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ARTICLE

Why do State Policies toward Religious Minorities Change? Evidence from the Muslim Minority in Postcommunist Bulgaria

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Abstract

Between 2011 and 2018, Bulgaria enacted a series of reforms accommodating the two most salient demands of its Muslim minority in the postcommunist period: the registration of elected Muslim leadership and the provision of state funding for religious communities. This constituted a significant departure from the restrictive policies pursued during the first two decades after communism and from the repressive legacies of earlier periods. Through process tracing based on 11 semi-structured elite interviews, press releases, and secondary sources, I argue that the geostrategic concerns of Bulgarian elites from the influence of the minority's kin-state, Turkey, from 2011 onward, and their aim to decrease the dependence of the minority on the kin-state provided the main motivation to accommodate Muslims' religious demands. These concerns were driven by domestic political changes in Turkey in the post-2011 period and their reflections in the country's foreign policy.

Keywords: Bulgaria; Muslim minority; postcommunism; religion; Turkish foreign policy

Introductory puzzle

Between 2011 and 2018, Bulgaria enacted a series of reforms that significantly accommodated the religious demands of its Muslim minority. Beginning in 2011, Bulgarian state institutions started registering the elected bodies of the Muslim community – the Office of the Grand Mufti (OGM) and the High Muslim Council – thereby resolving a long-standing leadership dispute with the communist-era appointed Grand Mufti that had persisted since the early postcommunist period. Second, a December 2018 amendment to the 2002 Denominations Act introduced, for the first time, substantial state funding for the elected OGM to cover clerical salaries, educational activities, and related expenses. By granting state funding, the amendment addressed the second most salient problem facing the Muslim minority – persistent financial difficulties that had constrained its communal activities since the 1990s.

This accommodative shift is puzzling because to some extent it departs from the historical pattern of state–religion relations in Bulgaria, where the state systematically restricted and interfered in the internal affairs of Muslim institutions. The reforms, particularly the 2018 amendment, are also puzzling because they were enacted amid an international context of rising Islamophobia and right-wing extremism across Europe and the world. Finally, contrary to the expectations of rational political actor models, the main enactor of these policy changes was the mainstream right-wing party Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB), which had negligible electoral support among Muslims, lacked ideological commitment to expand minority rights, and governed in coalition with far-right parties in both 2011 and 2018. Given these non-permissive international and domestic conditions, why did Bulgaria accommodate the demands of its Muslim minority between 2011 and 2018?

In this article I argue that the geostrategic concerns of Bulgarian elites from the influence of the minority's kin-state, Turkey, from 2011 onward, and their aim to decrease the dependence of the minority on the kin-state provided the main motivation to accommodate Muslims' religious demands. These geostrategic concerns were driven by domestic political changes in Turkey in the post-2011 period and their reflections in the country's foreign policy. More specifically, the consolidation of the Justice and Development Party (AK Party) rule after 2011, a new reformist approach toward minorities (primarily Kurds) at home, and the conflict with the Gulenists shaped a bold and assertive Turkish foreign policy toward the Balkans, where the ruling party used, among others, its influence and support for kin communities to strengthen its domestic position. It was this domestically driven assertiveness in Turkish foreign policy that generated concern among Bulgarian elites and prompted strategic accommodation after 2011. Accommodation was essentially a way of advancing Bulgaria's interests, which were perceived to be at stake due to Turkey's post-2011 involvement.

The loyalty of the Muslim minority has long been of central importance to the Bulgarian state due to two structural factors that set Bulgaria apart from other European countries. First, Bulgaria hosts the largest indigenous Muslim minority in Europe, the majority of whom (approximately 70 percent) are ethnic Turks. The most recent 2021 census puts Muslims' share of the population at 10.8 percent (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute 2021)[1], while the U.S. Department of State's (2023) *International Religious Freedom Report*, citing the OGM's parallel count, provides an unofficial estimate of 20.8 percent.[2] Second, Bulgaria shares a border with the minority's kin-state, a geopolitical position matched only by Greece. Combined, the Muslim minority's demographic characteristics – its indigenous status, large size, and ethnic Turkish majority – alongside shared borders, have heightened Bulgaria's geostrategic concerns regarding any move of Turkey perceived as interfering in its internal affairs.

In what follows, I first outline the research design, method, and data used to develop the argument. I then briefly review four alternative explanations for shifting state policies toward religious minorities – historical institutionalism, international context, electoral interests, and new nationhood discourses – and demonstrate their limitations in explaining the Bulgarian case. After reviewing state–religion relations during the monarchical and communist periods (1878–1989), I explain why restrictive

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policies persisted between 1989 and 2011, noting how domestic political developments in Turkey during this period supported the continuation of the status quo in Bulgaria. The fifth section discusses the significant domestic political changes in Turkey after 2011 and their implications for Turkish foreign policy. The sixth section explains the change in Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority after 2011, making the case that it was driven by elite geostrategic concerns over Turkey's increasingly assertive, domestically driven foreign policy. The concluding section considers Bulgaria's treatment of its Muslim minority within a regional and broader European context and assesses the current state and possible future trajectory of state–religion relations in Bulgaria.

Research design

This article employs a within-case analysis of postcommunist Bulgaria to trace the reason behind the accommodative policy shift toward the Muslim minority. While focusing mostly on postcommunist developments (1989–present), I briefly reference the monarchical (1878–1944) and communist (1944–1989) periods to assess the long-term trajectory of state–religion relations. Analyzing a country diachronically has long been recognized as a good way to increase comparability as it "generally offers a better solution to the control problem than comparison of two or more different but similar units (e.g., within the same area) at the same time, although the control can never be perfect; the same country is not really the same at different times." (Lijphart 1971, 689; see also George and Bennett 2005, 151–179) Consequently, I focus mostly on postcommunist developments to increase the number of critical constants that can be controlled, such as regime type and foreign policy orientation. Furthermore, the 37 years since the collapse of communism provide a sufficient timeframe for a meaningful diachronic analysis of Bulgarian state-religion relations.

The dependent variable (outcome of interest) in this study is change in Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority. To measure policy change, I look at changes in the adoption and implementation of domestic legislation concerning the three most salient and politicized issues facing the Muslim minority in postcommunist Bulgaria: the OGM leadership dispute, state funding and the restitution of religious foundations inherited from the Ottoman period. Bulgarian courts began registering the *elected* bodies of the Muslim community – the OGM and the High Muslim Council – only from 2011 onward. Prior to that, state institutions mostly blocked the registration of the elected Muslim bodies, recognizing instead the parallel institution established by Nedim Gencev, the last Grand Mufti appointed during the communist era.

Concerning state funding, a December 2018 amendment to the 2002 Denominations Act introduced for the first time significant state funding for the two largest religious communities in the country – Bulgarian Orthodox and Muslim – based on a scale of 10 levs ($6) per capita. Crucially, the amendment designated the elected OGM as the recipient of this funding, thus precluding rival claims from Gencev's parallel institution. Consequently, since 2019, the OGM has received around $4 million in annual state funding (U.S. Department of State 2020; 2021; 2023), constituting nearly half of its annual budget (Hüseyinoğlu and Emin 2021, 280). Previously, the OGM's primary – and often sole – funding source was Turkey, which had provided around two million

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levs ($1.1 million) annually via its Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) since 1998 (Öztürk 2021, 141).

Finally, Bulgaria continues to block the restitution of religious foundations. The OGM has lost most of the court cases for restitution despite possessing the necessary documentation to prove that it is the legal successor of those properties prior to the 1944 communist takeover. Some cases remain pending because Gencev's parallel institution also claims ownership. In short, unlike the leadership dispute and state funding, Bulgaria's policy toward property restitution remains unchanged.

To explain Bulgaria's accommodative policy shift, I employ process-tracing as a within-case method of causal inference (George and Bennett 2005, 205–232). By focusing on periods of causal significance and the sequence of events leading to policy change in the aforementioned issue areas, I demonstrate that Bulgarian elites shifted course only when they perceived Turkey's role as assertive and interfering in Bulgaria's internal affairs. These perceptions were driven by domestic political changes in Turkey after 2011 and their reflection in a new assertive foreign policy. I therefore identify 2011 as the tipping point in which domestic changes in the kin-state triggered changes in its foreign policy and generated geostrategic concerns among Bulgarian elites. Eventually, accommodation was strategically employed to decrease the minority's dependence on the kin-state.

To measure the level of Bulgarian elites' geostrategic concerns, I draw on a combination of secondary sources, press releases in English, Turkish and Bulgarian, and original interview data. I conducted 11 semi-structured elite interviews with OGM officials, politicians, presidential advisors, ambassadors, and academics during fieldwork in Bulgaria between November 2018 and April–July 2019. The interviews were conducted immediately before and shortly after the adoption of the December 2018 amendments to the Denominations Act, thereby providing contemporaneous insights into the motivations underlying the accommodative shift. Finally, to assess the reflections of Bulgaria's policy in the international community, I use data from the U.S. Department of State's annual *International Religious Freedom Report* for Bulgaria covering the 2002–2023 period.

Alternative explanations

Existing explanations in the literature do not adequately account for Bulgaria's policy shift toward the Muslim minority between 2011 and 2018. I briefly review four of them here. First, historical institutionalist accounts suggest that, absent external shocks serving as "critical junctures", state policies toward religious minorities should follow established patterns of state–religion relations (Thelen 1999; Fetzer and Soper 2005). The collapse of communism definitely counts as an external shock but Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority did not change in many respects during the first two decades after communism. The repressive 1949 Denominations Act, for instance, remained in force until 2002. Even after its amendment in December 2002 under EU pressure, the government continued to restrict religious freedom in practice. The continuation of the OGM leadership dispute for another decade further proves this point.

Second, accounts emphasizing the importance of international context argue that policy change toward religious minorities becomes more likely when strong domestic

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actors instrumentalize a suitable international context to advance new policy agendas. Ramazan Kılınç (2020), for instance, points to Turkey's European Union (EU) accession bid (2000–2010) and the rise of the AK Party to explain the adoption of more liberal policies toward the Christian minority. Such accounts are valuable because they conceptualize policy change as "an outcome of the interaction of international context and domestic politics" (Kılınç 2020, 5). However, they cannot properly explain the timing of Bulgaria's policy shift toward the Muslim minority. If international context were decisive, accommodative policies would have been adopted in the early 2000s, when Bulgaria was preparing to join the NATO and EU (the former requiring Turkey's approval). At the time, the country was ruled by a coalition between the former king's party – the eponymous National Movement Simeon II (NDSV) – and the Muslim/Turkish minority party, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS). Yet the December 2002 amendments to the Denominations Act that this coalition government passed[3] largely continued the restrictive practices of the 1949 Act, using this time the courts to block the registration of the elected OGM leadership. Contrary to the expectations of international context accounts, accommodative policies were adopted only between 2011 and 2018 – amid rising Islamophobia and right-wing extremism across Europe – and with far-right parties participating in government.

The last point relates also with two additional explanations of policy change toward minorities: those emphasizing the electoral incentives of the parties enacting such changes (Gill 2007) and those highlighting new ideologies or nationhood discourses to justify such changes (Aktürk 2018). For instance, Şener Aktürk (2018) explains the AK Party's reform initiatives toward non-Muslims (Armenians and Jews) between 2004 and 2013 by pointing to an Ottoman-Islamic reconceptualization of the nation and a discourse celebrating religious diversity (539). Neither electoral incentives nor a new minority-friendly redefinition of the nation applies in the Bulgarian case. The mainstream right party GERB, which enacted the accommodative policies between 2011 and 2018, has negligible Muslim support and governed in coalition with far-right parties during this period. Likewise, there is no new nationhood discourse in Bulgaria. Recent scholarship shows that all major parties endorse a monoethnic and mono-religious nationhood vision, deny the existence of minorities (Aktürk and Lika 2022; Lika 2023), and seek to control the Muslim community through a divide and rule strategy – an approach also observed in Greece (Tsitselikis 2012).

Historical trajectory of state–religion relations in Bulgaria: monarchical and communist periods (1878–1989)

A brief overview of state–religion relations in monarchical and communist Bulgaria reveals two recurring patterns. First, state policy toward Muslim institutions was marked by systematic restriction and interference in their internal affairs. The OGM was placed under executive supervision from the outset under the 1879 Tarnovo Constitution (Yalımov 2016, 55–56). From the 1895 Provisional Regulations for the Spiritual Administration of Muslims onward, the Grand Mufti – the highest representative of Bulgarian Muslims – was appointed rather than elected for almost the entire period (Kanev 2002, 320). These restrictive policies turned into outright

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repression after the 1944 communist takeover, when religious foundations were seized by the state and Islamic education was closed down and banned under a policy of militant atheism (Yalımov 2016, 249–250; Ivanova 2017, 40–41). Repression culminated in the forced name-changing campaigns[4] targeting Pomaks (1971–1974)[5] and later ethnic Turks (1984–1989) (Zhelyazkova 1998, 168–169).

Second, geostrategic concerns have played an important role in Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority. Yet such concerns led to brief accommodative shifts only in the issue area of Islamic education, not in the state's restrictive stance toward Muslim institutions. In September 1913, for example, the Kingdom of Bulgaria established the Nuvvab *madrasa* (religious vocational high–school) in Shumen – the first post-Ottoman Islamic higher educational institution in the country (Yalımov 2016, 248). This initiative was largely an outcome of the Bulgarian–Ottoman rapprochement after the Second Balkan War (Alptekin et al. 2020, 46–47). Similarly, the relatively accommodative policy toward Islamic education during the interwar period was shaped by Bulgaria's threat perceptions vis-à-vis the newly established Kemalist ideology in Turkey (Neuburger 2004, 45). In a personal interview with the author (May 2, 2019), former Bulgarian Socialist Party MP (1990–1991) and former rector of the High Islamic Institute in Sofia (1998–2012) Ibrahim Yalımov summarized this broader pattern:

> If we take a look at the history of Bulgaria's minority policy – whether during monarchy, the era of totalitarian socialism, and the present day – the primary aim has been to separate Bulgarian Turks from the Turks of Turkey ... Different Bulgarian regimes have always claimed that Bulgarian Turks bear no connection to the Turkish nation ... Kemalists and Ataturkists sought to cultivate Turkish national consciousness – precisely what Bulgarians are opposed to. Their aim is to prevent the development of national consciousness. There are Muslims in Bulgaria. Islam may be tolerated, but not Turkishness. This objective remains unchanged today ... There is an extreme nationalism here, and this is so evident.

Persistence in Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority during the first two decades after communism

The collapse of communism and the advent of pluralism in Bulgaria restored several fundamental religious rights that had been seized by the totalitarian regime for more than four decades. Most notably, Bulgarian Muslims were allowed to reclaim their names, the ban on religious practice was lifted, and Islamic schools were reestablished. The historic Nuvvab madrasa in Shumen, for instance, was reopened in August 1990, and by 1992 two new branches had been established in Ruse and Momchilgrad. In September 1990, a High Islamic Institute was established in the capital Sofia to train religious teachers and preachers (Yalımov 2016, 251–252).

These reforms marked a clear break with the repressive legacy of totalitarian socialism. Yet continuity persisted in two key areas: the OGM leadership dispute and the restitution of religious foundations. The two were closely linked, as restitution depended partly on removing OGM's communist–era appointed leadership and

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securing state recognition of the newly elected one. However, for two decades after communism (1989–2011), state institutions continued to block the recognition of the OGM's elected leadership.

1989–2002 period

During the first decade after communism, it was the Religious Denominations Directorate (RDD) of the Council of Ministers – acting under the 1949 Denominations Act – that blocked the recognition of the elected bodies of the Muslim community. Instead, the communist successor Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), which governed in 1990–1991 and 1995–1997, recognized the parallel institution established by Nedim Gencev, the last communist–era appointed mufti. Gencev had gained notoriety for collaborating with the regime during the forced name-changing campaign of the late 1980s. He later "openly admitted that he was on the payroll of State Security" (Zhelyazkova 1998, 178). Ultimately, the objective in blocking the recognition of the elected leadership was to establish control over the Muslim community by dividing it.

The role of the minority party DPS is critical here due both to its links to the BSP and the party's aim to use the OGM as a tool to control the large pool of Muslim votes. Hence, the DPS had a vested interest in perpetuating the schism within the OGM. Evidence from elite interviews conducted by the author reveals that DPS leader Ahmed Doğan and many other founding members were communist State Security informers and they were tightly controlled by the oligarchic circle around BSP leader Andrey Lukanov (Mihail Ivanov, personal interview, November 12, 2018; Kasım Dal, personal interview, November 11, 2018; Güner Tahir, personal interview, November 7, 2018). Moreover, Hüseyin Ömer, a DPS deputy elected in 1990 and later expelled from the party, argues that the primary function given to the DPS by the State Security was to consolidate and retain the Muslim vote (personal interview, November 13, 2018).[6] Similarly, Hayri Emin, foreign relations expert at the OGM, claims that the unwritten agreement between BSP and mainstream right Bulgarian parties was that Muslim votes belonged exclusively to the DPS, and that Bulgarian parties would not target Muslim votes (personal interview, November 8, 2018).

Turkey supported the domestic status quo in Bulgaria during the 1990s and it mostly steered clear of any involvement with the problems facing the Muslim minority. One key reason for this non-interventionist stance was Turkey's own Kurdish problem and the fear of attracting external involvement with its poor record of minority rights during the 1990s (Koinova 2013, 133; 143–144). Consequently, Ankara prioritized maintaining good relations with Sofia and strongly supported the political integration of the Muslim minority under the single banner of DPS. Evidence for this policy is seen in the decision of the coalition government led by Bülent Ecevit in 2001 to grant free temporary residence permits to thousands of undocumented Bulgarian Turk migrants in Turkey, contingent on their support for the DPS in the 2001 Bulgarian parliamentary election (Kaşlı and Parla 2009, 213). Implemented for the first time in 2001, this policy led to a dramatic increase in DPS votes, enabling the party to enter government for the first time as the junior coalition partner of the former king's party, NDSV (Parla 2019, 63).

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Turkey's support for the domestic status quo in Bulgaria throughout the 1990s and early 2000s led Bulgarian political elites to regard potential Turkish funding for the OGM as largely unproblematic. Indeed, as long as the OGM remained weak or divided and served the DPS' electoral interests, Bulgarian elites to some extent even welcomed Turkish funding, since the moderate version of Turkish Islam helped counter potential extremist influences from elsewhere. The June 1998 agreement between the Bulgarian RDD and the Turkish Diyanet partly reflected these calculations, regulating Turkish funding for the OGM, its three affiliated religious high schools, and the Sofia High Islamic Institute (Hüseyinoğlu and Emin 2021, 268–269). This funding was the OGM's primary – and often sole – source of support from 1998 until 2017, when Bulgaria unilaterally ended the agreement with Diyanet (269). However, it often fell short of covering even basic expenses, such as employee and preacher salaries, highlighting the severity of the Muslim community's financial problems. As High Muslim Council chair Vedat Ahmed explained in a personal interview (April 29, 2019): "Many of our employees and preachers had to leave their jobs due to insufficient salary, and some went to work abroad. A certain amount of support comes from Turkey but it is not enough. Still, we could survive until now only due to that support." Financial difficulties were further exacerbated by Bulgaria's blocking of religious foundation restitution during the 1990s.

2002–2011 period

During the first decade of the 2000s, Bulgaria's bid to join the EU and NATO did not lead to any significant change in state policy toward the Muslim minority. As part of the EU membership process, the 1949 Denominations Act was amended in December 2002 by the NDSV–DPS coalition government; however, these changes were largely cosmetic. Specifically, the 2002 amendments transferred authority to register religious groups from the RDD to the Sofia Municipal Court, established a prescriptive period of ten years during which religious groups could apply for restitution of religious foundations, and permitted the formation of alternative groupings within religious communities. Rather than resolving disputes, these provisions exacerbated leadership tensions within the OGM. Exploiting the provision on alternative groupings, Nedim Gencev established a parallel institution – the "Muslim Sunni Hanafi Denomination" – and sought court registration to claim leadership over the Muslim community and its foundations. Instrumentalizing this dispute, in turn, Bulgarian courts continued to block the registration of the elected Muslim bodies and suspended action on OGM's restitution claims (Vedat Ahmed, personal interview, April 29, 2019; Hayri Emin, personal interview, May 1, 2019). OGM officials also reported that Gencev's parallel institution was established by the state as a tool to stall the resolution of Muslim community issues.

In short, little substantially changed for the Muslim minority after 2002. As Vedat Ahmed observed, "While during the 1990s there was direct political interference into the functioning of religious institutions, after 2002 the interference continued through the courts" (personal interview, April 29, 2019). Successive reports by the U.S. Department of State (2003) and the European Commission (2004) also strongly criticized the registration process mandated by the 2002 Act, noting that "[t]he

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government restricted religious freedom through a registration process that is selective, slow, and nontransparent" (U.S. Department of State 2003).

Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority in 2002–2011 did not change because none of the domestic actors that had established the 1990s status quo changed. The DPS was part of the government for almost the entire period (with NDSV in 2001–2005 and with the BSP–NDSV coalition in 2005–2009) and arguably had an even stronger incentive than in the 1990s to perpetuate divisions within the OGM to serve its electoral interests. Indeed, during 2002–2011, the OGM became virtually a DPS "satellite", with the Grand Mufti and district muftis regularly accompanying DPS leadership at electoral rallies (Hayri Emin, personal interview, November 8, 2018). Similarly, the mainstream Bulgarian parties that controlled the executive and passed the 2002 amendments (NDSV and BSP) were affiliated with the former communist party. Interview evidence indicates that the former king's party NDSV was founded by individuals affiliated with the oligarchic circles within the BSP (Osman Oktay, personal interview, November 12, 2018; Hüseyin Ömer, personal interview, November 13, 2018). Thus, the decision of NDSV–BSP–DSP coalition governments to maintain the status quo is unsurprising.

While Bulgaria saw no reformist change during 2002–2011, Turkey experienced significant domestic political transformation, which, however, did not translate into an assertive foreign policy advocating for the rights of kin communities abroad. Specifically, the period witnessed the rise to power of the political Islamist-rooted AK Party, which successfully built a broad-based coalition of religious conservatives, moderate nationalists, minorities and liberals, and managed to neutralize the power of the veto players (military and judiciary) of the secular Kemalist establishment (Öniş 2013, 116–117; Özbudun 2014, 155–156; Esen and Gümüşçü 2016, 1584–1585). Relying also on strong Western support, it took the AK Party three consecutive election wins (2002, 2007 and 2011) with increasing vote share, and a successful constitutional referendum in September 2010 to largely curb the power of its "longtime secularist foes" and cement its hold on power (Müftüler–Baç and Keyman 2012, 85–86). Preoccupied with this domestic agenda and to some extent still vulnerable – the Kemalist-dominated judiciary had unsuccessfully tried to shut down the party as late as 2008 – AK Party could not yet adopt a proactive policy for kin communities abroad. Even its new reformist approach toward domestic minorities, which later facilitated more assertive steps abroad, would have to wait until 2009–2013 for the most significant reforms to take place (Aktürk 2018).

Consequently, the AK Party in 2002–2011 largely maintained the policy of its predecessors and supported the domestic status quo in Bulgaria. This is evidenced by the continuation and systematization of the practice initiated by the Ecevit government in 2001: granting free temporary residence permits (via one-off amnesties) to undocumented Bulgarian Turkish migrants in Turkey in return for their support of the DPS in Bulgarian elections. During 2002–2011, this policy was enacted twice for parliamentary elections (2005 and 2009) and twice for local elections (2007 and 2011) (Parla 2019, 62). More broadly, Turkey continued to discourage the permanent settlement of Bulgarian Turkish migrants in Turkey and was not committed to extending citizenship rights, preferring instead that its ethnic kin remain and prosper in Bulgaria.[7] Strengthening DPS electorally thus served this broader strategic aim, as

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DPS was the party "Turkish government invests in with the aim of developing a stronger footing in Balkan and wider European politics" (Parla 2019, 62).

These dynamics began to shift after 2011, as domestic political changes in Turkey transformed its foreign policy, generated geostrategic concerns among Bulgarian elites, and ultimately pushed them to accommodate the religious demands of the Muslim minority.

Domestic political changes in the kin–state and their foreign policy reflections

"Turkey is one of those states for which foreign policy preferences are shaped mainly by domestic political developments" observes Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2021, 50) in a recent important book on Turkey and the Balkans. Developments after 2011 strongly substantiate this observation. Scholars of Turkish politics broadly agree that the consolidation of AK Party power after 2011 led to democratic backsliding, with the resulting regime type being described variously as majoritarian or delegative democracy (Özbudun 2014), illiberal democracy (Öniş 2015), and competitive authoritarianism (Esen and Gümüşçü 2016). Other scholars frame these developments in terms of "de-Europeanisation" (Demirtaş 2015; Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016).

The year 2011 constitutes a critical turning point because, by that time, the tutelary power of the Kemalist establishment had been largely neutralized following the successful 2010 constitutional referendum and the AK Party's landslide election victory a year later. With the removal of the common Kemalist foe, however, the broad-based coalition that AK Party had successfully built gradually dissolved and the ruling party saw a significant decline in its electoral support (Özbudun 2014, 156), losing also much of its earlier Western support. These developments shaped a new assertive Turkish foreign policy after 2011, in which support for kin communities abroad served, among other purposes, to bolster AK Party's domestic legitimacy (Demirtaş 2015, 124–126). More broadly, Ziya Öniş (2015, 36) similarly argues that "The AKP's pro-active and assertive foreign policy, especially after 2009 ... paid handsome dividends in domestic politics". The post –2011 assertiveness should be seen not only in view of the consolidation of AK Party rule domestically, but also in the context of the Arab Spring, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, and the failed coup attempt in 2016, all of which led to a more significant ideological and anti–Western shift.

Scholars have also emphasized that Turkey's post –2011 foreign policy activism has carried religious overtones, with the Diyanet serving as a key instrument. Öztürk and Sözeri (2018, 627), for example, argue that: "AKP has also transformed *Diyanet* into a pliable state apparatus geared toward implementing the political ideology of the party. The transformation of *Diyanet* is not limited to domestic policy, but extends to the new TFP [Turkish Foreign Policy], which has acquired an ethno-religious identity." The Diyanet has significantly shaped the institutionalization of Muslim/Turkish minority interests in Bulgaria since it is Turkey's only transnational state institution with an official presence there, unlike in other Balkan states that also host TİKA [Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency] and Yunus Emre Institute offices (Öztürk 2021, 146–147). Bulgarian elites have therefore displayed heightened sensitivity toward Diyanet activities after 2011.

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Two additional important domestic developments shaped Turkey's post-2011 foreign policy. The first was a series of reforms toward minorities – primarily Kurds – that allowed for the expression of their hitherto suppressed ethno-linguistic distinctiveness. Although the "Kurdish opening" began in 2004, its "most significant reforms occurred in 2009–2013" (Aktürk 2018, 529), after the AK Party had largely consolidated power and curbed Kemalist influence. Closely related was the "Kurdish peace process" and ceasefire with the PKK (Partîya Karkerén Kurdîstan) that began in 2013. These developments are very significant because domestic accommodation discursively enabled the AK Party to advocate for the rights of its kin abroad as well. As Alptekin (2018, 313) notes: "Turkey adopted a bolder and more assertive approach toward its kin groups in the Balkans and the Middle East as it simultaneously adopted a reformist approach to its own Kurdish question in the 2000s."

The last key development was the conflict and the transnational fight against the Gulenists, a conflict that essentially began after the 2010 referendum but came out into the open only after 2013. Gulenists are a "messianic religious cult" centered on the figure of Fethullah Gülen (Aktürk 2016, 142). They are implicated in a wide-range of illegal and criminal activities in Turkey and beyond, and are officially designated as a terrorist organization by Turkey since late 2015 (Aktürk 2016, 156–159). Most critically, as contributors to an important edited volume conclude, Gulenists planned and carried out the coup attempt on July 15, 2016 (Yavuz and Balcı 2018, 12). During the 2002–2010 period, they had a "predominantly political" relation with the ruling party, driven by the common goal of neutralizing the Kemalist establishment (Taş 2018, 396). Once that objective was achieved, however, Gulenists were transformed into a "power-obsessed structure", rendering a clash with the ruling party "inevitable" (Yavuz 2018, 42).

Among other countries and regions, Gulenists established an extensive presence in the Balkans through a network of schools, foundations, business associations, universities, and media outlets. In Bulgaria, they even managed to gain partial control over the OGM and its affiliated religious schools (Öztürk 2021, 164–165). Countering this network, thus, became an additional driver of Turkey's assertive regional policy after 2013.

In sum, three domestic factors – AK Party's post-2011 power consolidation, minority reform at home, and the conflict with the Gulenists – fed into a more assertive Turkish foreign policv toward Bulgaria and beyond. After 2011, Turkey began to openly support the elected OGM leadership and minority parties rival to the DPS. These moves generated geostrategic concerns among Bulgarian elites and prompted selective accommodation of Muslim minority demands.

Geostrategic concerns and change in Bulgaria's policy toward the Muslim minority (2011–present)

From 2011 onward, a more assertive Turkey openly backed the elected OGM leadership in its efforts to resolve the long-standing dispute. A key moment was the October 2010 official visit of Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan to Sofia, which took place amid another heated OGM leadership crisis. Emphasizing the "question of the Grand Mufti", Erdoğan expressed confidence that the issue would be "resolved

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democratically within a very short period of time with the participation of the muftis in an election" (Özlem 2016, 196–197).

Coming one month after Turkey's constitutional referendum, Erdoğan's visit was also significant because it gave the first signs that Ankara no longer viewed the DPS as its sole interlocutor in Bulgaria. Instead, Turkey cultivated ties with Kasım Dal and Korman İsmailov, two former DPS deputies who left the party in early 2011 and founded the People's Party for Freedom and Dignity (NPSD) in December 2012 (Özlem 2016, 197–198). In a personal interview with the author (November 11, 2018), Kasım Dal claimed that he left the party after it became known that most of the DPS founders had been State Security informers and argued that Muslim minority population in Bulgaria is sufficiently large to sustain more than one party in parliament. Bulgarian elites, however, interpreted these developments differently. Illustrating perhaps the earliest example of elite geostrategic concerns, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov declared in 2010 that: "No party intermediaries are necessary between Bulgaria and Turkey. I insist that our Turkish colleagues review their relations with certain circles in Bulgaria who present themselves as actors expressing the will of the Turkish state in Bulgaria." (cited in Öztürk 2021, 181)

NPSD eventually was not successful. It failed to cross the four percent threshold in the 2013 parliamentary election, while it could elect only one MP (Korman İsmailov) in the early 2014 election as part of a pre-election coalition with the center-right Reformist Bloc (Alptekin et al. 2020, 86). However, NPSD's formation is causally important because it represents the *first* Turkish-supported challenge to DPS' monopolistic control of the Muslim vote.

Taken together, Turkey's support for the elected OGM leadership and for a rival minority party pushed concerned Bulgarian elites into action. Within six months of Erdoğan's visit, in April 2011, "the Sofia Appellate Court overturned the lower court's refusal to register Mustafa Hadji as the legitimate Chief Mufti of the Muslim denomination, which officially ended the longstanding leadership dispute with Nedim Gendzhev." (U.S. Department of State 2011). The Sofia District Court subsequently registered the elected bodies emerging from the 2016 and 2021 Muslim National Conferences without obstruction (Hüseyinoğlu and Emin 2021, 266–267). Interviews with Hayri Emin, foreign relations expert at the OGM (November 8, 2018; May 1, 2019; August 20, 2024), shed light on the rationale behind this shift. He argued that after 2011 the OGM gradually moved from being a DPS "satellite" to an increasingly autonomous institution due to the support provided by Turkey. As he put it, "We don't go anymore to accompany politicians at election rallies. The politicians now come to us and we stand at an equal distance from all parties".

A trend toward growing conservatism was also observed among Bulgarian Muslims after 2011. In Bulgarian media and public opinion, this trend was frequently framed through discourses of "radical Islam", with references to the rising influence of Wahhabi and Salafi doctrines. The arrest, trial, and sentencing of 13 Muslim Roma preachers in Pazardzhik in 2012 further reinforced such perceptions (Hürriyet Daily News 2012). By the mid-2010s, it had become widely accepted that religious views within the Muslim community were becoming more conservative, more receptive to external influences, and unevenly affecting its three main groups – ethnic Turks, Pomaks, and Muslim Roma. Thus, Bulgarian elites' geostrategic concerns, primarily

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driven by Turkey's assertiveness, should also be understood against the backdrop of growing conservatism among Bulgarian Muslims after 2011.

Although the OGM leadership dispute was resolved, the emergence of other Turkish-supported minority parties further increased geostrategic concerns among Bulgarian elites. Former DPS leader Lyutvi Mestan was expelled from the party in late 2015 and founded the Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance (DOST) in April 2016 (Öztürk 2021, 182). DOST's creation followed Turkey's February 2016 entry ban on DPS honorary chairman Ahmed Doğan and one of its MPs, the media mogul Delyan Peevski. This move reinforced the perception that Ankara backed the new party. Prime Minister Boyko Borisov stated at the time that, "The pressure and the desire of the Turkish leadership to intervene in this conflict [Ahmed Doğan and Lyutvi Mestan] made me dubious." (cited in The Sofia Globe 2016). The ban may also have undermined DOST electorally, as it was poorly received among segments of minority voters.

DOST's establishment was perceived as very threatening by Bulgarian elites. In a March 2016 television interview, Petăr Vodenski, former Bulgarian ambassador to Ankara (1991-1992) and a former staff member of Bulgarian military intelligence, argued that, "They [Turkey] are already interfering in the political process in Bulgaria, even more so since it was found out that Turkish diplomats gave instructions in places about whom to vote for ... whom to support from the two leaders [Ahmed Doğan and Lyutvi Mestan] and so on ... This is flagrant, very flagrant interference in the internal affairs of a country and it should not be allowed." (POGLED TV 2016). His remarks reflected a broader establishment consensus. Indeed, the period following DOST's founding coincided with the most serious diplomatic crisis between Bulgaria and Turkey in the postcommunist era.

The political climate ahead of Bulgaria's March 26, 2017 snap elections was particularly tense, as the vote occurred just three weeks before a critical constitutional referendum in Turkey. On March 3, 2017, Turkish Minister of Labour and Social Security Mehmet Müezzinoğlu – himself of Balkan-origin – declared at a Balkan workshop in Istanbul: "DOST Union was founded to ensure that the dynamics there [in Bulgaria] can proceed in parallel with the dynamics in Turkey. Together we will shape a strong future." (BBC Türkçe 2017). The official response from the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs a few days later clearly evidenced the level of concern among Sofia elites: "The promises of material incentives for voting and the open calls to support a particular political party are considered a direct interference in Bulgaria's internal affairs and are deemed completely unacceptable" (Mediapool 2017). Caretaker Prime Minister Ognyan Gerdzhikov similarly declared on March 17, 2017: "We know there is a party receiving support from Turkey, but we have taken the necessary measures to prevent this situation from continuing" (BBC Türkçe 2017).

The "necessary measures" included the expulsion of four senior Diyanet officials since December 2015 (Frognews 2017) and the unilateral termination of Bulgaria's 1998 agreement with Diyanet, which had provided funding for the OGM (Hüseyinoğlu and Emin 2021, 269). Both steps reflected the perception among Bulgarian elites that Diyanet served as a Turkish foreign policy instrument. Even liberal public intellectuals such as former presidential advisor Mihail Ivanov, who had previously welcomed Diyanet's role among Bulgarian Muslims, now viewed it more as

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a "political instrument" (Öztürk 2021, 147). Many Bulgarian analysts also linked Ankara's support for DOST and the ensuing diplomatic crisis to Turkey's April 16 referendum, interpreting these moves as a tactic by the Turkish ruling party to strengthen its domestic position ahead of the crucial vote (Theresheva 2017). This illustrates how Turkey's domestic political developments shape its foreign policy behavior.

Although eventually unsuccessful, the DOST–NPSD coalition that contested the March 2017 parliamentary elections led to the largest decline in the DPS vote share. This represented *the* most serious challenge to the party's dominance over the Muslim vote in the postcommunist period and prompted Bulgarian elites to address the other pressing issue: state funding for the Muslim community. Indeed, proposals to amend the Denominations Act resurfaced after the March 2017 elections as part of broader efforts to curb perceived Turkish influence.

The starting point of the debates for amending the Denominations Act were a series of restrictive measures proposed by GERB's far-right coalition partner, the United Patriots, that included banning foreign funding for religious communities, restricting foreign clergy activities, and prohibiting preaching in languages other than Bulgarian (Vedat Ahmed, personal interview, April 29, 2019). However, these restrictive measures were voted down by GERB and DPS, which in December 2018 eventually settled on an accommodative package of policies that provided for the first time significant state funding for the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and the Muslim community, formally designated the OGM as the recipient of this funding, and deferred for ten years the repayment of OGM's accumulated debt to the state (U.S. Department of State 2019). Prime Minister Boyko Borisov justified the amendments as necessary "to preserve ethnic peace and national security" in Bulgaria, implying that they could be threatened by external interference (Svobodna Evropa 2019). High-level OGM officials similarly maintain that the reforms aimed to reassert state control over a growing Muslim institution and reduce its financial dependence on Turkey. As High Muslim Council Chair Vedat Ahmed explained, Bulgarian elites reached the conclusion that "if we do not support this institution, for sure it will be forced to take support from Turkey" (personal interview, April 29, 2019). This interpretation is also confirmed by the then Turkish ambassador in Sofia Hasan Ulusoy in a recent interview with the author (December 5, 2024). Hayri Emin further noted that state funding carried "very clear" expectations: "loyalty to the state" (personal interview, August 20, 2024).

The 2018 amendments triggered another diplomatic crisis between Bulgaria and Turkey, albeit less severe than the previous one. On March 28, 2019, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu stated that Turkey had influenced the passage of the amendments. In an official statement, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs rejected any suggestion of external involvement in its legislative process and stressed that no such interference had occurred. Notably, it also observed that Çavuşoğlu's remarks came only days before local elections in Turkey (BNR 2019). The episode once again underscored how Turkey's domestic political developments shaped its foreign policy conduct.

It is worth noting that although the external strategic context – especially Turkey's post-2011 activism – created the incentives for accommodation, Bulgaria's eventual response was mediated by domestic political calculations and institutional dynamics.

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Accommodation of Muslim minority demands became viable amid declining electoral support for the DPS, efforts to reassert control over the large pool of Muslim votes, rising religious conservatism among Bulgarian Muslims, and nationhood cohesion among mainstream parties on the minority question. Bulgarian elites ultimately concluded that the costs of non-accommodation had begun to exceed its benefits and adjusted their policies accordingly. In short, external kin-state policies influenced the outcome only insofar as they aligned with domestic political calculations, highlighting the central role of internal actors in translating external strategic contexts into concrete policy responses.

Finally, state funding was also employed as a strategy to attenuate Muslim demands for the restitution of religious foundations. Because restitution is intrinsically linked to the OGM's potential financial autonomy – given the substantial economic value of these properties – Bulgarian elites sought to reduce the salience of the issue by offering state support instead. As Vedat Ahmed (personal interview, April 29, 2019) observes:

> State support is, of course, important for Muslims in Bulgaria. Support from Turkey is also important. However, the religious foundations historically belonging to Bulgarian Muslims have still not been returned. These properties are the resources that would enable our institution [OGM] to function autonomously. Instead of state funding, what we actually demand is the restitution of all our religious foundations. They should be returned. However, the state does not want to return them, and this has been an unchanging policy for a century.

Hayri Emin similarly describes restitution as a "red line" for Bulgaria, citing the large number of properties involved, their central location in major cities, and their considerable economic value (personal interview, August 20, 2024). Unlike the OGM leadership question and state funding, Bulgaria's policy on restitution has remained unchanged. This issue underscores the limits of strategic accommodation and shows that the accommodation of Muslim minority demands does not reflect any normative or ideological commitment to advancing minority rights, but is instead instrumental. Accommodation in Bulgaria has therefore been selective rather than comprehensive, illustrating how minority-friendly policies can coexist with enduring restrictions when core state interests are perceived to be at stake.

Conclusion

In this article, I advance the argument that extensions of rights to religious minorities may be strategic, aimed at reducing the influence of a neighboring kin-state. Specifically, I contend that Bulgarian political elites perceived Turkey's increasingly assertive foreign policy after 2011 as a threat, prompting a strategic accommodation toward Bulgaria's Muslim minority. The registration of elected Muslim leadership and the provision of state funding to the OGM are the prime examples of the accommodative policy shifts. Accommodation served to advance Bulgaria's interests, which were perceived to be at stake due to Turkey's post-2011 involvement. Notably, these changes occurred amid rising Islamophobia across Europe and were enacted by a right-wing government with limited electoral support from Muslim voters.

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Bulgaria's treatment of its Muslim minority seems to represent an outlier within both the regional and broader European context. Regionally, the Muslim minority in neighboring Greece is a case with very similar domestic political conditions. It is an indigenous, Turkish-dominated Muslim minority; since the mid-1980s, the most politicized issue has been the dispute over appointed versus elected muftis; and Turkey's involvement as a kin-state has been substantial. Indeed, Turkey's influence has been more pronounced in Greece than in Bulgaria due to the bilateral framework established by the Lausanne Treaty, which enables formal engagement (Aktürk and Lika 2022, 21). However, Greece has responded differently to Turkey's external influence and continues not to recognize elected muftis, relying instead on appointed muftis, as mandated by the legislative act of 1991 (Tsitselikis 2012, 419–420).

Within a broader European context, Bulgaria's strategic accommodation also deviates from restrictive patterns adopted elsewhere. Since 2015, for instance, countries such as Austria, Denmark, and France have enacted legislation banning foreign funding for Islamic organizations, mosques, and imams (see for instance Nasralla 2015). Bulgaria, by contrast, refrained from adopting comparable restrictive measures. Structural factors may help explain this divergence. Regarding Greece, Bulgaria's Muslim minority is almost eleven times larger (10.8 versus 1 percent). Bulgaria indeed hosts the largest indigenous Muslim minority in Europe, the majority of whom are ethnic Turks. The geopolitical stakes are therefore considerably higher for Bulgarian elites, prompting a strategic accommodation toward the Muslim minority. In northern and western European cases, by contrast, Muslim minorities are largely of immigrant-origin, smaller in relative size, ethnically heterogeneous, and not territorially contiguous with their kin-state. Unlike Bulgaria, once more, perceived geopolitical threat is consequently lower.

The accommodative shift has produced a new modus vivendi between the Bulgarian state and its Muslim minority. Relations between the DPS and the OGM have become largely cordial, but far from the patronizing mode of the 1990s and early 2000s. There is a growing rapprochement between the DPS and Turkey as well, with the former once again serving as Ankara's principal minority interlocutor in Bulgaria, while the NPSD and DOST have virtually ceased to exist. Since the November 2021 early parliamentary election, Bulgarian Turks residing in Turkey have again been mobilized (via the migrant associations) to vote for the DPS (BBC Türkçe 2021), echoing earlier patterns of transnational electoral mobilization. However, Ankara has adopted a neutral position toward the recent split within the DPS between honorary chairman Ahmed Doğan and party co-leader Delyan Peevski.

The durability of the new status quo will depend on broader geopolitical developments. In the short to medium term, it is likely to persist, given Bulgaria's prolonged political instability – the country has held seven parliamentary elections in just three years, internal fragmentation within the DPS, and the geopolitical turbulence generated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has encouraged closer security cooperation between Bulgaria and Turkey, particularly in the Black Sea. Over the longer term, however, relations between the Bulgarian state and its Muslim minority will remain conditioned primarily by the level of geostrategic concerns regarding Turkey's regional role.

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Notes

1. Out of a total of 638,708 Bulgarian citizens who self-identify as Muslim, 447,893 are ethnic Turks (70 percent of the total), while 45,817 are ethnic Roma. The remaining approximately 145,000 are Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims) (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute 2021).
2. In relative terms, both North Macedonia and Montenegro host a larger indigenous Muslim minority than Bulgaria. However, the ethnic composition differs: in North Macedonia the majority of Muslims are ethnic Albanians, while in Montenegro they are predominantly Bosniaks.
3. The head of the parliamentary commission that drafted the 2002 amendments was then DPS member of parliament (MP) and later party leader Lyutvi Mestan.
4. What Evgenia Ivanova (2017, 35) aptly describes as "the most characteristic Bulgarian 'patent'".
5. Pomaks were previously targeted in two similar forced assimilation campaigns: during the First Balkan War (1912) and again during the Second World War (1942–1944) (Ivanova 2017, 39–40).
6. Ömer also related to the author that Yuli Bahnev and Miroslav Drmov – two ethnic Bulgarian lawyers brought into the DPS by Ahmed Doğan – prepared the party's charter and program and secured its registration before the Sofia District Court, then headed by Dimitar Popov. Bahnev, Drmov, and Popov were all high-level State Security agents. Yuli Bahnev had served for 22 years as Bulgaria's ambassador to Malaysia, while Miroslav Drmov had previously worked as an informer in East Germany. Both Bahnev and Drmov were elected as DPS MPs in the 1990 parliamentary election.
7. Hungary adopts a similar policy toward its ethnic kin migrants from Transylvania (Romania) and other neighboring countries (Brubaker 1998, 1055).

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