

MEMORIZING THE QUR'AN IN A CHRISTIAN-MAJORITY COUNTRY: THE REVIVAL OF HIFZ TRADITION IN POST-SOCIALIST BULGARIA

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Abstract

The tradition of Qur'an memorization (hifz, hafızlık) in Bulgaria has developed within changing political and social conditions, resulting in a history marked by both continuity and interruption. In the post-Ottoman period, hafızlık was sustained as a local tradition shaped by mosque-based religious instruction and family transmission. This continuity was seriously disrupted during the socialist period (1944–1989), when religious education was excluded from public life. Mosques were placed under strict control; formal Qur'anic instruction was prohibited. Memorization was therefore carried on largely without an institutional framework, most often within the home and in conditions of secrecy. Following the political transition of 1989, public religious life gradually re-emerged; however, the reconstruction of religious education progressed slowly throughout the 1990s, shaped by infrastructural limitations, a shortage of trained personnel, and the gradual reorganization of religious institutions. Within this context, the Madan Hafızlık Qur'an Course was established on 1 July 1999 under the authority of the Office of the Grand Mufti, during the tenure of Grand Mufti Mustafa Haji, becoming the first and only officially recognized institution in Bulgaria devoted exclusively to Qur'an memorization. This article examines contemporary hafızlık education in Bulgaria through the case of the Madan course, focusing on how Qur'an memorization is pursued alongside the country's secular public education system and assessing the significance of this institution for the Muslim minority in terms of religious education and communal continuity. The study draws on both fieldwork and documentary sources collected in the summer of 2025, including institutional documents and materials produced by the Office of the Grand Mufti as well as local press and media sources. The findings show that the memorization method practiced at Madan closely corresponds to the traditional hafızlık approach widely used in Türkiye, particularly with respect to working from a single muşhaf, correction through repetition, steady daily progress, and systematic review aimed at long-term retention. At the same time, the organization of the course allows students to continue their regular state schooling, reflecting a locally adapted model suited to Bulgaria's secular educational environment. Finally, the article demonstrates that a significant number of Madan graduates continue their religious education after completing memorization and later serve as imams, Qur'an-course teachers, preachers, or staff within local muftiate offices, thereby contributing to the continuity of religious education and institutional life in post-socialist Bulgaria.

Keywords: Qur'an memorization, Hifz, Religious education, Bulgarian Muslims, Madan Qur'an Course.

Hristiyanların Çoğunlukta Olduğu Bir Ülkede Kur'an Ezberlemek: Post-Sosyalist Bulgaristan'da Hafızlık Geleneğinin Yeniden Canlanması

Öz

Bulgaristan'da hafızlık geleneği, ülkenin değişen siyasal ve toplumsal şartları içinde şekillenmiş, kesintiler yaşamış bir tarihî arka plana sahiptir. Osmanlı sonrası dönemde hafızlık, cami çevresindeki dinî öğretimle aile içi aktarımın iç içe geçtiği mahallî bir gelenek olarak varlığını sürdürmüştür. Bu süreklilik, sosyalist dönemde (1944–1989) ciddi biçimde kesintiye uğramıştır. Söz konusu dönemde dinî eğitim kamusal alandan dışlanmış; camiler sıkı denetim altına alınmış, resmî Kur'an öğretimi yasaklanmış; hafızlık ise kurumsal bir zeminden yoksun biçimde, çoğu zaman ev içinde ve gizlilik içinde sürdürülmüştür. 1989 sonrası siyasal dönüşümle birlikte kamusal dinî hayat yeniden görünürlük kazanmış olsa da, dinî eğitimin yeniden inşası 1990'lar boyunca kademeli ilerlemiş; bu süreçte altyapı yetersizlikleri, yetişmiş kadro eksikliği ve kurumların yeniden yapılanma süreci belirleyici olmuştur. Bu bağlamda Madan Hafızlık Kur'an Kursu, 1 Temmuz 1999 tarihinde Bulgaristan Başmüftülüğü bünyesinde, dönemin başmüftüsü Mustafa Hac'ın görev süresinde kurulmuş ve Bulgaristan'da sadece Kur'an ezberlemeye odaklanan ilk ve tek resmî kurum olmuştur. Bu makale, Bulgaristan'da günümüzde yürütülen hafızlık eğitimini Madan Hafızlık Kur'an Kursu örneği üzerinden ele alarak, hafızlığın ülkedeki seküler kamu eğitim sistemiyle birlikte nasıl sürdürüldüğünü incelemekte ve bu kurumun Müslüman azınlık açısından dinî eğitim ile topluluk sürekliliği bakımından taşıdığı önemi değerlendirmektedir. Araştırma, 2025 yazında gerçekleştirilen saha çalışması ile Başmüftülük tarafından üretilen kurumsal belge ve materyallerin yanı sıra yerel basın ve medya kaynaklarının analizine dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, Madan'da uygulanan ezber yönteminin Türkiye'de yaygın olan geleneksel hafızlık usulüyle büyük ölçüde örtüştüğünü; özellikle tek mushafla çalışma, tekrar yoluyla düzeltme, istikrarlı günlük ilerleme ve kalıcılığı sağlayan sistemli tekrar uygulamalarına dayandığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte kursun işleyişi, öğrencilerin devlet okullarındaki eğitimlerine devam edebilmelerine imkân tanıyacak biçimde düzenlenmiş; böylece dinî eğitim ile seküler okul hayatı pratik düzeyde birlikte sürdürülebilmektedir. Son olarak çalışma, Madan Hafızlık Kur'an Kursu mezunlarının önemli bir kısmının hafızlık sonrasında dinî eğitimlerine devam ederek imamlık, Kur'an kursu öğreticiliği, vaizlik ya da yerel müftülüklerde görev aldıklarını ve böylece post-sosyalist Bulgaristan'da dinî eğitimin ve kurumsal dinî hayatın sürekliliğine katkı sağladıklarını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kur'an ezberi, Hafızlık, Dinî eğitim, Bulgaristan Müslümanları, Madan Hafızlık Kur'an Kursu.

Introduction

The memorization of the Qur'an (*hafızlık*, *hifz*) has always stood at the heart of Islamic education, symbolizing devotion, discipline, and the preservation of divine knowledge. Within the broader Muslim world, it represents the ideal union of faith and learning, where knowledge is not only studied but lived. For centuries, Muslims have regarded the *hāfız*—the one who has memorized the entire Qur'an—as both a bearer of knowledge and a moral exemplar.¹ Through the act of repetition, recitation, and spiritual focus, the believer embodies a relationship with the sacred word that transcends time and place. At the same time, *hafızlık* has never been sustained by devotion alone: it has also depended on pedagogical routines—diverse memorization methods and, crucially, systematic practices of review intended to preserve memorization over time.²

In the Balkans, this classical tradition acquired distinctive forms shaped by the region's multilingual social fabric, shifting borders, and layered religious histories.³ Yet Qur'anic memorization itself has rarely been approached as a central theme in writing on Balkan Islam; it tends to appear only in brief remarks within wider accounts of Islamic institutions, minority religious life, or post-socialist revival. Even in Bosnia and Herzegovina—often cited as one of the best-documented Balkan settings in terms of Qur'anic education—authors have drawn attention to the scarcity of sustained written traces on *hifz* in the local scholarly tradition.⁴ Bulgaria, a small country situated between Europe and the Middle East, is

¹ Celâleddîn es-Süyûtî, *el-İtkân fi 'Ulûmi'l-Kur'ân*, vol. 1 (Cairo: el-Hey'etü'l-Mısriyye el-Âmme li'l-Kitâb, 1974), 218–221; Ali M. ed-Dabbâ, *Kur'an Okumanın Edepleri ve Hafız Olmanın Sorumlulukları*, çev. Ali Osman Yüksel (İstanbul: Hikmet Neşriyat, 1985), 70–74.

² Ömer Özbek, "Dünyada Hafızlık Yöntem Örnekleri," *Bilimname* 29 (2015): 183–209; Ömer Özbek and Gamze Çevik, "Hifzı Korumanın Önemi -Bazı Uygulama ve Tavsiyeler," *Tafsir Dergisi* 3/2 (Kasım 2023): 18–41.

³ R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 112–118; Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans, Vol. 2: Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 44–46.

⁴ Safwat Halilović, *Hifz – Reciting the Qur'an by Heart* (Zenica: Islamic Pedagogical Academy, 2003), 13–18.

home to one of the largest Muslim populations within the European Union.⁵ Unlike most Western European contexts where Islam is discussed largely through migration, Bulgaria's Muslims are indigenous, their presence tracing back to the Ottoman centuries. Islam here is not an imported religion but an inherited moral world—rooted in memory, family, and daily life.⁶ And yet, despite this deep historical continuity and the visible re-emergence of Qur'anic education after 1989, *hafızlık* in contemporary Bulgaria has attracted remarkably little sustained scholarly attention—particularly in the form of empirical research on how memorization is organized and pursued within a secular schooling environment.

The twentieth century brought one of the most difficult tests to this continuity. Under the Communist regime (1946–1989), religion was officially suppressed under the ideology of “scientific atheism.” Mosques were closed or repurposed, Qur'anic education was banned, and religious gatherings were closely monitored.⁷ Even small expressions of faith—such as performing prayer, fasting, or using Islamic names—could lead to interrogation, fines, or imprisonment.⁸ The regime's policy of assimilation targeted Muslim communities especially, forcing many to adopt Slavic names and to abandon visible markers of religious identity.⁹ Yet despite these restrictions, Islam endured in silence. Within homes, especially

⁵ National Statistical Institute of Bulgaria, *Ethno-Cultural Characteristics of the Population: 2021 Census Results* (Sofia: NSI, 2022), 9.8 %; United States Department of State, *2022 Report on International Religious Freedom: Bulgaria* (Washington D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2023), 10.7 %; Minority Rights Group International, *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples – Bulgaria* (London: MRGI, 2018), “Muslims of Bulgaria” section.

⁶ Nathalie Clayer, “The Muslims in South-Eastern Europe: From Ottoman Subjects to European Citizens,” in *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, 2. bs., ed. Roberto Tottoli (London: Routledge, 2022), 73–88.

⁷ Michail Gruev and Aleksei Kalyonski, *The Revival Process: Muslims under Communism in Bulgaria* (Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2011), 24–31.

⁸ Milena Savova-Mahon Borden, *The Politics of Nationalism under Communism in Bulgaria: Myths, Memories and Minorities* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University College London, The School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London, January 2001), 320–325.

⁹ Michail Gruev and Aleksei Kalyonski, *The Revival Process: Muslims under Communism in Bulgaria* (Sofia: Sofia University Press, 2011), 24–31.

through the voices of elderly women, fragments of Qur'anic verses and prayers were transmitted quietly from one generation to another. At the same time, local imams—often without formal appointment or under constant surveillance—continued to provide discreet guidance, teaching children to recite short surahs and preserving the rhythms of ritual life in secrecy. Through these intertwined efforts of women and imams, faith survived as a living memory rather than a public institution.

The collapse of Communism in 1989 opened a new chapter in Bulgaria's religious life. The first decade after the transition was marked by both freedom and uncertainty. Muslims could once again practice their religion openly, but they faced a landscape stripped of institutions and teachers.¹⁰ The Office of the Grand Mufti, re-established in Sofia in the early 1990s, began a gradual process of rebuilding Islamic education. New mosque schools were opened, small imam-training programs were initiated, and community donations became the main source of religious revival.¹¹ Among these initiatives, the foundation of the Madan Qur'an memorization course (*Kurs za naizustyavane na Korana*) in 1999 represented a turning point.¹²

Located in the southern Rhodope Mountains, the Madan course remains the only official institution in Bulgaria dedicated entirely to Qur'an memorization. Approved by the Office of the Grand Mufti and supported largely by local Muslim contributions, it offers full-time residential education for boys aged eight to eighteen. Its establishment carried both educational and symbolic significance.¹³ For the first time in the country's history, a formal structure for *hafızlık* was created within a Christian-majority environment that had long discouraged public religious expression. The course thus became not only a place of learning but a collective sign of revival and continuity.

¹⁰ Ibid., 194–196.

¹¹ Antonina Zhelyazkova, Bozhidar Aleksiev, and Zhorzheta Nazurska, *Myusyulmanskite obshtnosti na Balkanite i v Bŭlgariya: istoricheski eskizi* (Sofia: International Center for Minority Studies and Intercultural Relations – IMIR, 1997), 102–110.

¹² Gyulyumser Yusofova, "Islyamskoto religiozno obrazovanie v prekhoda kŭm demokratsiyata," *Godishnik na Vysshiiy Islamski Institut* 4 (2011): 232–234.

¹³ Ibid., 233.

Against this background, the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course provides a concrete case for examining how *hafızlık* is practiced in contemporary Bulgaria. Established in 1999 and operating with the approval of the Office of the Grand Mufti, it remains the only officially organized program in the country dedicated entirely to Qur'an memorization. By focusing on this institution, the article considers how the practice of *hafızlık* is pursued alongside Bulgaria's secular public education system, paying particular attention to the institutional arrangements that allow students to continue regular state schooling while engaging in intensive memorization. The analysis draws on institutional documents and media materials produced by the Office of the Grand Mufti, relevant press coverage, and semi-structured interviews conducted in the summer of 2025 with students and their family members. The Madan course thus offers a focused lens for observing how Qur'anic memorization is institutionally organized in a Christian-majority national context.

The study is organized into four main sections followed by a conclusion. The first section traces the historical suppression and cautious revival of Qur'an memorization during and after the socialist period (1944–1989). The second section examines Qur'an memorization in post-socialist Bulgaria, focusing on the establishment, organization, and educational practices of the Madan Hifz Course, currently the only organized memorization program operating in the country. The third section, titled *The Madan Hifz Course and Its Meaning for Bulgaria's Muslim Minority*, analyzes the role of memorization in the moral and religious life of the Muslim community. The fourth section offers comparative reflections on Qur'an memorization practices in Bulgaria and Türkiye, before the article concludes with general reflections.

1. Qur'anic Education under Socialism (1944–1989)

When socialism settled over Bulgaria after 1944, it came with a promise of equality, enlightenment, and collective progress. For Muslim communities, however, this promise soon became a language of control. Mosques fell silent, Qur'anic schools were absorbed into the state system, and the teachers who once shaped moral and spiritual education quietly disappeared from public life. Religion was no longer treated as knowledge

but as superstition, something to be overcome in the making of the “new socialist citizen”.¹⁴

By the end of the 1940s, all minority schools had been nationalized and placed under state supervision.¹⁵ Religious subjects were gradually removed from their programs, Arabic and Turkish were banned from classrooms, and the Qur'an itself was declared a forbidden text.¹⁶ The shift drew upon a longer national ideology that had equated modernization with secularization, a continuity that reached back to Bulgaria's interwar elites.¹⁷ The emigration of thousands of Turkish families in the early 1950s, many of whom had provided local religious leadership, further weakened the institutional base of Muslim education.¹⁸ Before socialism, however, Muslim schooling in regions like Dobrudzha had flourished as a community-based effort, sustained by *waqfs* and local donations.¹⁹ Its abrupt disappearance after 1944 therefore marked not only a political rupture but the loss of a deeply rooted educational tradition.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Bulgaria's socialist regime transformed its anti-religious stance into a systematic state policy. The construction of a “new socialist citizen,” free from what the authorities termed *religious illusion*, required replacing the language of faith with that of scientific materialism.²⁰ Qur'anic instruction was outlawed; imams and local teachers were summoned for ideological “re-education,” and many faced public denunciation or imprisonment for continuing religious

¹⁴ Radko Popov, “Islam in Modern Bulgaria: 1878 to Present Days,” *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 33, no. 2 (2013): 3–4.

¹⁵ Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Turkish Minority Education and Literature in Bulgaria* (Ankara: 1986), 4.

¹⁶ Ali Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria* (London: Routledge, 1997), 60–75.

¹⁷ Richard Crampton, *Bulgaria, 1878–1918* (New York: East European Monographs, 1983), 176.

¹⁸ Huey Louis Kostanick, *Turkish Settlement of Bulgarian Turks, 1949–1953* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 74–80.

¹⁹ Müstecib Ülküsal, *Dobruca ve Türkler* (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü Yayınları, 1966), 105–121.

²⁰ Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, “Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* / report text, 12–13.

instruction.²¹ As a result, the visible practice of Islam was driven from the public sphere into the domestic domain. Yet within private homes, a hidden pedagogy endured—small circles of memorization guided by aging hocas or family elders, conducted in silence and secrecy.²² These quiet forms of transmission reflected what Neuburger has called “the Orient within,” a survival of embodied Islamic life beneath the homogenizing project of socialist modernity.²³ In this sense, the clandestine continuation of Qur'anic learning represented both cultural persistence and an act of everyday resistance.

Even under repression, faith did not vanish; it adapted. Scholars of everyday resistance have long noted that when power closes public spaces, people invent quiet strategies to preserve meaning. James C. Scott calls these practices *hidden transcripts*, unspoken acts through which the oppressed sustain dignity and memory. Michel de Certeau describes them as “tactics,” small improvisations that reclaim life within structures of control.²⁴ In socialist Bulgaria, these tactics took shape in kitchens, basements, and courtyards. Mothers taught their children short *surahs* after dinner; grandmothers whispered prayers over bread before dawn. Curtains were drawn not only to hide, but to hold the sacred within a world that had forbidden it.

A living testimony of this quiet continuity comes from *Hafiz Şefket Hadji*, now the director of the Qur'an memorization course in Madan. Between 1968 and 1974, amid the forced name-change campaigns and the tightening of control, he completed his *hifz* under his father's guidance.

“We were at school all day, which in itself was not bad, but there was no time left for memorization,” he recalls. “So, I studied only on weekends, and for that reason it took me six years. Those were difficult

²¹ Georgiev – Trifon Trifonov, *Pokrastvaneto na bulgarite mohamedani 1912–1913* (Sofya: BAN, 1995), 75–76.

²² Michail Gruiev ve diğr., *Nasilie, politika i pamet* (Sofya: Universitetsko Izdatelstvo “Sv. Kliment Ohridski,” 2011), 471–488.

²³ Mary Neuburger, *The Orient Within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 142–149.

²⁴ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

times for the free practice of religion. At home, the curtains were drawn, and someone always stood outside to make sure no stranger heard what was happening inside.” His father continued to teach in that way for nearly a decade—without permission, without books, but with extraordinary patience.’’²⁵

Through memories like these, Qur’anic education under socialism emerges not as a relic of resistance but as a lived form of endurance. To teach a verse became to guard a boundary; to memorize, an act of quiet defiance. What survived was more than religious knowledge—it was an ethic of resilience transmitted through silence, gesture, and faith. In this sense, as Kristen Ghodsee suggests, the religious life of Bulgaria’s Muslims was not extinguished by socialism but reshaped by it: redefined within the walls of home, sustained by memory, and carried forward by those who whispered the sacred into being.²⁶

2. Qur’an Memorization (Hifz) in Post-socialist Bulgaria

Qur’an memorization in post-socialist Bulgaria represents both continuity and transformation. During the socialist era, religious knowledge survived largely through private instruction and oral transmission, sustained by families and local imams under strict state control. After 1989, the gradual opening of public religious life allowed Muslim communities to reorganize these fragmented efforts into more visible and structured forms of education. In its early years, the introduction of formal *hafızlık* education drew some public concern about possible radicalization—a reflection of the post-socialist anxiety surrounding Islam in the 1990s. Yet, twenty-five years later, these fears have proven entirely unfounded, as the Madan course has become a stable and respected part of Bulgaria’s religious and civic landscape.²⁷ This

²⁵ Ahmed Ahmedov, “Хафъз Шефкет Хаджи: В Мадан се подготвят нови хафъзи,” *IslamBG Blog*, 17 Ağustos 2009, erişim 28 Ekim 2025, https://islambgr.blogspot.com/2009/08/blog-post_18.html.

²⁶ Kristen Ghodsee, *Muslim Lives in Eastern Europe: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Transformation of Islam in Postsocialist Bulgaria* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 46–52, 87–92.

²⁷ Nuno Ragaru, “Islam in Post-socialist Bulgaria: An Aborted ‘Clash of Civilizations’,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 29/2 (2001), 293–310;

section outlines the evolution of *hafızlık* within this shifting context, beginning with the establishment of the Madan Course for Memorizing the Qur'an as the first organized institution of its kind in the country.

2.1. The Establishment and Structure of the Madan Hifz Course in Bulgaria

For much of the communist period in Bulgaria, Qur'anic education survived as a fragmented and clandestine practice rather than an institutional system. Religious instruction was confined to informal circles—individual imams, elderly teachers, or family members who transmitted the sacred text orally within domestic spaces. The practice of *hafızlık*, or complete memorization of the Qur'an, thus persisted without public visibility or formal structure. After 1989, when state control over religion gradually loosened, Muslim communities began to rebuild the forms of knowledge that had long been maintained in secrecy. Yet it was not until the late 1990s that these scattered efforts culminated in the founding of a formal institution devoted exclusively to Qur'an memorization.

The Madan Qur'an Memorization Course (MHK), established on 1 July 1999 by the Grand Mufti's Office of Bulgaria, marked the first organized attempt to institutionalize Qur'an memorization in the country.²⁸ It was the first of its kind—an educational center dedicated solely to *hafızlık*—signalling the transition from private, home-based instruction to a public and officially recognized setting.²⁹ The decision to locate this pioneering institution in Madan, a small town in the central Rhodope Mountains, was deeply symbolic. The region had long served as a center of spiritual learning, shaped by teachers whose moral authority came from oral transmission and communal respect. Among them was *Hafiz Selim Mehmed Gerçekov*, affectionately known by his local honorific

Radicalisation in Bulgaria: Threats and Trends (Sofia: Regional Cooperation Council, 2018), 7–9.

²⁸ Grand Mufti's Office of Bulgaria, official communiqué on the establishment of the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course, 1 July 1999.

²⁹ “Една реализирана мечта – Курс за хазфи ‘Хазфз Мурад Хаджи,’ Мадан” (One Dream Realized – Qur'an Memorization Course 'Hafiz Murad Hadji,' Madan). YouTube video. Published by Bayram Ushev, 2020. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uPiXOJITew>.

“*Gercheka*.” Originally from the nearby village of Elhovets, Gercheka was a devoted imam and *muallim* who played a formative role in sustaining Qur’anic education during the years of repression. Elhovets itself was known for its Ottoman-era *medrese*, remembered today through numerous handwritten manuscripts preserved by village families.³⁰ Within this intellectual environment, Hafiz Gercheka trained many students — among them *Hafiz Murad Haji* (1936–2018), who would later help establish the Madan course and dedicate his life to its continuation.

Murad Haji was not merely the founder of an institution but the moral architect of a whole generation. His students recall him as a teacher of extraordinary precision—firm, disciplined, and devoted to detail during lessons—yet gentle and kind-hearted once class was over. “He was demanding in recitation, but afterward he was like a father,” said one former pupil. His close colleagues, Hafiz Ahmed Kukalev, himself of Pomak origin, and Hafiz Hasan Tevfik, described him as tireless in his service to Islam; Tevfik, speaking through tears, ended his remembrance in Bulgarian: *Allah da e dovolen ot nego* (“May Allah be pleased with him”).³¹

After his father’s passing, *Hafiz Shefket Murad Haji* (b. 1959) assumed the responsibility of continuing this legacy. Born in Madan, he memorized the Qur’an at the age of fourteen—an achievement remarkable in the 1970s, when all forms of religious education were prohibited.³² His father served as his only teacher, instructing him secretly at home during the years of political repression. Before entering formal religious work, Shefket Haji worked as a tailor and later as a miner in his hometown,

³⁰ Zorka Ivanova and Anka Stoilova, “Arabographic Books Preserved in the Village of Elhovets, Smolyan Region,” in *Islam i kultura: Izsledvaniya* (Islam and Culture: Studies), eds. Galina Lozanova and Lyubomir Mikov (Sofia: International Center for Minority Problems and Cultural Interactions, 1999), 175–178.

³¹ “Една реализирана мечта – Курс за хафъзи ‘Хафъз Мурад Хаджи,’ Мадан” (One Dream Realized – Qur’an Memorization Course ‘Hafiz Murad Hadji,’ Madan). YouTube video. Published by Bayram Ushev, 2020. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uPiXOJITew>.

³² “Hafızlar Bahçesi: Madan ‘Hafız Murad Hacı’ Hâfızlık Kursu Müdürü Hafız Şefket Hacı ile Mülakat” (The Garden of Hafizes: Interview with Hafiz Shefket Haji, Director of the ‘Hafiz Murad Hadji’ Qur’an Memorization Course in Madan), *Spisanie Myusyulmani*, 9 (2019): 2–4.

experiences that grounded his deep familiarity with working-class Pomak life.

Following the democratic transition, he became imam of Madan in 1991 and was later elected regional mufti of Smolyan in 1997, serving two terms. Since 2004, he has taught at the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course, located in the central mosque complex, and remains its director. Married with two children, he is widely known among his students for his patience, humility, and methodical precision in tajwīd instruction.³³ His teaching style combines traditional memorization techniques with moral mentorship—he often reminds his students that “the Qur'an is not only to be memorized, but to be lived.” Under his supervision, dozens of students from across Bulgaria have completed their *hafızlık*, turning the Madan course into a national reference point for Qur'anic education.

Through this lineage—Gerçekov → Murad Haji → Shefket Haji → Bayram Ushev—a once-fragile, home-based tradition matured into Bulgaria's first külliye-type institution for Qur'an memorization, located within the mosque complex of Madan and equipped with dormitory facilities for thirty students. What had once been taught in secrecy is now preserved through open recitation, continuity, and living memory. In the collective remembrance of local Muslims, Hafiz Murad Haji and Hafiz Shefket Haji stand not only as father and son but as successive embodiments of faith, discipline, and devotion—a legacy that continues through their descendants.

2.2. Program Structure and Student Life at the Madan Hifz Course

The most distinctive feature of the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course is its dual educational model, in which *hafızlık* training operates in parallel with Bulgaria's system of formal secular education (svetsko obrazovanie). Unlike in Muslim-majority contexts where students attend separate religious institutions, in Madan all pupils continue their regular schooling in state institutions—elementary, middle, or secondary—while pursuing Qur'anic memorization within the mosque complex. This coexistence between religious and secular learning represents a uniquely Bulgarian adaptation of Islamic education to a post-socialist environment,

³³ Ibid.

where faith and formal schooling are not perceived as opposing domains but as complementary forms of moral and intellectual cultivation.

The students reside in a modest two-storey building adjacent to the Madan Central Mosque, which functions simultaneously as dormitory, classroom, and study hall. The day begins before dawn with the fajr prayer, immediately followed by the morning *sabaq*—the session for new memorization. Around 7:00–7:30 a.m., breakfast is served, and the students leave for their respective schools. Classes in Bulgaria typically end around 2:00 p.m., and by 3:00 the afternoon hifz lessons resume inside the mosque. During these sessions, each student recites a new passage according to individual capacity. Most memorize between five lines and half a page daily, while exceptionally gifted students may advance faster; for instance, Hafiz Ibrahim Kamach from Breznitsa village is known to have mastered three or even four pages in a single day. Roughly eighty percent of students progress at a steady rhythm of half a page per day, ensuring both accuracy and retention. After presenting their *sabaq*³⁴, students review previously learned sections *takrār* under supervision, and upon completion of their revision, they are free until the evening. Dinner is followed by study time dedicated to homework for their *svetsko uchilishte* (secular school), after which the day concludes with the ‘*ishā*’ prayer and rest.³⁵

Although the atmosphere of the Madan Hifz Course is modest and communal, the process follows a clear internal discipline. From the very beginning, each student works with a single personal *muṣḥaf*, which they keep throughout their years of study. Memorization from multiple copies is discouraged, as the visual familiarity with the same page layout helps accuracy and long-term retention. When mistakes occur, the teacher marks them discreetly in pencil, and the student is expected to correct and

³⁴ In Qur'an memorization pedagogy, *sabaq* refers to the new portion a student is assigned to memorize each day, while *takrār* denotes the revision of previously learned sections.

³⁵ The detailed description of the course's daily routine and student life is based on field observation and the documentary film “Една реализирана мечта – Курс за хафъзи ‘Хафъз Мурад Хаджи,’ Мадан” (*One Dream Realized – Qur'an Memorization Course ‘Hafiz Murad Hadji,’ Madan*) directed by Bayram Ushev (2020), which visually documents the teaching methods, daily schedule, and learning environment within the Madan complex.

recite the passage again until flawless. Every student also has a fixed spot inside the mosque—often chosen during the first weeks of study—and they return to the same place daily for memorization. This continuity of place and page cultivates a rhythm of focus and reverence. Lessons are held at consistent hours, and students learn that spiritual discipline arises not from severity, but from repetition, regularity, and respect for the text.

On Saturdays, the course introduces a broader Islamic curriculum including *sīra* (Prophetic biography), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, and *tajwīd* lessons from 10:30 a.m. until *dhuhr* prayer, while Sundays remain free. The institution covers accommodation, meals, and materials for all students. Financing is maintained jointly by the Grand Mufti's Office of Bulgaria and local Muslim communities. Villagers from nearby areas frequently deliver food donations to support the students' meals, preserving a long-standing regional ethic of *sadaka* and communal solidarity.

When the course was first established in 1999, it began with only twelve students from different parts of Bulgaria. Since then, the number of participants has fluctuated yearly, as some complete memorization in two years, others in four or five. By 2019, twenty-five students had completed the Qur'an in full, and today the total number of *huffāz* trained in Madan exceeds thirty—an emblem of the gradual but steady regeneration of Qur'anic education in post-socialist Bulgaria.³⁶ Each graduation is marked by a ceremony held in the mosque courtyard. Earlier ceremonies were modest, but in recent years they have grown into public celebrations, announced on social media and attended by representatives of the Turkish Embassy, the Grand Mufti's Office, and religious guests from abroad. These events have transformed *hafızlık* completion into both a communal thanksgiving and a symbol of pride, reflecting how a once-clandestine tradition has re-entered the public sphere with renewed dignity.

At present, however, the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course remains an all-male institution, shaped by local social norms and practical constraints rather than explicit exclusion. According to instructor Bayram

³⁶ "Хафъз Шефкет Хаджи – интервю" (*Interview with Hafiz Shefket Hacı*), *Мюсюлмани (Müslümanlar)*, бр. 9 (2019): 2–5.

Ushev, grandson of the founder Hafiz Murad Hadji, the facility's capacity and supervision arrangements were designed for male residents, making expansion difficult. Yet, he emphasizes that Qur'an memorization is "a virtue open to all," and that the administration's long-term aspiration is to create a similar environment for girls in the future. Discussions within the Smolyan Muftiate have already begun regarding a possible separate course for female students—a vision that reflects the broader desire to make religious knowledge equally accessible across gender lines.

Parallel to this, female hifz education has begun to flourish elsewhere, particularly within the Mestanli (Momchilgrad) Islamic Secondary School. In November 2018, *Sara Shaban* and *Adile Kambach* received their hifz certificates in a national ceremony held at the Yeni Mosque in Kardzhali (Kircaali), attended by Grand Mufti Dr. Mustafa Haji, regional muftis, and Turkish reciters such as Mustafa Özcan Güneşdoğdu. The event was widely regarded as the first formal recognition of female huffāz in post-socialist Bulgaria. This trajectory continued in May 2025, when Sabrina Medar, another student from the same institution, was honored with the title of hafize in a ceremony at the Mestanli Mosque, attended by regional muftis, Turkish diplomats, and community leaders. In local discourse, such perseverance is described by the expression "Sabrina Medar"—literally, "anchored in patience"—a phrase that encapsulates the steadfastness and moral devotion through which Bulgarian Muslim women, particularly of Pomak and Turkish descent, have reclaimed sacred knowledge after decades of enforced silence.³⁷

2.3. Student Profiles and the Social Role of Huffaz

Graduates of the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course occupy visible positions within both the religious and civic life of the Rhodope region. Many serve as imams, Qur'an teachers, or religion instructors in nearby towns such as Rudozem, Nedelino, and Zlatograd, while others are employed as ethics or religion teachers in the public school system (svetsko uchilishte). Their presence reflects the normalization of religious

³⁷ "Mestanlı İmam Hatip Lisesi Öğrencisi Sabrina Medar, 'Hafız' Ünvanı ile Onurlandırıldı," Grand Mufti's Office of Muslims in the Republic of Bulgaria, 10 Mayıs 2025, <https://www.grandmufti.bg/tr/za-nas-5/novini/13364-2025-05-10-08-44-55.html>.

education within Bulgaria's secular framework after decades of restriction.

Local educators often describe former students of the Madan course as disciplined, cooperative, and responsible. These traits are frequently attributed to the structured routine of memorization and the strong emphasis on order and concentration in the program. Parents similarly view the course as a formative environment where children learn persistence and respect in addition to religious knowledge. In this sense, hifz training complements rather than competes with secular education, producing students who are well-adjusted to both settings.³⁸

Among the course's graduates are Hafiz Eliasa Emin, Hafiz Erdinç Syuleiman, Hafiz Zahri Jurnalov, Hafiz Aziz Mehmed, Hafiz Iusein Halibriam, and Hafiz Ibrahim Kamach, who have continued their studies or work in religious institutions. In 2023, twelve-year-old Hafiz Muhammed Ahmedov completed his memorization, and in 2025, Hafiz Sami Eminev joined the list of graduates, indicating that the course continues to attract new students and maintain stable outcomes.³⁹

Graduates of the Madan course appear to move into a range of roles within Bulgaria's religious-education landscape, extending the impact of *hafızlık* beyond individual memorization. Alumni pathways often combine continued training in religious education with service roles in mosques, Qur'an courses, and local mufti administrations. The cases below are illustrative rather than exhaustive, but they indicate how memorization competence can translate into sustained forms of community religious service. Elyasa Emin, for example, pursued university-level training in religious education and later worked as a Qur'an-course teacher and instructor. Erdinç Süleyman, after completing a theology degree at Marmara University, currently serves as head imam

³⁸ Zheleva, Olya. "Guardians of the Qur'an in Madan: Children Memorize the Holy Book in the Mosque of the Rhodope Town." *e-vestnik.bg*, August 30, 2007. <https://e-vestnik.bg/2103/пазители-на-корана-в-мадан/>

³⁹ "Една реализирана мечта – Курс за хафъзи 'Хафъз Мурад Хаджи,' Мадан" (One Dream Realized – Qur'an Memorization Course 'Hafiz Murad Hadji,' Madan). YouTube video. Published by Bayram Ushev, 2020. Accessed October 31, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uPiXOJITew>.

in Benkovski and teaches in the town's Qur'an course; he is also affiliated with the Grand Muftiate's *Muslims* magazine through editorial-board service.⁴⁰ Another trajectory involves graduates who return to the Madan program itself as instructors: Bayram Ushev, a graduate of the course, continues to work at the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course as a teacher. Others pursue further study immediately after secondary school; Ibrahim Kambach, for instance, went on to continue his religious-education training at Marmara University.⁴¹ Together, these trajectories suggest that the Madan program can function as a pathway into diverse forms of community religious service, including mosque leadership, Qur'anic instruction, local mufti-office work, and religious media initiatives.

3. The Madan Hifz Course and Its Meaning for Bulgaria's Muslim Minority

The Madan Hifz Course occupies a place in Bulgarian Muslim life that far exceeds its small physical scale. It represents not merely the revival of a forgotten form of education, but the moral reweaving of a community that endured decades of silence. For those who lived through the socialist era, the sound of Qur'an recitation echoing openly from a mosque in Madan carries a meaning deeper than learning itself—it signals the restoration of dignity. In this sense, hifz is not only a pedagogical act but a form of collective memory, a practice through which Muslims reclaim continuity with their own past.⁴²

Students and teachers alike describe the process of memorization as an education of the soul. Discipline, humility, and patience—virtues once cultivated quietly within homes—are now taught aloud again. Parents view their sons' participation as a moral investment, an act of gratitude

⁴⁰ Grand Mufti's Office of Bulgaria, "Един от лауреатите на наградата 'Ходжазаде Мехмед Мухийдин ефенди': Ердинч Сюлейман — пример в областта на ислямското възпитание," *Grand Mufti's Office of Bulgaria* news item (15 December 2017), accessed October 31, 2025, <https://grandmufti.bg/bg/up-to-date/novini/5086-edin-ot-laureatite-na-nagrada-hodzhazade-mehmed-muhiiddin-efendi-erdinch-syuleiman-primer-v-oblastta-na-islyamskoto-vazpitanie.html>

⁴¹ Interview conducted by the author with a former student of the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course, summer 2025.

⁴² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 772–773.

toward the generations who preserved faith in secrecy. The course thus functions as a bridge between eras: it connects the silent religiosity of grandmothers who whispered prayers under communism with the confident voices of children who can now recite the Qur'an in public.

This continuity is sustained not only by the Muftiate's administration but by the community's everyday generosity. Villagers bring potatoes, rice, cheese, fruits, and even meat from sacrificial animals to the students' dormitory. Each delivery, whether a small jar of honey or a sack of vegetables, carries the scent of devotion. These offerings are not mere gestures of charity, but acts of shared moral responsibility.⁴³ As Meredith McGuire and Veena Das note, religion often resides not in doctrinal statements but in everyday practices—the small, embodied acts through which faith becomes lived.⁴⁴ The circulation of food, in this sense, forms a quiet system of reciprocity and care that binds the community together. Each contribution nourishes both body and belief, turning *hifz* itself into a collective act of worship. At the same time, the Madan course stands as a subtle response to the insecurity and marginalization that often accompany minority existence. In a society where Islam is both native and numerically minor, the act of memorizing the Qur'an affirms presence without confrontation. It allows Bulgarian Muslims to express identity through discipline rather than declaration—what James C. Scott has termed a “quiet form of resistance.”⁴⁵ The Madan students embody this ethos: they do not protest or demand visibility, yet their daily recitations gently reoccupy a moral space once denied. In this way, the Madan Hifz Course has become more than a school. It is a living symbol of endurance, patience, and moral continuity—a small institution that carries the memory of an entire faith into the future.

⁴³ Field observations, August 2025.

⁴⁴ Meredith McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12–15; Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 6–8.

⁴⁵ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xv–xvi.

4. Qur'an Memorization in Comparative Perspective: Bulgaria and Türkiye

Qur'an memorization is one of the most enduring forms of Islamic education, yet its rhythm and meaning change according to history and social context. In Bulgaria and Türkiye—two neighbors sharing Ottoman roots but shaped by very different twentieth-century experiences—the practice of *hifz* reveals two distinct but complementary stories. Both aim to preserve the divine word, yet each does so through a different form of continuity: Türkiye's through institution, Bulgaria's through remembrance.

In Türkiye, *hifz* education is part of a firmly institutionalized religious system under the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Hundreds of boarding schools across the country offer a structured and state-supervised path. Students often pause their general education for two or three years to focus entirely on memorization. Their progress is monitored through national examinations, and completion is celebrated through public ceremonies that mark social recognition as well as spiritual achievement.⁴⁶ Recent Turkish scholarship also discusses *hafızlık* training in method-oriented terms, mapping differences in memorization routines and review (*murāja'a*) schedules across programs while emphasizing shared retention practices.⁴⁷ Edited research on *hafızlık* education further signals a growing pedagogical interest in how memorization is taught and sustained—alongside institutional supervision—through educational frameworks that include learner-oriented approaches.⁴⁸ Becoming a *hafiz* in Türkiye carries both religious prestige and cultural honor—it signals discipline, endurance, and piety within a well-recognized framework of national faith.

In Bulgaria, the practice follows a much quieter and smaller path. The Madan Hifz Course—the only structured memorization program in the country—was founded nearly a decade after the return of democracy,

⁴⁶ Mustafa Öcal, "Türkiye'de Kur'an Eğitim ve Öğretiminde Görülen Gelişmeler ve Bir İcâzetname Örneği," *Uludağ Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 13, sy. 2 (2004): 81–84.

⁴⁷ Ömer Özbek, "Dünyada Hafızlık Yöntem Örnekleri," *Bilimname* 29 (2015): 183–209.

⁴⁸ For a useful overview of contemporary discussions on *hafızlık* education in Türkiye, see Cemil Osmanoglu and Ömer Özbek (eds.), *Hafızlık Eğitimi Üzerine Araştırmalar* (Kayseri: Kimlik Yayınları, 2019).

at a time when religion was still cautious and rebuilding its voice. Though officially registered as a Qur'an course under the Muftiate, it functions in practice as a small residential *hifz* school. The school occupies a simple two-storey building beside the central mosque and serves simultaneously as dormitory, classroom, and study hall. Most students come from Pomak villages around the Rhodope region rather than from Madan itself. They attend the state school in the morning and continue memorization in the mosque after classes. The two spheres—public education and religious study—coexist without tension, forming a daily rhythm of learning, prayer, and quiet community life. Students live in the dormitory for extended periods, sometimes visiting home only during holidays or religious festivals.

The method relies on consistency rather than intensity —and this is precisely where Bulgaria and Türkiye resemble each other most closely in everyday *hafızlık* practice. Students work from a single muşhaf throughout their studies, often returning to the same spot at nearly the same hour each day, so that memorization is anchored not only in sound but also in the visual and spatial familiarity of the page. Teachers mark mistakes lightly in pencil and expect precise correction the following day. Progress moves at a steady pace—five lines, half a page, sometimes a single verse—until it is secure. Repetition and stability thus cultivate an inner discipline that replaces the external control of large institutions. The soft hum of recitation in the late afternoon, voices overlapping in gentle rhythm, gives the space both its order and its spiritual warmth. In Turkish discussions of *hafızlık* education, these long-established routines are also described through pedagogical lenses—such as “multiple intelligences” approaches—highlighting how auditory repetition, visual familiarity with the muşhaf, and bodily regularity can jointly support retention.⁴⁹

The Madan Hifz Course remains the only institution of its kind in Bulgaria; therefore, it serves as the central reference point for understanding contemporary Qur'an memorization in the country. Unlike in Türkiye, where *hafızlık* is part of a nationwide system producing

⁴⁹ Ömer Özbek, “Çoklu Zekâ Uygulamaları ve Hafızlık Eğitimi,” in *Hafızlık Eğitimi Üzerine Araştırmalar*, ed. Cemil Osmanoglu and Ömer Özbek (Kayseri: Kimlik Yayınları, 2019), 203–246.

professional imams and teachers, the Madan course remains intimate and community-based. There are no uniforms, formal diplomas, or competitions. Its meaning lies not in scale but in survival. Each student who completes the memorization represents not an individual success but the collective endurance of faith. In a community that once saw the Qur'an hidden in ceilings and prayers whispered behind closed doors, the sound of children reciting aloud again is the truest form of victory.

The Muftiate's support for the course reflects this symbolic role. In Türkiye, the Diyanet's supervision of *hafızlık* education is administrative routine. In Bulgaria, the Muftiate's involvement carries historical and moral significance—it asserts that Muslim life belongs to the country's moral fabric, even as a minority presence. Supporting this single course is less about expansion and more about protection: guarding a small but vital space where religion can breathe naturally again.

As James C. Scott reminds, quiet acts of endurance often carry the deepest forms of resistance.⁵⁰ In Madan, the memorization of the Qur'an functions in this way—faith preserved not through open defiance, but through continuity. Thus, while Türkiye's *hifz* tradition maintains continuity through structured authority⁵¹, Bulgaria's maintains it through quiet resilience. One operates through abundance; the other through endurance. One preserves Islam as public institution; the other as shared memory. Both teach the same sacred text, yet in Madan the act of memorization stands as a quiet continuity rather than a public declaration. It reflects how faith adapts through endurance, how memory sustains belief, and how a small community preserves dignity through disciplined devotion.⁵²

Conclusion

This study has shown that Qur'an memorization (*hifz*) in Bulgaria cannot be understood merely as a religious educational practice. Rather, it emerges as a historically shaped form of continuity that has survived

⁵⁰ James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), xvi–xviii, 29–30.

⁵¹ Ömer Özbek, "Dünyada Hafızlık Yöntem Örnekleri", *Bilimname* 29 (2015), 183–209.

⁵² Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 57–60.

profound political disruption and institutional rupture. During the socialist period (1944–1989), Qur'anic education was systematically removed from public life. Mosques were closed, instruction was prohibited, and memorization survived only through fragmented, home-based transmission carried out by parents, elderly relatives, and a small number of imams under conditions of surveillance and fear. In this context, memorizing the Qur'an became a slow, fragile, and often interrupted process—one that depended on patience rather than institutional support.

The post-1989 period introduced religious freedom but not immediate reconstruction. Qur'anic education re-emerged in a landscape marked by the absence of trained teachers, institutional infrastructure, and public confidence. The establishment of the Madan Qur'an Memorization Course in 1999 therefore represents a decisive moment: for the first time in Bulgaria's history, Qur'an memorization was organized within a formal, officially recognized institutional framework. As the only program in the country devoted entirely to hafızlık, the Madan course transformed a practice that had long been confined to secrecy into one conducted openly, collectively, and with continuity. Importantly, this institutionalization also drew on a Rhodope chain of Qur'anic teaching and moral authority associated with Hafız Selim Mehmed Gerchekov ("Gercheka"), and was concretized through the founding work of Hafız Murad Haji (1936–2018). The course's continuity has since been sustained through the leadership and pedagogy of his son, Hafız Şefket Murad Haji (b. 1959), who serves as director and instructor, alongside later instructors such as Bayram Ushev.

In comparative perspective, the Bulgarian case differs from Türkiye mainly in institutional scale and organization. In Türkiye, Qur'an memorization is widely pursued within an established, state-supervised religious-education framework, whereas in Bulgaria it is carried by a much smaller institutional setting. At the level of everyday pedagogy, however, the routine documented at Madan closely resembles the traditional hafızlık method practiced in Türkiye, particularly its reliance on a single muşhaf, careful correction through repeated recitation, steady progress, and systematic review to secure long-term retention.

Equally significant is what the Madan course provides for Bulgaria's Muslim minority. In addition to offering a structured setting for Qur'an memorization, the course trains huffāz who often continue into further religious education and later work as imams, Qur'an-course teachers, and instructors, as well as within local muftiate offices, including preaching (vaizlik) and related services. In this respect, the Madan program functions as one channel through which religious-education personnel are prepared for minority Muslim communities in post-socialist Bulgaria.

A further point emerging from the Bulgarian case concerns the relationship between religious learning and everyday social life. Unlike memorization settings historically associated with withdrawal from ordinary schooling or social environments, students at the Madan course continue their regular state education while pursuing Qur'an memorization. Hafızlık here does not isolate children from public life; rather, it unfolds alongside ordinary schooling, family relations, and community participation. This coexistence allows religious discipline and secular education to reinforce rather than exclude one another. In this sense, the Madan experience demonstrates how minority Muslim communities adapt inherited forms of religious learning to contemporary social realities without severing connections to broader civic life. Qur'an memorization thus appears not as a retreat from modernity but as a practice capable of integrating faith, education, and social belonging within a post-socialist European context.

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