

A Critical Review of the Bulgarian Ethnical Model

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Abstract. *The term "Bulgarian ethnic model" has often been used in recent years. It describes the existence of tolerance towards ethnic minorities in the country and the successful maintaining of religious and ethnical peace. This paper aims to analyze the parameters of this model. It is true that the Bulgarian ethnic model exist, but it is also true that it has many flaws and it is necessary much more to be done for the successful integration of ethnic minorities in the country.*

Key words: *The Bulgarian ethnic model, ethnic minorities*

The term "Bulgarian ethnic model" has often been used in recent years. It describes the existence of tolerance towards ethnic minorities in the country and the successful maintaining of religious and ethnical peace. This paper aims to analyze the parameters of this model. The basis of the analysis are the results of the newest research of social distance and stereotypes for ethnical minorities in Bulgaria accomplished by a research team of Open Society Institute – Sofia (May-June 2008). The research is based on a regionally stratified nationally representative sample, which covered 1,144 people over 18 years, distributed in 232 nests. As research methods are used the adapted "Bogardus scale" and the modified version of "Katz and Braly's test" (Пампоров, с. 25-26).

The correct interpretation of the results of the research required defining of the main defects of theoretical approaches, revealing the essence of personality dispositions, attitudes and stereotypes, and the methods used to measure them (Добрев, с. 180-188). The first strong argument here is that the different social situations determined differences in behavior, not the existence of social stereotypes (Mischel, 1968). This means that a person with a negative prejudice against the Gypsies is possible to demonstrate cooperative, altruistic and receptive behavior towards them under the influence of the

social situation and despite the stereotypes. The second criticism is related to the fact that stereotypes are nothing more than labels for different types of behavior that we think coincides with them. In other words, the prejudices are our fantasy ideas, but are not sustainable features of behavior. The third argument is related with the assumption that the behavior affects a human's personality rather than some existing stereotypes (Kenrick, Stringfield, 1980). The essence of this argument is that existing prejudices can predict the behavior (with high probability) only of these people in whom these attitudes have a leading position in motivation. Out of two people that both dislike the Turkish ethnic minority, discriminatory behavior is more likely to be observed only in the one in whom this stereotype is leading for choice of behavior. In addition to these general deficiencies in the methodology of dispositional approach toward the cited research of the Open Society Institute may be directed two more significant criticisms. In the first place, the authors of the research are based on the assumption that the existence of negative stereotypes is something unnatural and these stereotypes must be eliminated. This assumption is wrong because the existence of prejudices, either positive or negative, is part of the normal existence and functioning of the human person. The attempts of the society to form among its members a fixed number of "acceptable attitudes" leads to social engineering and totalitarianism, which is at least unacceptable. The existence of a negative prejudice by itself is not inferiority or a disadvantage: people are arranged so as to see the bad beyond themselves (Айви, с. 15). In the second place, the stereotypes have a ternary structure, including cognitive, affective and behavioral component (ДЖОНЕВ, 1996, с. 213). The methods used in the research of Open Society Institute measured only cognitive and affective components. It follows that the existence of negative stereotypes toward ethnic minorities does not mean that they would automatically provoke real discriminatory behavior or practices.

According to the authors of the research, the results suggest that Bulgarian society supports significant racial and religious prejudices against ethnic minorities in the country. Several clusters (positive answers in %) can be tagged regarding the attitudes to a marriage with representatives of other ethnic groups living in Bulgaria (the nearest of social distances). The smallest social distance (the highest level of liking) is observed among the

citizens of the European Union (42.7%), English (34.4%) and immigrants from some Orthodox Slavic countries: Russians (36.9%), Macedonians (26.0%), Serbs (25.7%) and Bulgarians from Bessarabia (28.7%). A second cluster forming the so-called traditional minorities in the country - Armenians (24.2%), Greece (24.1%), Bulgarian Muslims (22.6 %), Turks (21.7%), Romanians (21,3 %) and Jews (20.0 %). This group includes Ukrainians (21.7%) as well. At the bottom of the social prestige with very similar results are new immigrant minorities - people of African origin from the USA, European Union, Latin America and Africa (10.3% -11.1%); Kurds (10.7%); Arabs (11.4%); Albanians (11.5%) and Vietnamese (11.5%). The Japanese (16.7 %), the Chinese (12.5%) and the Gypsies (16.7%) are in an intermediate cluster between traditional and new ethnic minorities. With few exceptions, these levels remain similar in the two other social distances – labor and education (Пампоров, с. 28-44). When from the nationally representative sample are taken into account only the answers of those, who identified themselves as Bulgarians, we can find several trends that are different from the previous ranking. The Gypsies and the Chinese fall in the group of the most disliked, when they need to be accepted as guests, neighbors or citizens of the same town. On the same indicators Bulgarian Muslims rise in the prestigious group of the most liked minorities. The Japanese rise up and receive liking from the rank of traditional minorities in the country, along with Romanians and Turks, which demonstrate stable levels of such acceptance.

Critical reading of the previous data allows several comments: First, the question, measuring the closest social distance, "Would you marry...?" must be reformulated, because it does not measure directly and only ethnic stereotypes. For example, it is possible for respondents who have already married or are in retirement age to respond negatively (I would not marry ...) not because of the existence of a negative stereotype towards the minority, but because of their reluctance to remarry again. In the same way, the youngest respondents (aged 18-30) often prefer to live together or to have a relationship without marriage, and their reluctance to marry may reflect this trend, rather than an ethnic prejudice. Secondly, I can not agree with the conclusion of the authors from the Open Society Institute that the Bulgarians have deep religious prejudices. A proof of

this is the fact that Bulgarian Muslims are among the most popular minorities. Thirdly, I must dispute the assertion that the racial and ethnic prejudices of the Bulgarians are as significant and deep as they are presented: the results regarding the social distance "living together in Bulgaria" show that different ethnic minority groups receive high acceptance - the difference between the first and the last in this ranking is only 10-15%.

According to the results of the cited research, the gender and the age do not have a statistically significant influence on the maintenance of social distances. However, a similar trend was observed for all ethnic minorities: people aged 31-45 are the most tolerant, people aged 46-60 have attitudes similar to the national average, while the youngest 18 - 30 years old and the oldest over 60 support the greatest social distance towards the ethnic minorities. As the most tolerant towards the ethnic minorities is emerging South Central Region of Bulgaria (Pazardjik, Plovdiv, Smolyan, Haskovo and Kardzhali). The largest social distances against minorities are measured in the North Central (Veliko Tarnovo, Gabrovo, Ruse, Targovishte, and Razgrad) and Northeastern region (Silistra, Dobrich, Varna, and Shumen). The type of the town plays a crucial role in the more intimate distances (such as the agreement for marriage) and has almost no influence on more distant categories (such as the agreement minorities to live in Bulgaria). Social distance towards the ethnic minorities in the capital and major cities are smaller than in villages and small towns. The level of education of the respondents is in inverse proportion with the social distance related to the agreement for marriage: the higher educational level is related to fewer prejudices and vice versa. This trend remains with the other spatial categories - visits in the home, neighborhood, etc., as persons with university education showed a significant higher propensity to accept ethnic others in their social world (Пампоров, с. 44-46).

The examination of the contents of stereotypes of ethnic minorities allows the identification of four types of stereotypes: personal characteristics, lifestyle, physical characteristics, and cultural patterns, including associations of historical facts (Пампоров, с. 90). I will here present and comment the results only of a few ethnic groups.

The leading stereotypes about the Bulgarians are: "industrious" (30.8%), "hospitable" (14.2%) and "good-natured" (12.5%). There is a contradiction in

autostereotype, as far apart "industrious" the Bulgarians describe themselves as "lazy" (8.1%). According to Pamporov, other negative attitudes about the Bulgarians are "envious" (10.8%) and "poor" (8.3%). The physical characteristics are summarized in the stereotype "beautiful" (5%) (Пампоров, с. 92).

Probably because one of the leading stereotypes toward Bulgarian Muslims is "brothers Bulgarians" (7.5%), the majority of attitudes to them coincide with those of the Bulgarians: "industrious" (45.1%), "good-natured" (10.9%) and "poor" (4.1%). There is an interesting accumulation of positive interrelated personal characteristics - "modest" (7.9%), "fair" (5.3%), "submissive" (4.5%), "reticent" (4.9%). In contrast to the Bulgarians in stereotypes for the Bulgarian Muslims appear signs of their religious difference: they are perceived as "religious" (7.9%) and are described with the characteristics of their clothing – "yashmak / trousers" (4.9%) (Пампоров, с. 97).

There are lots of similarities in the structure of the generalized image of the Chinese with that of the Vietnamese. The Chinese are "yellow" (14.5%), with "pulled eyes" (5.2%) similar to the Vietnamese, but the "short" characteristic of the Vietnamese has been replaced with "little" for the Chinese (7.4%). According to Pamporov, the presence of a similar trend toward the Japanese is evidence for the existence of a racial stereotype, which binds Asians with definitions "yellow" and "short / little". Like the Vietnamese, the Chinese are considered as "industrious" (28.4%), "traders" (15.5%) and "poor" (2.6%). In the realm of cultural specifics the Chinese are presented with their meals, but in contrast from "dogs", attributed to the Vietnamese food, here are observed definitions "rice" (5.8%) and "Chinese restaurants" (3.9%) (Пампоров, с. 102).

Leading stereotypes about people of African origin are: "black" (48%), "poor" (25.8%), "strong" (10.9%) and "curly" (4.3%), supplemented with the negative "underdeveloped" (5%), "sick" (7.2%) and "uneducated" (5.4%). According to the authors from the Open Society Institute, the combination between "black", "strong" and "curly" shows the existence of racial prejudice in the same way as combination between "yellow" and "short / little". About the people of African origin from the USA and European Union appears the stereotype "artists" and disappears the stereotype "slaves", attributed to the Africans from Latin America and Africa (Пампоров, с. 105 - 107).

Notable stereotypes for the Romanians are "neighbors" (25.9%), "Gypsy" (14.3%) and "thievish" (13.9%). Comparing these data with the results of the Greeks, Macedonians, Serbs and Turks, enables the remark that measurement uncertainties might have occurred. It is possible that respondents have declared their opinion on the citizens of our neighboring countries rather than on the ethnic minority from these countries who live in Bulgaria. Interesting additions to the previous prejudices about the Romanians are the definitions "like us" (5.4%), "cheaters" (6.6%) and "jiggery-pokery" (3.5%) (Пампоров, с. 109).

The stereotypes toward the Turks are concentrated around their different religious backgrounds: "faith" (24.8%), "Ottoman rule" (15.1%), "yashmak" (8.7%), "fanatics" (10.1%); but also more positive: "industrious" (14.4%) and "painstaking" (4%). As a whole, in the stereotype of the Turks recombinate various stereotypes typical for other Muslim groups in the research are observed (Albanians, Arabs), but the generalized image is not similar to any of the generalized images of the other groups (Пампоров, с. 112).

Obviously, the stereotype "thievish" (46.3%) is leading for the Gypsy ethnic group in Bulgaria. The other two main stereotypes are "lazy" (23.4%) and "dirty" (15.4%). The Gypsies are a minority associated with the largest number of negative prejudices: "lying" (11.2%), "uneducated/stupid" (8.6%), "poor/hungry" (7.7%), "revelers" (6.5%), "cheeky" (3.7%) and "crafty" (3.0%). The only positive in these data is the fact that many of these attitudes are weak and uncorrelated and can relatively easily be destroyed with an adequate politics (Пампоров, с. 110).

A disturbing conclusion that the research authors made is that the Bulgarians support strong and clear racial stereotypes (Пампоров, с. 120). In my opinion, this conclusion is incorrect and unfounded. To say that the Bulgarians support strong racial stereotypes, we must state in comparison with whom these stereotypes are strong or weak. In cited research does not present comparative data about the prejudices of citizens of the European Union or the United States. The existence of large social distances toward people of African origin and the Japanese can be explained by factors other than racism: the absence of a real contact or historical tradition in the interaction with these cultural communities; the presence of too few of their representatives in our country; the negative

image of them created by the media, etc. The statement that the perception of the Japanese, Chinese and Vietnamese as "yellow" and "short/little" (Пампоров, с. 102) and the people of African origins as "black", "strong" and "curly" (Пампоров, с. 107) is a proof for negative racial stereotype, is incorrect. The majority of the Asians are actually short (for European standards) and the majority of the Africans are actually curly and with dark skin, so it is normal exactly these characteristics to be fixed in our cognitive scheme. Even stranger and more absurd would be the statement that the Africans are blond and white skinned. In other words, the use of existing distinctive physical characteristics as part of the description of a group of people still does not make this description racial: the context and the sense the assessment are important. The used in the research method for measurement (associative question) does not allow a disclosure of this context. The other thing that the researchers from the Open Society Institute forget is that along with the negative, according to them, attributes, the Chinese are described also as "industrious", "traders", "poor"; the people of African origins also as "poor", "diligent" and "athletes"; and against the Japanese there is no one negative stereotype. These definitions indicate the existence of empathy, compassion and acceptance by the Bulgarians rather than the existence of racial prejudice.

According to Pamporov, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 global public opinion seemed to start equating between Islam and terrorism. The Myth of Islamic terrorism is directly reflected in the stereotypes of the Bulgarians toward ethnic minorities. All three new ethnic communities in Bulgaria, which come from regions with predominantly Muslim population: Albanians, Arabs and Kurds - are classified as "terrorists", "fanatics", "militant" and "aggressive". According to the authors of the research, this is a great example of religious stereotyping (Пампоров, с. 120). Here I only partly agree with the above formulated conclusion. It is a fact that in the global society the image of terrorist-Muslim is spreading and this "threat" has justified a military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. But it is also a fact that in contrast to the majority of the European and American citizens, the Bulgarians have shown remarkable rationality and not fall prey to the myth of Islamic terrorism. Evidence for this is that the

Bulgarians does not place the brand “terrorists” on the two large Muslim communities in the country - the Turks and the Bulgarian Muslims.

Summarizing the data from the research, Pamporov notes: “The study of social distance and ethnic stereotypes aimed to check for the existence of tolerance towards ethnic minorities in the country or to prove that this is a myth, called with the loud name “Bulgarian ethnic model”. The data shows that in Bulgaria deeply rooted racial and religious stereotypes exist, which are the reason for the maintenance of significant spatial, labour and educational distances toward the majority of ethnic minorities and potential immigrant communities.” (Пампоров, с. 118). I must call into question that generalized conclusion. In addition to the previously formulated arguments against this thesis, I must state a few more critical remarks. The significant defect of the research of the Open Society Institute is the interpretation of the respondents’ answers to the associative question measuring the content of ethnic stereotypes. The positive or the negative sense of the answers, given by respondents, is defined not by the respondents, but by the authors of the research. For example, does the definition „crafty”, used for 12 out of 24 ethnic groups, describe the negative or positive stereotype? Why definitions like “poor” (for the Africans, the Chinese, the Bulgarians, etc.), "drunk, vodka" (for the Russians), "nationalists" (for the Macedonians) and "usurers" (for the Jews) are accepted by the researchers of Open Society Institute for negative stereotypes? The random referring to positive or negative sense of the answers means that the researchers have measured not the attitudes of the Bulgarians, but their own. There is a tendency for manipulative presentation of the research results. The text describes only negative stereotypes toward many ethnic minorities, while positive attitudes are skipped to be mentioned and discussed. So the Romanians are described as "Gypsy" (14.3%), "thievish" (13.9%) and “cheaters” (6.6%), but the authors of the research did not mention that the Bulgarians also perceive them as “industrious” (6.6%), “good” (5.8%) and “farmers” (3.9%). They convince us that the Turks are perceived as “faith”, “Ottoman rule”, “fanatics” and “yashmak”, but they skipped the positive descriptions such as “traders”, “neighbours”, “good” and “progressive”. The situation is analogous with the already commented Chinese,

Vietnamese, Japanese and Africans. An interesting fact that has escaped from the researchers' interpretations is that the most tolerant towards the ethnic minorities is the South Central Region of Bulgaria (Pazardjik, Plovdiv, Smolyan, Haskovo and Kardzhali). This is the region with the highest concentration of compact Gypsy and Turkish ethnic communities. This proves that the Bulgarians living in areas where they really coexist with compact and large communities of Turks and Gypsies are more tolerant toward minorities than those living in areas where such coexistence is missing or minimized. Last but not least, a proof that the Bulgarian ethnic model of tolerance towards the ethnic minorities is not a myth, but an existing and well functioning reality is the fact that, unlike neighboring countries, in our country real and deep conflicts on religious or ethnic grounds have not been observed in the last 20 years.

Despite my critical remarks, the cited research is the best one planned and implemented in our country so far. It is true that the Bulgarian ethnic model exists, but it is also true that it has many flaws and it is necessary much more to be done for the successful integration of ethnic minorities in the country.

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