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Urban Culture, Religious Conversion, and Crossing Ethnic Fluidity among the Bulgarian Muslims ("Pomaks")

Numerous cases of conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity are just one of the ways to express the changes in the fluid identity of Bulgarian Muslims ("Pomaks") in Bulgaria after 1990. On the example of the town of Zlatograd, this paper addresses the formation of specific urban culture contributing to social cohesion and strong community spirit. It is the main task of the article to examine local urban culture as a factor for creation of a high level of tolerance supporting the voluntary transformation of marginal Muslim ("Pomak") identity with Bulgarian one.

Key words:

Urban culture,
Bulgarian Muslims,
Identity, Conversion

Almost till the end of the 19th century, the cities in the Balkans were small, and the population of the Peninsula was primarily rural (Kenny, Kertzer 1983, 9; Hartmuth 2006, 17).[1] During the 20th century most Balkan towns remained small. Only the capital cities increased their population and after the middle of the 20th century, experienced violent growth attracting huge inflows of people; the rural regions suffered depopulation and the capital cities proved overcrowded (Kenny, Kertzer 1983, 10). These processes eached their extreme proportions at the start of the new millennium. How are the small towns developing? How their study could enrich urban anthropology? This work is an attempt to outline one of the possible scenarios of a contemporary transformation of the small Balkan city, where there is the coexistence of Christians and Muslims, inherited from history, on the one hand, while on the other, the cultural heritage is used to promote tourism. The main thesis of this paper is that the specific culture of the small Bulgarian town of Zlatograd has been contributing to the concensual building up of relations of the groups of population with different religious backgrounds (Christian and Muslim).

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[1] In 1833 Athens had a population of 4000; Belgrade in 1867 – 24 000; in 1878 the population of Sofia amounted to 11 200 citizens (Bastea 2010; Kenny, Kertzer 1983: 9; Stanoeva 2010: 91)

In supporting this stand I shall first consider the specific identity of the Bulgarian Muslims and its modern transformations; second, I shall study the institutions of urban culture in the historical context of Zlatograd and their significance for making the two religious communities in the town draw closer; third, I shall present the projects for the successful transformations of the local cultural heritage into a resource of development of the tourist industry; finally, I shall show how these apparently independent spheres of social life mutually interact to entail "rewriting anew" the symbolic geography of Zlatograd.

1. Bulgarian Muslims and the study of their identities

Let me remind that "the Bulgarian Muslims (i.e., the *Pomaks*) are a religious minority. They are Slavic Bulgarians who speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue[2], but whose religion and customs are Islamic" (Poulton 1993, 111; cf. also Brunnbauer 1999, 39). The very name "Bulgarian Muslims" considered to be politically correct by most Bulgarian authors, has sometimes been challenged (Neuburger 2004, 2); the synonymous "*Pomaks*", however is pejorative (Garnizov 1997, 71). In the outlined meaning, I shall use the name "Bulgarian Muslims"; the Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria will mostly be meant further in the text. Defining the Bulgarian Muslims as a minority is disputable (Georgieva 1998, 287) and "the status of the "*Pomaks*" [is in] an in-between position between the majority and "the national" minorities (Büchsenschütz 2000, 4).

Competing nationalisms attribute Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, etc. affiliation to the Bulgarian Muslims. In response to the pressure, exerted for decades on end, by the national state, Bulgarian Muslims in Bulgaria have been responding by instability, hybridity and marginality of collective and personal identities. Different strategis of identification have been noted by scholars: a) Bulgarian identification by the sign of language belonging; b) identification depending on religion - as Muslims; c) "Pomak" identity "in the ethnic meaning of the word"; d) Turkish identity (Brunnbauer 1999, 38).[3] Mario Apostolov brings statistic data concerning four types of identities: "about 196 000 Pomaks lived in Bulgaria in the 1990-s. In the 1992 census in Bulgaria out of those who declared themselves Pomaks, 70 251 identified themselves as ethnic Bulgarians, 65 546 as Bulgarian Muslims, Pomaks or Muslims, 25 540 as Turks whose mother tongue is Bulgarian and about 35 000 as Turks" (Apostolov 2001, 109).[4]

Complexity and the disputed character of that matter is among the reasons for the significant research interest in the Bulgarian Muslims during the past twenty

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[2] Unprejudiced researchers, outside Bulgaria included, note the Bulgarian character of the language/dialect spoken by the Bulgarian Muslims (Voss 2007, 184).

[3] Evangelos Karagiannis, presents a more-detailed classification, noting nuances to the "Muslim-Pomak", "Bulgarian-Muslim", "political-Pomak" options of the identification (Karagiannis 1997, 60; cf. also Karagiannis 2000, 149-153).

[4] For similar typology see Garnizov 1997.

five years[5]. Huge body of literature has been accumulated and is still growing (cf. Ghodsee 2010; Voss, Telbizova-Sack 2010; Troeva 2011; Иванова 2013; Иванова 2014). Publications on the Bulgarian Muslims, though, almost obligatorily adopt a victimizing approach, entailing in some cases bias and doubtful scientific correctness. On the other hand, authors fairly often ignore the internal differentiation of the community and sum up observations on one local enclave, uncritically transferring the conclusions onto the entire Bulgarian Muslim population. Researchers' attention has most often been drawn by the Bulgarian Muslims' strategies of distinction and of outlining cultural borders between them and the other groups of the population. On the other hand, this part of the Bulgarian Muslims who define themselves as Bulgarians have almost not been object of scholars' interest. This has most probably been due to the authors' strivings to stay away from the theses of Bulgarian nationalistic rhetoric. In this sense, I must state that I definitely disassociate from the latter. One of the objectives of my work has been to present the strategies of accepting Bulgarian identity among the Bulgarian Muslims, due to the lack of studies on this topic.

Bulgarian identity has been more clearly manifest in the region of the Central Rhodopes. This is also the region where the *Rodina* [Homeland] Association (1937-1947) had developed its activities in the past. This was a cultural and educational organization of the Bulgarian Muslims, targeted at growing closeness with the Bulgarian Christian majority (Sbornik Rodina 1939; Ivanova 2002; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008). My analysis here has been based on field work in the town of Zlatograd in the Central Rhodope Mountains: a town, perceived and self-perceived as inhabited by Bulgarian Muslims and Bulgarian Christians.

Why has precisely Zlatograd been chosen as an example demonstrating the trend towards the adoption of the Bulgarian identity among the Bulgarian Muslims? This has been a general trend for the region of the Central Rhodope Mountains, as statistics also indicate. The population of Zlatograd, however, is an example of a community, in which crossing beyond the marginal identity has been an advanced though not completed process. One of the determining factors for the transformation of the local community into a social field, where this change has been quite visible, has been the formation of specific urban culture.

The shortages in the official Bulgarian statistics do not make it possible to assess the number of Bulgarian Muslims claiming Bulgarian identity. Available in the 1992 census was the option "Pomak" or "Bulgarian Muslim"; subsequent statistical studies, however, excluded it from the census form. The latest 2011 census in Bulgaria, for instance, was accompanied by political scandals and subsequent exclusion of the options "Bulgarian Muslim" or "Pomak" from the census form. For that reason, after 1992 data concerning the identity of Bulgarian Muslims have been only indirect. So the 2001 census showed that "131 531 persons of the Bulgarian

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[5] Cf. a review of literature in Georgieva 1998: 286-308; Georgieva 1999: 59; Konstantinov 1997; Brunnbauer 1999:38; Ghodsee 2010; Troeva 2011; concerning Pomaks in Greece cf. Tsibiridou 1995: 53-70; Tsibiridou 1998: 185-196; Tsibiridou 2000; Markou 2002: 41-53; Michail 2003; Steinke, Voss 2007.

ethnic community profess Islam".[6] I perceive these data as an indirect expression of the Bulgarian ethnic identity among 131 531 Bulgarian Muslims in 2001.

According to the last census in 2011, the population of Zlatograd was then 5271; 5185 of them declared Bulgarian ethnic belonging. The remaining 86 people declared Turkish or "other" identity, or failed to identify.[7] In the nine villages, which with the town make up the Zlatograd municipality, the picture is almost identical. The population of these villages is 4248; only 64 among them stated a non-Bulgarian identity.[8] Although not so homogeneous, the claimed ethnic affiliation in the neighbouring Central Rhodopes municipalities is similar to the one in the Zlatograd municipality. Whether and how far have the data of official statistics been correct? A comparison between statistical data and the data produced by my research with qualitative methods should be an answer to this question.

Zlatograd[9] is a centre of a hinterland (now split by the state frontier between Bulgaria and Greece) in the southern part of the Rhodope Mountains. Insofar as living in the town are Bulgarian Christians and Bulgarian Muslims, the surrounding villages (on Bulgarian and on Greek territory) are compactly inhabited by Bulgarian Muslims. At the end of the 19th century Zlatograd (Daradere at that time) had 400 houses, 110 of which belonged to Bulgarian Christians (Shishkov 1892, 7). The city joins the Bulgarian state territory in 1912, after the First Balkan War, alongside most of the territory of the Rhodopes. Until that time the town had been part of the Ottoman Empire. In 1912 the population of Zlatograd consisted of 120 families of Bulgarian Christians and 200 families of "Pomaks" (Miletić 1918, 295). The wars and the peace treaties that followed split what had once been the Zlatograd county [*kaaza* in Turkish] (ibid., 291-292) between Bulgaria and Greece.

According to unofficial assessments, under socialism Muslims in Zlatograd exceeded the Christians by five times.[10] Under socialism the economic upsurge of Zlatograd and the neighbouring municipalities was considerably stimulated by the development of the mining industry by way of the opening of the *Gorubso* state enterprise after the 1950s (cf. Gruev, Kalyonski 2008; Ghodsee 2010; Archive K. P.).[11] The establishment of a private Ethnographic Areal Complex in 2001, due to the work of businessman Alexander Mitushev and ethnographer Boris Tumangelov

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[6] Naselenie [Population] 2002. www.nsi.bg/Census/Census.htm. Access 1. 08. 2013.

[7] Naselenie [Population] 2011. http://www.nsi.bg/census2011/pagebg2.php?p2=175&sp2=190. Access 1. 08. 2013.

[8] Ibid.

[9] The town's name had been *Daradere* up to 1934 (Michev, Koledarov 1989).

[10] Surkova 2012; Interview taken from K. P. 08. 07. 2013. Despite the socialist policy of settling Bulgarian Christians (especially highly skilled specialists) from other regions of the country in Zlatograd, the number of Muslims increased under socialism due to migration from the neighbouring villages to town.

[11] The closedown of Gorubso in 1990 exerted a strong negative influence on the post-socialist economy of the three municipalities (cf. Ghodsee 2010). At present, the mining enterprise of Gorubso is being resumed, as a private company. 400 people are being hired (*Zlatogradski vestnik* newspaper, 30. 08. 2013, p. 1).

(1935-2007)[12] had a positive impact on the development of tourism and on the town's cultural appearance.

Field research in Zlatograd was carried out in the period from 2004 to 2014 in five short field trips, each one lasting from a few days to a week.[13] Ethnographic methods include observations, field diry, 21 autobiographical interviews, numerous informal interviews. I also studied written sources, one personal archive including.[14] Useful for the writing of this text has been my field experiences in other settlements, inhabited by Bulgarian Muslims (village of Draginovo, Velingrad region, 1996-2003, cf. Benovska-Sabkova 2006; village of Pletena, Goce Delchev region, 2011, cf. Benovska-Sabkova 2014).

The ethnographic observations in Zlatograd have shown a multilayered and dynamic picture concerning identities and the levels of identification. One of the first topics, which Zlatograd inhabitants discuss spontaneously and on their own initiative with visitors of the town, has been the unproblematic and good, in their view, cohabitation of Christians and Muslims. The observer can easily establish the contrast to some other settlements of Muslim population, where the outside visitor experiences direct manifestations of distrust (Benovska-Sabkova 2006). Guided by professional skepticism, the anthropologist seeks to find some kind of "second reality" beyond the verbal declarations; instead, he/she gradually finds evidences of their authenticity.

The mixed marriages are considered as an indicator in for the presence of lack of tolerance. Interviews and informal conversations indicate that though rarely bi-confessional marriages existed in the 1960s. In our days they are not by far a rarity and surprise no one, though there are no reliable data about their number. The bi-confessional marital or partnership couples are becoming a connecting link between the two communities and this entails further mutual familiarization and closeness between them as well as impacts in the sphere of ritual life. The son of our interlocutor L. V. – a Christian – has a girl friend from a Muslim family. In the summer of 2013, L. V. was invited by the Muslim family to perform a prestigious role in a life cycle ritual. L. V. narrated about that event respectfully both with regard to the people, and to their traditions, which she got to know in this way.

The topic concerning bi-confessional marriages paradoxically intersects with another one – of the mixed cemetery in Zlatograd, where since 1976 Christians and Muslims have been buried side by side. That fact is mentioned in almost all the interviews and informal conversations and it has been invariably mentioned in support of the claims of the high level of tolerance between the two population groups.

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[12] Boris Tumangelov (1935-2007) was long-term researcher at the Ethnographic Institute with Museum who settled in Zlatograd after his retirement (authors' note).

[13] Part of the fieldwork has been shared with my colleagues Ilya Nedin and Ana Luleva as well as with students from the University of Blagoevgrad "Neofit Rilski". My appreciation goes to all of them for the shared discussions and ideas.

[14] Personal archive of Constantin Peryov. I am grateful to Mr Peryov for his kind cooperation.

It is known that the destruction of Muslim cemeteries and the establishment of common cemeteries with Christians was part of the campaigns of repression of Muslims in Bulgaria under socialism. However, in the collective memory of the citizens of Zlatograd, these traumatic events have been reinterpreted and the story of them (shared by Christians and Muslims alike), turns into a positive message, reaffirming mutual respect. According to the story we heard in different variants, in the arrangement of the mixed cemetery, the local socialist rulers called the imam and the then priest Father Atanas Arolski, who had served for fifty two years in Zlatograd and had been considered a saint in the Central Rhodope Mountains (Surkova 2012). They informed them about the plans for a common cemetery. Initially, the imam disapproved of the idea, but then Father Arolski rhetorically asked, why should dead be divided, after they spent their lives together. The imam agreed and in this way a consensus was reached on the delicate matter.

On 20. 09. 2012 we visited (together with students) the village of Medoussa (former *Memkovo*) in Greece, located less than 10 km away from Zlatograd and populated by "Pomaks". In conversation with a dozen or so men from the village, they imparted that they liked Zlatograd but did not approve of the mixed cemetery. Unexpectedly, our driver, a man of 48, from Zlatograd, joined the conversation. *"Well, how can I separate them now?",* he exclaimed. "*My mother was Muslim, I buried her in the Muslim fashion. My father was a Christian – he died soon after her and I buried him in the Christian way. But in one place. This was their wish – I complied!"* Surfacing in man's response are the consensus discourses, characteristic of Zlatograd: the cemetery is mixed, because in their lifetime people lived together and should not be separated after death.

The mixed cemetery creates ambivalence, which in turn, engenders strategies of its neutralization. The mother of my interlocutor, a Muslim, had taught her how to deal. On entering the cemetery she had to say out loud *"Good day! Good day!"* twice: first in her own name, then on behalf of the dead. *"They* (the Christians, M. B.) *are foreign, therefore first respect to them."* Then she had to say, twice again: "*Selyam aleikum – aleikum selyam",* addressed to their own, to the Muslims.[15] The cemetery, like the temple, is a place where the idea of a borderline between "one's own" and "the others" is most acutely felt. The expression *"They are foreign, therefore respect is due to them first"* unambiguously evinces the fragile balance between the awareness of invisible borders, on the one hand, and tolerance and respect, on the other.

The orientation to Bulgarian identity found expression in the process of voluntary conversion from Islam to Eastern Orthox Christianity, which had started in the early 1990s and is continuing to this day. In her autobiographic narrative, R. D. mentions that she adopted Christianity together with her family after 1990. The Muslim origin of the family is kept secret from the grandchildren until their adolescence. During her story R. D. also shows two donations certificates by which the family has sponsored the painting of icons for chapels under construction in Zlato-

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[15] Interview, taken from M. S., 11. 07. 2013.

grad.[16] A year later, her husband showed out to us the icon, donated by their family, when we visited together the Chapel of St Constantine and Helena. Notwithstanding that they have adopted fundamental Christian symbols (baptism, lighting of candles, taking part in the construction of Christian temples), R. D. and her family rarely go to church. The conversion from Islam to Orthodox Christianity has rather been a sign of change of identity, than prompted by religious motivation. The latter however cannot be interpreted as a sign of universal opportunitic motives for the conversion. Among the most commited parishioners of the Church of St George in Zlatograd have been two young women (one of whom is also a sexton), formerly Muslims, recently converted.

Conversion to Eastern Orthodox Christianity started in Zlatograd, and the neighbouring settlements of Nedelino and Startsevo, in 1993 with a few group conversions of people from the region, on the initiative of the Eastern Orthodox missionary Father Boyan Saraev, himself of Muslim origin. Through the mass-media, the missionary activity of Father Saraev became extensively known among the Bulgarian population and in fact this was the most popular case of group conversions among the Bulgarian Muslims during the past twenty-five years.[17]

During the past few years, however (after the end of the 1990s), the processes of conversion have changed. According to the admission of believers playing an important role in the life of the Orthodox parish in Zlatograd, Father Saraev withdrew from the practice of group conversions. At the same time, both the metric book and the interviews testify that conversion has been going on, but individually. When we studied the metric book of the church with the help of a student - September 2012, in the church of the Assumption of Our Lady [*Uspenie Bogorodično*] we were warned not to put down and make public the names of the newly converted, because of the categorical wish of some of them that their conversion remain a secret. In some of the cases, change of religion has been prompted by pragmatic reasons. Migrants or people wishing to emigrate to countries of powerful influence of the church (Greece, Spain) take the decision for conversion in anticipation of this facilitating their integration in these countries. Because of strivings to discretion, the metric book is only partially informative about the number of the newly converted. The scale of the conversion may be judged by the statement of Father Costadin, now priest of Zlatograd[18]: during the past three years he has converted 200. Obviously, this is not a matter of isolated cases, but of a tangible process of conversion. The existence of opportunistic motifs in some of the cases does not play down the significance and complexity of this process as a sign of adopting Bulgarian identity.

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[16] Interview, taken from R. D., 04. 05. 2012.

[17] For a similar, but much more sweeping conversion of Muslims to Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Georgia, cf. Pelman 2006. Concerning Father Saraev, cf. his book: Saraev 1996.

[18] The information has been comminicated by father Costadin to my colleagues Ana Luleva and Ilya Nedin on 02. 05. 2014, during church service in the chapel of St Atanasius, located on the peak of the same name in the vicinities of Zlatograd.

Tolerance in Zlatograd does not preclude rivalry between different cultural strategies or different groups of interest, among the Bulgarian Muslims including. One of these contradictions is between the actively practicing Muslims in Zlatograd, on the one hand, and the Muslims of lay orientation or atheists, on the other. This contradiction is visualized in a competition in height between the newly built mosque and the trade centre under construction twenty meters away from it, crowned by a high tower. This competition for spacial and symbolic supremacy has not been just a rumour. The owner of the trade centre, a man of Muslim origin, also undertook a deliberate provocation in 2012, opening an erotic bar in the building facing the entrance to the mosque[19]. Obviously, for some of the people of Muslim origin in Zlatograd, the attempts at re-conversion to Islam are inadmissible and the building of an overlarge and tall new mosque is perceived just in this way. The conflict has been alleviated by the mediation of the local elite[20], whereby the erotic bar was closed down in return for the promise, taken and observed, that singing in the mosque be live and without amplifiers.

These cases lead to the conclusion that influential and empowered circles of people of Muslim origin perceive the Christian identity as more prestigious and withdraw from historical and biographical trajectories relating them to Islam. In this way the marginality of the Bulgarian-Muslim identity is being overcome along with the traumatic connotations it carries.

2. The urban culture

Let me remind one of the initiale questions: why has precisely Zlatograd been a place where the process of adopting Bulgarian identity proved to find so tangible manifestation? There are different reasons for these sentiments. First, historical continuity should be pointed out, as for example the activity of the *Rodina* [Homeland] Association (1937-1947) among the Bulgarian Muslims in the Central Rhodope Mountains (Krasteva-Blagoeva 2001; Gruev, Kalyonski 2008), and in Zlatograd, in particular (Pachilov 2008, 98-100). Another cause of the rapprochment between Muslims and Christians in Zlatograd is also rooted in the local history under socialism: the influence of the socialist atheistic policy should also be pointed out along these lines[21], which led to alleviating the alienation between both confessional groups; yet, people among the Bulgarian Muslims became part of the local communist elite under socialism.

Another important factor of the local climate of rapprochement has been the long lasting impact of urban culture. It becomes clear from the characteristics of the town, made by Stoyu Shishkov (Shishkov 1892, 7-13) that in the 19th century Zlatograd (at that time *Daradere*) had been closer to the model of the big Bulgarian mountain villages (like Panagyurishte, Koprivshtitsa, Kotel, Elena, Tryavna and

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[19] *Zlatogradski vestnik* newspaper, 30. 01. 2012, p. 6.

[20] "We managed to deal with that", interview taken from P.Sh., 13. 07. 2013.

[21] Ghodsee 2010 speaks about a similar result in Madan.

others), which turned into towns during the period of National Revival (Georgieva 1981, 21,26). This transformation was due to their economic flourishment as centres of commerce and crafts and the related architectural urbanization and development of the piublic institutions. This also refers to Zlatograd, which owed its prosperity to trade and crafts (textiles, tailoring) during the 19th century. Trading was predominantly characteristic for the Bulgarian Christian population, which though less numerous exerted a greater influence on town governance. The Muslim population was chiefly occupied with agriculture, stock-breeding and, to a certain extent – with local trade (Shishkov 1892, 7).

The institutions, developing in Zlatograd during the 19th century, were not only evidence of the processes of modernization, but also opened up new space for public communication: a Bulgarian Christian municipal school opened in 1852 (Shishkov 1892, 8); replicating its example a Muslim primary school (*ruzhdie)* also opened in 1888 (ibid; Pachilov 2008, 22, 52). Built in 1834 and 1871 were also the two churches; during that time there were five mosques in the town and six *masjids*[22]. Being a centre of a *kaaza* (district), Zlatograd had also administrative functions, and, respectively, public buildings: a government house and barracks (Shishkov 1892, 10). I should mention here the trade spaces, characteristic of the Balkan towns during the Ottoman period – the bazaar and especially the *čarşi*, located around which were prestigious and spacious homes of wealthy citizens of Zlatograd (Hartmuth 2006, 22-23).

Insofar as Zlatograd (together with the region of the Central Rhodope Mountains) were included in the Bulgarian state later, in 1912, somewhat later a *chitalishte*[23] *"Prosveta"* [Enlightenment] was aslo established (1908 – Pachilov 2008) and a post office (1913). Once founded, the *chitalishte* became a centre of vigorous social life and diverse, definitively modern cultural events and urban entertainment: an amateur theatre (starting in 1915) and operetta (1911-1912), choir singing, a string orchesgra, dancing parties, educational courses (in accounting and esperanto – ibid, 24). Considerably contributing to the activation of artistic life in the town was the small group (of about ten) highly educated Russian Whiteguard immigrants. They arrived in 1926 and soon afterwards were at the head of the church choir, the orchestra and helped the staging of operettas in 1927-1934 (ibid, 33-38).[24]

The musical life, centred in the *chitalishte*, exerted a beneficial influence also on the forms of open public communication in the town with a specific urban phenomenon – *corso* [*'dviženie'*]. According to recollections about life in Zlatograd in the 1930s, during these evening walks along one of the main streets, young peo-

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[22] After the Ottoman tradition, *Masdjid* is a smaller Muslim temple with no minaret located in Islamic residential quaters *mahalle*.

[23] Chitalishte: historic Bulgarian cultural institution combining the feature of library and cultural center comprising library collection and theatre, musical, etc. facilities.

[24] Recollections about the cultural life Zlatograd and the role of the Russian immigrants feature in the interviews with A. Sh. 29. 09. 2012 and 04. 05. 2014; and P. Sh., 13. 07. 2013.

ple sang melodies remembered from the *chitalishte* shows and merry-making (Pachilov 2008, 93-94).

Paralel to the *Prosveta* [Enlightenment], in Zlatograd in the 1930s there had been also an independent Muslim *chitalishte* „*Yudgedilekt*". On the initiative of the *Prosveta*, the two community centres integrated in 1934 for joint activities.[25] In 1936 the Muslim school *Ruzhdie*[26] was closed down and the Muslim children started attending school together with the Christian in a common school "Antim I" (Pachilov 2008, 96-97). Later on, under socialism the public urban spaces were extended, which made possible the coexistence of Christians and Muslims to overcome the segregated (though tolerant) co-existence in confessionally homogeneous neighbourhoods in Zlatograd.[27] These processes were accelerated, including also by working together in the industrial enterprises, opened up under socialism, first and foremost in the mining industry, viz. "Gorubso" – Zlatograd.[28]

Although joining the population of Zlatograd have been all the time people from the neighbouring villages (particularly under socialism), the local community has a definitive urban identity, in which it takes pride. *"Zlatograd has no traditional wear"*: this sentence was the first in the conversation with a local schoolmistress in retirement on 04. 05. 2014. By these words she emphasizes the urban character of the cultural tradition of Zlatograd. Her personal memory keeps no image of a traditional (rural) clothing in Zlatograd and as evidence she demonstrates a rich family album of photos from the 1920s on. Indeed the black-and-white photos have preserved not only the faces of people in standard European clothes, but also a memory of events showing also a European style of entertainment and leisure.

The politics of memory and the management of the tangible cultural heritage of Zlatograd after the end of socialism have been mutually related. Presented here will be mainly the Ethnographic Areal Complex and the development of tourism in Zlatograd linked to it. The Ethnographic Areal Complex in Zlatograd was inaugurated on May 24, 2001 thanks to the initiative and collaboration between the local businessman Engineer Aleksandar Mitushev and Boris Tumangelov, who also have family relation.[29] The two of them are at the basis of the Delyo Voivoda Association assisting the project. The Museum Complex in Zlatograd differs from other similar projects in Bulgaria in that it is private property (belonging to Engineer A. Mitushev) and that the buildings in it have permanent residents (Georgieva 2006).

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[25] Chitalishte, No. 6, 1956, 22-28.

[26] The closing down of the Muslim school in 1936 was a result of the Bulgarian nationalistic state policy during that time, which alongside its authoritarian character "had nevertheless a positive effect on the modernization of society", cf. Gruev, Kalyonski 2008, 91.

[27] About the 13 Zlatograd neighbourboods during the 19th century, cf. Shishkov 1892, 7-8.

[28] About "Gorubso", cf. Ghodsee 2010; archive Konstantin Peryov.

[29] The information about the area ethnographic complex has been mostly drawn from interviews, taken from Boris Tumangelov (04. 05. 2004) and Aleksander Mitushev (19. 09. 2012) and supplemented by data from the periodical press and the electronic media.

1. Family picture taken in 1927: a family from Zlatograd in city costumes.
Submitted by Ms Atanaska Shukova, Zlatograd, 2014.

The realization of the project became possible under the impact of various factors. The original idea belonged to Boris Tumangelov. The financing came from different sources (individual investments, funds supplied by PHARE and SAPARD). A major role was played by the cooperation of the municipality in Zlatograd (it gave free of charge the buildig of the Ethnographic Museum) during the establishment of the complex. The availability of about one hundred houses, declared to be architectural monuments of culture under socialism and restored in the 1980s has been a significant local resource, skilfully managed and put to use by the authors of the project. In 2001 Alexander Mitushev purchased from their owners the ground floors of the restored houses they inhabited – monuments of culture – and appointed them as nine craftsmen' workshops. In its initial appearance, the Ethnographic Areal Complex included the workshops, the building of the restored old coffee house, the Ethnographic Museum and the restored water mill at the town's end, which combined museum functions with a restaurant of traditional Rhodope cuisine. The museum collections opened earlier and operating – a Museum Collection of Communications (1987) and a Museum of the Education Cause in the Central Rhodope Mountains (1978), which have been public property[30] are conceived by the visitor to be part of the integrated space of the Ethnographic Areal Complex.

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[30] Cf. www.zlatograd-bg.com/pages/church-and-museums

2. The Ethnographic Museum in Zlatograd, and students from the University of Blagoevgrad posing, 2012. Photo by Milena Benovska-Sabkova

3. Museum presentation of traditional costumes from Zlatograd - Ethnographic Museum, Zlatograd, 2012. Photo by Milena Benovska-Sabkova

However, the project rapidly expanded, moreover along commercial lines. The restoration of the existing old houses was supplemented by the building of a series of new ones, though erected in the spirit of the traditional Rhodope architecture and located at the same site, neighbouring the structures of the museum complex. In this way visitors of Zlatograd come across the fact that the newly-built structures share the space of the Ethnographic Areal Complex. Moreover, in guides (booklets and in Internet) they are presented as part of the Complex.[31] The new construction has been helped both by cultural knowledge and resources, part of the museum complex (like the woodcarving workshop, for instance, which produces wooden parts for the newly erected buildings).

Now property of Aleksandar Mitushev are six hotels of different categories (from the de luxe "Aleksandre" to the "Grebentsi" hostel), five of them in the complex, as well as six restaurants and coffee houses.[32] Employed by the Ethnographic Area Complex are about eighty people.

In the course of time the project has obviously become largely commercialized, whereby the cultural heritage of Zlatograd has gradually started to play a secondary role. This trend has been demonstrated by the interview taken from Aleksandar Mitushev in September 2012. My questions concerning the cultural heritage most often received answers covering the development of the tourist business. A comparison of published interviews of Boris Tumangelov and Aleaksander Mitushev show indicative differendces. Whereas Tumangelov is primarily speaking about the culture and traditions of Zlatograd (though sometimes idealized, cf. Georgieva 2006), the newspaper interviews of Mitushev rather openly advertise the tourist sites (Dvevnik 2008; Petkova 2012).

Numerous ritual events and holidays are held on the territory of the Complex, which it is even hard to enumerate. They deserve separate consideration, but even a cursory mentioning of some of them brings to the fore their character of "invented traitions": organizing of "authentic weddings", dying of Easter eggs by schoolchildren, recreation of the *Peperuda* [*Butterfly*] rain ritual, *Trifoniada* – a holiday honouring St Trifon [vine pruning] and others. Most of these rituals are associated with Christianity and their popularization in a town, where the Islamic traditions are at least part of the history of a considerable proportion of the population, raises more questions than answers.

My field research in September 2012 coincided with the *Delyo* Festivities (17-24. 09. 2012) which are annually held and part of which is also the holiday of Zlatograd. The next field research, in 2013 and 2014, showed that the festival of Zlatograd was held by and large according to the scenario, observed in September 2012. The *Delyo* Holidays included a programme of varied cultural events among which also exhibitions, presentation of a book, a basketball tournament. The culmination was the enactment of *"A Market Day One Hundred Years Ago"*. Partially

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[31] Cf. for instance the Internet site of the Ethnographic Area Complex: http://www.eac-zlatograd.com/en/home/

[32] Ibid.

staged (with the assistance of the *chitalishte*), partially spontaneous (meeting the desire of the citizens themselves), this was a recreation of the old city *čarşi* from the past – *"one hundred years ago"* with the participation of costumed characters. Some of the citizens, among whom also numerous young people, pupils and children were dressed up in "folk costumes", borrowed from the stock of the folk song and dance groups with the *chitalishte*.[33] Recognized from among the costumed multitude were women dressed up in traditional village costumes (part of their own or their mothers' dowry), characteristic of the nearby Muslim villages. Other parts of the characters were dressed in "old urban clothing", i.e. European clothes. The latter rather reflected European urban fashions from the end of the 19th and the early 20th century, which had gained currency in the popular imagination by way of the culture industries (cinema, TV, festivals) rather than historical models familiar from museum collections. The enactment of *"the old Zlatograd market place"* proceeds rather under the form of *corso* – a walk of the citizens along the cobbled streets of the Ethnographic Area Complex; it was more important to stress the euphoric festive atmosphere. Culture management, guided "from the top" (by Mitushev himself with the assistance of the local authorities and institutions), has found a direction, also backed up by the spontaneous sentiments of the citizens of the small town, who obviously need holidays.

The Ehnographic Arial Complex has been attracting tourists (mainly "internal" – from Bulgaria but also foreign) ever since its opening in 2001 to date. In the interview taken from him, Alexader Mitushev proudly emphasizes that in 2000 Zlatograd had not attracted "a single tourist", whereas currently between 60 000 and 70 000 tourists visit the town every year. Even if the figures have been inflated, the presence of tourists has been a weighty factor in the town's economic life.

According to the www.pochivka.bg internet site, now Zlatograd has 18 guest houses and nine hotels; the larger and smaller restaurants and cafees are hard to enumerate. Part of them are owned by Aleksander Mitushev; the rest, however, belong to other owners, most often in the form of family businesses (let us mention, for instance, the Enchevi inns, Hotel Flora and the smaller guest houses "Lili", the "Todorova" house). The development of the Ethnographic Area Complex in Zlatograd has obviously been an incentive for the development of tourism in the town, whereby after the initiative of the local business leader Engineer Mitushev, the hotel and restaurant business has attracted other entrepreneurs, too. In this way tourism is turning into an increasingly more significant factor in the local economy. "The annual turnover from tourism in the municipality of Zlatograd exceeds 3 000 000 leva. The municipality is visited every year by 70 000 tourists, a number exceeding 13 times the population of the town".[34]

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[33] This kind of costumes are a specific form of folklorism. Usually they are made by order of the amateur folk song and dance groups with the library clubs and often do not comply with the character of the local traditional atire of the past but rather copy the costumes of the professional folklore ensembles operating in Bulgaria from the time of socialism to date.

[34] *Zlatogradski vestnik* newspaper, 31. 07. 2013, p. 1.

The buildings declared monuments of culture and restored in the 1980s, remained unkempt and in a poor state after the end of socialism. Alongside the possible "free interpretations" of the architectural heritage, it has been saved from declay through being included in the museum complex. Indicative is the comparison with the neighbouring small town of Nedelino: there had been there, architectural monuments too, similar to those of Zlatograd, though in a poor state of repair. The municipality in Nedelino, however, had allowed the sale and pulling down of these houses, which had obviously been advantages missed within the context of the high rate of unemployment and the sharp drop of the population of Nedelino as a result of emigration and migration.[35] On the other hand, the commodification of traditions and commercialization raise numerous questions. Obviously, those authors who have a critical approach to "the distortion of historical facts for the purposes of entertainment" (Smith 2003: 82) have reasons to object.

Parallel to the development of the Ethnographic Complex and the tourist business seething around it after 2001, an ambitious programme unfolds for the building up or reconstruction of four Eastern Orthodox chapels, located in the form of a cross in the vicinities of the town.[36] The project became popular under the name *Krastata Gora* [*Cross-Shaped Forest*].[37] This project has been an expression of the specific politics of memory[38]: this is on the one hand a strategy of adopting a Bulgarian identity by people of Muslim origin in Zlatograd; at the same time the enhacement of the Christian symbolism in the urban space is also associated with the ambitious entrepreneurial plans of the local business and political elite. Confirmed among the latter has been the conviction that cooperation across the border with neighbouring Greece (from which economic advantages are expected) is only possible by emphasis on the Christian identity. Probably these expectations are not groundless in the context of the heightened nationalistic sentiments among parts of Bulgarian society after the electoral successes of "*Ataka* [Attack]", the extreme nationalistic party, since 2005. In other words, the stressing of the Christian past and traditions of Zlatograd benefits the perception of the town by tourists, as well, as a scaled down image of the homogeneous "national traditions" and cultural heritage. These sentiments find also expression in the manner whereby the Ethnographic Museum presents the traditional culture of Zlatograd and the region of Zlatograd as homogeneous and lacking the signs of religious differences. The vernacular female village costume, for instance, supplied for the museum from nearby villages of compact Muslim population, has been put on show without the *shalwars* [*loose Turkish trousers*] otherwise traditionally worn up to the mid-20th century.

[35] *Zlatogradki vestnik* newspaper, 28. 06. 2012, p. 6.

[36] *Zlatogradski vestnik* newpaper, 29. 02. 2012, p. 4.

[37] *Krastata Gora* is probably a new name analogous to the Christian sanctuary *Krastova Gora* near Assenovgrad. Whereas the chapels themselves had actually existed in the past and there is information about them from about the end of the 19th century (Shishkov 1892, 13) the name *Krastata Gora* is new and is associated with the current initiative of restoring these chapels – interview with A.Sh, 21. 09. 2012.

[38] A definition of politics of memory, cf. in Barahona de Brito et al. 2001, 1-39.
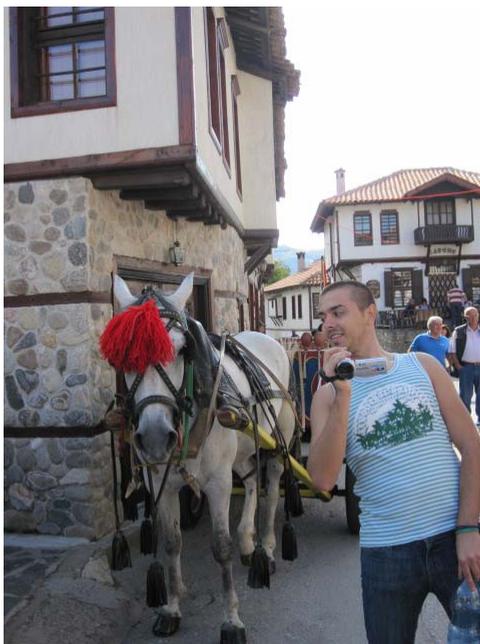
4. Moments of the Festival "A Market Day in Zlatograd, One Hundred Years Ago", September 2012.
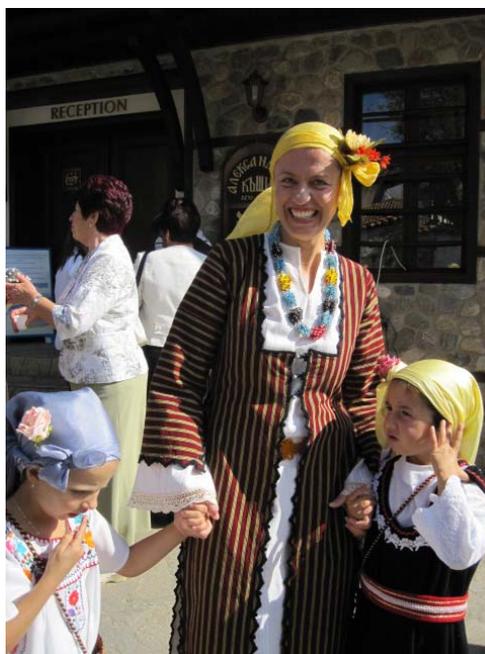
5. Moments of the Festival "A Market Day in Zlatograd, One Hundred Years Ago", September 2012.

Within this context it should be no surprise that the leading role in the *Krastata Gora* initiative belongs to the most influential representatives of the local economic and political elite, who are Muslim by origin. The project, however, enjoys extensive public support by the whole local community no matter of what religious identity (former or current), including also through the collection of donations from the citizens.[39] To put it in short, this initiative aims at modifying the symbolic geography of the region along the lines of a national homogeneity, desired and backed up by most of the citizens.

Short Conclusion

What has been presented so far and the available sources of data make it possible to outline the historical transformations in the urban culture in Zlatograd from the 19th century to our time. Though comparatively small as far as the population goes, in the 19th century Zlatograd had a mixed image: it combined the features of a commercial town, an administrative centre, and of agrotown. Under socialism the town also developed as a mining settlement,[40] while the outlines of the trade town were only a historical memory during socialism, leaving a trace in the architectural and cultural heritage. The revitalizing of the latter through the Ethnographic Areal Complex after 2001 and the development of cultural tourism in this connection, has been changing the image of the town again. It is turning into a tourist destination, while at the same time by way of the processes of musealization the invention of traditions, it has been claiming a status of a museum and "historical settlement". In the final count it "struggles" for a place on the map of the national historical memory.

It could be concluded that Zlatograd has been developing urban culture, which flexibly combines different features and it is precisely these combinations – distinct in the different historical periods – that characterize a specific version of the culture of a small Balkan town. The example of Zlatograd comes to show that the search for a culture, distinctive for the small town, is not in counter opposition to the village; it is rather in the ability of the town to flexibly integrate and transform "the inflows" of rural tradition.

The opening up of spaces for public communication is a distinctive feature of the town as the bearer of "being civilized". In Zlatograd they have been shaped in the 19th century and have been increasingly more tangible in the course of time to our day. Alongside a number of other historical factors, urban culture has been influencing the growing closeness between the Bulgarian Christians and the Bulgarian Muslims. This entails an advanced (though as yet incomplete) process of change in the local Muslim identities, personal and collective, as well as crossing over beyond their traumatic marginality. "The Zlatograd Case" brings to the fore the mech-

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[39] Cf. *Zlatogradski Vesnik* newspaper, 29. 02. 2012, p. 4.

[40] Concerning the types of towns, outlined in the anthropology of the Mediterranean societies, cf. Kenny, Kertzer 1983, 13.

anisms whereby one of the possible contemporary transformations of identity is shaped of the Muslim self-perception as identification with the Bulgarian language and origin. The specific local urban culture has been among the factors making this possible.

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Урбана култура, религијска конверзија и превазилажење етничке флуидности Бугара муслимана („Помака")

Рад је посвећен променама до којих долази у типу маргиналног идентитета Бугара муслимана, а под утицајима градске културе. О Бугарима муслиманима, који представљају конфесионалну мањину, постоји обимна научна литература (бугарска и инострана), публикована након 1989. године. Истраживања показују да постоје различите стратегије колективне идентификације у овој заједници: бугарска идентификација (на основу језика), муслиманска (у етничком смислу) и турска (на основу религије). Велики део научне литературе заузима „виктимизирајући" приступ. Усвајање бугарског идентитета је процес који доминира у широком региону Средњих Родопа, али је он од стране истраживача игнорисан и непроучаван. Овом идентификационом процесу је посвећен први део рада. Као израз ове идентификације, а на основу примера малог града Златограда, разматрају се културне стратегије: мешовити биконфесионални бракови, постојање заједничког биконфесионалног гробља (хришћанског и муслиманског) и конверзија ислама у хришћанство. Један од фактора који утиче на приближавање хришћана и муслимана у граду јесте специфична култура малог планинског града, коме је посвећен други део рада. Указује се на историјске трансформације Златограда: он је био административни центар, трговачки град и „agrotown" током XIX века, рударски град у социјализму, а потом центар туристичке индустрије од 2001. године. Отварањем Етнографског комплекса под отвореним небом, културно наслеђе је успешно експлоатисано, трансформишући Златоград у туристички центар. У исто време, локална елита покреће иницијативу за реконструкцију четири хришћанске капеле. У Етнографском комплексу, као и у поменутом пројекту, учествују представници локалне елите муслиманског порекла. Муслимански идентитет се опажа као мање престижан, па је реконструкција капелâ покушај „дописивања" симболичке географије града подвлачењем хришћанске симболике.

Кључне речи:

урбана култура, бугарски муслимани, идентитет, конверзија