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The Myth of the “Fifth Column” in the Discourse on the Political Organisation of Bulgarian Turks

Abstract

The first years of democratic transition in Bulgaria were marked by profound social processes. One of the aims of the political elites of the time was to repair the state’s ethnic policies. However, the 1990s in the country also saw an explosion of nationalist and xenophobic sentiments. Nationalist communities sought not only what united the nation, but also appeared as a threat to its integrity. Therefore, the formation of a new identity also meant pointing to what constitutes a kind of antithesis of Bulgarian identity. The Turkish minority was entangled in this narrative of foreign influence, imposing the label of the so-called “fifth column” on this group. The myth of the “fifth column” itself was present in the Bulgarian public debate much earlier, but after 1989 it acquired a new dimension. Nowadays, it is mainly used to criticise the activities of the political organisations of the Turkish minority and their links with the Republic of Turkey. The aim of this article is to show the etiology of this issue and to identify the interest groups that are actively constructing a similar discourse in contemporary Bulgaria.

Keywords: Bulgarian Turks, Turkish minority, Bulgaria, minority political parties, ethnic minorities

The term “fifth column” originated during the Spanish Civil War. These words described the support of the people of Madrid for the Frankist army. It was first supposed to have been uttered during a radio broadcast, only to be later spread by Republican columnists. In the second half of the 1930s, the phrase spread in Europe to refer to National Socialist circles in the countries that formed the spectrum of the Third Reich’s political interests. On the other hand, it was transplanted to the American discourse by Ernest Hemingway¹.

¹ J.H. Louis, *Xenophobie et concepts de «cinquième colonne» aux Etats-Unis : 1939–1941*, “Revue française d’études américaines” 1980, no. 9, L’Étranger dans la culture américaine, pp. 89–97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20872766> (date accessed: 04.02.2024).



Today, the *Cambridge Dictionary* concisely defines the “fifth column” as a group of people who support the enemies of the country they live in and secretly help them².

Although the term itself was coined at the beginning of the last century, the perception of certain social groups as potentially capable of sabotaging the structures of the state they inhabit existed as a phenomenon even earlier. Among the groups perceived as potentially prone to sabotage, society often identifies ethnic minorities. The perception of them as “strangers”, capable of betraying the interests of the state, not only determines how minorities are perceived, but can also generate specific forms of aggression against them. Hostile interactions between ethnic groups operate at the dichotomous level. Differences, sometimes insignificant or marginal, can be exaggerated to a level where they are seen as a real threat. Horowitz saw the references of the process of juxtaposition and comparison at the root of social psychology theory³. Brubaker, on the other hand, notes that in a culturalist approach, researchers emphasise that the source of fear of the “stranger”, rather, is cultural and historical ground. Tools such as rhetoric, symbolic elements and forms of representation construct the context in which a different social group is embedded. Brubaker emphasises that the demonisation, and sometimes dehumanisation, of a group act as catalysts for ethnic conflict⁴.

The perception of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria as a “fifth column” doesn’t present a new phenomenon in Bulgarian discourse. Historical considerations, the cultural burden of the Ottoman heritage only intensify the distance towards this population. Therefore, the policy towards the Turkish minority has been a challenge for the authorities since the proclamation of independence⁵. The Bulgarian Turks were seen as a serious destabilising factor and a threat to the state’s existence. Over the years this approach has not lost its relevance. One of the reasons that determine this is the specific position of this group. Once again, it is worth referring to the research output of Brubaker, whose “triadic” nexus aptly illustrates the situation where the Turkish minority is located between the “nationalizing state”, i.e. the Republic of Bulgaria, and the Republic of Turkey described as a “external national homeland”. Each element of the Brubaker system is a dynamic center constantly monitoring the activity of the others⁶.

Methodology and State of the Research

The aim of this article will be to explain how the myth of “the fifth column” emerged in post-communist Bulgarian discourse on the Turkish minority and which circles popularise this narrative in their political rhetoric. The author will try to answer the following questions:

² The “fifth column”, *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fifth-column> (date accessed: 1.09.2024).

³ D. Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict*, Berkley 2000, pp. 174–184.

⁴ R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups*, Harvard University Press 2004, pp. 108–110.

⁵ This problem is extensively analysed by Dr Krzysztof Popek, see K. Popek, *Muzulmanie w Bułgarii 1878–1912*, Kraków 2022.

⁶ R. Brubaker, *Nationalism Differently. National structure and national issues in the new Europe*, Cambridge 1996, pp. 87–89.

1. What was the attitude of other parties towards the political representation of Bulgarian Turks in the 1990s?
2. Did the growing political position of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms⁷ in the 21st century intensify the perception of Turkish groups as the “fifth column” of the Republic of Turkey?
3. What impact has the Republic of Turkey had on the various Turkish minority parties?
4. Did internal splits within the Turkish minority political environment affect its perception as a “fifth column” of the Republic of Turkey?

In answering the above questions, the author will try to prove the hypothesis that the post-communist Bulgarian discourse around the myth of the Turkish “fifth column” primarily serves nationalist circles to build their political identity. The analysis covers the period 1989–2023. The research methods used in this article are the historical method, the institutional-legal method and the comparative method. Showing the development of the activities of the Turkish minority groups in Bulgaria in 20th and 21st centuries, as well as characterising the legal status that allows them to function on the Bulgarian political scene will help to understand what constitutes the source of conflict between this political circles and other parties. On the other hand, a comparison of the programmes and elements of the rhetoric of the extreme populist right⁸ in Bulgaria will illustrate how they use the myth of the “fifth column”.

The subject of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria is well known in Polish science. Among the Polish researchers who have dealt with this problem so far, it is worth mentioning: Tadeusz Kowalski, Irena Stawowy-Kawka, Elżbieta Znamierowska-Rakk, Marek Żmigrodzki, Karol Bieńek, Piotr Eberhardt, Jakub Pieńkowski, Krzysztof Popek, Jakub Wódka and Tomasz Kamusella⁹. Also, many historians and political scientists have discussed Bulgaria’s recent history and the country’s political system after 1989 in their works, including: Andrzej Koseski, Jerzy Jackowicz, Zbigniew Klejn, Andrzej Burakowski, Tadeusz

⁷ The political party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Bulgarian: Движение за права и свободи, ДПС). This article uses the Bulgarian abbreviation DPS.

⁸ In using this term, the author has in mind the classification by Cas Mudde, who describes this group of political actors with three attributes: authoritarianism, populism and nativism. See C. Mudde, *The ideology of the extreme right*, Manchester 2002, p. 10.

⁹ Polish authors [Turkish minority in Bulgaria]: T. Kowalski, *Les Turcs et la langue turque de la Bulgarie du nord-est*, Prace Komisji Orientalistycznej PAU, Kraków 1933; I. Stawowy-Kawka, *Turecka mniejszość narodowa w Bułgarii po 1945 r.*, in: *Religia i polityka w Europie Południowo-Wschodniej*, vol. 1, ed. I. Czamańska, W. Szulc, Poznań 2010; eadem, *Islam w Bułgarii i Grecji. Współczesne problemy*, in: *Niemcy – Europa – Świat. Studia Międzynarodowe*, ed. I. Stawowy-Kawka, Kraków 2007; E. Znamierowska-Rakk, *Sprawa przesiedleń obywateli bułgarskich tureckiego pochodzenia do Turcji po drugiej wojnie światowej*, Z Dziejów Stosunków Polsko-Radzieckich. Materiały i dokumenty, vol. 15, Warszawa 1977; M. Żmigrodzki, *Mniejszość turecka w polityce narodowościowej Bułgarii*, Materiały Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej, vol. II, Lublin 1993; K. Bieńek, *Ruch Praw i Wolności – partia bułgarskich Turków*, “Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Politologica” 2013, vol. XI; P. Eberhardt, *Problematyka narodowościowa Bułgarii w XX wieku*, “Sprawy Narodowościowe” 2005, vol. 27; R. Zenderowski, J. Pieńkowski, *Kwestie narodowościowe w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej. Jesień Narodów i jej konsekwencje*, vol. III, Warszawa 2016; K. Popek, *Mniejszość muzułmańska w Bułgarii*, “Przegląd Geopolityczny” 2015, vol. 14; J. Wódka, *Mniejszość turecka w Bułgarii a stosunki turecko-bułgarskie w okresie zimnej wojny*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 2009, year 41; T. Kamusella, *Ethnic Cleansing During the Cold War. The forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria*, New York 2019.

Czekalski, Wiesław Walkiewicz, Marek Bankowicz, Andrzej Nowosad, Jacek Wojnicki and Rafał Woźnica¹⁰. Among Turkish historians and political scientists who have written about the Turkish minority in Bulgaria are the well-known names of Bilâl Şimşir, Türker Acaroğlu, Hüseyin Memişoğlu, Levent Kayapinar, Ayşegül İnginar Kemaloğlu, Ömer Turan¹¹. Naturally, the greatest interest in the topics mentioned is among Bulgarian researchers. The list of those who deal with minorities in Bulgaria is extremely long. However, a few leading representatives in this scholarly discourse should be mentioned: Ilona Tomova, Antonina Zhelyazkova, Iskra Baeva, Evgeniya Kalinova, Mikhail Gruev, Vera Mutafchiyeva, Bogdana Todorova, Maksim Mizov, Mila Maeva, Miumiun Tachir, Magdalena Elchinova¹².

Turks in Bulgarian Politics after the Fall of Communism

The end of 1989 opened a chapter of new possibilities in ethnic politics in Bulgaria. The last years of the Zhivkov regime went down in history as the apogee of a period of repression against the Muslim population, which resulted in the largest mass migration to

¹⁰ Polish authors [post-1989 Bulgarian history and political system]: A. Koseski, *W bałkańskim kregu*, Pułtusk–Warszawa 2013; J. Jackowicz, *Bulgaria od rządów komunistycznych do demokracji parlamentarnej 1988–1991*, Warszawa 1992; Z. Klejn *Bulgaria. Szkice z dziejów najnowszych*, Pułtusk 2005; A. Burakowski, A. Gubrynowicz, P. Ukielski, *1989 – Jesień Narodów*, Warszawa 2009; T. Czekalski, *Bulgaria – historia państw świata w XX i XXI wieku*, Warszawa 2010; W. Walkiewicz, *Bulgaria. Dzieje polityczne najnowsze*, Białystok 2018; M. Bankowicz, *Transformacja konstytucyjnych systemów władzy państwowej w Europie Środkowej*, Kraków 2010; A. Nowosad, *Władza i media w Bułgarii*, Kraków 2008; J. Wojnicki, *Transformacja systemowa w Bułgarii – opóźniona czy specyficzna*, in: *100 lat relacji dyplomatycznych między Polską a Bułgarią. Aspekty polityczne, społeczno-gospodarcze i kulturowe*, eds. M. Czernicka, J. Wojnicki, Warszawa 2019; R. Woźnica, *Bułgarska polityka wewnętrzna a proces integracji z Unią Europejską*, Kraków 2012.

¹¹ Turkish authors: B. Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri (1878–2008)*, Istanbul 2009; T. Acaroğlu, *Bulgaristan'da 120 yıllık Türk gazeteciliği (1965–1985)*, Istanbul 1990; H. Memişoğlu, *Bulgaristan'da Türk İslam Kültürü ve Sanatı*, Istanbul 2007; idem, *Gecmişten Günümüze Bulgaristan'da Türk Eğitim Tarihi*, Ankara 2003; L. Kayapinar, *Balkanlar'a Yapılan Türk Göçlerinde Coğrafya ve Kimliğin İzleri*, Izmir 2020; A.I. Kemaloğlu, *Bulgaristandan Türk Göçü 1985–1989*, Ankara 2012; O. Turan, *Turkish migrations from Bulgaria*, in: *Forced Ethnic Migrations in the Balkans: consequences and rebuilding of societies*, E. Popova, M. Hajdinjak (eds.), Sofia 2006; idem, *The Turkish Minority in Bulgaria (1878–1908)*, Ankara 1998.

¹² Bulgarian authors: I. Tomova, *Ethnic Dimension of Poverty in Bulgaria. Report Commissioned for the Bulgaria Social Assessment (The World Bank)*, Washington D.C. 1998; eadem, *Етническа идентичност*, in: *Аспекти на етнокултурна ситуация в България*, ed. В. Русанов, София 1992; A. Zhelyazkova, *Bulgaria in transition: the Muslim minorities*, “Islam and Christian Muslim Relations” 2001, vol. 12 (3); eadem, *The Bulgarian ethnic model*, “East European Constitutional Review” 2001, no. 10 (4); И. Баева, Е. Калинова, *Възродителният процес. Българската държава и българските турци (средата на 30-те – начало на 90-те години)*, София 2009; idem, *Bulgarian Turks during the Transition Period*, in: *Bulgaria and Europe: Shifting Identities*, S. Katsikos (ed.), London 2010; М. Груев, *Възродителният процес*, София 2012; В. Мутафчиева, *История населена с хора*, vol. 1–2, София 2005; Б. Тодорова, М. Мизов, *Българският етнически модел – мит или реалност?*, София 2010; М. Мизов, *Българският етнически модел – политическа митология или проблемна реалност?*, София 2011; М. Маева, *Образът на турците в Р. Турция през погледа на българските турци преселеници*, “Българска етнология” 2002, vol. 28, no. 4; М. Тахир, *Към интегрираща идентичност*, София 2011; М. Elchinova, *Border and categorization of the 1989 Bulgarian re-settlers to Turkey*, in: *Migration, Memory, Heritage: Sociocultural Approaches to the Bulgarian-Turkish Border*, M. Elchinova (ed.), Sofia 2012.

the Republic of Turkey in the summer of 1989¹³. For almost three months, long queues of citizens determined to leave the People’s Republic of Bulgaria (Bulgarian: Българска народна република, БНР, BRL) lined up at border crossings with Turkey¹⁴. The massive scale of this event was overwhelming, as it is estimated that the migration could have involved some 310,000–370,000 people¹⁵. These events outraged public opinion worldwide and caused the political isolation of the BRL. Although the repressive policy of assimilation was negated and immediately stopped after the fall of the dictator¹⁶, the authorities’ efforts to address the injustices were far less impressive. In January 1990, under the auspices of the National Assembly, the *Declaration of the National Assembly of the Bulgarian People’s Republic on the National Question* was passed. It again condemned the repression of the Muslim population, as well as calling for the maintenance of public order. The document specified the establishment of a parliamentary commission soon to deal with the problems of the population from ethnically diverse areas¹⁷. This decision provoked mixed feelings among the public, as not everyone wanted to apologise for the so-called “revival process”¹⁸. Quite a number of citizens took part in its organisation at the local level. At that moment, a wave of nationalist protests swept the country, whose participants disagreed with the revocation of the policy of forced assimilation. However, these were not spontaneous gatherings, but rather actions inspired by activists of the local communist committees. Bakalova mentions three factors that may have aroused ethno-nationalist sentiments among the population at the time. Firstly – and this has been mentioned – some citizens actively participated in the implementation of the so-called “revival process”. It was not without reason that they feared retaliation from the victims. In addition, the economic crisis (partly caused by the mass migration in the summer of 1989) completely ruined the employment structure in agriculture and industry, for which state propaganda blamed the departing Turks. Thirdly – many families multiplied their assets by buying at a discounted price the properties left by the emigrants¹⁹. At the end of 1989, the Committee for the Defence of National Interests was formed in Kyrdzjali – a region densely populated by the Turkish minority – to coordinate mass protests by nationalists. Demonstrators gathered in major urban centers (including Sofia, Plovdiv, Shumen, Ruse, Targovishte). Slogans such as “Bulgaria for

¹³ The second half of the 1980s saw the repression of the communist authorities mainly against the Turkish minority, but before that similar measures were imposed to other ethnic groups – the Roma and the Pomaks. By contrast, the process of gradually restricting civil rights of the Muslim population itself (regardless of identity) began from the mid-1950s. For more on the so-called “revival process” in the Bulgarian People’s Republic, see I. Stawowy-Kawka, *Turecka mniejszość narodowa...*

¹⁴ In this work, the People’s Republic of Bulgaria will be abbreviated as BRL. Although this does not reflect the first letters of the Bulgarian name, it refers to the Polish nomenclature, cf. PRL.

¹⁵ M. Gruev, *Възродителнят...*, p. 193; M. Maeva, *Bulgarte Turci Preselenci v Respubliki Turki*, Sofia 2006, p. 49. The authors use residual data or estimate their value. They should therefore be treated with distance.

¹⁶ Стенографски протокол от извънреден Пленум на ЦК на БКП, 29 декември 1989 г., “Понеделник” 1999, vol. 3–4, pp. 94–110.

¹⁷ ДВ, бр. 6, 19.01.1990 г., Указ но. 90 по обнародване Декларацията на Народното събрание на Народна република България по националния въпрос, pp. 3–5.

¹⁸ The policy of forced assimilation towards the Bulgarian Muslims was propagandistically referred to as the “process of rebirth” (bulg. възродителен процес).

¹⁹ M. Bakalova, *The Bulgarian Turkish Names Conflict and Democratic Transition*, “Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research” 2006, vol. 19, no. 3–4, p. 235.

Bulgarians”, “No to Turkish separatism”, “Bulgaria is not Cyprus”, “Go back to Turkey” were chanted. The demonstrators alleged that the government, through its passive attitude, was supporting the Turkisation of the country. The birth rate among Muslims was higher at the time, so they threatened the public with a Cyprus scenario, warning that Bulgaria could also be divided into Bulgarian and Turkish parts. Restoring Turkish names to the repressed was seen as a mistake that could cost the loss of sovereignty. The Committee’s attacks intensified in December 1990, when it was decided to proclaim the illegitimate Bulgarian Republic of Razgrad. Razgrad is a city in the north traditionally inhabited by a large proportion of Turks. The Republic of Razgrad was intended to be an independent state entity. Its founders opposed any liberalisation of ethnic politics, considering similar gestures as a betrayal of national interests. The authorities at central level immediately condemned this act of secession. The initiative itself was marginal, but it was indicative of the great emotions that were aroused by almost every decision on ethnic minorities²⁰.

Due to the prevailing anti-Turkish sentiments, the communists and opposition forces deliberately pushed back minority issues. This is exquisitely illustrated by the Bulgarian Round Table, to which the Turkish minority delegation was not invited. Neither the Union of Democratic Forces (Bulgarian: Съюз на демократичните сили, СДС, SDS), nor the Bulgarian Communist Party (Bulgarian: Българска комунистическа партия, БКП, ВКР) cared about the presence of such a delegation²¹. Meanwhile, by the beginning of 1990, the Turks already had formal political structures. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms was established on 4 January 1990 in Varna (the registration by Sofia court was made on 26 April 1990)²². In fact, ethnic policy issues were only discussed during the working sessions and not in official television broadcasts. The various circles did not want to be associated with the liberalisation of policy towards the Muslim population²³. In addition, during the Round Table on 3 April 1990, *the Political Parties Act* was passed. Its provisions explicitly stated that no grouping against sovereignty and territorial integrity or organised on religious or ethnic basis would be allowed to function in Bulgaria²⁴. In this way, they tried to curb the potential growth of Turkish parties. It may therefore come as a surprise that the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – as mentioned – has been registered. Paradoxically, it was the communists who were behind this, planning to break up the support guaranteed to the opposition forces in this way. These behind-the-scenes activities led the DPS to the first democratic elections²⁵.

Apart from this exception, the strategy towards the presence of the Turkish minority in politics was consistent. Starting the 1990s, political forces didn’t support Bulgarian Turks to establish a real representation in the National Assembly. Therefore, provisions regulating the participation of ethnically oriented parties were also to be included in the future constitution. Chapter One concretised this in Article 11. 4, warning that political parties could not be formed

²⁰ R. Vassilev, *Bulgaria’s Ethnic Problems*, “East European Quarterly” 2002, vol. 36, no. 1, pp. 106–109.

²¹ R. Kolarova, *Tacit Agreements in the Bulgarian Transition to Democracy: Minority Rights and Constitutionalism*, “The University of Chicago Law School Roundtable” 1993, vol. 1, no. 12, pp. 33–39.

²² Движение за права и свободи, Регистър на политическите партии, Софийски градски съд, <https://sgs.justice.bg/bg/14755> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

²³ R. Kolarova, *Tacit Agreements...*, pp. 33–39.

²⁴ ДВ, бр. 29 от 10.04.1990 г., Закон за политическите партии от 3.04.1990 г., pp. 5–7.

²⁵ B. Rechel, *State Control of Minorities in Bulgaria*, “Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics” 2007, vol. 23, no. 3, pp. 354–358.

on the basis of affiliation, ethnic, racial or religious²⁶. Another important provision was Article 44.2, which forbade the establishment of organisations aiming at separatism or inciting ethnic or religious hostility, as well as the establishment of paramilitary structures against the state²⁷. Although the nature of these norms was general, as they applied to all political organisations, it was clearly intended to hold back the political ambitions of representatives of ethnic minorities. These provisions also provided a pretext for nationalist circles to strike directly at the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. On the other hand, the draft of the new constitution referred in two places to the situation related to the past policy of forced assimilation. Article 29 contained the wording that "no one could be forcibly assimilated", while Article 35.2 stated that "every citizen had the right to return to the country", which was a guarantee for the hundreds of thousands of Turks who left the BRL in 1989²⁸.

In October 1991, 93 parliamentary deputies submitted an enquiry to the Constitutional Court on the legality of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Ganev points out that the anti-state origin of the DPS was one of the key petitioners' arguments. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms originated from the Turkish National Liberation Movement. It was an underground organisation that already had the ethnic attribute in its name. It was alleged that the then structures associated with the person of DPS leader Ahmed Dogan were responsible for terrorist acts in the mid-1980s. However, since the applicants were unable to provide credible evidence, the application was immediately rejected. After careful analysis, the Constitutional Court referred only to Article 11.4. It was found that it was impossible to establish precise criteria that would determine the ethnic profile of a political formation. It used the argument that many parties used names that referred to ethnic or religious categories, e.g. Christian Democratic parties or those with the adjective Bulgarian in their name. The Movement for Rights and Freedoms was able to continue operating on the national political stage²⁹.

In the 1990s, the perception of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms as a group pursuing Turkish interests made the formation a constant object of attack from political opponents. Hence, after the Constitutional Court verdict, the party preferred to steer its programme towards the centre-left orientation. Over the following years, its activity was characterised by a rather restrained ethnic rhetoric. The new programme was written so that the DPS promoted the protection of the rights of all Bulgarian citizens. From the perspective of the political environment of Bulgarian Turks, this was a convenient approach, as the formation had no significant competition. According to Johnson, a monopoly is the best scenario for ethnic minority parties. In the case of stratification, the different actors not only compete on the field of activity, but also at the ideological level³⁰. Although the first attempts at separation took place back in 1992 (Turkish Democratic Party), they failed

²⁶ *Konstytucja Republiki Bułgarii*, Warszawa 2012, series *Konstytucje Świata – Biblioteka Sejmowa*, art. 11.4., p. 55.

²⁷ *Konstytucja Republiki Bułgarii...*, art. 44.2., p. 66.

²⁸ *Konstytucja Republiki Bułgarii...*, art. 25, p. 61.

²⁹ ДВ, бр. 35 от 28.04.1992 г., Решение но. 4 от 21.04.1992 г. по к.д. но. 1/91 г. по искане за обявяване противоконституционността на Движението за права и свободи и за установяване на неизбираемост на народните представители от 36-то Народно събрание, избрани с листата на Движението за права и свободи в изборите на 13.10.1991.

³⁰ C. Johnson, *Democratic Transition in the Balkans: Romania's Hungarian and Bulgaria's Turkish Minority (1989–99)*, "Nationalism and Ethnic Politics" 2002, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 16.

as Adem Kenan's party was not allowed to register. In May 1994, Mehmed Hodzha, another DPS activist, challenged Ahmed Dogan by founding the Democratic Change Party. This gesture was a reaction to Dogan's cooperation with the Socialists. Despite cooperating with the SDS, the new Turkish party also failed to achieve competitive support. By far the biggest split in the 1990s was experienced by the Movement when the National Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Bulgarian: Национално движение за права и свободи, НДПС, NDPS) was formed in 1998. The NDPS retained, *de facto*, almost all the attributes and points of the parent party's programme, but returning to its roots, it emphasised ethnic distinctiveness more strongly. With the increasing impoverishment of the southern regions of the country, ethno-nationalist sentiments began to be felt among Turkish voters as well. As a result of these trends, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms began to visibly engage in local politics in areas where the ethnic electorate predominated³¹.

The 1990s was also a period when Bulgarian Turks actively cooperated with other parties. This was encouraged by the new moderate programme. DPS was not part of any coalition at the time but offered its support at local as well as central level. Politicians from both the left and the right of the political spectrum could count on it. This conciliatory attitude also seems to resound in the words spoken by Ahmed Dogan during the opening session of the National Assembly in 1991:

[...] First and foremost, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms is there to guarantee social order in the Republic of Bulgaria, as well as to irrevocably return democratisation to the tracks of Europeanisation of political and parliamentary life in the country³².

From now on, balancing between the major political players will define this formation and provoke criticism from its political opponents.

Growth in the Position of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms

At the dawn of the 21st century that the Movement for Rights and Freedoms was to increase its influence in politics. An opportunity to do so was to participate in a coalition with the National Movement Simeon II (Bulgarian: Национално движение "Симеон II", НДСВ, NDSV). Despite its sensational result in the parliamentary elections, the formation of former Bulgarian tsar Simeon Sax-Coburg-Gotha needed an allied party to govern³³. In the newly appointed cabinet, the DPS was given the ministry of agriculture and forests, 1 ministry without portfolio and 5 deputy ministerial posts³⁴. The government's ambitious

³¹ J.T. Ishiyama, M. Breuning, *Ethnopolitics in the New Europe*, Boulder 1998, pp. 33–34.

³² А. Доган, *Реч по повод на Първо заседание на 36-то Народно Събрание от 4 ноември 1991 г.*, in: *По образ и подобие на европейските измерения. Избрани речи на Ахмед Доган*, София 2008, p. 10; originally: "[...] Преди всичко Движение за права и свободи е и за гарантиране на социалния мир в Република България, и за превръщането на демократизацията в необратим процес в контекста на пълното европеизиране на политическия и парламентарния живот на страната!"

³³ Z. Klejn, *Bulgaria. Szkice z dziejów najnowszych*, Pułtusk 2005, pp. 222–225.

³⁴ Agreement on Coalition Government signed, portal Novinite.com, 20.07.2001, <https://www.novinite.com/articles/1142/AGREEMENT+ON+COALITION+GOVERNMENT+SIGNED> (date accessed: 07.06.2024).

agenda, entitled *Bulgaria's Wealth is the People*, also included demands for ethnic policy. The goals set by ruling authorities were divided into: short-, medium- and long-term goals. The programme included: the creation of anti-discrimination law mechanisms and the monitoring of progress in the implementation of the recently ratified Framework Convention on National Minorities; the creation of an agency responsible for advancing ethnic policy; and the improvement of living standards in regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. The points made have hardly matured into reality. Among the few successes is the renaming of the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Affairs as the National Council for Ethnic and Demographic Cooperation under the Council of Ministers³⁵. Its position was increased and this existing body was reorganised, but the restructuring issues ended there. In addition, the *Anti-Discrimination Act* was passed in 2003, which included regulations for ethnic minorities³⁶.

In 2005, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms celebrated its 15th anniversary. It was also the time when, after the next parliamentary elections, the DPS once again took responsibility for executive power in the state. A tripartite coalition between the Socialists (Bulgarian Socialist Party, Bulgarian: Българска социалистическа партия, БСП, BSP), the NDSV and the DPS was signed in August 2005. In the context of the goals of ethnic policy, there was still an emphasis on promoting the development of regions inhabited by ethnic minorities and advancing the concept of peaceful coexistence of ethnic groups (the so-called Bulgarian ethnic model)³⁷. Importantly, it was also decided to strengthen cooperation with representatives of the various ethnic minorities so that the solutions adopted would come from these groups and not be imposed from above. Particular concern was given to the Roma minority, as it was the Roma who were the focus of attention in the EU institutions. Bulgaria, not wishing to delay its accession to the European Union, had to cooperate closely on ethnic policy³⁸. The position of the Turkish minority was not so emphasised by EU observers, as they assumed that a minority with its own political representation did not need such extensive support. Meanwhile, this population, often living in the same neighbourhoods as the Roma, experienced material and social deprivation. While in 2006, the average monthly household income was 255 levs, in regions with large minority populations this figure was around 180 levs³⁹. As during the first coalition, the Movement failed to push through most of the proposed ethnic policy demands. The impact on law enforcement did not result in an improvement in living condition of the DPS electorate. It is true that many of the legal measures from 2001–2009 raised the standard of ethnic policy to the level of other member states (anti-discrimination law, education in the mother

³⁵ ДВ, бр. 110 от 17.12.2004 г., Постановление но. 333 на Министерския съвет от 10.12.2004 г. за създаване на Национален съвет за сътрудничество по етническите и демографските въпроси към Министерския съвет и за приемане на Правилник за неговата дейност.

³⁶ ДВ, бр. 86 от 30.09.2003 г., Закон за защита срещу дискриминация, pp. 2–11.

³⁷ More about the so-called Bulgarian Ethnic Model, see: A. Zhelyazkova, *The Bulgarian Ethnic model*, "East European Constitutional Review" 2001, vol. 10, no. 4.

³⁸ Програма на правителство на европейска интеграция, икономическия растеж и социалната отговорност 2005–2009, p. 7, http://old.europe.bg/upload/docs/GovernmentalProgramme_final_bg.pdf (date accessed: 07.06.2024).

³⁹ Author's elaboration of the data on the platform НСИ: Инфостат, Общ доход по източници на доходи преди 2008 г. (през 2006 г.), https://infostat.nsi.bg/infostat/pages/reports/result.jsf?x_2=1175 (date accessed: 07.06.2024).

tongue of minorities, unemployment programmes, etc.), but their implementation was less impressive. Finally, the Stanishev government, in which the DPS participated, left amid a scandal over the misappropriation of EU funds⁴⁰.

Growth of the Populist Far-Right Party in Bulgaria

Over the years, the process of stratification on the Bulgarian political scene has progressed and new significant actors with a populist far-right profile have emerged on the scene. The shared characteristic of these groups became their attitude towards Turkey and the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria, including the political participation of this group. It can be assumed that such a trend was to some extent an interpretation of the prevailing mood in society. Since the 1990s, public opinion polls entitled *Social Distancing and Ethnic Stereotypes about Minorities* have been conducted periodically in Bulgaria⁴¹. This involved completing a questionnaire that assessed the degree of social distancing towards particular groups according to the Bogardus scale. Another task was to describe groups with the five characteristics that respondents felt best characterised minorities. In 2009, as many as 49.8 per cent of respondents answered that the presence of Turks in their region of residence was not a problem. Approx. 38.6% of Bulgarians would invite a Turkish man/Turkish woman into their home. However, only 18.7% of respondents would agree to report to a Turkish supervisor at work. Two-thirds of respondents would send their children to a class with children of Turkish origin, but only 12.3% would accept that Turkish peers make up half of the pupils in the class. The words used most often to describe Bulgarian Turks were: faith, Turkish slavery and hardworking⁴². There seems to have been a slight change in this case, as according to Tomowa – in 1992, terms such as fanatics, devout and vindictive were mentioned most frequently⁴³. The 2009 report indicated that negative stereotypes based on different religion or historical heritage were still the two leading factors in the perception of Turks in the public space. The use of these elements was an extremely attractive form of political strategy for the extreme populist right groups. Especially when a party perceived as Turkish – the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – was operating in parliament. On the other hand, however, these surveys should be approached with the appropriate distance, since, as the authors of the survey themselves emphasised, some answers were based on the perceptions and not on the respondents' own experience. Moreover, not all stereotypes, even the most negative ones, were translated into real life and interpersonal contacts⁴⁴.

⁴⁰ A. Burakowski, *Postkomunizm w Bulgarii*, "Ślupskie Studia Historyczne" 2011, vol. 17, pp. 240–241.

⁴¹ Български хелзински комитет, Социални дистанции в България в периода 2008–2012, <https://www.bghelsinki.org/bg/publication/socialni-distancii-v-blgariya-v-perioda-2008-2012-g> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁴² А. Пампоров, *Социални дистанции и етнически стереотипи за малцинствата в България*, Институт "Отворено общество", София 2012, pp. 112–113, 127, 130–139.

⁴³ И. Томова, *Етнически стереотипи и предразсъдъци у българите*, in: *Аспекти на етнокултурната ситуация в България*, ed. В. Русанов, София 1992, pp. 80–81.

⁴⁴ Д. Добрев, *Критичен анализ на изследването на социалните дистанции и етническите стереотипи за малцинствата в България*, in: *Диоген. Съвременни философски изследвания, сборник*, ed. В. Бузов, Велико Търново 2011, pp. 147.

In 2005, the debuting ATAKA party introduced its MPs to the National Assembly. ATAKA was an anti-system group, contesting the then balance of political forces in the country. Its leader, Volen Siderov, commented in his statements on many occasions that “foreign influences” were responsible for the political destabilisation of Bulgaria. He considered international organisations, world powers, neighbouring countries and ethnic minorities to be such. In this universe, the DPS was positioned as a natural enemy of the system of values that the Attackers held. When the coalition of the Stanishev government was about to include Dogan’s party, ATAKA organised a protest outside the Parliament seat. Siderov then said to those gathered: “Socialists will give half of the power to the DPS, and Stanishev’s government will put fezzes on us and turn us into *giaours*! We will boycott this cabinet, we want early elections!”⁴⁵. In a petition sent to President Parvanov at the time, he threatened that whoever appointed the Stanishev government would be committing “de facto national treason”⁴⁶. There were many more similar incidents, criticising and insulting the DPS, throughout the term. Siderov called the Movement a “political cancer” and a “danger to Bulgaria”⁴⁷.

Another party from the extreme populist right is the VMRO-Bulgarian National Movement (Bulgarian: ВМРО-Българско национално движение, ВМРО-БНД, VMRO-BND). Already in the party’s agenda itself one can find a direct reference to the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, which was defined there as an “unconstitutional, Turkish, ethnic and religious party”. Later on, VMRO-BND characterised other groupings of Bulgarian Turks such as the People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity and the Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance with a similar label. Like ATAKA, VMRO considers betrayal of national interests a crime that should be prosecuted under the Criminal Code. The party is active on the internet and social media. On its official website, there is a special tab entitled “Turkey Unmasked” (Bulgarian: Турция разбулена), where the reader can find many publications on Turkish affairs. The headlines of the articles unambiguously characterise the content gathered therein: *On neo-osmanism, Bulgaria and Turkish producers in our country* (Bulgarian: За неоосманизма, България и турските мекерета у нас⁴⁸), *Is Erdogan preparing Turkish expansion?* (Bulgarian: Подготвя ли Ердоган турската експанзия?⁴⁹), *How long will we put up with the misrepresentation of Bulgarian history?* (Bulgarian: До кога ще търпим гавра с българската история?⁵⁰), etc.

⁴⁵ Рехав митинг на Атака скандира срещу ДПС преди вота на кабинета, portal Mediapool, 26.07.2005, <https://www.mediapool.bg/rehav-miting-na-ataka-skandira-sreshtu-dps-predi-vota-za-kabineta-news107416.html> (date accessed: 06.02.2024); originally: “[...] БСП дава половината на власт на ДПС, правителството на Станишев ще ни сложи фесове и ще ни направи гяури. [...] Ще бойкотираме този кабинет, искаме предсрочни избори”.

⁴⁶ В. Сидеров: Мандат на ДПС е “национално предателство”, portal Mediapool, 12.08.2005, <https://www.mediapool.bg/v-siderov-mandat-na-dps-e-natsionalno-predatelstvo-news107972.html> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁴⁷ В. Сидеров: “Станишев да подаде оставка”, portal Kapital.bg, 21.05.2007, https://www.capital.bg/-vestnikut/kapital_prim/2007/05/21/341781_volen_siderov_stanishev_da_podade_ostavka/ (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁴⁸ А. Джамбазки, За неоосманизма, България и турските мекерета у нас, 15.12.2013, Официален уебсайт на ВМРО-БНД, <http://www.vmro.bg/za-neoosmanizma-blgariia-i-turskite-mekereta-u-nas/> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁴⁹ В. Митов, Подготвя ли Ердоган турската експанзия?, 31.03.2019, *ibidem*, <https://vmro.bg/владимир-митов-подготвя-ли-ердоган-турската-експанзия> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁵⁰ К. Каракачанов, Докога ще търпим гавра с българската история, *ibidem*, 22.12.2015, <https://vmro.bg/-vmro-докога-ще-търпим-гавра-с-българската-история> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

Finally, the political formation with the shortest seniority is the National Salvation Front of Bulgaria (Bulgarian: Национален фронт за спасение на България, НФСБ, NFSB; established in 2011)⁵¹. Its chairman is Valeri Simeonov – owner of the private TV station SKAT. The National Front categorically denies minorities the right to political representation. Among the NFSB’s programme demands is a proposal that the active right to vote should be restricted on the basis of knowledge of the Bulgarian language⁵².

All three groups decided to declare their participation in the 2017 parliamentary elections as the United Patriots coalition. In order to make themselves known in the media, the coalition members organised a blockade of the border with Turkey a few days before the elections. In this way, they tried to stop buses carrying potential voters from the neighbouring country. As Volen Siderov explained at the time, this move should be stopped, as the electorate riding in the buses has nothing in common with Bulgaria, and “Ankara will continue to support the anti-Bulgarian parties of Turkish intelligence through them”⁵³. In March 2017, the United Patriots represented the third government of Boyko Borisov. Influenced by his coalition partners, the Prime Minister agreed to many concessions related to ethnic policy issues. The United Patriots coalition ended in 2019⁵⁴. Its hostile attitude towards the Turkish minority and the Republic of Turkey became its hallmark, on which it continually built its political capital and developed an ideological identity.

A Split in the Political Environment of the Turkish Minority in the 21st Century

Although the position of the DPS continued to grow at the dawn of the new century, collaboration with the Socialists within the Stanishev government caused an internal rift within the party. Over the following years, the Movement, relegated to the role of opposition, faced its own crises. The first of these manifested itself in 2011, when Kasim Dal left the party. He had been one of Ahmed Dogan’s most loyal associates. In an open letter, he criticized the leader of the Movement with neglecting the decline of their organization and for having ties to corruption⁵⁵. The following year, together with Korman Ismailov, he founded a new party known as the People’s Party “Freedom and Dignity” (Bulgarian: Народна партия “Свобода и Достойнство”, НПСД, NPSD). The NPSD leadership repeatedly stressed that they did not intend to copy the DPS, but rather to become a nationwide alternative for its voters. Another important demand was to guarantee the right to vote also

⁵¹ Устав на НФСБ, Официален уебсайт на НФСБ, http://www.nfsb.bg/public/documents/ustav_2017_edition.pdf (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁵² НФСБ, Основни цели на Национален Фронт за Спасение България, <http://www.nfsb.bg/targets.php> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁵³ “Обединени патриоти” блокираха границата, Телевизия SKAT, <http://www.skat.bg/news.php?action=7&-newsID=38971> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁵⁴ “Обединени патриоти” се разцепиха: ВМРО и НФСБ изключиха Атака, Portal Mediapool, 25.07.2019, <https://www.mediapool.bg/obedineni-patrioti-se-raztsepiha-vmro-i-nfsb-izklyuchiha-ataka-news296166.html> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁵⁵ Доган взел 150000 лева за “Цанков камък”, “Труд”, 20.03.2010, <https://web.archive.org/web/20100713223718/http://www.trud.bg/Article.asp?ArticleId=420788>, [archive page] (date accessed: 06.06.2024).

to citizens living abroad⁵⁶. This, in turn, has aroused the interest of the Republic of Turkey. Until now, this had not been as apparent due to Ahmed Dogan’s leadership. Dogan lacked support from the Turkish authorities – his past as an agent during the BRL is believed to have been an obstacle. The Turkish government welcomed the emergence of a new formation representing the interests of the Turkish minority⁵⁷. However, the lack of a clear political programme did not ensure the NPSD’s success in the 2013 elections. It did not cross the electoral threshold⁵⁸.

In 2013, there was a change in the position of President of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Ahmed Dogan handed over his position to long-time activist Liutvi Mestan to remain Honorary Chairman of the DPS himself⁵⁹. It might seem that these were façade changes; however, Mestan as a politician had his own vision and ambitions. One of these was a rapprochement with the Republic of Turkey, which succeeded in 2014. At that time, as the new leader of the DPS, he was invited by Turkish President Recep Erdoğan⁶⁰. The meeting was widely commented on by the media and the Movement’s political opponents. The accusations made at the time were about mobilising the electorate from the neighbouring country so that Ankara could influence politics in Bulgaria. Mestan could count on the Turkish elite. However, just two years later, he had to leave the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. His resignation was the result of a behind-the-scenes conflict with Dogan. The media speculated that the trigger for the dispute was DPS’ support of Turkey in the National Assembly regarding the downing of the Russian plane on November 24, 2015. By making a statement to the DPS parliamentary group, Mestan exposed himself not only to the BSP, which issued a message to the contrary (supporting the Russian side), but also to the honorary chairman of the DPS. A month after the incident, Mestan was not only stripped of his position, but also forced to leave⁶¹. The following year he decided to set up his own political formation, which he called Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom and Tolerance (Bulgarian: Демократи за отговорност, свобода и толерантност, ДОСТ, DOST). Initially the party was not accepted by the Sofia municipal court. The refusal was motivated by the fact that the acronym DOST means the word “friend” in Turkish. However, the negative decision was overturned by the Court of Cassation, which considered the lower court’s arguments to be hypothetical⁶². The formation has been registered. In

⁵⁶ K. Fijolek-Kwaśniewska, Interview with Kasim Dal, private archive.

⁵⁷ The media reported that during a visit to Bulgaria in 2011. Recep Erdoğan did not meet with the DPS leadership, but only with Kasim Dal. See: *Рецеп Ердоган се срещна с Лютви Местан*, portal bTV Novinite, 13.09.2014, <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/izbori/redzhep-erdogan-se-sreshтна-s-ljutvi-mestan.html> (date accessed: 07.06.2024).

⁵⁸ ЦИК, Избори за народни представители 2013, <https://results.cik.bg/pi2013/rezultati/index.html> (date accessed: 07.06.2024).

⁵⁹ VIII Национална конференция на Движението за права и свободи, Решението от 19.01.2013 г., <https://web.archive.org/web/20130418234851/http://dps.bg/news/events/1961/veee-ta-natsionalna-konferentsiya-na-dps-izbra-d-r-ahmed-dogan-za-pocheten-predsedatel-i-lyutvi-mestan-za-predsedatel-na-dps.aspx>, [archived page, document available at the link] (date accessed: 07.06.2024).

⁶⁰ *Рецеп Ердоган се срещна с Лютви...*

⁶¹ *ДПС изхвърли Местан, той обяви, че отстоява европейски, а не руски интереси (обобщение)*, “Дневник”, 24.12.2015, https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2015/12/24/2676235_dps_izhvurli_mestan_toi_obiavi_che_otstoiava/# (date accessed: 7.06.2024).

⁶² ВКС, Решение no. 125 от 29.07.2016 г., <http://domino.vks.bg/bcap/scc/webdata.nsf/vCourtActsByCase/78869DB360B8257BC2257FFF002F5F1D> (date accessed: 7.06.2024).

order to increase its chances in the parliamentary elections, it allied itself with Kasim Dal's party. Thus, the two former DPS politicians formed a common front to win over a part of the Turkish electorate in Bulgaria. The coalition partners could count on mobilising votes from the southern neighbourhood, as they had Turkish politicians from the ruling AKP (Turkish: Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Justice and Development Party) and the nationalist MHP (Turkish: Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, National Action Party) on their side. There was no shortage of controversy during the election campaign (including Mestan being fined for the second time for political agitation in Turkish, which was forbidden by the Electoral Code in Bulgaria)⁶³. In the March 2017 elections, the Dal and Mestan coalition obtained only 2.94%. However unimpressive the result was, the two formations managed to pick up some support in the southern regions of the country, as well as in neighbouring Turkey⁶⁴.

The Rapprochement of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms with the Republic of Turkey

It was not until the end of 2020 that it proved to be a breakthrough from the perspective of contacts between the Movement for Rights and Freedoms and the authorities of the Republic of Turkey. Cooperation between the DPS and Turkish politicians began to intensify when Mustafa Karadayı, a politician of the younger generation, took over a presidency. In June 2021, a DPS delegation participated in the celebrations of Atatürk's 130th birthday. The visit was accompanied by a meeting with the Speaker of the Turkish Parliament and President Erdoğan⁶⁵. It was widely reported in the Bulgarian media. The president of Bulgaria, Rumen Radev, chose to speak out, stating that:

[...] The DPS leader should rethink the meaning of the word “homeland” and in which context he uses it. He should remind himself of the oath he took in the National Assembly – that he would abide by the Bulgarian Constitution. [...] Turkey is a good neighbour, an important partner and ally, but this relationship should develop on the principles of equality, mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs⁶⁶.

⁶³ ДОСТ провежда в София учредителната си конференция в присъствието на депутати от Турция, Българско национално радио, 10.04.2016, <https://www.bnr.bg/vidin/post/100679346/zasileni-merki-za-sigurnost-na-uchreditelnata-konferencia-na-dost> (date accessed: 7.06.2024).

⁶⁴ ЦИК, Парламентарни избори 26 март 2017 г., <https://results.cik.bg/pi2017/rezultati/> (date accessed: 7.06.2024).

⁶⁵ Президентът на Р Турция, Реджеп Тайип Ердоган, прие делегацията на ДПС, водена от председателя Мустафа Карадайъ, 05.06.2021, официална страница на ДПС, <https://www.dps.bg/aktualno/sabitia/prezidentyt-na-r-turciya-redjep-tajip-erdogan-prie-delegaciya,-vodena-ot-predsedatelya-mustafa-karaday.html> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁶⁶ Радев за визитата на Карадайъ в Турция: Лидерът на ДПС да преомисли понятието “родина”, в. “Труд”, 08.06.2021, <https://trud.bg/радев-за-визитата-на-карадайъ-в-турция-лидерът-на-дпс-да-преосмисли-понятието-родина/> (date accessed: 06.02.2024); originally: “[...] Мисля, че лидерът на ДПС трябва да преосмисли понятието “родина” и в какъв контекст го употребява. И да си припомни клетвата, която е положил в българското Народно събрание – да спазва българската конституция, [...] Турция е добър съсед, важен партньор и съюзник, но тези отношения трябва да се развиват върху равнопоставеност, взаимно уважение и ненамеса във вътрешните дела” (translation – K.F.-K.).

In a statement, the party responded that its loyalty to Bulgaria should not be questioned⁶⁷. Undeniably, this course towards Turkey, as significant in the history of the Movement as a whole, was the result of Ahmed Dogan’s temporary removal from the decision-making stream. However, given the events of November 2023, when Karadayı resigned as leader and Dogan retook his place at the head of DPS, a similar collaboration is unlikely to continue⁶⁸.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to try to answer the question of why in the post-1989 social discourse, the myth of the “fifth column” is associated with the Turkish minority and its activity in politics. In the 1990s, Bulgarian identity was being redefined, based on a simple dichotomy of what was native and what was foreign. The idea of a suffering nation building its identity on the graves of its heroes returned with full force during the period of political transformation. As Čolović wrote in *Terror of Culture*, the symbols, myths and relics of a nation become its sacredness and at the same time a tool of political power⁶⁹. Within the sacralisation of national symbols, Turkish elements were unacceptable. The Turks could only play one role – those who in the past had raised their hand against Bulgarian independence. In contrast, the effect of the so-called “revival process” was to strengthen the sense of identity among the Bulgarian Turks themselves. The forced assimilation made this group realise that it had its own identity expressed in religion, language and customs. The time of political transition also became a motivation for them to fight for their own social rights. The conflict between these two visions of identity was inevitable and aroused great emotions among citizens.

Seeing these trends in the early 1990s, the communists deliberately tried to dismiss the topic of ethnic politics. The Union of Democratic Forces also preferred to represent minorities behind the scenes rather than realistically allow them to speak on their own behalf. Overt support of the Turkish minority was not in the interest of either bloc. This is confirmed by the history of the first political organisation of Bulgarian Turks, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms. Indeed, its registration was the result of a political games between competing political actors. Later years showed that the party constantly came under attack for allegedly cooperating with Turkey. Legislative and judicial initiatives at the time sought to diminish its political influence. In addition, this period saw the first splits in the political environment of the Turkish minority.

Starting the 21st century, the Turkish minority faced criticism from new parties of the extreme populist right. The fact that the Movement for Rights and Freedoms held power as a coalition partner between 2001 and 2008 contributed to this. New parties contesting the political situation at the time accused Turkish politicians of intelligence activity, betray-

⁶⁷ И. Кючюк, Гласът от Бурса, Бирмингам и Бостън за нас тежи еднакво, БНР, 10.06.2021, <https://bnr.bg/post/101481027> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁶⁸ Карадайъ подаде оставка като председател на ДПС, portal bTV novinite, 07.11.2023, <https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/karadaja-podade-ostavka-kato-predsedatel-na-dps.html> (date accessed: 06.02.2024).

⁶⁹ I. Čolović, *Balkany – terror kultury*, Wołowiec 2007, p. 24.

ing national interests and destabilising state structures. The myth of a “fifth column” destroying Bulgaria from within became an extremely valuable narrative tool for these groups and built their support among the more radical electorate. Representatives of the Turkish minority in politics also had to face further challenges, this time from former allies. The second decade of the 21st century marked further divisions within the DPS. Two former activists of the party set up their own political organisations, which, despite overt support from the Republic of Turkey, failed to significantly win over the Movement’s electorate. Surprisingly, there was also a rapprochement between the Movement for Rights and Freedoms party itself and the Turkish authorities after 2020. This was a sign that Turkey was ready to communicate with the largest political formation of Bulgarian Turks in order to pursue its regional policy in the Balkans. However, as it turned out at the end of 2023, this was a short-lived trend, as the DPS returned to the old political course that its leader, Ahmed Dogan, had cultivated for decades.

In conclusion, in the opinion of the author of this text, the hypothesis stating that the post-communist Bulgarian discourse around the myth of the Turkish “fifth column” primarily serves nationalist circles to build their political identity cannot be unequivocally confirmed. On the one hand, the accusations levelled against the Movement for Rights and Freedoms for its alleged collaboration with the Republic of Turkey can be considered exaggerated. For long decades, the DPS, which had a monopoly among the political organisation of Bulgarian Turks, did not enjoy the favour of the authorities of Bulgaria’s neighbour. On the other hand, splits in the Movement led to the creation of new political formations that undoubtedly sought support among the political elite in Ankara. This was evident in the context of the Dal and Mestan’s parties. The heterogeneous nature of the political circles of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria does not make it possible to confirm the assumed hypothesis. However, it can be assumed that none of the newly established parties has such a great potential to threaten the leading position of the DPS. Moreover, as this publication has tried to prove, the threat from the Turkish “fifth column”, as well as Turkey, is a popular motif that the extreme populist right parties use in their rhetoric. It appears both in the statements of politicians of this profile, as well as in the political programmes of the respective formations. It must be stated that it is a fundamental element of the identity of these parties, which will continue to exist as long as Bulgarian Turks actively participate in the political life of Bulgaria.

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