

# **Pomak Language Usage and the Spell of Nationalism: The Case of the Pomaks in Greece**

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## **Introduction**

I would like to begin on a personal note. When I started to take an interest in the Muslim minority in Greece, I was thinking about the possibility of conducting some research related specifically to the Pomaks because of their linguistic particularity within the minority. I am better equipped for such a study than many of those who have previously taken an interest in their language, since my degree in Balkan Studies included standard Bulgarian and Macedonian as well as south Slav dialectology. When I started to orientate myself regarding the written output on the Pomaks of Greece, however, I became discouraged. To my mind the Pomaks are a group that has simultaneously attracted both too little and too much attention. I seriously doubt the sincerity of many of those who take an interest in the Pomaks and believe they are mostly guided by ulterior motives. In my understanding the Pomaks are a subgroup within a minority, but because of political expediency interest in this group has been completely blown out of proportion. People who heard I was doing research on the Muslim minority seemed immediately to think that I was working on the Pomaks. Greek works concerning the Pomaks must be many times the output on the Muslim minority in general. At the same time, there is little original research and a preponderance of clichés that

have been reiterated ad nauseam. The reason for this is that interest in the Pomak language is not at all an innocent endeavour. It is embroiled in a mesh of competing nation-building projects and each one them has its own agenda. When we take an interest in the Pomak language, we must bear in mind this situation.

## Who Are the Pomaks?

We can continue with a deceptively simple question: What is a Pomak? There is unfortunately no simple answer, and we have to take a closer look at different approaches. In scholarly literature, it is usual to refer to them as a Slav-speaking population group that embraced Islam during the Ottoman period. There may be different opinions about the exact date of conversion, but in general, it is considered to have happened several generations before the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Some claim it was voluntarily, others, that it happened by force. There are various local names for Slav-speaking Muslims such as Torbesh in western Macedonia, Pomak in the Rhodope mountains along with Ahriyan etc.<sup>1</sup> Ulf Brunnbauer goes as far as claiming that “most scholars would agree on the definition of Pomaks as Bulgarian-speaking Muslims of South Slav ethnic background [apart] from the fact that various non-Bulgarian nationalists challenge this assumption (especially Turkish and Greek ones).”<sup>2</sup> This brings us very easily to a top-down approach, with nationality as point of departure. On an ideological level, such questions regarding their identity have followed different trajectories under the influence of the national narratives in the countries that have Pomak populations, that is, Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. I will outline the basic tenets of each position later on. Dimitris Antoniou has conducted fieldwork among Pomaks who have moved to Athens in search of work, and approaches the matter from the point of view of self-definition. This

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1 There are several variant spellings of Ahriyan, often connected to attempts of etymology.

2 Ulf Brunnbauer, “The Perception of Muslims in Bulgaria and Greece: Between the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21:1 (2001), pp. 42–43.

does not, however, lead to any clearer picture: “To this day I find it very difficult to talk about a single Pomak identity and to define Pomakness at a macro level. Over the years I came across many individuals who manifest a Pomak identity and have totally different understandings of its content.”<sup>3</sup> **When we deal with groups, such as the Pomaks, there are a number of factors to take into consideration and we cannot take every statement at face value.** Historical and social transformations have a bearing on the meaning of the word, and usage can also vary according to circumstances.

## National Narratives

### Part 1: Turkey

We have at our disposal infinitely more materials on what has been said about the Pomaks, compared to what has been said by the Pomaks. In order to better understand the position of the Pomaks it is now time to turn to their position in the national narratives of the main claimants. Within the framework of the theocratic Ottoman Empire the Pomaks were primarily defined according to religion as Muslims and part of the Muslim community (*Cemaat*), while other characteristics such as language were of secondary importance. The agenda of the Turkish republic was to transform the former Muslim identity into a Turkish national identity. The Pomaks were consequently integrated into the Turkish national narrative according to the standards of the day.<sup>4</sup> **This meant that** Turkish scholarship tried to trace both the descent and the language of the Pomaks back to their Central Asian mythical Turkish place of origin with more or less fanciful theories. Their descent is usually arbitrarily traced back to Turkish tribes that arrived in the Balkans before the Ottomans such as the Cumans, Pechenegs, Kipchaks etc. In Turkish nation-

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3 Dimitris Antoniou, “Western Thracian Muslims in Athens: From Economic Migration to Religious Organization,” *Balkanologie* IX (décembre 2005), pp. 79–101.

4 For a more complete critical presentation of the Turkish history thesis, see the standard work, Büşra Ersanlı Behar, *İktidar ve Tarih, Türkiye’de Resmî Tarih Tezinin Oluşumu (1929–1937)* (İstanbul, 2000).

alist scholarship I have encountered the assertion that “Pomak Turkish” consists of 30 percent Ukrainian, 25 percent Cuman-Kipchak Turkish, 20 percent Oghuz Turkish, 15 percent Nogai Turkish, and 10 percent Arabian. The Ukrainian component is due to the contact the Cuman Turks had with the local Slavs when they trekked across the Ukrainian steppes in the tenth and eleventh century. The 10 percent Arabic is related to their acceptance of Islam. The rest are pure Turkish dialects. In this way they not only managed to “Turkify” the Pomak language, but also rid it of any influence of its main competitor, Bulgarian.<sup>5</sup> There are also other arguments made to counter Bulgarian claims. Özönder mentions inter alia that in the early twentieth century the Bulgarians did all they could to separate the Balkan Turks by exploiting their different dialects (*lehçe*). He also claims that the Pomak Turks have no physical anthropological relationship with the Bulgarians or other Balkan Slavs.<sup>6</sup> It goes without saying that this is not disinterested scholarship, but scholars in the service of the nation. It is an open question as to what degree the conjuring up of such fictitious data is the result of scholarly sloppiness, wishful thinking or promotion of national ideals according to the maxim that “the ends justify the means.” **The repetition of such data could also** be linked to the authoritarian character of the Turkish Republic and what is acceptable to express publicly. An extended discussion of this aspect would, however, take us too far from our subject.

## National Narratives

### Part 2: Bulgaria

In the beginning, the Bulgarian national movement that emerged in the nineteenth century embraced only the Christian Bulgarian popu-

5 This claim is presented repeatedly in works such as Cihat Özönder, “Pomak Türkleri,” *Batı Trakya'nın Sesi* 1:4 (May–June 1988), pp. 16–19; Halim Çavuşoğlu, *Balkanlar'da Pomak Türkleri, Tarih ve Sosyo-Kültürel Yapı* (Ankara: Köksav, 1993), p. 124; İlker Alp, “Bulgarların Pomak Türkleri (Kıpçaklar-Kumanlar) politikası,” *Diyanet Dergi* 29:2 (1993), pp. 76–77. It all seems to originate from the book of Ahmet Cevad, *Balkanlarda Akan Kan* (Istanbul, no date), pp. 190–191.

6 Özönder, op. cit., p. 17.

lation, while Muslim Slav speakers were added as an afterthought and without consulting them!<sup>7</sup> Up until 1905 the Pomaks were indeed listed as Turks in the national censuses. It proved difficult in practice for the Bulgarian national movement to transcend the former religious divide and this led to several attempts to convert the Pomaks in order to assimilate them. There were forced conversions in the wake of the First Balkan War in 1912, new assimilation campaigns in 1937–1944 and a final conversion cycle from 1971 to 1974 as part of the “process of rebirth” that was only reversible after the fall of the socialist regime in 1989. In Bulgarian terminology the Pomaks are usually referred to as “Bulgarian Muslims” thereby connecting them to the Bulgarian nation. They are often presented as an integral part of the Bulgarian nation that unfortunately went astray during the Ottoman occupation and that should now be brought back into the fold. Their Muslim faith was purportedly based on forced conversions and their inclusion in the Bulgarian nation was considered a “return” to Christianity. The language is naturally referred to as Bulgarian, since it does not differ in any substantial way from the Bulgarian spoken by the local Christian population, and is considered to be one of the significant markers of their national identity. If anything, they are presented as speaking a purer and more archaic Bulgarian than the Christians, which is considered to be a further proof of their Bulgarian origin. Even after the change of regime in 1989, it became clear during the discussions on the ratification of the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention on National Minorities in 1997 and 1998 that society is not prepared to accept the Pomaks as a “national minority.” According to the majority view they are still regarded as Bulgarians. In any event, the identity question is tricky. “A worried observer wrote in 1931

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7 I am only attempting to make a brief presentation of the main point of interest. For a more thorough discussion of the fate of the Bulgarian Pomaks with relevant bibliographical references, consult Brunnbauer, *op. cit.* He is less familiar with the Pomaks in Greece, and includes a discussion of them mainly for the sake of comparison. For a concise presentation of the Pomaks’ situation, see Alexei Kalionski, “The Pomak Dilemma,” *La transmission du savoir dans le monde musulman périphérique* [Lettre d’information no. 13] (Paris, mars 1993).

that ‘talking about themselves, the Bulgarian Mohammedans call themselves “Turks.” **If you tell them that they are not Turks, but Bulgarians** of Mohammedan belief, they will look at you with big eyes, as if they are threatened by great harm’.<sup>8</sup> **In this case the connotations are religious.** For the Pomaks of this period, “Bulgarian Muslim” must have sounded like a contradiction in terms since the term “Bulgarian” is associated with the Christian faith. Conversely, the term “Turk” has traditionally been used in both the Bulgarian and Greek language as a synonym for “Muslim.” **On the other hand, this use of the term “Turk” should be differentiated** from the total transformation of the word brought on by the Kemalist reforms in Turkey. It should be added that the Pomak population forms a continuum in the Rhodope mountains and Bulgaria has a far larger Pomak population than Greece.

## National Narratives

### Part 3: Greece

Greece has followed a more inconsistent path, usually tied to changing political conjunctures. As long as the main rivalry was with Bulgaria, Greece was content to group the Pomaks together with the Turks and other Muslims. Until the early 1950s Greece treated the Pomaks mainly as Turks.<sup>9</sup> Later on, when the relationship with Turkey deteriorated, Greece would from time to time accentuate their difference from the Turks. Still, while a Foreign Ministry source from 1952 displays awareness of Pomaks and Gypsies, it is mainly occupied with promoting discreet support for the conservatives in their opposition to the modernist followers of the Kemalist reforms in Turkey.<sup>10</sup> **The Greek willingness to play the Pomak card became clearer after the foundation of the**

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<sup>8</sup> *Rodopa* 10:2 (1931), quoted in Brunnbauer *op. cit.*, fn. 38.

<sup>9</sup> Τσιούμης, Κωστής Α., *Οι Πομάκοι στο ελληνικό κράτος (1920–1950)*, Ιστορική προσέγγιση, Θεσσαλονίκη, Εκδόσεις “Προμήθευς,” 1997, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Κωστόπουλος, Τάσος, *Το “Μακεδονικό” της Θράκης – Κρατικοί σχεδιασμοί για τους Πομάκους (1956–2008)*, Αθήνα, Εκδόσεις “βιβλιοράμα,” 2009, p. 43. Kostopoulos’ book is the most comprehensive presentation of Greek state policies towards the Pomaks in the period after 1956.

Special Pedagogical Academy in Thessaloniki (SPAT) in 1969 that provided Greek sponsored teacher education for the minority. Here most of the students were Pomak graduates from religious secondary schools (*medrese*), who were recruited to counterbalance the minority teachers with a secular education from Turkey. At about the same time the Greek authorities sought ways to promote and reinforce Pomak identity.<sup>11</sup> The ultimate goal seems to have been the assimilation of the Pomaks, but this was never a serious option as long as there was no change to the economic and social basis of their lifestyle and no sincere attempts to integrate them into the social fabric of Greek society.

From the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974 until the early 1990s a significant body of writings on Pomaks in Greece appeared that was primarily governed by Greek nationalist ideas. An article by the Greek administrator, Panayotis Foteas, is indicative of the tone, and many were soon to follow.<sup>12</sup> In style and content they are remarkably similar to the Bulgarian and Turkish approaches. Tatjana Seyppel – who provides an overview of these efforts – remarked that although they were produced in a Western democracy where science should not be under the tutelage of politics or religion, they could easily be mistaken for being written under the pressure of a totalitarian regime: “The scale goes from chauvinism over well-intended patriotism to ignorance.”<sup>13</sup> I will quickly summarise some of the basic themes. It is important to find a racial connection to the Greeks. This can be done by connecting the Pomaks to ancient Thracian tribes harking back to the time before the Slavs and Turks arrived on the scene. Physical anthropology and blood testing have been used, among other devices, in order to prove this. Besides the futility of the whole project, it contradicts simple evidence available to anybody who takes an interest in the Pomaks. For example, Professor Xirotiris

11 Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 87–88.

12 Φωτέας, Παναγιώτης, “Οι Πομάκοι της Δυτικής Θράκης. Μικρή συμβολή σ’ ένα μεγάλο θέμα,” *Ζυγός* 25, Μάρτιο-Απρίλιο 1977.

13 Tatjana Seyppel, “Das Interesse an der muslimischen Minderheit in Westthrakien (Griechenland) 1945–1990,” in Gerhard Seewann, ed., *Minderheitenfragen in Südosteuropa* (München: Südost-Institut-R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1992), p. 392. A more recent critique of this material is found in Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–144.

attempts to prove, by employing genetic material, that the Pomaks on the Greek side of the border are different from those on the Bulgarian side.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, it is a well-known fact that many Pomaks have relatives on the other side of the Greek-Bulgarian border.<sup>15</sup> There were also amateurish attempts to portray the Pomak language as more related to Greek than Bulgarian or Turkish. Again we are confronted with a few *topoi* that are endlessly repeated by the Pomak “experts.” For example, Pavlos Hidiroglou claims that Greek is the backbone of the Pomak language since many verbs have Greek roots. He tries further to demonstrate that they are not Greek loanwords into Bulgarian but remnants of the Greek used by the “Thrako-Hellenes.”<sup>16</sup> The argument about verbs stemming from Greek roots, which ostensibly demonstrates the organic relationship between Pomak and Greek, is also presented by several others.<sup>17</sup> While there is naturally an influence between language groups that are in contact, there is no basis for “nationalising” this influence in such a fashion. People who are part of this “school” also acknowledge the crudeness of such attempts in times of self-examination. Sella-Mazi argues that the Greek policy must be to separate the Pomaks from the Turks, not to Hellenise or Christianise them as some superficial people demand. This argument has been repeated by many others and can also be found in the Greek mainstream press.<sup>18</sup>

14 Ξηροτύρης, Ν., “Αχριάνες και Πομάκοι: Θράκες ή Σλάβοι,” *Συμπόσιο λαογραφίας του Βορειοελλαδικού χώρου*, Θεσσαλονίκη, 1976.

15 Χαμδής, Ομέρ, *Η Πομακική γλώσσα στην Ελλάδα Σήμερα*, (paper read at the international conference on minority languages organised by Holland Mercator, 23–25.11.2004). <http://www.antifonitis.gr/parekliseis/greece/10.htm> (accessed 01.03.2010)

16 Χιδίρογλου, Παύλος, *Οι Έλληνες Πομάκοι και η σχέση τους με την Τουρκία*, Αθήνα, Ηρόδοτος, 1989, pp. 23–25.

17 Among others, see Μαγκριώτης, Γιάννης Δ., Πομάκοι ή Ροδοπαίοι. Οι Έλληνες μουσουλμάνοι, Αθήνα: Πελασγός, 1994, p. 53 and Λιάπης, Αντώνης, “Οι Πομάκοι μέσα στον χρόνο,” *Θρακική Επετηρίδα*, τομ. Δ’, Κομοτηνή, 1983, p. 10.

18 Σελλά-Μάζη, Ελένη, “Διγλωσσία και ολιγότερο ομιλούμενες γλώσσες στην Ελλάδα,” στο Κ. Τσιτσελίκης, Δ. Χριστόπουλος (επιμ.), *Το μειονοτικό φαινόμενο στην Ελλάδα: μια συμβολή των κοινωνικών επιστημών*, Αθήνα, ΚΕΜΟ & εκδ. Κριτική, 1997, p. 235. See also *Οικονομικός Ταχυδρόμος*, no. 2165, 02.11.1995.



## Greek Terminology and Policy Gets a Facelift

The new minority policy that was announced by Prime Minister Konstantinos Mitsotakis during his visit to Thrace in May 1991 represents a significant shift in the Greek approach to the Pomak issue. While the Greek strategy had previously been to emphasise the religious character of the minority in order to minimise the reference to Turkey, this had now been left untenable after human rights organisations criticised Greece for denying its ethnic identity.<sup>19</sup> The new policy also represents a step away from the former practice of searching for vestiges of Christian or Greek traditions in Pomak culture. Mitsotakis stressed that the minority consisted of three ethnic groups, that is, those of “Turkish origin,” the Pomaks and the Roma. Greek policy was now brought more in line with Western concepts of ethnicity and various ways of sponsoring Pomak language and culture should be viewed within this context. Some Greek Pomak “experts” criticised that Greek policy seemed to be bogged down within the perspective of Greek-Turkish relations, while programmes initiated by the European Parliament and Council of Europe could be utilised to cultivate Pomak culture.<sup>20</sup> The preface of a Pomak primer presents it as one of the “lesser-spoken languages” of Europe, which clearly indicates that adoption of the new terminology has become established.<sup>21</sup> The new minority policy was criticised by those in the minority who were close to Turkish policy as an attempt to create a new Pomak nation and language. In this connection the EU was supposedly “fooled by satanic plans” that portrayed the minority as Muslim with three different roots instead of Turkish.<sup>22</sup> The updated Greek policy gave it more credibility versus Turkey. It enabled Greece to outflank Turkish

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19 Lois Whitman, *Destroying Ethnic Identity: The Turks of Greece*, (New York: Helsinki Watch, 1990).

20 Λιάπης, Αντώνης, “Η υποθηκευμένη γλωσσική ιδιαιτερότητα των Πομάκων,” *Ενδοχώρα* 1995 τ. 2., p. 89.

21 Κόκκας, Νικόλαος, *Uchem so Pomatsko, Μαθήματα πομακικής γλώσσας. Τεύχος Α. Είκοσι πέντε μαθήματα*, Ξάνθη: Πολιτιστικό Αναπτυξιακό Κέντρο Θράκης, 2004.

22 *Gerçek* (Komotini) 349/19.12.1992.

nationalist positions by adopting a reference framework that was more convincing in international forums. The sincerity of the interest in the Pomak language has, however, been questioned, since there is little official interest in linguistic diversity in other parts of Greece.<sup>23</sup> It is striking that Greece has adopted this policy selectively only for its Muslim minority and not for other “lesser-spoken languages.” It is also an open question to what degree it reflects an interest by the Pomaks themselves, as language initiatives still appeal only to a small circle. The first concern seems to be the traditional policy of creating obstacles to the unification of the minority under Turkish tutelage while long-term policies of integrating the Pomaks better into Greek society take a back seat.

### **Where Are the Pomaks?**

It is now time to leave the topic of state policies towards the Pomaks and turn our attention to the behaviour of the Pomaks themselves. As is usually the case with any terminology, the word “Pomak” exists because it reflects a social reality. The Pomaks constitute under certain conditions a distinctive group and display collective behaviour. Important markers are the combination of language, religion and habitat. It should be stressed that exactly because there is no Pomak state, or other centralised administrative structures that could unify them, it is primarily a local culture. One could also call it a subculture within the minority at large. The local character is to some degree a function of the traditional isolation of the Pomak villages in the mountainous area. When they leave the core Pomak area in the mountains they have to interact in an environment where Greek and Turkish are the dominant languages. To put it simply, a “pure” Pomak is someone who remains in his mountain village. Or to be more precise, it is more likely to be a woman who stays at home and has limited contact with the outside world. The lack of a unified Pomak culture is also a function of traditional patterns of movement. The primary direction of movement is north-south between the mountains and the plains, while east-west movement is limited. This helps to explain the differences in Pomak culture between the Xanthi

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23 Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 247–251.

and Komotini regions, but there are also significant differences among villages that are relatively close to each other.

As mentioned previously, under Ottoman rule language played a secondary role to religion. There is consequently limited statistical material on the Pomaks during this period. The criteria for Greek statistics have not been consistent and this makes comparison of various figures difficult. It can, however, be useful to present some basic data. According to the 1928 census the Muslims numbered 102,621 persons: about 17 percent of them were Pomaks and 85 percent of the Pomaks lived in the Xanthi region. The 1951 census is very similar. According to unofficial data from the 1981 census the minority numbered 96,173 persons, about 35 percent of them being Pomaks and 75 percent of these Pomaks living in the Xanthi region. According to unofficial data from the 2001 census the minority numbered 111,00 persons, about 33 percent of them being Pomaks and 65 percent of them living in the Xanthi region. More analytically the figures from 2001 are as follows:<sup>24</sup>

Prefecture	“Turkish Origin”	Pomak	Gypsy	Total
Xanthi	10,000	24,000	9,000	43,000
Rhodope	42,000	11,000	9,000	62,000
Evros	2,000	2,000	2,000	6,000
Total	54,000	37,000	20,000	111,000
% of minority	48.65	33.33	18.02	100.00

There are several problems related to the above figures and they should not be taken too literally. The table clearly presents the greater proportion of Pomaks in the Xanthi region, but this is well known anyway. A more interesting question is in what way they behave as Pomaks? To return to my previous label of Pomak culture as a local phenomenon, I would say that there are Pomaks in all stages of transition from being “pure” Pomaks living in their mountain villages to fully assimilated Turks of Pomak origin. As many Turks in the more fertile plains has moved

<sup>24</sup> All figures from Κωστόπουλος, op. cit., pp. 276–291. Some calculation mistakes that Kostopoulos points out in the original figures have been tacitly corrected.

to Turkey, their places in the villages have been filled by Pomaks who left their mountain villages for an easier and more modern life. There is hardly a village without some Pomak families and there is also intermarriage between Pomaks and Turks. I could also add that there has been a significant migration of Pomaks to Turkey.<sup>25</sup> **Some scholars mention this shift of population.** In the Komotini area there was a strong migration wave to the plains in the late 1940s in the wake of the civil war. Liapis provides a list of the villages that received the most Pomaks, besides the massive settlement on the outskirts of Komotini. In some cases he also mentions their mountain villages of origin. Many of these Pomaks later became totally “Turkified.”<sup>26</sup> Papadimitriou mentions many villages to which Pomaks migrated in the Xanthi area, besides the town itself.<sup>27</sup> It is not always easy to trace these movements, and information from the Pomaks may not be trustworthy because many Pomaks prefer to pose as Turks. An anthropologist who has recently conducted fieldwork in the region clearly presents the elusiveness of Pomak identity. She does not, however, have a clear grasp of the historical dimension when she states that “there is no indication that Pomaks lived anywhere other than in the mountain villages before the late 1940s. It is also telling that Turkish Komotinians could not remember the term ‘Pomak’ being part of their daily vocabulary prior to the 1990s, when the mass movement of Pomaks from the villages to the town occurred.”<sup>28</sup> **This contradicts the references that were mentioned previously as well as information from people I know.** For example, a friend who grew up in Kır Mahalle of Komotini in the 1950s has told me that at that time the basic “ethnic” distinction of this quarter was between the Pomaks and the Yoluç Turks.

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25 This information is based on personal experiences and conversations with several minority members.

26 Λιάπης 1983, *op. cit.*, pp. 37–38.

27 Παπαδημητρίου, Παναγιώτης, *Τα πομακικά. Σύγχρονη περιγραφή μιας νότιας τοπικής ποικιλίας της αναλυτικής σλαβικής από τη Μύκη του νομού Ξάνθης*, Θεσσαλονίκη, Κυριακίδη, 2008, p. 32. fn. 30.

28 Olga Demetriou, “Prioritizing ‘Ethnicities’: The Uncertainty of Pomak-ness in the Urban Greek Rhodope,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 27:1 (January 2004), p. 100.

## Social and Political Implications of Pomak Identity

Many politicians who have played a central role in the Muslim minority from an early period on have been of Pomak descent, but this does not necessarily mean that they have been profiled as Pomaks. Members of parliament of Pomak descent in the Komotini area such as Hafiz Salih Mehmetoğlu (?–1934) and Molla Yusuf (1915–1969) were elected in their capacity of being conservative Muslims, and not as Pomaks, although their descent was well known.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, the ethnic Turk Hafiz Yaşar Mehmetoğlu (1920–1992) had a great following among the Pomaks in the mountainous area in his capacity to be a conservative leader. He was reputedly a factor in preventing the Pomaks from responding to attempts by the Greek authorities to sponsor Pomak identity by insisting on the importance of their common faith. We have more examples of Pomak identity being a factor in the competition for votes in the Xanthi region. One reason for this is the greater number of Pomaks; another was the lack of an organised conservative wing in this area. There are examples of Pomaks who have been elected to the Greek parliament based primarily on a Pomak electorate. This was particularly the case in the interwar period. In recent times the more common pattern has been that certain Pomak leaders would bargain for a collective Pomak vote with parties or patrons. A typical example of this approach is the late “elected” mufti of Xanthi, Mehmet Emin Aga (1932–2006). Both Greek and Turkish authorities have taken this collective behaviour into consideration when approaching the Pomaks, each for their own purpose.

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29 For the electoral behaviour see Νικολακόπουλος, Ηλίας, “Πολιτικές δυνάμεις και εκλογική συμπεριφορά της μουσουλμανικής μειονότητας στη Δυτική Θράκη: 1923–1955,” *Δελτίο Κέντρου Μικρασιατικών σπουδών*, Αθήνα; Νικολακόπουλος, Ηλίας, “Η πορεία προς την αυτόνομη πολιτική συγκρότηση της μουσουλμανικής μειονότητας στη Δυτική Θράκη,” Καϊάφα, Ουρανία (επιμ.), *Επιστημονικό συμπόσιο / Μειονοτητές στην Ελλάδα (7/9 Νοεμβρίου 2002)*, Εταιρία Σπουδών νεοελληνικού πολιτισμού και γενικής παιδείας, Αθήνα, 2004. For Hafiz Salih Mehmetoğlu see also *Милетич, Любомур. Историята на Гюмлюрджинската автономия*. София, 1914. p. 12.

## State Policies and Pomak Identity

Turkey has sponsored the Pomaks in various ways in order to promote the unification of the minority under Turkish tutelage. Many minority members are also upset about what they perceive to be Greek attempts to divide the minority. Here we have to remember that previously the unifying principle was the Muslim community (*Cemaat*), which later came under pressure from the Turkish national ideal following developments in Turkey. Until the 1990s Turkey was the main provider of higher education for the minority and in many cases it would target leading Pomak families in order to attract the Pomaks to Turkey's side. A good example is Celâl Zeybek (1938–1993), minority MP for Xanthi (1977–1981). He was the son of Hüseyin Zeybek who was minority MP for Xanthi in the period 1946–1950 and whose electoral strength was in the Pomak area. Celâl Zeybek went to Turkey for his education and was deeply influenced by Turkish ideals, as can be seen in his obituary.

“I learned Ottoman manners from my family,” he used to say and felt proud of it.

But in fact, he was a child of the republic. He attended secondary school (*ortaokul-lise*) in Turkey during the 1950s. Celâl Zeybek's abilities, social interests, and determination were already apparent when he was a pupil. For a while, he was chairman of the Democrat Party's youth organisation in Manisa. When Celâl Zeybek returned to Ksanthi he led the Ksanthi Turkish Union during its most difficult period. He was a person who loved his people and his religion and was prepared to sacrifice himself for the minority cause. He was a person who sacrificed himself.

The great Celâl! The great Pomak! The great Turk!

“We are the remnants of the Cumans and the Pechenegs, part of the Ottoman civilisation” he used to say. The fierce Turkish nationalist Celâl said, “If you open my heart and look inside, you will see Turanism.” He, who was the most tolerant towards foreigners, the most open-minded, and most internationalist in the minority possessed a most rare personality, and had succeeded in completely separating his Turkism, indeed his fierce Turkism, from vulgar nationalism, xenophobia, and racism.<sup>30</sup>

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30 İbrahim Onsunoglu's (1948–) speech at the cemetery at the burial of Celâl Zeybek. *Trakya'nın Sesi* (Komotini) 452/26.05.1993.

One would think that Turkey would later try to invest in people like Celâl Zeybek who had been attracted to the Turkish cause. This had, for example, been done in the past with people like the politician Osman Nuri Fettahoğlu (1902–1990) who played a major role in introducing the Kemalist reforms to the minority. There are also, however, other “qualities” that matter for those who want to attract the Pomaks to their side. Both Greece and Turkey have had a tendency to deal with the minority indirectly through its leaders, who in turn could act as brokers for it as I have mentioned previously in the case of elections. Here, an outstanding Pomak leader in recent times was Mehmet Emin Aga. A quick glance at his career is instructive for understanding the dynamics of Pomak policies. Mehmet Emin Aga was from a Pomak family who had been under the tutelage of the Greek authorities as leading conservatives. His family would benefit from the patronage of the Greek authorities and play a leading role when Greece began to cultivate a Pomak identity in the 1950s and 1960s. He played along with the Greek authorities until the anti-minority policies of the Greek authorities under the dictatorship (1967–1974) made his position untenable. When Turkey approached him in 1974, he immediately changed camp taking with him a large group of people under his influence. Celâl Zeybek would remark dryly: “Since there is no longer any bread in the Agriyan cause (*agriyanlıkta*) today’s mufti and his son Hafız [i.e. Mehmet Emin Aga] have started to exploit the poor people with Turkish nationalism.”<sup>31</sup> **In this case Turkey chose to approach him, in spite of his problematic past activities with anti-Turkish conservatives, exactly because it brought a liminal and contested group over to her camp. Later on, Celâl Zeybek would repeat his criticism of Mehmet Emin Aga from the viewpoint of a bona fide Turkish nationalist in an interview with a Greek newspaper:**

Look here, the first who said that in Greece we are “Greek Muslims” and disputed our national identity was Aga. It was not me. The first to put blinkers on the Turkish children and teach them Arabic so they would not know what is happening was Aga. The first to send graduates from the medrese to the Special Pedagogical Academy in Thessaloniki was Aga.<sup>32</sup>

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31 *İleri* (Komotini) 139/11.05.1979. For the word “Agriyan,” see footnote 1.

32 *Ελευθεροτυπία* (Athens) 16.06.1989.

Mehmet Emin Aga must have continued to a certain degree to play both sides, as is evident in connection with several elections after 1974. When the Greek-Turkish confrontation peaked in the early 1990s, however, he was firmly mobilised on the Turkish side.<sup>33</sup>

## **Pomaks and the Mufti Controversy**

The way that both Greece and Turkey consider Pomak ethnicity is very clear in the case of the mufti controversy. Traditionally, Turkey did not take much interest in the appointment of muftis and concentrated on promoting secular values. This gradually changed, and when the mufti of Komotini, Hüseyin Mustafa, died in 1985, appointment of a new mufti became a major point of friction between Greece and Turkey. The Komotini mufti, an ethnic Turk, and the Xanthi mufti, Mustafa Hilmi Aga an ethnic Pomak, had been appointed in the 1940s when the main cleavage in the minority was between conservatives and Kemalists. The Greek authorities decided to appoint Meço Cemali (1938–) as a replacement for Hüseyin Mustafa. He is a Pomak from the village Ehinós who has studied in Saudi Arabia and is consequently as far removed from Turkish nationalism as possible. For various reasons, this triggered reactions from the minority members who were close to Turkey, and they would stage informal elections in order to promote their man to the rank of mufti. The “elected” mufti İbrahim Şerif (1951–) is an ethnic Turk who has studied in Turkey. When the mufti of Xanthi, Mustafa Hilmi Aga, died in 1990 the situation was even more complicated. The Greek authorities first appointed his son, the aforementioned Mehmet Emin Aga, as temporary mufti. This is a further indication that he played both sides. Since his main dependence at this time, however, was on Turkey he came under pressure to resign in order not to indirectly accept the Greek appointment of Komotini mufti. The Greek authorities then appointed Mehmet Emin Şinikoğlu (1937–) as mufti of Xanthi. He had a similar background to Meço Cemali, that is, he was a Pomak from

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33 For a more detailed presentation of Mehmet Emin Aga’s exploits, see Vemund Aarbakke, “The Muslim Minority of Greek Thrace,” doctoral thesis, University of Bergen, 2000.



Ehinos who had studied in Saudi Arabia and Iraq.<sup>34</sup> Mehmet Emin Aga then became “elected” mufti as the man of Turkey. When Mehmet Emin Aga died in 2006 the new “elected” mufti was Ahmet Mete (1965–). He was born in the Pomak village Oreo and had studied in Turkey. Turkey must in this case have elected to back a Pomak in order not to estrange the large Pomak population in the Xanthi region, but the choice fell on a Pomak who is close to Turkey and who has repeatedly raised the banner of Turkish nationalism.<sup>35</sup>

### **State Interest and the Promotion of Pomak Language**

Only after we have a basic understanding of the above structures and the politicised environment does it make sense to speak about the use of Pomak language. As mentioned previously, Greece has in various ways tried to sponsor a Pomak sense of separateness in order to avoid the evolution of a unified Turkish identity of the minority. Earlier this was primarily done by bolstering the conservative element that had not embraced the Kemalist reforms with measures such as supporting the *medrese* in Ehinos and facilitating religious studies in Arab states. Interest in the Pomak language and education is a relative newcomer in this regard. Some ascribe the idea to Panayotis Foteas who took a particular interest in the Pomaks when he served as prefect in Komotini in the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> **In the 1980s we can encounter writings that stress the importance of cultivating the language in order to keep the Pomaks as a separate ethnic group and prevent assimilation by the Turks.<sup>37</sup> There is**

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34 Cemali and Şinikoğlu both had a monthly salary from Saudi Arabia for promoting Islam (*İleri* 321/02.12.1983).

35 He started his education in the primary school of the village, but his father sent him to Istanbul from the third grade on. Most of his higher religious education is from Turkey, but he also had a stint at the University of Medina. For biographical details, see Sevil Şerifoğlu, “İçimizden biri,” *Öğretmen'nin Sesi* 103 (January 2007).

36 Εμπειρικός, Λ. et al. *Διημερίδα για τις γλώσσες της μειονότητας της Δυτικής Θράκης, Κομοτινή, 30–31 Μάιου 1998, Γλωσσική ετερότητα στην Ελλάδα, Αθήνα, Αλεξάνδρεια, 2001, p. 32.*

37 *Λιάπης* 1983, *op. cit.* p. 12.

really not much of an interest in the language itself, either on the Greek or Turkish side. It is a kind of second-best choice for both countries. If Greece cannot make them speak Greek they prefer them to speak Pomak instead of Turkish. Likewise, Turkey prefers them to speak Pomak instead of Greek, but really wants them to speak Turkish.

Several leading minority politicians have spoken up for the need to abandon the language and use only Turkish. This was partly a reaction to the Bulgarian excesses related to the forced conversion campaign in 1912. Minority members claim that many villages decided to stop speaking Pomak after World War I because of the previous violence against them.<sup>38</sup> **This seems to have been more widespread in the Komotini area.** In the 1950s the minority MP for Xanthi, Osman Nuri Fettahoğlu, would admonish the Pomaks repeatedly to leave aside their language and only speak Turkish. This fact has also been pointed out in Greek publications.<sup>39</sup>

## **Pomak Language Usage**

### **Part 1: The 1940s**

An interesting historical testimony to the language situation on the ground is provided by the late Patriarch Kiril of Bulgaria, who carried out studies on location in 1943–1944. As a general observation he mentions that the “Bulgarian” names are better preserved when the places are isolated from Turkish influence and the Turkification is strongest near the city of Komotini. “The locals call themselves Ahryani (that is what the Turks called them) and more seldom Pomaks, but they say that they speak Pomak, because they are not Chitaks (Turks).”<sup>40</sup> **In the mountainous area above Xanthi, the inhabitants generally only know “Bulgarian,”**

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38 *Εμπειρικός*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

39 *Λιάπης* 1995, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

40 *Кирил, Патриарх Български*. Българомохамедански селища в Южни Родопи (Ксантийско и Гюмюрджинско), топонимно, етнографско и историческо изледване. София, Синодално Книгоиздателство. 1960. p. 18. A Greek partial translation appeared in Α. Χ. Δομτζίδης – Ν. Θ. Κόκκας, *Καταγράφοντας ζωντανές μνήμες στα Κιμμέρια Ξάνθης*, Ξάνθη, 2006.

except for the central village of Ehinós where the Turkish influence is more pronounced.<sup>41</sup> **The Turkification of the “Bulgaro-Mohamedanians”** has gone further in the Komotini area. In mountainous villages such as Nymfea and Mytakas, young people already speak Turkish while the older ones still speak “Bulgarian.” **More specifically, in Nymfea, everybody of over 30 years speaks very good “Bulgarian,”** and some of the old people do not know Turkish. The locals said it was because the Greek authorities had prohibited “Bulgarian” (the village is close to a border post). The Greek soldiers reacted strongly to “Bulgarian” being spoken, while Turkish was not hindered, but rather encouraged. The village Orhani is considered totally Turkified culturally, but the names of the locals are “Bulgarian.” **The inhabitants speak a mixed Turco-Bulgarian. The toponyms too are continually transformed from “Bulgarian” to Turkish ones.** The village Ayasma five km north of Komotini is also considered totally Turkified. The hodjas who are active in Komotini as well as in the adjacent villages are an important factor in the Turkification process. They have frightened the population with their spiritual authority and do not want them to use the “language of the infidels.” **There are many “Bulgaro-Mohamedanians” in Komotini, but they hide the fact and try to pass as Turks.**<sup>42</sup> If we return to the present-day situation, contemporary observers agree that Pomak still prevails for everyday situations in the mountainous area above Xanthi, but it does not have the same prestige as Turkish. In Xanthi Town, some Pomak families use only Turkish by decision.<sup>43</sup> **In the Komotini area Pomak is most spoken in the area close to the Bulgarian border and its use decreases as you approach the plain.** The lower villages adopted the Turkish language during the last generations. In Evros Prefecture, the Pomaks know even less Pomak.<sup>44</sup>

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41 Кирил, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

42 Кирил, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–98.

43 Μιχαήλ, Δόμνα, “Η στάση των Πομάκων της ορεινής Ξάνθης στην ελληνόφωνη εκπαίδευση στο τέλος του 20ου αιώνα,” *Η ελληνική παιδεία από το 18ο ως τον 20ο αι*, Φλώρινα, Πανεπιστήμιο Δυτικής Μακεδονίας, 2005, p. 527 and Παπαδημητρίου, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

44 Λιάπης 1995, *op. cit.*, pp. 17–18.

## Pomak Language Usage

### Part 2: The Current Situation

I can mention a few of my own experiences. In Komotini you do not hear Pomak spoken often. I have been with Turks who refer to villagers from the mountainous area as Pomaks in a way that clearly implies inferiority. There are several leading minority members whom I know are of Pomak origin, but they will not usually mention it. It is more common for their political opponents to mention it since it is less prestigious than being of Turkish origin. For example, the late minority MP Sadık Ahmet (1947–1995) would refer to Mehmet Emin Aga as Pomak to belittle him since they were political opponents. Most of the Pomaks from families who have been living for more than a generation in Komotini have no proper knowledge of the Pomak language. Once when I was with some of the minority elite the journalist and former MP (1989–1990) İsmail Molla (Rodoplu) (1938–) mentioned, in an inoffensive manner, that the lawyer Adem Bekiroğlu, who was present, knew “Bulgarian.” I **know** that Adem Bekiroğlu is from the Pomak village Ragada, but under these circumstances he was not comfortable displaying his language skills. In Xanthi the language is much more commonly heard. Here, I should add that it is one thing to hear the language spoken by coincidence and another to inquire about its use. It is a sensitive political issue, which makes it difficult to discuss usage unless it is with someone you get to know over a period of time. On the other hand, although I usually start speaking Turkish or Greek to Pomaks, I often mention that I have studied Bulgarian. This may tickle their curiosity later on and make them throw a few Pomak words into the conversation to test whether I understand them. This has even happened with people who are considered champions of Turkish nationalism. For example, in the 1990s I used to visit the “elected” mufti, Mehmet Emin Aga, when I was in Xanthi. His brother in law who served us tea would after a while inform me about his relationship by using the Pomak/Bulgarian word “zet” (that is, he was married to the sister of Mehmet Emin Aga). The imam of the village Oreo, who at the time was considered a fierce Turkish nationalist, would also tell me under more relaxed circumstances that he was a Pomak. What upset him most though was that he was sick and tired of people

trying to tell him what he was. It is, of course, again a question of what they mean by being a Pomak. While some Pomaks do not like the term “Pomak” and insist that they are Turks, other will declare more freely that they are Pomaks. For example the editor of the minority newspaper *Trakya'nın Sesi*, Abdülhalim Dede (1956–), will state quite openly that he is of Pomak origin and does not have any inferiority complex because of it. On the other hand, he will also often add that the Pomaks are Turks. I have the impression that Dede thinks of the Pomaks as Turks more in a cultural sense. Others, as we saw previously with Celâl Zeybek, have adopted the whole Turkish nationalist argument of racial connection between Pomaks and Turks.

When it comes to usage we are again confronted with a very varied picture. For example, a good acquaintance of mine who grew up in Xanthi mentioned that his parents did not want him to learn the language, but he still heard it sometimes at home since his parents used it as a secret language when they did not want their children to understand what they were talking about. As a result, later when he was a student in Turkey in the early 1990s he could not follow the conversation of some fellow students from Xanthi when they used Pomak in informal situations. I have also heard some Pomaks speak good standard Bulgarian, which indicates that they have cross-border contact. For the vast majority, however, it is a local language with limited use. I discussed this aspect recently with a Pomak in his forties who had a good command of the language. He used the language when he spoke with his parents, but mentioned that his son knew less than he did. To some degree this is linked to changing life conditions. Language is dependent on usage and words connected to old-fashioned agricultural production methods are disappearing together with the old way of life. In other words, on the one hand, the Pomak language is under threat from Bulgarian, Greek and Turkish nationalism and on the other it is under threat because of limited need for its use as the contact with the outside world increases. For the Pomaks the road to education and modernity goes through other languages, and this will probably be an even bigger factor in the future.

## The Greek-sponsored Codification Effort

Some special mention should be made of the recent attempts to codify the language. It is impossible to hold a sensible discussion about this without bearing in mind the political environment already outlined. Traditionally, minority policies have been more dependent on Greek-Turkish diplomatic relations than on any initiatives of the minority itself. In other words, there are people in Greece and Turkey who try to draw up Pomak policies according to Greek and Turkish national goals, without much concern for the needs of the Pomaks themselves. In the 1960s much Greek policy-making was in the hands of the locally based Council for the Coordination of Minority Policy in Thrace (CCMPT) that made proposals and implemented policies outside normal democratic control.<sup>45</sup> Osman Nuri Fettahoğlu had already protested in the mid-1950s against books written in “Bulgarian” with the Greek alphabet for the Pomaks, but little is known about these books.<sup>46</sup> **Two interesting discussions** took place within the CCMPT in 1966 concerning the possibility of codifying and teaching the Pomak language. There were diverging opinions mainly because of concerns about potential reactions from Turkey and other negative side effects could also be envisaged with reference to the recent codification of standard literary Macedonian.<sup>47</sup> **Various Greek** writings on Pomaks in the 1980s, which have been mentioned previously, proposed teaching of the Pomak language. It would take until the mid-1990s, however, before the first books related to the codification of the language appeared. The long period from the first discussions to the eventual publication of such books reflects the hesitation of the authori-

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45 For a more thorough discussion of the work of this council see Ηλιάδης, Χρήστος, “Η μειονοτική εκπαίδευση στην Θράκη μέσα από το αρχείο της Γενικής Επιθεώρησης ξένων και μειονοτικών σχολείων και του Συντονιστικού Συμβουλίου (1945–1967),” *ΑρχειοΤάξιο*, 8/1, Αθήνα, Θεμέλιο, Ιούνιος 2006 and Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–69. I have known about many of these policies indirectly from various sources, but the temporary availability of the Council’s archives has provided us with a much better documentation of them.

46 Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

47 Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–92.

ties responsible for minority policies. This is clearly demonstrated by the fate of Petros Theoharidis' books. Petros Theoharidis was a state-employed teacher at the religious college (*medrese*) in Ehinós and knew the Pomaks through his work there. In the 1960s state funding was available for studies on the language and history of the Pomaks. Theoharidis first submitted a book on the Pomaks in 1968. The state agencies that oversaw minority policies found it “interesting” and proposed to “buy it.” **They had, however, reservations and considered that it should be expanded and published in due time.** It is interesting to notice the emphasis on presenting the book not as published by the state. It should instead “for obvious reasons” appear to be published by the author. Publication of the book was postponed, however, in 1969, and would not appear until 1995.<sup>48</sup> **In a short period of time from October 1995 to February 1998** there was a burst of publications on the Pomak language, in an effort of codification involving several dictionaries and grammars. Sponsors of these efforts ranged from the Fourth Army Corps to various companies in the private sector with the entrepreneur Prodromos Emfietzoglou playing a central role. The army saw its initiative as the beginning of a larger effort that would make possible the teaching of Pomak in schools. Emfietzoglou is a high-profile entrepreneur who has taken on several expensive public works and is also well known for his nationalist leanings. Among other things these private donors were behind the publication of two dictionaries and a Pomak primer. They also funded the Pomak Research Centre in Komotini (1997), two Pomak newspapers in Komotini and Xanthi and various other activities.<sup>49</sup> **At this stage, the official pres-**

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48 Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91, 95. The book is Θεοχαρίδης, Πέτρος, *Πομάκοι. Οι μουσουλμάνοι της Ροδόπης. Ιστορία, καταγωγή, γλώσσα, θρησκεία, κοινωνικά*, Ξάνθη, Πολιτιστικό Αναπτυξιακό Κέντρο Θράκης, 1995.

49 Details concerning the emergence and presentation of these books are again well covered in Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 154–164. The books in question are *Πομακικοελληνικό λεξικό*, Αλεξανδρούπολη, Δ Σώμα Στρατού, 1995; *Γραμματική πομακικής γλώσσας*, Αλεξανδρούπολη, Δ Σώμα Στρατού, 1996; *Συντακτικό της πομακικής γλώσσας*, Αλεξανδρούπολη, Δ Σώμα Στρατού, 1997; (As part of the same effort is also worth mentioning the presentation of Pomak culture in Κεβεντζίδης, Συμεών, *Οδοιπορικό στα πομακοχώρια*, Αλεξανδρούπολη, Δ Σώμα Στρατού, 1996); Θεοχαρίδης, Πέτρος, *Γραμματική της πομακικής*

ence of the Greek state did not take centre stage, but it is hard to imagine that these initiatives could have found place without official backing behind the curtains. State support was also clear due the highly profiled presentation of the dictionaries at the venerable Hotel Grande Bretagne in the centre of Athens on May 10, 1996, which, among others, featured speeches by Minister of Justice Evanyelos Venizelos, and the soon-to-be special secretary for intercultural education at the Ministry of Education, Anyelos Syrigos.<sup>50</sup> **Although the initiative was first of all motivated politically by a wish to prevent linguistic assimilation towards Turkish, it also led to some unexpected protests from Bulgaria that perceived it as an attempt to fragment the Bulgarian language just as standard literary Macedonian had done previously. Bulgaria was also afraid of possible repercussions on her own Pomak minority.<sup>51</sup> This probably caused Greece to tread more carefully in its Pomak policies. Another factor that may have slowed down the implementation of a Pomak programme is the improvement in Greek-Turkish relations after 1999 in connection with the so-called earthquake diplomacy.**

As can be seen from the above discussion, the issuing of Pomak dictionaries and grammars as well as other works on the language was first of all politically, and not educationally, motivated. This may help to explain the shoddiness of much of the work in question.<sup>52</sup> Both Petros Theoharidis and Nathanail Panayotidis were involved in the Greek minority education mechanism and had no background in Slavic philology. Their works are full of mistakes and inconsistencies due to their

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*γλώσσα. Παράρτημα με φράσεις και κείμενα πομακοελληνικά-ελληνοπομακικά*, Θεσσαλονίκη, Αίγειρος, 1996; Θεοχαρίδης, Πέτρος, *Ελληνοπομακικό λεξικό*, Θεσσαλονίκη, Αίγειρος, 1996; Θεοχαρίδης, Πέτρος, *Πομακοελληνικό λεξικό*, Θεσσαλονίκη, Αίγειρος, 1996; Παναγιωτίδης, Ναθαναήλ, *Οι Πομάκοι και η γλώσσα τους*, Αλεξανδρόπουλη, Εκδόσεις Γνώμη, 1997.

<sup>50</sup> The mobilisation of the Greek press is also evident. Also see the large two-page feature on the presentation in *Ελευθεροτυπία* 11.05.1996 by G. Stamatopoulos.

<sup>51</sup> Παπαδημητρίου, *op. cit.*, p. 43. See also, *Ελευθεροτυπία* 03.07.1996.

<sup>52</sup> For a detailed philological criticism of the books, see Alexandra Ioannidou and Christian Voss, "Kodifizierungsversuche des pomakischen und ihre ethnopolitische Dimension," *Die Welt der Slaven* XLVI (2001).



incompetence. In the case of Panayotidis, he even states frankly in his preface that the book was written without pretension to “philological laurels.”<sup>53</sup> The dictionaries and grammar issued by the Forth Army Corps are the best of the lot, probably because it could enlist help from trained philologists who did their army service to assist the Pomak recruit, Ridvan Karahotza, who was listed as the primary author.<sup>54</sup> **There is still no** standardised system for writing Pomak. Every author has his own system, usually based on the Greek or Latin alphabet with certain modifications in order to render phonemes that do not exist in Greek. If we look at the various works that have appeared since 1995, there seems to be a gradual preference for the Latin alphabet instead of Greek. There may be valid arguments for both choices, but the main problem with these works is the lack of consistent criteria when rendering Pomak words into the alphabet chosen. Here the grand prize for cursory work should go to Manolis Varvounis. In his work on Pomak folkloric songs, he chose to render them in the Latin alphabet but according to phonetic rules of the Greek alphabet! In the word list presented at the end of the article we can consequently encounter words like *louk- κρεμμύδια* (that is, “onion,” from the Bulgarian/Pomak word *luk*) or *orntek-πάπια* (that is, “duck,” from the Turkish word *ördek*) etc.<sup>55</sup> **Let us be more specific regarding** the last example so that it becomes understandable to people who are not familiar with Greek phonetics: Since the Greek letter “δ” is pronounced like the English “th” in the word “this” – a voiced dental fricative – the English letter “d” as in the English word “do” – a voiced alveolar plosive – is spelled with the letters “ντ” in Greek. Furthermore, we have a problem regarding to what degree it is possible to aspire to a unified standardised Pomak language. Petros Theoharidis based his work on

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53 Παναγιωτίδης, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

54 It should be stressed that these scholars were not trained in Slavic philology. It must, however, have inspired one of them to work further with the material since he later published the most scholarly description of the Pomak language of Miki Village; Παναγιωτίδης, *op. cit.*

55 Βαρβούνης, Μανόλης, *Συμβολή στη μελέτη των δημοτικών τραγουδιών των Πομάκων της ελληνικής Θράκης*, Κομοτηνή, Μορφωτικός Όμιλος Κομοτηνής, 1994.

the Pahní Village dialect, which is arbitrarily chosen because his main Pomak informant was from this village. Papadimitriou uses the Miki Village dialect for his study. It should be stressed that in contrast to most of the other works, he is aware of the implications of what he is doing and does not aspire to write anything else than a description of a Pomak dialect. His choice of the IPA as method of notation makes it interesting mainly for a scholarly audience and less useful from a practical user's point of view. He makes it clear that the Miki dialect is different from the Ehinós (a mere eight kilometres away) and the Oreó (a mere thirteen kilometres away) dialects.<sup>56</sup> **It goes without saying that the differences in** regard to the Pomak dialects in the Komotini area are much greater. Still, they are all part of the language continuum that extends to the other side of the Greek-Bulgarian border. As of writing, it seems that the alphabet question has not yet been resolved. A question in parliament in 2007 regarding Pomak language issues made the Department of Education answer that it will commission a university to carry out an investigation concerning the possible introduction of the Pomak language in schools where there will be a final choice on which alphabet to use.<sup>57</sup>

## **Greek Linguists in the Service of Nationalism**

The Greek authorities have obviously been aware that many of those engaged in the codification of the Pomak language did not have the proper training for the task. This made them seek advice from the Department of Linguistics at the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki, which is well reputed and has the expertise in question. In his comments to the grammar issued by the Forth Army Corps, which is published as a preface to the book, Professor Haralambos Symeonidis commends the initiative and thinks without doubt that the authorities should go ahead with the publishing of the book although he has some reservations. In extension to this he was also invited to make a “grant proposal” to the Foreign Ministry for a research programme that would fulfil the need “to work out authoritative dictionaries and grammars that could be accepted

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<sup>56</sup> Παναγιωτίδης, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

<sup>57</sup> Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

internationally, in contrast to those presently available, which could become the basis for the teaching of the language whenever that should be decided.”<sup>58</sup> **No result of this research project should be published** without the advance consent of the Foreign Department and absolute confidentiality was a precondition. Kostopoulos stresses the high cost of the proposal (60,000,000 GDR), which also deterred the Foreign Department. What I find more interesting is the line of argument employed by Symeonidis. He not only offers his linguistic expertise, but he also adopts the stereotypes of previous nationalist research such as presenting the Pomaks as descendants of ancient Greek tribes. He puts himself in the service of traditional Greek nationalism, so that the conclusions are already given in the research proposal. Consequently, it is important for him to present Pomak as a separate language that must be considered different from the Bulgarian language and dialects. Symeonidis is also eager to point out the possibility of assimilating the Pomaks, and other matters that are far beyond his linguistic competence.<sup>59</sup> **All in all it looks** like a recycling of old dubious arguments in slightly more professional packaging as far as the linguistic expertise is concerned.

### **A Debate Where the Pomaks Are Largely Absent**

One of the most discouraging aspects of these initiatives to codify the Pomak language is the obvious double standard when we consider the attitudes displayed towards other “lesser-spoken languages” in Greece. The language situation is often presented in a highly emotional fashion. The Pomaks are displayed as victims, neglected by the Greek state and under pressure from Turkish nationalism. It is of course correct that the educational system has been imposed on them from above. In school they learn Turkish as the language of minority education, Greek as the official language of the state and Arabic for those who attend religious courses. In many cases they end up without satisfactory proficiency in

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<sup>58</sup> *Ελευθεροτυπία* 17.01.2009, “‘Confidential’ Research in Thrace” (<http://www.enet.gr/?i=news.el.article&id=8177>). See also Κωστόπουλος, *op. cit.*, pp. 191–199.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

any of these foreign languages and there is no education in their mother tongue. Some people who call for Pomak language education are simply exasperated by the present education system and its consequences for the children,<sup>60</sup> but in most cases it seems to be insincere proposals that cater to an old-fashioned nationalist agenda.

Since the Pomaks are squeezed between Greek and Turkish nationalism it is difficult to judge what the Pomaks really want. The initiative to codify the language did not emerge from the Pomaks themselves. The Pomaks who have contributed to the process are relatively few, and there is as yet no sign of broader acceptance. One factor that inhibits acceptance is the massive condemnation by Turkey and minority members who are promoting the minority's Turkish identity. When the first Pomak-Greek dictionary appeared, part of the minority leadership condemned the effort in strong terms. They characterised the publishing of the dictionary as “fascist” (since it ran contrary to Turkish nationalism), and made it clear that they would oppose the teaching of Pomak language in schools.<sup>61</sup> **It is also clear that many Pomak parents were highly sceptical** of the prospect of introducing Pomak language into the minority education system.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusions

As can be seen from what I have written above, I do not take a romantic approach to the Pomak language. I wish everybody to be able to speak their mother tongue freely and that no stigma be attached to this. Unfortunately, the homogenisation efforts of nation states are often less than kind to deviating cultures. Superficially, it may seem that recent

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60 Μιχαήλ, Δόμνα, “Η εκπαίδευση των Πομάκων της Δ. Θράκης: Πολιτικές και κοινωνικές διαστάσεις του θέματος,” Θ. Μαλκίδης-Ν. Κόκκας (Επι.) *Μετασχηματισμοί της συλλογικής ταυτότητας των Πομάκων*, Ξάνθη, 2006. pp. 191–219.

61 *Ελευθεροτυπία* 18.05.1996.

62 Ekaterini Markou, “La Question identitaire et l’éducation chez les pomaques de Thrace Grecque,” Doctoral Thesis, École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, Paris (Novembre 2001), pp. 325–333.

Greek interest in Pomak language and folklore is a sign of respect for cultural pluralism, but this is deceptive. It is impossible to interpret this interest correctly without bearing in mind the Greek-Turkish antagonism in regard to the minority. That is also the reason why recent efforts to codify the language and the publication of various dictionaries and grammars have been dominated by amateurish efforts. To a large degree the interest is not in the Pomak language per se, but in demonstrating – often in a crude manner – the non-Turkishness of part of the minority. Within the minority the language has low prestige and limited use. The attempts to codify the language are also problematic because the area inhabited by Pomaks in Greece does not form a natural dialectic unit. As I have mentioned earlier, east-west contact in the Pomak area was limited and there are significant dialect differences. And even if we had a more uniform Pomak dialect do we really need another south Slavic language for a small and marginal group? Another interesting aspect is Bulgaria's concerns regarding Greek codification initiatives, since this implies that the far larger Pomak population of Bulgaria does not speak Bulgarian. The most important thing is that ultimately the Pomaks themselves should decide on this. Their language and culture should be supported to the degree that it serves their needs and interests. In the present situation they are unfortunately all too often pawns in the competing nationalisms of the surrounding states.