

# THE “INVISIBLE” ISLAM (SYNCRETIC RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG BULGARIA’S ROMA)<sup>1</sup>

Alexey Pamporov

*Institute for the Study of Societies and Knowledge - BAS*

apamporov@gmail.com

*The existence of Radical Islamism in Bulgaria is an undoubted fact. It mainly develops in the Roma districts and neighbourhoods, which is a major threat for the Bulgarian state system<sup>2</sup>*

**Abstract.** *This article focuses on the heterodox religious practices among the Roma population in Bulgaria, which still exist today but became “invisible” about the mainstream society due to the institutional marginalization of Alevi Islam in the country. Because there are no large and institutionally recognized Alevi communities, as well as due to the lack of multicultural education, in Bulgaria such practices are received with derision and labelled as “Gypsy (i.e. low quality) thing”. As a matter of fact, it is a domestic syncretic fusion between Alevi Islam and some local folklore Christian practices.*

**Key words:** Alevi Islam, Roma people, religious syncretism

Over the last few years Bulgaria has seen a more frequent and overt use of hate speech on the part of the media for the spread of negative stereotypes in relation to different ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. That is why the quote, used as an epigraph for the present article, should not surprise the readers. A study by the “Open Society” Institute, conducted in July 2013, shows that the Roma are the main target of hate speech in Bulgaria (Ivanova, 2013). However, the study was conducted before the beginning of the influx of refugees from Syria and does not reflect the later social reactions, which saw a conspiracy plot for the islamisation of the country in the refugee crisis<sup>3</sup>. Actually, the fear of “Islamisation” and the fear of “Tsiganisation” [editor’s note: i.e. Gypsisation] of the country have constantly been in political use in all pre-election campaigns since 1989. In this respect, there is a clear connection between the intensity of publishing negative articles and materials about Roma and the approach of the election day (Pamporov, 2012).

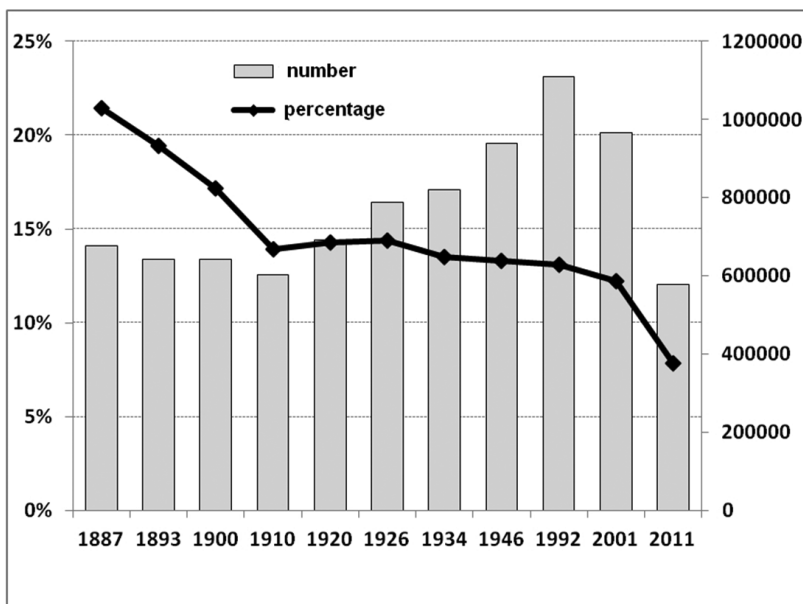
The image of the “Muslim terrorist”, having been created by the media and “patriotic” politicians, has played a very negative role in relation with the publicly declared identity and religious identity of respondents in various opinion polls, in-

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<sup>2</sup> Angel Dzhambazki, Deputy Chairperson of VMRO – BND in an interview for Darik Radio, 17.12.2012

<sup>3</sup> Magdalena Tasheva, Member of Parliament from PP Ataka in an interview for Nova TV, 06.10.2013, stated: “The Islamic colonisation at the moment is carried out by the refugees under the command of the USA”.



**Figure 1:** Absolute numbers and proportions of people who identified themselves as Muslims in the Population and Housing Census in Bulgaria

*Source:* Author's calculations based on NSI data

cluding the population and housing census in the Republic of Bulgaria. According to the instructions for the completion of the census form of the National Statistics Institute, religion is defined as “historically determined belonging of a person or his/her parents, or his/her ancestors to a given group with certain religious beliefs.” Despite this extremely broad definition, which allows non-religious people and atheists to declare a religious affiliation, it is noteworthy that, according to the official data, the proportion of Muslims in the country has progressively decreased together with a sharp decrease in the absolute number of Muslims after 1992 (Fig. 1 ). Of course, over the past twenty plus years, neither high mortality rates have been observed only among the followers of Islam in Bulgaria, nor has there been registered a significant emigration wave of Muslims alone (similar to the one during the so called “Revival Process” [editor’s note: a process of assimilation during the 1980s in communist Bulgaria during which those who opposed assimilation were let to leave the country, respective a substantial outflow of Muslim population was observed]). The decrease in the proportion of Muslims can be attributed to the fear caused by hate speech. Individuals keep their identity, they generally observe their traditions and religious practices, but refuse to officially identify themselves as belonging to ethnic or religious minorities for fear of repression and discrimination. This does not mean that these people disappear. They just become “invisible” to the official statistics and are absent from the analyses based on them. Such a phenomenon is not unprecedented