

Religious Diversity in Bulgarian Schools: Between Intolerance and Acceptance

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IMIR

Education is among the most democratic and all-embracing processes occurring in a society, as it brings together all children and youths regardless of their ethnic, religious or racial background and facilitates their adaptation into the society. At the same time, education is also one of the most conservative systems in Bulgaria, and continues to reproduce the long-lasting national (and nationalistic) ideology.

In this report, we analyse public debates on **the place of religion in education in Bulgaria**. The three main debates are: introduction of obligatory religious education in public schools; Islamic religious education and the alleged spread of radical Islam in the regions populated by Bulgarian Muslims; and presence of religious symbols in schools (especially the dress code of Muslim girls). The first debate deals with the relationship between religion(s) and secularity in Bulgarian education, while the other two debates raise the question of the attitude towards Islam in Bulgaria today.

Although the debates about the religious diversity in Bulgarian schools bring forward the general question about **the position of religious otherness** in the Bulgarian society, the analysis shows that Islam is the most contentious issue. The presence of other traditional religious minorities (Catholics, Protestants, Armenians and Jews) is not perceived as a problem.

The report proposes an answer to the question in what way (if at all) should religion play a role in schools. It summarises the opinions of respondents, interviewed during a fieldwork, in order to establish its potential influence on the **interactions and relations between the majority and the minorities** – whether it would lead to more respect and recognition, or would intensify intolerance.

The three main debates on religious diversity in Bulgarian schools are related to:

- *introduction of obligatory religious education*
- *content and control over Islamic religious education*
- *presence of religious symbols*

Confrontation lines:

- *religious - secular*
- *Christianity - Islam*

Evidence & Analysis (Key Findings)

Religious education – obligatory, optional, or none at all?

The debate about the **introduction of obligatory religious education into public schools** was initiated by the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) in the early 1990s and continues today. The BOC insists that religious education should be based on Orthodox Christianity. The minority children from traditional religious communities (Islam, Judaism, Catholicism, Armenian Apostolic Church) should receive appropriate confessional education in their own faith. The leaders of the Islamic Community in the country (the Chief Mufti office) also support the introduction of obligatory religious classes.

Representatives of the **two main religions** (the Orthodox Christianity and Islam) insist that proper confessional instruction (study of the Bible and study of the Quran) should be obligatory because it is **essential for preservation of identity**. Orthodox religion is thus presented as one of the most important pillars of the Bulgarian identity and statehood. For the representatives of the Islamic faith, religious education is essential for fostering their identity and culture.

"Orthodox religious education has to be introduced, because without it, Bulgaria is like a table with only three legs." - Interview with an Orthodox priest.

"This question is exceptionally important for Muslims. It deals with preservation of identity of Muslims in Bulgaria." - Interview with a Deputy Chief Mufti.

Representatives of smaller denominations suspect that the larger ones are trying to impose their views and fear that the compulsory religious education in schools would inevitably put the **Orthodox Church and Islam in advantage over the smaller religious communities**. In their view, religious education should be organised in churches, mosques and other temples.

The opinion of secular experts is that separate religious education for children belonging to different faiths would cause **tensions and confrontations among the children**. Religious education in a form proposed by the religious institutions has no place in schools – especially not as a compulsory subject. An alternative that many of them propose is a course offering the children a **comparative perspective** and presenting different religions as cultural phenomena. Such a course would take into consideration two main characteristics of Bulgaria: first, that the Bulgarian society is highly secular, and second, the significant religious diversity of the country, which means that it would be practically impossible to provide

Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Chief Mufti office support the obligatory religious education; experts propose comparative study of religions.

The case FOR obligatory religious education: it preserves and strengthens identity.

The case AGAINST obligatory religious education: it can cause division and confrontation, and discriminates against smaller religions and non-believers.

education for all denominations. A **comparative education** on religions would not only increase the children's knowledge about, but also **tolerance towards different religions**.

"Those religions, which exist in Bulgaria, should be studied. The Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Catholicism. People should know what are the similarities and differences." - Interview with a Protestant pastor.

"Children have to learn in comparative aspect about different religions, so that they could understand different identities and be more tolerant." - Interview with a secondary school head-teacher.

Experts believe that any type of religious education or education on religions in schools should be **under the supervision of the state**. Although the relevant religious institutions could have a say in the formulation of the curriculum, they should not be in charge of the subject.

Islamic religious education – fear and concern or prejudice and intolerance?

The debates on religious education are very suitable for testing the levels of non-toleration, toleration and respect/recognition in the Bulgarian society. The question of Islamic religious education is often **overshadowed by apprehensions** that radical Islam might be spread in the Muslim community through religious classes.

On the one hand, the society accepts that the **Muslim community has a right to religious education**, but on the other, there is a **significant distrust**. Most respondents underline the need for strict state control over the form and content of such classes. The media and certain politicians periodically raise doubts and even make direct accusations that radical Islamic teachings are spread under the disguise of Islamic education. Such fears are also strengthened by the European and global tendencies of confrontation with Islam in the post 9/11 world.

"They have their education; there in the mosques they have special classrooms. They teach them to hinder the work of the state, to make provocations." - Interview with an Orthodox priest.

In this light, the attitude towards Muslims has in recent years shifted in the direction of **increasing intolerance**. The seemingly tolerant understanding that the Muslims are entitled to Islamic religious instruction is overshadowed by the entrenched suspicions that they cannot be trusted to manage such education entirely on their own and thus need to be monitored by the state institutions.

The case FOR comparative study of religions: it respects secularity and religious diversity of Bulgaria, and promotes tolerance.

Islam in schools: inalienable right of the Muslim community or a tool for dissemination of radical Islam?

Understanding that Muslims are entitled to Islamic religious education is overshadowed by deep-seated prejudice.

The representatives of the Islamic community and the Chief Mufti office are aware of the public attitudes and suspicions and are taking great care to control the content of the Islamic education they provide. They support the belief that the good **control and supervision are essential** to prevent a possible encroachment of extreme Islamism. Despite their conformist stance, the strong emphasis on control only shows that the rights of the Muslim community, and in particular Islamic religious education, are neither accepted nor recognised by the majority society.

"...it will be controlled by the Ministry of Education. There will be no place for speculations that (...) they are teaching children something non-traditional and different." - Interview with a Muslim believer.

Do religious symbols belong to secular schools?

Another indicator of the level of tolerance in Bulgaria is the issue of **religious symbols in schools** – especially headscarves of the Muslim girls. Most respondents in principle acknowledge and respect the right to be different. Immediately afterwards, however, they add a reservation that some **"suspicious" forms of otherness** cannot be accepted. The examples from various European countries of policies intolerant towards Islam have strongly influenced the Bulgarian debates. Despite the fact that in Bulgaria, cases of Muslim girls and women wearing headscarves in class are rather limited, the media often devote much attention to the topic and initiate discussions, which are often characterised by intolerant tone. The **French model of prohibition** of all religious symbols in schools is most often pointed out as a model Bulgaria should follow.

"Everyone can have beliefs, but they should not be demonstrated openly, especially this with the headscarves I would not accept." - Interview with an NGO activist.

"...burgas, veils (...) We are a Christian country and we should not allow this in any way." - Interview with an Orthodox priest.

The debate about the place of religion in general and Islam in particular in the Bulgarian schools shows that **the Bulgarian society** at the current moment in time is **moving in a direction opposite from acceptance and recognition of otherness**. There is no consensus in the society about which good practices could be followed to change this trend. The stereotypes and the negative attitudes among the majority population remain strong and overcoming them will be a challenging task.

Islamic community is very defensive and supports the view that the content and form of Islamic religious education need to be under state control.

The right to wear and display religious symbols in schools: French example of strict prohibition is seen as the most suitable for Bulgaria.

Key Messages for Policy Makers

- (1) Religious education in schools should not be compulsory. Preferably, it should be conducted in a form of a course offering the children a comparative perspective and presenting different religions as cultural phenomena, as this could increase not only their knowledge about, but also tolerance towards different religions.
- (2) Proper confessional education should be conducted by the religious institutions at the relevant places of worship.
- (3) The separation of children in different classes on religion according to their religious belonging, which would be a result of compulsory religious education in school, would not strengthen tolerance and acceptance among them, but would lead to unnecessary division and potential confrontation.
- (4) In practice, it would be impossible to organise so many different religious classes as to accommodate all religions practiced in Bulgaria. Consequently, such education would inevitably put the two major religions (Orthodox Christianity and Islam) in advantage over the smaller denominations.
- (5) The state should strictly uphold the constitutional principle of equality of all religions and should promote tolerant approach in cases of Muslim girls attending their schools in compliance with the Islamic dress code. Wearing of a headscarf cannot be a reason to deny Muslim girls access to education.

Methodology

The research took place between January and July 2011. It included a review and analysis of political documents and practices, and of media coverage of the studied issues, as well as a fieldwork. During the fieldwork, twelve semi-standardised interviews were made. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 30 minutes. In addition, a discussion group with six participants (experts from different fields) was also organised.

Respondents had a different religious background. Three were Eastern Orthodox, three were Muslims, one was a Protestant, and five did not consider themselves religious. Gender division was the following: 2 women and 10 men. Seven interviews were made in Sofia, and one each in Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Sevlievo, Sarnica and Damyanovo.

Five respondents were representatives of the clergy (two Orthodox priests, two muftis, and one Protestant pastor). Four respondents worked in different education establishments (a secondary school head-teacher; a secondary school history teacher; a history professor at Sofia University; a kindergarten director). One of the respondents was an expert on ethnic and religious issues previously working both in the state administration and in the NGO sector, one was an NGO activist and one was a politician (representative of the Sofia municipal council).

The analysis of the data collected through interviews and discussion group was based on the method of critical discourse analysis. Each interview was analysed in order to establish the specific contents and topics, and to understand the respondents' positions on all studied themes. Special attention was paid to the context and subjectivity of the respondents, messages they conveyed and attitudes they displayed. After it was established how respondents perceive and interpret various topics, the interviews were compared and a matrix of commonalities and differences was set up, making it possible to come up with analytical conclusions.

Further reading

Zhelyazkova, Antonina; Kosseva, Maya; Hajdinjak, Marko. *Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses in Bulgaria: Bulgarian Ethnic Model - Parallel Cohabitation or Multicultural Recognition?*. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Diversity_Discourses_BG.pdf

Kosseva, Maya; Hajdinjak, Marko. *(In)Tolerance of Difference in Bulgarian Schools: Discourses and Practices*. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/In-Tolerance_of_Difference.pdf

Kosseva, Maya; Hajdinjak, Marko. *Living Next Door to "Europe": Bulgarian Education Between Tradition and Modernity, and Between the European and National*. http://www.imir-bg.org/imir/reports/Living_Next_Door.pdf

Project Identity

Acronym:	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title:	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description:	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
Website:	www.accept-pluralism.eu
Duration:	March 2010-May 2013 (39 months)
Funding Scheme:	Small and medium-scale collaborative project
EU contribution:	2,600,230 Euro, Grant agreement no. 243837
Consortium:	19 partners (15 countries)
Coordinator:	European University Institute (Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies)
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