

INTERVIEW WITH MR. DAMJAN ISKRENOV* AND MR. SHIKIR BUJUKOV* FROM THE VILLAGE OF KOCHAN – POMAKS FROM CHECH, WESTERN RODOP MOUNTAINS (PIRIN PART OF MACEDONIA), R. OF BULGARIA

(Interviewed by Prof. Aneta Svetieva on March 20th 2004 in Skopje, Republic of Macedonia)¹

Abstract: Interview with representatives of the Pomaks from the Republic of Bulgaria, from the region of Chech on important issues related to ethnic identity, relation of the state and its policy towards identity, features of contemporary culture of Pomaks in Bulgaria and different thesis on the interpretation of their ethnic origin and religious issues.

Key words: Pomaks, Pomaks from Chech, Rodops, Republic of Bulgaria, identity, ethnic identity, religious background

A.S. I would like to publish an interview with you in our e – magazine. If you don't mind, please present yourself and tell me the reason for your visit to Skopje?

D.I. Damjan Iskrenov, Pirin Macedonia. In fact we are representatives from the Association of Pomaks in the R. of Bulgaria² invited here for ...holidays. I was born in '61. I run personal business, together with my family. Married, two children. My daughter studies here in Skopje. The other child is in tenth grade.

A.S. The Bulgarian literature that we know of usually defends the thesis that Pomaks are Islamized Bulgarians. I mean, there are different theses about Pomaks. Even a Greek one that claims that Pomaks in Greece are descendants of antic Greeks, the one about their Turkish origin, this and that... How do you feel there? Which culture you feel closer to?

D.I. In Bulgaria there are approximately 350 thousand Pomaks and they are all subjected to assimilatory policy by the Bulgarian Government, Turkish Government...

A.S. I see. It is the same here.

*Shikir Bujukov, village of Kochan, Chech region, Western Rodop mountains, Blagoevgrad Bulgaria, Muslim Pomak from the Chech area

¹ The original audio file is kept in the Archive of the Ethnological Department – Institute of Geography, Skopje.

² The original name is: “Sdruzenie na Pomacite za kultura i evrointegracija v Blgarija“

D.I. That's how it is with us. That is why the goal of our organization is to make unification of Pomaks, not only in Bulgaria but in Greece, Macedonia, and Albania too. We are one nationality as well, the Traco - Macedonian tribes. Truly our people the Pomaks ...of Alexander the Great. He ruled then....

A.S. Are you interested in history?

D.I. Yes, I am.

A.S. I am much more interested in contemporary culture. For example in your family relations, the language that you use at home, dialect, speech and is it different from literary language that you learn in schools? Does your folklore differ in terms of songs and dances? Is there a difference compared to others and if there is one do you feel it?

D.I. Each population has its own dialect. We have one too, like everybody. The language simply differed from the official one, but still we have studied Bulgarian and its literature for so long. That is happening in Greece as well. So the things change in time.

A.S. Some changes must take place; it can't be without it. But how do you feel? For example in relation to the folklore, to the various stories that you have heard at home from your elders, riddles etc?

D.I. Regarding the folklore I give the word to Shikir Bujukov, our ex-Parliament representative who is familiar with that issue.

A.S. Please, present yourself.

S.B. I am Shikir Bujukov from the village of Kochan near Blagoevgrad in Bulgaria. I am teacher by vocation, also with a degree in choreography. Currently I am retired. I was representative of the People's Assembly, the seventh People's Assembly of Bulgaria. The folklore is the area that I am involved in – this is what interests you. In the region that we live in, we are neighbors, from a geographical point of view the river Mesta is between us, between Pirin Macedonia and the Western Rodop Mountains. We live in the Western Rodop Mountains, in the well-known Dabrash, our municipality is called Sotovchanska, also known as Chech, and Chech means “solid stone“.

A.S. You are Pomaks from Chech, right? There are some texts written about you, about Chech and the people that lived there- Chech Pomaks. For example K'ncov, B. Rusic etc.

D.I. / S.B. Chech, the geographic region.

D.I. I have some parts of K'ncov's work where there are more detailed descriptions of our places...

A.S. Yes, yes, right.

S.B. Regarding the folklore our region is one source. Rich with authentic folklore that is different from others.

A.S. That is exactly what I want to know. Can you feel that difference as a person who is involved in that subject...

S.B. Although we live on the Rodop Mountains, one can never draw an exact border between the separate areas such as Trakia, northern Bulgaria, Shopluk, Pirin Macedonia and the Rodop Mountains, because there is a certain overlapping between Pirin Macedonia and the Rodop mountains, an area that we live in. But, when it comes to songs and dances, they belong to the Pirin songs. There is an influence from Aegean Macedonia too. So, the male dances (the "horo") are in fact from Aegean Macedonia while the songs are closer to Macedonian songs. If you attend our concert this evening, you will see that our people sing songs from Pirin Macedonia. Our dances are also related. It is the 7/8 beat that connects them.

A.S. That is something that is not specially re-done for this occasion, but is original, as it is there in the villages?

S.B. It is an authentic folklore that is preserved in our region. We should mention that this band (the folk ensemble that is performing) has won a lot of Bulgarian as well as international recognitions and is presenting itself well, which means that the folklore is absolutely preserved, and we keep taking care of it. We now have a chance, because at the moment in Bulgaria there is a different perspective on culture, in a sense that the state is poor and is deliberately cutting finances in that sector, but we know that people who did not preserve their culture do not deserve one. That is why we tend to keep those things, because at the end, that is the proof of our ethnic and national belonging.

A.S. Did you know that a young man, scientist from Austria, Ulf Brumbauer, had his PhD on Pomaks? He visited your homeland and claims that the Pomaks should stick to their name and culture and that those should be recognized as a distinct entity among the diversities that exist in Bulgaria. The same way there are Gagauz, Turks, Roma, etc. there should be Pomaks, as a distinct and authentic group with a culture of their own. Are you familiar with that thesis?

S.B. This thesis is familiar to me. I have not met him. In fact we, the Pomaks, although they are trying to ignore us as an ethnic group, exist with our own culture, traditions, songs, customs, traditions that have different origin. According to our Government, when there is a census of population, in Bulgaria there are only two national groups: Bulgarians and Turks. The other ethnic, national, linguistic, religious minorities are not mentioned. When we have to define ourselves, who we are, there is no such category, and many of us cannot register themselves accordingly. At the time of Communism, one had to be "Bulgarian". Now we don't have a chance to say who we

are. There is a category “others“, but we do not feel as “others“, we are Pomaks. We want, as we have been presented in the Parliament, to be represented in the Ministerial Council, the administration etc. We want our ethnic group to be confirmed and to find its place. This is guaranteed to us by the Human Rights Conventions, according to which all people have equal rights. Those rights, no matter if it comes to religion, language, culture, nationality, should be respected. According to me, I support this since I have been a “legislator“ (meaning he has been an ex-delegate in the People’s Assembly – my note). When we created the Bulgarian Constitution, it was made according to these Conventions. Finally, we ratified those Conventions and after this the state has obliged itself to fulfill them, but in practice it is not done.

A.S. Yes. There is also a big difference between the censuses made after World War II in Bulgaria, when a huge part of the people declared themselves as Macedonians from the Pirin are, and now there are no Macedonians, that is, they belong to the category of “others“? What is your opinion on this issue? Is this a pressure made by the state, or the people have change, what is the essence of this? We know these censuses, they were published.

S.B. Probably Macedonians face the same situation, as we all know. It is true that as a nation it declared itself, since each nation has the right to declare its own ethnic background. Bulgaria has conducted a policy according to which there were no Macedonians, there was even a moment, known as a joke, when Tito said: “Either you tell me where the 600.000 Macedonians are, or show me their graves“. Practically, those Macedonians evaporated, in fact there are here, they exist, but they do not have the right for self- designation. Even if they have the right, even if they try to express themselves, they would be subjected to unpleasant things, they cannot do that...

A.S. They face problems at their working places?

S.B. Problems at work, problems at school, problems of self-realization in the society, no one gives them a serious function in administration. From this point of view, so that they do not face problems, they are forced to declare themselves Bulgarians. We have been subjected to the same forceful Bulgarianization. I did not want to become Bulgarian, to change my name, practically I was entitled to that. There are many others who did not want to turn Bulgarian, but they were imprisoned. This is why we hope that the situation will change and that until Bulgaria exists those things will not happen again, even more since we have to act as a pillar and not let things being presented in the wrong way. Each and every person should find a dignified place in this world and should be able to declare with dignity that he is Macedonian, Turk, Bulgarian or Pomak.

A.S. Because of the large Turkish minority in Bulgaria, which probably has its own political and other associations and organizations, do they put pressure upon you to declare yourself as Turks? We have that kind of problem. Besides that, we have another problem with the Albanization of population with Islam confession and Macedonian spoken language. So at the same time there is Turkish and Albanian assimilation going

on. Do you, I mean the Pomaks and other Islamized people, feel the same kind of pressure to declare yourself as Turks?

S.B. We have solved that issue with the acceptance of the Bulgarian constitution. According to it, everyone has the right to use his native language and to learn his language and culture. But in practice it is different... In fact you have the right, but the minority rights are afterwards restricted by additional laws, this is how the possibilities are being limited. I think that these issues in Bulgaria should be solved like this: one is Bulgarian due to the fact that one lives in Bulgaria. I am Bulgarian citizen, but I have the right to declare myself as Bulgarian, Pomak, Turk, and according to the constitution to learn my own language, to express my own religion and to develop my own culture without problems...

A.S. My question was weather there is pressure from the Turks about you being Turks, because they have such thesis. If you look for information about Pomaks on the Internet you will get various data from Greek, Turkish, Bulgarian and other authors that defend different theories. Turks claim it is a Turkish population that has forgotten the Turkish language. I mean there are different theses, but do you fill such pressure?

S.B. We had similar situations. If you are Muslim it means you have a Muslim name, a Muslim religion, so you should be belonging to the Turkish minority. When others cease power, they say: "You are Bulgarians because your language is Bulgarian", although in principle everybody feels as he/she finds it suitable. Sometimes we are being counted as Bulgarians, sometimes as Turks depending on the policy when they want to gain our affection. There are elections to be won. They promise a lot of things...

A.S. Elections. Yes. Even an outsider could tell that in some censuses the number of Turks is rising, in some the number of Albanians, when in fact this is a population with Islamic confession, Macedonian spoken language and a culture of its own... So, it is the same situation here.

S.B. In other words, the actual situation is like that, we have been manipulated for a long time.

A.S. That's right, it is a similar situation.

S.B. We started being "baptized" in 1912 and afterwards in '41, '61, '62, '73, '84, '85³... That is why we want to declare ourselves once and for all as people, as an ethnic community, so that we can protect our rights, although the rights are protected in principle, still everyone has a right of religion, faith, confession, but this is not respected in practice. At the moment we, in the party that functions and from which I was elected as MP, have certain freedoms that are guaranteed. Also I should tell you that thanks to the "Movement for Rights and Freedoms" Bulgaria has taken the path of peace, that

³ Meaning the years 1912, 1941, 1961, 1962, 1973, 1984, 1985.

made us an example in the world because we didn't allowed a repetition of the Kosovo scenario on Bulgaria's soil. Those things were preserved. So that's why we should pay respect to our party leader ("Movement for Rights and Freedoms"), who is now turning 50 years old and who will be awarded with the highest reward in Bulgaria – a medal called "Stara Planina" (Old Mountain), because through the Movement he preserved ethnic peace in Bulgaria. But in practice there should be more Pomaks in the Parliament and in the administration. We can prove and have already proven our capability, so we should have general support, internally and internationally, which means we want a kind of international appearance since many have tried to convert us into "others". That's why we the Pomaks from all over the world should unite and not let same the things happen again. All people are brothers because there is one God, we are descendants of one Man and in order to go forward there should be tolerance, protection of religions, rights and freedoms of all people.

D.I. During the communism in Bulgaria there wasn't any possibility, for example, for Pomaks to attend Universities and that is why for us (in Bulgaria) the attitude that Pomaks are rude, illiterate remained. So we don't have skilled people. The things are finally moving nowadays. Now we have the possibility to educate our students here (in the Republic of Macedonia). They will get their degrees and will be able to take over the issues important for our community. We need educated persons, to coordinate and to govern....

A.S. Thank you very much.