

**Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov**

## **From Roma Muslims to Romani Islam**

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When speaking and writing about Roma and their religion in Europe, it is usually assumed to be about Christians, and it is often forgotten that a significant proportion of European Roma are Muslims. Information about the existence of Roma Muslims is usually met with surprise.

Such was the case with a special audience for Roma and Sinti at the Vatican on 26 October 2015, when all media distributed a photo of a Roma folk group from Macedonia, in which Roma women and girls wore shalwar (Muslim women’s dress).

The presence of Roma Muslims in Europe is linked to the Ottoman invasion and the establishment of the Ottoman Empire in the region from the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries onwards. Regarding the Roma in the Ottoman Empire, this school has already discussed the topic during a special lecture, so we will say only a few words. The earliest mention of the ‘Gypsies’ in the Ottoman tax documentation dates from the late 15th century and appears in the tax register for the Nikopol *sanjak* (a territorial administrative unit). The specialised tax register, which deserves particular attention, dates from 1522-1523 and is entitled “Comprehensive roll of the income and taxation of the ‘Gypsies’ [Kıptyan] of the *vilayet* [province] of Rumeli”. At that time, the province of Rumeli included almost the entire Balkan Peninsula. This tax register recorded 10,294 Christian and 4,203 Muslim Roma households (in total, a further 471 widows’ households were included). In addition, there were a further 2,694 Roma Muslim households in the so-called ‘Gypsy sanjak’ [Çingene Sancağı]. In this case, ‘sanjak’ is not used in the usual sense of a territorial unit but in the sense of a certain group of the Roma Muslim population, which was involved in a number of auxiliary activities in the service of the army.

The position of Roma Muslims in the Ottoman Empire was ambivalent. The Roma always were differentiated through their ethnicity. This separation of the Roma was rooted in the general feeling towards them – Ottoman state and local population alike considered them to be a lesser category of people, not real Christian nor real Muslims. From point of view of the Empire's administration this was expressed through higher taxation of Roma Muslims than other Muslims population, however it was possible to rebut this in court. One of most outspoken examples is the case from Bosnia, where in 1693 the Rom by name Selim, the son of Osman, a baker, turned to the court in Sarajevo with the request to be exempt from the payment of the poll-tax ‘as an infidel’. In the request he stated:

“... I am the son of a Muslim and I am a Muslim. I live in the Muslim quarter and along with my co-residents pay the tithe when I can manage it. Moreover, along with the Muslims I pray five times a day and send my children to the religious school to learn the Koran along with the rest of the children. I work on my baking orders, and my lawful wife avoids strangers ...”

Alongside his request, he enclosed his wedding certificate and a circular letter from the Sultan on the payment of taxes by Muslims. According to the court's final decision, the claimant was exempt from paying the poll-tax. Examples like this explain how the authorities, without resorting to violent measures, promoted the adoption of Islam among the Roma in various ways (mostly through tax incentives). The process of converting to Islam among the large number of Roma in the Balkans can be traced back in time, with a continuing trend over the centuries to adopt Islam.

It is interesting to follow the personal names of Roma in the tax registers. Since Muslim and Christian names differ, their analysis makes it possible to draw conclusions about their religion. Names were recorded according to the formula: personal name + son of so-and-so. The rule was that converts to Islam (i.e. those who had adopted Islam) were to have the notation “son of Abdullah” added after their personal name. However, the examples show that, as far as the Roma were concerned, these rules did not always apply. In the registers, one encounters Muslims with Christian names without the designation “son of Abdullah,” and conversely, Christians with Muslim names. In addition, almost all women have Christian names. For example, in the community (*jemaat*) of Turali, the son of Husain from the district of Yanboli, Kostas, the son of Anastas, Tasos, the brother of Nikola, and Nikola, the son of Kuchar, were recorded as Muslims, while Husain Kethuda and his son Turali, Resim, the brother of Tatar, Husain, his brother, Arnavud, the brother of Seidi, Dervish, the brother of Kuriz and Ibrahim Hruzo were recorded as Christians; In the community of Goros, the son of Muhos from the district Eski Zaara, Kalin, the son of Ivan, and Bogdan, the brother of Paskal, were listed among the Muslims, while Iskender and Hamza, the brothers of Matosh, Yankos, the son of Ismail, Ivan, the son of Iskender, and Ibrahim, his son, were included among the Christians.

This probably indicates, on the one hand, a slow process of religious conversion and, on the other, syncretism and frequent shifts from one faith to another.

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In the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire was in a prolonged socio-economic and political crisis, accompanied by the rapid development of national ideas and emancipatory movements among

Christian peoples. As a result, new Christian ethno-national states emerged in the Balkans (Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria), and the vassal principalities of Wallachia and Moldova united to form a new country - Romania). The processes of forming new Balkan states ended after World War I, when the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist (formal in 1923), and in the Western Balkans new independent states were created (Yugoslavia and Albania).

In newly independent Balkan countries (except Albania), the dominant religion shifted from Islam to Orthodox Christianity, and the states' national languages replaced Ottoman Turkish as the official language, which put Roma Muslims in an unenviable public position. They found themselves doubly marginalised, both on the basis of their ethnicity and their religion. Some of them, e.g. in Greece, Serbia, and Bulgaria, were forced to convert to Orthodox Christianity through various forms of pressure. In other instances, however, these processes of religious change proceeded voluntarily over the years. Among those Roma who remained Muslims, the processes of acquiring preferred ethnic identity intensified (i.e. they preferred to publicly declare themselves as ethnic Turks and Tatars).

Significant parts of the Roma Muslims in Balkan countries remain (at least nominally) adherents of their old religion, without changing their ethnic identity, and among them started to emerge specific Roma forms of Islamic religious life. Aspirations for the civil emancipation of Roma arose and developed precisely among these Roma Muslims. Their first manifestation was in Bulgaria and was linked to the struggle for equal voting rights. In 1901, changes to the Electoral law were adopted in Bulgaria, under which Muslim Roma (at that time the majority of Roma in Bulgaria) and nomadic Roma (a relatively small share of the total Roma population) were deprived of voting rights, despite the fact that the Bulgarian constitution of that time guaranteed equal voting rights to all Bulgarian citizens regardless of ethnic origin. In response to these anti-constitutional and discriminatory restrictions, on 19.12.1905 in Sofia a "Koptic Congress" (from Kipti, i.e. the Egyptian; in this way the Roma in the Balkans were designated in the Ottoman) was held. The Congress adopted a telegram to the Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand, hoping he could apply his influence "to restore our human rights ... to not live like pariahs in a free and constitutional Bulgaria". A delegation from the Congress, led by Dr. Marko Markov, handed over to the National Assembly a request for the removal of the adopted amendments to the Election Law, which remained without any result.

In 1910, a Roma public organisation in the town of Vidin was officially registered. It published a brochure entitled "Statute of Egyptian nation in town of Vidin". The organisation's main objective was to formalise the long-standing relationship between local Roma and state and local authorities, reflecting an effort to transfer and legalise existing de facto social relations inherited from the time of the Ottoman Empire. The organisation's establishment was driven not only by the desire for recognition of Roma as a distinct ethnic group, but also by their aspirations to be publicly recognised

as an equal part of the new Bulgarian nation-state's social structure. Most of the organisation's leadership at that time were nominally Muslims. But now you can have a closer look at the stamp and its iconography, and you can see interesting details: As the organisation's annual holiday was declared Gergyovden (St George Day), the organisation's seal depicts St George "on a horse with a spear in his hand, stuck in a crocodile, and behind his horse the royal daughter". It reveals connections with Ancient Egypt and emphasises ties to Christianity, the "dominant religion" in the new Bulgarian state, according to the Tarnovo Constitution.

In 1919, *Sofia's Common Moslem Educational-Cultural Mutual Aid Organisation "Istikbal-Future"* was established in Sofia. Shakir Pashov (a prominent Roma activist and the main driver of the Roma movement in Bulgaria for several decades) served as its secretary. The organisation's statute does not use the terms "Roma" or "Gypsies". The statute makes it clear that the Roma of Sofia (the majority Muslim at the time) intended to use this organisation to gain control of the mosque and waqf (Islamic religious endowment) properties in the capital. Local Islamic leaders resisted these moves, all of whom belonged to the Turkish minority (although, at the time, only an insignificant number of Turks remained in Sofia). The Roma organisation filed several lawsuits to try to gain control of these assets. The court proceedings dragged on for more than a year, but the Supreme Administrative Court eventually dismissed the case. This battle continued into the 1930s, when, based on the Istikbal Association, the *Common Mohammedan-Gypsy National Cultural-Educational and Mutual Aid Union in Bulgaria* was created. Indeed, the Roma movement in Bulgaria in the period between the two world wars developed under the sign of the struggle to govern the Islamic estates, a battle that ultimately the Roma lost.

The situation in the then-Yugoslavia between the two world wars was different. In the Western Balkans, many heterodox Sufi orders existed for centuries, united in *the Union of Dervish Orders of Alija*, established in 1874 in Prizren (Kosovo). In the interwar period, the majority of ethnic Turks, especially from the lands of present-day Republic of Macedonia and Kosovo, emigrated to Turkey, and these orders began to include large numbers of Roma, many of whom became sheikhs (i.e., leaders of the local Islamic communities), and the orders themselves became de facto Roma's. This process received approval and support from the *Union of Dervish Orders of Alija*, because it helped keep the number of believers high and secured maintenance for existing Islamic sacred places.

In the religious life of Muslim Roma, significant changes occurred after World War II, when communist regimes were established in most of the countries in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Albania, Romania). The public influence of Islam (as of any religion) was severely restricted (in Albania, even any religion was forbidden), and Muslim Roma were largely left to themselves. In many

cases (especially in Bulgaria), many of them converted to Orthodox Christianity. Among the Roma, Muslims continued to practise and develop so-called “everyday or Folk Islam”, which functions almost independently of the existing Islamic institutions. At the head of the local Roma Islamic communities (mainly in urban Roma neighbourhoods) stand local religious leaders, sheikhs in Yugoslavia and *hodzhi* (imams) in Bulgaria (not recognised by official Islamic authorities). The religious life included a number of syncretic elements from other religions, more or less contrary to Islamic norms.

The modern development of these processes will be discussed later; now we will briefly present the mosaic of heterogeneous communities of Roma Muslims in the Balkans today.

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The presence of numerous Roma Muslim communities across the Balkans is understandable given the region’s history. Today, European Muslim Roma live in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in certain areas of Serbia, Greece and Romania. Roma Muslims, descendants of Balkan migrants, also live in Ukraine and the Russian Federation. After World War II, in the former Yugoslavia, many Muslim Roma from Kosovo and Macedonia, moved to other federal republics, especially Croatia and Slovenia. In the 1960s–1970s, Roma Muslim migration from Yugoslavia was part of the broader process of labour mobility among Yugoslav citizens who worked (and later, in many cases, permanently settled) in Western Europe (Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, etc.). After the breakup of Yugoslavia, many Roma Muslims emigrated as refugees from the wars and ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, mainly to Italy and Germany, and to Serbia.

Most often, Roma Muslims in the Balkans are called ‘Turkish Gypsies’ not only by the surrounding population in the relevant languages, but they also define themselves as *Xoraxane/Xoroxane Roma* (i.e. ‘Turkish Gypsies’ in *Romanes*) or *Khorane Roma*. Some groups have preserved their group divisions and Roma language as their “own”, or at least use it alongside Turkish, and have a more or less strongly expressed Roma identity. Other significant groups have Roma identity but have lost their former group divisions and declare themselves exclusively as *Xoraxane Roma*. Now, on the slide you may see the composition of Muslim Roma in the Balkans.

- Western Bulgaria: *Kalajdži* (North-West), *Erli* (Sofia, Kystendil) – former Muslims; *Xoroxane Roma* (South-West); some of whom have Turkish identity.
- Eastern Bulgaria: *Musikanti*, *Gradeški tsigani* – former Muslims; *Futadži*, *Košničari*, *Džambazi*, *Fičiri*, *Žužane Roma* – with Roma identity; *Usta-milliet*, *Čarale*, *Xoraxane Roma* – mixed languages (*Romanes* and/or Turkish) and identities (Roma or Turkish);

- Turkish-speaking and strong Turkish identity – Dobrich, Russe, Razgrad, Targovishte, Silistra, Veliko Tarnovo, Pazardjik, Burgas, Haskovo, Kardjali, etc.
- Ethnically neutral name: ‘Milliet’ (“people”), also ‘Muslims’, ‘Minority’.

**Romania (Northern Dobrudja):** common name ‘Țigani turci’ (Turkish Gypsies), Turkish- and/or Tatar-speaking, with Turkish or Tatar identities.

**Greece (Aegean Thrace):** common name ‘Turko-gifti’ (Turkish Gypsies); most are Turkish-speaking and identify as Turkish.

**Albania:** nominally Muslim Roma with Roma identity; Roma groups – *Mečkara* (living in Albanian lands for centuries), *Kabudži*, *Kurtofia*, *Arlia* and *Sepedži* (last migrants).

### **Muslim Roma in the states of former Yugoslavia**

**Macedonia:** *Kovači*, *Barutči*, *Topanli*, *Bugurdži*, *Muxadžiri*, etc.; so-called ‘yarım ağalar/yalâm agalari’ – Turkish-speaking with Turkish identity.

**Kosovo:** *Arli* (group division – *Bugurdži*, *Arabadži* / *Kovači*, *Maljoko*, etc.) and part of *Gurbeti*.

**Serbia:** *Arli* and part of *Gurbeti* in South Serbia.

**Bosnia and Herzegovina:** *Muslim Roma*, *Kaloperi*, and part of *Čergari*.

**Montenegro:** *Muslim Roma*.

**Croatia and Slovenia:** Roma migrants from Kosovo and Macedonia.

**Western Europe:** labour migrants (Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Belgium, etc.) and refugees (Italy, Germany, etc.).

**New identities:** ‘Jevg’, ‘Madžup’, ‘Гюпти / Гюпци’, ‘Египќани’, ‘Kovači’, etc., with Albanian identity = *Balkan Egyptians*; *Ashkali* with Albanian identity = RAE (Kosovo).

Another smaller part of Roma Muslims gradually chose to redefine their identity as Turkish. From the times of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, there is correlation, overlap, and even reciprocal change between religion and ethnic identity; thus, the term *Turkish Roma* could mean that they are Muslims, and in reciprocity, when they are Muslims, it means that they are ‘Turks’. From this overlap starts the development of a phenomenon: ‘the preferred identity’. A significant number of them have also adopted a Turkish identity, at least in front of strangers, and publicly declare themselves as ‘Turks’. Significant parts of Roma communities in the Balkans, however, not only deny their Roma identity, but when they must declare themselves, they prefer the ethnically neutral term ‘Milliet’ (‘people’) and/or also use other ethnically neutral self-designations, such as ‘Muslims’ and ‘Minority’. These processes can ultimately lead to the formation of a new, non-Roma and non-Turkish identity, as is the case with *Balkan Egyptians* and *Aškali* in the Western Balkans.

In addition to the previously mentioned Muslim Roma communities we need to add also the *Кърмлитка Рома* (also known as Krimurja), derived from the word *Къръм* — the Tatar name for

Crimea). Their ancestors migrated to the Crimean Peninsula in the 17th–18th centuries from the Balkans; during the Soviet period, they spread throughout the USSR, but in recent times they mainly live in the Russian Federation and Ukraine, as well as in Kazakhstan and Georgia. In Crimea, there is also a community called *Дайфа/Тайфа* (their own name was *Урумчел* or *Урмачел*), and some of them still use the self-appellation *Cengene*. They are Muslims who migrated from the Ottoman Empire, probably in the 16th–17th centuries, from the Balkans and Asia Minor. Today, they are Tatar-speaking and predominantly identify as Tatars.

And finally, a small Roma Muslim community also lives in Iran, migrants from the Balkans approximately 300 years ago. Their self-appellation is Zargari.

Let's go back to the Balkans. The changes (or attempts to change) ethnic identities are only part of the processes taking place among various parts of the Muslim Roma in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Closely connected to and intertwined with these changes are processes of developing their religious identities. Among some Roma in Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia, there is almost full conversion to Orthodox Christianity; in other cases, Christianity is blended with Islam in a syncretic manner, or even the practice of specific religious 'diglossia' develops (that is, professing both Islam and Christianity in different social and/or geographic settings). Among part of the Roma, a contrary phenomenon occurs, with further increases in adherence to Islam. In all these cases, centuries-old stereotypes and prejudices against Roma continue to be an important factor in the development of the process of the formation of Muslim Roma communities, including their religious life. Formally, the Muslim Roma in the Balkans are an integral part of the local Islamic communities, but in practice their Islamic institutions remain aloof from Roma coreligionists. This attitude of Muslims in the Balkans towards Roma Muslims has caused the emergence and preservation of separate, Roma-only, Islamic religious communities. Under these conditions, the so-called Folk Islam continued to develop and be preserved, including a few syncretic forms with Christianity and older pagan beliefs, customs, and rituals, some of which contradict the norms of orthodox Islam. Examples in this regard are numerous. These include, for example, the existence of "own" Roma "hodzha" (imams) and even "hodzhakini" (wife of the imam), which are not recognised by the official Islamic institutions but play an important role in the life of Roma neighbourhoods; the existence of separate Roma cemeteries (or Roma portions on Islamic or Orthodox Christian cemeteries); conducting syuneti (circumcisions) and Orthodox Christian Baptism of one and the same boy; Orthodox Christian Baptism of a girl with simultaneous folk celebration and folk baptizing; celebrating not only the double holiday (in Islamic and Christian versions) Hederlezi or Dzhurdovdan/Gergiovden, but even holidays of some Christian saints, e.g. Vasilica (the day of St. Basil) called by Muslim Krimurja Yıl Baş. Over the past two decades, in connection with the advent

of new evangelical churches among large parts of the Muslim Roma, who converted to Evangelism, even more new and more diverse syncretic forms have appeared.

In all the Balkans, Romani folk Islam is also characterised by syncretism between Sunni and different variants of heterodox Islam, e.g. Sufi or Alevi traditions. The majority of Roma belong, at least nominally, to Sunni Islam; however, together with the surrounding population of different faiths, they also visit Sufi or Alevi holy places, most commonly *türbes* or *tekiyas* (tombs of Islamic saints).

In Bulgaria, Romania (in the Dobruja region), and Greece (in Eastern Thrace), visiting these holy places—for example, the *türbe* (or *tekke* in Bulgarian spelling) of Demir Baba in the Razgrad region of Bulgaria, or the *türbe* of Sarı Saltık in Babadag, Romania—does not lead Muslim Roma to become part of the local religious communities that practice heterodox Islam. In recent years, however, there have been cases in Bulgaria where Muslim Roma, without becoming affiliated with the local Alevi Turkish communities, have established their own Alevi shrines (for example, in the Stolipinovo neighbourhood of Plovdiv).

The process of creating their own Roma religious structures within heterodox Islam is much more advanced in the Western Balkans, especially in the former Yugoslavia.

These processes began between the two world wars but took on new dimensions after the breakup of Yugoslavia, particularly in Kosovo and Macedonia. Various heterodox orders and brotherhoods were especially numerous in this region for centuries, but in the past Roma were usually not allowed to join them, though they were permitted to participate in some celebrations, such as visits to the tombs of Islamic saints. In recent years, however, the creation of separate Roma-only religious 'cemaats' [religious communities] has accelerated. The surrounding population most often designates them all as *Dervishi*, but in practice, at least formally, they belong to different branches (Orders) of heterodox Sufi Islam – the Bektashi (mostly in Albania), Khalwati / Halveti, Rifai / Rufa'i, Qadiri / Kadiri, Sa'di, Naqshbandi, Mevlevi, Shadhili, Melami / Malamati, Sa'di, Sinani, etc.

The Halveti and Rifai orders are the most popular among the Roma, while Prizren has emerged as something of a centre for Roma dervishes today. Alongside processes of labour migration, and consequently as refugees from the wars in former Yugoslavia, large parts of the heterodox Muslim Roma from Kosovo and Macedonia settled in other former Yugoslav republics and in various countries of Western Europe. In their new countries of residence, they continue to maintain their separate religious community life and create their own religious communities. In some cases, they even establish new holy places of their own, for example in Pula (Croatia), Brussels (Belgium), and elsewhere.

All those listed above phenomena are actually part of a more general process in the development of Islam, namely, the transition in the twentieth century 'from Religiosity to Identity', in which the leading position of the Islamic religion gives way to the national (or more accurately said ethno-

national) Roma identity. Of particular interest in this regard is the combination of Roma and Islamic traditions in the celebration of *Bajrakesko dive* ("Flag Day"), which is celebrated on the weekend two weeks after *Herdelez*. On this day, a procession takes place through the streets of the city, carrying the old guild flag of the blacksmiths of Prizren, followed by a visit to the *türbe* of Ymer Baba in the nearby village of Lez. An interesting detail is the date written on the flag itself – it is 1227 according to the Muslim calendar, which corresponds to 1849.

The processes of ethnicization of Islamic traditions encompass not only heterodox Islam but also "classical," Sunni Islam. A striking example in this regard is the publication in Sarajevo of a luxury edition of the Qur'an in Romani, translated by the popular Roma singer Muharem Serbezovski. These processes develop much more successfully under the conditions of migration to Western Europe, where their own religious communities are created not only by heterodox, but also by orthodox (Sunni) Muslim Roma, who in many places have already established their own *Romane džamije* (Romani mosques), for example in Düsseldorf, Germany, where a mosque was officially opened in 2009 and was established by the *Islamische Kultur Union der Roma Düsseldorf e.V.*

The processes of specific Roma emancipation of Muslim Roma in the context of Islam, or in other words, the transition from Muslim Roma to Romani Islam, received a boost after the changes from 1989-1990, when almost the entire Balkans (excluding Greece) began a long and difficult period of transition to democracy. Under these conditions, in various Balkan countries, representatives of the Muslim Roma are trying to engage more actively in the life of religious communities in the management of Islamic institutions at the local level, but in most cases, they encounter resistance from the "true [that is, non-Roma] Muslims", which sets them on the path of Romani Islam.

In the 21st century, new trends point to the possibility of another transition within Islam. It is no longer 'from Religiosity to Identity' but 'from Identity to Religiosity', a shift from national/ethnic Islam to Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism. An important factor in this later process for Muslim Roma from the Balkans has been the open borders within the united Europe, which have brought together countries of the former communist camp in Southeast Europe and those in the process of accession. It may sound paradoxical, but radical Islam enters the Balkans not from the Middle East but from Western Europe. Some Muslim Roma from the Balkans, during their migration to Western Europe, come under the influence of radical Islamic ideas, and when they return (temporarily or permanently) to their homelands, they bring Islamic literature and financial support from various Islamic foundations. The extent to which this Islamic literature, mainly in Arabic and incomprehensible to Roma, is used, and the impact it has (apart from the symbolic one), is quite controversial. What is noticeable, however, is the use of financial aid for the construction of new mosques in Roma neighbourhoods and for the establishment and maintenance of religious schools.

The ideas and principles of radical Islam have become more pervasive in the lives of some Roma communities, most clearly visible nowadays in the cities of Pazardzhik in Bulgaria and Skopje in Macedonia. The results seem shocking: For more than five centuries in the Balkans, Muslim Roma women have never worn the burqa, but today many women in Pazardzhik and Skopje are wearing it. Sutka in Skopje has already witnessed active propaganda against the celebration of the greatest festival of Roma, Hederlezi, because “it is contrary to the principles of ‘real’ Islam”. The true dimensions of these processes remain unclear, but as a result, some Roma neighbourhoods have come to be seen in the public perception of the countries of the region as clusters of radical Islamism, where mass anti-Gypsy attitudes in society have been particularly strong and have been growing over the last two decades. So far, in Bulgaria, only one person was legally convicted in 2005 for propaganda of radical Islam, and that was a Rom from the town of Pazardjik. Further lawsuits on charges of spreading radical Islam by Roma were filed in 2014 and 2015, and the accused were Roma also from other cities – Plovdiv, Asenovgrad, Haskovo and Harmanli. Most of them were sentenced for the distribution of public propaganda of symbols of radical Islam, for example, photos with the flag of the Islamic State (ISIL). In this way, the topic of Roma Islam was linked to the refugee crisis and sparked many public debates, thus merging existing mass anti-Roma, anti-Islamic and anti-refugee public attitudes.

This case also led to another development that is very important for Muslim Roma in Bulgaria. While in the 1920s and 1930s the Supreme Muslim Council (the highest Islamic religious institution in Bulgaria) repeatedly declared that “Muslim Gypsies are not true Muslims” and therefore could not participate in elections for Islamic institutions or in the administration of Islamic properties, in recent years the Supreme Muslim Council has adopted a very different principle as its guiding approach: in Islam, everyone is equal—there are no Turks, no Bulgarians, and no Roma.

At present, the secretary of the Supreme Muslim Council is of Roma origin, and there are also Roma serving as regional muftis. Thus, it can be said that in Bulgaria, at least to some extent and at this stage, Roma emancipation in the sphere of Islam and Islamic institutions has finally been achieved.

On this optimistic note, we conclude our lecture, while emphasising that the materials and conclusions presented here concern only Muslim Roma in Europe, where Islam is nowhere the dominant religion. Even in countries such as Albania and Kosovo, where Muslims constitute the majority, the states are officially secular, and Islam is only one of the religions practised there.

The situation of Muslim Roma in Turkey, the Middle East, and North Africa is, in principle, different, because Islam is the dominant religion in these countries. Even if there are some common features in the processes taking place, the historical and contemporary contexts are quite different, and it is only natural that the situation there cannot be the same.

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