

Magdalena Elchinova*

Demographic Trends among the Orthodox Bulgarians of Istanbul

Introduction

The decline of the Ottoman Empire during the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, followed by the emergence of the Balkan nation-states brought about sharpening nationalistic claims over the European territories of the Empire. The ultimate outcome was the partition of these territories among several states and the ethnic unmixing¹ of their populations, achieved through measures such as assimilation, migration, displacement, exchange of populations, etc. The article deals with the small community of Orthodox Bulgarians of Istanbul, formed as a result of the processes and policies that took place in that epoch.

The migration of Bulgarians to the Ottoman capital city started in the 17th–18th centuries; however it was not before the second half of the 19th century when a sizeable Bulgarian colony emerged in Istanbul.² The colony consisted of craftsmen, traders, intellectuals, as well as a few wealthy people with influence on the Sublime Porte. With its estimated number of no less than 40,000 people, the Bulgarian colony in Istanbul was bigger than any other Bulgarian town at the time being that is why Istanbul is often defined as the largest Bulgarian city of the 19th century.³ As their number got bigger, the Bulgarians in Istanbul became better organized and more socially active – they founded Bulgarian schools, churches, a culture club, and charitable organizations, published newspapers, journals and other literature. In the second half of the 19th century, Istanbul stood out as one of the centers of the Bulgarian movement for national liberation, particularly of the struggle for an independent Bulgarian church, the climax of which was the formation of the Bulgarian Exarchate in 1870. The Exarchate remained seated in Istanbul until 1913, long after the establishment of the Bulgarian nation-state in 1878. The idea of Exarch Josef II was to preserve its influence in the regions of Thrace and Macedonia, still under Ottoman rule. With its substantial clerical and

* New Bulgarian University, Sofia

¹ Rogers, Brubaker, “The Aftermath of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples.” In *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*, eds. Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

² Barbara, Jelavich, *History of the Balkans XVIII-XIX cc*, Volume I, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1983), 191, 344; Toncho, Zhechev, *B'lgarskiyat Velikden ili strastite b'lgarski [Bulgarian Resurrection or the passions of the Bulgarians]*, (Sofia: BAS Publishing House, 1995).

³ Toncho, Zhechev, *B'lgarski svetini v Istanbul (Tsarigrad) [Bulgarian Sacred Places in Istanbul (Tsarigrad)]*, (Sofia: Balkani, 2002), 7.

educational activity,⁴ the Exarchate was the consolidating center of the Bulgarians in Istanbul, Macedonia and Thrace. This religious institution had a political agenda, too. It played an important role in the construction of Bulgarian national identity among the members of its diocese. With this, it entered into direct confrontation with the Constantinople Patriarchate over the spiritual and political dominance in Macedonia and Thrace. In Istanbul, the Exarchate left a considerable material heritage, a small part of which had been preserved until today, including St Stephen church and the Convent at the shore of the Golden Horn, the Exarchate House with St Ivan Rilski chapel in the Şişli neighborhood, the Bulgarian cemetery with St Dimitar church in the adjacent quarter of Feriköy.⁵ All these were a property of the Bulgarian religious community in Istanbul which in 1875 established the Bulgarian Exarchate Foundation in Istanbul (*Bulgar ekzarhlığı ortodoks kilisesi vakfi Istanbul*) in order to take care of them.

After the establishment of the Principality, later Kingdom of Bulgaria, the bigger part of Bulgarians in the Ottoman capital city headed back to their newly liberated places of origin. Only those who came from Macedonia and Thrace remained, because these regions were still part of the Empire. In the following decades new migrants from the same regions settled in Istanbul. They left for the big city driven by various reasons, economic and political alike, with the latter taking prevalence in the early 20th century. Migration was particularly intense in the aftermath of the Ilinden uprising in 1903, the Second Balkan War in 1913 and WWI. Consequently, within a relatively short span of time the Bulgarian colony in Istanbul underwent serious transformations – the number of its members significantly decreased and the bulk of them consisted of re-settlers who came from villages in the Aegean part of Macedonia.⁶

As of today, the Bulgarians of Istanbul do not exceed 450 people. According to their own estimates, over 90% of them are descendants of re-settlers from Aegean Macedonia (mostly from villages near Kastoria, or *Kostur* in the vernacular). The rest are individuals who trace back their origins to Eastern Thrace or Vardar Macedonia. Their community is highly organized and unified, and the Foundation (as I further call it for brevity), which represents it before the central and local authorities in Bulgaria

⁴ See for details: Toncho, Zhechev, *B'lgarskiyat Velikden ili strastite b'lgarski*; Voin, Bozhinov, *B'lgarskata prosveta v Makedoniya i Odrinska Trakiya. 1873-1913* [*The Bulgarian Enlightenment in Macedonia and Edirne Thrace. 1873-1913*], (Sofia: BAS Publishing House, 1982); Zina, Markova, *B'lgarskata ekzarhiya 1870-1879* [*The Bulgarian Exarchate 1870-1879*], (Sofia: BAS Publishing House, 1989).

⁵ About the Bulgarian sites in Istanbul see Hristo, Temelski, *B'lgarskata svetinya na Zlatniya rog* [*The Bulgarian Sanctuary at the Golden Horn*], (Sofia: Bulgarian Orthodox Church St Stefan in Istanbul, 2005); Hristo, Hristov, *B'lgarskite pametnitsi v Istanbul* [*Bulgarian Monuments in Istanbul*], (Istanbul, 2009); Toncho, Zhechev, *B'lgarskiyat Velikden...*

⁶ By 1958, the total number of Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul has been 1218; 69% of them came from Aegean Macedonia, 18% came from Vardar Macedonia, 6% came from Eastern Thrace, and another 6% came from Bulgaria, see Darina, Petrova, *Tsarigradskite b'lgari* [*Tsarigrad Bulgarians*], (Sofia: IMIR, 2000), 122.

and Turkey, arranges for a variety of its social and cultural activities.⁷ The habitual scene of their collective events is the above-mentioned Exarchate sites. The Istanbulites today are in close relations with both the Patriarchates in Sofia and in Istanbul.

Bulgarians of Istanbul are little known among the Bulgarian and Turkish societies. Only the local authorities in Istanbul with whom they regularly cooperate in their efforts to maintain their vakif properties recognize them as “the Bulgarian commune” (*Bulgar cemāti*); Turkish authorities in general treat them as non-Muslims. Their relations with the Bulgarian central authorities have been very fragile in the course of time. Until the end of WWII the Bulgarian state has supported the co-ethnics in Istanbul, providing textbooks for the Bulgarian schools in the city, as well as newspapers and other literature. The communist regime however which saw Turkey as one of its major ideological opponents has cut off all contacts with the community in Istanbul. After 1990, these contacts have been renewed and intensified. Bulgarian officials frequently exchange visits with the Foundation’s representatives. The Foundation has also been receiving financial and other support by the Bulgarian state. In recent years, the Istanbul-based Bulgarian community has been sporadically mentioned in Bulgarian media on various occasions. Istanbul Bulgarians have scarcely attracted scholars’ attention. The first detailed study combining methods of historiography and ethnography has been conducted during the second half of the 1990s.⁸ Between 2010 and 2013, together with a few anthropology students from the New Bulgarian University in Sofia under my supervision, I accomplished an anthropological study of the community, the results of which are discussed in a number of publications.⁹ Hereafter, I present part of my observations on the demographic processes characteristic of the community, as well as on other related social, political and cultural features. In particular, I analyze the reasons for the decreasing number of Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul, the ageing of the community, the steady emigration attitude among its younger members, as well as the impact of cross-marriage.

Factors Underlying Demographic Processes

The major demographic trends that characterize the existing community of Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul include the steady decline of their number, their rising average age, low birth rates, and widespread emigration. Inasmuch as demo-

⁷ See for details: Magdalena, Elchinova, “Memory, Heritage and Ethnicity. Constructing Identity among Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians.” *Ethnologia Europea, Journal of European Ethnology*, 64:1, 2016, 99-113.

⁸ Petrova, *Tsarigradskite b'lgari*.

⁹ Magdalena, Elchinova, “Memory, Heritage and Ethnicity. Constructing Identity among Istanbul-based Orthodox Bulgarians.”; Magdalena, Elchinova, “Regards bulgares sur Istanbul,” *Anatoli*, № 7, dossier thématique Istanbul, capitale régionale et ville-monde, (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2016a), 269-292; Magdalena, Elchinova, *Nevidimata obshtnost: pravoslavnite b'lgari v Istanbul [The Invisible Community: Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul]*, (Sofia: NBU, 2017)

graphic developments are influenced by various social, political, economic and cultural factors, I am going to briefly outline some important aspects of the formative sociocultural context of the Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul before proceeding with the discussion of concrete demographic indicators of their community. I am starting with migration which is the major driving force of the very formation of the community in discussion, as well as of its subsequent transformations. On the one hand, migration is a basic demographic indicator which, together with the number of births and deaths, shapes population growth. In the case of the Bulgarian Istanbulites, migration (especially emigration) accounts for the above-mentioned demographic characteristics of their community. On the other hand, migration is a complex social phenomenon, determined by a plethora of motives, such as global or local conflicts, national policies, economic conditions, social differentiation, cultural diversity, racism and so on and so forth. The present-day Bulgarian community in Istanbul has been formed as a result of continuous inbound and outbound migrations in the late 19th–early 20th century. After the establishment of the Turkish nation-state in 1923, migration from the region of Macedonia has ceased, whereas this from Eastern Thrace, which is within the boundaries of Turkey, has continued, though on a very limited scale.¹⁰ By the 1950s, the immigration of Bulgarians to Istanbul had practically stopped, which however did not affect the emigration. The largest emigration waves had taken place after WWI when 5,000 Bulgarians left Istanbul; proceeded in the 1930s, when another some 1,000 left after the implementation of the Turkish laws that limited the spheres for professional realization for non-Muslims;¹¹ after WWII, especially in the 1960s and the 1970s Bulgarians continued to leave Istanbul, this time heading mostly to the USA, Canada, and Australia. Today, many young Bulgarian Istanbulites study abroad, at Western-European or North-American universities. Upon graduation, part of them do not return to their home city because of the supposedly better professional opportunities and higher living standards they enjoy in the West. Due to the multidirectional nature of the migrations of Bulgarians from the region of Macedonia throughout the 20th century, now virtually each Bulgarian family in Istanbul has relatives in Bulgaria, the US, and Canada, some having kin also in Australia and Greece. Having close relatives abroad, especially in the West, may play the role of a pull factor for further emigration.

The shifting borders in the Balkans in the early twentieth century have re-categorized the Bulgarian re-settlers in Istanbul from internal to international migrants. Consequently, from subjects of the Sultan, part of the *rum millet*, they have become an

¹⁰ Very few Christian Bulgarians have remained in these regions after the ethnic cleansing undertaken by the Ottomans in 1913. About the exodus of the Bulgarians from Eastern Thrace which has affected as many as 300,000 people, many of whom lost their lives, and the rest found refuge in Bulgaria, see in Lyubomir, Miletich, *Razorenieto na trakiyskite b'lgari prez 1913 g.* [*The Devastation of the Thracian Bulgarians in 1913*], (Sofia: D'rzhavna pechatnitsa, 1918). The few Bulgarians who remained after the exodus in Edirne and Kırklareli (*Lozengrad* in the vernacular) have afterwards left for Istanbul to merge with the larger Bulgarian community there.

¹¹ Petrova, *Tsarigradskite...*, 119. The major destination of these earlier emigrants was Bulgaria. The communist regime which ruled the country between 1944 and 1989 put an end of this migration. Today, Bulgaria does not attract migrants from among the Istanbul-based Bulgarians.

ethnoreligious minority in Turkey, one which is not even officially recognized. Turkish authorities have adopted the clauses of the Treaty of Lausanne from 1923 regarding minorities. According to them, only Greeks, Armenians and Jews, or the largest non-Muslim groups in the country, are acknowledged as minorities.¹² These are the only ethnic groups mentioned by official statistics in Turkey. For the same reason Bulgarians in Turkey are not counted by the Bulgarian state, either. There is statistical data about them from the Ottoman period. The Bulgarian Exarchate has been particularly meticulous in keeping records about the members of its parishes. After it moved to Sofia, the Bulgarian state kept records only of the Bulgarian citizens on Turkish territory. Citizenship however is a variable (the same individuals and their descendants can change their citizenship in time due to various reasons) and it cannot be a reliable indicator about the total number of people born and living in Istanbul who define themselves as ethnic Bulgarians and East-Orthodox Christians.¹³ Here I will only touch upon the dynamic relation between ethnicity and citizenship. Originally, the Bulgarians in Istanbul were Ottoman subjects. During WWI in which Bulgaria and the Empire were allies the men from the community in Istanbul got the right to join the Bulgarian army. After the end of the war, they returned to their homes with Bulgarian passports for themselves and for their family members. After the introduction of Turkish laws that were quite unfavorable to foreigners,¹⁴ many of these Bulgarian citizens changed their citizenship. For many years, the members of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul have been of mixed citizenship – not only within the community but within the family, too. The dominant trend however has been towards increasing the number of the Turkish citizens in the community. It has particularly accelerated after WWII as a result of the ideological rivalry between Bulgaria and Turkey. In addition, in the 1950s an amendment in the Turkish citizenship law has stipulated that children born in Turkey automatically become Turkish citizens. At present, the vast majority of Bulgarian Istanbulites are Turkish citizens. When in 1990 the Turkish state allowed dual citizenship to the 1989 re-settlers from Bulgaria, Istanbul-born Orthodox Bulgarians also got such an opportunity. It became particularly appealing after Bulgari-

¹² Alexis, Alexandris, *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations 1918-1974*. (Athens: Center of Asia Minor Studies, 1983), 77-104, 320-323.

¹³ It should be specified that there are several categories of Bulgarians currently living in Istanbul. The most numerous among them are the Bulgarian-born Turks, re-settlers in Turkey since 1989. Most of them, as well as their descendants born in Turkey, hold dual citizenship – Bulgarian and Turkish. There is no official statistics about their number either (see Ayse, Parla, "Irregular Workers of Ethnic Kin? Post 1990s Labour Migration from Bulgaria to Turkey," *International Migration* Vol. 45 (3), 2007, 156-181) but those living in Istanbul are at least a hundred times more than the native Orthodox Bulgarians. There are also a number of Bulgarian citizens who live and work in Istanbul – employees of international companies, of the Bulgarian Consulate in the city, university lecturers, etc. In the second half of the 1990s, according to D. Petrova they were between 2000 and 3000 (Petrova, *Tsarigradskite...*). The members of the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Istanbul differentiate from both of these groups.

¹⁴ Soner, Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey: Who Is a Turk?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006); Alexandris, *The Greek Minority...*

ia joined the EU in 2007. The first community members who applied for Bulgarian passports however soon found out that the bureaucratic procedures were too clumsy and often resulted in rejection of their applications. That is why today the number of Bulgarian citizens among the community members remains small. Mostly businessmen who benefit from the EU citizenship are willing to undertake the precarious step to apply for Bulgarian citizenship. Alternatively, some of them apply for Greek passports which are said to be much more easily obtained.¹⁵

The reasons for the dominant demographic trends among the Istanbul Bulgarians are multifarious. On the one hand, it is important to view this specific group against the background of the demographic processes characterizing Istanbul's population at large, in order to see how and to what extent the general political, economic and sociocultural factors in a specific period have influenced this particular group. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly essential to take into account the impact of the official Turkish politics towards the non-Muslim minorities in the country. Even though these policies vary in time, for long periods they have been restrictive, hostile and coercive. Most of the laws aimed at non-Muslims have been introduced in the 1920s and the 1930s, but stayed in effect for long after. Part of the implemented measures was of an assimilationist nature, aimed at the Turkification of minority populations. Most of the measures however were directly intended for the economic discrimination of non-Muslims: a number of laws limited the professions they were allowed to exercise, there were laws which allowed the confiscation of their property under certain conditions, there were periods in which non-Muslims had to pay much higher taxes than Muslims¹⁶ or did not have the right to apply for bank credits; the state controlled the movement and travel of non-Muslims and took decisions about their re-settlement.¹⁷ In addition to these laws, there were also outbursts of physical violence, or pogroms, against non-Muslim communities. Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul were particularly affected by the pogrom of September 6–7th, 1955 which was originally instigated against the Greeks in the city.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the property of many Bulgarians was also destroyed by the attacking mobs. At the time, most of the Bulgarian Istanbulites were making their living by running small businesses – they were milkmen, bakers, butchers, greengrocers and florists, and their homes and shops were scattered in neighborhoods of predominantly Greek and other non-Muslim inhabitants. Most of the people of the community I met told me how their family property was destructed during the pogrom. Some families could never restore their businesses again and closed down, others managed to revive them at the price of

¹⁵ On citizenship see Elchinova, *Nevidimata obshtnost: pravoslavnite b' Igari v Istanbul*, chapter 4.

¹⁶ One of the most drastic measures against non-Muslims was the Welfare Tax, or Varlık Kanunu, in effect between 1942 and 1949. See for details in Reşat, Kasaba, "Kemalist Certainties and Modern Ambiguities." In: *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, eds. Sibel Bozhoğan, Reşat Kasaba, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1997), 28; Alexandris, *The Greek Minority...*, 208-233.

¹⁷ Cagaptay, *Islam, Secularism, and Nationalism in Modern Turkey*; Alexandris, *The Greek Minority...*; Kasaba, "Kemalist Certainties and Modern Ambiguities," 15-51.

¹⁸ Dilek, Güven, "Riots against the Non-Muslims of Turkey: 6/7 September 1955 in the Context of Demographic Engineering," *European Journal of Turkish Studies*, Vol. 12, Pt. II, 2011; Alexandris, op. cit., 256-270

hard work and deprivation, yet others left the country. To summarize, the politics of the Turkish state towards non-Muslims up to the late 20th century¹⁹ has led to ceaseless emigration, lower social-economic position of the representatives of these minorities, limited prosperity and, as a consequence, low birth rates and negative growth rates.

It would be however incomplete to explain the negative demographic trends with such factors as globalization, economic stagnation, or unfavorable minority cities. Other factors of a sociocultural character have catalyzed the same processes. These sociocultural factors include the place which the Bulgarian Istanbulites on the social ladder in Turkey, their self-identification as “true” Istanbulites, as well as the culture patterns which they have adopted and developed in congruence with this identification. Exploring the register of the deceased kept at the Bulgarian cemetery in Ferriköy, D. Petrova observes that all members of the community who died between 1977 and 1997 were born in Istanbul.²⁰ This is to say that in the 1970s an overall generational change has been completed; by that time the community consisted only of people who were born in the city, moreover, many of their parents were born there, too. Today, with very few exceptions, the community consists of people who are at least third generation born in Istanbul, i.e. their parents, grandparents, and even great grandparents were born in the city. This fact is accompanied by a process of gradual transformation in the identity of the Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul. The descendants of immigrants from rural Macedonia and Thrace have developed the mentality and behavior of urban people. Moreover they consider themselves “true” Istanbulites and practice typically urban cultural traditions and customs.²¹ The Bulgarians of Istanbul classify themselves as belonging to the middle-class city residents of secular orientation and are very attached to a certain lifestyle which corresponds to their social position.²² Their shared living standard and way of life, alongside the Turkish politics towards non-Muslims and some general processes and events that have affected life in the city on the Bosphorus in the course of time, have enabled the emergence of the demographic trends which I discuss below.

What Lies behind the Numbers?

Having faced the lack of reliable and systematic statistical data about the Bulgarians in Istanbul, I base the discussion about the demographic processes and

¹⁹ The negative attitude of the Turkish authorities towards ethnic Bulgarians in the country continued until the fall of communism in Bulgaria by the end of 1989.

²⁰ Petrova, *op. cit.*, 122-124.

²¹ Their practices and patterns of behavior clearly mark their divergence from the cultural traditions of their forefathers, as well as their differentiation from other, more recent immigrants in Istanbul who have come from various underdeveloped regions in Turkey. These “newcomers”, according to them, have a lot of children but are unable to provide education and to take proper care of them. See for details Elchinova, *Nevidimata obshtnost*, chap. 2

²² Elchinova, “Memory, Heritage and Ethnicity.”; Elchinova, *Nevidimata...*, chap. 3

trends in their community on information, obtained through qualitative research methods, such as interviews, life stories, and direct observation. I refer to estimates made by individual community members and by employees of the Bulgarian Consulate in Istanbul about the number, average age, and birth rates of the community. The picture is completed by the evidence I derive from a book kept by the administrative director of the Foundation in which he registers the living members of the community by name and year of birth. Children born in mixed marriages are also considered members of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul and their names appear in the book.²³ According to this register, as of September 2011²⁴ Istanbul Bulgarians totaled 427 people. This number is close to the estimates, made by the Consular General of the Republic of Bulgaria in Istanbul – between 450 and 500 people. Darina Petrova, who did her research among Istanbul Bulgarians in the second half of the 1990s and who in her capacity as a Consulate’s employee was in close relations with community members, approximates their number at the time at 500–550 people. According to her, in 1958 the Bulgarian colony in Istanbul had 1217 members and this number had dropped down to only 900 by the 1970s.²⁵ As loose as these figures may be, they show a consistent decline of the total number of Orthodox Bulgarians in the city on the Bosphorus. I have already mentioned the role of migration in the growth and then the decline of the community. In the second half of the 20th century, with still continuing outbound migration and virtually no new immigrants, the community’s reproduction depended solely on natural increase, which in its turn also dropped down due to low birth rates. Thus, within a relatively short span of time, the community’s size has halved.

The “book of the living” as I call it gives an idea about the shifting birth rate. Obviously, the data it contains about earlier years cannot be taken at face value because only the names of the people still alive by the time of registration appear in its pages. According to the book, the highest birth rate was recorded between 1953 and 1966 (between 5 and 14 babies per year). Data about recent years are more reliable (and striking): between 2000 and 2009 the number of births varied between one and two per year (the exceptions were four newborn babies in 2005 and three in 2000). In 2011, the Bulgarian Consular General in Istanbul mentioned a total number of 23 children in the community, when we discussed the possibility for opening a Bulgarian Sunday school. Because of the small number there was no such school at the time. At the very beginning of 2015, the Consulate General in Istanbul initiated the opening of a Sunday school for the children of all the Bulgarians in the city. The school was

²³ Other observations also testify about the demographic developments taking place in the community. One of the sources of such data is the Facebook page of the Foundation where information about significant communal events is regularly posted. Among other posts, there are announcements about weddings, baptizing ceremonies, funerals and commemoration services. Unfortunately, the majority of these messages are about deaths in the community, and only rarely about weddings and baptisms. My interviewees have observed the same: “*We have no weddings around here, only one in three years.*” Baptizing ceremonies are more often, once a year, but this number includes rituals organized by people coming from outside the community, usually from Bulgaria.

²⁴ All the figures I use here have been actual by that moment in time, when I examined the book.

²⁵ Petrova, op. cit., 122.

named “St St Cyril and Methodius,” just like the first Bulgarian school opened in Istanbul back in 1857.

The dwindling number of Istanbul-born Bulgarians is coupled with their rising erage age. When I asked the administrative director of the Foundation whether the young community members participate in its activities, the 64-year old man half-jokingly, half-seriously responded that “the young” were those of his age. He went to say that between 60 and 70 percent of the community’s population were in their and older. Indeed, today the people between 40 and 80 years old are the most part of the community as I have been able to observe during my fieldwork. people are dedicated rather to their professions or studies. This only comes to say age is a relative indicator: even though in general demographic terms people in their 60s are defined as elderly, in the context of the particular community such people are among the most active in communal initiatives and for that matter are often called “the young” within the community. Such a label sounds appropriate, taking into account the relatively high average age of the Istanbul Bulgarians. There is no statistics about the rate of life expectancy among them but according to the “book of the living” 52 women and men were above 79 years old in 2011. Just for comparison, life expectancy in Bulgaria is 78 years for women and 71 years for men, or 74.5 in total,²⁶ and in Turkey – respectively, 78.9 and 72.6 years, or 75.8 in total.²⁷ The man who keeps the register of the living community members presented the eldest ones so: “*The oldest woman was born in 1910, she is now 101 years old. (Who is she?) Alexandra Basheva. There is another woman, Svoboda Kolicheva, she was born in 1914. Then there are two women born in 1919 – Zhivka Dinova and Nevena Kalaydji.*”

Calculations, based on the data in the register, define the average age of the community members at 52.6. The people above forty are 2.9 times more than those below forty. 65 community members are aged 75 and above, 114 are between 60 and 74 years old, 140 are between 40 and 59 years old, 78 are between 21 and 39 years old, and 34 are 20 years old or younger. Low birth rate and high emigration promise further rise of the average age.

Judging by what I have heard from my interviewees, nuclear families prevail among the Bulgarians of Istanbul. The exceptions are when sick or widowed elderly parents live together with their children’s or grandchildren’s families. Customarily, upon marriage young couples move to a separate household. Historical demographic research reveals that nuclear families and simple households (such that consist of the members of one family only) have been prevalent for the population of Istanbul since the mid-1940s, with an average of 4 persons in a household and fertility of 2.5 newborns per mother in 1985.²⁸ Already by 1907 nuclear families (a couple with children) formed 25% of all the families in Istanbul. This is not to say

²⁶ http://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/LifeExpectancy_2011-2013_Q12YVG3.pdf

²⁷ <http://www.worldlifeexpectancy.com/turkey-life-expectancy>

²⁸ Gülbin Gökçay, and Frederic Shorter, “Who Lives with Whom in Istanbul?” *New Perspectives on Turkey*, № 9: 47-73, 1993, 52.

that extended family ties were not strong; on the contrary they remained tight at least by the end of the century. The reasons for the relatively high percentage of nuclear families and simple households in the early 20th century are to be sought in the high mortality rates and the late marriages which were caused by wars, the high risk of diseases and accidents, the bad economic conditions, the poor level of healthcare and so on.²⁹ Studies from the 1980s reveal that the differences between immigrant and native families and households in Istanbul had been small at the time. Such differences were more visible between migrants who came from the Eastern parts of Turkey and those who came from its Western parts; the former more often tended to keep the extended family and to have more children. The organization of life in the big city however made it easier to support simple households with fewer members. Nevertheless, systems of intergenerational support and close association among members of the extended family remained important and were preserved in various ways. Native-born Istanbulites were least prone to living in extended families and complex households³⁰ – a tendency which is supported by the organization of life of the community in discussion.

By the 1960s, families with two children had become typical for the Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul; in the following decades the number of families with one child began to grow. Some of my interlocutors however currently see a reversal in this tendency: “*Our generation, I am,*” say, “*in my 50s now, we have one child, but the young couples now have two children*” (female, born in 1966, college degree, housewife).³¹ The reasons for the small number of children are various. On the one hand, life in the big city leads to it (dominant forms of cohabitation, prices of real estate, household expenses, transportation expenses, education costs, etc.). On the other hand, there is the impact of the unfavorable position of non-Muslims in Turkish society. Circumstances allow them to maintain a certain living standard with only one or two children in the family: “*Few children, one, they don’t give birth to more children, nowadays when they grow up it is a big deal – private schools, big expenses*” (female, born in 1935, elementary school, housewife). The fewer the children, the higher the social prestige of the family, according to Istanbul-born Orthodox Bulgarians: “*Peasants, they have many children, they are more religious*” (the same informant).

The low birth rate is also related to the position that women hold in the family and society. According to my informants’ accounts, already the first generation of migrants who arrived in Istanbul has been much concerned with their sons’ and daughters’ education. Consequently, the educational level of people in the community has steadily risen in time. Among the elderly generations completing 5th to 7th grade has been considered sufficient for their realization; however for their successors (those born in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s) to graduate from high schools or colleges has

²⁹ Ibid., 64-66

³⁰ Ibid., 68

³¹ One can safely assume that the number of children of the Istanbul-born Bulgarian couples is much lower than that of their grandparents who came from the region of Macedonia. Thus for example, the owner of the popular dairy house “Pando kaymak” at the Fish market in Beşiktaş comes from a family of eleven children.

been a must, and today the majority of community members do not hesitate to support the university studies of their children in Turkey or abroad. Despite the degrees they get, until recently women in the community have tended to become housewives after marriage. Being a housewife is particularly wide-spread among women in their 70s, 60s and 50s. The way in which representatives of these generations discuss this fact leaves one with the impression that they consider it a sign of social position: “(Do you go to work?) *No, I don’t. I have never worked, here men usually go to work* (the respondent looks astonished to be asked such a question). *Women take care of the children. The young women go to work*” (female, born in 1952, high school graduate, housewife).

Housewives take care of the children, the household and the family and this does not make them inferior in the eyes of their fellow community members. Many of them hire help for the most demanding household tasks, which gives them extra time for socializing, charity and work for the community. It has not always been so. Women from the first and the second generations of re-settlers in Istanbul used to keep the household and to work together with their husbands in the family business (dairy house, bakery or garden). Not all families can afford to hire housekeepers today and the duties of such housewives are heavy but unpaid. The pattern of the working woman becomes more and more popular among women of the younger generations. Almost all of them have university degrees or study at a university; those who have graduated have jobs. Their jobs are mostly in the private sector. The command of foreign languages determines the high percentage of employees of foreign companies among them. Men in the community usually run their own businesses. The combination of all these factors –the aspirations to provide good education for their children, the popular nowadays pattern of the working woman and the still limited financial capabilities of the majority of community members– has cemented the trend of declining birth rates. The slightly increased number of childbirths –having two rather than just one child in the family– of which some of my interviewees have mentioned may be a result of the gradually rising social and economic status of the Bulgarian Orthodox families³² and the steadily increasing trend of cross-marriages. Furthermore, continuing emigration also contributes to the low birth rate – it is the young people who go abroad, usually to study at Western universities, and often stay to work and live in a foreign country after graduation. The families they make there and the children they give birth to, do not contribute directly to the growth of the community in Istanbul, accordingly, the average age and death rate among this community’s members get higher. Against these trends stands the relatively high life expectancy, characteristic of Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul. This indirectly supports the suggestion that the living standard and way of life are as equally influential upon demographic processes as are such negative factors as political persecution, economic stagnation or unfavorable minority politics.

³² There are no more professional restrictions on non-Muslims in Turkey. Nevertheless there are still no state employees in the community.

The Significance of Cross-marriage

Their progressively decreasing number upsets the members of the community, as do cross-marriages between Bulgarians and representatives of other ethnic and religious groups. For those Bulgarian Istanbulites who were born before the 1970s, and even for many of the younger ones, endogamy has been an imperative. Cross-marriages were rare among the elderly generations of community members because they were strongly disapproved of by their families and the community in general. *“Now it is different but before it was such a big deal, to marry a foreigner was awful. Now they get married to locals, Germans, Italians, Greeks”* (female, born in 1942, elementary school, housewife).

The way of life in the past enabled endogamy. Orthodox Bulgarians used to live in only a few residential areas of the city and this enabled intense communication among them on a daily basis. Moreover, they were closely related in all spheres of life – work, leisure, religious and secular holidays. The Bulgarian school was the scene where the young used to meet and get to know each other. The few foreign language schools chosen by most community members to continue their education made provided a further terrain for these connections. Endogamous marriages have remained a value by the beginning of the present century, but in the course of time they became less and less feasible. The shrinking size of the community led to a serious decrease in the number of potential marital partners within it. The actual number got even smaller because of the complex kinship ties already established between most families in the community. Little by little, Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul settled in various neighborhoods. After the last Bulgarian school in the mega polis was closed in 1972, young Bulgarians went to study at Turkish schools where they got mixed with classmates of another ethnic and religious background. These factors have contributed to lessening ties with young people from within the community and strengthening the connections with people from outside of it. Thus, cross-marriage has become a major alternative, even though it is still disapproved of by the elders. As the number of cross-marriages increases, the attitude towards them among community members slowly but irreversibly becomes more accepting. Endogamy is now interpreted in broader terms to include marriages with other Christians, especially Orthodox ones. The transformation of the customary norm has been explained with the similar cultural and value systems, shared by Orthodox Christians of all kind. *“What matters to me is to marry a Christian. /.../ The spouse can be an Italian but /s/he must be a Christian. /.../ Christianity is what matters”* (female, born in 1943).

In his comprehensive study of Constantinople Greeks, Alexis Alexandris specifies that mixed marriages became a possibility for the representatives of the various religious groups in Istanbul after the introduction of the Swiss civil code in Turkey in 1926. According to its regulations, decisions about marriage and divorce became a prerogative of civil authorities and not of religious institutions as it had been earlier.³³

³³ Alexandris, op. cit., 138-139.

This led to a looser control on religious and ethnic endogamy and paved the way for cross-marriages.

Cross-marriages between Orthodox Bulgarians and Greeks are the most conventional in the community. They are not an exception anymore. The number of mixed marriages with Turks is also on the rise, even though people in the community speak of such marriages reluctantly. *“I know of four or five mixed marriages with Muslim Turks registered in the last five years”* (male, born in 1963, mechanical engineer). *“Children can’t get married, they marry Turks and this makes us very unhappy. We’ve got a Bulgarian son-in-law for our daughter but it is very risky for X (the informant’s granddaughter). /.../ We don’t want to get married to Turks at all, not at all! They are very different, another religion, how can I explain it? She may marry an Italian, a Frenchman or another but I don’t want Turks! All we have is here and our children cannot get married, we have become so few, very few of us have left”* (female, elementary school, housewife).

When commenting cross-marriages with Turks, my interlocutors have usually stressed on the differences in mentality and culture which are the result not only of the different religion but of the belonging to a different social class: *“(Do you want your son to marry a Bulgarian girl?) Yes, yes, but it will be hard. (And what if he marries a Turkish girl?) It will be hard. I don’t divide people by religion but it is hard, isn’t it? It’s not only faith, you know, they should be on the same cultural level. It’s not only faith. There are not many old (Turks) who were born and grew up in Istanbul. They are like us but now in Istanbul so many have arrived from Anatolia and what can we do? They brought to Istanbul all their local customs and these customs widen the gap between us”* (female, born in 1966, high school, housewife).

One of the most often discussed cases of intermarriage is between a young Bulgarian woman and a Turkish man. It is telling how different people speak about this marriage. Most informants have been in a hurry to notify that the husband converted to Christianity before the wedding – a fact which supposedly makes the situation more acceptable. There are however individuals who do not believe that the conversion was real. When discussing the case with the young woman herself and with her mother, the latter insists that for her it was no problem that her daughter married a Turkish man: *“They are wealthy, good people”* (female, born in 1950, college education, housewife). Encouraged by her mother’s words, the daughter adds: *“There was no problem, my parents approved of the marriage. There are no such problems in our community. We have people married to Turks, to Greeks, to whomever else. Besides, X (her husband) got baptized and now he is of our faith”* (female, born in 1980, MA in ballet pedagogy, on maternity leave). In the course of the conversation, it has become clear that her husband comes from a wealthy non-religious Turkish family. He is an IT specialist, works for a big company and often makes business trips abroad. He has been baptized at the church of the Constantinople Patriarchate. Their wedding took place in the same church and so did the baptizing ceremony of their baby daughter. The girl’s name is of Greek origin

(Evangelia, Lia for short) and she is not named after any of her grandparents (as is custom within the community).

The mother's father however does not sound happy when he speaks about his granddaughter's marriage: *"Well, she has a Turkish husband and I was against their marriage but he is a good man, he has a big house at the Bosphorus. He got baptized but his parents don't know this. Look at those people at the table (the conversation takes place in the courtyard of the Exarchate House and the elderly man points at one of the tables there, where a few people are sitting and chatting), this man is a pure Turk but his son took a Bulgarian wife from Bulgaria. We know a lot of Bulgarians here and in Bulgaria but we didn't take a Bulgarian man, we took a Turk. Enough with this matter, it's shameful! We stick to each other here, do you understand?!"* (male, born in 1923, retired florist and goldsmith).

Younger community members demonstrate greater tolerance to cross-marriages and a modern attitude to marriage as a personal matter: *"It may happen that even if one marries a Bulgarian woman he is not happy. You never know, he might marry a Turkish woman and be very happy. But I prefer her to be at least from Sofia. (So, you are saying that ethnicity doesn't matter?) Of course, it doesn't."* (female, born in 1966, college, housewife).

"(What do you think about cross-marriages?) Well, they are OK now. Moreover, I don't think I have the right to interfere or comment. Everybody has a personal life and even if you comment for good or for bad, it doesn't make any difference. That's why I think there's no need to comment at all. The only thing is that after that some of these people (who have married outside the community) unfortunately do not come here anymore or come very rarely, they join another, really big community where they have more opportunities for socializing. (We talked to many elderly people and they were all very much against these mixed marriages.) Everybody is free to wish whatever they like but you can't control what you wish. That is why nothing depends on a given grandma, mother or father. This is not a problem particularly of the Bulgarian community in Istanbul, or I may be wrong to call it a problem at all, but this is a practice that can be observed all over the world" (male, born in 1963, mechanical engineer).

There still are younger individuals who insist on marrying an ethnic Bulgarian. Facing the limited choice of partners within the community, they hope to find a partner from Bulgaria. There are already a few such marriages, in which the wife comes from Bulgaria, and the husband is from the community in Istanbul. With the growing practice to study abroad, the chances for ethnic and religious exogamy have enhanced.

The perspective of cross-marriages becoming customary for the next generations is not welcomed by those community members who stick to the traditional norm of ethnic and religious endogamy. Many people think that mixed marriages endanger the coherence and unity of the community: new traditions are introduced in the family by the non-Bulgarian partner, children not only belong to two families, but are also a part of two cultures, often of two religions as well, families start to associate with other, larger communities and to take part in their cultural activities. Hidden behind the fear that the cultural and religious "purity" of the community would be lost, there is con-

cern that class boundaries may be transgressed causing the loss of social status. Luckily, so far there have been no mixed marriages that led to downward mobility of the Bulgarian partner. Rather, as in the case discussed above, the “foreign” partner stands higher on the social ladder. The similar economic and social position of the two partners is regarded as a guarantee for cultural affinity – one which is not a result of shared ethnic or religious affiliation but of pertaining to the same social layer.

Conclusions

In this article I have discussed demographic processes and related cultural practices among the Orthodox Bulgarians in Istanbul. Their community progressively decreases in size, the average age of its members gets higher, birth rate drops down, whereas mortality rate rises, and exogamy slowly but irreversibly takes over ethnic and religious endogamy. The direct reasons for these ongoing trends are to be sought in steady emigration, low birth and fertility rates and the tight web of kinship relations that intersect the community (the latter is a result of the small size of the of community and the long practice of ethnic endogamy within it). A variety of political, economic and sociocultural factors underlie these processes. Among the political factors, the impact of Turkey’s politics towards non-Muslim minorities has been of crucial significance. The implemented measures (e.g., the constraints on professions which non-Muslims have been allowed to exercise for long decades, the higher taxes which they had to pay, the expropriation and/ or destruction of their property, etc.) have stimulated emigration, limited the opportunity for economic prosperity of non-Muslims, and have not allowed their smooth integration in the larger society. Ethnic politics in Turkey has also brought about a change in the cultural identity of non-Muslim minorities by confining their right to run their own educational and cultural organization (minority schools, press in the mother tongue, etc.). The social-class affiliation which crosses ethnic and religious boundaries, have also affected demographic processes. In terms of social categorization, Orthodox Bulgarians of the community in discussion belong to the secular urbanized middle-class section of Istanbul’s population. Regardless of the linguistic, religious and other differences which divide the various groups of secular middle-class native-born Istanbulites, they all share similar lifestyles, values and attitudes, tastes and patterns of behavior. Some sociodemographic features, such as family type, birth rates, educational attitudes, patterns of socialization, are also strongly dependent on class and rank. The analysis of the demographic trends taking place among the Istanbul-born Bulgarians has revealed that their community will most likely not last, at least not the way it was known in the past and the way it is today. However, the discussion has also traced opportunities for the community’s survival and future wellbeing – through transformation and merging into larger supra-ethnic and supra-religious entities, within which the notions of ethnic and religious distinctiveness would be reconsidered and redefined.

