Public communications disorder in Bulgarian-Turkish relations: overcoming discourses and narratives of fear

Plamen Ralchev

Department of International Relations
University of National and World Economy, Sofia, Bulgaria
ralchev@unwe.eu

Abstract

This article outlines and discusses specific problems of public communications in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. The author interprets and explains these problems, considering their historical and psychological dimensions, the presence of the Turkish minority and Turkish political party in Bulgaria, and the role of current and potential interlocutors in bilateral relations. He applies discourses and narratives as tools to examine the dynamics of Bulgarian attitudes towards Turkey and 'Turkish-ness'. The author emphasizes that the instruction of the discourse and narrative of Fear of Turkey has been detrimental to public relations between the two nations. What he calls the Fear Factor or the Fear of Turkey Syndrome implies the securitization of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Beyond analysing problems and deficits in bilateral public communications, the article goes on to highlight recent positive developments in relations between Bulgaria and Turkey. Among these, the author points out the improved people-to-people contacts, tourist exchange, and the outreach of Turkish mass-media products in Bulgaria. However, certain negative stereotypes in Bulgaria regarding Turkey and Turkish-ness remain. Besides assessing the ongoing transformations in Bulgarian-Turkish public communications, in the conclusion the author also draws readers' attention to amalgamated identity formation and the socialization of young Bulgarian Turks in the contemporary social and political setting in Bulgaria as an EU member-state and the impact this may have on generational change in perceptions of Bulgarian-Turkish relations.

Key words: Bulgarian-Turkish relations: public attitudes, image, perceptions

The way in which the Bulgarian public perceives relations with Turkey has specific characteristics. The least to say is that it has deep psychological and emotional dimensions, upon which this article will elaborate. The focal point and underlying thesis of the paper are based on the interpretative framework of discourse and narrative. Both discourse and narrative are used as examples for the dynamics and state of affairs of Bulgarian-Turkish relations.

For methodological purposes, it is necessary to explain first the use of the categories 'discourse' and 'narrative' in interpreting Bulgarian-Turkish relations. The social and psychological dimension of these relations has been relatively under-researched; therefore it is the point of departure for this analysis. Studying discourses and narratives reveals the state of public awareness and public perceptions of a particular issue.

Methodological reference to discourse and narrative[i]

Discourse is a broad term with various definitions, ranging from linguistics, through sociology, philosophy and other disciplines. One of the leading definitions of discourse is based on that of van Dijk (1977: 3) and Fairclough (1993: 9) and their general concept of discourse as text in context, with the focus being put on discourse as action and process. From this it follows that "discourse" is a wider term than "text". Another definition describes discourse as a group of ideas or patterned way of thinking which can be identified in textual and verbal communications, and which can also be located in wider social structures. *Discourse* is similar to an interpretation matrix, i.e. a certain way of making sense of events which fits in with a historical background, a given linguistic and cultural context and a political culture. (Lupton 1992)

In Foucault's meaning, discourse orientates the way we think, speak and act. It is a mode of organizing knowledge, ideas, or experience that is rooted in language and its concrete contexts as history or institutions (Foucault 1972).

Narrative is referred to here as a story, a narrated representation of collective memory, generational consciousness and experience. Exploring *narratives* is a social-anthropological method to research the dominant discourses in a society, images, perceptions, interpretations, and even the self-reflexivity of the society in question. Narratives can and do create and/or shape discourses and the following discussion is illustrative of this.

How is Turkey perceived in Bulgaria?

The image of modern Turkey in mainstream public discourses in Bulgaria is challenged by persevering complexities, prejudices, misperceptions and taboos which are still present in Bulgarian public opinion and largely shape people's attitudes towards Turkey and Turkish-ness. Turkish-ness is perceived hereafter as a complex image and representation of Turkish society, polity, culture, lifestyle, mentality, etc. (Bakalova 1997: 99–106).

Although they inhabit neighbouring states, the publics in Bulgaria and Turkey seem to know very little about each other. Why is understanding Turkish-ness so difficult in Bulgaria? There could be a plethora of "by default" answers to this question, but in order to ensure a greater awareness of the problem at hand it is instrumental to provide a logically structured classification of those features that yield the broadest insights and meanings.

Feature # 1: The bearings and impact of historical and nationalistic/ ideological discourses

Outside of academic and expert communities in Bulgaria, the image and understanding of Turkish-ness is very poorly informed, biased and largely irrational. This is due, on the one hand, to the formation of a Bulgarian psychological complex towards Turkey and Turkish-ness, and on the other hand, the accumulation of malformed public opinion, which has largely been influenced by historical discourse and popular folklore narratives.

The image of the modern Turkish state and society is challenged by deeply-rooted prejudices and misperceptions amongst the majority of the Bulgarian public. There are several clusters of reasons explaining this.

First and foremost is the seminal perception of the Republic of Turkey as a continuation of the Ottoman Empire. This particular historical discourse was built in an effort to support and sustain Bulgarian nationalism of the 19th century and later. Similar to both Greek and Serbian nationalism, which grew up in antagonism with the Turkish Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, Bulgarian nationalism and the Bulgarian liberation movement motivated the masses by creating perceptions, drawing images and dividing lines between the oppressed Bulgarians and the oppressive Ottoman Empire (Ralchev 2011).

National emancipation and the re-establishment of a sovereign statehood constructed persevering narratives and discourses with regard to the former imperial master. The creation of a specific historical account and even nationalist mythology about the confrontation between Bulgarians and Ottoman Turks resulted in deeply rooted historical and nationalistic/ideological discourses which have been nurtured and fuelled by various sources of Bulgarian literature and culture (e.g. the first modern Bulgarian novel *Under the Yoke* by Ivan Vazov, poetry commemorating national heroes of the 19th century, and especially the revolutionary poetry of Hristo Botev, Stefan Stambolov and Dobri Chintulov), thus they had enormous bearing on the formation of perceptions with regard to Turkey and Turkish-ness. One of the most long-lasting narratives is the narrative of the "Ottoman/Turkish Yoke" under which the Bulgarians lived for nearly 500 years. The semantics of the word "yoke" portray the whole period during which the Bulgarian state disappeared after being conquered by the Ottoman Turks in 1396 as the most unfortunate period in Bulgarian national history (Erdinç, mimeo).

In recent years, efforts have certainly been made to refer to this period more soberly and to consider some of the benefits Bulgarians enjoyed during Ottoman rule. These efforts, for example, include replacing the public use of the term "Ottoman/ Turkish yoke" with "Ottoman rule" or "Ottoman period". On the whole, however, stereotypes and perceptions about the Ottoman Turkish Empire have persevered, especially amongst people over the age of 60, as shown by public opinion polls conducted in 1997 and 2008.

Hence when Turkey's Foreign Minister Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu refers to "Strategic Depth" and the Ottoman heritage as a new beginning for Turkey's geopolitical stance, to many in Bulgaria his words may have a deeper meaning, implying an attempt to restore the past (Дърева, 2012). These different understandings thus ultimately create communication disorders.

The history curriculum within the Bulgarian compulsory education system extends to the end of the two World Wars, but there is little attention paid to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War One. To ordinary Bulgarians, the modern Turkish Republic is obscure, and it was not until the end of the Cold War that Bulgarians started discovering modern Turkey (Simeonova 2001). In fact it was the intensification of tourism from Bulgaria to Turkey that proved the main factor in raising such awareness (Statistical Data of the Bulgarian Ministry of Economy, Energy and Tourism 2010, 2011).

In a nutshell, *Feature 1* highlights that Bulgarians tend to draw their understanding of Turkey from the time of the Ottoman Empire and that they are still burdened with historical images, narratives and perceptions from the past (Ralchev 2011).

Feature # 2: Representation of Turkish-ness and the bearings of the minority discourse – implications of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria

The Turkish minority in Bulgaria is a significant factor shaping the image and public understanding of Turkish-ness in Bulgaria. In retrospect, however, this minority has served more as a dividing line than a bridgehead between the two nations.

Stemming from and similar to specifics highlighted in *Feature 1*, the comprehension of the average Bulgarian tends to equate the Turkish minority in Bulgaria with the politics and society of the Republic of Turkey, and this overlap of image and perceptions of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria and the Turkish state further aggravates negative stereotypes (Bakalova 1997: 105).

In the past there was much speculation and fear in the public at large about potential irredentist claims from the Turkish minority in Bulgaria and of support being offered from their kin-state of Turkey. During the years of communist dictatorship in Bulgaria (1944–1989), the regime changed its policies towards Bulgarian Turks and Muslims a number of times. At first it tried affirmative action in the 1950s with Turkish schools, publications and cultural institutions, and then it resorted to outright assimilation in the 1970s and 1980s. When the communist regime initiated repressions against Bulgarian Turks in the winter of 1984–1985, it was the Turks who first organized protests demonstrating public discontent with the regime (Bakalova 2006: 233–246).

One can even say that the foundations of the communist regime were further weakened by their violations of the human and civil rights of Bulgarian Turks and their mass expulsion and exodus from Bulgaria in 1989. The situation improved rapidly immediately after the fall of the regime in 1989 and the rights of Bulgarian Turks have since been restored. However, older generations of Bulgarian Turks kept alive for years the memory of humiliation and repressions,

and this predetermined their electoral behaviour after 1990. Throughout the whole period of transition after 1989, Bulgarian Turks tended to vote for a specific political party, i.e., the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (the DPS), despite some of them disapproving of DPS governing practices at local and national level. The DPS succeeded in attracting the votes of Bulgarian Turks mainly because of their fear that not voting for DPS would leave them under-represented and unprivileged in local and national politics (Petkova 2002: 42–59).

Feature # 3: Turkish-ness and public attitudes towards Turkey in Bulgarian security discourse

The eclectic mixture of nationalistic/ ideological and minority discourses at times of political controversies between Bulgaria and Turkey has been largely exploited by ruling circles in Bulgaria (namely during the Communist regime) to set up and maintain an atmosphere of fear with regard to Turkey. The *'Fear' Factor*[ii] was used by communists and later on by populists to encourage antagonism towards Turkey amongst the Bulgarian public. Creating negative perceptions and an image of Turkey as an "enemy", possibly referring to a second "Cyprus scenario",[iii] helped Communists in Bulgaria keep a hold on power and to justify their oppressive measures against the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in the 1980s. Portraying the Turkish minority as a 'problem' and considering it within the overall context of Bulgarian-Turkish relations, combined with Özal's vision of 'outside Turks', established a comprehensive atmosphere of fear among Bulgarians with regard to the Turkish minority in Bulgaria and with regard to Turkey. The Turkish minority was publicly perceived as Turkey's arm in Bulgaria (Bakalova, 1997: 100–101). Strategically, this is the worst situation of Bulgarian-Turkish communications and perceptions. Communist Secret Services contributed much to "engineer" this situation in the 1980s. It was very difficult to deal with the repercussions of this strategy after the regime change in 1989, especially considering the fact that some former Secret Service officers went into the 'shadows' and are still believed to 'pull the strings' behind the scenes.[iv] Moving beyond security discourse, and even abandoning security discourse in Bulgarian-Turkish public relations, must therefore be adopted as a strategic objective. Branding the Turkish minority in Bulgaria as a security asset for Bulgarian-Turkish relations rather than a security threat for Bulgaria is likewise

an outstanding mission that is possible but which so far remains incomplete. The year 2012 marked some important developments in bilateral relations at the level of high politics, including a collective visit of a substantial part of the Bulgarian Government to Ankara on 20 March 2012 and a joint session with the Turkish Government at which 17 bilateral agreements were signed (Хюсеинов 2012). At lower levels of politics, however, much more needs to be done.

Feature # 4: Representation of Turkish-ness and the bearings of the interlocutor

It is critically important who represents modern Turkish-ness in Bulgaria—how he/she is perceived by the general public, and the message and image he/she brings to it. Communicators/interlocutors of Turkish-ness in Bulgarian public discourses are essential stakeholders. Biased interlocutors sustain the irrational and inherent fear of the Bulgarian public with regard to the politics of the Turkish state.

As has been argued above, perceptions of Turkish-ness in Bulgaria are a very sensitive issue. This sensitiveness is fuelled by the fact that, besides the original external representation of Turkish-ness by Turkey, there is domestic representation of Turkish-ness in Bulgaria.

After 1990, a monopoly on communicating Turkish-ness in Bulgaria was established by the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), an influential political party which is perceived by and large as representing the interests of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. This further aggravated the public understanding of average Bulgarians regarding Turkish-ness. As a coalition partner in several Bulgarian governments, the DPS has been suspected in many cases of misusing power and of corrupt practices.[v] This led to a backlash on the part of the populist and nationalist party, ATAKA, which seized the wave of nationalistic rhetoric and propaganda and achieved significant results at national and local elections in 2005 and 2006. The ATAKA receives support from extremist and marginal parts of Bulgarian society which, though declining in numbers now, are yet vociferous.

ATAKA's anti-DPS motions and emotions form distinct fault-lines within Bulgarian society which prevent or at least gravely impede the public perception and understanding of the image of modern Turkish-ness. This image is by and large confused with the public profile of

Bulgaria's own Turkish minority and its grievances.

Feature # 5: (Mis)understanding of Turkish-ness and Bulgaria's support for Turkey's EU membership

Before Bulgaria became an EU member state, the Bulgarian Government avoided expressing a clear and firm position on certain questions that are the subject of debate amongst EU members, including the Turkish bid for EU membership. This was caused by the country's desire not to oppose the Union in order to conclude its negotiations as soon as possible.

The official position of Bulgarian governments after 1997 was that, as part of Southeast Europe, Bulgaria is interested in the European future of the region and supports the EU enlargement policy. This general position is based on the understanding that security, stability and prosperity in the region are only possible within the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions (Bakalova, 2008).

In this regard, the Borisov government (2009–2013) considers that the enlargement process gives a strong impetus for political and economic reforms in Turkey which contribute to peace and security in Europe. Bulgaria does not doubt that the Union should maintain the dynamics of the enlargement process. However, Bulgaria considers that progress in negotiations with Turkey depends on the implementation of internal reforms for fulfilling the membership criteria.

Defending this position is not easy for Bulgarian governments, however. The issue of Turkish membership has divided the Bulgarian political parties. In 2010, two nationalist parties, VMRO (which has no seats in parliament) and ATAKA, even started collecting signatures to call a referendum on Turkey's bid to join the European Union in an effort to stop government support for the bid, but failed to achieve the desired public effect. The mobilization potential of the issue proved to be rather low.

Public opinion polls carried out in 2005 and 2007 show that Bulgarian society's support for Turkish membership has decreased considerably since Bulgarian accession to the EU. *(In 2005, opinion polls showed that public support for Turkey was at 55% (18% against), while in*

2007 those in favour amounted to only 29% (27% against).) Political experts explain that the Bulgarian general public is still badly grounded in the "pros" and "cons" of common policies, which allows the nationalist parties to manipulate public opinion and to further trouble the implementation of the government's official policy (Ralchev 2011).

Feature # 6: Bulgarian confused understanding of Turkish-ness – some breakthroughs

The problem of public communication disorder and confusion over Bulgarian perceptions of Turkish-ness became widely evident in 2009 when, for the first time in history, an alternative source of information appeared in the form of a contemporary Turkish TV series presenting Bulgarian audiences with an image of modern Turkey, opening space for communication influence. Over the last three years, more than a dozen Turkish TV series have been broadcast on four Bulgarian TV channels with nation-wide coverage. Some of them have slots in TV prime time and attract a considerable number of viewers. As a result, the Bulgarian public has gradually become aware of the information and communication deficits it has suffered with regard to its understanding of modern Turkey as a polity, society and lifestyle.

The highlighted flaws necessitate the formation of alternative communication channels to bring in and cultivate a different public understanding of Turkey in Bulgaria. There is a pressing need for a neutral but positive discourse and interlocutor of modern Turkish-ness in Bulgaria. It is a public communication niche that needs to be targeted moderately but thoroughly with public diplomacy activities.

These activities, however, should maintain a low profile and be very specific in their intent and target audience, as they could be misinterpreted and misperceived by specific public segments and certain extremist political parties and trigger reactions on their behalf.

Conclusion

Public communications aspects remain an unexplored domain of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. It is true that there is an asymmetry of perceptions and understandings between both

countries and their respective publics. For Turkey, Bulgaria and the Bulgarian public may seem negligibly small. Looking North-West from Ankara or Istanbul, one sees straight to Bosnia; yet for Bulgaria and the Bulgarian public at large, Turkey is a neighbour to consider. This asymmetry of perceptions may not immediately affect Turkey, but in the long run this could create an unfavourable communication environment for Turkey. The least to say is that Turkey critically needs positive public perceptions and a receptive communication environment in Europe and that, although small, Bulgaria is part of this overall European environment. Furthermore, it has its unique experience in the Balkans, being squeezed for so long between East and West, between Russia and Turkey, and having a rich and difficult history of relations with Russia. For all these reasons, Bulgaria should not be treated just as part of *komşuluk* policy, but considered more widely within Turkey's European policy.

In terms of public communications, Turkey needs to develop a customized strategy for Bulgaria to map the deficits and deficiencies in public communications with the Bulgarian general public. The next stage would be to select appropriate target audiences in Bulgaria to address and modify their perceptions about Turkey.

It is a matter requiring special attention to research the meta-identity which has been formed among young Bulgarian Turks (born after 1989) who have been socialized in an entirely different public, social and political environment than the generations of their forebears. Some research suggests that that the Bulgarian-Turkish identity of those aged 18–25 has undergone specific transformations. If before 1989 the stress used to be on Turkish as a primary identifier, i.e. Bulgarian ***Turkish***, interestingly, at present the stress tends to be on Bulgarian as a civic identifier, i.e. ***Bulgarian*** Turkish. (pers. comm.).[vi] This change marks an important transformation which deserves further research, i.e., that young Turks in Bulgaria identify themselves in civic terms more as Bulgarian rather than in ethnic terms as Turkish, whereas the generations of their parents and grandparents used to identify themselves more as Turkish (as a general identifier, not only ethnic), rather than Bulgarian (as a civic identifier). This trend may have wider explanations related to the overall political, social and economic transition in Bulgaria which occurred after 1989, as well as the process of integration of Bulgaria into the EU (Ralchev, 2005). The enabling opportunities that have emerged since Bulgaria became an EU member-state might have widely affected the identity-formation process. If older generations of

Bulgarian Turks before 1989 might have felt oppressed and deprived, this is no longer the case with younger generations of Bulgarian Turks who have unlimited opportunities for socialization, inclusion and integration in mainstream Bulgarian society, regardless of their ethnic origin (Bakalova, 2008, Ralchev, 2008).

In conclusion, one can make at least three specific recommendations for the reassessment of perceptions and prevailing attitudes amongst the Bulgarian general public towards Turkey and Turkishness. *First*, it is necessary to overcome the deficits in Bulgarian political and public debate on Turkey and its policies. *Second*, the **Fear of Turkey syndrome** and public manipulation of this fear should abate. *Third*, communicating this issue in the public space has to be done moderately in order to gradually transcend the historical, emotional and psychological burdens and barriers of the past.

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[i] It is not the purpose of this article to provide an elaborate theoretical discussion on discourse and narrative. Definitions of these categories are instrumental and operational to explain how they refer to the construction of arguments in the text that follows.

[ii] For details and a conceptualized framework, see Moïsi, D., The Geopolitics of Emotion: How Cultures of Fear, Humiliation, and Hope are Reshaping the World, Anchor Books, New York, 2010.

[iii] Fears of repeating the Cyprus scenario, meaning fears that Turkey may occupy parts of Bulgaria in a similar way to the military action in Northern Cyprus in 1974.

[iv] During the years of transition in Bulgaria after 1989, much of the political and public debate was focused on the disclosure of the activities of the ex-Communist State Security Service (DS) and the people who had worked or had been associated with it. Following investigative journalists' interest, inquiries were made about the role of former DS officers and associates in the political transition – specifically in party politics in the 1990s, in processes of economic transition like the privatization of state-owned property and the accumulation of capital by the new elite. Transforming DS contacts, information, human infrastructure into an economic power or means of economic control is what enabled it to transfer its former political might into a new, economic one.

[v] The DPS leader Ahmed Dogan was revealed to have received remuneration of nearly 2 million BGN as a consultant for the Tsankov Kamak project. DPS MP and former mayor of Dulovo, Mithat Tabakov, was sentenced to 5 years in prison for misusing public funds and for conflict of interest. Other people related to the DPS have been sentenced for paying voters to vote for DPS candidates in elections (http://www.mediapool.bg, last accessed 12 July 2012).

[vi] These assessments are based on personal interviews and participant observation made by the author in the period 2010–2012.

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