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Religious Education for Equity, Tolerance, Dialogue and European Identity Formation

Diana Petrova Tyurkedzhieva

PhD Candidate

European Studies Department

Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

Bulgaria

Abstract: Despite Bulgaria’s religious diversity most of the Bulgarians associate their religious identity primary with their national, ethnic, and cultural affiliation. Orthodoxy is viewed as a key and yet first component of the national identity by the vast majority of those who identify as Orthodox Christians. After the fall of the totalitarian regime, Bulgaria underwent reforms by enacting new inclusive policies, instituting religious education in public schools, and transforming the country's religious and cultural landscape toward diversity – yet not highly pluralistic in European and global terms. This article examines the religious education in Bulgaria, which is of great importance for secular education, given its relationship with the social environment, religious tolerance, recognition of the rights and freedoms, and respect for the religious identity of every citizen. The study material is an attempt to understand how local religious situation vary from the perspectives of several different research approaches and emphasises on the role the religious education could play for building tolerance, mutual understanding, and a greater European identity.

Keywords: Religion; Religious Education; Tolerance; Religious Identity; European Identity; National Identity; Pluralism.

Introduction

The political direction for Bulgaria has been firmly defined after 1989 when economic and political reforms in the former communist countries began, and the policy reorientation towards a pluralistic democracy and market economy has gained widespread support. In 1995 Bulgaria began the process of EU integration through elite-driven application in 1995. It was then postponed until 1997 due to the requirement for the country to develop transitional policies. In 2000s the country undertook a slew of reforms to prepare for EU membership, including consolidation of democratic systems, establishment of the rule of law, recognition of human rights, commitment to personal freedom of expression, and development of a functioning free-market economy.

Some of the major steps Bulgaria has taken after the fall of the communist regime on its path towards democracy was to adopt its new Constitution in 1991, to ratify both the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in 1992, and the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1999.

Bulgaria joined the European Union during the fifth phase of its enlargement on 1st of January 2007. Years later it took over the Presidency of the Council of the European Union (2018) driven by the motto: “Unity Makes Strength”. During the Presidency the country's priorities were focused on



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regional stability, security, EU integration, the future of Europe and young people, and the digital economy.

Religious landscape in Bulgaria

Bulgaria's traditional religion is Orthodox Christianity. According to the most recent census data from 2021 more than 71% of the population or 4,219,270 people identify as Christians. With 638 708 adherents, the Muslim community – primarily comprised of Bulgarian Turks – is the second-largest religious minority in the country. The number of the Jews is 1,736. The share of the population that belongs to other denominations is 6,451 people, while 1,036,944 people do not belong to any denomination, could not identify or were unwilling to answer. Information for 616,681 persons is missing from the registers used in the census¹. The question about the affiliation to different denominations does not appear in the 2021 national census², but it is available in the census conducted in 2011. The data shows that the number of the people belonging to different Christian/Muslim denominations is as follows: Eastern Orthodox population – 4,374,135 people; Protestants – 64,476 people, Catholics – 48,945 people, Muslims-Sunni – 546,004 people, Muslims-Shia – 27,407 people, Armenians Apostolic – 1,715 people³.

The number of officially registered religious institutions in Bulgaria as of June 2022 is 210, according to the data available at the Directorate of Religious Affairs⁴. Due to the lack of national statistics beyond the official data obtained by 2011 census it is difficult to determine the exact number of the members of the different religious denominations in Bulgaria at present, although we can draw on from the existing data of other studies to partially answer the question of the real religious picture in Bulgaria. For example, according to the European Values Study conducted in 2017, on the question "Which religious denomination do you belong to?" (Q13A) the distribution of Bulgarian citizens who declare belonging to Orthodoxy is 79.5% (902 out of 1560 respondents), Catholics are 1.3% (15 out of 1560 respondents), Muslims 18.3% (207 out of 1560 respondents)⁵. According to the data received by a survey conducted by the Pew Research Centre on religious attitude in Central and Eastern Europe in 2017, a large majority of Bulgarians self-identify as Orthodox Christians (75%), with respondents stating that being Orthodox is an important part of the Bulgarian identity. The lack of pre-1991 surveys also make it difficult to determine the extent to which the population's religious affiliation has grown since that period. Data from the same survey shows that the percentage of the Muslims is higher than that of the Christians in terms of the importance of religion in their lives⁶. The analysis of another representative survey conducted by the Alpha Research Agency reveals that 89.1% of the

¹ Население по вероизповедание, статистически райони и области към 7.09.2021. НСИ, 2022. <https://www.nsi.bg/bg> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

² After the fall of communism, a new way of collecting data related to the religious affiliation of believers was introduced. This way of surveying was deliberately abolished in the previous censuses during the communist regime.

³ See more at: <https://www.nsi.bg/Census/StrReligion.htm> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

⁴ Дирекция по вероизповеданията към Министерски съвет. See more at: <http://veroizpovedania.government.bg/docs> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

⁵ European Value Study. Fifth wave, 2017-2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudybg.wordpress.com/> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

⁶ Pew Research Centre. Religious landscape and Central and Eastern Europe, 2017.





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participants self-identified as Orthodox Christians and 10.9% as "I am not a believer or atheist" (out of 1,033 interviews conducted for the purpose of the survey)⁷.

Religious Education in Bulgaria – Brief Overview

The issue of religious education was treated in a radical way throughout the communist era. During this time the education was "science-based" and interpreted as atheistic and anti-religious. The fall of the communist regime in 1989 gave rise to a process of radical transformation in all spheres of social life. The Bulgarian Orthodox Church (BOC) was confronted with the challenge of its new social role and on how to carry out its own mission in the context of the expanding globalisation and political, social, cultural, and religious plurality in this new setting. The political changes fuelled hopes among some Bulgarians that religious education will be reintroduced in school. During this time the concept of religious education had become subject of intense debate in academic and political circles. Initially, this resulted in a bipolar division in opinions on religious education: on the one hand, there was a radical rejection of the need for religious education in public schools; on the other hand, there was an extreme affirmation on the importance of the religious teaching. The concern was about how the religious content could be integrated in the learning process, whether as part of the curriculum or as an extracurricular activity, without violating the fundamental rights of individuals who do not wish to study it.

Initially the religious education was not introduced due to the school's secular status. The situation steadily improved after 1996 when the religious education was offered in schools for the first time as an elective subject called "Religion" by Minister of Education Order No 06-000-159/28.08.1997. The subject thus has begun to be taught by theologians in different schools across the country since the 1997-1998 academic year⁸. In 2003 new changes to the Public Education Act's Implementing Regulation were made. "In secular schools, religion can be studied in classes organized for compulsory and elective courses", according to a new paragraph (Para.3) introduced in the Article 4 of the Regulation⁹ including a proposal by the Ministry of Education in 2003 for teaching Religion-Christianity and Religion-Islam¹⁰.

The question of religious education later faded into the background, occasionally being brought up for discussion at various committee meetings and in parliament¹¹, but with little impact.

For the first time in 2018 significant changes in the school's syllabuses (I-XII grades) have been made for the subjects "Religion" (Christianity-Orthodoxy), "Religion" (Islam) and "Religion" (non-denominational education). The syllabuses were developed and introduced by the Ministry of

⁷ Мнозинство и малцинства. Нагласи към различните. Доклад – анализ от национално представително проучване, Алфа Рисърч, 2019-2020. <https://alpharesearch.bg/> [accessed on 23.01.2023].

⁸ Denev, I., Groß, E., Eds. International Symposium on Religious Education in Bulgaria: Religious Education within the Context of the Common European Home. Sofia, 2004, pp. 20-22.

⁹ Правилник за прилагане на Закона за народната просвета <https://www.lex.bg/laws/ldoc/-12809727> [accessed on 12.12.2021].

¹⁰ Инструкция № 2 от 23.06.2003 г. за провеждане на обучението по учебен предмет „Религия“ издадена от министъра на образованието и науката.

¹¹ See more at: <http://parlament.obshtestvo.bg/sessions/203> [accessed on: 12.12.2021].





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Education¹² also with the support of the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and of the Grand Mufti's Office of the Muslim denomination in Bulgaria. The new syllabuses are based on the principle of freedom of conscience, which also implies the right of each person to choose the way he or she forms his or her worldview and builds the moral foundations of his or her personality. Thus, opportunities were created for students to learn about their own religion and to acquire knowledge about the history and nature of world religions. The subject "Religion" in all its three forms of teaching aims to build values and virtues as well as to impact on the religious dialogue and mutual respect in a positive way. The subject is of great importance for the secular education, given its relationship with the social environment, religious tolerance, recognition of the rights and freedoms of the individual, equality of religions, and building respect for the religious identity of every citizen¹³.

Despite the positive attitude and stances voiced by both the government and BOC, compulsory religious education has remained only advisable until today. According to the recent data revealed by experts from the Ministry of Education, religious education is taught in 147 schools across the country with only 12,000 students enrolled so far¹⁴ out of a total of 565,000 students nationwide in the 2020/2021 school year¹⁵. This situation directly relates to the unpopularity and widespread disregard for religious education, which has also resulted in high unemployment rates among theological graduates. Regardless of the changes in the Church Statute¹⁶ made by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church by introducing new cultural-educational concepts and strategies, and other reforms following the fall of the communist regime, various sociological surveys confirm the observation that "the religious culture of the Bulgarian people is not yet high"¹⁷.

Church-State Relations

The transition from monarchical to republican governance in 1945 led to the complete separation of the Church from the State. During the communist period the religious life in Bulgaria was regulated by two government bodies – the Committee for the Affairs of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church and Religious Cults at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Committee for Religious Cults and Religions at the Council of Ministers, which were replaced (after 1989) by the Directorate of Religions at the Council of Ministers.

The advance of the Communism put an end to all autonomous religious organizations' activities. The charitable work of religions was seen as a risk factor for promoting foreign interests

¹² Заповед № РД09-1474/24.07.2018 на министъра на образованието и науката. <https://web.mon.bg/bg/98> [accessed on: 21.01.2023].

¹³ See more at: Учебни програми по религия. I-XII клас. Приложение № 1. <https://web.mon.bg/bg/98> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

¹⁴ Interview held with Kosta Kostov, State expert. Ministry of Education and Science. See more at: <https://bnr.bg/horizont/post/101303019> [accessed on 23.01.2023].

¹⁵ Образованието в Република България през учебната 2020/2021 г. Преброяване 2021. НСИ. www.nsi.bg [accessed on 21.01.2023].

¹⁶ Статут на БПЦ. <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/statute> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

¹⁷ Донкова, Ж. Вероизповеданията в Република България пред прага на Европейския съюз, 2006. <https://www.svet.bg/вероизповеданията-в-българия/> [accessed on 12.12.2021].





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and influence, therefore all the assets, expertise and responsibilities of the existing denominations were transferred to the new government, which later shaped the new social and atheistic ideology.

The fall of the socialist regime put the BOC in a difficult situation. Generations of Bulgarians have gone without perceiving it as a living and functioning institution with a public purpose. Deprived from religious literacy¹⁸ the Bulgarian society did not feel the need for religious education until recently. The aggressive atheism of the communist ideology, in Karamelska's words, turned the Church into "a decorative institution with no significant influence on the social behaviour of the citizens, while its functions were reduced to the reproducing of an existential effortless "household" or "folk" Christianity¹⁹". These are, in her view, the main reasons for the destabilization of the faith and for the inadequacy of the ecclesiastical institution towards the new forms of publicity²⁰. On the other hand, the long-standing division between the State and the Church (which is ultimately permissible in the Bulgarian Constitution) has significantly delayed the reintegration of the spiritual dimension into the public life.

During the transition period BOC was heavy politicized, which further caused divides among both believers and non-believers²¹. The new Bulgarian government established a Board of Religious Affairs in 1991. The Board began reforming the religious institutions in the country. In 1992 it declared the election of Bulgarian Patriarch Maxim as illegal since he was appointed in an uncanonical way by the communist government. This caused a division among the bishops, resulting in the formation of an Alternative synod²². The official Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church declared the new Synod schismatic. In 1998 above-jurisdictional *Pan-Orthodox Church Council* was held in Sofia to terminate the canonical precedent. The Board initiated reforms of the country's religious institutions. Meanwhile the registered religions had already exceeded 100²³ as the law stipulated that all religions must be administered by a state committee or directorate²⁴. Many religious groups originating from the same denomination or religion were able to register under the new Religious Denomination Act, however the Alternative Synod and Old-Calendar Zealot parishes

¹⁸ Симеонова, Г. Относно добротворството в минало време и възможното му възкресение днес.

<https://liternet.bg/publish26/gatia-simeonova/sveta-marina.htm> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

¹⁹ Карамелска, Т. Православни ценности и социално участие. В: Фотев, Г. Европейски ценности в днешното българско общество. София, 2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudybg.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/172-196.pdf>, с. 175 [accessed on 21.01.2023]

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Aleksandrov, A. Religious education in Bulgaria: Past and Present. – In: R. Aikonen, A. V. Aleksandrov (Eds.). Proceedings of Orthodox Christian Religious Education Association [OCREA]: Methods of teaching in religious education: Learning by heart, or by experience? Sofia, 2015, pp. 86–96.

²² By the time of the change of political power, and the regaining and redesigning of sacred spaces, an Alternative Orthodox Synod had been registered to replace the canonically legitimate socialist one (so that the local Church would remain without hierarchs and synod), and as a result a Church network of about 200 parishes and monasteries had functioned legally. Similar processes occurred at the time and later in other denominations, but due to archival loss, they have yet to be sufficiently and independently investigated.

²³ Донкова, Ж. Ibid., 2006. <https://dveri.bg/a9y4p> [accessed on 12.06.2021]

²⁴ Беров, Х. Държава и вероизповедания – нормативна уредба на религията и религиозните общности в България. София, 2009.





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remained unregistered²⁵ despite the significant social-cultural impact of the alternative church structures, which were widespread by the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, following the implementation of the Religious Denomination Act the Alternative Synod started to be persecuted, and on the night of July 20-21, 2004 (known as the *Bulgarian Crystal Night*), priests of the Alternative Synod were forcibly evicted from approximately 250 churches and other properties for which the Holy Synod claimed that they were illegally occupied, resulting in a legal case before the *European Court of Human Rights* in 2009, but without significant social consequences.

BOC has also played an active role in preventing the ratification of the *Istanbul Convention*, while calling for an end to local LGBT pride parades in recent years. Furthermore, during the refugee crisis, BOC demonstrated its capacity by calling for a halt to the entry of migrants as a threat to Bulgarian national identity and state sovereignty. Nonetheless, these acts not only did not totally ruin BOC's institutional image as a global confessional unity, but on the contrary, they were largely supported by the society, which defined its function as an important factor in a patriotic perspective.

The positive image of the BOC, which was established as the saviour of the Bulgarian people throughout the five-century Ottoman tyranny, could explain the above phenomena²⁶. Despite numerous challenges, the traditional Bulgarian Orthodox Church continues to enjoy a high level of public credibility²⁷. The humility and patience demonstrated in its commitment to all institutions of public benefit, without at the same time compromising the nature of its core mission, orientation towards the faithful, and in not accepting sources of funding incompatible with Orthodoxy, is the essential underlying factor here.

Religious education in Bulgaria – education to equity and identity formation

During the Soviet period the religious education was excluded from the school curriculum and the religion remained a private family matter. Nevertheless, individuals of all ethnicities and religious backgrounds coexisted peacefully in Bulgaria, remaining traditionally resistant to religious propaganda. This is why religious education in Bulgaria is frequently viewed as identity formation rather than confessional practice, while the knowledge of the statistically dominating *Eastern Orthodox Christian* faith is generally perceived by local populace as part of a nationalist and ethnic patriotic upbringing, comparable to what youngsters were exposed to during previous times.

Nevertheless, the transition processes defined the religious education as one of the most important aspects of the restoration of the religious rights towards the preparation of the state for the EU integration. The rise of multiculturalism not only provided the majority with greater possibilities to exercise religious freedom, but it also empowered previously marginalized culturally ethnic religious minorities. Nonetheless, as it has been already mentioned in this article, religious education is not fully integrated in the civic education, even though Bulgaria has been a member of the EU since

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Kalkandjieva, Daniela. Religion and Forced Displacement in Bulgaria, 2020. <https://fpc.org.uk/religion-and-forced-displacement-in-bulgaria/> [accessed on 23.10.2021].

²⁷ The Bulgarian Orthodox Church is the institution with the highest credentials rating among the population, <https://www.diakonia.bg/българската-православна-църква-е-инс/> [accessed on 23 August 2019]





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2007. One of the reasons could be that it is often perceived only as an important tool for building religious identity, balancing identities, or avoiding competing/conflicting identities. Furthermore, some researchers view the Orthodox Church primarily as a social tool for populist purposes, pursuing individual social identity aspirations, and what may be seen on the surface as communal expression are religious ceremonies rather than genuine social influence and faith-based mission²⁸. Regrettably, critical insiders' opinions aren't always trusted to build positive image of the Church.

The call for the establishment of a democratic social order and deideologisation of education, as well as to slightly overcome the memories of the repressive cultural policy of the communist regime, resulted in the exclusion of some religious traditions as a national cultural heritage. As a result of this and other circumstances, new approaches to religious education have been developed.

Nowadays, besides the religious education that is taught in public schools, many Church parishes and monasteries organize activities for children and sometimes for adults. There are also two theological seminaries in the cities of Sofia and Plovdiv. Some public schools include in their curriculum extensive courses in spiritual and material ecclesial heritage. Various kindergartens provide a variety of day-care activities for children whose parents are interested in religious education, while some parishes organize kindergartens and day-care activities, and develop social projects to integrate children with special needs and from minority backgrounds. Muslim residential schools and an Islamic Institute have been also established.

Some faith communities and public Christian organizations have taken on the responsibility to educate and nurture youth in traditional values and identity, also by introducing how other denominations are generally understood and practiced in Bulgaria in a spirit of friendship and tolerance. Lifelong learning and international mobilities also contribute to the social-cultural transformation as well as to the recognition and respect of the rights of other religious groups. Minor religious communities also demonstrate a strong desire for state-subsidised religious education in the confessional sense.

There is no doubt that the contemporary education may be used as an effective tool to combat prejudice, hate speech, alienation, exclusion, and marginalization but also to enforce social unity and cohesion. We believe that this goal is completely applicable to the new local pedagogical and andragogical approaches of pedagogy, as well as for the development of children's spirituality by enforcing social competences. The BOC, as well as active members of other religious communities, could play an important role in assisting the introduction of innovative religious education and teaching practices in the Bulgarian universities, schools, kindergartens, community centres, churches, monasteries, yet not fully applied at national level. Of course, we must acknowledge the delay in respect to the establishment of national policies concerning religious education and the so called "Church quietness"²⁹.

Educational policymaking cannot imply acculturation, disregard for the world's positive achievements, or disproportionate Church's social commitment. Moreover, it is possible to adapt the

²⁸ Карамелска, Православни ценности и социално участие. В: Фотев, Г. Европейски ценности в днешното българско общество. София, 2018, р. 195. <https://europeanvaluesstudybg.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/172-196.pdf> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 175–177.





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experience of Romania and Greece, as Balkan Orthodox EU Member States, whose religious education can be viewed as quite effective in terms of inclusive policies, social peace and cultural enrichment of European identity³⁰. We also assume that we cannot change the pattern of our lives or the quality of our policies until we notice and value the others around us as collaborators and partners. As a result, there is no better educational goal than the one set by UNESCO – the states should provide minimum standards of education and ensure the religious and moral training of their children in accordance with their own beliefs³¹. In this regard, the teaching of the Eastern Orthodox Christian Church offers a variety of options. Bulgarian Synodal textbooks³², which were recently released (with state funding) are also favoured and valuable sources that meet high standards and are currently being used as alternative teaching materials by some other religious communities as well.

We often overlook how little we know and comprehend each other's cultures and heritages when it comes to the religious education in churches and schools. Experts' efforts to mitigate tensions over other cultures and to encourage European citizens to see rich diversity of identities as one of the most important characteristics of unity, which is primarily cultural, could help people forget stereotypes and ideas of dominance, boundaries, ghettoization, polarization, and so on. In such a complex glocal context, the Bulgarian practice is to consider the role of the Church in the religious education, to adjust its methods to various situations and cases of diversity, and to balance the recreation of its traditions (lifestyles, rites, customs, rituals, festivities, charities, and liturgical practices) as a living heritage, based on the societal demands.

Nevertheless, nowadays it seems that our social environment is gradually changing in a positive direction, and that a new local tolerance culture is emerging. This has been already demonstrated not only by statistics, but also by the real-life experiences of believers and ordinary people who have become less hostile to migrants, more neutral to the entire LGBT spectrum of issues, or truly compassionate to those in need, despite the Church's inability to adapt to their needs.

Religious identity in the context of European identity

The most recent European Values Study (EVS) in Bulgaria (2017-2018) on the religious affiliation shows a significant upward trend in the orientation towards religion. 22.1% of Orthodox respondents answered that religion is very important in their personal life, 45.4% said it is quite important. 7.8% of Orthodox respondents answered that religion is not important in their lives. Of the Muslim respondents, 39.5% said religion is very important, 44.4% said it is somewhat important, and only 2.9% said religion is not important³³. Among Catholics, religion is important for 60% of the responders, 26.7% say it is somewhat important, and 6.7% say religion is not important in their

³⁰ Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/25454> [accessed on 21.10.2021].

³¹ See more at: <https://www.coe.int/bg/web/compass/education> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

³² <https://bg-patriarshia.bg/> [accessed on 21.01.2023].

³³ European Value Study. Fifth wave, 2017-2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudybg.wordpress.com/> [accessed on 30.08.2021].





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personal lives. 60% (5 of 1,560) of Protestants consider religion as very important and 40% consider it somewhat important³⁴.

Only 2.4% (37 of 1,560 respondents) attend religious services more than once a week (Q15), 9.6% (150 of 1,560) once a month, and 7.2% (113 of 1,560) of respondents once a year. The answers to the question "Regardless of whether or not you attend religious services, would you describe yourself as a religious person?" are encouraging – 61.54% of respondents (960 out of 1560) self-identified as religious, and 3% described themselves as convinced atheists³⁵ (convinced atheists are 4 % according to the data released by the fourth wave of the study from 2008 and 5.6% according to the same data from the third wave of the study in 1999³⁶). This indicates a positive trend in the attitudes and consciousness of Bulgarians towards abandoning the atheism unprecedentedly imposed during the communist regime and deepening religious affiliation regardless of religious denomination.

Another intriguing conclusion of some Bulgarian analysts is the different way individual identities are being perceived. Ganeva assumes that social identities (national, ethnical, and religious) are not equally important for Bulgaria's majority population, minorities, and emigrants of various national origins³⁷. Bulgarians' religious affiliation is normally placed after their national and ethnic identities. For minority groups, ethnic identity is frequently prioritized over national identity, whereas the majority views national identity as the most important³⁸. Kabakchieva assumes that Bulgarians are unified community with a strong sense of national identity³⁹, regardless of whether their identity is ethnic or civic. She also states that the Muslim community identification is more political, while Orthodox Christian community identification is more ethnic, and that "this difference is already a problem by itself, because it shows that generally shared national identification is differently understood by the two largest denominations in Bulgaria"⁴⁰.

However, due to the absence of an ethnical indicator and a representative sample, it is difficult to say to what extent people understand the question of their Bulgarian origin as an ethnical, national, or a civic concept, as well as how Bulgarians understand the concept of religion after the period of communism, when atheism was widely proclaimed.

Denominations in Western Europe have the potential to play an important role in the formation of national and European identity. Kabakchieva and other European researchers assume that European identity is based on Christian faith as a primary cultural code, as well as on the shared cultural values, which leads to the formation of a common mindset. On the other hand, the ongoing

³⁴ Ibidem. (See also at: Фотев, Г. Европейските ценности. Новата констелация. София, 2019 г).

³⁵ European Value Study. Fifth wave, 2017-2018. <https://europeanvaluesstudybg.wordpress.com/> [accessed on 30.08.2021].

³⁶ Карамелска, Т. Ibid., p. 178.

³⁷ Ганева, З. Социални идентичности и психично благополучие. София, 2010 г. <http://www.elbook.eu/images/book10.pdf> [accessed on 30.08.2021].

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Кабакчиева, П. Ibid., pp. 257–278.

<https://europeanvaluesstudybg.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/257-278.pdf> [accessed on 30.07.2021).

⁴⁰ Ibid.





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efforts of the European Union leaders to institutionalise the concept of European citizenship, as well as the fact that all EU Member States have the same rights regardless of where they live, reinforces the idea of the European Union as a political community that minimises national identity⁴¹.

The debate over European cultural identity also reflects on the discussion over the rights of the immigrants and tolerance for foreigners. Kabakchieva assumes that European cultural identity, i.e., identity based on shared roots and history, is far more restricted and intolerant to foreigners⁴². Although EU institutions play an important role in the construction of European identity, guaranteeing the protection of human rights and liberties as one of the main principles of European citizenship, this does not mean that these principles apply equally to migrants and foreigners⁴³.

For Bulgarians, too, some researchers argue that they have created a myth about their tolerance that they themselves believe in, but ethnocentrism, racism, sexism, and political intolerance still dominate their attitudes, as well as the everyday political and media discourse in the country, especially when it comes to the values of Western cultures and societies⁴⁴. Nevertheless, the tolerance towards other religions, ethnicities or migrants has increased over the years, although discrimination and segregation of Roma people remains high. The results of a quantitative study conducted by Alpha Research (2019-2020) in Bulgaria show high levels of tolerance towards different religious and ethnic communities, except for the Roma – hatred towards them is 21.6% in a total of 1033 effective interviews conducted. Hatred towards other groups is significantly lower⁴⁵. Furthermore, the Bulgarian identity's integration into the EU has created fundamental problems about believers' social involvement and resistance to the establishment of new inclusive policies. One of the consequences from such resistance could be that Roma minorities in Bulgaria have not yet attained significant social status as subcultures, including rights to specific expression of their religions and lifestyles outside the traditional neighborhood⁴⁶, and that patriotic people's psychology⁴⁷ is seriously challenged after three decades of social transformation.

The conclusion we can draw as a result of this analysis is that the majority of the Bulgarians are not very interested in religion. The affiliation of the Bulgarians is firmly linked to their cultural or political belonging, while the religion itself is perceived more as civic or people's religion in terms of spiritual expression and lifestyle. The religions have recently begun to be seen by various social circles as a form of national identity, based both on the historical and religious heritage, and on the recreated traditional festivities, life practices and ceremonies. Nevertheless, personal recognition of

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 260-261.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 257-261.

⁴³ Ibid., pp.257–261.

⁴⁴ Томова, И. 2009. Различните – между стигмата и признаването. Във: Фотев, Г. Европейските ценности в днешното българско общество. София, 2009, pp. 119 –153.

⁴⁵ Мнозинство и малцинства. Нагласи към различните. Доклад – анализ от национално представително проучване, 2019-2020. <https://alpharesearch.bg/> [посетен на 23.01.2023].

⁴⁶ See also: Фотев, Г. Съседството на религиозните общности в България. София, 2000 г.

⁴⁷ See also: Петкова, Д. Религиозни идентичности в постмодерния свят. Интеркултурни и комуникационни аспекти. София, 2020.





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Orthodox traditions and affiliation to the Orthodox Christian identity has increased in recent years, despite the significant number of people declaring their belonging to other denominations with abstract identities, without being religious⁴⁸, i.e., without believing or unregular church-goers – processes that we could also observe in other Orthodox or international contexts too.

By alternating between the post-socialist perspective on the soviet-influenced Church heritage of atheist communist regimes in some countries in South-Eastern Europe and the acknowledgement of the positive aspects of the cultural tradition and its adequate transmission, the Bulgarians are expected to develop a new religious identity within the context of a widely recognized European identity that will not be further rejected.

Conclusion

Pluralism is a universal value, not just a reaction towards religions as usually perceived by the believers due to potential risk of conversion, or simply because it confuses people about different convictions and worldviews.

Without a doubt, today's religious education may be used to combat discrimination, hate speech, alienation, exclusion, and marginalization, as well as to reinforce social integration and cohesion. Both BOC, which has a long history of public celebrity, and active members of other religious communities in Bulgaria could play a crucial role in the creation of inclusive policies, fostering tolerance and respect for the rights of minorities and other marginalized groups. In this regard, the teaching of religion in public schools offers a variety of options and the religious education could be used in a variety of settings. The religious education is of great importance for secular education, given its relationship with the social environment, religious tolerance, recognition of the rights and freedoms of the individual, equality of religions, and building respect for the religious identity of every citizen⁴⁹.

Religious education in Bulgaria could adapt its teaching methods to different situations and cases of diversity, balancing the recreated traditions as a living heritage based on the actual needs of the community and the society. By fostering a culture of human rights and minority protection, it can become a powerful tool to balance inherited traditional nationalism and patriotism.

With regards to the European identification, the denominations could play an important role in the construction of both national and European identity in Europe. Bulgarians are also expected to develop a new identity within the context of a widely recognized European identity that could not be rejected. At the same time, tensions over other cultures must be overcome to help EU citizens to consider rich diversity of identities as one of the main characteristics of unity, which is predominantly cultural. This will help abandoning the stereotypes and ideas of domination, boundaries, ghettoization, polarisations, etc.

The European Union may turn into a unifying factor through the integration of the majority of the Balkan Eastern Orthodox population and could be also enriched by potential membership of states such as Serbia and the Republic of Northern Macedonia. While Croatia joined in 2013, the

⁴⁸ Except for Protestant denominations.

⁴⁹ See more at: Учебни програми по религия. I-XII клас. Приложение № 1. <https://web.mon.bg/bg/98> [accessed on 21.01.2023].





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potential presence of Albania, Kosovo, and Turkey in the future will likely Europeanize Islam and add to the diversity even more than immigrant cohabitation.

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