

**Movement for Rights and Freedom:
Bulgaria's Turkish minority party**

Mozgalom a Jogokért és Szabadságért:
Bulgária török kisebbségi pártja

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Abstract: This paper describes the political trajectory of the Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) in Bulgaria. It outlines the history of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, as well as the social background enabling the emergence of the party. The paper also describes the political history of the party during the last thirty years and highlights its role in Bulgarian politics. It is argued that the MRF has built a solid electoral base by relying not only on the Turks living in Bulgaria but also on the Turks who live in Turkey but have a Bulgarian citizenship. Despite several attempts to break its political hegemony over the Turkish electorate, the party has managed to keep its primacy and resist any kind of counter-hegemonic attempts.

Keywords: Bulgaria, minority party, MRF, DPS, Turkey, transborder community

Összefoglalás: *Jelen írás célja a bulgáriai Mozgalom a Jogokért és a Szabadságért politikai pályájának rekonstruálása. Megvilágítja a bulgáriai török kisebbség történetét és a párt felemelkedését lehetővé tévő társadalmi hátteret. Ezt követően a tanulmány rátér a párt elmúlt harminc éves történetére, illetve a bolgár politikai életben betöltött szerepére. A mozgalom szilárd választói bázist épített ki azáltal, hogy nem pusztán a Bulgáriában élő törökökre támaszkodott, hanem olyan törökökre is, akik Törökországban élnek, de van bolgár állampolgárságuk is. Annak ellenére, hogy történtek próbálkozások a török nemzetiségű választói közösségen gyakorolt hegemoniája megtörésére, a párt képes volt megőrizni elsőségét, és ellenállni a hegemoniáját veszélyeztető törekvéseknek.*

Kulcsszavak: *Bulgária, kisebbségi párt, MRF, DPS, Törökország, határon túli közösség*

INTRODUCTION

Due the Balkan wars during the 1990s resulting in the dissolution of Yugoslavia, the ethnic mosaic of the region changed. Successful independence movements, an aspiration for ethnic purification in line with the exodus of various communities, assimilation, and economic migration towards Turkey and Western Europe have decreased the share of minorities in the peninsula. Nowadays, the Romani groups constitute the only exception from this demographic pattern among the ethnic minorities.

Today, Turks constitute the largest minority group in the Balkans (after Hungarians). Turkish minority groups are dispersed across four countries in the region: Romania, North Macedonia, Kosovo, and Bulgaria. The largest community lives in Bulgaria, where they number around 600,000 people according to the latest

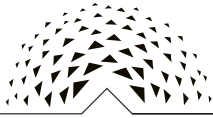
census in 2011,¹ constituting the largest minority group there. Furthermore, parts of other minorities, like Muslim Romanis and Bulgarian-speaking Muslims, the so-called Pomaks, can be identified as Turks.. The Turkish population is concentrated in the north-eastern and southern parts of Bulgaria. They are in majority in only one, the Khardzali district (oblast) in the south, in the proximity of the Turkish border. In the northeast they are mixed with Bulgarians in a number of villages, although sizeable communities live in Shumen. In general, the Turkish population is a rural one, the only Turkish-majority city is Khardzali (Kırcaali in Turkish), with some 40,000 inhabitants. Despite their relatively high percentage within the Bulgarian society, the Turkish minority only managed to achieve limited educational and cultural rights at the beginning of the 1990s. The Turkish names which had to be replaced by Bulgarian ones during the Revival Process in 1985 were given back, Turkish-language education was allowed (but only as an elective class in primary school), and obstacles against the establishment of cultural organizations were removed.

The second largest Turkish group is located in the western parts of North Macedonia. Based on the last census in 2002, when their number was around 70,000 people, they constitute some four percent of North Macedonia's population. In Kosovo, Turks number around 15-20,000 people, a tiny group in a county of 1.7 million. They are located in the southwestern part of the country, with 5,000 people in the village of Mamuşa, where they are in absolute majority. They also have a large community of around 10,000 people in the neighbouring town, Prizren. Despite their small number, the relatively minority-friendly Kosovar laws grant them parliamentary representation. In Romania, Turks usually live with another Turkic group, the Tatars in the littoral region called Dobrudja. In the 2011 census, 28,226 people declared a Turkish ethnic affiliation (some 0.15 percent of the total population) (Kiss, 2012).

The size of the Turkish minority groups varies greatly in the states where they live. While in Bulgaria they represent a strong ethnic group, in North Macedonia they are only a small group in a state with a strong ethnic division between the Macedonian majority and the Albanian minority. In the case of Kosovo and Romania, they only represent a tiny proportion of the population.

After the collapse of the Communist regimes, Turks created their own political movements and have participated in state politics. Depending on their size and the legal framework, their parties have become kingmakers (e.g. in Bulgaria) or useful partners in governance (e.g. in Kosovo). This paper analyses the development of these political formations in Bulgaria, and the political trajectory of the Movement for Rights and Freedom/MRF (*Dvizenie za Prava i Svobodi in Bulgarian; Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi in Turkish*).

1 However, some 600,000 people refused to disclose their ethnic affiliation, so the size of the Turkish minority might be larger.



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Turkish population can be considered the most visible legacy of the long-lasting rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans. Shortly after the Ottoman armies penetrated the Balkan Peninsula in the mid-fourteenth century, Turkic migrants wanting to settle in the newly conquered territories followed in their steps. Beyond the military, officials, Muslim preachers, dervishes, and merchants settled down in the key cities, especially in the southern part of today's Bulgaria, Northern Greece, and North Macedonia. To strengthen the Turkic presence, the sultans sent nomadic tribes called *yörük* to strategically important areas, a policy that was practically the continuation of the Byzantine tradition of population transfer from one distant part of the empire to another.

After the mid-fifteenth century, the north-eastern regions of Bulgaria, which had key locations along the Danube River, saw a mass influx of Turkic population, who then comprised the majority in many districts for centuries. Although the Ottoman Empire continued its expansion towards Central Europe, the percentage of the Turkic population remained low and was concentrated in cities, without large rural areas part of these new conquests. This was the opposite of what happened in the territories neighbouring the centres of the Empire, first in Edirne, and after 1453, in Istanbul.

Supported by great powers, the struggle of various ethnic groups for independence in the Balkans led to the gradual shrinking of the Ottoman Empire. Starting with Serbia (1817/1867), followed by Greece (1830) and Bulgaria (1878, *de jure* 1908), and the subsequent annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary (1878), territorial changes curtailed the Ottoman presence in the region. The final phase in this rollback occurred with the Balkan Wars (1912-13), when the Empire could only secure less than 40,000 km² in mainland Europe.

The territorial losses came hand in hand with the withdrawal of state administration as well as large parts of the Turkish population, who fled to Anatolia as refugees. It was not only the war-related ethnic cleansings and destructions that reduced the number of Turks in the Balkans but also the anti-Turkish policies of the newly founded independent countries seeking to become nation states. Bulgaria, inheriting the largest Turkish-populated areas, displays several examples of these policies (Köse, 2012) (Popek, 2019).

The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923 opened a new chapter in the history of minorities. Atatürk gave up any territorial claims towards Turkey's neighbours in the Balkans and facilitated the immigration of Muslim groups (Albanians, Bosniaks, Pomaks, and Turks) towards war-torn Anatolia. Several agreements were signed on a bilateral basis to regulate (voluntary) immigration to Anatolia (with Bulgaria in 1925, with Romania in 1936). This policy was also followed after World War II: between 1954 and 1990 some 185,000 Muslims (not just Turks but Albanians and Bosniaks as well) migrated from Yugoslavia to Turkey (İçduygu & Sert, 2015).

Beyond the legal agreements pushing for the immigration of Turks, in some cases the host countries applied harsh measures to reduce the size of the minority. The most prominent example of these policies was Bulgaria, from where several hundred thousand Turks (perceived as 5th column of Ankara) were ousted in the early 1950s and the late 1980s. The so-called 'Big Excursion' of 1989 represented the greatest population movement in this context, as some 350,000 Turks left Bulgaria until Turkey closed its borders due to the aggravating humanitarian crisis in August 1989 (Eminov, 1999). Although some one-third of Bulgarian Turks returned to their home shortly after the collapse of the Zhivkov regime, large groups remained in Turkey. Later on, economic migration also contributed to the growth of the Bulgarian Turkish community in Turkey. This development facilitated the establishment of a transborder community that plays an important role in Bulgarian and Turkish domestic politics (although it is much less significant in the latter).

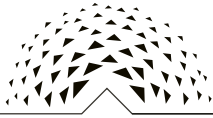
The regime changes that took place from Romania to Albania in line with the wars in Yugoslavia (1991-1995) redrew the internal and external dynamics of the region. The tremendous change ending Communism, and the transition from planned to market economy resulted in high social tension, the rise of nationalism, and ethnic clashes (or war, in the case of Yugoslavia). Nevertheless, the transition of the region from dictatorship to democracy opened up new opportunities for minority groups to secure their political position and gain assurances for their rights.

After the war-ravaged and politically particularly momentous 1990s, the 2000s and 2010s brought a calmer period for the Balkans, as well as ethnic minorities. Several of the countries with a Turkish minority, such as Romania and Bulgaria, managed to join the European Union in 2007, while others, such as North Macedonia, gained candidate status. The political and economic circumstances changed dramatically compared to the Communist period, and the Turkish minority achieved parliamentary representation and bargained for more rights.

POLITICAL REPRESENTATION AND MAIN ISSUES

In Bulgaria, which hosts the largest Turkish community in the Balkans, the fate of Turkish political organizations received special attention. Due to the Bulgarian assimilation campaign and the 'Big Excursion' in 1989, ethnic tensions were on the rise, especially after the return of around two-thirds of the Turks who had just left the country during the exodus.

In order to secure Turkish representation, the Movement for Right and Freedom (MRF) was founded under the leadership of a former philosophy professor, Ahmet Doğan, who also served as an agent of the Bulgarian State Security. His background suggests that the emergence of the Turkish party was



rather the outcome of a coordinated move to consolidate the regime change and avoid ethnic conflict with the support of state secret services. The Turkish minority took to the streets to push for more rights. Their wishes were partly accepted, and the Turkish language was introduced in primary schools as an elective language,

The MRF also had to face the possibility of being banned, as the Bulgarian constitution clearly states that no ethnic or religious party can be formed. This 'constitutional nationalism' persuaded the MRF to pursue a wider ideological approach and become a liberal party by co-opting ethnic Bulgarian or Pomak politicians, even if the overall majority of its electorate has remained Turkish. A Constitutional Court decision in 1994 saved the party from being banned, and it became an integral part of the Bulgarian party system.

The 1990s were politically hectic due to the difficult economic and political transition, but the MRF managed to stabilize its electorate and gain seats in the parliament at every election. Moreover, during the 2000s, it became a king maker in Bulgarian politics and participated in several government coalitions. This occurred in 2001 for the first time, when it formed a coalition with former Tsar Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha's National Movement Simeon II party (National Movement for Stability and Progress - NMSP, *Natsionalno dvizhenie za stabilnost i vazhod - NDSV* in Bulgarian). MRF also remained in power during the 2005-2009 period, in coalition with NMSP and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (*Balgarska sotsialisticheska partiya - BSP*), under the premiership of Sergey Stanishev, by demonstrating greater flexibility in forming coalitions.

Due to corruption scandals during the Simeon government, many people became disillusioned with the established right and left-wing parties of the 1990s and early 2000s, and the second half of the 2000s brought a spectacular rise of nationalist movements in the country (Dúró, 2020). Thus, the Turkish minority and the MRF had to face new challenges, a rising nationalistic discourse, and more criticism. The party was put in the crosshairs of ATAKA, a nationalist party that entered the parliament in 2005. ATAKA, whose leader, Volen Siderov came second at the presidential elections in 2006, directly criticized the MRF as the Trojan horse of Turkey. In the upcoming years, tensions increased between the MRF and ATAKA supporters, leading to clashes, like the one in 2011, when supporters of the far-right party attacked Muslims praying in Sofia's Banya Bashi mosque (Novinite, 2011).

The party image, however, was further challenged by various corruption scandals. In 2010, prosecutors launched a probe against Ahmet Doğan by accusing him of pocketing BGN 1.5 million as a consultant for hydroelectric projects, although the Supreme Administrative Court acquitted him in early 2011 (Insight, 2011). In 2013, he resigned after an assassination attempt he barely escaped. Since then, he has been an honorary chairman of MRF, and more importantly, a grey eminence and influential actor in Bulgarian politics (RFE/RL, 2013).

After the 2013 elections, the MRF participated in the Plamen Oresarsky government. However, the fact that the party nominated Delyan Peevski, a media tycoon and MRF Member of Parliament, perceived by many as a corrupt oligarch

in Bulgarian politics, to the position of Chief State Security, triggered protests, which led to the withdrawal of Peevski’s nomination.² The party finally left the government after the 2014 European Parliament elections, due to its poor results. Despite securing its parliamentary position in the upcoming elections (2014, 2017, and 2021), the MRF could not participate in government coalitions due to the strong reluctance on the part of Boyko Borisov’s GERB (Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria, or *Grazhdani za Evropeysko Razvitie na Bulgaria* in Bulgarian), which rather aligned itself with nationalist parties.

The MRF remained a strong opposition party after 2014, and it could maintain informal leverage over Bulgarian politics, triggering criticism regarding the oligarchic and corrupt nature of the political system. Due to its embeddedness, the corrupt image of the party could not be overwritten and has led to further scandals. In 2020, Ahmed Doğan caused a major scandal. In early July 2020, Hristo Ivanov, leader of the extra-parliamentary coalition Democratic Bulgaria, approached Doğan’s summer residence by boat. The residence is located on the coast of the Black Sea, but when Ivanov tried to land at the villa, he was intercepted by guards. It was later revealed that the guards were members of the National Protection Service (NSO), who are responsible for protecting high-level officials (RFE/RL, 2020). The issue went viral, and along with other scandals, led to protests that lasted for several months in Bulgaria.

Even if the MRF is criticized by many, it has always managed to keep its electorate due to ethnic voting. It usually obtains 20-40 seats in the Parliament (Table 1.) and around 10 percent of the votes.

Table 1.
The electoral performance of the MRF

Election year												
1990	1991	1994	1997	2001	2005	2009	2013	2014	2017	2021a	2021b	2021c
23	24	15	19	21	34	37	36	38	26	30	29	34

The party promises representation for the Turkish minority living in the poorest regions of the country and pledges to channel EU funds to the underdeveloped regions. Along with issues related to the economy, the party places strong emphasis on identity policy, where the memory of the assimilation campaign and the Big Excursion plays an important role. The other important source of voters for the party is the Bulgarian Turkish community living in Turkey. Ten thousand people, who fled from their homeland to Turkey, participate in the Bulgarian

2 Nevertheless, he maintained close relations with the MRF, and he also won a European Parliamentary seat twice (2014 and 2019) through the MRF list, only to later abandon them. (Dimitrov, 2019)



elections supporting MRF. Since its foundation, the MRF has maintained its liberal image and has also joined the Liberal Group (ALDE) in the European Parliament, where it has managed to send representatives in consecutive EP elections. Beyond this image, it has remained a clearly Turkish party, with an overwhelmingly Turkish electorate, by seeking more rights and peace for ethnic and religious minorities and supporting Bulgaria's integration into the EU and NATO (MRF, 2021).

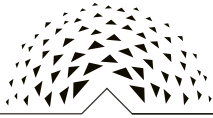
KIN-STATE RELATIONS

In the Balkans, Turkish parties' relationship with their kin-state reflect their institutional embeddedness, the demographic and political weight of their minority communities in their homeland, as well as Turkey's relations with their countries of residence. As Turkish parties vary according to their political leverage, Turkey's room for manoeuvre also differs. In a broader context, Ankara intends to play a greater role in the Balkans and does so by supporting not only the Turkish minorities but other Muslim communities as well (Egeresi, 2021) (Rašidagić & Hesova, 2020) (Mehmet, 2014).

The political movement of Bulgarian Turks has had greater independence from Ankara, even if some part of its electorate lives in Turkey. Since 2002, when the AKP (Justice and Development Party, or Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi in Turkish) seized power in Turkey, the relation between the MRF and the AKP has become problematic. This stems from the different characteristics of the two parties: while MRF is a self-declared liberal party and more importantly, a secular one, AKP's pro-Islamist background sets a natural distance between the two political movements. Furthermore, the relations between Ahmet Doğan and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have usually hindered greater cooperation.

That is why the Turkish government has usually been open to supporting breakaway political groups, especially those that have a political affiliation with the Bulgarian Turkish community in Turkey. This was the case for Kasim Dal and Korman Ismailov, who founded the People's Party Freedom and Dignity in 2012 to challenge Ahmet Doğan's dominance over the Bulgarian Turkish minority. Despite Erdoğan's support, their attempt did not bear any fruit.

The second and more successful challenge occurred after late 2015, when the incumbent president of the MRF, Lüfi Mestan was ousted from his position due to his siding with Turkey on the issue of the Russian SU-24 fighter that was shot down in November 2015. The MRF group upheld a pro-Russian position in the conflict, infuriating Turkey. The removed president turned to Turkey and in 2016 founded a new party in Bulgaria, called Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance or DOST (which means 'friend' in Turkish). The party received support from Turkey for the general elections in March 2017. However, it could not surpass the four-percent threshold and failed to enter parliament, and the MRF could secure the majority of its votes despite backing from AKP.



Many high-profile politicians from Turkey participated in the founding conference of DOST, such as Fatma Betül Kaya, the deputy chairperson of the AKP at the time, as well as deputy chairman of the MHP Semih Yalçın, and Turkish ambassador to Sofia Süleyman Gökçe (Cheresheva, 2016). Later, Turkish Minister of Labour Mehmet Müezzinoğlu, himself a Turk from Western Thrace, Greece, also called on Bulgarian Turks to vote for DOST in the 2017 general elections, which was also a sign of open political support from the AKP (Novinite, 2017). This campaign was not in vain: DOST received more votes from the Bulgarian citizens (mainly Turks) living in Turkey, but it could not defeat the MRF in Bulgaria, where it had much better institutional embeddedness.

Beyond the political and vocal support, financial help was also available to DOST. According to the Bulgarian Prosecutor-General, an independent NGO called Batu Platform Association, working in Kircaali, inhabited mainly by the Turkish minority, illegally supported the DOST campaign. The party allegedly received some EUR 100,000 in a transfer via a Turkish bank to buy food packages and later distribute them among DOST members and activists (Leviev-Sawyer, 2017). Naturally, this direct interference in domestic politics raised concerns in Bulgaria, especially among nationalist parties, which called the party the 'Trojan horse of Turkey.' Simultaneously with its financial and political support to DOST, the Turkish government imposed a travel ban on prominent figures such as Ahmet Doğan or Delyan Peevski, a famous tycoon and party member (Cheresheva, 2016).

DOST's failure to change Turkish voters' political preferences compelled the Turkish government to reconsider its stance. This change was probably also motivated by the decline of Boyko Borisov's party, which finally lost the elections in 2021. The change in the AKP-MRF relations was highlighted in late 2020, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan greeted the party leadership online at the MRF congress. Furthermore, in June 2021, he hosted a MRF delegation led by Mustafa Karadayı prior to the 11 July elections, to talk about possible cooperation (Özkan, 2021).

While the MRF-AKP relations have been rather problematic during the last two decades, the MRF has emerged as a supporter of Turkish interests several times. The most well-publicized case was the vote about the Armenian genocide. The issue was first brought to the parliament by the nationalist party of ATAKA in 2006. The numerous attempts to accept a declaration about the events of 1915 bore fruit during the 2015 anniversary: the Bulgarian parliament adopted a declaration that used the word 'extermination' instead of 'genocide', and the MRF walked out of the session (Bechev, 2015).

Beyond the 'genuine' differences between MRF and AKP, Bulgarian domestic politics has also contributed to maintaining a certain distance between the two. The Boyko Borisov governments, especially after 2016, tried to build good relations with Ankara. This stemmed from the fear of a possible migration crisis, which hit Greece in 2015-16. As a result of the efforts of the Turkish authorities, the Bulgarian borders have remained relatively calm during the last few years. Even during the

2020 migration crisis, when several thousand migrants tried to storm the Greek border guards, the Bulgarian borders remained untouched, even though they were close to Edirne.

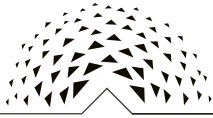
The Bulgarian government has also endeavoured to satisfy Turkey's anti-Gülenist war. The country has extradited several people to the Turkish authorities (Gotev, 2016). This pro-Turkey stance has not only been apparent in bilateral issues but also at the international level: Bulgaria usually tries to smooth the harsh decisions of the European Council against Turkey, and it has demonstrated understanding towards some Turkish grievances (Michalopoulos, 2020). Due to this behaviour, AKP did not have to directly build on the Turkish party because it found an amicable government, which ultimately has greater power than a party that is in the opposition. The political battles of Borisov's GERB and the MRF have also helped cement this situation, where the Turkish government supported its counterpart or helped establish new Turkish parties rather than mend fences with the MRF. However, the electoral defeat of GERB in April 2021 is pushing Ankara to reconsider its stance concerning its possible partners in Bulgaria.

A TRANSBORDER COMMUNITY

Due to the mass (forced) emigrations, like the 'Big Excursion' in 1989 and the economy-driven migration to Turkey, nowadays the country has a large Turkish community of several hundred thousand people of Balkan heritage. Certainly, demography matters here as well, as the largest group within this community consists of Bulgarian Turks. While their integration into Turkish society has occurred without any significant tension or conflict, large parts of these groups of Balkan heritage have tended to preserve their links to their homeland by creating various associations.

The institutionalization of the Bulgarian Turkish migrant groups started in the mid-1980s, as a move of solidarity with their original communities facing the assimilation policies of the Zhivkov regime. The mass influx of refugees in 1989 gave a huge impetus to further institutionalization. The main Bulgarian Turkish association, Bal-Göç, which was founded in 1985 (Bal-Göç, 2021), was able to open new branches in a number of cities in Western Turkey, where the newcomers preferred to settle, for example in various districts of Istanbul, Izmir, and also Bursa, which has developed a vibrant Balkans cultural life as a result of the well-organized Bulgarian Turkish community.

The gradual development of these associations also had an impact on local politics. Their members coordinated voting, and the associations lobbying town hall granted them special support from district or city mayors. Sometimes they were even able to send representatives to parliament, e.g. Mümin Gençoğlu, founder of Bal-Göç, secured a mandate between 1991 and 1993 (Bal-Göç, Balgoc.org.tr, 2021).



The well-established networks of migrant organizations have made efforts to lobby for various issues in the interest of their membership even with the Bulgarian government. In the 1990s, the most crucial affair was the issue of pension, as the Bulgarian state denied reimbursing them for their pre-1989 employment. Ivan Kostov, Bulgarian Prime Minister elected in 1997, visited Turkey to court the rich neighbour, and he visited Bursa, where he pledged to solving the pension issue, although the promise was not kept (Gangloff, 2000)

This fiasco prompted the associations to strengthen their relations with the MRF, which had a consistent parliamentary presence and occasionally even governmental participation. New dimensions opened for the cooperation between Turkey-based Bulgarian Turkish communities, their associations, and the Bulgarian Turkish political movement when Bulgaria gave the right to vote to its dual citizens.

From that time, associations in close cooperation with the MRF started to organize campaigns and mobilize their members and the whole community to vote for the Turkish party. This development emerged visibly during the 2001 general elections, when the movement acquired 38,000 votes in Turkey. Having a total of 340,395 votes, the mobilization of Bulgarian Turks in Turkey granted the party around 3 mandates out of 21 seats. Moreover, the Balkan associations managed to persuade local Turkish authorities to grant residence permits to illegal immigrants from Bulgaria, in the hope that they would participate in parliamentary elections and vote for the MRF (Kasli & Parla, 2009).

This tendency continued during the upcoming elections as well. In 2005, the MRF got 39,858 votes in Turkey, when around twenty thousand people passed the border to vote (Dayioğlu, 2005). Four years later, in 2009 the votes of Turkish dual citizens in Turkey increased to 93,903 – almost double the previous results, securing the MRF five more mandates (Özgür-Baklacioğlu, 2012). Even though the Bulgarian courts later decreased this number by 18,400 votes, the steady growth in votes from Turkey remained.

Voting is organized in two ways: 1) by bus trips and 2) by voting sections in Turkey. Bus trips are usually combined with other programs, such as family or relative visits, in order to attract more people to take the several-hour-long journey and administrative burden. Although it is difficult to see the real number of participants of this kind of 'election tourism', they may represent a significant portion within the MRF votes. At the general elections in 2005, Bal-Göç is estimated to have sent some 10,000 voters to Bulgaria (Balkan, 2005).

Similarly to election tourism, voting sections have become an issue in Bulgarian domestic politics, too. Nationalist parties typically campaign to reduce the number of voting sections, which happened in 2007 in the case of the European Parliamentary elections, when the ATAKA party managed to push through parliament a decree to decrease the number of polling stations in Turkey. A decade later, a similar amendment of electoral law took place,

when the number of voting sections in Turkey was reduced from 140 to only 35. This regulation remained in force until the early elections of 11 July, 2021, when the number of polling stations abroad was increased again in order to attract the votes of the Bulgarian diaspora, which enabled Bulgarian Turks to vote in the Bulgarian elections in Turkey in greater numbers (in July, 26487 votes, in November 2011 85256 votes according to the Electoral Commission of Bulgaria).

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties the Turkish minority groups have had to face during the last century, they have managed to survive and establish their own political representation in several Balkan countries. Due to their size, Turks in Bulgaria play the most decisive role in the political life of their home country: the MRF was founded shortly after the end of the Zhivkov era and emerged to become an established part of the Bulgarian party system, becoming a notorious kingmaker in the country.

Despite the general perceptions regarding the role of the Turkish minority and the MRF, which is more problematic for historical and political reasons, the MRF is sufficiently strong to hold its parliamentary positions and can also count on the votes of Bulgarian Turks living in Anatolia, by supporting the existence of a transborder community. Kin-state relations have also shaped the trajectory of the party. Since 2010, the relation between MRF and AKP, Turkey's governing party, has become more problematic. This has opened the way for the establishment of new parties to challenge the political hegemony of the MRF over the Turkish electorate and later on for pushing the Borisov governments to mend fences with Ankara and create more established cooperation on several issues, such as immigration. This can change after the 2021 elections, but MRF's position, despite its successful electoral performance due to the mobilization of Turkish voters, will remain delicate.