

CHAPTER 33

The Bulgarian mixture (those famous minorities, again)

The Bulgarian society can be given as an example of rather harmonious multicultural mixture, with its members living amid tolerance and mutual respect. Stemming from very ancient times is the tradition of accepting “aliens,” provided they behave peacefully, and intermixing with them, typically – given time – absorbing them altogether. To start with, that tradition was in fact what gave birth to the Bulgarian nation. Deeply rooted, that habit determined the acceptance of, and the tolerant attitude towards, migrants in the last millennium or so, which resulted in the current mix of ethnic minorities coloring the streets of the country.

All of this has been the case for many centuries. Yet in the last two decades major changes started to emerge, courtesy of the efforts by political activists inside as well as outside the country. Whether through ignorance or malevolence and urge to exploit ethnic tensions for career purposes, many such individuals have attempted to incite frictions on ethnic base and harvest political dividends for their own advancement. The brief description below is meant to give you the basics about most members of the ethnic minorities in Bulgaria. Hopefully it will be sufficient to allow a better judgment about events in the recent past as well as potential future developments.

The Gypsies

Originally our Gypsies are of Indo-Iranian ethnicity. They have come to the Balkans in at least two major waves: the first about 1000 years ago and the second some four to five centuries later, following the invasion by the Ottoman Turks. The larger part of them still speaks their native tongue, an Urdu dialect¹. They define themselves as Christians, drifting around the churches in search of food and other means for living, particularly in times of hardship. Their attachment is loose, though, and switching allegiance is a rather common phenomenon, with some swinging multiple times during their entire lifetime between Christ and Mohammad. A while back some part of the Gypsies has made a pledge to Allah and consequently they started defining themselves as Turkish Gypsies, gradually converting into using the language as a “mother tongue.” These are even being frequently counted as “Turks,” in the statistics, given the appetite of the modern politicians.

The single major problem with the Gypsies is that originally they were nominally conducting the life of free nomads, with little to none expectations or demands, with no plans or a vision for the future, just living for the day. Until about the middle of the last century that was still palpable, for the governments of states which were housing them in large quantities. When the borders had to be sealed, everything changed. First they were locked within given territory and then their nomadic lifestyle became unacceptable, hence mandated was that they settle down. Since old habits die hard, they never accepted the notion to go regularly to school, to learn, to

¹ To this day I still remember instances when, as kids in the 1950's, in the cinema saloons where Raj Kapoor's movies were projected, our Gypsy street-friends have been bursting in laughter much before the rest of us: films were almost never dubbed then, hence you needed to read the subtitles.