



CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDY SOFIA

CAS WORKING PAPER SERIES

Issue 1

Sofia 2007

This publication presents part of the research outcome of a project carried out at the Centre for Advanced Study Sofia under the title

Sofia Academic NEXUS

How to Think about the Balkans: Culture, Region, Identity

*Available in electronic form at
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HOW TO BE KARAKACHAN IN BULGARIA?

This text will focus on the identity of the Karakachans in Bulgaria – a former nomadic community forced to settle down at the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s of the last century. The Karakachans are Orthodox Christians and speak a specific Greek dialect. That, together with their former way of life and cultural tradition, makes them different from both Greeks and Bulgarians. This particular group gives a unique opportunity to outline the constant mental mapping and re-mapping carried out under specific national and trans-border circumstances. The Karakachan case is, in a way, comparable to the “ethnic revivals” or “reappearances” of other small Balkan ethnic groups on the social, economic and political scene of the changing region¹

Nowadays the small ethnic (local, ethno-confessional) groups (Karakachans, Gagauz, Gorani, Yuruks, Armenians and others) are not at the centre of the most severe Balkan conflicts. Some of them, the Vlachs/Aromanians, for example, have occasionally been in the focus of international contradictions; however, the gradual social integration, assimilation and emigration have reduced them in number and importance during and after the clashes of the “big” nationalisms. The very survival of some of the small Balkan ethnicities in the near decades is under question. Given the fact that both many of the Bulgarian Karakachans and quite a few authors share this view, the present-day situation proves to be much more complex and controversial.

The Karakachans’ numbers in Bulgaria can be only roughly estimated retrospectively, but the same is true of the situation today. Statisticians have always given lower figures, both owing to political considerations and the impossibility to account for the nomads (“Vlachs”), or those who identify themselves as “Greeks”, “Bulgarians”, etc. The official Bulgarian census of 1956 gave the number of 2,085 people. According to the general estimates of

1 Schwander-Sievers, S. *Ethnicity in Transition: The Albanian Aromanians’ Identity Politics*. – *Ethnologia Balkanica*, vol.2 (1998), 167 – 184.

Bulgarian and foreign ethnologists, during the 1960s their number was between 3,000 and 5,000. For the same period it was calculated that in Greece alone there were about 10-12,000 Karakachan families, or 80-100,000 people having about 1,800,000 sheep and goats.² The Federation of the Karakachan Cultural and Educational Societies in Bulgaria (founded in 1991) has calculated their number at approximately 18,000.³ According to the official census of 1992, 5,144 people have identified themselves as Karakachans.⁴ Bulgarian sociologists and ethnographers give the number 12-15 000, although in both cases the mixed marriages and, respectively, the sense of “being” Karakachan and “belonging” to the Karakachan community remain problematic. And not only statistically.

The number of Karakachans is not insignificant indeed, especially in Greece. However, the last groups of stubborn nomads have already disappeared even there. After a few decades of uncertain future, Balkan nomadism now irreversibly belongs to history. Many of the basic elements of this tradition (the pastoral migratory way of life with its economic strategies, social and economic organization, traditional breeds, dress, textile and other manufacture, rites, superstitions, etc.) have completely disappeared or will soon disappear. The last, now old generation of ex-nomads will carry away with it the strictly observed wedding, childbirth, burial and calendar rites. Perhaps the same future awaits the food and medicine recipes and the whole complex of aesthetic principles, notions, skills and practices, connected with the specific production of home-made textile. The standards of Karakachan art are quickly disappearing: the ornaments and colours of the various fabrics, the female traditional attire (quite different from the other Balkan traditional costumes), the richly decorated ritual bread and fretwork. As it is, the future investigators of old traditions will have to rely increasingly on the compiled archive materials and museum collections rather than on field research.

However, the remaining “Karakachans” still sustain a distinguishable ethnic identity. Following James Clifford, we could say the Karakachans are still a vital community in spite of the irreversible extinction of a considerable part of their own cultural heritage, of the “pure” culture associated with the nomadic tradition. They have different ways of asserting the legitimacy of their difference and place in Bulgarian society.

For several decades this community has experienced dramatic changes in terms of economic strategies, social organization, tradition and integration in Bulgarian society. The “socialist” state policy and the isolation from the rest of the population, which remained outside the Iron Curtain in Greece, have

2 **Beuermann, A.** Op. cit., p. 154.

3 **Pimpireva, Z.** Op. cit., p. 9-10.

4 Nacionalen statisticheski institut. Rezultati ot prebrojavaneto na naselenieto. Vol. I. (Demografski karakteristiki). Sofia, 1994, p. 194.

strongly influenced the process of shaping the present-day identity of the Karakachan ethnic minority. After the radical political and economic changes in post-1989 Bulgaria, the majority of Karakachans had to adapt themselves to the new realities, to try to establish new economic and social contacts, strategies for survival and social success. New factors and actors have emerged during the last decade. The Karakachans in Bulgaria for the first time have the opportunity to enjoy certain minority rights, the support of the Greek state, cultural associations, businessmen and NGOs. Trans-border contacts with Greece, a whole spectrum of economic activities and the policy of the established cultural societies mark the new dynamic stage in constructing (or re-constructing) the identity of Bulgarian Karakachans.

1. The burden of the past

The history of the Karakachans is almost completely anonymous and can be summed up in a few words: seasonal migrations and settlement; searching for new pastures (“homelands”) and securing the traditional ones (since the end of the 17th century to the 1950s – 1970s). During the latter two decades the community was forced to settle down and search for new ways of economic, social and cultural adaptation, quite different from nomadism.

The Karakachans’ past is even more “uneventful” than the history of the Vlachs/Aromanians or the Yuruks (Turkish speaking and Muslim semi-nomads), who had their considerable settled (urban or rural) subgroups, auxiliary military structures and social categories of special status within the Ottoman system. The political importance of the Vlachs resulted in the recognition of separate *millet* (1905). Rich “Tsintsar” merchants actively participated in the formation of the Balkan economic and cultural elites. Urban Vlachs, both in their “homeland” (Epirus, Thessaly, Southern Albania, Western Macedonia) and in their Diaspora (within and outside the region), were active agents of the respective national revivals in the 18th – 20th century. They contributed with a number of prominent figures, especially to the Greek national cause, but also the Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian and, later – the Macedonian – ones. The predominant part of the pastoral Yuruks and Vlachs/Aromanians gravitated towards their much more numerous, long settled, socially more integrated, ethnically assimilated fellow-peoples. The neighbouring Balkan peoples were gradually but constantly, absorbing parts of them.

In sharp contrast, for two centuries or so, the Karakachans remained considerably isolated from the peninsula’s political dynamics (or seldom chose, unless forced or “tempted”), other political causes other than theirs. Their cause involved above all securing the economic success and cultural survival of the migrant group among “others” (communities, nations, states, rival “propagandas”, guerillas and armies). For quite a long time they remained (or tried

to remain) an economically and socially autonomous (but not autarkic) small ethnic group. Accordingly, the Karakachans seldom figured in the Balkan ethnographic-cartographic-linguistic games as well as in the official statistics until the beginning of the 20th century. Meanwhile, before the two Balkan Wars broke out, the last stage of migrations of Karakachan nomadic groups from Northern Epirus and Thessaly to Peloponnesus and from Ottoman Macedonia and Thrace to Bulgaria, Southern Serbia and Western Anatolia had been gradually picking up momentum.

As a result of this migration, Karakachans found themselves within the political borders of several Balkan countries/nations and became a classical example of a major problem: representation of the pre-national Balkan communities (local, kinship, religious, language, ethnic). In this particular case very important is the lack of “own” written history and the predominant illiteracy (or very restricted literacy) among the pastoral nomads. What was recorded from their own oral history (local, group, individual), from the folklore, is anchored in mythology and daemonology.⁵

It does not facilitate any of the attempts made to reconstruct the Karakachan past before the 1820s. In the few decades during and after the Greek revolution a number of proper and family names, which are most probably Karakachan, appear in the turmoil of events in Epirus, Thessaly and Peloponnesus. The Karakachans themselves traditionally believe the captains Kachandonis and Theodoros Karaiskakis to belong to their ethnos. This is the second moment after the 1700s, where (again indirectly) their mysterious population appeared on the historical scene.⁶

The collective memory of a few generations does not go back further than those heroic times. Some relatively realistic stories, preserved in songs and legends, can be dated to the same period. However, beyond the days of Ali Pasha of Yoannina and the Greek struggle for liberation, all genres of the Karakachan oral tradition lose themselves in the realm of mythology and daemonology with their saints and *klephtes*, wood nymphs and demons, “Bulgarian” fields and “Vlach” mountains. Here the migration of the sheep flocks and the people from the coastal plains to the alpine pastures is eternal. Time runs within the circle of seasons, with no beginning or end. Its pace is measured only by the constant alternation between St. George’s (6 May) and St. Demetrius’ Day (26 October). The rhythm of this cycle was determined by the necessity that the family, the community, the population as a whole, should keep on moving in order to survive and achieve success according to traditional nomadic values. Ever since their “emergence” up to the 60s and the 70s of the 20th c., the Karakachans were in constant search of pastures and

5 **Antonijevic, Dr.** *Obredi i obicaji balkanskih stocara.* – Posebna izdanja Balkanoloskog instituta, SANU, 16, Beograd, 1982, p. 157-164.

6 **XATZHMIXAΛH, A.** *ΣΑΡΑΚΑΤΣΑΝΟΙ. ΑΘΗΝΑ*, 1957, Τ. Ι, Α., ης, ηθ, ρα, ρβ.

water for their sheep and horses in an attempt to secure shelter for their wives and children. Whether they came back to the same meadows year after year or traveled along roads unknown to their fathers and ancestors, their goal was always a particular combination of natural conditions. Every country, region or place possessing those conditions might have been the native land of a nomadic community.

That is how, within about two centuries, the Karakachans, moving eastward, passed across the whole length of Greece, Central and Southwest Albania, Macedonia and East Serbia, and cutting across Bulgaria and Thrace reached as far as West Asia Minor. This migration scattered them around the mountains of the Balkans and Western Anatolia, inhabited before them by the Yuruks and part of the Aromanians.⁷

Wherever they went, they inhabited zones with similar ecological characteristics -the pastures in the alpine belt near the upper border of the woods in summer and the seaboard plains in winter. The grass and the water, the woods and the herbs, the position of the pastures and the distances between them, the climate and many other factors were of vital importance. They kept the constant correlation between the composition and the size of the flock. The sheep and the goats supplied food and clothing for a definite number of people, produced goods for the market as well as the financial means necessary to back up the inevitable risks.

The symbolic geography of the nomads encompassed a tripartite world: the mountain, the field and the roads between them. High in the mountain the Karakachans used to choose the most suitable place for a summer camp. For a few months a tiny piece of land was turned into a small economic centre giving an output of dairy products, wool textile and clothing, dyes and drugs from various plants and minerals, wooden and leather utensils, implements and tools. Women were mainly responsible for this production. Men were away, tending the sheep on the surrounding ridges, while the horses usually grazed on their own. The mountain was considered by the nomads their real home, while in the autumn they had to go down to the lowlands, which they saw as “alien”. The road occupied a central place in their everyday life, as well as in their mythology, daemonology and magic. Sometimes the traveling lasted as long as a month. Time was measured by the distance between the temporary stops (“*konaks*”). An unexpected death or childbirth often visited the black-tent camp or the strenuous caravan life.

The routes, along which the Karakachans and their herds followed the spring’s snow-melting and the autumn’s grass withering, go from Pyndus to the gulfs of Artta and Volos, from the Balkan Range, Rila and Pirin to Thessaloniki,

7 **Marinov, V.** *Prinos kam izuchavaneto na proizhoda, bita i kulturata na karakachanite v Bulgaria*. Sofia, 1964, p. 13, 29-30.

from the Rhodopes to Drama, Kavala and Alexandroupolis. Those routes are the true counterpart of the mythical road, connecting the mountain and the sea, our world and the world beyond. Even when the seasonal migration was done in times of peace and according to law, and involved passing by well-known partners or patrons from the settled population, it still retained the symbolism of the journey through “deserted”, “no-man’s” lands. Some rituals mirror the primal effort to survive in a wild and unfriendly world, as well as the constant subdued conflict with the settled farmers, seen as antipodes. A young woman in traditional wedding attire, wearing her wedding jewels usually led the caravan. She was both an “anthropomorphic” amulet against an evil eye, and a symbolic victim, a ransom for the freedom to move.⁸ The urge for survival and success in the natural and socio-political surroundings full of surprises, formed the basis of these people’s collective experience and attitude towards life.

Unfortunately, much of what has been experienced by this previously illiterate population cannot be traced back any longer – both from the inside and from the outside. The collective memories of the separate local groups, as well as the community as a whole, contain blank spaces. They are due to the shift of the generations, the distance, the national borders and the cultural shock, which accompanied the process of sedentarisation. Many events have sunk into non-existence without being registered either in a legendary or in a semi-legendary form. Still, there is more to it. Oblivion is as important as the preserved oral tradition for this originally illiterate culture. It was long left aside by the personalities, the texts and the institutions that have constructed, “invented” and supported the historical memory of the Balkan nations.

Between the early 18th and 19th c., the Karakachans were most probably concentrated mainly in Epirus, where most of the summer pastures and camps were situated, in the region of Zagori. A vague memory is kept about the Karakachans⁹ subordinated position in relation to the local Aromanian communities, which possessed the best pastures at the beginning of the 19th c.¹⁰ However, throughout the whole period from the end of the 10th c. to the end of the 17th c., there is not even a shred of evidence pointing to the fact that any Karakachans were present in a definite historical moment or region. All existing written sources refer to the nomadic inhabitants of the Balkan with the common name of “Vlachs”. The ancestors of the Karakachans were “hidden” for centuries behind this old Indo-European “ethnonym”. During the Balkan Middle Ages, and afterwards, in the Ottoman period, the term’s meaning worked simultaneously on three different levels: socio-categorical, cultural-and ethno-distinctive. Moreover, it was one of the numerous pejorative names,

8 **Pimpireva, Z.** *Karakachanite v Bulgaria. Ot nomadstvo kam usednalost.* Sofia, 1995, p. 33.

9 **Beuermann, A.** Op. cit., p. 144-146, 162.

10 **Ivanov, V., V. Toporov.** “K voprosu o proishozhdenii etnonima “Valahi”. In: *Voprossi etnogeneza i etnicheskoi istorii slavian i vostochnih romancev.* Moscow, 1976, p. 61-84.

synonymous to “wanderers”, “shepherds”, “nomads”, “vagrants”, to mention only a few. “Vlachos”, “VlachcT”, “Wlachula” “Vlachf were the names by which the Karakachan nomads referred to themselves. “Karakachani” (“Sarakatsani” in Greek) is a name most probably given by the Ottomans. Literally, it means “black fugitives”, “black nomads”. Its closest analogue is the Slavonic “Tchernovuntzi” (used in West Bulgaria and Serbia). Etymologically different, both names bear almost the same semantic meaning (people who breed black sheep and therefore have black clothes and tents; who belong to the wild, to the alien, and therefore to the other, the next world). If peoples’ names convey any information about them, the Karakachan “Vlachos” is different, even opposite in meaning to the name “Aroman” (“Roman”, “Romaics”). In recent times the name “Vlachs” has been used as an auto-ethnonym mainly among the Karakachans themselves. The Aromanians often reject it, especially in its derisive variant “Koutzovlachs”.¹¹

The “Vlachs” formed military squads (auxiliary forces) in medieval Serbia, Croatia and Byzantium. This was a multiple social category including not only the shepherds of various origin called “Vlachs”, but also nomadic groups with an autonomous social, linguistic and etho-cultural profile. They are considered the most direct ancestors of the present-day Aromanians and Karakachans.¹² They played a certain, in some places very important, role in food and fabrics supply, as well as in transport. The economy of the nomadic “Vlachs” was based on a specific kind of stock-breeding, on trade, and armed robbery. Their survival hinged on the skills of the warriors, the caravan leaders, the shepherds and the weavers, which were handed down from generation to generation.

The economic strategy of the nomads was flexible enough. It is one of the main reasons for their survival in the region up to the mid 20th century. In their constant search for a favorable environment they needed two basic conditions – free pastures and access to them. Both were found in the once vast, uninhabited lands and islands of virgin nature where the nomads adapted themselves without inflicting drastic changes on the environment. Besides, they always made good use of the opportunities for economic symbiosis with the settled farmers. The contacts were regulated both by civil and common law. Traditionally, dairy products, fabrics and clothes were exchanged for bread and weapons, fallow fields and communal lands were rented for money, manuring or transport services; ideas and influences were exchanged, too.

- 11 **Weigand, G.** *Die Aromunen. Ethnographisch – philologisch – historische Untersuchungen über das Volk der Sogenannten Makedo-Romanen oder Zinzaren.* Leipzig, Vol. I, 1895, p. 273-278.
- 12 **Gyoni, M.** *La transhumance des Vlaques balkaniques au moyen age.* – *yzantinoslavica*, XII, 1951, p. 27-42; **Werner, E.** *Yuruken und Wlachen.* – *Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Karl Marx Universität, Leipzig*, (15), 1966, p. 471-478.

On the practical level, i.e. politically and socially, the access to pasture was achieved through a whole system of relations between the nomadic communities, on the one hand, and the medieval rulers and states (later with their successor, the Ottoman Empire), on the other. For centuries the Balkan nomads constituted a special social category. Within its legally acknowledged framework there always co-existed two tendencies, determined by the concrete historical conditions. The first one was oriented towards social evolution and changes, i.e. sedentarisation and assimilation, while the other tended towards ethno-cultural self-isolation. Of course, it was relative, conditional and selective, but quite effective in preserving the tradition within the mythological figments and relative “timelessness” of a separate small world. It rarely participated in the dynamics of the larger one.

The Karakachans still experience the memory of their past in a specific way. Their origin, according to the most popular versions, is traced back to a certain region (usually Zagori) or even village (Sirracou in Epirus, etc.) They see themselves as fugitives from Ali Pasha’s estates, doomed to wander; exiles because of their uncompromisingly defended honour and faith and because of their heroes, the *klephtes*, fighting for the Greek cause.¹³ That is exactly how the Asia Minor Yuruks used to convince the others (and perhaps themselves) that their ancestors had been citizens, inhabitants of the same ancient ruins around which their flocks would spend the winter.¹⁴ The oral tradition assigns the leading role to the Karakachan “Egypt”, “Canaan” and “Philistines” (acted out successfully by Epirus, the Bulgarian mountains and the Turks), and the Karakachan “Pharaoh” (impersonated by Ali Pasha). The Karakachan Christ and St. George coexist with legends from the times of the *klephtes*, *partisans* and *andartes*; legends based on memories of wars, coups and revolutions. Hard winters, calamities and wanderings alternate in their stories with periods and moments deeply engraved in their memory, demanding a drastic personal or collective choice. Their hostile attitude towards all kinds of official authority always went hand in hand with a traditional hospitality and support offered to outlaws (*haidouks*, *klephtes*), rebels and hermits. Through them or without them, the Karakachans have been drawn into all Balkan cataclysms, as well as into events decisive for particular countries.

The relations with the neighboring peoples, villages or individuals traditionally included mutual suspicion and alienation, although the two communities also enriched and complemented each other. Thefts, magical practices, superstitions, prejudices and pejorative names were an inseparable part of the contact as well, which was carried out selectively on both sides of an invisible cultural border. It was characterized mainly by the almost strict endogamy

13 XATZHMIXAAH, A *Op. cit.*, T. I, A., σ – οα, ηε; Pimpireva, Z. *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

14 Benth, Th. *The Yourouks of Asia Minor*. – Journal of the Anthropological Institute, 1890-1891, Vol. 22 (3), p. 276.

that separated the Karakachans from all other Balkan peoples. It also manifested itself in the clashes – usually avoided, yet inevitable – over the damage inflicted by the thousands of moving sheep on the crops. To such conflicts we owe a considerable amount of evidence about the “Vlachs”: from the chronicles and the codices dating from the 15th -16th c. to the legislative decrees and the newspaper reports of the 20th c. During the times when the nomads had some privileges and power, they were able to oppose effectively the bandits, bureaucratic arbitrariness and religious intolerance. However, during the last two centuries, the contrary became the rule for the Karakachans – they were the ones who needed friends or patrons.¹⁵ But all this fits in with nomadic everyday life, with the smooth flow that turns the weeks into months, seasons and years, and years into centuries.

As a matter of fact, during the last two centuries, Karakachan history has been a succession of interruptions in their traditionally established course of time. It is characterized by the strife for physical and cultural survival and for a place among the states and the nations that succeeded the Ottoman Empire. For example, in Ottoman Macedonia before the Balkan wars (1912 – 1913), their age-old strategy of self-isolation, ethnic mimicry (after the official acknowledgement of the Vlach *millet*, ethno-religious community, in 1905, some Karakachans declared themselves Aromanian), as well as the practice of buying their freedom, often failed.¹⁶ Here they lived among contesting national causes, rivaling educational and church institutions, official Ottoman and unofficial rebel authorities, each with its own supporters or agents. Showing a more or less constant affinity with the Greek community, the Karakachan groups in the region sometimes had to choose between different misfortunes. Their contact with politics almost always led to injury, ranging from obligation to feed squads of armed rebels of various kinds, down to complete ruin or extermination.¹⁷

During the first half of the 20th century, the changing state boundaries and policies limited the seasonal migrations and migrant movements. This predetermined the processes of gradual settlement (mainly for social and economic reasons in Greece) or forced sedentarisation (which was the case in Bulgaria for political, economic and social reasons). While the relatively smaller communities in Yugoslavia, Romania, Albania and Turkey were subjected to a thorough assimilation or deportation, the Karakachans survived as a separate ethnic identity in Greece and Bulgaria. About the turn of the 20th century a number of uprisings, the front lines of the two Balkan and the two World Wars, as well as the Greek Civil War (1946-1949), swept over the Karakachan summer and winter pastures. Mobilisations, punitive expeditions and supply

15 **Campbell, J.** *Honour, Family and Patronage*. Oxford UP, 1965, p. 213-262.

16 **Surin, N.** “Karakachanski kolibi nad selo Rozhden, Morihovsko”. – *Makedonski pregled*, 1929 (3), p. 88-92.

17 **Siljanov, Hr.** *Osvoboditelnite borbi na Makedonija*. Vol. II, Sofia, 1983, p. 175-177.

services of national, occupational and *partisan* (guerrilla) armies troubled them. The constantly changing national borders cut the once undivided space from Valona to Istanbul and Bergama, from Kopaonik to Parnon and Taygetus, from the Balkan Range to the Aegean and the Sea of Marmara. Customs duties and taxation policy, veterinary quarantine and marketing issues diverted the routes of the sheep towards the inland valleys and fields.

Until the end of World War II the state policy of the different countries for integrating the nomadic population belonged more to the sphere of ideas than to the realm of practice. Although not unhampered, during the 30s and the 40s, big Karakachan flocks and caravans were still able to cross the borders.¹⁸ However, after World War II, due to the new reality of total antagonism in Europe, this was no longer possible. Many clans, even families, were separated for long. At the same time, although at a different pace, industrialization and agriculture swallowed up the lands where the Karakachans used to find their ecological niche. Industrial development, tourism and melioration projects had taken away a substantial part of the winter pastures by the end of the 60s.

Following a chosen or imposed direction of modernization, Balkan societies went through a difficult transition towards new social and economic structures and relations. The transformation or destruction of the hitherto prevailing agricultural and stockbreeding traditions lay at the very core of the conversion. It took an extremely dramatic turn in Bulgaria, Albania and Yugoslavia.

The Karakachans in Bulgaria were obliged to make commodity supplies and were forced to keep only very limited numbers of sheep. Measures were taken to register and settle the nomadic groups. The flocks were integrated by force into the co-operative farms. Some of the sheep were slaughtered right away or died because of the drastic change of breeding conditions. At some places the Karakachan horses were exterminated. All this predetermined and even speeded up the sad result: the economic branch of mobile stockbreeding was arbitrarily destroyed.¹⁹

In Greece the process of settling was relatively calmer but none the less irrevocable. From the 20s until the late 70s of the 20th c. the local Karakachans went through different transitional stages on the way to complete settlement. The steps leading to it were: shortening of the travelling distance; reduction of the number of sheep and horses; changing the flock composition (inclusion of local sheep breeds, increasing the number of goats, etc.). The involvement with the market and – through patronage, marriages or co-operation – with the Greek villages and provincial towns grew deeper with every passing day. The conic huts made of reed, bark or straw were replaced with houses – ei-

18 XATZHMIXAΛH, A *Op. cit.*, T. I, A., λα – λβ; **Marinov, V.** *Op. cit.*, p. 29-47; **Pimpireva, Z.** *Op. cit.*, p. 83-96.

19 **Marinov, V.** *Op. cit.*, p. 117-127; **Pimpireva, Z.** *Op. cit.*, p. 86-98.

ther rented seasonally or owned. The shepherds started to go alone up the mountain, leaving behind their wives and children in the family house. Agriculture and many other new trades gradually made their way into traditional Karakachan occupations. Many families managed to buy plots of land (mainly in the plains) and build houses. Technically equipped and economically prospective Karakachan farms began to appear. Intellectuals, independent organizations, unions and folk groups started to emerge within the community.²⁰

Today this dynamic process of integration between this population and the nation, felt to be close, is perfectly natural. The similarity between the Karakachan tongue and some Greek dialects, the East Orthodox religion and the common plight within the *Diaspora* provided some other favorable conditions for this development. This general tendency was irreversibly established between the 1950s and the 1970s, despite the resistance of the last nomadic groups. They had no other choice. They had to face the sudden collapse of their own inhabited world and their concept of the universe.

Seven years passed between the state decree for sedentarization of the Karakachans in Bulgaria (March 15, 1954) and the registered settling of the last wandering family.²¹ A little later, in 1963, the last Karakachan nomads in Yugoslavia (in the Federal Republic of Macedonia) left for Greece. Thus the northwestern part of the Karakachan territory was completely deserted.²² The Karakachan fate in Turkey (in Eastern Thrace and West Anatolia) remains unclear; the same is mostly true for Albania as well.

After the shock experienced after the forced sedentarisation, the Karakachans in Bulgaria somehow managed to adapt themselves to the new conditions. The abrupt ending of their migrations left some families with some money. Part of the sheep was sold and the once life-saving reserve was put into use. The state backed up the building of family houses by providing land, materials, and funds. A campaign was launched for the liquidation of illiteracy by bringing children to school.

The majority of the Bulgarian Karakachans settled in separate quarters, mostly in some towns and surrounding villages near the mountains in the northwestern and southern parts of Bulgaria. Today there are more or less compact communities in Sliven (both town and region), the Burgas region, Kotel, Zheravna, Karlovo, Kazanlak (both town and region), Dupnica, Samokov, Montana, Vraca, Berkovica, Varshec, etc.²³ Even now, part of them is still into the trade of sheep breeding and the production of woolen yarn and clothes.

20 **Antonijevic, Dr. Sarakacani.** – *Balkanica*, Vol. 6, Beograd, 1977, p. 221-231.

21 **Izvestija na Prezidiuma na Narodnoto Sabranie**, 1954, Vol. V., N 25, p. 23; **Marinov, V.** Karakachani. – *Otechestvo*, (21) 1976, p. 18-21.

22 **Antonijevic, Dr. Op. cit.**, p. 223.

23 **Marinov, V. Prinos...**p. 14-15; **Pimpireva, Z. Op. cit.**, p. 12-13; 17-18.

Some shepherds can still be met in the mountains, on the roads and pastures where their fathers and forefathers were born and died.

2. Balkan Ethnologists on the Ethnogenesis of the Karakachans

In the context of the disputes on the “historicity” [E. Hobsbawm] of the Balkan nations, the Karakachans might be named as a clear instance of a “non-historical” community. Until it was “discovered” by European and Balkan scholars, this community, which used to be almost entirely nomadic, and socially marginal, did not play a role in the argumentation of the rivaling national ideologies (including the Greek one) during the period between the 1880s and 1920s.

Several books about the Karakachans – classics of Balkan and European philology, sociology and ethnology – have been published since the 1920s. A massive amount of fieldwork material has been gathered. However, the important question “Who are the Karakachans?” is still pressing, especially for historians. The majority of chance observers during the last hundred-odd years – travellers, military men or tourists – have usually asked themselves “whom the Karakachans belonged to”. The same can be said about some of the professional researchers, too. This question has been phrased in different ways and at different places and it has inevitably predetermined the circle of possible answers. As a result, today many of the most essential characteristics of Karakachan culture can be traced only through analogy. Some of them, mentioned only in vague or brief notes, are now lost forever without being at least partly documented. This is true, for instance, of the burial rites before the influx of local and East Orthodox elements.²⁴

Nevertheless, traditional Karakachan culture is relatively well studied, despite its predominant representations as a “unique” and “antique” one. In a way, it is relevant to an already bygone situation – of the small, socially and economically independent, relatively isolated from the surrounding political dynamics, seasonally migrating community.

Balkan ethnologists, philologists, physical anthropologists, historians, and even veterinarians usually summarize this phenomenon by following two main lines. The first one is related to portraying the “live archaic”, i.e. constructing the image of remote times (as far back as prehistory) and “wild” space (mountains, sparsely populated or deserted coastal lowlands). The second one reflects the ethno-genetic, linguistic, territorial and geographical, cultural, and “civilization” standards established in the respective national historiographies. A relatively small and politically marginal group, having

24 **Ilkov, D.** “Ekskurzijapo Kaloferskata planina”. – *Periodichesko spisanie*, (52-53), 1896, p. 678-679; **Pimpireva, Z.** *Op. cit.*, p. 70-82.

moved in and between the national states for a long time, is presented as a living relic of the ethnic ancestors of several modern nations. As a rule, in the “big” historical narratives, the Greek-speaking Karakachans and Romance-speaking Aromanians (Vlachs) are an example of the “most ancient” predecessors surviving up to the present (after the scheme “Thracians” and “Dlyrians” – Bulgarians; “Hellenes from the age of the Archaic” – Greeks; “Turkic shepherds” – Turks).

Beginning with the pioneering book of Danish linguist and ethnographer C. Hoeg (1925-1926), several systematic ethnological and anthropological studies in the 1950s -1980s (A. Hatzimichali, G. Kavadias, Dr. Antonijevic, A. Beuermann, J. Campbell, V. Marinov, Zh. Pimpireva) portray the tradition and the identity of the last nomadic generations on the eve of (or shortly after) their final sedentarization²⁵. Despite the different methodological approaches, ranging from descriptive (“total”) ethnography to cultural and social anthropology, these authors, together with some linguists, geographers, physical anthropologists and veterinarians studied, collected and represented the Karakachan tradition as a “unique”, “archaic” and “vanishing” one (I. Campbell’s classical anthropological study is a significant exception). During that period it was already too late for some of the supposed “most archaic” features of the tradition to be observed, recorded or studied in the field (the distinctive dichotomy “Christianity” – “Paganism”, some rituals and magic practices, etc.). Since the 1970s the developing syncretism with bigger neighboring communities has gradually become an important part of the scholarly interest, and has produced mostly stories of survival, adaptation, cultural loss, and assimilation.

On the one hand, the present state of the Karakachan cultural identity has been featured as a dynamic yet normal process of transformation, and on the other hand – as a gradual deterioration (or loss of many of its original/ “aboriginal”, most typical elements). Although partially observed and studied, the Karakachan inventions and even revivals during the “post-nomadic” period(s) still remain a weaker stance if compared to the representations of cultural integrity, homogeneity, exoticism, geographic (ecological) and social marginality of nomadic life. One may speak of a (more or less central) concept of “sad mountains” [in analogy to *Levi-Strauss’s* “tristes tropiques”].

Almost all Balkan (and a number of Western) experts in Karakachan culture could not resist the “Idol of Origin” (M. Block). But it is hardly possible to encompass very poorly documented (observed) migrations during the last two centuries, some heroes from the Karakachan oral tradition, and the vast (yet fragmentary) documentary corpus about “Vlachs” (“nomads”, “moun-

25 Høeg, C. *Les Sarakatsans. Une tribu nomade grecque*. Vol. I – II, Paris, 1925, 1926.

taineers”, “Romance-speakers”, “pastoralists”) dating from the Medieval and the Ottoman times. It is a difficult abstraction, too.

Nevertheless, not only historians, but also ethnologists, anthropologists and even veterinarians tried to cope with the necessity not to deprive both the Karakachans and their own nations from their supposed “ancient” ancestors. The widespread notions of nomads as extremely conservative, “capsulated” (E. Gellner) economies, cultures and societies have strongly influenced the portraying of the Karakachans as a “living relic”. A possible way is to resort to “fictions of the primitive” (J. Clifford) (“archaic”, “Oriental”, “ancient”, “pre-historic”).

The question arises: a “relic” of what? Here the respective historiographic traditions and narratives, along with their established ethno-genetic schemes, selected components (ancestors) and continuities, and often predetermined the representation of the “living Balkan nomadic archaism” (until the 1950s – 1970s). Visions of the national past, as well as of different epochs and Balkan nature (“wild spaces” – unpopulated mountains and marshy plains), of “pastoral” and “tribal”, constituted part of the picture. Historical essentialism and anthropological concepts of culture(s) sometimes co-exist (as in the case of Dr. Antonijevic’s texts). Still, the “overly broad entities of race and civilization” (J. Clifford) are more typical of the historical studies (Balkan and Western) of Vlachs and Karakachans (applying positivist, Marxist, Braudelien, or “historical-anthropological” methods and models).

Not surprisingly, in some cases, as it was during the times of nationalist rivalry and “propagandas” in Ottoman Macedonia before the Balkan Wars (the numerically relatively insignificant) Karakachans served as a suitable additional argument for territorial or other political claims (together with the Aromanians).

The projections of the past through the prism of the present and “the state of being in culture while looking at culture” (J. Clifford) are inevitable (with or without ironic self-reflection). But in the Karakachan case, the past seems to obscure the present (or the near nomadic past) – it proves too “unique” and “archaic”, even in the context of the visions of “the ethnographic museum of Europe”.

Of course, there have always existed more or less convincingly articulated and grounded hypotheses about the origin of the Karakachans.²⁶

What I would tentatively call the “Greek” hypothesis, advanced by some of the most prominent scholars, is based upon the anthropological and linguistic similarities between the Karakachans and the Epirus Greek population (an

26 **Pimpireva, Z.** *Op. cit.*, p. 19-22; **Marinov, V.** *Prinos...*p. 11-15; **Kavadias, G.** *Pasteurs-nomades méditerranéens. Les sarakatsans de Grèce.* Paris, Gautier-Villars, 1965, p. 6-14.

isolated population, taken for the nucleus of the Epirus anthropological type, speaking a Greek dialect, formed before the 16th c.²⁷). The striking similarities between Karakachan ornamentation and the “geometric” style of pre-classical Hellas as well as some other elements in common, generally considered “prototypical” for Greek culture, are proposed as arguments.²⁸ Last but not least comes the Karakachan ethno-religious and political choice (in the cases or periods when they chose to make any). Sometimes evidence is given in support of the theory that once the Karakachans lived as settled (Greek) farmers who were later compelled to flee to the mountains and thus became nomads (i.e. the Karakachan lore is taken literally). It is supposed that they became nomads because of their isolation and as a result of an extreme situation.²⁹

The “Aromanian” hypothesis is usually based on the Karakachan lifestyle, the cultural proximity and some lexical parallels with the Romance-speaking Vlachs. The linguistic difference is usually attributed to a long process of Hellenisation.³⁰

There are some theories suggesting that the Karakachans could be descendants of some of the Thracian tribes. Basically, the “Thracian” hypothesis searches for arguments in the Karakachan almost complete isolation in the mountains; in the cultural and the historical analogies with the Aromanians, the Albanians and the Carpathian highlanders; and in the traces of an ancient linguistic stratum that is older than the Greek, the Roman and the Slavonic ones. In this line of thought, the Karakachans are heirs to Hellenised Thracians or Illyrians, while the Aromanians are supposedly of the same origin but have been Romanised.³¹

The fourth hypothesis can be broadly referred to as “Turkic”. It follows up on the obvious presence of a Turkish super-stratum. It is found in the language (many Turkish words in the shepherding, horse-breeding, household and other specialised terminology). Part of the Slavonic words in the Karakachan dialect are attributed to the immigrant influx from the Russian steppes, but never to the influence of one of the main groups of Epirus’ residents in the Middle Ages, nor to the ethnic surroundings in Macedonia, Thrace and Bulgaria. Other arguments in support of this theory are the ethnonym “Karakachan” and some alleged anthropological features (a faint Mongoloid streak).³² The elements of material life have also been brought forth as arguments (the conic huts, the tents, the milk-skins, the looms, the decorative art, etc.) as well as

27 **Poulianos?** A. Sarakatsani: “The Most Ancient People in Europe”. In: *Physical Anthropology of European Populations*. Mouton Publ. 1980, p. 175-182.

28 **Kavadias, G.** *Op. cit.*, p. 9.

29 **XATZHMIXAAH, A** *Op. cit.*, T. I, A., ρς – ρθ.

30 **Kavadias, G.** *Op. cit.*, p. 9-10.

31 **Capidan, Th.** Sarakacianii. Studiu asupra unei populatiuni romanești grecizate. – Dacoromania, Vol. 4., 1924-1926, p. 923-959.

32 **Marinov, V.** *Op. cit.*, p. 12; **Pimpireva, Z.** *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

the burial and other rites. The ancestors (at least one of the main ethno-genetic components) are sought among the Turkic nomads, whose waves periodically flooded the Balkan Peninsula from north and east: Pechenegs, Uzes, Coumans, Turkmen and Yuruks.³³

Along with this, there are analogies with ancient nomadic peoples, the Old Testament Jews included, pointed out by the best authorities on Karakachan religion, magic, mythology and daemonology.³⁴ Of course, many features of their tradition, and especially the social model, the economy, art, and spirituality in general have many unique and universal dimensions. The Aromanians, however, who are also pointed out as an example of a “paleo-Mediterranean” and “Indo-European” synthesis, have different wedding and burial rites as well as different types of ornamentation, clothing and physical type.³⁵

The presumably oldest but still not thoroughly investigated linguistic substratum, a number of separate details or whole sets of customs and rites, the animal breeds, the dwellings, the female costume, the typology of the dairy products and some ways of preparing food (for instance, boiling on a heated stone) show how old indeed is the nucleus of the Karakachan cultural tradition. The attempts to relate it to a concrete ancient or medieval ancestor have been too exclusive. The ornamentation, for instance – this handy argument for diverse standpoints, is archaic not only, or not so much because of its similarities with the art of pre-classical Hellas. No less close analogues can be found in the geometric patterns of the Yuruks, the Kurds and many other peoples and tribes, the North American Indians included.³⁶

Given the predominant silence of the written sources from the Middle Ages and the Ottoman period before 1820s, physical anthropology is quite often involved in historical reconstruction. For instance, the prominent Greek anthropologist Aris Pulianos rejects the alleged presence of Mongoloid traits. He considers the Karakachan physical type as the oldest in Europe (much older than those of the Basques and the Lapps) and finds its closest analogues in the Neolithic and even the Mesolithic Ages. Sometimes the connection between certain features of the Karakachan tradition and such remote historical epochs seems more convincing than the archaisation of some functional peculiarities of their nomadic way of life (for instance, the lack of pottery does not necessarily mean a pre-ceramic Neolithic “relic”).

Different ethno-genetic constructs follow respective methodologies, as well as the established techniques of ascription of the image of “the Balkan archaic”

33 **Boev, P.** Die Rassentypen der Balkanhalbinsel und Ostgaischen Inselwelt und deren Bedeutung for die Herkunft ihrer Bevölkerung. Sofia, 1972, p. 211-212.

34 **Guboglo, M.** K voprosu o proishozhdenii Karakachan. – Sovetskaja Etnografija, (4) 1966, p. 164-176; **Eremeev, D.** Etnogenez turok. Moscow, 1971, p. 68.

35 **Antonijevic, Dr.** *Obredi i obicaji...* p. 52, 60, 75, 77.

36 **XATZHMIXAAH, A** *Op. cit.*, T. I, A, ξδ, ρβ – ριε, ρλ – ρλβ, ρθ; **Antonijevic, Dr.** *Op. cit.*, p. 12-18.

and, sometimes directly, serve as the ground for conclusions about the Karakachans' representing the "common" or "own" ancestors and "heritages" of several modern nations: "Hellenes from pre-classical Antiquity" (standing for "Greeks" or "Greekness"); "Pelasgians"; "Thracians"; "Illyrians" (for "Bulgarians", "Romanians" and "Vlachs'V'Aromanians"); Medieval and Ottoman "Vlachs"; Turkic/Eurasian steppe invaders ("Turks"); even "proto-Indo-Europeans" and "pre-historical nomads" (despite the fact that the first documentary evidence of "Vlach" nomadic migrations date from the 10th -11th c.).

Thus the "sub-" and "super strata" constructs, hypotheses of "nomadization" and "re-nomadization", visions of a "Balkan patriarchate" and "tribalism" (K. Kaser) have been projected from times immemorial to the late Byzantine and Ottoman periods. Inevitably, the argumentation has to be selected (or deduced) from the same recorded or studied social facts, the nomadic way of life, "material culture", traditional art, mythology, daemonology and religion, language, the "physical type" (of a predominantly endogamous population) and even the breeds of Karakachan sheep, dogs and horses. From ethnographic field studies they penetrate the historical narratives and vice versa. Despite some structuralist (or other) suspicions of "origins", ethno-genesis remained an important way of portraying the Karakachan tradition, of the "Homo Saracatsanus" (G. Kavadias) (up to the 1990s).

The present-day situation of the Karakachan "post-nomadic" generations could be studied and represented not only within the widely shared visions or feelings of "endangered/lost authenticity". It is also a dynamic, syncretic process of developing "forms that prefigure an inventive future" (J. Clifford).

3. Social change, ethnic policy and cultural survival

After half a century of adaptation to the socialist state centralized economy, ideology and policy, the Karakachans in Bulgaria "re-appeared" in the official statistics as an existing yet hidden or denied part of the complex ethnic and religious picture of the country. But after the political changes that marked the autumn of 1989, the community and its intellectual and political representatives were not any more semi-anonymous. The formulations of "Karakachanness" appeared in the public space immediately after the political changes. Silent to that moment, representatives of the Karakachan intelligentsia, newly elected leaders of the multiplying cultural societies and the leaders of the Federation of the Karakachans addressed the Bulgarian media and *Flambura*, the Annual Informational Bulletin of the Karakachan Federation. Since 1990 the "we" discourse has been developed under the strong influence of the newly established economic and political contacts with Greece and Greek Karakachans/Sarakatsani, and as a result of economic change, social and cultural transition. New actors and factors became crucial in the process of a

relative and contradictory “ethnic revival”. The Bulgarian Karakachans live in a country which is once again undergoing radical changes, but are not any more passive witnesses to the next turn of history.

The intellectual representatives of the community offer their own reconstructions of the past in order to find the community’s place amongst the big nations, especially Greeks and Bulgarians. Different formulations/registers appear during interviews with representatives of different generations and localities, professions (from older ex-nomads to intellectuals, businessmen and political leaders) when discussing the nomadic past in the context of rapid changes. In the present-day situation of different trans-border opportunities and contacts, generation gaps and expanding mixed marriages, very selective and politically and socially determined concepts of “own history” appear. The determining factors are the level of education, the profession, bilingualism, and the acquired specific ways of the already fixed group of Bulgarian Karakachans. Their family and historical relations with the majority across the Bulgarian-Greek border, become more important as time passes. The present-day reality breaks into their lives rapidly and drastically.

On the other hand, some leaders, intellectuals and businessmen, try to centralize the “we” discourse. The activities of the leaders, intellectuals and organizations range from supporting the first large exposition of Karakachan traditional art at the National Ethnographic Museum in Sofia (2001 – 2003) to demands addressed to different post-19 89 governments for compensation for the herds nationalized by the communist regime, for organizing education in Greek, theatrical/visual representations of what is considered/selected as “living” and “authentic” tradition (the annual Karakachan rally in the mountains near Sliven, in the region of the Balkan range), etc. Those spectacular events demonstrate and commemorate the very existence of the small community as “old” and even “the most ancient one”, and serve as a classical example of borrowing historical concepts and choosing “own” symbols. Until recently the main sources were some Greek academic and popular writings, patterns and ideas of Greek Karakachan societies. The “invented” images, symbols and concepts have become no less significant than the language, family tradition and endogamy. The economic and political support from Greece, the cultural contacts and the privileged access to education, seasonal work and “business” have facilitated and influenced the “re-discovering” of Karakachan “Greekness”. There is some tension between the different necessities – the desire to stress the fact that Karakachans are “real Greeks” and the awareness of the different cultural tradition; the Bulgarian nationality and the status of an ethnic minority; the archaism of customs and the EU passports held by many of them. The latter, together with the “Karakachan ID cards” were very important for Karakachan seasonal trips, especially before the opening of EU borders for Bulgarian citizens, and still provide an opportunity to work legally in Greece. But this conjuncture is once again changing with the perspective for the Bulgaria’s accession to the EU.

The results of my fieldwork among the two principal kinds of Karakachan local communities – the relatively compact and more numerous ones in the area of Sliven, Kotel, Zheravna and Berkovitsa (in the eastern and north-western parts of the Balkan range), and smaller, relatively isolated groups in Maglizh (Northern Thrace) – show a variety of “native ethnographer’s” statements. These appeared to be directly or indirectly influenced by written texts (books, articles, booklets or rumors about something written, said or filmed) of different kinds, but also by the attempts at organizational centralization of certain aspects of the community’s life (such as commemorations, feasts, exhibitions, education in Greek, economic and other possibilities/choices).

In this particular case, there appears to be a gradual overcoming of the old “nomadic” complex (of the “uneducated”, “marginal”, “wandering” community). The attitude to the nomadic past and to the more remote, mythical or historical times is contradictory. It combines “progressist” and “modern” identifications that are usually opposed to the former “uncivilized” way of life. But there is just the opposite tendency: the pastoral idyll as a vision of the near past combines the Karakachan version of “archaisation” – seeking and finding ancient ancestors. There is no doubt that it is borrowed not only from the stories of the former nomads, but also from the schools, texts and media of the “others”, however refracted through Karakachan selection and arguments.

Several decades have passed since the sedentarization of the nomadic groups, and new strategies, ideas and concepts have been developed. What the Karakachans consider “their own” today is formulated in different ways, especially when an outside observer is involved. The traditional value system, which stresses the difference from the “others” combines second language education, professions, political and social concepts accepted in the “big” society. At the same time, their own Greek dialect, the concept of “land of origin” (Pindus, some areas and settlements in Northern Greece), kinship, seasonal work and trade in Greece have increasingly influenced the community after 1989.

The main results of the research reflect the dynamic, mixed and insecure character of any ethnic identity. However, the pursuit of authenticity and valid concepts of “our own” history and culture requires not only “inventions”. The rapid disappearance of the “pure” material and folklore “relics”, personified by the generation of the last, now very old former nomads, proved to be only one of the existing problems.

The Karakachan identity policy and the next “post-nomadic” generation (between 50 and 60 years of age) have to face some new social phenomena. On the one hand, endogamy and conservatism fail to secure the future of the community. On the other, the growing modernization of everyday life and the emancipation of the younger generations are becoming a considerable

obstacle to the attempts at cultural monopolism, economic dependence or clientelism, or at imposing political, social or ethnic choices.

Today many Karakachan families and (often relatively young) individuals enjoy considerable economic success (by general Bulgarian standards). It is mainly a result of years of seasonal work in Greece and different opportunities to capitalize (on different social levels) on the opportunities created by the official Greek policy of protecting and supporting Greek-speaking and Orthodox Karakachans. It turned out to be related also to the traditional family solidarity and some “inherited” strategies and positions dating from the “socialist” period.

Here is how the predominant strategy develops: money is being saved as a result of seasonal agricultural or other work in Greece (the lowest economic/social level) or international “business contacts” and cooperation is being developed (the highest, most successful ones). But in most cases, what is earned is brought back to Bulgaria and invested in the common family budget, education, housing and/or privately owned companies (even factories), cafeterias, hotels, i.e. a broad spectrum of activities called “business” in Bulgaria. The fact that many of the Bulgarian Karakachans prefer this new “migratory” way of life in order to secure their future in Bulgaria, is evident from the fact that there has been no exodus to Greece so far.

The new economic activities have resulted in a relative emancipation of the younger generations from the family authority and conservatism. The traditional economic roles determined by age, gender and ownership have changed. That is how the mixed marriages with Bulgarians are rapidly becoming a norm rather than an exception.

The identity policy of mobilizing the symbolic cultural capital now faces not only “the existing among fragments” (James Clifford) and the deficiency of “own” history. The different individual options and choices are justly considered to be threatening the community with gradual extinction. Given the different attitudes, discourses and registers (civic “Bulgarian-Karakachan”, “Karakachan-Greek”, “Bulgarian-Greek”), there is a chance for a “Karakachan”, local Bulgarian and trans-border (Bulgarian-Greek) community to survive.

The research shows that resorting to different options in different situations and conjunctures marks the present-day dynamics of the Karakachan identity in Bulgaria. The sense of belonging to a distinctive group (“archaic” and “exotic”), but also successful and already well established in society at large, exists and is being constructed on different levels. Similarly to the common Bulgarian expectations, the very existence of “Karakachanness” is often seen as quite possible if better opportunities for “selling exotic” (or “selling Karakachan identity” – vision, folklore, cuisine) would appear in Bulgaria as a “tourist country”, which is part of a united Europe.