

## **BULGARIA'S TURKISH MINORITY AND TURKEY-BULGARIA RELATIONS 1923-1939**

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### **SUMMARY**

This article aims to insight into the relations between Turkey and Bulgaria in regards to the issue of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in the period between 1923-1939. Indeed, from the establishment of the Republic of Turkey to the beginning of WWII, the most important issue in the relations between these two states was Bulgaria's Turkish minority. As a consequence of this, the living conditions of this community were clearly influenced by the political relationship between Ankara and Sofia. In this context, it is useful to investigate into how the Turkish minority's living conditions were affected by these two states in the interwar era by taking into consideration regional political conjuncture and social dynamics in this article.

**Keywords:** *Bulgaria, Turkey, Turkish minority, interwar era 1923-1939*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As the WWI was resulted in catastrophic defeat for Bulgaria and Turkey, this was the sign of the difficult times for them. This alliance relationship did not benefit both states, and Bulgaria and Turkey, were forced to sign an armistice with very severe conditions. Apart from the territorial losses, the Turks had experienced events that led to the loss of their political existence, while the Bulgarians had lost a large part of its territory. Since the Turkish National Movement under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal was

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considered as the beginning of the destruction of the Versailles system, which was imposed by victorious states to the defeated states to accept it after the WWI, it was followed with great interest and some hopes in Bulgaria. Besides, as it left a large amount of its territory to Yugoslavia and Romania with the Treaty of Neuilly which was imposed under the name of the peace agreement at the Paris Conference, Bulgaria left Western Thrace under the control of the victors.

The leader of the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union Aleksandar Stambolijski, who came to power in March 1920 in Bulgaria, took care not to provoke the Allied Powers in the hope of changing the terms of the Treaty of Neuilly. For this reason, he avoids openly and directly developing diplomatic contacts with Turkey, which has no territorial problems between them in the Balkans. However, this does not prevent him from approaching the resistance movement in Turkey with sympathy. The close relations that started with the Stambolijski's government had a positive impact on the conditions of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria at the same time. The Turkish minority in Bulgaria started to be a determinant subject in the relations between the two countries during the interwar era between the two world wars, both in terms of migration and socio-economic and cultural issues. During this period, a various treaties were signed between the two countries. For instance, the Treaty of Friendship signed in 1925 stated that there would be a lasting peace, sincere and eternal friendship between Ankara and Sofia.

After the coup, overthrow Stambolijski's government and assassination of Stambolijski in 1923, the political relationship of contiguous countries altered dramatically. The policies against the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, therefore, also began to radical change. With this changing political conjuncture in towards to Turks of Bulgaria from the Bulgarian government, a national awakening has begun among them. In related to that, Turkish National Movement has also brought into the open national feelings for Turkish minority in Bulgaria during 1920s. Thus, the cultural and social organizations were formed among the Turkish minority. These attempts were concerned as a possible internal social disorder in Bulgaria from Bulgarian government due to the Turkish population.

By the 1930s, the increasing economic problems brought by the great depression and the changing government policies were also effective in shaping the policies on minorities. As a result of successive military coups and

government policies in Bulgaria, pressure on the Turkish minority was increased from time to time. However, as well as mutual high-level political visits and conciliatory attitudes between the two countries, the conditions of the Turkish minority in bilateral relations have started to change according to the political stability. In conjunction with that, Bulgaria, which did not take willingly to this idea when the Balkan Entente was on the agenda in 1930s, became a country that was given importance in bilateral relations in order to continue the politics in the Balkans peacefully with the initiatives of Turkey.

During this time, the Turks of Bulgaria, were influenced by the politics of both countries, have become the decisive element in bilateral relations. The main aim of this article is to emphasize the living conditions of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, within the framework of the experiences between 1923 and 1939 and how the political conjuncture and social dynamics changed the bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Turkey.

### ***Historical Overview: Ottoman-Bulgarian alliance***

The beginning of Ottoman-Bulgarian diplomatic relations was the 1878 Berlin Agreement. Bulgarians, who were formerly under the Ottoman rule, gained an autonomous Bulgarian Principality with this agreement. Since Bulgarian independence from Ottoman rule in 1878 political action in Bulgaria has been directed toward the creation of a territorially, culturally and linguistically unified nation-state by eliminating cultural diversity through migration of the country's ethnic minorities.<sup>1</sup>

Later, in 1908, it unilaterally declared its independence from the Ottoman Empire and became the Kingdom of Bulgaria. It cannot be said that Ottoman-Bulgarian relations, which started after the establishment of the Kingdom of Bulgaria, were placed on a friendly axis until before the WWI. The Balkan Wars had a great place in the negativity of these relations. However, in the Second Balkan War, the loss of territory experienced by Bulgaria brought them closer on the eve of WWI.

For the Bulgarians, WWI was a prolongation of a period of warfare which had begun with the Balkan Wars in 1912-13. Bulgarian involvement in all three military operations was motivated by transborder nationalism. In other words, it was the longing for territorial enlargement, in order to

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<sup>1</sup> Ali Eminov, *Turkish and other Muslim Minorities of Bulgaria*, 1997, p.4.

include within the state borders the co-nationals who were still under Ottoman rule, that is, the entire alleged nation.<sup>2</sup> Although the relations between the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria deteriorated due to the Balkan Wars, they were restored the relations after the Gallipoli Campaign in the WWI. The reason for this was that when Bulgaria entered the war on the side of the Central Powers, it became an ally of the Ottoman Empire.

At the end of the WWI, the Ottoman Empire signed the Armistice of Mudros with the Allied Powers. As a result, the Allied Powers had occupied the lands (Misak-ı Milli<sup>3</sup> Boundaries) of the Ottoman Empire after this armistice. Aside from that, Bulgaria signed the Armistice of Salonica. According to the Treaty of Salonica, which was a full surrender document, the Allied Powers began to occupy Bulgaria and gained the superior position in Eastern Europe. As a result of the WWI, Bulgaria and Turkey were forced to cut off relations with all of its former allies, including each other, in accordance with armistices which they signed at the end of the war. Their diplomatic relations would have continued through the Spanish embassy in Sofia for Turkey, and the Swedish embassy in Istanbul for Bulgaria.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Diplomatic Rapprochement in 1920s***

The defeat of Bulgaria in the WWI brings with internal turmoil in the country and as a result, in 1919, a revolution took place in Bulgaria. After the revolution, Stambolijski's Bulgarian Agrarian National Union came to the government by election in May 1920. This period of administration has been a period in which the Turkish minority was partially in peaceful situation and their rights were recognized. The Stambolijski's government did not make any innovations directly related to the Turkish minority. However, since 80% of Turks were farmers, political changes made in favor of the farmers had positive results for the Turks.<sup>5</sup> In this period, the Turkish population in Bulgaria gained freedoms such as using their own language in social life and in their education, living their culture, opening their schools, and worshiping freely according to their own religion.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> Eleonora Naxidou, *Bulgarian Historiography and World War I*, Bulgarian Studies Association, Vol.2, 2018, p.97.

<sup>3</sup> National Pact, it is a six-point statement that is the political manifesto of the Turkish War of Independence in 1920.

<sup>4</sup> Veysi Akın, *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ile Bulgaristan Arasında Siyasi İlişkilerin Kurulmasında 1925 Dostluk Antlaşması'nın Yeri ve Önemi*, [The Place and Importance of the 1925 Friendship Treaty in the Establishment of Political Relations between the Republic of Turkey and Bulgaria], "Balkan Araştırma Enstitüsü Review", Vol. 1, N. 1, 2012, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> Bilal Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri 1878-2008*, [Turks of Bulgaria 1878-2008], Bilgi, 2012, p.65.

<sup>6</sup> Yüksel Kaştan, *Atatürk Dönemi Türkiye-Bulgaristan İlişkileri*, [Ataturk Era Turkey-Bulgaria Relations], in

particular, this positive attitude can be given as an example to the reforms initiated by Stambolijski, especially, in the education of the Turkish minority. It was hugely essential that Stambolijski was in need of Turkish minority in its agriculture-based economy. For this reason, the Bulgarian government took initiatives to provide the guarantees for the rights of the Turkish minority's culture, religion and education in the country. So, Bulgaria has followed a policy which was to establish good relations with both Turkey and the Turkish population in Bulgaria during this period.

Turkish officials also were followed closely Bulgarian politics with an idea of a possible alliance in this period. Because Turkish authorities were trying to be successful in Thrace in order to keep Eastern Thrace within the borders of Misak-ı Milli. With this notion in mind, the Bulgarian officials should have guaranteed for this purpose for an understanding and cooperation. However, Greece started to occupy Western Thrace in May 1920. In addition, the occupation of Western Thrace by Greece caused reactions also in the Bulgarian public opinion, and this issue enabled Bulgaria and Turkey to get closer in terms of alliance after WWI in order to keep Eastern and Western Thrace away from the Greeks.<sup>7</sup>

Another effect in this positive attitude was that Turkey's success in the National Movement on the Bulgarian government's perspective. Although the relations between the two countries were brought to the desired levels with the rapprochements, the government's inability in Bulgaria to provide economic comfort after the WWI, the government collapsed with a coup under the leadership of nationalists. Thus, Stambolijski loses both power and his life. After the coup in Bulgaria, the government fell into the hands of radical nationalist Aleksandar Tsankov.<sup>8</sup> After the coup of nationalists, Simeon Radev, a graduate of Galatasaray High School (Istanbul, Turkey) and an experienced diplomat with an impeccable Turkish speaker, replaced with Todor Markov, the former Consul General of Bulgaria to Edirne, who came to Turkey between 21-31 January 1923. This reassignment had a positive effect on the talks, which started on 10 June 1924, and focused on long-pending issues, such as immigrants and their property, minority

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"Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Review", Vol. 24, N. 72, 2008, p. 673.

<sup>7</sup> Bülent Yıldırım and Harun Bekir, *Atatürk Döneminde Türkiye Cumhuriyeti - Bulgaristan İlişkileri*, [Relations of the Republic of Turkey and Bulgaria During Atatürk's Era], in the Editorial Book of Turkish Foreign Policy During Atatürk's Era 1920-1938: Caucasasia, Balkans, Middle East from Political, Economic, Social and Cultural Aspects, 2018, p.69.

<sup>8</sup> Kaştan, op.cit., pp. 671.

rights, Bulgarian schools in Turkey, the Bulgarian Exarchate in Istanbul, and Turkish schools in Bulgaria.<sup>9</sup> Markov had a very friendly meeting with Mustafa Kemal in Izmir and both sides were pleased with this meeting.<sup>10</sup>

The positivity between these two countries at the beginning of the 1920s created the first Friendship Treaty, Additional Protocol, and Residence Agreement which was signed in Ankara in order to establish diplomatic relations between the two countries in accordance with international law. The Treaty of Friendship signed on 18 October 1925 by Tevfik Kamil, the Undersecretary of the Ministry on behalf of Turkey, and Simeon Radev on behalf of Bulgaria, entered into force mutually on 17 August 1926. Thus, after the WWI, Turkey and Bulgaria officially resumed the political relations they had broken apart from their own initiative in accordance with the armistice agreements signed by both countries with the Allied Powers. Also, in the re-establishment of Turkish-Bulgarian rapprochement and diplomatic relations, President Mustafa Kemal and Tsar III. Boris' contributions were great.<sup>11</sup>

The treaty essentially expected the establishment of a long-lasting peace and eternal friendship between Turkey and Bulgaria, and immediately starting of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The Turkish-Bulgarian Friendship Treaty signed between Turkey and Bulgaria was vital importance for the Turkish minority. Because the migration of Turks living in Bulgaria to the homeland for the first time was regulated with this treaty and, many diplomatic visits were made with the initiatives of Mustafa Kemal and the warm rapprochement of Bulgaria, with the aim of both creating a peaceful atmosphere in the Balkans and protecting the rights of the Turkish minority.

Furthermore, during this period, some consultations were held between the two countries in the economic field. The Trade and Navigation Agreement, which was about commercial relations between both countries, was signed on 12 February 1928 and put into effect. In accordance with the agreement made, the products specified in both countries will be sold to other countries both internationally. This agreement was very important for Turkey, because Turkey has gained significant benefits in terms of exports and im-

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<sup>9</sup> Yıldıırım and Bekir, *op.cit.*, p.65.

<sup>10</sup> Akın, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

ports with European countries in the process.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Changing political atmosphere and the World Economic Crisis of 1929***

The government of Tsankov remained in power in Bulgaria until 1926. However, political power changed hands with another military coup of Andrey Lyapchev in 1926. The new government sets out with the slogan “Bulgaria belongs to the Bulgarians” and naturally this new policy of the government brought pressures on the minorities. This new policy of government was kept far away from the concept of nation by the new government and was limited to only ethnic origin, in other words ideal homogenous state. With this new policy, the relations between the two states continued to follow a declining course due to new politics’ attitude to the Turkish presence in Bulgaria and ideological approaches.

In accordance to Friendship Treaty of 1925, the Treaty of Neutrality, Conciliation, Judicial Resolution and Arbitration was signed on 6 March 1929 between Bulgaria and Turkey in order to strengthen the political ties. This treaty recorded the basic principles such as staying neutral in case of a possible war, finding a peaceful solution to disputes, and operating the arbitration institution.<sup>13</sup> There were very detailed articles on how to resolve any disputes that may arise between the two states, as well as the determination and functioning of the arbitrators. However, at the same time, there were changing conditions under the world economic crisis in 1929; consequently, there was a decrease in the trade capacity between the two countries.

As a result of the political and economic instability that started in Bulgaria in 1930, with the initiative of Democratic Party Leader Aleksandar Malinov, all opponents were united under the name of the Popular Front. They won the elections in June 1931. Due to Malinov’s health problems, he handed over his duties to Nikola Mushanov in October 1931. During this period of power, which continued until the military coup on 19 May 1934, Bulgaria followed a revisionist policy. It maintained its current claims, such as territorial claims against its neighbors, in this period as well.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Kaştan, op.cit., pp. 686.

<sup>13</sup> Mustafa Göleç, *Hakimiyet-i Milliye Gazetesine Göre Cumhuriyetin İlk Yıllarında Türkiye-Bulgaristan İlişkileri (1923-1930)*, [Turkey-Bulgaria Relations in the First Years of the Republic, According to Hakimiyet-i Milliye Newspaper (1923-1930)], “Türkiyat Mecmuası Review”, Vol.26, N.1, 2016, p.160.

<sup>14</sup> Yıldırım and Bekir, op.cit., p.75.

On the one hand, according to the Treaty which was signed in 1929, mutual visits started between the two countries and the first visit was made in 1931. The Bulgarian Prime Minister Mushanov visited Ankara with the effect of the political relations between Turkey and Bulgaria at the beginning of the 1930s. As Mushanov continued to say positive words in favor of Turkey in his country, and next appointment was held in Sofia on 20 September 1933 by Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü and Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras. As one of the positive achievements of the visit, the continuity of Treaty of 1929 was extended for 5 more years with the additional protocol which was signed in 1934. During the period of these positive developments, a change in power took place in Bulgaria, and this was resulted as an increasing pressure on the Turkish minority.<sup>15</sup>

The world economic crisis in 1929 and regime changes in Bulgaria also brought about different nationalist organizations in the Bulgarian popular base. Between these years, two main Bulgarian nationalist organizations were emerged in Bulgaria. One was born as “Rodna Zashtita” (Motherland Defense) in Northern Bulgaria and the second as “Thrace” Committees in Southern Bulgaria.<sup>16</sup> One of the main activities has been their oppression and attacks that the Turkish minority in Bulgaria has been subjected to. For instance, a Turkish cemetery in Razgrad (Bulgaria), was destroyed by Bulgarian activists affiliated with the Rodna Zashtita organization in 1933. Although they did not represent a large part of the society, they were influential on political life with their aggression. Some Turks, who could not stand these persecutions, were forced to migrate to Romania. The opinion of the authorities in Turkey was seen that even the acceptance of all its Turkish speaking Muslim minority cognates to homeland within the framework of a certain plan. It was considered that the Turkish government was worried that the security of life and property of its compatriots in Bulgaria. Turkish officials were of the opinion that Turkish minority would completely disappear and that they could be assimilated in the long term as a result of pressure.

Moreover, the negotiations were being held by Turkish officials to relocate Turkish minority from Bulgaria to certain parts of Turkey. Mustafa

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<sup>15</sup> Esra S. Değerli, Hasan Karakuzu, *İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın Türkiye-Bulgaristan İlişkilerine Etkisi*, [The Effect of the Second World War on Turkey-Bulgaria Relations], *History Studies Review*, Vol.14, N.2, 2022, p.428.

<sup>16</sup> Hüsamettin İnaç and Betül Yazıcı, *Bulgaristan'dan Türkiye'ye Göçler, Bulgaristan Diasporası ve Uluslaşma*, [Immigration Waves from Bulgaria to Turkey, Bulgarian Diaspora and Nation Building], “Balkan and Near Eastern Journal of Social Sciences”, Vol. 4, N.4, 2018, pp.80-81.



Kemal's settlement policy in this period, was generally based on demographic and economic principles. By means of migrations, the population of the Republic of Turkey would be increased and the country would have a homogeneous structure with this settlement policy. In addition, it was desired to create a nation that would easily adapt to each other and be united around the same ideal.

Hence, the Turkish officials has worked on bringing the Turkish minority in Bulgaria to the motherland. In accordance with the agreements made in the period of Mustafa Kemal, a fairly smooth migration flow from Bulgaria to Turkey has begun. 15-20 thousand Turks came to Turkey from Bulgaria every year in the 1930s. There was no collapse in the Bulgarian economy, as there was no mass migration. Since the Turkish minority came with their movable properties, they did not become an economic burden to Turkey either. In this period, the annual average of immigrants in Bulgaria was about 17 thousand.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Rising revisionist policies and the Balkan Entente***

The impoverishment that took place with the Great Depression also strengthened the right-wing and racist tendencies in Bulgaria. Fascist associations activated in the country, inspired by ideology of Hitler, wanted to intimidate the Turkish minority as well as other minorities.

In 1934 Damian Velchev-Kimon Georgiev's government came to power after a coup and subsequently carried out many administrative reforms including a far-reaching policy of changing the Turkish names of settlements. Two-thirds of all Turkish place names and settlements were changed by ministerial orders in 1934 alone.<sup>18</sup> And this changing political atmosphere was brought the necessity of establishing regional pacts in the Balkans rather than the states being in opposite camps. However, Bulgaria, which followed a revisionist policy between 1931 and 1934, did not favor the Balkan Entente due to its territorial demands from the past. The idea of establishing the Balkan Entente, which could be seen as Turkey's policy of convergence with the Balkan countries, was to ensure Turkey's regional security and at the same time to consolidate its goodwill relations with the Balkan countries.

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<sup>17</sup> Şimşir, op.cit., pp.492-493.

<sup>18</sup> Milena Mahon, *The Turkish minority under Communist Bulgaria – politics of ethnicity and power*, Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans, Vol.1, N.2, 1999, p.154.

Georgi Kjosivanov who came to power in Bulgaria in 1935, was known his closeness with the Axis Powers<sup>19</sup> in this period. As such, Bulgaria was the only state that was not disturbed by Italy's expansionist policy in the Balkans in this period. Italy has also backed up Bulgaria for its own interests in the region.<sup>20</sup>

Although there was not a great deal on political relations between Turkey and Bulgaria, it was a fact that the relations could not be raised to the desired level. Turkey's support of maintaining the status quo in Balkan region and Bulgaria's following a revisionist policy were the biggest obstacles to a solid union between the two countries.<sup>21</sup> The political relations between the two countries were partially damaged by the fact that they started to take place in different camps as of 1929, Turkey has also made efforts for Bulgaria to enter the Balkan Entente. On the contrary, in Bulgaria, when various talks and conferences were held since 1929 for the establishment of a Balkan Entente, nationalist groups in Bulgaria carried out various activities that brought up the territorial demands of the neighboring Balkan countries.

Whilst Bulgaria did not give up on its regional territorial claims, while Turkey adopted regional peace as its fundamental principle, it was of the opinion that peace and friendship agreements would be important steps for this purpose. For this reason, the first step in the formation of a regional peace was the Balkan Entente. In fact, this region has had a feature that expansionist states had always easily used and mobilized for its own purposes. Therefore, the ideas of creating unity in the region accelerated in this period. While no country was distinguished in these initiatives, the revisionist foreign policy determined by Bulgaria for itself made the environment difficult to reach the target.<sup>22</sup> Also, the territorial losses resulting from the abandoning of Western Thrace to Greece took away Bulgaria's right of direct access to the Aegean Sea.

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<sup>19</sup> Aix Powers were a military coalition that initiated World War II and fought against the Allies. Its principal members were Nazi Germany, the Kingdom of Italy, and the Empire of Japan.

<sup>20</sup> Esra S. Değerli, *Türkiye'nin Balkan Ülkelerine Yakınlaşma Çalışmaları: Balkan Paktı*, [Turkey's Efforts to Improve Relations with Balkan Countries: Balkan Pact], Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Review, Vol.9, N.2, 2008, p. 119.

<sup>21</sup> Aptülâhat Akşin, *Atatürk'ün Dış Politika İlkeleri Diplomasisi*, [Atatürk's Foreign Policy Principles Diplomacy], 1991, p.247.

<sup>22</sup> İhsan Sabri Balkaya, *Basınımıza Yansdığı Şekliyle Balkan Antantı Sürecinde Türkiye ve Bulgaristan*, [Turkey and Bulgaria in Media the Period Balkanian Pact], Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi Review, Vol.20, N.10, 2004, p.764.

The determined attitude of Turkey on the creation of the Balkan Entente was given in the form of the First Balkan Conference in Athens on 5 October 1930. Bulgaria attended this first meeting with its representatives. The Second Conference was held in Istanbul in 1931. Since Bulgaria did not take kindly to the idea of establishing this entente at this conference, it kept its distance on the issue. In 1932 the third Conference was held in Bucharest and Bulgaria withdrew from the Conference.<sup>23</sup> Despite Turkey's intense efforts, Bulgaria did not join the Balkan Pact which was signed on 9 February 1934. Bulgaria's desire was having an exit to the Aegean Sea via Greece and the problem of territorial claims in the region prevented this situation.

The relations between Bulgaria and Turkey have started to begin to normalize after the visits of Turkish Prime Minister İsmet İnönü and Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras to Sofia in 1937. The negotiations were held with Prime Minister Kjöseivanov. Bulgarian officials purposed to remove the articles limiting the armament of Bulgaria and to improve relations with other Balkan Entente member countries. Bulgaria was pleased with this effort of Turkey. As a matter of fact, as a result of these efforts, the Salonika Agreement in 1938 between the member states of the Balkan Entente and Bulgaria.<sup>24</sup> This was the last mediation attempt between Bulgaria and the Balkan States, made in interwar era. Whilst the parties affirmed that not to use force in order to solve the disagreements, Bulgaria was released from the military commitments and restrictions it has undertaken with the Neuilly Agreement.

### ***Turkish minority in Bulgaria 1923-1939***

The alliance of Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire during the WWI was an important factor in Bulgaria's change of attitude towards the Turks in the country at the end of the war. During the period of Stambolijski, who came to power at the end of the war and remained in power until 1923, the Turkish minority could live smoothly. The basic philosophy of Stambolijski government focused on the farmers and the peasants were factors that help to improve relations. Approximately, 90% of Turks living in Bulgaria was coming from the peasant class. And the Bulgarian government did not dissociate its own target audience due to ethnic elements during this period

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.766.

<sup>24</sup> Yıldırım and Bekir, op.cit., p.79.

provided that Turkish minority was close to the government of Stambolijski, and their closeness was reflected in the relations between the governments.<sup>25</sup> However, there were some difficulties during this period as well. Unfortunately, the tolerant attitude of the Bulgarian authorities did not last long. After the assassination of the Agrarian Premier Stambolijski in 1923 the situation of the Turkish minority began to deteriorate.<sup>26</sup>

The treaty of Friendship, Additional Protocol, and Residence Agreement signed between Turkey and Bulgaria in 1925 mutually regulated the migrations between the two countries. Accordingly, the two countries would not prevent the Turkish minority from migrate voluntarily by taking their movable properties with them. The Bulgarian government has committed to the Turkish government to develop the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria, to gain a benefit from all the provisions regarding the protection of minorities which were written in the Neuilly Treaty signed by Bulgaria at the end of the WWI. In other words, the Turkish minority's freedom of religion, using Turkish language in social and education life, Turkish newspaper publishing and forming an association etc., they would have own independence. The Bulgarian government was undertaken not to put any obstacles or to impose any restrictions on the rights and freedoms of the Turkish minority.

Turkish-Bulgarian political relations were shaped around the economic negotiations because of the economic crisis of 1929 and the issues of Turkish minority because of the changing political atmosphere in Bulgaria between 1926 and 1929.<sup>27</sup> In 1926, Premier Lyapchev's formula "Bulgaria belongs to Bulgarians" left the Turkish minority in a difficult circumstance. Pressures in the social, cultural, economic and political fields had led Turkish minority living in the region to migrate to Turkey, as before. Additionally, the nationalist policies of Bulgaria and the consequent oppression to minorities, pushed the Turkish minority to unite and organize well together. They were activating this uniting through the organizations they had established in Bulgaria. Two important organizations that had a great role in the life of Turkish minority were the Turkish Teachers' Union and the Turan Society. For instance, The Turkish Teachers' Union worked

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<sup>25</sup> A. Baran Dural, *Turkish - Bulgarian Relations within the Kemalist Era*, Management and Education Academic Journal, Vol.8, N.3, 2012, p.17.

<sup>26</sup> Eminov, op.cit., p.126.

<sup>27</sup> Ahmet Özgiray, *Türk-Bulgar Siyasî İlişkileri (1920-1938)*, [Political Relations between Turkey and Bulgaria (1920-1938)], Tarih İncelemeleri Review, Vol. 10, N.1, 1995, pp. 58-60.

to provide Turkish language education in parallel to their homeland, and to increase Turkish education to a modern level in Bulgaria. Especially, Turkey's transition to the Latin alphabet in 1928, it was decided to start education with the new Turkish letters in Bulgaria. Initially, the Bulgarian government banned the use of these Turkish letters, but later released them. This union was in favor of both to adopt the Turkish language in education and to strengthen ties with Mustafa Kemal's Turkey. However, the activities of the Turkish Teachers' Union were banned again by the Bulgarian government in 1933 on the eve of the Balkan Entente.<sup>28</sup>

The Turan Society as another organization, was aiming to get together and develop the Turkish youth in Bulgaria. This society was tried to adopt the Turkish minority the Kemalist revolutions in 1926.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it's first formation was the Turkish Sports Union formed by various Turkish minority's youth sports clubs in Bulgaria, and later changed its name to Turan society. They did not see sports activities alone as sufficient after they re-named the society, and they wanted to promote Mustafa Kemal's main principles in the Turkish minority's youth in Bulgaria. However, the society, whose last congress was held in 1933, was closed by the Bulgarian authorities the following year. Some of the members, who were unemployed and did not see themselves as safe situation, immigrated to Turkey in 1930s.

The living conditions of Turkish minority became increasingly difficult in the 1930s. More and more schools were closed and Turkish minority newspapers ceased to appear.<sup>30</sup> During the time, the main idea of Turkish newspapers on the Bulgarian agenda was, despite all the persecution of the Bulgarian government, in the direction of not migrate to Turkey. These newspapers made an effort to discourage Turkish minority from emigration.<sup>31</sup> The idea was that wanted to organize together and stand strong against the Bulgarian government.

While oppressions continued on the Turkish minority starting from 1924 until 1934 in Bulgaria, cultural relations between the two countries also continued peacefully. In 1931, Bulgarian Prime Minister Mushanov visited Turkey. As a result of his visit, the positive atmosphere between the two

<sup>28</sup> Kaştan, op.cit., pp. 684.

<sup>29</sup> Şimşir, op.cit., pp.118-119.

<sup>30</sup> Bjorn-Cato Funnemark, *The Turkish Minority in Bulgaria*, Proceedings of the International Symposium of Jurists on the Question of Turkish Moslem Minority in Bulgaria, Organized by the Istanbul Bar Association, 1987, p.148.

<sup>31</sup> İnaç and Yazıcı, op. cit., p.81.

countries was also reflected in the cultural relations. These bureaucratic meetings between two countries played an important role in the development of educational and cultural relations on the minority issue. Bulgarian delegations visited Turkish cities such as Edirne, Bursa, Istanbul while Turkish delegations visited cities such as Sofia and Varna. As a matter of fact, Mustafa Kemal, who was the military attaché in Sofia between 1913-1914, had a great impact in the future established relations.<sup>32</sup> During his time in there, Mustafa Kemal established close relations with senior civil and military Bulgarian officials, and respected by the Bulgarians.<sup>33</sup> For this reason, Mustafa Kemal was knowing both this country and its bureaucracy well. After the Turkish National Movement and the proclamation of the Republic, it has provided a great advantage on the relations with Bulgaria on the minority issue.

For instance, with the initiative of a group of Bulgarian intellectuals, the Bulgarian Turkish Society was established in Sofia. According to this, another Society was founded in Ankara in 1930s. The aim of this associations was to work on the development of political, economic, social and cultural relations between Turkey and Bulgaria. For these purposes, mutual visits, academic meetings and similar programs were organized in order to reinforce the relations between two countries.<sup>34</sup> These visits, within the changing political atmosphere in this period, there were beneficial exchanges between the two countries mostly in the field of culture and education.

In fact, cultural and social relations played a positive role in the normalization of political relations, which were occasionally strained. The reason for this situation was that Turks and Bulgarians have a common historical background and a centuries-old culture of coexistence. Another important factor in cultural and social relations was the presence of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.<sup>35</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, Bulgaria, entered the WWI as an ally with Turkey and were defeated. Bulgaria signed the Neuilly Treaty after the war, and with this

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<sup>32</sup> Bahar Toparlak, *1930'lu Yıllarda Türkiye-Bulgaristan Arasında Sosyo-Kültürel ve Eğitim Amaçlı Seyahatler*, [Cultural and Educational Journeys Between Turkey and Bulgaria During the Years of 1930], *Journal of History and Future*, Vol.2, N.2, 2016, pp. 142-143.

<sup>33</sup> Yıldırım and Bekir, *op.cit.*, p.67.

<sup>34</sup> Göleç, *op.cit.*, p.163.

<sup>35</sup> Yıldırım and Bekir, *op.cit.*, p.89.

agreement, the rights and freedoms of the minorities were guaranteed. During the interwar era, Turkey and Bulgaria has signed agreements on minority issues and on trade. After the WWI, Bulgaria brought broad rights to the Turkish population both in accordance with the Neuilly Treaty and in the stage of re-establishing the administration in the country (1919-1926). The provisions of this agreement also have included the Turkish minority living in the region, although they were not one of the parties to the agreement. In this sense considering the important developments in the country from the Neuilly Treaty to the end of 1939, the relations between Bulgaria and Turkey and the situation and general problems of the Turkish minority can be examined in two stages.

First stage was the period when the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union was in power, the Turkish minority lived their most peaceful days. At the same time, the Bulgarian-Turkish relations established during the National Movement in Turkey undoubtedly positively affected the cooperation and rapprochement between the two countries. These relations gained a greater vitality during this period. During this period, the Turkish minority was able to teach Turkish language in their own private schools and develop their social and cultural activities, and also, they were able to freely practice their religious activities. Again, at the same time, with an agreement signed between Turkey and Bulgaria, the legal basis of migration between the two countries was established. As a result of these efforts, the Turkish-Bulgarian Friendship Treaty emerged in 1925 and, the basic problems regarding the rights of minorities were resolved, as well as the initiation of political relations between the two countries. These efforts made at that time are also of great importance in terms of today's political relations and, the positive progress of relations between Turkey and Bulgaria also contributed to the protection of the rights of the Turkish minority.

During this period, Turkey defended the aspect that Turkish minority should be integrated into their country politically and economically. There was a policy that specifically stated that steps that might encourage separatist or violent movements between the two countries in the long run should be avoided. However, Turkey was trying to preserve the cultural identity of the Turkish minority and to strengthen their historical ties with Turkey in the interwar era. While following this policy, it has always continued to pursue regional constructive policies towards Bulgaria.

Second stage was the political relations between the two countries were

partially damaged by the fact that they started to take part in different camps as of 1929, Turkey made efforts for Bulgaria to enter the Balkan Pact. After the 1930s, the pressure on the Turkish minority was beginning to increase with the change of Bulgarian government's attitude. With the change of regional policies of Bulgaria, Turkey would not abandon its regional policies based on conciliatory and direct diplomacy, and as a requirement of this, it would continue to endeavor to maintain its neighborly relations with Bulgaria. On the other hand, Bulgaria aimed to establish strong ties between Turkey and the Turkish minority through cultural and social exchanges as well as political relations. At the end of 1931, Bulgarian Prime Minister Mushanov visited Ankara. In the second half of 1933, a Turkish delegation headed by İsmet İnönü went to Bulgaria. The Turkish Prime Minister was warmly welcomed by the Bulgarian public and during this visit, the duration of the Friendship Treaty was extended and initiatives for cooperation were determined. After the coup in 1934 in Bulgaria the relations have started to be strained, however, the relations between two states started to normalize again in 1937.

Turkey, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, appointed Prime Minister Celal Bayar and Foreign Minister Tevfik Rüştü Aras to Bulgaria in May 1938, within the framework of the continuity of its foreign policy towards the Balkans. During the meeting, Tsar III. Boris and Prime Minister Kjo-seivanov, it was stated that Turkey made efforts to abolish the heavy provisions and sanctions imposed on Bulgaria by the Neuilly Treaty of 1919, and wanted Sofia to improve its relations with the other member states of the Balkan Entente. Bulgarian government also stated that they are satisfied with this approach of Turkey. In brief, the relations between Turkey and Bulgaria have improved by taking effective and constructive steps between Ankara and Sofia in the interwar era. In addition to these effective and constructive steps of political relations between two parties, the main issues regarding the Turkish minority were also developed in constructive way in the interwar period, with the positive attitude of both sides.