

**BALKAN SOCIETY  
FOR PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATION**

**Athina A. Sipitanou (ed.)  
Natasha Galevska Angeloska (ed.)**

**12th International Conference  
on Inclusive Education  
in the Balkan Countries:  
Policy and Practice**

**Education  
and  
Pedagogy  
in Balkan  
Countries**

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***Kyriakidis Brothers s.a.***



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54006 Thessaloniki / GREECE  
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki  
Faculty of Philosophy and Education  
Department of Education  
tel. & fax +30.2310.997348  
e-mail: terzis@ccf.auth.gr

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**12<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Inclusive education  
in the Balkan Countries: Policy and Practice**

## Education of Pomaks

*Maria Vergeti*

Greece constitutes a classic example of the nation-state – with the exception of Thrace,<sup>122</sup> a region on its north-east border where there is a recorded Muslim minority consisting of populations that speak the Turkish, the Pomak or the Rom language.

The Pomaks live mainly in the Rodopi massif, and there are Pomak villages within the geographical boundaries of both Greece and Bul-

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122 The Treaty of Lausanne (24 July 1923) established the Evros River as the border between Greece and Turkey. The contraction of the Greek nation to within the borders of the Greek state had occurred a few months earlier, with the agreement between the Greek and the Turkish governments on the exchange of populations, which was signed, also in Lausanne, on 30 January 1923. The criterion for displacement was religion, not language. The populations designated for emigration were the Orthodox Christian Greeks living in Turkey, with the exception of those in Constantinople and the islands of Imvros and Tenedos, and the Muslims of Greece, with the exception of those living in Western Thrace (see Alexis Alexandris, “Το ιστορικό πλαίσιο των ελληνοτουρκικών σχέσεων 1923-1954” [The historic framework of Greek-Turkish relations], in Alexis Alexandris *et al.*, *Οι Ελληνοτουρκικές Σχέσεις 1923-1987* [Greek-Turkish Relations], 1988 Athens, Gnosis, p. 38). With the implementation of the Treaty of Lausanne Greece became one of the most homogeneous states in Europe: according to the 1928 census the percentage of the population that was not Greek Orthodox was just 6.17% (see K. Svolopoulos, “Η Δυτική Θράκη στον κορμό της ελληνικής επικράτειας” [Western Thrace in the main body of the Greek territory], in *Θράκη* [Thrace] 1994, published by the General Secretariat for Macedonia-Thrace, p. 269). The picture is not the same in Western Thrace, but even there, despite the continued presence of a Muslim population, the Greeks remain in the majority.

garia. In Greece we find Pomak villages in the area bounded by the Nestos River on the west, the Ardas River in the north and the Evros River to the east.

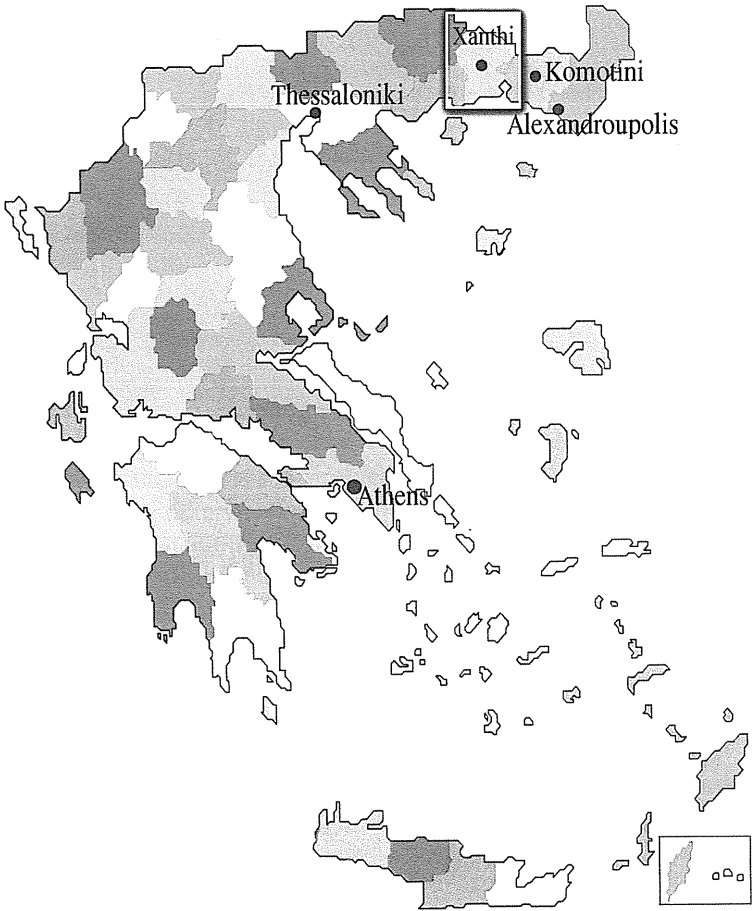
Greek Thrace is a multicultural geographical region. The Pomaks are a culturally distinct social group numbering about 40, 000 persons,<sup>123</sup> the majority of whom live in the Prefecture of Xanthi. The total Pomak population is difficult to calculate, since the Greek National Statistics Service, which carries out the national census, does not ask the question “What language do you speak at home?”. The national censuses thus provide information only about the population of the purely Pomak villages; it is exceptionally difficult to estimate the size of the Pomak-speaking populations in the mixed villages and the towns.

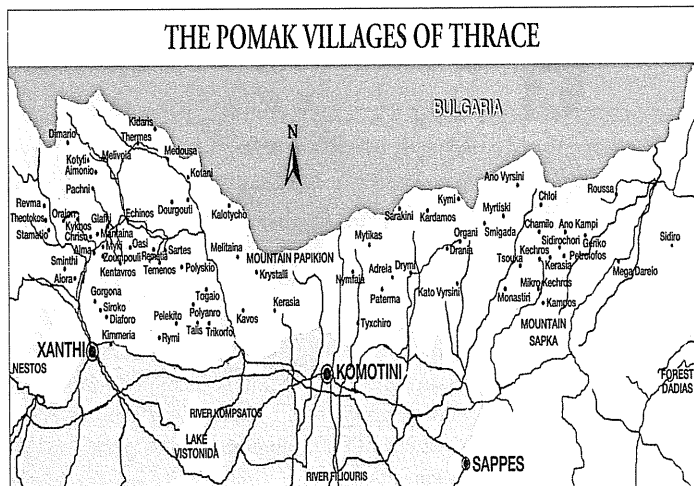
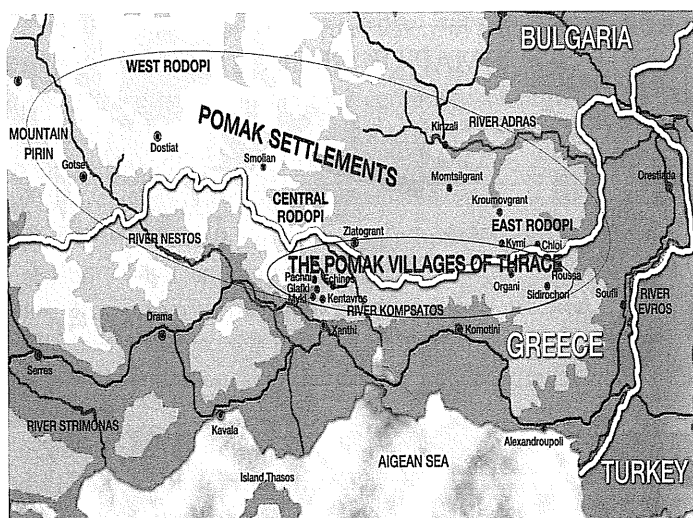
The primary language spoken in Pomak homes is Pomak, a tongue belonging to the Southern Slav group. It is very closely related to Bulgarian, but has assimilated elements of Greek and of Turkish.

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123 Based on the Greek National Statistics Service (ESYE) figures for the 2001 census and on local research carried out by the author in unmixed Pomak villages in 2008 (the ESYE did not record a population for some villages inhabited by only a few families or only seasonally by families who go into the cities looking for work and then return to their villages), the most modest estimate of the number of Pomaks living in unmixed Pomak villages is roughly 22, 000. This number does not include those living in mixed villages or in cities, e.g. Xanthi, Komotini, Alexandroupoli and Orestiada. The figure of 36, 000 Pomaks cited by Efstratios Ch. Zeginis in 1994 appears reasonable (see Efstratios Ch. Zeginis, *Οι Μουσουλμάνοι Αθίγγανοι της Θράκης* [The Muslim Gypsies of Thrace], 1994, Thessaloniki, Institute for Balkan Studies, p. 48.)

MAP OF GREECE





Children of the Pomak minority have the right to attend the ordinary Greek state schools or the special schools for Muslim students. Because of bilateral agreements between Greece and Turkey, the Pomak language is not taught. In the “minority schools”, that is, the special schools for Muslim students, children whose mother tongue is Pomak are obliged at the age of six to learn to communicate and to write in Turkish and in Greek. Instruction in the Koran and in the foreign language required by the curriculum are added to their programme shortly afterwards. The situation is the same in the ordinary Greek schools where, although they are not taught Turkish or the Koran, they still receive no instruction in the Pomak tongue. These schools do, however, foster social integration, since the children acquire a better knowledge of Greek and have more employment and development opportunities.

The educational reality of the “minority schools” has nothing to do with multi-lingualism or multi-culturalism and transcultural education. The result is that the Pomak children are unable to learn any language. Performance in school is connected with further study and with the improvement or otherwise of one’s level of education. Level of education is connected with choice of occupation, which in turn is connected with income and social prestige. The low achievements of Pomak pupils push them into low social positions. Pomak girls, who are also hampered by the restrictions imposed on women by their closed Muslim communities, face more difficulties than their brothers in their attempts to pursue their studies and to find employment other than as manual workers.

Social changes since the 1990s have worked to the benefit of the educational level and the general standard of living of the Pomaks. Their mountain villages have become less isolated as travelling has become easier. More families have moved permanently, rather than seasonally, into the towns and cities. Far from the absolute control of the extended patriarchal family, parents are beginning to look more favourably on education beyond the primary level for their daughters. In the towns the number of Pomak-speaking children being educated

in the ordinary state schools is steadily increasing.<sup>124</sup> In 1996 a quota of 0.5% of admissions to post-secondary education was reserved for students from the Muslim minority, a measure that makes it much easier for Muslim girls to go on to further education.<sup>125</sup> Since 2000 adult education programmes for women have been introduced in these closed rural societies, resulting in a slow, gradual but steady rise in their social mobility.<sup>126</sup>

This article presents the conclusions of research conducted in 2008. Twenty-four Greek-speaking teachers who taught in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s in virtually inaccessible mountain villages in Thrace, in which all or most residents are Pomaks, describe the extremely difficult educational conditions that they had to face. For the choice of question the snowball technique was used. Analysis of the data requires a number of interviews sufficient to achieve a saturation effect.

All newly appointed teachers lacked information about the particularities of the school population in the Pomak villages. While living conditions have improved for both teachers and pupils, they remain difficult compared to the rest of Greece. The two following statements are typical:

*“At the beginning of October 1984 I was sent as a temporary substitute teacher to a two-room minority school [i.e. two classrooms with children in different classes in each] in Kidari, a hamlet in the Township of Thermes in the Prefecture of Xanthi, near the Greek-Bulgarian*

124 Maria Vergeti, 2008, “Visible and invisible functions of the institution of the education of cultural minorities in Thrace”, in the one-day Meeting on *Managing Cultural Otherness in Education*, Alexandroupolis.

125 Maria Vergeti, 2008, “Social change and female identity: The case of women of Pomak descent in Thrace”, presentation in the Scientific Congress on *Targeted Social Assistance, Solidarity and Welfare Actions*, Mytilene.

126 Maria Vergeti, 2008, “Media and Lifelong Education as significant factors in enhancing the quality of life of Pomak women in Greece”, presentation in the 1st ISA (International Sociological Association) Forum of Sociology, Barcelona.

*border. The appointment was made on a Friday. I remember the supervisor showing me the dot on the map and explaining the situation to me, that the village had no electricity and no transport. On Saturday morning I looked in my phone book, found the only number given for the village, and called it. The person who answered – it was the owner of the café, I met him a few days later – spoke broken Greek; when he heard who I was he was delighted and tried to boost my spirits. He told me not to worry about anything, and promised that I would enjoy being up there. That reassured me a bit, for truth to tell I was very anxious. I had never even heard the word Pomak before.”*

*“Even though I am of Thracian descent, the Rodopi mountains were totally unfamiliar to me until the 1980s, when I was sent there as a substitute teacher. For two consecutive years I taught Pomak children in two different minority schools, in the unmixed Pomak villages of Myrtiski and Sarakini, in the Prefecture of Rodopi. I lived there, in the teacher’s house, from Monday through Thursday. I had some contact with the men of the village in the afternoons, in the village’s only café-cum-grocery. With no preparation whatsoever, and lacking any knowledge of the cultural differences and the particular environment, I found myself in another world, where the Muslim religion played a pre-eminent role, both for the villagers and in the school (prayers, fasts, behaviour)”.*

The Greek-speaking teachers developed excellent relations with the inhabitants of these Pomak villages, but they did not remain there. Usually they re-encountered Pomak students years later, in state and minority schools in Thracian cities. The number of Pomak children in the state schools increased steadily. The following statement is typical:

*“I was sent in 1984-1985 to Kato Vyrsini, a Pomak village in the Prefecture of Rodopi. I knew nothing about minority education. My position was in the neighbouring village, in the two-room minority school*



*in Kovalo, which had 17 pupils. I had to walk back and forth, because the roads were so bad. There was no school on Friday, because of the religion of the children, nor on Sunday, because of the religion of the teacher. Almost twenty years later, in 2000-2006, I was teaching in a school in Xanthi, on the eastern edge of the city, near the Old Town. In the beginning 15% of the children were Pomak; in the space of 5 years the percentage of Pomaks had risen to 40-45%. The parents of these children told me some of the reasons why: a) Many Pomaks had emigrated to the city to find better jobs, b) they didn't want their children to attend the minority school in the village, c) Many of the children at the 1<sup>st</sup> Minority School in Xanthi transferred to the public (Greek) schools in the city."*

Greece abides by its commitments under its agreements with Turkey in the matter of the education of its Muslim citizens. This, however, deprives the Pomaks of instruction in their mother tongue. In the past two decades the Pomaks have turned towards the ordinary Greek state school system when there is such a school in the area where they live, and this, along with a change in the mentality of the Pomak family that allows women some measure of choice in matters of education and employment, has gradually helped improve the standard of living of the Pomaks. Despite these significant changes, however, they continue to constitute a vulnerable group that is discriminated against within the educational system on grounds of geographic isolation and cultural heritage.



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