

## Reassessing ethnic identity in the pre-national Balkans

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### Abstract

Ethnic communities have been investigated so far mainly by anthropologists and ethnologists. As the specific research tools they have developed are not applicable to communities that have disappeared a long time ago, historians have searched for evidence of ethnic consciousness mainly in political statements, while literary historians have focused on ego-documents. However, a critical study of these and other written sources reveals that in the Balkans prior to the nineteenth century ethnic allegiance occupied a far more modest place in the hierarchy of moral values than is usually assumed. People identified with a religious community in the first place, to a large extent neglecting or ignoring ethnic distinctions and feeling no compelling moral liabilities regarding the ethnic community they belonged to. Obviously, religion is not a component of ethnic consciousness, as is so often claimed. Ethnic identity transpires to be rather a local variant of a larger, essentially religious collective identity. This state of affairs seriously challenges the traditional assumption that national communities organically “continue” ethnic communities.

Keywords: Balkans, ethnicity, Plovdiv, Ohrid

Historians in general agree that national ideologies, national communities and nations emerged in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century. According to traditional historiography, national communities were preceded by and emerged from ethnic communities. However, as Maria Todorova and others have argued, ethnic communities conceived as precursors of the nation appear to be just as much “constructed” as nations are. (Todorova 1994: 92-93) To people in the pre-national era is attributed an “ethnic awareness”, implying feelings of belonging and loyalty that in fact are typical of national consciousness.

In my presentation I argue that ethnic identity, dealt with in this way, is indeed a highly questionable concept. Ethnic consciousness — the idea that one belongs to a group possessing particular cultural features of which language in most cases is the most important — existed without any doubt, but it did not imply any allegiance beyond the border of the (extended) family, the clan (*rod*) or the small local community. Since many anthropological and ethnological methods are not applicable to people that died more than two hundred years ago, I will use the tools of historiography and philology.

### Multiple meanings of ethnonyms

A careful reading of historical sources reveals that people in the pre-national era — roughly prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century — identified themselves not with an ethnic, but with a religious community. In Bulgarian sources from the Ottoman period the ethnonym “Bulgarian” is relatively seldom used; instead, the authors prefer the term “Christian”. (Angelov 1994: 92-93; Makarova 2004: 271; Makarova 2005: 93) This is the case in most of the so-called *letopisni belezhki* (small autobiographical or chronicle-like notes added to manuscripts), in the well-known account of the translation of the relics of H. Ivan of Rila to the Rila Monastery (15<sup>th</sup> century), in the *Lives* of the New Martyrs Georgi and Nikola of Sofia (16<sup>th</sup> century), in the *damaskini* (compilations of edifying religious texts, from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onward), and so on. (Angelov 1994: 99-101; Nachev 1984; Petkanova-Toteva 1965) In all these texts, the authors as a rule call themselves, their protagonists and their addressees “Christians” and

not “Bulgarians”. Some historians claim that the authors of these texts, when defending the Christian faith, actually defended Bulgarian ethnic identity. (E. g. Mizov 1988: 171) One wonders though why, if Bulgarian identity was their priority, they did not say so overtly. Fear for Ottoman harassment cannot reasonably be invoked here, since the Ottomans were not interested in ethnic issues, but might have been irritated by Christian intransigency.

Actually, “Christians” is used in the sources as a common denomination and self-identification of all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, regardless of their ethnic affiliation. Western travellers in the Balkans as well label all Orthodox Christians as “Christians” or as “Greeks”. In these cases, “Greek” was used as a synonym of Orthodox Christian. One of these Western travellers for example pointed out that “both the Greek and the Bulgarian language are made use of for reading and writing by the Greeks of Adrianople, but in the villages on the road to Philippopoli the Greeks are better acquainted with the Bulgarian language”. (Clogg 1996: 253) There was yet another term, “*romaios*” or “*romios*”, “Roman” or “Romaean”, which could mean “ethnic Greek”, but also refer to all Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire of whatever ethnic origin. Peter Mackridge notices that “the word *Romaios* was often used by the Orthodox Church – and *Rum* was likewise used by the Ottoman authorities – to refer to all of the Orthodox Christian subjects of the Sublime Porte, regardless of linguistic and ethnic differences. This was also the normal way for Orthodox Christians to think of themselves.” (Mackridge 2008: 4) Orthodox Bulgarians did not consider a Muslim or a Catholic Bulgarian as “one of them”. They belonged to an other community. While marriages between Bulgarians of different creeds occurred very rarely and always were a traumatic event, marriages between Orthodox Bulgarians, Greeks, Vlachs and even Arabs were a frequent phenomenon in urban environments. (Detrez 2003: 35)

A second observation pertains to the use of ethnonyms to denote not only ethnic and religious groups, but also social, status and vocational groups. The terms “Greek” or “Romaean” could also refer to traders or city-dwellers, while Slav-speaking peasants were called “Bulgarians” or “Serbs”. (Roedometof 1988: 13; Vermeulen 1984: 234) Pandeli Kisimov wrote in his memoirs related to the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: “A citizen was, even if he did not know any Greek, a Greek; the name Greek indicated a city-dweller as for his lifestyle and his outfit; a Bulgarian could be the villager.” (Kisimov 1897: 9) However, in such cases the term “Greek” was never disconnected from the notion of “Ottoman Orthodox Christian”, since only an Orthodox Christian in or originating from the Ottoman Empire could be a “Greek” in the sense of a trader or a city-dweller. Muslim, Jewish, Armenian, and Catholic traders and city-dwellers were never called “Greeks”. “*Vlah*” — the name of a Balkan population speaking an East Romance language — could refer to an ethnic Vlach, but also to a person of whatever ethnic origin, practicing transhumance or semi-nomadic cattle breeding. (Georgiev 1978:700; Vermeulen 1984; 237; Wace 1914: 3) Not only ethnic Albanians, but all armed men (soldiers, guardians, bodyguards) could be called “*Arnauts*” (Albanians). (Clayer 2007: 25)

This means that peasants migrating to the city and changing their profession, social situation and status apparently also changed their ethnic identity. Many Bulgarians moving to the cities became “Greeks”, spoke Greek and called themselves “Greeks”. XXX This transformation indicates how unimportant ethnic affiliation actually was. Since it did not represent a violation of the principal commitment, which was felt to be due to the religious and not to the ethnic community, it could happen without any qualms of conscience.

All this, to be sure, does not mean that people were unaware of their ethnic identity. Petko Slavejkov writes that the Bulgarians in Plovdiv “did not want to become Greeks, they want to be Romaean” (*не тъсят да са гърци, но искат да са римляни*). (Slavejkov 1851) In the Ottoman *defters* (registers) Orthodox Christians were as a rule recorded as *kâfir* or *gâur* (non-believers) or (*u*)*rum* — the latter being the Turkish rendition of “*Romaios*”. Some

*defters*, however, do mention the local occurrence of specific ethnic groups. (Gălăbov 1938-1939: 92; Georgieva 1983: 43–48; Ivanova 2006 : 150–151) In epic folk songs as well, the protagonists are mostly referred to as “Christians”, but nevertheless ethnonyms unequivocally referring to ethnic affiliation do frequently appear. (Angelov 1994: 117-122, 162.) Especially in multilingual rural environments, people obviously were more conscious of ethnic differences, but their experience of ethnicity remained limited to the small space in which there was face-to-face contact and did not comprise the entire territory, occupied by the ethnic group.

### The proliferation of ethnic groups

Another phenomenon I want to draw the attention to is the proliferation of ethnic groups and the devaluation of ethnonyms. I have in mind the formation of small new groups referred to in ethnonym-like terms and displaying the characteristics of an ethnic group. As a rule the identity of such group consists of a peculiar combination of geographic, linguistic, religious and social features. One such group are the *gudili* in Bulgarian or *gudhiladhes* in Greek. (On the Gudilas more in detail, see Detrez 2003) They actually are the Plovdiv variant of the so called “Graecomans”, as all over the Balkans the Graecized Orthodox Christian urban upper class was called. Sociologically, the Gudilas constitute a part of the Plovdiv petty bourgeoisie, consisting mainly of Bulgarian peasants who had migrated to Plovdiv. In Plovdiv they adopted the language and the lifestyle of the (multiethnic) Graecophone urban establishment, but remained a separate social category in between the “Greek” upper class and the Bulgarians in the peripheral city neighbourhoods and in the surrounding villages. Konstantin Moravenov, whose *Pametnik za plovdivskoto hristiyansko naselenie* (Record of the Plovdiv Christian population, 1869) is our major, though extremely biased source of information about the Gudilas, uses the word “*pogudiljavane*” (“Gudilization”) referring to Bulgarian peasants turning into Greek speaking middle class citizens. (Moravenov 1981)

What made the Gudilas look like a separate ethnic group?

Firstly, they have a proper name, which initially apparently was an offensive nickname, but which they eventually started to use to denote themselves, as transpires from the following quote:

“As they said “Gudilas of the H. Paraskevi [parish]”, instead of “Ghoudhilas of the H. Paraskevi [parish]”, according to the local pronunciation of the Greek language in Plovdiv” (*κατο δυμαχα “Γκουντίλας της Αγί[ας] Παρασκευης” наместо “Гουδίλας της Αγίας Παρασκευης”* [sic], *първото по произношение туземско на гръцкийт в Пловдив език*). (Moravenov 1981: 250)

Secondly, the Gudilas spoke a particular language, a mixture of Bulgarian and Greek. (Detrez 2005) It struck Bulgarian and Greek visitors to Plovdiv as something particularly odd. (Karavelov 1984: 425; Nikolova 2006: 83, quotes M. Balabanov; Moravenov 1981: 169, 250; Apostolidhis 1959: 304). This is how “Gudilic” looked like:

*Вали **κλεчка** сто **дунка**, на ми свиризи о **ветарос**.* “Put a stick in the hole so that the wind does not whistle.” (Karavelov 1984: 426) The Bulgarian words are printed in bold, the other words are Greek.

Obviously both the speaker and the addressee knew both Bulgarian and Greek; otherwise they could not possibly understand each other. It is not excluded, though, that Gudilic was a kind of accomplished and relatively stable mixed language, which was spoken by people who were

essentially “monolingual in a mixed code” They had a fair command of the mixed code, but — as Mihail Madzharov (1968: 277-278) in his memoirs observed in Plovdiv — they were unable to speak either of both languages properly — a phenomenon well known to sociolinguists. (Blommaert & Meeuwis 1998: 81) As such, Gudilic appears to be a “language in its own right”, which functioned as the expression of a specific Gudilic identity, which was neither Bulgarian nor Greek.

Thirdly, as Moravenov’s account indicates, the Gudilas were treated on the same footing as other ethnic groups. For instance, Moravenov (1981:92) points out that the “Gudilas are buried *along* with Albanians, Vlachs and Greeks in the cemetery of the Church of St. Dimitrios”.

Finally, Moravenov mentions the existence of a “Guldila movement” (*gudilsko dvizhenie*), as opposed to the Bulgarian movement. This also seems to suggest that the Gudilas constitute a separate “ethnic” group. (Moravenov 1981: 63)

Similar groups that display features of an ethnic group while being definable in social or religious terms were not a rarity in the Balkans. Such groups were for instance the Vallahades (Greek-speaking Muslims in Macedonia), the Dönmes (Muslims of Jewish origin in Thessaloniki), the Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims), the Linovambaki and Laramans (crypto-Christians in Cyprus and Albania, respectively), and many others. There is also the remarkable case of the Karagüns — from Turkish *kara gün* (“black day”), a population of Albanians in southwest Thessaly that distinguished itself through constantly suffering from malaria. (Rizos 1998)

The proliferation of such ethnic groups and corresponding ethnonyms lead to their inflation: the more their numbers increased, the more their actual value declined. If every group was susceptible to such kind of ethnicization, what then did ethnicity ultimately stand for? Ethnic communities that now to us seem important because they eventually developed into nations actually did not distinguish themselves essentially from those small ethnic groups that mushroomed all over the Balkans.

### The irrelevance of ethnicity

Another aspect of what ethnic identity in the pre-national era actually meant to its bearers is revealed by the language situation in the city of Ohrid in the first half of the nineteenth century. Kuzman Shapkarev repeatedly points out that all citizens in Ohrid, even those who spoke Greek, called themselves “Bulgarians”. (Shapkarev 1895: 276-277; Shapkarev 1984: 46) Yurdan Ivanov points out that “every Bulgarian [in Ohrid, R. D.] who somehow knew to read and to write was proud to call himself a Greek and to behave as a Greek”. (Shapkarev 1895: 278, quotes Y. Ivanov. 1882. “Kām istoriyata na Vāzrazhdaneto v Ohrid”, *Svetlina* 2). Obviously, speaking and behaving like a Greek had nothing to do with ethnicity. It remains puzzling, however, how one can claim a Bulgarian ethnic identity and in everyday life speak another language than Bulgarian, also with other Bulgarians?

In order to fathom this, we should have a look at the use of Greek and Bulgarian in worship and education. The church services were as a rule celebrated in Greek, but there are many indications of the patriarchal clergy’s tolerance towards the use of Slavic. In the 1840s, the Bulgarian Church Slavonic tradition having fallen into oblivion, masses were sometimes celebrated in Church Slavonic on the basis of liturgical books imported from Russia. (Snegarov 1928: 57-58) The sermons were often given in the local dialect of Ohrid and the Gospel was translated into the Ohrid dialect from the Greek copy in the church. (Shapkarev 1895: 276-7) The records of the church councils and the guilds as well as trade agreements and similar official documents were all written in Greek.

The language of instruction in the Ohrid schools was Greek. Teachers occasionally made use of the Slavic native language of their pupils — the Ohrid dialect — only to enable them to acquire Greek more easily and rapidly. The teachers were not always Greek. We know the names of Albanian, Bulgarian, Karakachan, and Vlach teachers in Ohrid who zealously taught Greek. (Snegarov 1928: 59-60, 65; Shapkarev 1895: 272-273)

In 1843, Vlach seasonal workers built and financed a new school in the Lower Vlach neighbourhood (*Dolna Vlaška mahala*) and in 1848–1849 another one in the Upper Vlach neighbourhood (*Gorna Vlaška mahala*). (Snegarov 1927: 25) However, these schools had Greek as the language of instruction or at least as the language the pupils were supposed to master. Moreover, the school had Bulgarian pupils and teachers. Shapkarev studied at the school in the Lower Vlach neighbourhood for five years and his uncle, Yanakiy Strezov, taught there. (Snegarov 1927: 69-70; Snegarov 1928: 67-68). Briefly, the Vlach schools were actually Greek schools with pupils and teachers of various ethnic origins, just as the schools in the city center were.

In the 1840s, a few attempts were made to “Bulgarize” the Greek schools, but allegedly “insurmountable resistance” was offered by the pro-Greek forces in the city. (Vanchev 1982, 34-35) One might as well assume that the proponents of Bulgarian education received too little support. In 1852, the inhabitants of the neighbourhoods of Mesokastro, Kasām bey and Skenderbey opened a school which was, as an inscription indicated, meant to be a Bulgarian school, but it was ultimately transformed into a Greek one. (Ivanov 1986: 359-360) The short-lived school for mutual education, founded by Janakiy Strezov and Kuzman Shapkarev — two Bulgarians — in 1854, was a Greek school anyway, with Greek as the language of instruction. (Snegarov 1928: 68)

The fate of the Bulgarian school founded in Mesokastro in 1858 by father and son Mustrev, saddle-makers who had learned some Church Slavonic in the monastery of Saint John the Baptist near Debar, is also revealing. The language of instruction was the Ohrid dialect, but the language to be mastered by the pupils was in all probability Church Slavonic. (Shapkarev 1895: 283) The Mesokastro school lost most of its pupils and had to close its doors after the Greek school in the center as well started offering courses in Bulgarian, taught by Shapkarev — to whom we owe this version of the fate of the Mesokastro school. (Shapkarev 1895: 284-286; Snegarov 1928: 70-71) According to other sources, the school was closed down by the Ottoman authorities after “pro-Greek forces” in the city and the bishop had accused the teachers of making anti-Ottoman propaganda. (Shapkarev 1984: 85-89; Sprostranov 1896: 622-625)

Shapkarev’s account seems to be more credible since his own role in the events is not particularly laudable, all the more so as the Greek school soon after discontinued the Bulgarian courses. If Shapkarev is right, we may conclude that Greek education in combination with some courses in Bulgarian was more attractive to the citizens of Ohrid than an education exclusively or predominantly in Bulgarian, which left the pupils with no sound knowledge of Greek. If Shapkarev’s opponents are right, it appears that the “Greek forces” — consisting mainly of Graecized Bulgarians! — for the time being still constituted a majority able to impose its will.

A second Bulgarian school which used Bulgarian as a language of instruction was founded in 1859 or 1860 by Bulgarian construction workers in the neighbourhood of Kochishta. The school was inaugurated by the Greek bishop Meletios, who eventually donated 150–200 Serbian primers to the school. However, in 1861, the same Meletios had a Bulgarian school in the Bolnitsa neighbourhood turned into a Greek one. (Snegarov 1928: 73; Sprostranov 1896: 633-634) The Kochishta Bulgarian school was constantly on the verge of being closed down for financial reasons, which again suggests that the population was not eager to invest in Bulgarian education. It ultimately managed to survive until 1877 thanks to

the financial support of the Russian consulate in Bitola. (Shapkarev 1984: 89-91; Snegarov 1928: 71-73; Sprostranov 1896: 632-636) Interestingly, this school was left alone by the Ottoman authorities, although the Russian support might easily have raised suspicions of anti-Ottoman propaganda.

It seems that the Bulgarians in Ohrid in the first half of the nineteenth century were not particularly interested in having church services and education in Slavic. Fervent opponents were, in addition to a few (ethnic) Greek families, the Graecized Bulgarians in the city themselves, who obviously for professional and status reasons favoured worshipping and education in Greek. This did not make them merge with the (ethnic) Greeks, though. They probably preserved to some extent a Bulgarian ethnic awareness, as Shapkarev claims. However, this did not withhold them from being Graecized. Most likely, since they were “Christians” in the first place, ethnic issues did not affect their primary group identity and consequently were not an obstacle to speaking the language of an other ethnic group.

## Conclusion

We may conclude that, in the pre-national era, of all possible groups a person could identify with, the ethnic community was probably the less commanding. People identified themselves with a small homeland, a small local community, a social or vocational group, and most importantly with a religious community. The double and even triple meanings of Balkan ethnonyms indicate that ethnic, religious, social and professional identities were overlapping and merging. Even more significant is that these multiple meanings indicate once again that ethnic affiliation was considered of limited importance. If ethnic affiliation would have had the weight it acquired during the nineteenth-century national revival period, people would have insisted upon the use of an unambiguous terminology to denominate themselves and others.

To people in the pre-national era ethnicity was rather irrelevant to all that was really important in their lives. Ethnic awareness obviously had nothing in common with the feelings of belonging and loyalty we may nourish with regard to the national community we belong to. Nobody seems to have been really concerned with the preservation of the ethnic community’s language and other cultural features. If that is so, how to explain the sudden “discovery” of ethnicity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the strong feelings of commitment it raised. Whatever the answer may be, the information an unprejudiced examination of the sources yield does not support the view that ethnic communities “naturally”, “logically”, let alone “inevitably” (if not suppressed) develop into nations — a view that, to be sure, is now abandoned by most serious historians, but is still prevalent in popular historiography.

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