
BORDER TERRITORIES, BORDER PEOPLE: THE BULGARIAN TOWN OF ZLATOGRAĐ AS A BORDER AND A BRIDGE

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Abstract

Highly disputed, the Bulgarian-Greek border near Bulgarian town of Zlatograd divided the region of Rhodope Mountain for almost eight decades in the twentieth century. Vigilantly guarded under socialism, the border was an effective means for maintaining state sovereignty. Inhabiting areas near the historically contested border, the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria and the Pomaks in Greece were perceived as a threat to the national security of both countries. Boundary position, also symbolically, is the main characteristics of the Bulgarian Muslims. The cultural and linguistic community on both sides of the border was also split. Establishing state borderline after the World War I destroyed the pastoral economy of the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria by “cutting” their access to winter pastures near the Aegean Sea. The isolation of the Muslim population in the frontier Greek villages led to the formation of two different identities among the heirs of the former total Muslim community. Under socialism, the border location of Zlatograd brought economic advantages for the local community. While most Bulgarian Muslims in Zlatograd declare at present Bulgarian identity, the isolation and the Greek assimilation policies have influenced the formation of other, different strategies among their neighbours south of the border fence. Working together in the socialist enterprises, the specific culture of the small Balkan town, raising the level of education among Bulgarian Muslims, the imposition of secular values: all that led to the convergence between the Christian and Muslim population of Zlatograd during socialism and postsocialism. By skillfully managing the cultural heritage of the region after 2001 and developing of cultural tourism, Zlatograd community has partly offset the postsocialist economic difficulties. The border location of the town again became an economic stimulus at the end of the 1990s through the funds of the European Union. Borders transform themselves into bridges near

Zlatograd after opening the border checkpoint in 2010, by reviving trade, tourism, cross-border cooperation and through the resumption of everyday communication between people on both sides of the border fence. Destroyed in the past, this local community in the southeastern periphery of Europe has been reborn for contacts and new cooperation.

Key words: *borders, Bulgarian Muslims, identity, urban culture, cultural heritage*

Stoyo Šiškov, an excellent expert on the region of the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria, enthusiastically wrote in 1892 the following words about the residents of Zlatograd, today a town located on the Bulgarian-Greek border and called Dară-dere until 1934¹:

The cleanliness, tidiness and integrity in their family life cannot be compared with any Bulgarian village or town in the entire Gyomyurdžinski sanžak.² [...] Dară-derts³ are respected and loved everywhere and by everyone, who has had the chance to meet them. Their municipal government is such as to make one admire its works.⁴

This observation is largely true for the present day Zlatograd and its inhabitants, regardless of the past more than a hundred and twenty years since the end of the XIX century – a period marked by historical vicissitudes and demographic transformations.

A brief introduction

We remind the observation of Stoyo Šiškov because it has important implications for understanding the causes of the religious tolerance among the people of Zlatograd, indentifying themselves to varying degrees with Christian and Muslim cultural and religious traditions. We argue that tolerance is formed under the influence of several factors, most notably the culture of the small Balkan town and the specific impact of the state Bulgarian-Greek border on the economic and cultural development of the town and its hinterland.

The main objective of this work is to investigate the importance of the border in the everyday life of modern Zlatograd. Here we will discuss the real physical

¹ Mičev, Koledarov 1973.

² Sandžak (Turkish) – a military-administrative territorial unit in the Ottoman Empire (approximately – a district).

³ *Dară-derts* – name of the residents of *Dară-dere*.

⁴ Šiškov 1892: 8.

borders as well as the symbolic boundaries between the communities in the terms of Fredrik Barth.

In accordance with the nationalist ambitions of Bulgaria and Greece and the military conflicts between them, the border was highly contested and repeatedly remodeled in the twentieth century by political and military means. Its most disputed and changed segment is located precisely in the region between Zlatograd (Bulgaria) and Xanthi (Greece) and these changes have left a significant mark on the population of the region. Zlatograd and the region (Darā Dere), however, were subject to administrative changes earlier, in the previous historical period of the Ottoman rule.

In the second half of the XIX century Darā-dere was a center of *kaaza*⁵ whose contours and population changed repeatedly. As of 1882 it was the only town in the *kaaza* located at its center, and was the only settlement inhabited by a small enclave of Bulgarian Christians in coexistence with Bulgarian Muslims (“Pomaks”)⁶. At that time the *kaaza* covered an extensive area of 96 villages populated by Muslim Bulgarians (“Pomaks”) and Bulgarian Turks. Following the Ottoman administrative reforms, the *kaaza* was divided into two: Darā-derenska and Dzhebelska. In 1888 Darā-derenska *kaaza* was already smaller – it covered 57 villages with a total population of 21 174 people⁷.

Each historical tremor during the dramatic XX century left traces on the local society of Zlatograd and its hinterland. After the two Balkan wars Zlatograd was annexed to the Bulgarian state together with other parts of the Rhodope region; the *kaaza* then covered the town and 28 villages (on both sides of today Bulgarian-Greek border) with a total population of 16 990 people⁸. In 1912 the population of Darā-dere already comprised of 120 families of Bulgarian Christians and 200 families of “Pomaks”⁹.

Darā-dere was situated at the border only after the end of World War I when the Bulgarian-Greek state border split into two the territory and the population of the former *kaaza*; its southern half fell within the territory of Greece and Darā-

⁵ Kaaza – a district (Turkish).

⁶ A large and growing body of literature is dedicated to the Bulgarian Muslims (“Pomaks”). A very short list could not miss the review of the literature issued before 1998, see Georgieva 1998: 286–308; see also: Georgieva 1999: 59; Konstantinov 1997; Karagiannis 1997; Brunnbauer 1999: 38. For the literature from the last 15 years see Ivanova 2002; Neuburger 2004; Груев 2003, 2008; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008; Ghodsee 2010. On the “Pomaks” in Greece see Tsibiridou 1995: 53–70; Tsibiridou 1998: 185–196; Tsibiridou 2000; Markou 2002: 41–53; Michail 2003; Steinke, Voss 2007. Among the new titles we could note Voss, Telbizova-Sack 2010; Троева 2011; Ivanova 2013; Petkova 2015.

⁷ Šiškov 1892: 4, 5.

⁸ Miletič 1918: 295.

⁹ *ibid.*: 295.

dere became a border territory. During World War II (in the period 1941–1944) the Bulgarian troops occupied the territories of Western Thrace in Greece¹⁰. This led to another change of borders, which in this period did not pass near Zlatograd.

After World War II, however, this town again became a border settlement. The border and its historical shifts were factors that in many ways cut into the daily lives of people on both sides for decades on end: in the political, economic and cultural development of the geographical area which it divided. The problem is interwoven in the context of the identities of the Bulgarian Muslims: a topic which we will discuss further on; on the other hand, the borderline of Zlatograd is related to the transformation of the cultural heritage of the town into a tourist resource since the beginning of the new millennium onwards.

What's the influence of the Bulgarian-Greek border in the lives of the people from Zlatograd? How has this influence changed in different historical periods? These are the key research questions that are asked in this work. We will seek their answers mostly by analyzing data from ethnographic observations placed in a broader socio-historical context. The fieldwork in Zlatograd was carried out from 2004 to 2014 inclusive, by five short trips, each lasting from several days to a week. The ethnographic methods include observation, field diary, 24 auto-biographical interviews, numerous informal interviews, photographs, videos. In addition we studied written sources (press reports, archival documents, including a personal archive).¹¹ Our fieldwork is complemented by the experience of one of the authors (Iliya Nedin) during his one-year long military service in Zlatograd in the Bulgarian border troops in 1979.

In this text, we mention our interlocutors under fictional names, for ethical reasons.

In theoretical terms the analysis is based on the literature about “border studies“ which delineates the power, political and institutional aspects of the border as well as its function as an incentive for the development of specific cultural practices.¹² „The border environment“¹³ is characterized, besides the control of the national states over their territories, also by “separateness and otherness, i.e. to be culturally different from the core of the majority population”; areas of territorial and international conflicts, but also adaptation through cultural heterogeneity and functioning as zones of migration¹⁴. Besides being barriers, borders can be

¹⁰ Yonchev 1993.

¹¹ The personal archive of Konstantin Periyov. We express our gratitude to Mr. Periyov for his cooperation.

¹² For the trends in the anthropological discourse on borders and borderline see Vukov 2013: 186–190. See also Luleva 2006.

¹³ Martinez 1994: 8–14.

¹⁴ Ibid.; Donnan, Wilson 1999: 5.

characterized with the metaphor of the “bridge” that connects and enables the passage of people and their connectivity; incentives on trade and the flow of goods¹⁵.

Further, the text focuses on: a short portrait of the Bulgarian Muslims; borders as a means of control over territories and people during the socialist period; changes in the functioning of borders and perception of border areas rather as a bridge of economic and cultural exchange during post-socialism; the border as a bridge and space of economic and cultural exchange after 2010; crossing the symbolic boundaries between Christians and Muslims in Zlatograd.

*Who are the Bulgarian Muslims
and what is characteristic about them? Short notes*

„Bulgarian Muslims (i.e., the Pomaks) are a religious minority. They are Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, but whose religion and customs are Islamic”¹⁶. They inhabit mainly mountainous regions in six Balkan countries: Bulgaria, Greece, Turkey, Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo¹⁷. The largest and most compact enclave of Bulgarian Muslims is located in Bulgaria, mainly in the Rhodopes; the southern part of the same mountain is populated by the Pomaks in Greece. Particularly in Bulgaria, before the end of the nineteenth century the Bulgarian Muslims inhabited regions outside the Rhodopes as well¹⁸. The picture gained its present form under the influence of emigration since the XIX century onwards, forced or voluntary, flows of (heterogeneous) Muslim population to Turkey today¹⁹. The deportations were provoked by the numerous wars in the Balkans, the last – aimed at the redistribution of the Ottoman territorial heritage. In other words, the creation and development of the national states on the Balkans in the XIX century turned the “Pomak” population into peripheral and borderline.

Here we mostly focus on the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria. According to some authors, in Bulgaria “the status of Pomaks [is in] an intermediate position between a majority and “national “minorities”²⁰. Therefore, the definition of the Bulgarian Muslims as a minority is debatable.²¹ There is certain irony in the fact that their intermediate position (and the shared language with the Christian

¹⁵ Alvarez 2012: 32–37.

¹⁶ Poulton 1993: 111; see also Georgieva 1998: 287; Brunnbauer 1999: 39.

¹⁷ Georgieva 1998: 287.

¹⁸ Brunnbauer 2001: 43.

¹⁹ Ibid: 40–42.

²⁰ Büchschütz 2000: 4.

²¹ Georgieva 1998: 287.

majority of Bulgarians) is among the main causes for the series of repressive assimilation campaigns against them in the XX century: 1912–1913, 1962–1964, 1971–1974, 1985–1989.²²

The name “Bulgarian Muslims”, adopted as politically correct by most modern Bulgarian authors, is sometimes challenged²³; on the other hand, the synonymous term “Pomaks”, however, is pejorative.²⁴ In the meaning outlined, we will use the name “Bulgarian Muslims”. Further, the text is mainly about the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria; we use the name “Pomaks” when it comes to the people of the villages located on Greek territory near Zlatograd, in accordance with the self-perception of the respondents.

The Bulgarian origin of the Bulgarian Muslims, a priori accepted on the basis of language, including by authors outside Bulgaria²⁵, is contested in the Turkish and Greek historiography²⁶, respectively – and through the minority policies of both states. At a political level the competing nationalisms (Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, etc.) ascribe (and during XX century often imposed by various political means) Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, etc. origin of the Bulgarian Muslims. In response to the pressure exerted for decades by the national state, the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria react with hesitation and have unstable collective and individual identities.

Researchers characterize these identities as “marginal”, “hybrid”, “variable”, “shifting”, “hesitating”. These synonymous definitions speak of the existence of divergent trends in self-identification among the various territorial communities of Bulgarian Muslims. Ulf Brunnbauer notes: a) a Bulgarian identification by the sign of language belonging; b) identification depending on the religion – as Muslims; c) “Pomak” identity “in the ethnic meaning of the word”; d) Turkish identity.²⁷ Close to this typology are the distinctions proposed by Mario Apostolov, who substantiates his argument with statistical data: “about 196 000 Pomaks lived in Bulgaria in the 1990s. In the 1992 Census in Bulgaria out of those who declared themselves Pomaks, 70 251 identified themselves as ethnic Bulgarians, 65 546 as

²² see Georgieva 1998; Büchschütz 2000; Neuburger 2004: 142–162; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008.

²³ Neuburger 2000: 181–183; 2004: 2; Zelengora 2013: 61.

²⁴ Garnizov 1997: 71; Georgieva 1998: 287.

²⁵ For the latter, see Brunnbauer 2001: 42.

²⁶ The argumentation is rather political, not so academic. The official Turkish theses attribute Turkic and/ or Turkish origin (Huns, Avars, Cumans, Pechenegs, etc.) of the Bulgarian Muslims (see, e.g. Günşen 2013: 57; Turan 1999: 69–83). For a critical review of this issue, see Balikci 1999: 51–58). Convergence with the theses of Turkish authors is found in the works of the Bulgarian author Georgi Zelenogora (2013). As for the Greek thesis on the origin of the Pomaks from Slavicized Thracians, see Brunnbauer 2001: 49.

²⁷ Brunnbauer 1999: 8.

Bulgarian Muslims, Pomaks or Muslims, 25 540 as Turks whose mother tongue is Bulgarian and about 35 000 as Turks”.²⁸ A similar typology is suggested by Vasil Garnizov as well.²⁹ Evangelos Karagiannis presents a more detailed classification: „secular-Bulgarian“, „secular-Pomak“, „Turkish“, „Muslim-Pomak“ „Bulgarian-Muslim“ and „political-Pomak“ options for identification.³⁰

From all of the above it can be concluded that regardless of the nuances in the views of various authors, we talk about multiple identities³¹ among the Bulgarian Muslims. Due to the heterogeneous and fluid nature of their cultural strategies and strategies for identification, some researchers note that “*Pomaks* as a separate group exist only for the outside observer”³² or that local identities dominate among them³³, the connectivity with the village community at the expense of the weak identification with the confessional group as a whole.³⁴

The Bulgarian-Greek border during the socialist period: control over territories and people

During socialism (1944–1989) the strictly guarded border line, dividing Bulgaria and Greece, was located near the contours of Zlatograd. This was a geopolitical boundary of the confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War.³⁵ The years from the final phase of World War II (1944–1945) until the conclusion of the Paris Peace Treaty (1947) were marked by unprecedented

²⁸ Apostolov 2001: 109. The Census of 1992, cited by Apostolov, is the only document, which after 1989 contains data on the number of people who identified themselves as Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks), as well as data on the internal separations/ identities among them. The Bulgarian statistics does not provide data about the changes that occurred in the number of Bulgarian Muslims after 1992. The estimation could only be tentative, having in mind that Bulgarian population (the majority and minorities) decreased with 1 635 429 people between 1989 and the last Census in 2011. For this Census, see the webpage of the National Statistical Institute: <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/index.php>. The webpage was accessed on 1.08.2013.

²⁹ Garnizov 1997.

³⁰ Karagiannis 1997: 26; cf. also Karagiannis 2000: 149–15.

³¹ On multiple identities see, e.g. Smith 2000: 12. See also: Abes, Jones, McEwen 2007, 1–22; Josselson, Harvay 2012: 3–12; Gregg 2012: 13–38.

³² Büchschütz 2000: 69.

³³ Neuburger 2000: 182.

³⁴ Benovska-Sabkova 2006.

³⁵ On guarding the Bulgarian borders during socialism, see Vukov 2013.

tension and confrontation between Greece and Bulgaria, related to Greek territorial claims towards Bulgaria.³⁶

The draconian measures to guard the southern borders (Greece and Turkey), undertaken by the postwar governments of Bulgaria, must be considered in this context. This policy was directly managed and supervised by the Soviet command in Bulgaria, especially in the first years after World War II. The structures of the State Security were involved in and had shared control over the security of the border together with the Border Militia (which existed for two months in 1946), and since 10.08.1946 – together with the Border Troops.³⁷ In 1946 the “*forbidden border zone*” was determined, the access to which was highly restricted, while the movement of the local residents were monitored and controlled.³⁸ The extension of this zone was defined at 25 kilometers deep in the territory of the state – for the Bulgarian-Greek and Bulgarian-Turkish borders³⁹ and 10 kilometers – for the Bulgarian-Yougoslav border.⁴⁰

The former Rhodope natural hinterland was bisected by the border line between Bulgaria and Greece, more impermeable than ever. This noticeably affected the Bulgarian Muslims: the border facilities separated and isolated from each other yesterday’s neighbours and relatives for forty-five years. The mountain habitation in the Bulgarian-Muslim enclaves determined their dependence on the plains near the Aegean Sea for their traditional means of livelihood – semi-nomadic cattle breeding – and ultimately making ends meet. The state border,

³⁶ On the Greek territorial claims towards Bulgaria see archival documents: Memorandum of the Bulgarian people during World War II, 1946: Central State Archive (further: CSA), f. 146Б, оп. 5, а.у. 480, 12–16; Report on the objections of the Ministry of War regarding the military clauses, reparations and restitutions provided for in the draft of the peace treaty with Bulgaria. – State Military History Archive (SMHA), f. 9, оп. 4, а.у. 38, sh.245–248, 252–256.

³⁷ See Project for a law on border security, August 1946 – State security and border troops 2014: 51–54.

³⁸ District regulation № 4344 – P, for monitoring the movement of people in border zones. Sofia, 5.10.1950: „to monitor the movement of population in border zones, [...] a travel regime with open lists was introduced in the border zones for all Bulgarian citizens without exception“. – State security and border troops 2014: 237.

³⁹ Later the depth of the border zone was repeatedly changed: State security and border troops 2014: 5.

⁴⁰ District regulation № 1713 of the Ministry of War, 18.07.1946, Sofia: “In pursuance of the decision of the Soviet Command in Bulgaria a forbidden border zone is established – 25 km for the Bulgarian-Turkish and Bulgarian-Greek borders and 10 km for the Bulgarian-Yugoslav border.” The movement of foreign citizens in this zone was allowed with permission of the Soviet Command in Bulgaria, and for Bulgarian citizens – with „open lists“(permits), issued by the territorial units of the Ministry of the Interior. In case of lacking these documents, the passengers should be “detained”, i.e. arrested, and their release was done according to a set procedure. – State security and border troops 2014: 40–41.

established after the Balkan War in 1912, broke this natural geographical entity (although near Zlatograd the Bulgarian-Greek border was established only after World War I). As a consequence, the economic situation of the Bulgarian-Muslim population was worsening and in the conditions of the strictest border control after 1944, these processes were deepening. At the end of the 1940s large-scale cattle breeding was in decline and making a living became problematic.⁴¹ Narratives, presented by Kristen Ghodsee⁴², testify to the severe poverty and starvation of the Muslim rural families in the late 1950s in the area.

The proximity of the Bulgarian Muslims to the state borders and to the boundary of the Cold War is one of the explanations for the designation in the late 1940s of this population as a primary threat to the national security of Bulgaria (and Greece – see below). This fear was grounded due to the organization of illegal armed groups of Bulgarian Muslims during the period 1944–1950, mostly from villages closest to the Greek border in the Western Rhodopes (Gotse Delchev region).

These groups (linked to the Greek secret service) crossed the border on both sides and were involved in subversive anti-communist activity or banditry on Bulgarian territory⁴³. They comprised of a relatively small number of people in a short period of time: 80 people supported by another 94 people (their helpers) according to Vuchkov⁴⁴. Their existence, however, was among the arguments for a policy of deportations of Bulgarian Muslims (mainly between 1948–1950)⁴⁵ from the border regions to the interior of the state.⁴⁶ Besides the doubt in the loyalty of Bulgarian Muslims to the state, these events were influenced by Stalin's policy of deportations in the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

Although forgotten or ignored today, the special border regime under socialism was a disciplining measure deterring trans-border and internal mobility, including for the residents of border areas.⁴⁸ Besides the limited access for “outsiders” to the border villages granted by special permission – “open list”, it is worth noting the hidden, underground narratives: about shooting against violators

⁴¹ See Büchschütz 2000: 72. This problem was noted much earlier by the Bulgarian secret service, see: Report on issues and recommendations, related to reinforcing and guarding the border, addressed to the Minister of the Interior. 4.11.1947, Sofia. Signed by Major General [Yonko] Panov. – State security and border troops 2014: 61.

⁴² Ghodsee 2010: 38.

⁴³ Gruev 2003: 75–91.

⁴⁴ Vuchkov 2011: 276.

⁴⁵ This policy was devised, planned and prepared earlier, as three secret documents from 1946 indicate – State security and border troops 2014: 35–37.

⁴⁶ Büchschütz 2000: 95–96; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008

⁴⁷ Gruev, Kalyonski 2008.

⁴⁸ Vukov 2013.

of the border or about the actions of the Greek and Bulgarian intelligence, carried out exactly in the belt “no man’s land” with the assistance of part of the Muslim population on both sides of the border.

*The border, the economic growth of Zlatograd
during socialism and the identity of population of Muslim origin*

Zlatograd is one of the finest examples of advanced process of adopting Bulgarian identity among the Bulgarian Muslims – a trend characteristic for the Central Rhodopes in general. This is testified by the official statistics in 2011 (out of 5271 people who identified themselves by ethnic principle in Zlatograd, 5185 declared Bulgarian belonging)⁴⁹.

Moreover, one of the first topics that people of Zlatograd spontaneously and on their own initiative discuss with the guests of the town, is the smooth and well going coexistence between Christians and Muslims, according to them. The observer effortlessly establishes the contrast with other villages with Muslim population, where the foreign visitor is welcomed with distrust⁵⁰.

These facts invite for interpretation. While looking for answers to the questions why Zlatograd is a scene of such a development, and what caused the consensus sentiment in the town, in previous publications we have outlined several reasons for this. One of them is that the specific culture of the small town, fully shaped in the nineteenth century, has contributed and contributes to building consensus relations between populations with different confessional identity. The economic boom of Zlatograd in the XIX century was due to its development as a commercial and crafts center (textile and tailoring) and related architectural policy and development of public institutions. Although less numerous, mostly the Bulgarian Christian population was employed in trade which has greatly influenced the management of the town. The Muslim population was employed primarily in agriculture, cattle breeding and to some extent – in local trade.⁵¹

The institutions, developed in Zlatograd in the XIX century, contributed to the modernization of the local community, but has also opened new spaces for public communication. In 1852 the Bulgarian Christian municipal school was opened⁵²; the Muslim three-grade school (*ruzhdie*) opened in 1888 after the same

⁴⁹ Census 2011. National Statistical Institute – <http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/pagebg2.php?p2=175&sp2=190>. Accessed: 1.08.2013.

⁵⁰ For the latter see Benovska-Sabkova 2006.

⁵¹ Šiškov 1892: 7.

⁵² Šiškov 1892: 8.

model.⁵³ As a centre of district (*kaaza*), Zlatograd had administrative functions, respectively – public buildings: a government house and barracks.⁵⁴ Here we have to consider the influence of commercial spaces, characteristic of the Balkan towns during the Ottoman period: the market, and especially *čaršija*⁵⁵, surrounded by the prestigious estates of wealthy residents of Zlatograd.

The *čitalište* (Community Center) (1908⁵⁶) and post office (1913) were established in Zlatograd later than elsewhere, as far as the town (along with the area of the Central Rhodopes) became part of the Bulgarian state in 1912. Since its inception the *čitalište* became the center of a lively social life and modern forms of urban culture, entertainment and communication: amateur theater (beginning in 1915) and operetta (1911–1912), choral singing, string orchestra, soirees, educational courses (accounting and Esperanto⁵⁷). A small group (about ten people) educated Russian emigrés, “Whiteguards”, significantly contributed to the activation of the artistic life in the town. They arrived in 1926 and soon after headed the church choir, orchestra and facilitated the staging of operettas in 1927–1934.⁵⁸

The musical life, whose center was the local *čitalište* [Community Center], had beneficial effects on the forms of open public communication in the town with the specific urban phenomenon – *corso*. During these evening walks in the 1930s along one of the main streets youngsters sang tunes remembered from *čitalište* performances and entertainment.⁵⁹

The second reason for the atmosphere of tolerance is due to another type of historical continuity. The present practice of using mostly standard Bulgarian names among the Bulgarian Muslims in Zlatograd has been influenced by the former activities of the cultural and educational organization *Rodina* [Motherland], created by Bulgarian Muslims in the Central Rhodope Mountains (1937–1947).⁶⁰

Thirdly, despite the controversial policy of the socialist state towards the Muslims, mostly expressed through the numerous campaigns of name changing, people of Muslim background were included in the local communist elite during socialism.⁶¹ The state policy of encouraging education in the communities of

⁵³ *ibid*; Pačilov 2008, 22, 52.

⁵⁴ Šiškov 1892: 10.

⁵⁵ *Čaršija* – commercial street in Balkan and Ottoman cities XV–XIX centuries.

⁵⁶ Pačilov 2008.

⁵⁷ *ibid*, 24.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, 33–38. Memories of the cultural life in Zlatograd and the role of the Russian emigrants are included in the interviews with Anastasia, 21.09.2012 and 4.05.2014; and Polina, 13.07.2013.

⁵⁹ Pačilov 2008, 93–94.

⁶⁰ see Krasteva-Blagoeva 2001; Gruev-Kalyonski 2008.

⁶¹ Gruev-Kalyonski 2008.

Bulgarian Muslims, successful to a degree⁶², has also contributed to their convergence with the Bulgarian Christians.

The official government strategies followed the policy of “carrot and stick”, combining repressive campaigns with measures promoting education and creating local employment. In the same vein, the influence of the atheistic socialist policy⁶³ has led to a reduction in the importance of religious identity and to domination of secular worldview and lifestyle.

The border situation of Zlatograd is another factor indirectly contributing to the relatively successful development of the local economy and urban planning as well as to the convergence between Bulgarian Muslims and Christians. The latter is due to a tangible improvement in the living standards during socialism when Zlatograd was favourably influenced by policies aimed at promoting the development of border regions. The town’s residents most frequently mentioned the positive impact of the 22nd Decree of the Council of Ministers (Decree № 22, 1982), encouraging the development of border regions.

Among the various incentives, provided by the Decree, were facilitating housing construction through favourable loans and social benefits such as providing free meals at schools and kindergartens. The measures, provided for in the same Decree, had a negligible success in another border region – the Mountains Sakar and Strandja, also because in the early 1980s the depopulation there was an advanced and virtually irreversible process.⁶⁴ The situation in Zlatograd and its hinterland was quite different since the demographic picture there was much more favourable in the 1980s.

The development of the mining industry by the opening of the state enterprise “Gorubso”, getting lead-zinc ore, (with branches in Madan, Rudozem and Zlatograd) in 1950 contributed greatly to the prosperity of these settlements. The closure of “Gorubso” in the late 1990s had a strong negative impact on the post-socialist economy of the three Rhodope Municipalities. The activity of “Gorubso” – Zlatograd was restored in 2004 (albeit in a smaller capacity), primarily as a private company. In 2012 the enterprise employed 400 people.⁶⁵

⁶² Büchsenschütz 2000.

⁶³ Ghodsee 2010: 88–89 writes about a similar result in the town of Madan.

⁶⁴ Ivanov 2012.

⁶⁵ For more details on the history of “Gorubso“, including its significance during socialism, its decline and closure in the 1990s see Ghodsee 2010: 56–70; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008; archive K.P. With regard to restoring the activity of “Gorubso” – Zlatograd in 2004, see <https://money.bg/archive/gorubso-zlatograd-ad-zlatograd-promenya-sastava-na-saveta-na-direktorite.html>. Accessed: 5.08.2015.

*From a barrier to a bridge: the border as a space
of economic and cultural exchange after 2010*

In the early years of the establishment of socialism in Bulgaria the border with Greece was an arena of international tension and uncompromising fight to protect the sovereignty of the state territories; the measures to restrict the mobility in the region (affecting the locals) were symmetrical throughout the period 1944–1989 and both sides adhered to them (Grigoriadis 2008: 24–31). After the end of the Cold War the Bulgarian border facilities were perceived as unnecessary recurrence of the recent past and were dismantled in 1990.⁶⁶

However, soon after under the influence of migratory pressure from the heavily impoverished Balkan neighbours (Albania, Bulgaria, Romania⁶⁷), the Bulgarian-Greek border becomes asymmetrical space of control and restrictions on mobility imposed by Greece. As with other member states in the European Union, the increase in the transnational flow of people crossing the border, is perceived by citizens of the beneficiary country (in this case – Greece) as a risk to its sovereignty.⁶⁸

The Bulgarian-Greek border functioned as a membrane in the 1990s: blocking economic migrants, going to Greece, but at the same time – permeable to the movement of Greek citizens and capitals to Bulgaria.

The convergence of Bulgaria to the European Union and its accession in 2007 has not substantially altered the restrictive Greek policy on the permeability of the border. In 1995 Bulgaria received the status of an associate member of the European Union and the visa regime with the EU member states dropped in December 1999; on 1.01.2007 the country became a full member of the Union.⁶⁹ Despite these developments, despite the official Bulgarian-Greek talks of opening new checkpoints between the two countries, such checkpoint at Zlatograd-Thermes was opened only on 15.01.2010.⁷⁰

The unwillingness of the Greek side to open a checkpoint in the region of the Central Rhodopes in the late 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium is well represented by Ulf Brunnbauer:

“The awareness of the Greek government of the ‘danger’ of uncontrolled contacts between Greek and Bulgarian Pomaks is best shown by the year-long

⁶⁶ Order of the Minister of the Interior, for removing the electronic signalization fence of the western border and amending the content of the tasks performed by the border troops. Sofia, [1990]. – State security and border troops 2014: 1180–1182.

⁶⁷ See Lauth-Bacas 2002: 197–208

⁶⁸ Parizot 2016 forthcoming.

⁶⁹ Neznakomova 2010; Šivergeva, Načev 2015: 4.

⁷⁰ Neznakomova 2010.

quarrels about opening a border checkpoint in the Central Rhodopes. At present, there are only two border crossing points between Bulgaria and Greece, one in the very west of the common border, the other in the very east. Thus, the long border through the Rhodopes cannot be legally crossed anywhere. [...] But despite talks and negotiations since the early 1990s, both sides cannot yet agree to open border stations in the Rhodopes, with the Greek side being particularly reluctant. The economic loss is considerable, especially for Bulgaria, who hopes to develop local tourism and production by opening a checkpoint. But the Greek government—especially the local authorities—seem to be scared of possible contacts between Pomaks from both sides of the border”.⁷¹

The opening of the checkpoint Zlatograd-Thermes was preceded by efforts not only at central government level, but also from the vigorous implementation of local cultural strategies. After 2001 there was an ambitious program to restore the four Christian Orthodox chapels situated in the shape of a cross around the town.⁷² The project gained popularity under the name *Krăstata gora*.⁷³ This project is an expression of a specific politics of memory. Strengthening the Christian symbolism in the urban space is viewed by the local business and political elites as a means of reconciling the positions with the Greek neighbours and improving the cross-border regional cooperation with Greece, including the opening of the checkpoint.⁷⁴

“*This is our Trojan horse!*” said the chief sponsor of the restoration of *St. St. Konstantin and Elena* chapel⁷⁵, who is convinced that only the opening of the chapel has accelerated the agreement of Greece to the opening of the border checkpoint, long delayed by the Greeks. In this context it should not be surprising that representatives of the local elite from Muslim families had the leading part in the initiative *Krăstata gora*. However, the project enjoyed a wide public support from the entire local community, and from both religious groups, as families of Muslim background actively took part in the money donations campaigns.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Brunnbauer 2001: 60, note 83.

⁷² Newspaper of Zlatograd, 29.02.2012, p. 4.

⁷³ *Krăstata gora* is probably a new name, coined by analogy with the Christian sanctuary *Krăstova gora* near Assenovgrad. While the chapels actually existed in the past and were described in records from the end of the XIX century (Shishkov 1892: 13), the name „*Krăstata gora*“ is new and related to today’s initiative to restore the chapels – interview with Anastasia, 21.09.2012.

⁷⁴ Prior to the opening of the checkpoint Zlatograd-Thermes, the journey from Zlatograd to nearby Greek villages and towns across the state border followed an indirect route and extended approximately 150 kilometers.

⁷⁵ Interview with Alexander Mitușev, 11.07.2013.

⁷⁶ See *Zlatogradski vestnik* [Newspaper of Zlatograd] from 29.02.2012, p. 4.

Tangible and significant changes occurred in the economic development, as well as in the overall appearance of Zlatograd after the opening of the private Ethnographic Areal Complex in the town and the subsequent development of tourism. The Ethnographic complex was opened on May 24, 2001 and was made by the businessman engineer Alexander Mitušev and the ethnographer Boris Toumangelov (1935–2007).⁷⁷

The funds were mobilized from various sources (private investment funds, European Union funds and programs such as PHARE and SAPARD). The presence of about a hundred houses, pronounced as architectural monuments during the socialist times and restored in 1973, is an important local resource, skillfully managed and used by the authors of the project. In 2001 the ground floors of nine restored, but inhabited houses – cultural monuments – were turned into nine craft workshops. In its original form, the Ethnographic complex included workshops, the building of the restored “Old café house”, the Ethnographic Museum and the restored mill at the end of the town, which combines museum features with a restaurant for traditional Rhodope cuisine. The pre-existing museum collections – the Museum of Communications (1987) and the Museum of the Enlightenment in the Rhodope Mountains (1978), which are public property⁷⁸, are perceived by visitors as part of the integral space of the Ethnographic areal complex.

The initiative grew rapidly and took a commercial direction. The restoration of existing old buildings was complemented by the construction of a series of new buildings – hotels and restaurants built in the spirit of the traditional Rhodope architecture and located next to the museum buildings. They are seen as part of the complex. Zlatograd currently has fourteen hotels and twenty-one guesthouses; just two years ago there were nine hotels and eighteen guesthouses⁷⁹ it is difficult to count the larger and smaller restaurants and taverns. Six of them, together with six restaurants and cafeterias are owned by A. Mitushev. Over time the hotel and restaurant business attracts other entrepreneurs as well. “The municipality is visited annually by 70,000 tourists – a number that exceeds 13 times the population of the town.”⁸⁰

The development of the tourism industry was positively influenced by the border location of Zlatograd, since some of the hotels were built with the help of grants from the European funds and programs aimed at assisting border regions and cross-border cooperation. The proximity of the border (five kilometers), and

⁷⁷ The information about the Ethnographic Areal Complex is mostly based on the interviews with Boris Tumangelov (4.05.2004) and Alexander Mitušev (19.09.2012; 11.07.2013) and complemented by data from periodicals and electronic media.

⁷⁸ See www.zlatograd-bg.com/bg/pages/church-and-museums.

⁷⁹ See pochivka.bg/. Accessed: 5.08.2015.

⁸⁰ Newspaper of Zlatograd, 31.07.2013, p 1.

the short distance to the nearest Greek town of Xanthi, are included in tourist ads. Today's income from tourism cannot be compared with the benefits that the mining industry had brought under socialism ("Gorubso"); however, the tourism industry contributes to the (modest) recovery in the local economy.

So after 2010 the acquired border permeability becomes a bridge: for the movement of people on both sides and for mutually beneficial economic exchange, albeit on a modest scale. As one interlocutor from Zlatograd told in an interview in 2014, the Muslims from the villages on Greek territory thus restored access to their "natural" urban center. Their visits stir the trade in Zlatograd. Men from Medusa (Memkovo) shared with us in conversations in 2012 and 2013 their satisfaction with the opening of the border, allowing them to buy cheaper building materials from Zlatograd: "*They did well to open it, we repaired our houses.*" During the *Feast of the Zlatograd barbecue*⁸¹ in Zlatograd visited by thousands of tourists on May 4, 2014, there were familiar faces from Memkovo among the crowd.

The movement in the opposite direction also occurs through economic cooperation and friendly contacts and especially – by attracting Bulgarian tourists to underdeveloped tourist destinations along the nearby Aegean coast of Greece before 2010. After the opening of the border checkpoint in 2010 the flow of the Bulgarian tourists to the Greek Aegean resorts increased. The small and previously unknown villages of Keramoti and Mirodato become a preferred destination for a summer holiday among the people from Zlatograd as well as among Bulgarians from other regions of the country. Moreover, Keramoti and Mirodato were developed and established as resorts in recent years, largely in response to the interest of the Bulgarian tourists.⁸²This theme is present both in everyday conversations in Zlatograd and in the media.⁸³

The people of Zlatograd seek help and remedy in the waters of the mineral springs near Thermes⁸⁴ on Greek territory. The secretary of the *čitalište* in Zlatograd was involved with his personal sound system in the organization of the Muslim fiest Aderlez (May 6, 2014) near the border villages on the Greek territory. Some of our respondents regularly visit the Greek Pomak villages, where they have relatives or enjoy renewed contacts and friendships. During the fieldwork we found that some people from Zlatograd are familiar, personally and by names, to people across the border. Our visits to Memkovo/Medousa in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in the company of our respondent from Zlatograd provoked a rapid gathering of a group of men who talked with us. For the past few years after the opening

⁸¹ "Praznik na zlatogradskoto čeverme" [Bulg.].

⁸² Marinov 2011.

⁸³ Marinov 2011; vesti.bg 2013.

⁸⁴ *Banite* in Bulgarian.

of the border checkpoint there has been consolidation of the cross-border local community.

Once opened, the border near Zlatograd becomes a bridge between the actively practicing believers, Christians and Muslims, with Christians and Muslims from Greece. With donations from Greek Muslims⁸⁵ an impressive new mosque was completed in 2014 (after a long and often interrupted period of construction) in Zlatograd. The two historic churches in Zlatograd, however, also have a Greek sponsor: a merchant who regularly visits the town and makes donations to the church (icons, chandeliers, etc.).⁸⁶

On the other hand, the open border at present puts the Muslims – practicing (in the Greek Pomak villages) or rather not practicing (from Zlatograd) – in mirror-like position to each other. Visits “to the town” of the Pomaks from the Greek border villages trigger practices of adaptation: women consider their style of clothing in correspondence with the secular atmosphere of Zlatograd. In turn, exploring the Muslim ritual practices of the neighbours affects the self-perception of the people of Zlatograd and awakens their interest in abandoned or forgotten traditions.

The visit to the Greek Pomak villages prompts reflection on the consequences of the Greek restrictive policy towards this region. The contrast between Zlatograd, urbanized and lively, despite the difficulties of post-socialism, and the heavily depopulated villages across the border is striking. The reasons are political and not least related to the specifics of the Greek national doctrine. The ethnic composition of Northern Greek regions changed after the “Greek catastrophe” of 1922–1923: the deportation of about 1.2 million Greeks refugees from Asia Minor after the defeat of Greece in its war with Turkey (1919–1922) and the deportation of about 350,000 ethnic Turks / Muslims from Greece into Turkey.

The Greek refugees from Asia Minor were settled mainly in Northern Greece, from where large numbers of ethnic Bulgarians had been previously displaced, mainly after World War I.⁸⁷ Thus the ethnic diversity of the region was reduced, the balance between the different national and ethnic groups was changed in favour of the Greek population⁸⁸ and in the opinion of some Greek researchers “the so-called “Macedonian question” was resolved”.⁸⁹

The existence of a compact enclave of Muslims of Bulgarian descent near the border with Bulgaria, however, was perceived as a threat to the national security

⁸⁵ Interviews with the Imam of Zlatograd and the Chairman of the Muslim Board, 2013.

⁸⁶ Interview with Anastasia, 21.09.2012.

⁸⁷ Hirschon 1998: XVI; Hirschon 2008: 14, 17.

⁸⁸ Hirschon 2008: 16–17.

⁸⁹ Kitromilides 1992.

of the Greek state.⁹⁰ This explains the restrictive policies towards the “Pomaks” in the border region, including after the end of the Cold War. A non-exhaustive list includes assimilation strategies through restrictions on educational and cultural rights, restrictions on movement – with special permission; legal preconditions for the loss of Greek citizenship under certain conditions (the discriminatory Article 19 of the Code of Greek nationality⁹¹); difficulties in acquiring land, obtaining licenses and permits.⁹² Naturally, this border area of Greece was marked by economic and social marginalization⁹³ and is now in the process of depopulation. It’s not just about policy of changing identity through compulsory study of Turkish in school, but also for drastic economic underdevelopment and widespread unemployment in the region. Talking to people attests to the tangible process of individual migrations, including in recent years, from the Greek Pomak border villages to the interior of Greece or Turkey. On our first visit to the village Medusa /Memkovo in 2012, in the local school there were two children; two years later the school was closed. The policy of discrimination and restrictions, carried out by the Greek authorities against the residents of this historically disputed region, is translated into the “language” of the roadway. The attitude to the roadway crossing the border near Zlatograd-Thermes is asymmetrical, similar to the Albanian-Greek border near the (Albanian) region of Northern Epirus disputed by Greece and Albania.⁹⁴ The country, for which the communication is more desirable, provides a convenient roadway, unlike its neighbour across the border. In the case of the Greek-Albanian border region, the privileged part of the road is in Greece.⁹⁵ Regarding the border at Zlatograd-Thermes, the Bulgarian country, for which this transport link is long overdue and welcome, has provided in the section of its territory a convenient road, despite the mountainous terrain. It encourages travel. Conversely, the road in its Greek section, although new, is dangerously narrow and winding, and driving there is slow. The road was “deliberately constructed so that it is inconvenient and even dangerous. For seven kilometers the road is very narrow, very steep and has as sharp and unsafe turns as possible”.⁹⁶ In addition, the travel ban on cars and buses weighting over two tons on Greek territory is a cause of dissatisfaction with the Bulgarian side and the subject of dispute between the Bulgarian and Greek authorities – central and local. This prohibition was in force as soon as the border checkpoint was opened in 2010, but has been repeat-

⁹⁰ Grigoriadis 2008: 25

⁹¹ Ibid: 25.

⁹² see Grigoriadis 2008: 24–31; Brunnbauer 2001: 48–51.

⁹³ Grigoriadis 2008: 2.

⁹⁴ Dalakoglou 2010.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ vesti.bg 2013.

edly changed, including after protests from the local community in Zlatograd in May 2013.⁹⁷ In this way travelling in this part of the Greek state territory was limited. According to the opinions of people from Zlatograd, the restriction was also applied to Greek citizens and their opportunities for having trade relations with the Bulgarian neighbours – a sign that the distrust of the Greek side has not gone away. However, 130,000 vehicles passed through the border checkpoint Zlatograd-Thermes in the first year after its opening, and the local Greek and Bulgarian authorities reported a revival in trade and tourism in both countries.⁹⁸

Crossing the symbolic boundaries between Christians and Muslims in Zlatograd

Along with the transformations of space near the state Bulgarian-Greek border, the symbolic boundaries (in terms of Barth 1969) between Christians and Muslims in Zlatograd were changing in the period after World War II and especially after 1989. There is an advanced, though unfinished process of convergence between the two communities. The boundaries between them were problematized and crossed. The orientation towards Bulgarian identity among the Muslims is reflected in conversions from Islam to Orthodox Christianity, in discursive practices, intermarriage, bi-confessional cemetery, internal differentiation among the Muslims. The process of voluntary conversion to Orthodox Christianity began in Zlatograd in the early 1990s and influenced the neighbouring villages Nedelino and Startsevo. Due to the public media these conversions gained national prominence.⁹⁹ This is a complex issue and can not be fully represented here. We will only remind that in 1993 in the vicinity of Zlatograd several group conversions of people from the area took place on the initiative of the Orthodox missionary Father Boyan Sarăev, himself of Muslim origin. In addition to the media popularity in the 1990s, these events are reflected in the metric book of “*Assumption of the Holy Mother*” Church in Zlatograd.

In recent years, however, (after the 1990s) the conversion process changes. According to the believers, who actively participate in the life of the Orthodox parish in Zlatograd, Father Sarăev has retired from the practice of group conversions. Along with this, the metric book and the interviews indicate that conversions continue, but individually. While studying the metric book of “*Assumption of the Holy Mother*” Church (September 2012), we were told not to record and

⁹⁷ econ.bg 2010; vesti.bg 2013.

⁹⁸ Marinov 2011.

⁹⁹ For a similar, but larger conversion of Muslims into Orthodox Christianity in Georgia, see Pelkmans 2006.

announce the names of the new converts because of the strong desire of some of them the conversion to remain secret. In some cases the change of religion was dictated by pragmatic reasons. Current or future immigrants in countries like Greece and Spain decided to convert due to the expectation that this act would facilitate their integration in these countries. Because of the desire for privacy, the metric book is only partially informative for the scale of the conversion. At the request of the new converts, in many cases the information recorded in the book is incomplete. In her autobiographical story Ralitsa mentioned that she had adopted Christianity with her family after 1990. The Muslim decent of the family was kept secret from the grandchildren to their adolescent age. During our conversation she showed us two certificates for donations made by her family to support the painting of icons for unfinished chapels in Zlatograd.¹⁰⁰ A year later her husband showed us the donated icon when together we visited the chapel “St. St. Konstantin and Elena”. Even though they had adopted basic Christian symbols (Baptism, lighting candles, sympathy for the construction of Christian churches), Ralitsa and her family rarely went to church. The conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity is more often a sign of identity change and very rarely is a gesture driven by religious motivations. We should bear in mind that in its classical understanding “conversion is affiliation of a person to a new religious group, conceptualized as positive transformation of the nature and value of person”.¹⁰¹ Researchers from various disciplines define religious conversion as a radical transformation of personality¹⁰², despite the skepticism created by the analogy with the experiences of St. Paul and his conversion.¹⁰³ In today’s era of late modernity other models of conversion can be found: ranging from indifference to religion to religiosity or “internal conversion”: the rediscovery of religious identity, previously maintained only formally.¹⁰⁴ The post-socialist contexts also enrich the typology of conversion by understanding that it finds expression in replacing atheism with faith.¹⁰⁵

The conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity in Zlatograd should be interpreted in the context given above. Its delay and individual realization as well as the presence of opportunistic motives in some cases do not diminish the importance and complexity of this process. In some interviews people talk about the conversions of individual members of a family, while other members remain Muslims. The local priest declared he had baptized about two hundred people

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Ralitsa, 4.05.2012.

¹⁰¹ Stark, Bainbridge 1996: 197.

¹⁰² Asad 1996: 266; Spilka et al. 2003; Robbins, 2007: 5–17.

¹⁰³ Spilka et al 2003: 344; Stark, Bainbridge 1996: 195.

¹⁰⁴ Hervieu-Léger 1999: 120–125.

¹⁰⁵ Pelkmans 2009: 12–13.

only during the period from 2011 to 2014¹⁰⁶ and it is a testament to the scale of conversion in Zlatograd. Among the new converts there are cases of extreme devotion to Christianity and zealous church participation, but they are few. In most cases, the conversion must be understood as a manifestation of a positive personal transformation, but the religious gesture is rather symbolic for crossing the border between confessional groups. This gesture has a political meaning and is a sign of acceptance of the Bulgarian identity (informally, but firmly perceived as linked to Orthodox Christianity).

Random conversations also point to trends in the dynamics of identities. During one of the conversations with the locals in May 2012 one of our companions asked where we settled at a hotel. Hearing our reply, she added: *“We are family with them! Give them my regards.”* She was referring to the owners of the hotel. The conversation was repeated at the hotel when we passed the greetings. *“We’re family!”* – was the reaction of our hosts. One side in this seemingly simple dialogue was a family of Orthodox Christians and the other – a family of Muslim origin. Conversations like those we heard repeatedly. Although we do not exclude this family relationship to be real, we perceive talks about it as a strategy for building symbolic bridges between the two communities and as an expression of the desire to overcome the boundaries between them.

The latter is related to the issue of marriages between Christians and Muslims in Zlatograd. The interviews and informal conversations suggest that though rare, such marriages occurred in the 1960s. Nowadays they are not rare and do not surprise anyone, although no reliable data on their number exists. Biconfessional married couples or partners become a link between the two communities, leading to further mutual understanding and convergence as well as to influences in the ritual life. The son of our interlocutor Liliana – a Christian woman – has a girlfriend from a Muslim family. In the summer of 2013 Liliana was invited by the Muslim family to fulfill a prestigious role in the ritual life cycle. Liliana tells of this event with respect to people and to their traditions, she gets to know in this way.

The theme of biconfessional marriages paradoxically intersects with another – the joint cemetery in Zlatograd, where since 1976 Christians and Muslims have been buried side by side. The latter fact is mentioned in almost all interviews and informal conversations and it is always brought up in support of the claims about the high level of tolerance between the two groups.

The destruction of Muslim cemeteries and the establishment of common graveyards with Christians were part of the repressive campaigns against Muslims during socialism. In the collective memory of the people from Zlatograd, however, the traumatic events are reinterpreted and the narrative about them (shared by

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Father K., 2.05.2014.

Christians and Muslims) becomes a positive message, affirming mutual respect. According to the story I heard in different versions, while settling the joint cemetery the local authorities summoned the local imam and then the priest, Father Athanasius Arolsky, who served fifty-two years in Zlatograd and was considered a saint in the Central Rhodope Mountains.¹⁰⁷ They informed them about the plans for having a common cemetery. Initially, the imam expressed disapproval to the idea, but then Father Arolsky asked rhetorically why the dead should be divided, after spending their lives together. The imam agreed and so consensus on the sensitive issue was obtained.

Other, personal stories add more semantic accents to this shared fragment of the experienced history and collective memory. The joint cemetery is a sensitive topic. Two episodes of the fieldwork attest to that. On 20.09.2012 we visited with students the village Medusa/ Memkovo in Greece. In a conversation ten men from the village said they liked Zlatograd, but did not approve of the joint cemetery. Suddenly, our driver, a man, then forty-eight years old (then) from Zlatograd intervened in the conversation. *“Well, how could I separate them? – he exclaimed. – My mother was a Muslim, I buried her by the Muslim rites. My father was a Christian – he died shortly after her and I buried him by the Christian rites. But at the same location. Such was their desire – I honoured it!”* This remark indicates the consensus discourses, typical of Zlatograd: the cemetery is mixed, because in life people lived together and should not be separated after death.

By superseding religious boundaries in one of the most sensitive areas – the “city of the dead”, the joint cemetery creates ambivalence. This situation in turn requires the emergence of strategies to neutralize the ambivalence and deal with the apparent “disorder”. The mother of an interlocutor, a Muslim, taught her how to deal with it. On entering the cemetery she had to say out loud: *“Good day! Good day!”* – twice, the first time in her own name and the second time – as an imaginary response on behalf of the dead Christians. *“They [Christians] are foreign, therefore – first give them respect.”* Then she had to say again twice: *“Salaam alaikum – alaikum salaam”*, addressed to the kin, the Muslims.¹⁰⁸ The cemetery, like the temple, is a place where the idea of a boundary between “us” and “them” is most acutely felt. The phrase *“They are foreign, so – first give them respect”* is an unambiguous evidence of the delicate balance between awareness of invisible borders on the one hand and tolerance and respect – on the other.

The comparison with other settlements in the Rhodope shows a contrast. In 2012, Muslim clerics from the neighbouring village, Startsevo, filed a lawsuit (without success) against the mayor of Zlatograd (Newspaper of Zlatograd 12/2012). The purpose of the lawsuit was to abolish the municipal ownership of

¹⁰⁷ Surkova 2012.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Milka, 11.07.2013.

the cemetery and ultimately put an end to the burial practice for people of different faiths in this place.

The latest example is reminiscent of the internal differentiation among the Bulgarian Muslims. In the case of Zlatograd, tolerance does not exclude rivalry between different cultural strategies or different interest groups. One of these contradictions exists between actively practicing Muslims in Zlatograd, on the one hand, and secular Muslims or atheists. This contradiction is visualized in the race in height between the newly built mosque and the commercial center, crowned by a high tower, located twenty meters away from the mosque. This competition for space and symbolic supremacy is not just a rumor. The owner of the mall, a man of Muslim origin, undertook a deliberate provocation: in 2012 he opened an erotic bar in the building oriented towards the entrance of the mosque (Newspaper of Zlatograd 12/2012). A little later the conflict was mitigated through the local elite¹⁰⁹ as the erotic bar was closed down in exchange for a commitment and a fulfilled promise the singing in the mosque to be live and without amplifiers. Obviously, some people, even of Muslim origin, find the enforcement of Islamic symbols in the public space of Zlatograd as unacceptable. At the same time the construction of a large and too high new mosque is seen simply as an expression of ambitions for dominance.

The internal contradictions between different groups and individuals of Muslim origin in Zlatograd manifest in the ambitious program, referred to above, for the re-construction of four Orthodox chapels. This initiative aims at changing the symbolic geography of the region. The chapel “St. St. Konstantin and Elena”, destroyed in the past, was rebuilt in 2006 right on the Bulgarian-Greek border and this was the occasion for the organization of the Bulgarian-Greek festival, attended by thousands of people on both sides. On the one hand, the chapel is indicative of the process of crossing the boundaries between Muslims and Christians in Zlatograd; its location just at the border checkpoint, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a symbolic gesture to transform the border from a barrier into a bridge.

A brief conclusion

The boundary position, understood literally and figuratively, is the main characteristics of the Bulgarian Muslims in the compact area of the Rhodope Mountains, inhabited by them. This region has been divided by the state border between Bulgaria and Greece throughout most of the twentieth century until to-

¹⁰⁹ „*We managed to deal with that*” – interview with Polina, 13.07.2013.

day. At another level – of culture and identity – the boundary is expressed in associating with Bulgaria by language and with neighbouring Muslim Turkey – by religion. This dual borderline, geographic and cultural, sets the way in which this population is perceived by the nation-states in which they live. Inhabiting areas near the historically contested (including by military means) border, the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria and the Pomaks in Greece are perceived as a threat to the national security of both countries.

Therefore, the Bulgarian-Greek border near Zlatograd has had a serious impact on the lives of people on both sides. Highly disputed, it divided the Rhodope region for a few decades in the twentieth century. It broke the economic ties after 1918, destroying the pastoral economy of the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria by “cutting” their access to traditional winter pastures near the Aegean Sea. Poverty and food shortage marked their lives since the end of World War I almost until the end of the 1950s.

The cultural and linguistic community of the Bulgarian Muslims on both sides of the border was also split. Its almost complete impermeability after 1944, the isolation of the Muslim population in the frontier Greek villages (compared to the rest of the natural hinterland and to the Greek territory) led to the formation of two different communities, respectively – identities among the heirs of the former total Muslim community in the region of Zlatograd. While most Bulgarian Muslims in Zlatograd declare Bulgarian identity, the isolation and the Greek assimilation policies have influenced the formation of other, different strategies among their neighbours south of the border fence. The distancing themselves of Bulgarian belonging is the most visible strategy. It is expressed in highlighting their difference, such as by defining their language as “Pomak”. In this sense until recently (until 2010) the border near Zlatograd not only divided in spatial and political sense, but also culturally differentiated the once homogeneous population. Vigilantly guarded under socialism, the border was an effective means for monitoring and maintaining state sovereignty. On the other hand, the border location of Zlatograd brought economic advantages for the local community through the socialist policies of industrialization, creation of new jobs, development of infrastructure and public works, as well as through the measures (economic, educational, and social) to promote the development of border regions.

Working together in the socialist enterprises, the specific culture of the small Balkan town, raising the level of education among Bulgarian Muslims, the imposition of secular mentality and values by the atheistic policy – all that reduced the cultural differences and led to the convergence between the Christian and Muslim population of Zlatograd during socialism. The rising living standards resulted in

perceiving Islam and the Muslim identity as less prestigious and conversely – the Bulgarian Christian identity – as “modern” and more prestigious.

The development of cultural tourism in Zlatograd after 2001 has partly offset the economic difficulties caused by the post-socialist collapse of the local industry and unemployment in the 1990s. This result has been made possible by skillfully managing the cultural heritage of the region, its museification and socialization through the Ethnographic complex and turning it into a resource for the tourism industry. The border location of the town again became an economic stimulus at the end of the 1990s through the funds of the European Union, encouraging the development of border regions and cross-border cooperation.

The symbolic boundaries (in terms of Fredrik Barth) between Muslims and Christians in Zlatograd were problematized and crossed, especially after the end of the Cold War. Advanced, albeit incomplete processes of convergence between the two communities take place through conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity, mixed marriages, biconfessional cemetery and differentiation among the Muslim population of Zlatograd.

The property of borders to transform themselves into bridges is activated near Zlatograd after opening the border checkpoint in 2010, by reviving trade, tourism, cross-border cooperation and through the resumption of everyday communication between people on both sides of the border fence. Destroyed in the past, this community of people from a mountainous region in the southeastern periphery of Europe has been reborn for contacts and new cooperation.

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