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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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Bulgaria: Renewed Assimilation Campaign Against Ethnic Turks

SUMMARY

The Bulgarian government, at least since last December, has renewed its longstanding effort to assimilate its ethnic Turkish minority. The campaign has resulted in more than 400 deaths, mostly in the southwest and northeast sections of the country. Official Turkish reaction to the campaign has been cautious: the National Assembly has debated the issue and Turkey may accept some refugees. Western criticism apparently resulted in some moderation in the severity of the campaign in late January. But, given the potential problems the Turkish minority poses for the Zhivkov regime, there could be a revival in repressive measures in the near term.

[Redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] East European Division, Office of European Analysis. Comments and questions are welcome and should be addressed to [Redacted] Chief, East European Division, Office of European Analysis, [Redacted]

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## Introduction

The Zhivkov regime, at least since last December, has stepped up its longstanding campaign to force assimilation of its fast growing ethnic Turkish population. The Army and militia have been summoned to control resulting violence, as well as to continue the campaign to "Slavicize" names in heavily Turkish regions around Kurdzhali and much of the northeastern section of the country. Ankara has been playing down the issue, in sharp contrast with the Turkish press. Zhivkov will try hard to avoid any Western criticism of this latest repression, but he is not likely to ease up significantly for long. [redacted]

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## The Ethnic Turk Problem

Bulgaria's Turkish minority, comprising approximately 10 percent of the population, is made up of the descendants of settlers who migrated to the area during the five centuries of Ottoman rule. Mostly peasant farmers and artisans, few are active in the political system or in other national institutions. [redacted]

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The regime has had little success in assimilating this especially fast-growing group, which it badly needs to augment its stagnant labor force but which it fears as a serious threat to national integration. The ethnic Turks, with an annual population growth rate of 1.5 to 2 percent, are increasing their numbers about ten times faster than Slavic Bulgarians. Since 1977, some 60,000 of the country's roughly 850,000 Turks have emigrated, which has further depleted the work force. [redacted]

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## Central Issues

The ethnic Turk presence raises the following four distinct problems for the Bulgarian government:

Nationalistic. Ethnic Turks, with their separate culture and language and with their outright rejection of Slavic nationalistic symbols, challenge the legitimacy of the Zhivkov regime. Political and cultural nationalism has provided an important source of legitimacy for the Zhivkov regime in the past few years--especially while Zhivkov's late daughter Lyudmila served as Chairman of the Committee for Art and Culture. [redacted]

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Political. The Turks also are perceived as presenting a potential challenge to Bulgaria's constitutional underpinnings. The Bulgarian constitution has no provision for regional autonomy for its ethnic groups. It does, however, refer to the right of "citizens of non-Bulgarian origin" to education in their own language, a right not now observed by the government. [redacted]

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Economic. Most of Bulgaria's Turks live in backward rural areas, and the cost to Sofia of developing those areas would be

quite high. Moreover, Bulgaria's need for greater economic efficiency in the future may generate pressures for economic decentralization; which, in turn, might engender even greater fears that ethnic Turks in outlying areas might eventually challenge the Communist party's control. [redacted]

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Ideological. The Turkish minority's language, customs, and religion are perceived by the leadership as relics of pre-communist rule and as conflicting with the regime's goal of constructing the "new socialist man." Moreover, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism casts the Turks' Islamic faith as a potential security problem. Bulgaria's leaders may fear that the contagion of fundamentalism that has destabilized regimes elsewhere could seriously undermine public order. [redacted]

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### Government Policy

Bulgaria's policy toward the Turkish minority has been one of public tolerance combined with private discrimination and repression.

- The secret police have penetrated the Turkish population to ensure its continued passivity.
- The Turkish language is no longer taught in the schools and its use is prohibited in dealings with the government.
- The practice of Islam is officially discouraged and the government frowns upon use of Turkish customs.
- Few ethnic Turks serve in combat roles in the Bulgarian armed forces; they are confined, instead, to segregated labor brigades.
- Ethnic Turks have not been given representation in central party and state organs proportional to their weight in the population. In 1983 only one of 197 full members of the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee was Turkish, and no more than six of 139 candidate members and 14 of 400 National Assembly members were Turkish.
- Finally, ethnic Turks also receive few social benefits. [redacted]

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The urgency with which Bulgaria has attempted to eradicate the religion, language, and customs of the ethnic Turks has fluctuated with changes in domestic policy and its bilateral relations with Turkey. On two occasions since the beginning of communist rule, in 1950 and 1968, Bulgaria actively encouraged its Turkish minority to emigrate. But both Bulgaria and Turkey appear to prefer gradual repatriation of Bulgarian Turks. The

emigration of a large number of ethnic Turks would exacerbate Bulgaria's labor problems, while Turkey would resist accepting too many poor immigrants at one time. [redacted]

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### The Current Campaign

According to the US Embassy in Sofia, the recent renewal of the assimilation campaign may have begun as early as last spring when Sofia transferred the responsibility for the name changes from the police to the more heavy-handed militia and army. Since last December, we have received many reports of violent resistance, including more than four hundred deaths over a widespread area. Army and militia have restricted travel in these affected regions and, according to press reports in Turkey, Sofia recently may have temporarily closed its borders to Turkish tourists. [redacted] Bulgarian Turks trying to telephone Ankara's embassy to protest the campaign are routinely cut off. As of 31 January Bulgaria's Turkish language paper was required to begin using Bulgarian exclusively. [redacted]

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One reason for the resumption of the anti-Turk campaign may be Sofia's desire to meet its 1985 deadline for issuing new national identification cards to its citizens, a campaign said to be resisted by the Turkish minority. The effort also may be geared to end just before the start of a new national census scheduled for this December, which Sofia hopes will not show a large Turkish minority. [redacted]

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### Turkish Reaction

The government of Prime Minister Turgut Ozal so far has tried to avert a bilateral crisis with efforts to calm rising domestic furor over reports of Bulgarian brutality. In mid-January, President Evren sent a note to Party Leader Zhivkov, and security has been strengthened around Bulgarian consulates in Turkey. Some four weeks later, Ozal was still counselling "patience" when he received a group of Bulgarian Turkish refugees. In early February Ankara called its ambassador to Bulgaria home for consultations and the Turkish National Assembly debated the issue amid reports it might accept some Bulgarian refugees. [redacted]

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Ankara is uncertain about Sofia's reasons for undertaking the campaign. It has reacted cautiously because the costs of a strong protest--such as recalling its Ambassador in Sofia--would likely entail serious damage to its improving economic relations with Bulgaria and the USSR. Turkey, itself, also is vulnerable to international criticism for restrictive policies towards its Kurdish and Arab minorities. Finally, the Turks suspect that the West is trying to exploit the incidents in order to disrupt a warming trend in Turkish-East bloc relations. [redacted]

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Turkish press commentary, on the other hand, has harshly denounced Bulgaria and has criticized Ankara's passivity. Bulgarian Turks now living in Turkey are attempting to organize a broader protest and have bombarded Western embassies with telegrams of protest. [REDACTED]

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Prospects

President Zhivkov may modify his assimilation strategy if he is unable to continue warding off Western criticism of the repression. He wants better relations with the West and is worried that the papal assassination scandal and allegations of Bulgarian complicity in international drug trafficking and terrorism will further hurt his regime. But he is not likely to lessen his determination to remove what he sees as a potential threat from the ethnic Turks. [REDACTED]

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The brutality of current government efforts to force the name changes and the sealing off of affected areas shows the seriousness with which the regime is pursuing this campaign. Despite increasingly critical foreign press coverage, the assimilation effort will remain a central preoccupation of the Zhivkov government. [REDACTED]

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