

From Religious to Ethnic Minorities: The Cultural and Social Integration of Pomaks into Post-Ottoman Turkey

Gözde Emen-Gökatalay¹

Abstract

This article traces the cultural and social integration of Pomaks into post-Ottoman Turkey and the controversy over their 'Turkishness'. Current scholarship on early republican nationalism is particularly interested in the importance of the imperial legacy in nation-building in the early republic period. Scholars discuss that the Ottoman legacy of the millet system was vital to the formation of Turkish identity because the republican elites continued to accept Muslim immigrants from the Balkans due to their Islamic background. A closer analysis of primary sources with a focus on Pomak-speaking immigrants, however, reveals not only the challenges that their cultural assimilation posed for the government but also competing versions of Turkishness within intellectual and political circles. This article argues for a complex understanding of relations between immigration and nationalism, which shows that the public acceptance of Pomaks as Turks depended on domestic factors, such as linguistic nationalism and security concerns.

Keywords: Pomaks; Turkey; Integration; Immigrants; Turkishness

Introduction

Although Pomaks speak Bulgarian and Muslims from Crete speak Greek today, they will learn Turkish under the influence of Islam and abandon other languages tomorrow. Therefore, a nation is defined not only by language but also by religion.²

On May 28, 1914, Ziya Gökalp penned an article, titled "Nation and Homeland," in the nationalist magazine *Türk Yurdu* (Turkish Homeland) and laid down language and religion as the two main principles of national identity. As a prominent member of the Committee of Union and Progress, the ruling party of the period, Gökalp was among the Ottoman intellectuals who sought to redefine the nation in the face of an existential crisis that the territorial shrinking and political weakening of the empire created. Following the end of Ottoman rule in the Balkans and the Caucasus, hundreds of thousands of Muslims fled to modern-day Turkey and altered the ethno-religious composition of the remaining imperial provinces in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of them, including Pomaks, spoke languages other than Turkish as their mother tongue. Nationalist literati like Gökalp saw Muslim communities as part of the national community but expected them to learn and speak Turkish in the future. Their idea reflected the growing influence of a novel nationalism that emphasized the primacy of language. Although Gökalp passed away in 1924

¹ Gözde Emen-Gökatalay, Independent Scholar, Turkey. E-mail: gozdemn@gmail.com

² Ziya Gökalp, "Millet ve Vatan", *Türk Yurdu*, 28 May 1914, 2181.



and could not witness it, this linguistic nationalism came to dominate the ideological landscape of the Turkish republic in the next decades.³

With a primary focus on Pomak-speaking immigrants, this article captures the depth of the change in linguistic nationalism and its effect on immigrant integration into Turkish society. Current scholarship on early republican nationalism is particularly interested in the importance of the imperial legacy in nation-building in the early republic period. Scholars discuss that the Ottoman legacy of the millet system was vital to the formation of Turkish identity because the republican elites continued to accept Muslim immigrants from the Balkans due to their Islamic background (Cagaptay, 2006: 97). According to this approach, the Turkish government saw Pomaks as citizens “easy to assimilate” (Cagaptay, 2006: 16).

A closer analysis of primary sources, however, reveals not only the challenges that the cultural assimilation of Pomaks posed for the government but also competing versions of Turkishness within intellectual and political circles. Whereas a group advocated a secular notion of nationalism, others attached greater value to religion. Regardless of their contesting views about national identity, both groups advocated the acceptance of Pomak immigrants to Turkey because of the suffering of Pomaks in Bulgaria. Nonetheless, the public acceptance of Pomaks as Turks depended on domestic factors, such as linguistic nationalism and security concerns. Based on a rich trove of primary sources, this article argues for a complex understanding of relations between immigration and nationalism in early Republican Turkey. While there was neither opposition to Pomak immigration nor public animus against Pomaks, cultural and social discrimination against Pomaks was still maintained and reproduced through media outlets.

Pomak Immigration to Turkey

The inclusion of the Pomaks by official authorities in the national community depended on their counterparts’ policies in Bulgaria towards their Pomak population since the late Ottoman Empire. After the Ottoman-Russo War of 1877–1878, the Republic of Tamrash, which was composed predominantly of Pomaks, was founded and fostered a novel sense of communal identity among a wide range of Pomaks. When Bulgaria annexed it in 1886, however, Pomaks became a religious minority in Bulgaria where nationalism was formulated as an ideology against Islam, with Muslim/Turk being a negatively connoted term used to draw an analogy between oppression and freedom. Bulgaria’s aim to fashion itself as a legitimate, sovereign state necessitated its rejection of the Ottoman-Islamic past (Neuburger, 2011: 3). Bulgarian state authorities made a distinction between Pomaks and other Muslims by calling the former ethnic Bulgarians (Methodieva, 2021: 56-57). From the point of view of Bulgarian nationalists, Pomaks were ethnic Bulgarians who the Ottomans had forced to convert to Islam after its conquest of the Balkans. Bulgarian nationalism saw their conversion to Christianity absolutely necessary because they would identify, not with the national interests of the Bulgarian state, but with that of the Islamic Ottoman Empire if they remained Muslim.⁴ These assertions dominated political discourse after the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 gave birth to the Principality

³ For details, see Aytürk, İlker. (2004). “Turkish Linguists against the West: The Origins of Linguistic Nationalism in Atatürk’s Turkey”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (6): 1-25.

⁴ The members of nationalist organizations in Bulgaria also forcibly expel Pomaks, when they could not convert them to Christianity with the use of pressure, force, and threat. For more details, see Karpat, Kemal H. (1985). *Ottoman Population 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 60.



of Bulgaria (Zafer, 2014: 359). Bulgarian nationalists intended to cultivate a sense of national consciousness in Pomaks through schooling (Methodieva, 2021: 148). Embittered by these repressive measures, Pomaks migrated *en masse* to Anatolia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Ayhan, 1997: 146).

The Bulgarian efforts to convert Pomaks to Christianity gained momentum during the First Balkan Wars when Bulgaria sided with other Balkan states against the Ottoman Empire (Tahir, 2016: 279-292; Myuhtar-May, 2014: 82; Karagiannis, 2012: 22). The Bulgarian state gave them Christian names. The converted men were obliged to give up their fez, which was seen as a symbol of Islamic identity, and the converted women were forced to walk in the streets with their faces uncovered (Karagiannis, 2000: 145).⁵ Such obligations led to another exodus of Pomaks to the Ottoman Empire. The state-endorsed oppression of Pomaks turned Ottoman intellectuals more cognizant of their own religious identities; particularly Islamists addressed the mistreatment of Pomaks at the hands of Bulgarian nationalists and called on the Ottoman state and Muslim Ottomans to save their coreligionists from systematic repression.⁶ During the Turkish War of Independence, too, members of the parliament in Ankara regarded “Pomaks” as “loyal” groups to the government.⁷ Even after the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the caliphate was abolished in 1924, the identification of Pomaks with Turkey continued. Official documents labeled these Bulgarian-speaking Muslims as “Pomak Turks.”⁸

The language of officials toward Pomaks began to change in the mid-to-late 1920s. The consideration of Pomaks with Turkish culture and ethnicity was motivated by external factors. As Ali Eminov put it, although there were changes in the Bulgarian’s view of Pomaks since the Balkan Wars, “it was only during the late 1920s that Pomaks were officially identified as Bulgarians” (Eminov, 2007: 9). These assimilation efforts continued to force Pomaks to leave Bulgaria for Turkey. Turkish officials welcomed their arrival but made distinctions between “Turks” and “Pomaks.”⁹ For example, in 1928, one source called them “people who belong to the Pomak tradition” (*Pomak örfüne mensup eşhas*),¹⁰ which demarcated them from immigrants from the “Turkish” tradition. Most official circles, as well as press accounts, refrained from considering them “Turks” in the early-1930s.¹¹ Meanwhile, Turkish politicians overwhelmingly favored border controls. Several Pomaks were denied admission to Turkey.¹² Such measures did not specifically target Pomaks or any other group. Local officials stated that border cities were in no condition to accept more immigrants, regardless of their ethnic background.¹³ These changes meant neither the disinterest of the Turkish government in the well-being of the Pomak population in Bulgaria nor expressions of opposition to their mass migration to Turkey. On the contrary, Turkish diplomats in Bulgaria maintained contact with

⁵ Report of the International Commission to Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan War. (1914). Washington, DC: The Endowment, 155-156.

⁶ Şeyh Mihridin Arusi, “Pomaklar ve Basarabya Müslümanları”, *Hikmet*, 10 November 1910, 3; “İtiraf-ı Mezalim”, *Sebilü’r-Reşad*, 11 December 1913, 221-222; “Ehl-i Sâlib Mezâlîmi”, *Sebilü’r-Reşad*, 29 January 1914, 330-331.

⁷ Minutes of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM), 4 November 1920, 287.

⁸ TBMM, 5 November 1924, 28.

⁹ Turkish Republican Archives (BCA), 30-10-0-0-242-633-1, 7 January 1934, 1-2.

¹⁰ BCA, 272-0-0-12-58-154-12, 20 March 1928, 1.

¹¹ “Bulgaristanda”, *Vakit*, 4 November 1932, 8.

¹² BCA, 30-10-0-0-241-628-10, 20 May 1933, 1.

¹³ For example, see BCA, 30-10-72-472-8, 28 November 1934, 2; BCA, 30-10-72-474-7, 14 March 1935, 1.

Pomaks and followed the Bulgarian treatment of Muslims, including Pomaks.¹⁴ When Mustafa Sabri, who was an anti-Kemalist Islamist thinker, called Pomaks Bulgarian Muslims in 1929, the Turkish press wrote a razor-sharp account of his assertion.¹⁵

The Bulgarian policy towards Muslims continued to affect the identification of Pomaks by Turkey. The Bulgarian coup d'état of 1934 created fertile soil for the growth of radical right-wing groups and carried Pomak persecution to higher levels. The new regime did not only promote language-based Bulgarian identity on Pomaks but also severely restricted their Muslim identities. Yet the Pomaks remained attached to religion-based self-identification instead of a nationally-inspired collective Bulgarian identity, which triggered their desire to move to Turkey. In pursuance of their purpose, they approached Turkish authorities in Bulgaria, with whom they found no difficulty. In return, Turkey became more interested in their well-being. An incident at the Bulgarian-Greek border in late 1934 exemplified the inclusion of Pomaks under the broader category of "Turks." When a group of Pomaks crossed the border to enter Greece and eventually seek refuge in Turkey, Bulgarian officers murdered five of them. Their execution created a diplomatic crisis between Bulgaria and Turkey and gained national prominence after the Turkish press turned the spotlight on Bulgarian brutality against Pomaks. Turkish newspapers across the country reported that government-backed priests forced Pomak peasants to convert to Christianity.¹⁶ *Yeni Asır* pointed to the ill-treatment of Turks by irregular armed groups under the supervision of Bulgarian politicians. It further stated that Bulgarian Turks had to live far away from their homeland (i.e., Turkey) and abandon their properties to escape systematic marginalization. As with other newspapers, *Yeni Asır* branded Pomaks as Turks in Bulgaria and thought that this ethnic tie gave Turkey a special duty to provide shelter to their ethnic kin.¹⁷ Likewise, the Turkish press featured articles refuting the assertion that Pomaks were Slavic people who had been forcibly converted to Islam.¹⁸ With particular references to the Greek press, Turkish journalists brought the Turkishness of Pomaks to the attention of a wider public.¹⁹

The nexus between the Bulgarian persecution of Pomaks and their acceptance as Turkish immigrants preserved in the late 1930s. The Pomaks experienced even more pressure when *Rodina* (Homeland) was founded in 1937. Encouraged and financially supported by the Bulgarian government, this nationalist organization waged an aggressive campaign against Pomaks, which closely resembled the Bulgarian policies during the Balkan Wars. The *Rodina* activists tried to make Pomaks more aware of their assumed ethnic affiliation with Bulgarians (Neuburger, 2000: 182, 186; Karagiannis, 2000: 145; Eminov, 2007: 10). Their violence provoked further waves of Pomak migrants to Turkey (Kahraman: 2020: 96). From the outset, *Rodina's* activities drew the Turkish press's ire. By providing historical and contemporary references, Turkish publicists endeavored to make the migration of the Pomaks possible and

¹⁴ "Bulgaristan'da", *Yarm*, 12 April 1930, 5; BCA, 30-10-0-0-241-629-15, 17 June 1933, 1-2; BCA, 30-10-0-0-242-633-9, 30 April 1934, 1.

¹⁵ "Mustafa Sabri", *İkdam*, 18 June 1929, 4.

¹⁶ "Yugoslav Gazetelen", *Haber*, 4 December 1934, 2; "Pomaklar", *Savaş*, 6 December 1934, 2; "Kanlı Yazı", *Akşam*, 6 December 1934, 1.

¹⁷ "Bulgarlar Artık Çok Oluyorlar", *Yeni Asır*, 7 December 1934, 1.

¹⁸ "Bulgar Vahşeti", *Halkın Sesi*, 8 December 1934, 1; "Bulgar Dostlarımız", *Son Posta*, 21 December 1934, 1; "Siz Kafa Kesersiniz", *Haber*, 21 December 1934, 6; "Sofya Muhabirimizden", *Son Posta*, 17 June 1935, 15.

¹⁹ "Türk Ekaliyeti", *İzmir Postası*, 16 September 1934, 8; "Bir Elen Gazetesi", *Türkdili*, 12 December 1934, 2; "Trakyada Yaptığımız Manevralar", *Kurum*, 30 August 1935, 3.



assure the present residents of Turkey that the migration would upset neither the demographic nor the cultural makeup of the country.²⁰

The public acceptance of Pomaks as immigrants to Turkey reached another climax after the Second World War (Neuburger, 2011: 54). Communists took the power in Bulgaria with the formation of the People's Republic of Bulgaria in 1946. Physical violence and cultural fight against Muslims accelerated. Turkish official documents portrayed the abysmal living conditions of Muslims. At the same time, an anti-communist hysteria began to spring up in Turkey after the diplomatic ties between Ankara and Moscow were strained, which had implications for relations between Turkey and Bulgaria, a Soviet ally. Along with other Islamic groups in Bulgaria, Pomaks were seen by the Turkish public as "brothers" to be saved from the "communist menace." A letter written to the Turkish government by Turkish Consul General in Plovdiv Ali Rıza Malkoç in 1947 reflected this perspective. He not only cited Pomaks as Turks (*soydaşlarımız*) but also posed the question of whether Turkey could accept more Pomaks as immigrants. To convince high-ranking officials, Malkoç mentioned the campaign against Pomaks by the Bulgarian government since they voted for opposition groups.²¹ Consequently, as with the interwar era, the acceptance of Pomak immigrants as 'Turks' in the early Cold War was linked to a broader shift in Turkish foreign policy.

The idea that the Pomaks in Bulgaria were Turks continued to gain wide currency in political circles. Sinan Tekelioğlu, MP for the province of Seyhan, asked Foreign Minister Hasan Saka about atrocities committed against Turks in the Balkans in 1947. In his reply in the National Assembly, Saka referred to Pomaks as Bulgarian-speaking ethnic Turks. He criticized the harsh conditions that Pomaks endured in Bulgaria and the Bulgarian claim that Pomaks were Muslim Bulgarians. Tekelioğlu took the floor after the minister and told that Pomaks were "pure" (*halisüddem*) Turks although they spoke Bulgarian. He claimed that the repression of Pomaks, men and women alike, should be accepted as an assault on Turks.²² These speeches proved the wide acceptance of Pomak immigrants as Turks who needed to be admitted to Turkey in the early Cold War. Eventually, Turkey attracted large numbers of Pomaks, together with other Muslim groups, in 1951 (Zelengora, 2017: 83-85). All the discussions in this section proved that Pomaks, despite their cultural and linguistic differences, were accepted as immigrants even in the 1930s when political elites harbored ethnic nationalism.

The Cultural and Social Integration of Pomak Immigrants into Turkey

Soon after Pomaks actualized their migration to Turkey, however, their identification in the public imagination began to change. One thorny issue was linguistic barriers since many of them could not speak Turkish fluently but were native speakers of Pomak. There was no problem in Ottoman times, as Pomaks could speak their own language freely. Indeed, most Pomak soldiers who served in the Ottoman army during the Balkan Wars could not understand Turkish (Ömer Seyfeddin, 1973: 159). When Kemalists sought to remodel their new state on the example of Western nations, however, Turkish enjoyed unquestionable prestige as the official language of the state. The Turkish government paid scant attention even to those who lived in Bulgaria and Greece. It sent teachers and encouraged Turkish

²⁰ "Bulgaristanda Komşumuz", *Kurum*, 19 January 1938, 2; Şekip Gündüz, "Siyasa", *Haber*, 19 January 1938, 2.

²¹ BCA, 30-10-0-0-243-646-13, 31 January 1947, 2. He furthered his efforts in the rest of the decade as well (BCA, 30-10-0-0-243-646-7, 1 August 1948, 3).

²² TBMM, 4 September 1947, 633-634.

instructions in Pomak schools. It wanted Pomak students to read Turkish periodicals, especially after the Latinizing of the Turkish alphabet in 1928. Indeed, Pomak intellectuals made endeavors for their people to stop speaking the Pomak language and learn practical conversation skills in Turkish, which did not go unopposed by the Bulgarian and Greek governments (Çavuşoğlu, 1993: 131; Güler, 2007: 246).²³ The main concern of Kemalists for Pomaks abroad was to cultivate cultural and spiritual affinity with them through language. Turkish officials claimed that Bulgarian politicians sought to prevent Turkish instruction to take place in Pomak schools to curtail pro-Turkey propaganda and sever the bonds that tied Pomaks to Turkey.²⁴

Language created a host of new problems for the Turkish government when it came to Pomak immigrants in Turkey as it thought that the language was the chief way to facilitate their social absorption. Modern education based on Kemalist values was instrumental in promoting assimilation, which was likely to be most pronounced in children. The increased participation in formal schooling naturally did not affect the older generations, who could not easily acquire even basic proficiency in the state language.²⁵ Nevertheless, contemporary sources suggest that many Pomak citizens did not have direct access to education. In a report written to the Turkish government, Kâzım Dirik, who was the Inspector General of Thrace, the highest-level state official in the region, considered Pomaks “who had the misfortune to be alienated from Turkish culture.” He wrote that while there were 175 Pomak villages in the Thrace, only 94 of them had schools. Since the rest of the villages were sparsely populated and local governors did not have sufficient funding, new schools could not be opened.²⁶

The official emphasis on language was linked to a nation-wide campaign, as commonly known “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” (*Vatandaş, Türkçe Konuş!*), that the government sparked to promote the use of Turkish among citizens in the public space in the 1930s. The campaign soon became a cornerstone of the construction of the nation-state (Aslan, 2007: 245-272). As with other non-Turkish groups, Pomaks became the target of the campaign. The People’s Houses (*Halkevleri*), a government-backed institution that had hundreds of branches across the country, became a conduit between the political center and these immigrants as it encouraged them to learn and practice Turkish (Çolak, 2004: 81). Ali Rıza Dursunkaya, who was the head of the Kırklareli People’s House, wrote an article, titled “Citizen, Speak Turkish” (*Yurttaş, Türkçe Konuş*), in which he attacked Pomaks, along with other ethnic minorities, who continued to use their mother tongue in their daily interactions. He claimed that these people were ignorant of “national sentiments” (*ulusal duygular*) and failed to adapt to the receiving society. He regarded them as “disrespectful” (*saygısız*) and “irreverent” (*hürmetsiz*) towards Turkishness (*Türklük*). When two Pomaks came across, he continued, they forgot the fact that they lived in Turkey and spoke another language. He believed that these immigrants did so on purpose. He raspingly warned them and declared that Turkey could not tolerate the use of any language other than Turkish in the public sphere.²⁷ Public figures, like Dursunkaya, presented a deep critique of Pomak-speaking immigrants not only because they did not give up their old habits but also did not identify themselves as Turks by speaking Pomak. It was

²³ BCA, 30-10-0-0-242-637-8, 6 September 1934, 4.

²⁴ BCA, 30-10-0-0-242-637-8, 10 February 1935, 2.

²⁵ BCA, 180-9-0-0-240-1197-6, 3 February 1935, 2-5.

²⁶ BCA, 30-10-0-0-143-28-11, 22 April 1937, 3.

²⁷ Ali Rıza Dursunkaya, “Yurttaş Türkçe Konuş”, *Batı Yolu*, March 1936, 1.



clear that from the perspective of Turkish political elites and nationalist intellectuals, Pomaks could not succeed in blending into society if they chose the Pomak language over Turkish.

Not only state officials and government-affiliated intellectuals but also ordinary citizens who were native speakers of Turkish grew remorseful over the widespread use of Pomak by immigrants. Turkish newspapers of local and national circulation were full of reader's letters that attacked Pomaks for their choice of language. For example, M. Kâmil, who was an ironmonger in Lüleburgaz, Kırklareli, wrote a letter to the Istanbul-based *Son Posta* in 1934:

“Pomaks who live in certain villages of Thrace still use the Bulgarian language; they consider it a shame to speak Turkish among them and do not learn Turkish. It is very crucial to ensure that Turkish is spoken among these Turkish citizens and that they learn Turkish. Speaking Turkish is a requirement in the Turkish homeland. Speaking Bulgarian, not speaking Turkish, is a shame for Turks. Pomaks are Turks, not Bulgarians.”²⁸

Another letter written from Biga, Çanakkale to the Istanbul newspaper *Tan* bore a close resemblance to Kâmil's views:

“Despite the Citizen, Speak Turkish campaign, nobody speaks Turkish. People speak Bosnian and Pomak in coffeehouses. Some of them have neither knowledge of Turkish nor eagerness to learn it. They go to the court and demand an interpreter. I can't comprehend why people who have lived here for half a century do not wish to speak Turkish.”

It is important to note that these letters were not only published but also found confirmation in newspapers. *Tan* called the situation described above an “ugly epidemic.”²⁹ These letters were indications of the deepening social tension between Turkish and non-Turkish speakers engulfing both provinces and large cities. There were 32,661 people in Turkey who spoke Pomak as their mother tongue in 1939.³⁰ It was spoken even more rarely in Istanbul, with fourteen speakers.³¹ Yet the lack of proficiency in Turkish in immigrant-populated areas was enough to alarm media outlets in this city. The cultural and social pressure, thus, was not confined to a few towns and villages with a heavy concentration of Pomaks.

Those who complained about the speaking of Pomak included even Balkan immigrants. For example, Hakkı Ocakoğlu, the editor of the Izmir-based *Yeni Asır*, shared a letter from a person who had visited a Pomak village in Bursa. The letter's author went to a coffee shop and thought that “he was in Bulgaria” because he did not hear a single word of Turkish. Ocakoğlu, who was himself an emigre from Plovdiv, wrote that “the fact that some of our citizens speak a foreign language in big cities hurt our national feelings; as did the speaking of a foreign language by peasants in the countryside, despite the circulation of pure Turkish blood in their veins.”³² Journalists like Ocakoğlu still saw Pomaks as ethnic Turks but considered the use of another language by them a major obstacle to their objectives of intertwining the immigrants into Turkish society and exercising their civil rights and responsibilities. They requested the Pomaks to distance themselves from their region of origin

²⁸ “Kari Mektupları”, *Son Posta*, 20 April 1934, 6.

²⁹ “Bigada Çirkin Bir Salgın Var”, *Tan*, 14 October 1936, 11.

³⁰ Başbakanlık İstatistik Umum Müdürlüğü, *İstatistik Yıllığı Cilt 10*. (1939). Ankara: Hüsniyatıabat, 64–65

³¹ “İstanbulda”, *Son Telgraf*, 25 November 1939, 6.

³² Hakkı Ocakoğlu, “Millî Birlik”, *Yeni Asır*, 5 May 1938, 1.

and recast themselves as Turkish citizens. The poor command of the language by immigrants nonetheless fueled resentment towards them.

In terms of the ethnicity and language of Pomaks, public figures fell into two broad categories — one religious, the other secular. The first group labeled Pomaks as Slavicized Turks and was vocal opponents of their Christianization (Sabis, 1943: 17; Atabinen, 1946: 18). Some even claimed that the Pomak language was not related to Bulgarian.³³ Their broader point was to debunk false information about the Pomak; that is, the Pomaks were not Turks. Halil Yaver, a politically active lawyer in Istanbul, exemplified this Islamic form of nationalism. In his eyes, Pomaks were not Bulgarians in both cultural and racial terms. Like the fact that Turkish-speaking Greek-Orthodox communities in pre-republic Anatolia were Greeks because they were Christians, he believed, Pomaks were Turks because they were Muslims even though they spoke a Slavic language. He considered the Christianization of Pomaks a threat to the rights and future of the Turkish nation (Yaver, 1938: 52). Interestingly, he accused the Turkish government of prying open the doors of the country to the Gagauz, Turkish-speaking Christians in the Balkans in this period because their religious identity seemed to pose a contradiction to their ethnic identity (Yaver, 1937: 36-37).

The second entourage of intellectuals cherished secular ideals. For the advocates of this approach, the Islamic identity of Pomaks did not necessarily make them Turks. An article in *Milliyet* claimed that even Sultan Abdülhamid II, a leader who was known for his Islamic policies, had to deal with separatist Pomaks and other non-Turkish Muslim groups in the Balkans.³⁴ Yaşar Nabi Nayır, a famous author who wrote articles for the government-affiliated *Ulus*, was among these secular intellectuals. In 1936, he visited the Balkans and penned a book on Turkic groups in the region upon his return to Turkey. He criticized the Ottoman imperial strategies for ruling multiethnic polities since it did not attempt to formulate an inclusive national identity but centered its image around Islam and favored unity among the non-Turkish Muslim communities, including Pomaks. His main criticism arose from the Ottoman disinclination to teach Turkish to them (Nayır, 1999a: 26, 88). For Nayır, there was no doubt that Pomaks were “Muslims of pure Bulgarian blood” who spoke “only Bulgarian” (Nayır, 1999b: 24, 49). A point to bear in mind is that, unlike Yaver, Nayır advocated the migration of the Gagauz into Turkey because they were ethnic Turks even though they were Christians (Çagaptay, 2006: 83). The ideas of Yaver and Nayır were exemplary of positions taken up by contesting groups within the ruling elites. While the former was affiliated with Fevzi Çakmak, who was the Chief of General Staff of Military Staff and had an Islamic orientation, the latter was close to Internal Minister Şükrü Kaya, who belonged to the secular wing of the ruling party. In fact, Yaver publicly criticized Kaya in his writings, which contributed to their prohibition by the government.³⁵

Side by side with the problem of language in Pomak acculturation to Turkey, there were security concerns of the Turkish government. Pomaks had settled in Thrace and surrounding regions in the late Ottoman Empire. The Turkish government sought to transfer Pomak immigrants to other regions to cope with demographic and fiscal problems in the 1920s.³⁶ It kept a close eye on the rest of Pomaks in Thrace. Security concerns began to guide the

³³ “Kari Mektupları”, *Son Posta*, 25 December 1934, 6.

³⁴ “Yıldızdan Ordu Köşküne”, *Milliyet*, 5 July 1933, 2.

³⁵ BCA, 030-18-1-2-78-75-13, 31 August 1937.

³⁶ BCA, 272-0-0-11-17-79-6, 17 March 1924, 1.



settlement of immigrants in the early 1930s when the Turkish government perceived Bulgarian political aspirations and the existence of people who spoke “Bulgarian” in the region proximate to the Bulgarian-Turkish border as a threat. The Settlement Law of 1934 was an echo of this desire (Öztañ, 2020: 82-103). The drafters of the law expressed their frustration about the large numbers of Balkan immigrants in Thrace who could not still speak Turkish (Kirişçi, 2000: 5). Three months after the law, İbrahim Talî Öngören, who was the Inspector General of Thrace, visited cities in the region and held a meeting with governors. The application of the law and the Pomak question were among the two major issues of this meeting.³⁷ Kâzım Dirik, who replaced Öngören in 1935, drew attention to the urgency of assimilation of Pomaks into Turkish culture and prevention of the spread of “harmful propaganda” among them in a report to the government.³⁸ Although neither inspector general publicly stated it, both were concerned about religious opposition and minority nationalism. When a Pomak committed an offense against the state, such concern became more serious because the state officials were worried about the supposed readiness of Pomaks to conduct espionage against Turkey. For example, when a resident of Kırklareli attempted to burn down the headquarter of the border regiment in 1939, he and his family were forced to resettle in Sivas, a province in Central Anatolia, far away from the Bulgarian-Turkish border. The document explicitly stated his Pomak ethnicity (*Pomak soyundan*).³⁹ Likewise, when a Pomak committed a crime, Turkish newspapers laid the main stress on the Pomak identity of criminals.⁴⁰ Therefore, most politicians and intellectuals regarded Pomaks as Turks before their immigration and when they were integrated into public life as “loyal” members of society in Turkey. When immigrants spoke Pomak or were perceived as a threat to the social and political order, however, their Pomak identity was highlighted.

Still, the public acceptance of Pomaks into society was higher than most other non-Turkish Muslim groups. For example, a heated debate broke out in the National Assembly over the amendment of the Settlement Law to include more people under the broad category of Turks in 1939. Ali Galip Pekel, who was a Komotini-born MP for the province of Tokat, stated that the law successfully “eliminated” the legacy of the Ottoman Empire by replacing a religious-based identity with a racial one. Still, he considered non-Turkish Muslims in the Balkans part of the Turkish nation and approved their acceptance to Turkey as immigrants. He stated that Pomaks fought against the adversary of Turks together with Turkish soldiers during the Turkish War of Independence, which made them part of Turkish culture and nation. His speech received a mixed response. Some agreed with him; others were against the labeling of all Muslims as Turks. Ziya Gevher Etili, MP for Çanakkale, for example, underscored the armed attacks of Muslim communities on Ottoman soldiers in the Balkans and the Middle East in the Ottoman Empire. Nonetheless, even Etili stated that Pomaks were not among the people who “betrayed” Turks. Instead, he shared his first-hand experience with Pomaks in Turkey and argued for their Turkishness.⁴¹ The difference between Pomaks and other Muslim communities in the minds of these MPs was related to the historical background of Pomak-Turkish relations. Turkish political elites differentiated Pomaks from some other Islamic

³⁷ BCA, 30-10-72-472-5, 11 September 1934, 3.

³⁸ BCA, 30-10-0-143-28-11, 22 April 1937, 3.

³⁹ BCA, 30-18-1-2-88-77-4, 5 August 1939, 1.

⁴⁰ “Mahkemelerde”, *Milliyet*, 26 March 1934, 3; “Selâhattin Domuz mu Sanılmıştı?”, *Haber*, 30 December 1934, 6; “Salihin”, *Yeni Asır*, 18 January 1935, 8.

⁴¹ TBMM, 12 June 1939, 94-95.

groups, such as Arabs and Kurds, because, in their opinion, Pomaks did not rebel against Turks either in the late Ottoman Empire or the republican era. Accordingly, Pomaks had a better - albeit limited - chance of acceptance than these Muslim communities for them.

Conclusion

The existing literature on early republican nationalism is extensive and focuses particularly on the central role of Islam in the formation of the Turkish identity. Much of the literature emphasizes that the republican elites defined the Turkishness of immigrants based on their Sunni Muslim identity, which was assumed to exclude the Turkish-speaking Christian Gagauz.⁴² A closer analysis of primary sources, however, reveals that the admission of different people as immigrants to the country was one thing, their acceptance of Turks in society another. While Pomaks could easily find refuge in Turkey over decades, their social and cultural integration did not always go smoothly because the official and social view of what constituted Turkishness changed over time. To better understand not only the shifts in the formation of Turkishness but also the complex relationship between immigration and nationalism, one can look at the competing versions of Turkishness within intellectual and political circles and the changing public perceptions of the Pomaks in early Republican Turkey.

Although religion was not deemed irrelevant in the redefinition of the national identity in the early 1930s, linguistic nationalism began to reshape the Turkish view of Pomaks. The analyses of public discourses and speeches showed that several politicians, intellectuals, and local people in Turkey questioned the Turkishness of Pomaks more in this period when ethnicity-through-language became the cultural and social basis of Turkishness. Nationalist intellectuals, who made remarks about the immigrants' linguistic habits, however, did not oppose their coming to and settlement in the country. Even Yaşar Nabi Nayır, who was a longstanding champion of secular nationalism, thought that Bulgarians restricted Pomaks' civil rights, and most Pomaks chose Turkishness over their ethnic identity. He saw no objection to the inpouring of Pomak refugees to Turkey (Nayır, 1999b: 24-25, 49-53).

After Pomaks were naturalized, however, the public discussion about Pomaks became less welcoming. The adjective "Turkish," in a strictly legal sense, referred to all citizens, regardless of their ethnicity and religion. Nevertheless, there were legal obstacles ahead of Pomaks, evidenced by the Surname Law of 1934, which was motivated by nationalist sentiments. As with other ethnic and religious minorities, they were not allowed to have surnames in their own languages because Pomak was perceived as one of the "foreign races and nations" (*yabancı ırk ve millet*).⁴³ Even the word "Pomak" was considered against Turkishness (*Türklüğe aykırı*).⁴⁴

There was always implicit discrimination against Pomaks and an inherent reluctance to accept them as Turks. For example, *the Turkish Encyclopedia*, published by the Ministry of National Education, called Pomaks "Slavic" people.⁴⁵

⁴² For example, see Kirişçi, Kemal. (2000). "Disaggregating Turkish Citizenship and Immigration practices", *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36 (3): 14.

⁴³ "Kanunu Medeniye Göre: Medeni Haklarımızdan", *Edirne'de 6 Ok*, 25 November 1933, 8.

⁴⁴ M. Edip Sandıkçıoğlu, "Türk ve Türkiye", *Türkdili*, 20 November 1934, 4.

⁴⁵ *Türk Ansiklopedisi, Volume 8* (1946). Ankara: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 398.



Although the Turkish government and local officials, as well as Turkish-speaking citizens, discouraged them from speaking Pomak, primary evidence suggests that Pomaks continued to communicate in Pomak in their everyday life.⁴⁶ Even certain immigrants who had emigrated in the late nineteenth century and spent decades in Turkey could not speak a single word in Turkish (Varlık, 2010: 181). Though the Turkish government saw formal education as the key way to bring about a shifting sense of belonging and the formation of new identities for Pomak immigrants, it could not eradicate the limited access to formal education in the countryside. Another reason was the settlement of Pomaks in separate villages and the lack of opportunity to practice with Turkish-speaking citizens (Oluç, 1946: 42). In these areas, the elderly transmitted their customs and culture to the next generation in Pomak (Kurhan, 1956: 55). Despite the frequent appropriation of Islamic symbols, which was amplified by anti-communism, in post-war Turkey, secular nationalists still dared to express their views openly and continued to harbor prejudice against Pomaks due to their poor knowledge of Turkish. For example, Arın Engin, who was a Cyprus-born sociologist and staunch defender of “original Turkish” (*Öz Türkçe*), wrote that “Pomaks, Arabs, devshirmes, and converts (*dönmes*)” were against the speaking of Turkish and therefore the Turkish nation (Engin, 1955: 36).

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my special thanks of gratitude to Semih Gökatalay for taking the time to read my manuscript several times as well as Caner Tekin for offering constructive suggestions.

References

- Aslan, Senem. (2007). “‘Citizen, Speak Turkish!’: a Nation in the Making”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 13 (2): 245-272.
- Atabinen, Reşit Saffet. (1946). *Türk Medeniyet Tarihinden bir Yaprak*. İstanbul: İbrahim Horoz Basımevi.
- Ayhan, Aydın. (1997). *Balıkesir ve Çevresinde İskân Hareketleri*. Ankara: Karşı Basın.
- Aytürk, İlker. (2004). “Turkish Linguists against the West: The Origins of Linguistic Nationalism in Atatürk’s Turkey”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (6): 1-25.
- Çagaptay, Soner. (2006). *Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who is a Turk?* New York: Routledge.
- Çavuşoğlu, Halim. (1993). *Balkanlar’da Pomak Türkleri: Tarih ve Sosyo-Kültürel Yapı*. Ankara: Köksal.
- Çolak, Yılmaz. (2004). “Language Policy and Official Ideology in Early Republican Turkey”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (6): 67-91.
- Engin, Arın. (1955). *Atatürkçülük’te Dil ve Din*. İstanbul: Atatürkçent.
- Eminov, Ali. (2007). “Social Construction of Identities: Pomaks in Bulgaria”, *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe*, 2: 1–25.
- Güler, Ali. (2007). *Sorun olan Yunanlılar ve Rumlar*. Ankara: Türkar.
- Kahraman, Alter. (2020). *Muslim Minorities of Bulgaria and Georgia: A Comparative Study of Pomaks and Ajarians*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, METU, Ankara, Turkey.
- Karagiannis, Evangelos. (2000). “The Pomaks of Bulgaria: A Case of Ethnic Marginality”, *Bulgaria: Social and Cultural Landscapes*, 24: 143-157.
- Karagiannis, Evangelos. (2012). “The Pomaks in Bulgaria and Greece: Comparative Remarks”, *Euxeinos/Center for governance and culture in Europe.–St. Gallen*, 8: 19-24.
- Karpat, Kemal H. (1985). *Ottoman Population 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics*. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Kırışçi, Kemal. (2000). “Disaggregating Turkish Citizenship and Immigration practices”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 36 (3): 1-22.

⁴⁶ Foreign Office (FO) 424/268, Enclosure in No. 55, Edirne, 11 April 1928, 79.

- 50 *From Religious to Ethnic Minorities: The Cultural and Social Integration of Pomaks into Post-Ottoman Turkey*
- Kurhan, Yusuf. (1956). "Eskitaşlı Köyü Monografisi", *Istanbul University Journal of Sociology*, 2 (10-11): 44-59.
- Methodieva, Milena. (2021). *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Myuhtar-May, Fatme. (2014). *Identity, Nationalism, and Cultural Heritage under Siege: Five Narratives of Pomak Heritage—From Forced Renaming to Weddings*. Leiden: Brill.
- Nayır, Yaşar Nabi. (1999a). *Balkanlar ve Türklük I*. İstanbul: Yeni Gün Haber Ajansı.
- Nayır, Yaşar Nabi. (1999b). *Balkanlar ve Türklük II*. İstanbul: Yeni Gün Haber Ajansı.
- Neuburger, Mary C. (2000). "Pomak Borderlands: Muslims on the Edge of Nations", *Nationalities Papers*, 28 (1): 181-198.
- Neuburger, Mary C. (2011). *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Oluç, Mehmet. (1946). *Trakya Ziraat Ekonomisi*. İstanbul: İsmail Akgün Matbaası.
- Ömer Seyfeddin. (1973). *Kızıl Elma Neresi?* İstanbul: Türk Kültür Yayını.
- Öztan, Ramazan Hakkı. (2020). "Settlement Law of 1934: Turkish Nationalism in the Age of Revisionism", *Journal of Migration History*, 6 (1): 82-103.
- Sabis, Ali İhsan. (1943). *Harb Hatıralarım - Volume 1*. İstanbul: İnkilâb Kitabevi.
- Tahir, Nuri Ali. (2016). "1912-1913 Balkan Wars and the Conversion of Pomaks in Bulgaria: Creating More Solid Borders and the Making of Co-Nationals". In: Mehmet Yaşar Ertaş, Haşim Şahin, and Hâcer Kılıçaslan (eds.) *Osmanlı'da Siyaset ve Diplomasi*, İstanbul: Osamer.
- Varlık, M. Bülent. (2010). *Umumi Müfettişler: Konferansı'nda Görüşülen ve Dahiliye Vekâleti'ni İlgilendiren işlere dair Toplantı Zabıtları ile Rapor ve Hulâsası 1936*. Ankara: Dıpnat.
- Yaver, Halil. (1937). *Türkiye ve Balkanlar – Nereye Gidiyorsun Türkiye: Türk Milletine Açık Mektup*. İstanbul: Güttemberg Basımevi.
- Yaver, Halil. (1938). *Bulgarların Balkanları İstila Plânları*. İstanbul: Tecelli Basımevi.
- Zafer, Zeynep. (2014). "Balkan Savaşları ve Pomaklar". In: Mustafa Türkeş (ed.) *The Centenary of the Balkan Wars (1912-1913): Contested Stances 1912-1913*, Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları.
- Zelengora, Georgi. (2017). *Türkiye'deki Pomaklar* (Zeynep Zafer trans.). Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu.

