbated these fears.

What Zhivkov's regime launched, however, was not anything with a precedent in the history of the relations between the Bulgarian and Turkish populations after the liberation. The 1984-89 campaign to forcibly assimilate the Turks into the society included an insistence that they adopt Slavic Bulgarian names, bans on Muslim religious observance, and restrictions on using the Turkish language.⁸ It is hard to say what reasoning prompted the regime to assume that such a campaign would go unnoticed and without response by the international community. At the beginning, however, it seemed that the policy was successful as the international criticism was short lived and Bulgaria resumed its low level international visibility. Although the Turkish community resented

⁷Baev, *Voennopoliticheskite*, p. 163.

⁸On the assimilation campaign see, Hugh Poulton, *The Balkans: Minorities and States in Conflict* (London: Minority Rights Publication, 1991), pp. 129-163.

the campaign, it did not resort to outright violent opposition. In fact, the response was compatible with previous reactions to various governmental policies aimed at restricting Turks' rights, which, despite their discriminatory character, did not lead to a general deterioration of interethnic relations or violent confrontations. This time, nevertheless, the changing international context, the scale and depth of the campaign, and most importantly, its goals, led to an increasing politicization of the Turkish community which signified a new phenomenon in Bulgarian politics.

Nature of Bulgarian Nationalism

There are several important factors along with the assimilation campaign that account for the rise of Turkish nationalism in Bulgaria. Undoubtedly, one of them is related to the changing nature of Bulgarian nationalism. Thus, in a sense the politicization of Bulgaria's Turks was a form of reactive nationalism by a group which suddenly perceived itself threatened.

Until the communist takeover, Bulgarian nationalism can be generally identified as an irredentist nationalism, or outward oriented nationalism.⁹ The Treaty of San Stefano of 3 March 1877, put an end to the Russo-Turkish war and established a large Bulgarian state including all of Macedonia, western Thrace and present day Bulgaria. The boundaries of the state approximately followed the lines of the Bulgarian exarchate and was considered, therefore, the supreme fulfillment of Bulgarian national goals. To be sure, some of the regions incorporated in the new state were inhabited by mixed populations, and Bulgarians by no means constituted the majority in all of them.

The finest hour of Bulgarian nationalism was, however, short lived. The great powers would not permit a large state closely associated with Russia to control the Balkan Peninsula. At the Congress of Berlin in 1878, the San Stefano map was redrawn: a small Bulgarian principality under Ottoman suzerainty was established between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains; Thrace became an autonomous province called East Rumelia and kept within the Empire but governed by a Bulgarian; and Macedonia was returned to the Porte. For Bulgarians the new settlement was a deeply traumatic experience which defined the goals and nature of Bulgarian nationalism for the next

⁹See, Todorova, *Eastern European Nationalism*, and Martin V. Pundeff, "Bulgarian Nationalism" in Peter F. Sugar and Ivo J. Lederer, eds., *Nationalism in Eastern Europe* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1969), pp. 93-166.

sixty years. After the Congress of Berlin, the reunification of what was regarded to be Bulgarian lands and people became the main goal on the agenda of Bulgarian nationalism. "San Stefano Bulgaria" was seen as a goal and ideal giving the state and society a purpose as well as a symbol of the great European powers unwillingness to grant Bulgarians what they considered their own land.

The Berlin arrangement was, it had been thought, only a temporary settlement and the unification of the Bulgarian principality with East Rumelia in 1885 was considered to be the first step in a process of bringing lost territories and peoples back to the fatherland. With the recovery of East Rumelia, Macedonia remained the last torn piece of Bulgarian territory, and its recovery became the nation's "manifest destiny." The initial success of Bulgarian nationalism, however, was followed by devastating choices and policies resulting in catastrophic military campaigns and wars, including the two Balkan wars and the first and second world wars, as well as the loss of more territories. After the two Balkan wars, Bulgaria acquired Pirin Macedonia as the rest was divided between Greece and Serbia. During the two world wars the other two parts of Macedonia came under Bulgarian authority but the defeat of the Central powers and later the Axis once again resulted in their loss. Although there was some degree of dissent, particularly from the left, the public in general was enthusiastic about Bulgaria's moves to restore San Stefano Bulgaria-- powerful emotions of patriotism, especially in the Balkan wars and the first world war, accompanied the military campaigns.

The communist takeover in 1944 was a turning point for Bulgarian nationalism.¹⁰ After several years of a rather ambivalent policy of encouraging minority identities and trying to create new socialist identities, the regime turned to embrace ordinary nationalism.¹¹ Yet in contrast to its prewar manifestations Bulgarian nationalism dropped irredenta from its agenda and turned into a status quo nationalism. Many factors appear to account for the change in its nature, among them the geopolitical and political context. After years of unsuccessful efforts to reunite what was considered to be lost Bulgarian territories, even before 1944 Bulgarian nationalism was showing signs of despair and pessimism. More significantly, it was losing popular appeal. The first years of communist rule

¹⁰See Todorova, *East European*, pp 88-98; Pundeff, pp. 156-65.

¹¹See Joseph Rothschild, *Return to Diversity: A Political History of East Central Europe Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 147-191.

did not provide much reason for nationalist celebration either as no territories were recovered. What is more, the official policy was considered to be anti-national by the public. Total subservience to the Soviet Union, radical domestic policies based on class consideration, and suppression of any dissent provided for an environment unfriendly to any nationalistic manifestations.

In the 60s and 70s when nationalism once again reasserted itself more openly, it found the communist regime willing to embrace its appeal as a useful tool to claim legitimacy. The revival of emphasis on Bulgarian nationalism, however, could easily appear to be a challenge to the existing territorial status quo on the Balkans. There was a price to be paid for the new great power tutelage, and the communist regime had to renounce any policy that might have challenged the existing status quo in the Balkans. There is no evidence that the communist regime found it hard to repudiate irredenta since also Bulgarian nationalism appeared to abandon demands pertaining to reclaiming lost territories. Nor did the geopolitical context seem likely to tolerate any challenge to international borders. Thus, geopolitical considerations, the communist regime's need for internal legitimation, and a general national exhaustion after many unsuccessful attempts to realize San Stefano Bulgaria turned Bulgarian nationalism inward.

The Campaign and After

No sooner than the name changing campaign had been completed, the regime wished the issue would disappear. Although the matter caused some problems in the Bulgarian relations with some Arab and Muslim countries, Bulgaria found an advantage in its backwater existence since the international community appeared relatively unconcerned with the problem. In early 1989, however, Turkish resistance to the continuing assimilation campaign dramatically increased. By May mass demonstrations and other forms of protest became frequent occurrences in some Turkish populated regions. Clashes with the police and casualties were reported in the foreign media. Caught completely by surprise, the only response the authorities appeared to contemplate was to step up repression and to begin expelling those considered to be the instigators of the resistance. This time, however, the scale of the protest and the outcry in the international media proved to be too much of a crisis for the communist regime. In June, the Bulgarian ruler, Todor Zhivkov publicly announced that the law allowing all Bulgarian citizens to travel abroad would apply immediately to the

Bulgarian Turks. In the course of the next few months over 300,000 left the country for Turkey and only the Turkish government's decision to close the border toward the end of August prevented many more from leaving. It should be noted that almost half of the Turks returned to Bulgaria, many of them even while the exodus was still under way.

These developments, however, were overtaken by another event that was to have far greater impact on the future of interethnic relationships in Bulgaria. On November 10, 1989 Todor Zhivkov was ousted in an intra-party coup. His replacement, Foreign Minister Peter Mladenov promised changes. In the prevailing international context--communist regimes collapsing throughout Eastern Europe, and the Berlin Wall coming down--it was difficult to suppose that the Communist party willingly undertook these changes. Rather it was its instinct for survival and the increasing pressure brought to bear by the emerging non-communist opposition that caused the consequent restructuring.

The Politics of Ethnicity

Although anti-communist opposition among both the Bulgarian and Turkish communities had its roots in the pre-November 1989 period, and Bulgarian dissidents were often highly critical of the regime's assimilation campaign, this informal harmony of interests did not turn into a closer formalized collaboration in the days following Zhivkov's fall. The two communities had quite different agendas and concerns. While the Union of the Democratic Forces (UDF), a broad coalition of anticommunist groups established soon after the November 1989, demanded institutionalization of political pluralism and access to power, the Turkish community voiced its concerns about rather basic rights. These included the end of the assimilation campaign, restoration of their Turkish names, and return of property lost during the exodus to Turkey. In the first weeks after November 10, demonstrations by Bulgarians and Turks in front of the Parliament were a common occurrence. An unambiguous expression of the difference in perception and experience between the two communities was the fact that while the Bulgarians were chanting anticommunist slogans, the cry from the Turks was "Give back our names."

Soon Bulgaria's Turks organized in the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), whose roots go back to the onset of the assimilation campaign. Members of the organization were active

in defending the rights of the Muslim and Turkish communities in the period 1985-89, and sometimes advocated Turkish autonomy and outright separation from Bulgaria. The post-November MRF, however, adopted a more modified approach emphasizing its commitments to working for improvement of Muslims' human and civil rights. Initial satisfaction of Bulgarian Turks' demands was facilitated by the new communist government's willingness to distance itself from the legacy of the assimilation campaign. A law on the restoration of Turkish names was passed in March 1990, and several months later it was amended to liberalize all Muslims' choice of names.

In the June 1990 elections the MRF gained twenty three seats and became the third largest parliamentary group after the Bulgarian Socialist Party (the heir of the Communist Party), and the UDF. The early success in putting pressure on the Communists and the strong showing in the elections boosted the MRF's image and authority as the legitimate political representative of Turks and Muslims. In light of the circumstances in which the MRF was created, it is rather remarkable that the party has become a moderate political force in Bulgarian politics. Even more so, considering the almost uniform unfriendly to militant attitude with which all political organization, irrespective of their ideological persuasions, regarded a party based on ethnic and religious identity.¹² Given Bulgarian society's ambivalent view on minorities such a posture towards the party comes as no surprise.

Although Bulgarians recognize that Muslims and Turks represent distinctive groups, in the accepted political practice they are not referred to as minorities. There are wide spread apprehensions that the recognition of a national minority is the first step toward secession, and runs counter to the accepted notion of the unitary character of the Bulgarian state. That group rights may be granted to Bulgarian Turks makes it even harder to accept given traditional hostility toward Turkey. In fact, demands for recognition of a Turkish national minority are considered to be "an immediate and dangerous threat to (Bulgaria's) security, to its national unity, and its territorial

¹²In fact even the SDS and the Bulgarian president Zhelyu Zhelev, a staunch critic of the assimilation campaign prior 1989, are against the registration of the MRF and blamed it on the Socialists as an attempt to split the opposition vote. See "President Zhelev: Only Democracy Can Cure Ethnic Problems," *BTA in English*, 30 October 1991 (FBIS-EEU-91-211, 31 October 1991).

integrity."¹³ Not surprisingly, the Socialist Party-dominated Parliament adopted a new constitution which not only carefully omits the word minority, but also prohibits parties based on ethnicity, religion, or race.

The MRF asserts Bulgarian Turks can gain equality in the society only through granting of collective rights. Given the long history of Bulgarian attempts to assimilate the Turkish and Muslim population, group rights would ensure the distinct identity of these groups and thus give them opportunities to succeed in Bulgarian society. On the other hand, the MRF and particularly its leader, Ahmed Dogan, made sure to represent the party as a secular, anti-fundamentalist and pro-democracy organization which rejected territorial autonomy. In almost every interview Dogan gives time and again he is compelled to repeat that his party has no anti-Bulgarian designs, and that, in fact, its program and agenda are more extensive in their goals than the narrow, ethnic oriented policy the public associates with it.

The post-1989 political disposition gave the MRF an advantage upon which the party was able to capitalize. Yet, the party had a rather uncertain beginning since the Constitution made it ineligible for registration for the 1991 local and parliamentary elections. By then it became clear that to exclude the MRF, already a well established political organization, from participation in the political arena would enormously worsen dangerously fragile interethnic relations. After the Turkish and Muslim populations overwhelmingly voted for the party in the 1990 elections, there was no illusion that the same people would not perceive a ban on MRF as yet another assault on their freedoms. Yet, no Bulgarian party openly expressed support for the MRF's registration fearing that such a move might hurt their chances in the forthcoming elections. The Socialist party and other nationalist organizations were even more militant in their rejections and blamed the movement as anti-national and anti-Bulgarian. The leftist press charged Turkey and the US with interference in Bulgarian affairs by pressing the authorities to register the party. Only when the Supreme Court sanctioned the registration of the MRF was the potential crisis circumvented.

The MRF gained even greater political weight after the 1991 local and parliamentary elections. In the predominantly Turkish populated regions, local Turks were elected mayors and

¹³See interview with Nikolay Slatinski, chairman of the Parliamentary National Security Commission in *Trud* daily, 24 November, 1993 (FBIS-EEU-93-236, 10 December 1993).

councilors. Even more important, the party became the balance of power in the Parliament as neither the UDF nor the Socialists gained absolute majority. Thus the first non-communist government, headed by Filip Dimitrov, had to rely on the MRF's support. Although the UDF was a coalition uniting diverse political parties and organizations whose only common trait in was their anti-communism, they resisted formal agreement with another staunchly anticommunist group--the MRF. Nonetheless, it initially appeared that the informal coalition between the UDF and MRF might be a success as the government was able to launch its program of reform.

The big loser in this situation was the Socialist Party as it found itself unable to influence the legislative process while its interests were negatively affected by the government actions. Not surprisingly, in response the BSP accelerated its nationalist rhetoric, particularly during the presidential elections in 1992. The very narrow margin with which the UDF candidate, Zhelyu Zhelev, was elected and the strong support he received from MRF voters, led the BSP to accuse him of being a hostage of the Turkish interests.¹⁴ Indeed, nationalistic, anti-Turkish sentiments became one of the main themes in the campaign. Zhelev was the only candidate who carefully avoided any nationalistic rhetoric.

Still the informal collaboration between the UDF and MRF was not free of problems. Dimitrov's government began, though chaotically, to implement some shock-therapy economic and social reforms which adversely affected the population, particularly rural residents.¹⁵ The MRF was especially frustrated with the government policies as the majority of its constituents were rural. Moreover, Dimitrov seemed unwilling to moderate its program in collaboration with Dogan.¹⁶ The

¹⁴See Rada Nikolaev "The Bulgarian Presidential Elections," in *RFE/RL Research Report*, 7 February, 1992, pp.11-16.

¹⁵See, Gerald W. Creed, "The Politics of Agriculture: Identity and Socialist Sentiment in Bulgaria" in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 54, Number 4, Winter 1995, pp. 843-869; Gerald Creed, "an Old Song in a New Voice: Decollectivization in Bulgaria," in David Kideckel, ed., *East European Communities: The Struggle for Balance in Turbulent Times*, pp. 25-47.

¹⁶See Kjell Engelbrekt, "The Fall of Bulgaria's First Noncommunist Government," in *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol.1, No.45, 13 November 1992, pp. 1-7; Daniel Bates, "Uneasy Accommodation: Ethnicity and Politics in Rural Bulgaria," in *East European Communities*, pp. 137-159.

MRF also came under increasing pressure from the Turkish population. The socio-economic hardship caused tens of thousands of Turks once again to emigrate to Turkey, this time for economic reasons.¹⁷ After a few unsuccessful attempts to force changes in the government, the MRF had no choice but join a nonconfidence vote and oust Dimitrov. Then, in a informal coalition with the BSP during the next two years the party supported a government of experts led by Prof. Lyuben Berov. Understandably bitter after being ousted with MRF's votes, the UDF attacked Dogan's party accusing it of selling out Bulgarian Turks' interests and of being manipulated or even outright controlled by the former communists. It is worth noting, however, that in contrast to earlier Socialist rhetoric, the UDF did not accuse the MRF of being anti-Bulgarian and selling out the national interest to Turkey. Meanwhile the Socialists temporarily restrained their anti-Turkish rhetoric in order to accommodate their new political partner. Of course, restrained anti-Turkish attacks were a matter of political expediency rather than a change in philosophical persuasion.

The disastrous showing of the opposition in the the 1994 parliamentary elections was followed by equally disheartening participation in the 1995 local elections, which the Socialists once again won gaining the majority votes. Only after the first round did the major opposition parties try to join forces, although it was to no avail. In early 1996 UDF, MRF, and the People's Union (PU) finally signed an agreement which agreed upon selection of a joint candidate for the presidential elections to be held in November. The newly created coalition, called United Democratic Forces (Uddf), did not have much effect on the work of the Parliament. However, its showing at the presidential elections indicated that the opposition had come a long way since its emergence in 1989. In the first round, the Uddf's candidate, Petar Stoyanov, garnered 44% of the vote as opposed to 27% for the Socialist candidate Ivan Marazov. In the second round Stoyanov was elected president with 60% of the vote compared to 40% for Marazov.

In early 1997, following a prolonged political crisis, the opposition was finally able to force the socialist government to resign and to agree to early parliamentary elections. Deepening economic crisis, skyrocketing inflation, and general frustration with the government's unwillingness

¹⁷See *BTA* in English, 15 September, 1992.

to reform led to widespread public protest that caught even the opposition by surprise.¹⁸ After several weeks of tense stalemate between the BSP and the opposition, the Socialists gave in to the pressure of mass protests, civil disobedience and virtual economic collapse. A date for early elections was set and President Stoyanov appointed an expert government headed by Stefan Sofianski, mayor of Sofia and a politician closely associated with the UDF. In the April general elections the UDF won 52 percent of the vote as compared to 22 percent for the Socialists.

The campaign leading to the April elections had marked the end of cooperation between UDF and MRF. Both parties found it easier to collaborate in the face of cohesive and strong Socialist Party. As soon as the BSP lost popularity and chances to rule, however, ideological differences between the two parties surfaced. After numerous negotiations, attempts to recreate the successful UdDF failed as MRF rejected offers to join an agreement providing for a joint list of candidates and signed by UDF and the PU.¹⁹

The months following the presidential elections and preceding the April elections have certainly transformed the balance of political power. Before the elections the UDF finally transformed itself from a coalition of various parties with diverse strengths and ideologies into a single party. Its increased cohesiveness compounded by the failing fortunes of BSP made the UDF leadership more confident in its ability to gain absolute majority in the Parliament. The MRF, on the other hand, found it hard to accept the role of a junior partner unable to exert any influence from within the coalition. Ever since 1994 when the BSP had won the elections, the MRF has grown increasingly frustrated with its inability to exercise political influence. Unable to recreate a type of alliance with the UDF that would have provided any meaningful political weight in the post election rule, the MRF sought collaboration with other parties which it could both lead and dominate. In the days leading to the parliamentary elections Dogan hastily formed the Aliance for National Salvation, a coalition of rather diverse extraparlimentary parties with monarchist leanings. This action was an attempt to arrest the increasing political marginalization of the MRF. Although the new coalition fared rather well in the elections by attaining 9.2 percent of the vote, there was no doubt that the

¹⁸On the origins of the economic crisis see Michael Wyzan, "Why is Bulgaria a Land of Failed Reforms?" in *Transitions*, Vol.4, No.2, July 1997.

¹⁹*OMRI Daily Digest*, 1 April, 1997.

party would not be able to once again hold the balance of power in the Parliament. Dogan's leadership could not compensate for the lack of sizable parliamentary presence and for the first time since the party's creation Dogan had to worry about challenges to his leadership. Both from within and without the party there emerged leaders who were ready to successfully appeal to the Muslim electorate.

Security and Ethnicity

From the Balkans, the world looks quite different. This fact has its roots in history and politics. A long history of great power involvement that was more often than not the main agent of change--inevitably to the detriment of one Balkan state and the advantage of another--generated a sense of one's inability to master one's own fate. Most of the states gained their independence as a result of wars launched by outside powers, and their territories were determined by great power strategies. Indeed, until the end of the cold war, Soviet presence in the region defined matters of national security and stability. Not surprisingly, such historically constructed perceptions still exist in Bulgaria. Mass media and statements by political leaders perpetuate public fears that great and not so great powers still have designs on the Balkans. Ethnic conflicts and general crises in the Balkans are thought to be incited and supported by outside powers to further their own interests. These perceptions quickly penetrated the post-1989 political discourse in Bulgarian politics. The BSP often blames the UDF and MRF in selling out Bulgaria to Turkish and American interests in the Balkans, and anti-communists accuse the former communists in implementing Russian policies in their dealings with the world.

During the short period in which the UDF formed a minority government from the October 1991 elections to its ouster in late 1992, Filip Dimitrov reoriented Bulgarian policies toward greater cooperation with the West and the United States. This led to improved relations with Ankara, which was pleased to see changing Bulgarian treatment of the Turkish population.²⁰ Along with economic and social agreements, both governments arranged to develop bilateral confidence and security-

²⁰The improvement of bilateral relations was initiated following the ouster of Todor Zhivkov in November. See, Duncan M. Perry, "New Directions for Bulgarian-Turkish Relations," in *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol.1, No.41, 16 October 1992, pp. 33-40.

building measures, including a pact in December 1991 to give each other advance notice of military exercises taking place within sixty kilometers of the border, an exchange of military observers, etc. Military strength along the border was reduced on both sides. Yet, these developments failed to abate Bulgarian fears since military officials and politicians still continued to compare Bulgaria's military strength with Turkey's. These concerns became more active as in accordance with the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, excess weapons, including advanced systems, poured into the countries of Balkan NATO members.²¹

Even in this initial period of improved Bulgarian-Turkish relations, it became obvious that Bulgarian willingness to cooperate was an attempt to correct past deeds and ameliorate security threats rather than to reorient its foreign policy to the East in close collaboration with Ankara. When in 1992 Turkey embarked on the creation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Zone--an institution envisaging the establishment of a free-trade zone among Black Sea countries--Bulgaria reluctantly joined, voicing its rejection of any institutional arrangements that might keep her away from its European foreign policy priorities, particularly gaining membership in the European Community. That deeper concerns of being in a block dominated by Turkey might have been the real reason of Bulgaria's cool response to the initiative, may be evident by her persistent ambivalence to the BSECZ despite the growing realization that membership in the EU is far off in the future.

The BSP was again able to gain control, although indirectly, of the national government after the fall of the Fillip Dimitrov at the end of 1992 by supporting, along with the MRF, the expert government of Professor Berov. In December 1994, the BSP won an absolute majority in the parliamentary elections and formed a government headed by the chairman of the party, Jan Videnov. Even before the elections, the socialists disapproved of Bulgarian foreign policy direction. The BSP considered Dimitrov's foreign policy as excessively oriented toward the United States, which in the Socialists' language meant toward Turkey. In fact, in the leftist press American foreign policy objectives in the Balkans and Turkish foreign policy objectives in the region are used interchangeably. The Dimitrov government's foreign policy was considered to neglect relations with

²¹See a statement by Zhelyu Zhelev in *Bulgarska Armiya*, 18 November, 1991.

the former Soviet Union and Europe, and too subservient to American and Turkish interests.²² Consequently, Bulgarians became even more vociferous about military imbalances between Bulgaria, Turkey and Greece.²³ In contrast to the period of 1991-92, now concerns were voiced not only about the qualitative imbalances but also about the existence of a quantitative one.

There was a growing perception, particularly on the Bulgarian left, that the country is dangerously exposed in a threat rich environment. The lack of external security guarantees, continuing ethnic conflicts in the region, and growing Turkish influence prompted the Socialists to reconsider their approach to national security. In the post-1989 period former communists and anti-communists did not agree on much, but at least found common ground on foreign policy. By late 1994, however, even this issue became contentious as the Socialists concluded that NATO was not going to assure national security and once again sought closer cooperation with Moscow as the remedy to Bulgaria's immediate security concerns. The change in foreign policy course prompted the opposition to charge the BSP of deliberately isolating Bulgaria from the Central European quest to join Europe.²⁴ Of course, the change in policy did not lead to completely ignoring contacts with Turkey related to security issues.²⁵ Rather, it signified a change in priorities and orientations. The socialist government proved to be much more conservative in its foreign policy as it displayed a tendency to become a prisoner of Bulgarian history, falling back on alliances and affinities that had been developed in the course of history. During the cold war Bulgaria and Greece developed close

²²See *The White Paper of the Bulgarian Government*, distributed by the Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria, 1995.

²³See Lyubomir Denov, "At One Stroke, NATO Pushes Us Into a New Arms Race," in *Chasa* daily, 27 October, 1994, p.10 (FBIS-EEU-94-211, 1 November, 1994); Vasil Lyutskanov, "Army Needs Urgent Modernization, Or We Will Be Hopelessly Behind in One or Two Years," in *Commission* daily, 6 February, 1995, p. 13 (FBIS-EEU-95-028, 10 February, 1995).

²⁴In a lecture at the Atlantic Club, Sofia, President Zhelev accused the government for not seeking NATO membership and conducting imbalanced Balkan policy by turning its back on Turkey in favor of Greece. See *BTA*, 19 July, 1996.

²⁵Bulgarian and Turkish delegations signed a plan for military cooperation for 1996, including 35 joint confidence and security-building activities. See, *Khorizont Radio Network*, 24 January, 1996 (FBIS-EEU-96-017).

ties, an affiliation based on shared mistrust of Ankara. Thus, following UDF's policy that led to strained relations with Greece and Russia--especially after Bulgaria recognized Macedonia--Videnov's government embarked on restoring ties with Moscow²⁶ and fostering even closer relation with Athens.

Along with its change in foreign policy, the BSP, based on its majority in the Parliament, felt comfortable enough to cease efforts to accommodate concerns voiced by the opposition, including the MRF. Prime Minister Videnov appointed Ilcho Dimitrov as Minister of Education and Science. The MRF protested the appointment accusing Dimitrov of having been one of the initiators and participants in the assimilation campaign. In response, Dimitrov not only admitted his participation in what he called "the renaissance movement" but also accused the MRF of being anti-constitutional and harming Bulgarian interests.²⁷ In fact the BSP never, at least considering its rhetoric, accepted the constitutionality of the MRF. Ideological rejection of legitimacy is compounded by frequent political attacks against the movement. An ever present refrain in the Socialists' rhetoric is that the MRF is an instrument of Turkey's economic and strategic interests in Bulgaria. Dominance of Turkish capital in the southern and northeastern regions of the country is feared as the first step toward Ankara's dominance over Bulgaria.²⁸ In early February, 1996 ethnic tensions once again flared up in the city of Kurdzhali, after the BSP had challenged the municipal elections, won by a MRF member, alleging an electoral fraud.

Following the success of UdDF in the 1996 presidential elections, MRF and UDF found it hard to create a new coalition for the early elections in 1997. The new distribution of power following the collapse of the BSP made it unlikely that the two parties will initiate a new agreement. The UDF finally became a unified party thus eliminating the uncertainty and instability of reconciling

²⁶Of course, economic interest played a great role in this decision as the Bulgarian economy was disproportionately dependent on the former Soviet Union as a market and source of raw materials and energy.

²⁷See, *RFE/RL Daily Reports*, 27 January, 1995.

²⁸For early manifestations of these concerns see, *Duma* daily, 26 November, 1990, p. 4 (FBIS-EEU-90-232, December 3, 1990. For more recent example see, Radka Petrova "Ankara is Preparing for Our Privatization Process," in *Duma* daily December 4, 1995, p. 1. (FBIS-EEU-95-236).

sometimes diverging interests of its constituent parties. In addition, its most serious opponents, the Socialists, were in disarray and did not seem likely to gain substantial representation in the Parliament. Indeed, many Socialists left the party and along with other earlier defectors formed a new party, the Euroleft. DPS, on the other hand, faced a real dilemma in that it was compelled to choose between continuing cooperation with the UDF that would entail a junior status, and competing either alone or in cooperation with other parties. To be sure, since the 1994 elections, MRF had been in no position to substantially influence domestic politics. In the early months of 1997, however it found itself in the uncomfortable position of being part of the large opposition that unseated the Socialists and at the same time was unable to restore its pre-1994 position of a power broker.

If the domestic political balance of power after the 1997 parliamentary elections seemed to spell doom for the MRF, the emerging attitudes of the new political majority paradoxically gave the party a new potential window of opportunity. The Socialist government had adopted a foreign policy that has led to international isolation making Bulgaria's chances of joining both NATO and the EU nil. Perceived as a pariah among the rest of Eastern Europe, the Socialist governments had found an advantage in its self-isolation from the wider European processes. The government of UDF, on the other hand, made joining the EU and NATO its highest foreign policy objective. Accordingly, those goals required that Bulgaria adopt European standards and principles including those pertaining to the treatment of minorities. For a while it seemed that the MRF found a new reason d'etat--improving the political, cultural, and social status of the Turkish minority was presented to be an essential requirement if the nation were to have any chance of joining Europe. Accordingly the party intensified its demands for broader freedoms and rights, in accordance with European conventions, to be granted to minorities, and party leaders met with European representatives to discuss the status of ethnic relations in the country. Yet, the drive to make the party once again a significant player did not bear to fruition. Neither did the Turkish electorate mobilize behind what it perceived to be long articulated demand nor did the rest society at large found them so radical as to provoke a wide public debate, not to mention a backlash. The UDF government was equally unimpressed and after a short debate with various opposition parties signed to the European Convention for the Protection of Minorities and as if to deny any contribution by the MRF presented

the move as a part of the process of joining Europe. In addition the National Assembly passed a new media law which, among other things, allowed broadcasts in Turkish.²⁹

In foreign relations, too, the government was on the offense--meetings between Bulgarian and Turkish head of states and prime ministers became frequent as part of regular consultations between Bulgaria, Turkey, and Romania. Being unhappy at having been excluded from the current EU enlargement the Balkan leaders stepped up contacts to join efforts to battle regional problems ranging from Kosovo, to drug trafficking, to illegal immigration and regional infrastructure.³⁰ Bulgaria and Turkey also signed an agreement to set up a free economic zone that was estimated to boost bilateral trade turnover from current \$500 million to \$2.5 billion.

One might notice that so far nationalistic parties are conspicuous by their absence in our discussion. Ever since 1989, no purely nationalistic party has been able to either pass the 4 percent threshold required to send deputies in the Parliament (in fact, the most successful nationalist party, Bulgarian National Radical Party gained only 1.28 percent in the 1991 elections) or to exert significant influence over politics.³¹ The only purely nationalistic party with a deputy on the Parliament, the Fatherland Party of Labor, won the seat by entering into a preelection coalition with the BSP in 1991. In the 1994 and 1997 elections no nationalistic party qualified. Yet, the lack of such parties on the Parliament is a misleading indication, for in fact the BSP coopted the nationalistic vote. Another reason as already discussed is the nature of Bulgarian nationalism in the second half of the century--as irredentism lost appeal to the public, parties that challenge territorial integrity of the states would have limited impact. The former communists, on the other hand, have a long tradition of strong, inward oriented nationalism.

²⁹Reuters, July 31, 1998. Under a government decree of 1992 there have been half hour broadcasts in Turkish on the national radio.

³⁰Reuters, July 11, 1998.

³¹See Kjell Engelbrekt, "Bulgaria," in *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 3, No. 16, 22 April, 1994, pp.75-79; Luan Troxel, "The Political Spectrum in Post-Communist Bulgaria," in Joseph Held, ed., *Democracy and Right-Wing Politics in Eastern Europe in the 1990s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 191-203.

The Macedonian Question

A Gallup poll, conducted in October 1991, showed that 65 percent of Bulgarians considered Macedonians to be Bulgarian by nationality, but while 49 percent of the respondents supported recognition of a sovereign Macedonia, only 31 percent felt that recognition should lead to unification with Bulgaria.³² That Bulgaria was the first country to recognize Macedonia in January 1992 came as no surprise despite the sense of ambivalence toward the country and its people.

Public ambivalence about Macedonia is sometimes misleading for it feeds outside observers' suspicions about Bulgarian irredenta. As it was already discussed, irredenta was dropped from the main program of Bulgarian nationalism with the consolidation of the communist regime. The revival of Bulgarian nationalism in the 60s and 70s could hardly avoid exacerbating the Macedonian question since Bulgarian nationalism and history have been closely linked with Macedonia.³³ Nowadays, there is no significant Bulgarian party that seriously would claim Macedonia as a part of Bulgaria.

This sense of ambivalence has turned into an incoherent and confusing policy regarding Macedonia. On the part of all political parties, there is persistent disorientation as to how to deal with the new state. Consecutive governments have had a common policy about what not to do about Macedonia, rather than what to do. Although Bulgaria was quick to recognize the new state, no Bulgarian government has so far recognized the existence of a Macedonian nationality and language. Yet, every new government feels obliged to declare respect for the territorial integrity of Macedonia. This lack of policy objectives in regard to Macedonia has led to a major paralysis of bilateral relations. Great opportunities for both states are missed, held hostage to disputes that might seem irrational to outsiders, but are important issues to both countries.

Immediately following the Second World War, both the Yugoslav and Bulgarian communist regimes entertained the idea of a federation between the two countries. It required that a Macedonian

³²Cited in Troxel, *Democracy and Right-Wing*, p. 197.

³³For a discussion of the Macedonian question in the relations between the communist regimes of Bulgaria Macedonia see Robert King, *Minorities under Communism: Nationalities as a Source of Tension among Balkan Communist States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 187-220.

nationality would be recognized in Bulgaria, a move that was in accordance with the general policy of granting collective rights to minorities in the country. Bulgarians, however, as in the case of the Turkish minority, never felt comfortable with the idea, and the Soviet-Yugoslav split provided a justification to withdraw from the plan. Yet, minorities still existed and the 1956 census showed 187,729 Macedonians in Pirin Macedonia. In the 1965 census this number fell to 8750, and the 1975 census listed no minorities in the country.

In comparison to the Turkish problem, a discussion of the Macedonian question in Bulgaria involves a different set of circumstances and factors. First, the 1992 census did not provide reliable evidence about the numerical strength of people considering themselves Macedonian.³⁴ In fact, the nationalists' resistance to include questions on ethnic affinity and religion in the census was targeted at the Turkish community and not at a Macedonian minority. Second, the Macedonian question and the Turkish problem involve very different sets of security concerns. One obvious factor has to do with sheer power politics--Macedonia is a newly independent state of small size and no power, either economic or military. The country is understandably preoccupied with internal consolidation, a rather difficult process in the Balkan context, rather than with active foreign policy that clashes with the interests of its neighbors. Turkey, on the other hand, is an emerging regional power with interests well beyond its immediate neighbors and an expanding presence. Given the historical animosities in the region such a power projection is a recipe for clashing interests. The rising Turkish military capabilities--to a certain extent legitimate given the instability of Turkey's hostile Eastern and Southern neighbors--is making her Balkan neighbors feel threatened.

Third, although the relationship between Macedonia and Bulgaria has been tense and uneven in the last half century, it nevertheless is between peoples with close historical and cultural affinities. Of course the shared experience has often turned out to be a source of contention in the past, but it does not alter the fact that the historical/cultural experience has the potential of becoming a base for understanding and collaboration. Fears about perceived economic, cultural and demographic threats associated with the Turkish population, is not an issue in the public discourse in regard to the Macedonian question.

³⁴Unofficial figures put their number at 6,700. See Kjell Engelbrekt, *"Bulgaria,"* p. 77.

After the Socialist government failed to break the impasse, the new government of UDF, too, was unable to resolve the outstanding disagreements between Sofia and Skopje. Although the old issues seemed the same, the context in which the new government attempted to reach an understanding with Macedonia had changed. Whereas the socialists used to pay lip service to all-European and democratic principles, a solution to the disputes with Skopje proved to be a litmus test of the new government's ability to ascribe to these principles. Furthermore, the new ruling elite in Sofia realized that a successful conclusion to the dispute would bring tangible benefits as it was the only way Bulgaria could possibly meet some of the basic requirements for membership in both the European Union and NATO. In addition, the escalation of the Kosovo conflict made a solution to the bilateral dispute even more imperative. In fact President Stoyanov identified the crisis in Kosovo as a threat to reforms in the country.³⁵ Accordingly, the new government, driven by its desire to render the country's image in the West and fearful of the endemic Balkan instability, became more involved in trying to find a mutually acceptable solution to the dispute. Meetings of groups of experts, deputy foreign ministers, and gatherings of intellectuals from the two countries turned into a frequent occurrence. For a while it seemed settlement was at hand. Yet by mid-1998, the government resigned to the idea that what it considered a weak, pre-election Macedonian government would not jeopardize its electoral chances by compromising with Sofia.

While awaiting the outcome of the Macedonian parliamentary elections, the Bulgarian government nevertheless conducted an active Balkan policy. Alarmed with the growing tensions in the Serbian province of Kosovo, Sofia joined the other Balkan states in formulating a common stand on the crisis. At both multilateral meetings with the leaders of Greece, Romania, and Turkey and at the October summit of Balkan leaders in Antalia, Sofia reiterated its concerns that an escalation of the Kosovo crisis would create a chain reaction to the neighboring countries.³⁶ Bulgaria also enthusiastically embraced the project of setting up a joint Balkan peacekeeping force. The new group, known as the Multinational Peacekeeping Force for South Eastern Europe, will have between

³⁵*BTA*, June 11, 1998.

³⁶On multilateral meetings see *Reuters*, 11 July 1998, 4 October 1998. On the Antalia summit of Balkan leaders see, *Reuters*, 12 October 1998.

3,000 and 4,000 troops divided into 11 mechanized companies and three light infantry companies.³⁷ The force could deploy anywhere in the world under the umbrella of NATO, the WEU, the UN or any other multilateral organization. The peacekeeping force was the culmination of a barrage of bilateral and multilateral meetings of Balkan leaders involving cooperation in areas ranging from trade, to border security, and information exchange.

Nevertheless, further escalation of the crisis in Kosovo once more uncovered the systemic inability of the Balkan states to jointly manage regional conflicts. The crisis also exposed Bulgaria's vulnerability to instabilities in the Balkans. Although pledging support of the Western attempts to deal with Serbia, the Bulgarian leadership warned that another round of economic sanctions against Belgrade might wreck Bulgaria's transition to a market economy and democracy. Yet, when NATO requested overflight rights, President Stoyanov, the government and the Parliament were quick to declare their readiness to give free passage to NATO planes in case it decided to launch strikes against Yugoslavia.³⁸ The government also went to great lengths to assure the public of NATO's commitment to Bulgaria's security and furthermore to present the Bulgarian support of Western pressure on Serbia as a further boost to the growing chances of joining the Alliance. Any Western praise of Sofia's stance on the crisis and any consultation between government officials with NATO representatives were presented as further proof of NATO's commitment to the country's security.

News and analyses of Milosevic-Holbrooke negotiations and the following NATO threats of force against Serbia captured the public attention and exacerbated fears of a widening Balkan conflict. Only 19 percent of the Sofia population regarded the Kosovo conflict as having no consequences for Bulgaria's national security, while as many as 81 percent saw it as representing an immediate threat to the country. In fact, most of those polled feared that Bulgaria is fundamentally defenseless in a threat-rich Balkan environment. Only a minority had apprehensions about possible Serbian retaliation for Sofia's support of NATO air-strikes.³⁹ Significantly, however, despite the

³⁷*Reuters*, 26 September 1998.

³⁸*Reuters*, 11 October 1998.

³⁹Poll taken by Alfa Research, 12-14 October, 1998. Published in *Kapital* newspaper, 10-19-98.

public doubts as to the effectiveness of air-strikes and even regarding the justification for such an action, the great majority of the public supported the policy of the government.

No other elections in the Balkans received such sustained and sometimes passionate attention by the Bulgarian media as the 1998 parliamentary elections in Macedonia. The platforms of the main political parties and their possible policies in case they should form a government were presented and analyzed by all major newspapers. The press barely concealed its preferences for the opposition parties and especially for the coalition between VMRO-DPMNE and the Democratic Alternative. The coalition was perceived as friendly to Bulgaria and capable of breaking the impasse in bilateral relations. Conversely, the ruling Social Democratic Alliance for Macedonia (SDAM), former communists led by Branko Crvenkovski, was seen as unrestrained Bulgarophobes. After losing the first round of the elections, SDAM warned the electorate that the opposition would "destroy our state and hand it to Bulgaria."⁴⁰ The anti-Bulgarian rhetoric was not lost on the Bulgarian media and once more the case was made that the SDAM government was stalling the relations between the two countries. On the day before the second round of elections the Macedonian border authorities refused to grant entry to several accredited Bulgarian journalists. The press, of course, construed this act as a vindication of its claim. Although the Foreign Ministry protested with Skopje that this was a case of unprecedented treatment, Sofia downplayed the significance of the incident. The press, however, had no doubts that the incident was the last attempt of SDAM to gain some political dividend. The Bulgarian elite was also driven by ideological convictions in defining its preferences for a change in Macedonia's leadership: the incumbents were seen as unreformed communists who dared not break with their old Serbian associates.

After the VMRO-DPMNE-DA election victory, most of the Bulgarian media predicted that finally the two countries would be able to work out their differences. A few voices, however, cautioned that although the new ruling coalition intended to improve relations with Greece and Bulgaria, it did not necessarily mean Skopje and Sofia would be able to break the impasse.

There are reasons other than immediate foreign policy calculations that account for Bulgaria's inability to negotiate a solution. Most importantly, the Bulgarian public still regards Macedonian

⁴⁰*Reuters*, 31 October 1998.

demands to be unfair and inconsistent with historical record and realities. In fact there is little understanding, if not a total misunderstanding, of the Macedonian position. Skopje's demands are construed to mean irredenta and claims over significant aspects of Bulgarian history and culture. While for Skopje the Macedonian language is a crucial part of the nationhood, the Bulgarians view demands for its recognition as a challenge to both the tradition and territorial integrity of the nation. Accordingly, the public is always dismayed whenever foreign observers and media suggest that lack of willingness to recognize the Macedonian languages is indicative of Bulgaria's designs on Macedonia's territory. When in a recent interview Richard Holbrooke listed Bulgaria's taking portions of Macedonia as one of the possible scenarios of a wider Balkan conflict, the reactions in the country ranged from indignation to outrage. Yet there is little awareness that constant denials of territorial ambitions coming from the Foreign Ministry, politicians, and media will always fail to mitigate Macedonian fears of just the opposite.

Conclusion

Although in 1989 Bulgaria became able to conduct independent foreign policy, this did not translate into a perception of more security. The unraveling of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union was uncomfortable for the former communists in Sofia. One of the most important goals of consecutive Bulgarian governments was a quest for ensuring national security in the vacuum left by the disintegration of the old international order. The dominant position of the Soviet Union in Bulgaria has both supported the country's security vis-a-vis perceived external threats, as well as enabled the elite to avoid the difficult question of devising an independent foreign policy.

Following Zhivkov's ouster, one of the first steps taken by the communist government was to improve relations with Turkey by putting an end to the assimilation campaign against the Turkish population. This act, however, had the limited effect of correcting past excessive policies rather than fundamentally addressing the security dilemma involved. What makes the problem so acute is the combination of power discrepancies between the countries; the long history of tense, even hostile relations between the two populations; the need to accommodate a minority with a very distinct identity in terms of ethnicity and religion; and finally, the short capacity of the Bulgarian society to withstand challenges of various kinds, given the weakness of the nascent democratic institutions and

the deteriorating socio-economic conditions.

It is remarkable that being under such political duress, the MRF remained by Balkan standards a moderate political player. This is even more surprising given that the steady outmigration of Turkish population resulted in drain of professional and intellectual elites so needed in the operation of any party. Apparently much credit must go to the movement's chair since its creation, Ahmed Dogan, whose skillful leadership has much to do with the party's ability to adopt to challenges. MRF has been very careful to distance itself from calls that would imply territorial separatism. Indeed, members of the MRF, including parliamentary deputies, have been expelled from the movement for professing nationalism incompatible with the party's program. This policy, and to a certain extent the BSP pressure on the Turkish population have kept the party united, despite the proliferation of more, though unregistered, parties based on Turkish ethnicity.⁴¹ The MRF has, however, limits of its capacity. The growing deterioration of the economic situation in the predominantly Turkish populated areas, continuing outmigration to Turkey, and endless pressure from the BSP might radicalize the Turkish community which would compel the movement to forcefully push for additional resources and participation in governance of the country, or even for some kind of autonomy. Another factor that might radicalize the movement is an eventual political isolation. In the post-1989 years although all political parties felt ambivalent about the MRF, in most of the cases they actively interacted with it. With the Socialists holding majority in the Parliament, the opposition's role has been marginalized to the point of making it irrelevant in the legislative process. Yet, this fact once again turned into the MRF's favor as the UDF, needing all the support it can get, continues to cooperate with the movement. The most recent case of joint policies is the agreement signed by all opposition parties in the parliament, including the MRF, to support a single presidential candidate in the 1996 elections.

Another factor that might adversely affect the fragile relationship between Bulgarians and Muslims is the role of newly assertive Turkey in the region. Bulgarians looked uneasily at the fundamentalist rhetoric voiced by the Welfare Party during the last parliamentary elections in Turkey. To see the party actually participating in the government once again made politicians worry

⁴¹See Fikrie Salitova, "BSP United Muslim Parties," in *Demokratiya*, 14 December, 1995 (FBIS-EEU-95-243, 19 December, 1995).

about military imbalances in the region. Should Ankara become even more involved with the Turkish problems in Bulgaria, even out of well intentioned concerns, Bulgarians would feel extremely threatened, and the interethnic relations would deteriorate.

The acute political and economic crisis in late 1996 and early 1997 seem to indicate that it is international conditions and processes rather than domestic developments that will define the country's security in the future. The turbulent politics of the last two years did not lead to increased interethnic tensions and yet, in Bulgarians' perceptions the national security did not improve. Rising confrontation in Kosovo, simmering tensions between Turkey and Greece and, what is more important, the rebuff from both NATO and the EU heightened perceptions of isolation and exposure to threats.

Bulgarians were disappointed but hardly surprised by their unsuccessful bid to join NATO. One of the first acts of the Stefan Sofiansky's interim government was to declare Sofia's intention of seeking membership in the Alliance. The new government of Ivan Kostov made participation in NATO one of its highest foreign policy priorities. The BSP was the only party in the Parliament to oppose the part of the government's program related to Bulgaria's wish to join NATO. Compared to the other aspiring members, Bulgaria has appeared to have much more ambivalent attitude toward membership in NATO. This uncertainty stems from the lack of domestic consensus on the foreign policy priorities of the country. Differences in visions of ensuring national security follow ideological lines with the anticommunist parties strongly supporting membership in the Alliance as a crucial objective, and former communists reluctant to join it unless the organization changes its nature and becomes an all-inclusive European security system. The BSP has always insisted that any NATO enlargement would have to take into consideration Russia's security concerns and interests. Thus it is impossible to speak of a common position on the country's attitude toward the Alliance that indicates any continuity and stability in Sofia's security policies. A lack of domestic consensus upon security policy and heightened perceptions of external threats ensures future challenges to Bulgaria's capacity to deal with regional and domestic instabilities.