

Laura Olson Osterman

Associate Professor

University of Colorado, Boulder

**Islamic Revival and Folk Revival among Rural Bulgarian Muslims in the Post-Communist  
Period**

April 2 – July 2, 2013

Bulgaria

**Research Abstract:** How do Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks) define their relationship to Islam and locate their own identities in a newly Europeanized Bulgarian society? While Bulgaria's media represent Bulgarian Muslims as a homogenous population ripe for "conversion" to radical Islamic sects due to their isolation and backwardness, in fact there is great diversity and self-determination in their Islamic practice and belief. Traditional folk Islam and modern Islamic revivalism exist side by side, and are not mutually exclusive; they coexist with a burgeoning ethno-religious identity movement. In response to nearly a 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. 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, technology-savvy members. Pomaks, as native Europeans, are actively constructing themselves as Muslim Europeans, showing themselves to be an important presence on the Bulgarian and European cultural, economic and political scenes.

**Research Goals:** My study of the intersection of folk and religious revival in contemporary Bulgaria offers insight into the ways individuals define their ethno-religious identities and locate themselves as Muslims in a newly Europeanized Bulgarian society. My goals as I embarked upon this project included the following:

- Discover how Bulgarian Muslims refer to their ethno-religious identity and learn what markers of identity they hold as significant.
- Investigate “grassroots” Islamic revival, in which social groups, families and individuals choose to reinvigorate Islam in Bulgaria by practicing and transmitting it. How are they doing this? What values and beliefs do their practices promote, and why? How is grassroots revival related to programs and efforts sponsored by official channels (i.e. the office of the national Mufti)? Who are the leaders of these practices? How is folk Islam distinct from official Islam, and are connections being established between the two?
- Investigate performance of folk tradition among Pomaks -- both the intentional, scripted revival that appears on stage, and the spontaneous practices that take place off stage. Find out who leads and sponsors the organized activities -- urban intellectuals, locals, musicians, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs? What activities are conducted? Who is involved in these activities? What are their reasons for being involved? What symbols of specifically Pomak heritage may be seen in performances on or off stage? What connections can be seen between on-stage and spontaneous tradition?
- Investigate connections between Islamic and folk revival. For Muslim Bulgarians, does revival of Islam involve preservation and revival of folk tradition? Or are the two separate and/or mutually exclusive?
- Investigate how generational differences play a role in determining participation in folk and religious activities in these communities.

My study's ultimate purposes are: to deepen and update scholarly understanding of Bulgarian Slavic Muslim identity; to investigate the particular characteristics of Islam and Islamism as lived and practiced in Bulgaria; to understand Bulgarian Islamic identity in the context of Muslim communities in Europe and the Balkans; to promote scholarly knowledge of a neglected instance of minority ethnic/religious self-definition.

**Research Activities:** During the research period I studied intensively two communities (Draginovo, where I spent a total of 32 days, and Breznitsa, 11 days) and spent between one-half day and five days in 16 others (villages of Debren, Pletena, Bukovo, Lazhnitsa, Pashovi, Grashevo, Trigrad, Ribnovo, Dubnitsa, and Varbina, and cities of Kostandovo, Velingrad, Smolyan, Madan, Rudozem, and Chepintsi,). All of these communities are located in South West/South Central Bulgaria, in the heart of traditionally Bulgarian Muslim territory. Because the groups and individuals I was following attended and performed at Pomak-themed events in Turkey and Greece, I also visited one village (Akoren) and two cities (Edirne and Chanakkale) in Turkey and one village (Echinos) and a city (Ksanthi) in Greece, each with significant Pomak populations. In all of the above-mentioned places 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.

During this research period I focused considerable attention on performed (staged) folklore and religious events. I attended (and video recorded) eight festivals with significant folk performance components (three of which were sponsored by political parties) in traditionally Muslim areas, and talked with performers, organizers, and juries. I also met with and attended rehearsals of six amateur folk music and dance groups in schools and community centers, and attended a 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of one of these groups (Velingrad). The latter was not a

Muslim group, but was located in an area that formerly had Muslim population. It provided important points of comparison with the activities I saw in Muslim villages and towns.

The organized religious events I attended included a ceremony in Draginovo on the holiday Gergyovden (St. George's Day, May 6) for visiting Turkish guests whose families had emigrated from that village in 1913. This complex and multilayered event had folk, popular, and religious elements: it included a grand opening ceremony for a commemorative well marking the 100th anniversary of the migration; a folk song performance; a communal prayer conducted by the Grand Mufti of Bulgaria Mustafa Hadji (who lives in Draginovo); and a local ritual involving exchange of decorated eggs, followed by a young people's horo (round dance) to live music by local electronic "folk" musicians. Also in Draginovo, that same weekend (May 5), I attended a religious evening in the village cultural center to honor the prophet Mohammed. Featured speakers of this event were three regional Imams and Grand Musfi Mustafa Hadji. Also performing at this event was the group "Vest" (News), who play a new (for Bulgaria) genre of music, which I'll call religious folk-rock (sung in Bulgarian). In fact this musical group was featured at three religious events I attended, in Breznitsa, Draginovo, and Pashovo. At a later date I interviewed Vest's musicians, included the former and current imams of Madan, in their hometown. In Ribnovo and Echinis (Greece) I was able to observe "hatim dua" ceremonies put on by Islamic religious schools. At these festive events, students recite prepared passages from the Koran and put on skits, recite poetry, and sing religious songs (depending upon the location, in Bulgarian, Arabic, and/or Turkish). I also watched Koran-reading lessons for children in both Ribnovo and Draginovo. In Pashovo I attended a celebration for the opening of a new mosque, which included both performances of local children and the religious folk-rock group from Madan, as well as a "kurban" (sacrifice) offering.

In addition to investigating staged folklore and religious presentations, I also studied local folk and religious events that were not specifically performed for an audience. These

included three weddings (two in Draginovo, one in Breznitsa), one celebration of the signing of the Muslim nikyah (wedding document) (the celebration is called “chestito,” or “congratulations,” in Bukovo), one event welcoming a new baby (Draginovo), the spring holidays Blagovest and Gergyovden (Draginovo), two high school graduation events (Draginovo and Pashovo), several meetings of an informal women’s Islamic group (Draginovo), and three “kurban” (sacrifice) celebrations (one Christian, in Kostandovo, and two Muslim, in Echinov and Varbina).

My presence during spring was fortuitous, since Bulgaria conducted a national election on May 12. For the first time in Bulgaria’s history, a handful of candidates identified themselves as “Pomaks” and campaigned for Pomak votes. I was able to see how folk music and dance performance was used by all political parties, but particularly by those parties active in areas with high Pomak population (the DPS, known as the “Turkish party,” and BSP, Socialist party). The heightened awareness of politics among my informants during this time lent an unexpected dimension to my research, and several of my encounters and interviews focused upon the ways that Pomaks are choosing to situate themselves in the contemporary political system and in public life.

During my research period (as well as before and after), I kept in touch with informants and learned of new activities and plans via Facebook. Because my informants used Facebook (and to a lesser extent Youtube) to organize and promote activities and to memorialize performances, this tool allowed me to be not only a close observer but also a participant in the Pomaks’ unfolding process of building an ethno-religious identity.

**Important Research Findings:** In Bulgaria in recent years Pomak intelligentsia have begun increasing and broadening their ethnic and religious activism. An important subgroup of the intelligentsia is now interested in promoting the Pomak ethno-religious identity not only

nationally but throughout the Balkans. Another subgroup continues to maintain and establish ties with Islamic groups from Western Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East, and to revive, promote, and reconstruct Islam within Bulgaria. Both groups are using online social media to attain their goals of making and maintaining connections and networks, educating, gaining new constituents, and organizing and memorializing events. By and large, while they may share constituents, attend some of each other's events, and connect on social media, the two groups do not overlap in their goals. In particular, leaders of Islamic revival in Bulgaria are not inclined to participate in activities specifically promoting Pomak ethnicity: Islamic ideology values unity in the *ummah*, while many of these leaders believe such nationalistic movements tend to separate people. Nonetheless, where they deem events to have a Muslim character or where events support and promote an Islamic identity, they do participate actively. For their part, on the other hand, leaders of the Pomak identity movement do maintain connections with Islamic leaders and support their activities. A third subgroup of Bulgarian Muslim intellectuals (likely the largest in number, but not vocal) is oriented towards European secular culture and identity, and currently has only passing interest in the two ethnic and religious movements. However, there is anecdotal evidence these European-oriented intellectuals may gradually become more attracted to Pomak cultural or religious movements due to disillusionment with the Bulgarian government, the difficult economic situation, rampant discrimination, etc.

The Pomak identity movement is remarkable for the breadth and intensity of its activities. The main NGO I studied was the European Institute Pomak, which was officially registered as a cultural organization in Smolyan, Bulgaria in September, 2012 (<http://en.eipomak.eu/>). This group is undertaking political actions (despite its status as a non-political organization) which have never before been performed in the name of "Pomaks" in Bulgaria, including: lobbying for recognition of themselves 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 getting Bulgarians (including Muslims themselves) used to the very idea that Pomaks, traditionally 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 2013), 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. European Institute-Pomak (EI Pomak)’s response has been to publicize 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. At the time of my departure from Bulgaria, 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 exception 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.

Many Pomak villages are home to intellectuals who, although not formally associated with the EI Pomak NGO, also 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. One man from Breznitsa authors numerous posts on Facebook about songs, traditions, legends, and individuals from his village. He and his sons have made videos and photo essays. He has established and maintains connections with 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 is true 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.

These leaders and their followers desire recognition by Bulgarian and foreign media representatives and scholars, as long as these are sympathetic to their cause. The village intellectuals follow the work of such scholars and journalists, and will cut off access to anyone whom they suspect of writing what they perceive as untruths (i.e., as they would call it, repeating Communist-era "lies" such as the myth that Pomaks are Bulgarians who were forcibly converted to Islam during the Ottoman empire). Thus, these native, homegrown intellectuals are creating an alternative discourse and educating a generation through unregulated, unofficial means. Their grassroots work is perhaps the most important means to achieve a knowledge base and broader recognition of the Pomak ethnicity. Such activist work is being carried out mostly in the Muslim villages North, East, and Southeast of 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.

If Pomak ethno-religious activists are operating partly in the "underground" and partly in the public sphere, that is true for Pomak Islamic religious leaders as well. With regard to some

topics, religious leaders practice caution and secrecy, in part due to recent political events intensifying the anti-Islamic climate in the country. In September 2012, 13 imams were arrested and charged in Pazardjik District Court with spreading radical Islam in Bulgaria. The case against them is ongoing, and as one Bulgarian scholar put it, the charges of spreading anti-democratic, pro-Sharia ideology are impossible to prove, since it is unclear in what ways “radical Islam” is distinct from Islam itself.<sup>1</sup> The imams have been accused of reading and spreading literature with a Wahhabi-Salafist ideology, meeting with foreign Wahhabi representatives, and taking a firm line on religious questions in the community (for example, insisting on conformity with Islamic burial rites). Grand Mufti Mustafa Hadji, called as a witness for the trial, said, “there is no such concept as radical Islam. The Shariah 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). The trial itself is indicative of the low level of religious freedom and tolerance nationally, and has been taken by Bulgarian Muslim leaders as an attempt to scare Muslims and divide Muslims and Christians in the country. The media, in particular nationalist cable television stations such as SKAT and Alfa, have been playing up this topic, with sensational reports of anything that can be construed as evidence of Islamic radicalism (in one televised report, for example, the 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). As a result, many religious Muslims are very sensitive to the possibility that their words will be misconstrued, taken out of context, misreported, falsified, etc. Some Muslims were reluctant or unwilling to speak with me and several religious leaders refused to allow me to record conversations (although I did take notes). Some gave me glib answers to questions pertaining to affiliations with foreign Islamic

---

<sup>1</sup> In other words, to a foreign, untrained observer some of the doctrines and practices of Islam, when taken out of context and poorly understood, may seem “anti-democratic,” when in fact the reasons for these practices and beliefs are supported from within Islamic philosophy.

organizations, use of donations from foreign Islamic organizations to build mosques and sponsor programs, etc.

The Bulgarian media would have the public believe that many of these communities have embraced fundamentalist Islam wholesale, 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. I observed that those who participated in religious events were genuine believers who had chosen to increase their knowledge of their religion. While Islam is generally well regarded, the number of regular participants in religious events is fairly small; I estimated the rate of active participation (regular attendance of mosque or classes) to be between 2 and 5% in any given village. Nonetheless, organized activities continue. Religious revival has not been as affected as folk music and dance revival by economic woes. Mosques are being built and rebuilt. Programs for children and adults are ongoing. These programs are not necessarily signs of foreign-imported, fundamentalist Islam, however. Rather, they are akin to reconstructions and revivals of religion (for example, Reform or Renewal Judaism) that one may see today in America. In Muslim villages, for example, there are programs for children to study Islam and the Qur'an after school and during the summer, and the classes put on periodic demonstrations of their learning including reciting of passages from the Qur'an in Arabic, singing of religious songs, reciting of religious poetry, and skits demonstrating



religious principles.

**Figure 1 "Hatim dua" Qu'ran recital in Ribново, BG, April, 2013**

In addition, religious leaders engage professional musicians and clergy to put on religious events for the local population. Some communities have religious groups for adults, at which people get together to listen to presentations and ask questions of more knowledgeable members of the community. Such events abounded during April, which is celebrated as the month of the prophet Mohammed's birth. I did not observe Ramadan (Ramazan) services, but was told that during Ramadan the percentage of active participants in religious activities is significantly greater than during the rest of the year.



**Figure 2 Children perform at opening of rebuilt Mosque, Pashovo, BG, June, 2013**

Like the cultural leaders, Pomak religious leaders aim to educate their constituents; both see danger not only in Bulgarian mainstream academic and media sources which paint Pomaks /Muslims either as traitorous Bulgarians or as the unfortunate victims of Ottoman oppression, but also in European popular culture which teaches young people hedonistic, individualistic values. The religious leaders advocate Islamic practices including headscarves and modest attire for

young women, chaste behavior, and other values which are not always shared (or emphasized to the same degree) by the Pomak activists.

Although they may disagree on points of execution such as dress, gender roles, chastity, all of these leaders – religious and cultural -- find value in the customs of their forebears and preach respect for elders and tradition. To be sure, clergy offer modern alternatives to some village religious customs in efforts, over time, to change the traditions (such as traditional dress styles, the ritual significance of traditional home-prepared dishes, and the means by which people determine the date on which a holiday should be celebrated). They work to diminish the importance of folk Islam, and to entrench practices held in common by Muslims all over the world and dress fashions from nearby Muslim countries, to replace the old village traditions and traditional dress. This is a common phenomenon in many religions: clergy schooled in the doctrines of religion tend to view folk religion as “improper” or inferior. I did not find evidence of Saudi Wahhabism/Salafism (such as preaching of hatred of democracy, Christians, the U.S., and the West, advocacy of violence). All of these leaders advocated tolerance, including tolerance towards the West, other ethnicities and Muslims, and all condemned violence. They defined *jihad* as the effort one makes to perfect oneself as a Muslim believer (an internal struggle), rather than as a war one wages against enemies of Islam (both are accepted meanings of the word in Islam). Although these religious and cultural leaders do not view their religious rights as protected and do not view the Bulgarian government as treating Muslim believers fairly, I never heard violence advocated as a solution to these problems. Rather, in their speeches and classes religious leaders emphasized religious education, knowing/reading the Qu’ran, and self-perfection, as well as active intercommunity involvement (for example, leaders organized buses

to transport members of one congregation to attend the events put on by another congregation).



**Figure 3 Ali Hayraddin speaks at opening of mosque in Pashovo, BG, 2013**

Community members themselves showed a great range of attitudes towards religion, Islamic tradition, and changes in Islamic practice. In each community there were many people who greatly valued the traditions that had been handed down by their ancestors -- that is, folk Islam. Many middle-aged people were proud of their orientation towards tradition and their conformity to the expectations of elders. For example, middle-aged and elder women often worked together to produce the traditional textiles and foods necessary for lifecycle events such as weddings and



new-baby celebrations.

**Figure 4 Bride and her mother with dowry behind in Draginovo, BG, April, 2013**

In all of the communities, the traditions were not static and unchanging: the ways of conducting these rituals had changed in recent years to suit the practical needs of participants. On the other

hand, there were always people in each village, generally young people, but also professional middle-aged women, who were open to changing tradition for personal desires. Some of these were Westernizers, who wanted more freedoms (or valued their existing freedoms) and who valued styles of dress and behavior from Western popular culture; they did not reject Islam or tradition, but simply found ways to incorporate Western fashions and behaviors within the framework of daily life and rituals. Others sought ways to express a deep level of belief and adherence to Islamic principles, and were often very interested in styles of dress and ritual from Turkey and/or the Middle East. Such young women and girls wore imported Muslim fashions involving headdresses and long skirts, often in satin-weave fabrics. Sometimes these were combined with elements of traditional dress. In general, among both religious and Westernizing young women, there was great interest in expressing oneself through fashion. Both creativity and conformity were at play here. It was not unheard of for elements of all three cultural strains (Western, traditional, and Islamic) to be present in the dress and/or wardrobe of a given young



woman.

**Figure 5 Various dress styles in Pashovo, BG, May, 2013**

Generally, though, if a religious young women adhered to principles of body coverage that were more strict than those followed by her mother, it often reflected her very serious professional

interest in Islam. Often these girls intended to study Islam in one of the Bulgarian Islamic high schools or abroad, and dreamed of returning to teach it within Bulgaria.

**Policy Implications and Recommendations:** During and following its 2007 accession to the EU, Bulgaria has steadfastly refused to acknowledge the existence of Bulgarian Muslims as a protected minority, thus essentially denying their right to ethnic self-identification (Rechel 2008a). Bulgarian Muslim cultural and religious activists are intensely conscious of this fact, and have been attempting to raise national consciousness about this issue. However, they face an uphill battle. One of the reasons for the Bulgarian government's refusal is the fraught nature of the Pomak identity question: since the 1920s the official line has been that Bulgarian Muslims are Bulgarians who were converted to Islam -- thus they are not a minority, they are part of the majority. Much of the scholarship on this population from the 1950s onward has set out to prove this thesis. The Bulgarian government has not had incentive to accept this population as a minority, for many reasons (including the prevailing nationalistic ideology and historic lack of agreement among Pomaks). Nonetheless, many (perhaps most) Pomaks do not see themselves as part of the majority. Decades of governmental attempts to force assimilation on Muslims, to make them see themselves as Bulgarians, have not worked, and in some cases have created more antagonism. Pomak activism has been increasing in recent years, and my study shows it is currently on the rise. Although there is currently considerable heterogeneity in Pomaks' understanding of their history, origins and ethnic self-identification, social media provides an ideal medium for self-organizing and unification. It is clear that Pomaks will not allow the Pomak question to be swept under the rug, and will overcome their own differences in order to obtain rights and recognition. If the Bulgarian government continues to ignore and/or repress Bulgarian Muslims, while their activism gains momentum and funding through social media self-organizing and contact with foreign cultural and religious organizations, the result may be an

intensification of the current climate of antagonism and divisiveness. On the other hand, legal recognition of the Pomak minority and protection of their rights can present Bulgaria as a democratic and forward-thinking state, and can set an example for the other states with significant Pomak populations (Macedonia, Kosovo, Greece, Turkey).

The special expert to the United Nations Human Rights Council recommended recognition of the Pomak and Macedonian minorities in January, 2012 (McDougall 2012), as did the Commissioner on Human Rights of the Council of Europe (Hammarberg, 2012) and the deputy who reported on Bulgaria to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in January, 2013 (Volonte 2013). The latter, Mr. Luca Volonte of Italy, commented in addition that “recognition by the State as a minority is not a prerequisite to qualify for the protection of the Framework Convention and therefore the authorities should be urged to engage in a dialogue with persons belonging to groups interested in the protection offered by the Framework Convention.” By recognizing the NGO European Institute Pomak, the Bulgarian government has fulfilled this recommendation only in letter, not in spirit, as the National Security Agency has continued to treat this organization as an illegal and dangerous one. In fact, while some of EI Pomak’s historical theories may be difficult for Bulgarians to swallow, there is no harm in allowing their expression and publication. US government representatives should encourage the Bulgarian government to officially recognize the Pomak minority, so that there can be no question whether their rights are protected under the Bulgarian Constitution.

In recent years the US Embassy has continued to advocate for religious freedom within Bulgaria by meeting with Muslim and government representatives, including, in 2012, the Mayor of Sofia, Muslim defendants in the Pazardjik trial, and residents of Breznitsa (US Department of State 2012). Such support is needed because it gives the Bulgarian government a strong signal that abuses and discrimination will not be tolerated. It also shows Bulgarian Muslim leaders that the United States is not anti-Islamic, and helps to counter propaganda (passed on by Islamic

organizations and posted by Bulgarian leaders on the internet) promoting the opposite point of view. Such meetings and programs should continue, and should be intensified.

**Co-Curricular Activity:** Some of my plans for co-curricular activity had to be postponed, and due to my intense travel schedule especially during May and June, I was not able to reschedule them before leaving. I had planned to give a lecture on my research at South West University in Blagoevgrad, but it was cancelled because the husband of my contact (Dr. Milena Benovska) fell ill and died, and she took an extended leave of absence from work. I did meet with Dr. Benovska twice in Sofia and will see her this November, when she and I give papers on a US conference panel (ASEEES) that I organized. I also met with four other scholars during my stay (Veselka Toncheva, Albena Georgieva, Georgi Garov, and Lyuben Botusharov). I had intended to give a presentation on American holidays or the American education system at the High School in Draginovo village, Velingrad area, but this was cancelled due to the teachers' schedule of exams and graduation preparations. I hope to reschedule my presentations during a future trip to Bulgaria.

**Conclusions:** While media representations present Bulgarian Muslims as homogenous populations that are ripe for "conversion" to radical Islamic sects due to their isolation and backwardness, in fact these communities show great diversity and self-determination in Islamic practice and belief. Islamic observance in these communities ranges from traditional "folk Islam" to a modern form of Sunni Islam, and often a combination of the two can be observed. Community Islamic leaders, often educated abroad (in Turkey or the Middle East), bring a modern and global sensibility to these communities, and educate their constituents on how to bring an informed Islamic practice and deep religious belief into daily life. Local people tend to view the degree of religiosity as a personal decision, and although there can be (in certain

communities) social pressure to conform to external manifestations of belonging (such as dress or participation in rituals), everyone I spoke to denied that there was pressure “from above.” Rather, I saw evidence that there were many different levels (and styles) of authentic, self-driven participation in religious practices.

Historically marginalized and pushed away from intellectual professions, Pomaks have not been able to develop a native viewpoint within the Bulgarian academy. Nonetheless, today Pomak villages and towns are home to native, autonomous intellectuals with distinct ideas about their religion, identity, history, politics, and ethnicity. Community leaders are now 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 DPS party (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).

**Plans for Future Research Agenda/Presentations and Publications:** In November, 2012 I will deliver a paper at the Association for Slavic and East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) annual conference in Boston, entitled “Folklore and Social Media: Reinventing Pomak Ethnic Identity in Contemporary Bulgaria”; afterwards, I plan to publish this paper in a scholarly journal such as *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* or *Journal of American Folklore*. I will also write a paper for a workshop and edited volume on “Localised Islam(s)” (organized by Dr. Arolda

Elbasani at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, European University Institute, Florence, Italy) entitled “Speaking of Values: Bulgaria's Unofficial Islamic Leaders.” I plan to publish a scholarly monograph with the working title of “Islam, Identity and the Internet: Bulgaria’s Pomaks between Tradition and Modernity.”

## **Bibliography**

Alekova, Elena, 2013. “Absurdite Bulgarski” *Duma* 7 May, 2013 (No. 103)  
<http://duma.bg/node/53675>

Dorsunski, Mekhmed, n.d. *Istoriia na Akhrenite (pomatsite)*. No publication information.

Hammarberg Thomas, 2012. Commissioner of Human Rights, Council of Europe, Letter to Mr Nickolay MLADENOV, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bulgaria, 24 January 2012. CommHR/SG/sf 002-2012. <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1909473>

McDougall, Gay, 2012. Report to the Council for Human Rights of the United Nations General Assembly, January 3rd, 2012 A/HRC/19/56/Add.2/03.01.2012

Mollov, Efrem, 2012. *Ima li budeshte velika Bulgariia ili zashto be skrita istoriata na pomatsite*. Smolyan: Evropeiskii Institut -- Pomak.

Mollov, Efrem et al, 2013. REPORT on the “Status of the Pomaks – an Ethnic Minority in Bulgaria.” Presented at press conference, Sofia, 6 February 2013  
<http://en.eipomak.eu/?p=271>

News.bg. 4 July 2013. “Niama radikalni islam, obiavi glavniat ni miuftia.”  
[http://news.ibox.bg/news/id\\_851498126](http://news.ibox.bg/news/id_851498126)

*Plovdiv-online*, 2012. “DANS raspitva chlenove ne institute Pomak.” 18 September, 2012.  
<http://www.plovdiv-online.com/plovdiv/item/39890-d%D0%B0ns-r%D0%B0zpitv%D0%B0-chlenove-n%D0%B0-institut-pom%D0%B0k>

Rechel, Bernd. 2008. “What Has Limited the EU’s Impact on Minority Rights in Accession Countries?” *East European Politics and Societies* 22, 171-191.

Redzhepov, Ismen. 2012. *Pomatsite i Balkanskite voini v Rodopite 1912-1913*. Smolyan: Evropeiskii Institut -- Pomak.

US Department of State, 2012. International Religious Freedom Report for 2012. Bulgaria.  
<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2012&dliid=208298>

Volonte, Luca, 2013. "Post-monitoring Dialogue with Bulgaria." Report, Doc. 13085 | 04  
January 2013. <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=19244&lang=en>

Zhelev, Zlatko. 2012. "Voina v Rodopite! Pomatsite: Khristiiani ili miusulmani?" *Sofia utre* 2  
November, 2012. [http://www.sofiautre.bg/2012/11/02/140810-voyna\\_v\\_rodopite\\_pomatsite\\_hristiani\\_ili\\_myusulmani](http://www.sofiautre.bg/2012/11/02/140810-voyna_v_rodopite_pomatsite_hristiani_ili_myusulmani)