

# EUROPE'S SHAME:

## Anti-Muslim Hatred and the Roma of Bulgaria

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Islamic Human Rights Commission, 2010

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Islamic  
Human Rights  
Commission**



## History and current situation of Muslims in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has made substantial, and largely consensual, progress towards implementing and maintaining democratic processes and institutions. However, laws protecting the rights of ethnic and religious minorities have often been implemented as a result of pressure, or fear of pressure from Bulgaria's international counterparts, like the United States and Europe.

However, there is still noticeable racism and discrimination against the Muslim minorities of Bulgaria that is mostly rooted in the memories of Ottoman rule. After a long and bloody independence war, founders of the Bulgarian "nation state" felt that there was a pressing need for the redefinition of the territorial and ethnographic perimeters. During the process, everything related to the Ottomans, or anything reminiscent of their rule, was encountered severely, considered as remnants of a foreign rule that the Bulgarian nation needed to remove. Islam was to be regarded as a strong reminder of the Ottoman rule, while Muslims became the "others", to be either expunged or exiled.

There are three significant Muslim minorities in Bulgaria: Turks, Pomaks, and Muslim Gypsies or Roma. In addition, there exist pockets of Albanians, Tatars and Circassians who have assimilated into the Turkish Community. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878, around one million Turks and other Muslims emigrated from Bulgaria. This emigration flow continued during the Balkan Wars of 1912-1913 and the periods of the First and the Second World Wars. Those who had chosen to stay in the country centred their identities around Islam.

Currently the number of the Muslim minorities residing in Bulgaria is significant. Bulgaria currently has the largest proportion of Muslims among all the EU member countries. According to the last two population censuses from 1992 and 2001, the total number of Muslims (based on "religious belonging") is 1,110,295 (out of 8,887,317 total population) in 1992, and 966,978 (out of 7,928,901) in 2001. Turks, with 800,052 persons in 1992, and 746,664 in 2001, are the largest Muslim group in Bulgaria.

The education level amongst the Muslim minority in Bulgaria is very low. According to figures, only 2.7 per cent of the Turkish population have university education. Further, 5.6 per cent of Turks and Pomaks do not have a primary education. The low education rates have a great impact on the labour market. Lack of education puts the Turks and Muslim Bulgarians at a disadvantage, which in turn creates certain inequities in the labour market and inevitably leads to high levels of unemployment.

Unemployment in the Muslim populated areas is 3-4 times higher than the average national unemployment rate of 16 per cent. The estimated unemployment rate among the Turks and Pomaks is around 40 per cent and among the Roma is 80 per cent.

In comparison to other minorities Roma are the least favoured minority group in Bulgaria, with around 70 per cent of the population considering them unfavourably (31.8 per cent mostly unfavourable and 39.3 per cent very unfavourable). Surveys indicate that the Bulgarian majority perception of Muslim minorities in general is significantly more unfavourable than towards Armenians and Jews.

Shocking reports of a survey revealed that 89 per cent of Bulgarian high school and university students believed that Roma were robbers, 87 per cent considered them to be dirty and ignorant, 83% careless, 80% having bad manners, 76% being trouble makers, 70% having lice, 68% lazy, 64% with musical talents.

There is an issue of double discrimination for ethnic minorities that have additional 'disadvantages'. In the case of Muslim Roma their religious conviction and the current anti-Islamic climate indeed single them out to be in the category of facing double discrimination.

## Fieldwork report summary

The living conditions are dire and inhuman for the Roma community of Varna. In their neighbourhoods they mostly live in small shacks. The rooms consisted of either one or two beds that took up half of the room, with the families having to share these beds or sleep on the floor. The rest of the limited space was being used for eating, laundering and bathroom facilities. Many shacks have mice holes in some of the walls, and they mostly have no windows. In some shacks, there were holes where windows should have been, with people having to use plastic, metal, or wood to protect them from the harsh weather conditions.

Most of the children do not go to school simply because their families cannot afford to pay the fees, buy books or cover other expenses. There is a high level of unemployment. Some of the local Roma claimed that they were victimized by companies who employed them but did not pay their salaries. It seems to be a widespread problem and security forces offer no help. As a result the youth prefer to search through rubbish and collect metals so that they can earn some money to help their families.

## Summary of recommendations

In order to reverse the disadvantaged conditions of the Roma minority of Varna IHRC calls on the various structures and bodies that form the European Union to take stock of these issues. Whilst programmes do exist targeting the marginalisation of Roma in general, it is clear from this fieldwork that they are far from reaching the case of Roma in these areas of Bulgaria. Notably, many allegations of corruption and misuse of funds, designated for the purposes outlined above, have been made, and those institutions providing such funding need to look at these allegations seriously. If substantiated, measures must be taken to ensure that these issues are properly rectified, and that future breaches of trust are thwarted.

Finally, IHRC urges other international governmental organisations, notably the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to also review the report and take appropriate action within their respective capacities. The OSCE has many guidelines and positions on the effects of discrimination against Roma in the OSCE region, as well as a growing literature of policy recommendations in combating Islamophobia. Likewise, the OIC has a stated interest in tackling discrimination against Muslims. Both organisations need to include the Roma communities mentioned herein within their scope of their next assessment of discrimination in Europe, particularly cross-cutting discrimination against minorities in Europe.

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*The report (spiral bound) can also be purchased from the IHRC website at: <http://www.ihrc.org.uk/catalog/>*

