

THE FEMININE NAME *NIKOL (NICOLE)* IN THE BULGARIAN PERSONAL NAMING SYSTEM

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Abstract

In this article, the author attempted at analyzing the reasons for the popularity of the feminine name *Nicole* in Bulgaria by presenting statistical data about its first appearance in Bulgaria and its frequency in Bulgaria and in some foreign countries. The data from 3 questionnaires and their analysis provide information about the early reception of the name and some of the possible reasons for its extreme popularity.

Key-words: *given name, popularity, linguistic inquiry, questionnaire, Bulgarian*

Résumé

Dans cet article, on a tenté d'analyser les raisons de la popularité du prénom féminin *Nicole* en Bulgarie en présentant des données statistiques sur sa première apparition en Bulgarie et sa fréquence en Bulgarie et dans certains pays étrangers. Les données de 3 questionnaires et leur analyse fournissent des informations sur la réception précoce de ce nom et les raisons possibles de son extrême popularité.

Mots-clés: *prénom, popularité, enquête, questionnaire, Bulgarian*

The majority of the masculine names given to Bulgarian boys end in a consonant and the majority of the feminine names chosen for Bulgarian girls end in a vowel. Thus, the existence of the pair *Nikol*¹ (feminine) – *Nikola* (masculine) in the Bulgarian personal naming system may be seen somewhat as a phenomenon. In the Bulgarian personal naming system, if a name for a boy and a name for a girl have the same root, the one that ends in a consonant is the masculine one and the one that has the inflexion -a is the feminine one, e.g. *Plamen* (m) and *Plamena* (f), *Svilen* (m) and *Svilena* (f), *Daniel* (m) and *Daniela* (f). This is true for names of Bulgarian origin and for borrowed names like the last pair – *Daniel* and *Daniela*. That is why it is very interesting and unusual that now in Bulgaria we use *Nikola* – a

¹ Since the paper is about the use of the name in Bulgaria where we do not use the Latin alphabet but the Cyrillic one, throughout this paper when referring to it, I will use the transcribed form *Nikol* and not the original French spelling *Nicole*.

masculine name ending in -a, and *Nikol* – a feminine name having the same root but ending in a consonant.

When the author of the paper realized that the feminine name *Nikol* was borrowed in the Bulgarian personal naming system and that it had become quite popular, she was surprised. Because of its untypical ending, to her the name sounded foreign and it did not sound feminine. A few years later she learned about the reaction of a little girl (about 5 years old) towards the name *Nikol*. Every time she mentioned her friend from the kindergarten who was called *Nikol*, she called her **Nikola**. Her mother told her her friend's name was *Nikol* but her daughter said it could not be *Nikol*, it must be *Nikola*. The unusual popularity of a feminine name that ends in a consonant, the existence of the pair *Nikol* (feminine) – *Nikola* (masculine) and the interesting reaction of the little girl were my reasons for choosing to explore this topic. Also, various articles by Bulgarian linguists have been dedicated to certain given names. N. Kovachev wrote about some of the most traditional names in Bulgaria – *Maria* and *Georgi* (Ковачев 1992: 499 – 501; Ковачев 1988: 304 – 306) and about the once fashionable name *Albena* (Ковачев 1980: 238–243). There are articles about the names *Boris*, *Martin*, *Engelsina*, etc. (Симеонов 1972: 76–79, Симеонова 2006: 70 – 75, Михайлов 2016: 143 – 156).

The masculine name *Nikola* (the stress is on the second syllable) is the vernacular form of the official (calendar) name *Nikolay*. The form *Nikola* has been in use as an official name (i.e. the name is present in birth certificates). The name *Nikolay* is of Greek origin and means “victory of the people” and it was introduced in Bulgaria through Christianity (Илчев 1969: 360, Займов 1994: 169, Ковачев 1995: 382). N. Kovachev's list of the most popular masculine names for the period 1891 – 1980 (a period of 90 years) shows that *Nikolay* was the more popular one and occupied the sixth position, while *Nikola*, also very popular, ranked thirteenth (Ковачев 1995: 594). The names are as popular today. Data from the National Statistical Institute in Bulgaria (NSI) show that in 2020 *Nikolay* ranked eleventh and *Nikola* was the fifth name on the list of the most popular masculine names for newborn boys (НСИ 2020). The feminine form *Nikolina* ranked thirty-second in Kovachev's list of the most popular feminine names (Ковачев 1995: 597) – it was also quite popular. However, it is not present on the list of the 20 most frequently used names for Bulgarian women for the year 2020 published by NSI (НСИ 2020). Its popularity has declined in the 21st century. The diminutive form *Nikolinka* is also used in the Bulgarian personal naming system (Ковачев 1995: 383, Ангелова-Атанасова 2001: 197).

The feminine form *Nikol* became very popular at the beginning of the 21st century. According to N. Kovachev, it was only used thirteen times in the period 1891 – 1980 (Ковачев 1995: 382). It was first registered in 1916 – a century ago. It

was not used in the next two decades and it was only used once in 1941 – 1950 and once again in 1951 – 1960. It was given to six girls in 1961 – 1970 and to four girls in 1971 – 1980. The name was borrowed from French (Ковачев 1995: 382). In the next decade, 1981 – 1990, *Nikol* had a popularity of less than one hundred because it is not found in Angelova-Atanasova's list of feminine names with a popularity over 100 (Ангелова-Атанасова 2001: 185 – 210). During the last decade of the 20th century, however, the name *Nikol* was given to 1747 girls and ranked thirty-second in the list of names for newborn girls (The information was provided by the Centre for Bulgarian Onomastics at the University of Veliko Tarnovo)! Here it should be noted that before 1989 the choice of baby names was quite restricted, while after 1989 most of the restrictions were abandoned. I do not have access to data for the period 2001 – 2010. NSI provides statistics about the most popular baby names for each year after 2010. In 2011, *Nikol* ranked as high as fourth (НСИ 2011)! It needed just one decade to become one of the most popular names for newborn girls! In 2012, it ranked third (НСИ 2012). In 2013 and 2014, it reached second place on the list (НСИ 2013, НСИ 2014)! Since then it has ranked third (НСИ 2015, НСИ 2016, НСИ 2017, НСИ 2018, НСИ 2019, НСИ 2020).

The use of *Nikolay*, *Nikola*, *Nikolina* and *Nikolinka* in Bulgaria has conditioned the borrowing of *Nikol*, since the **tradition** of naming after the grandparents is still being observed by a great number of parents, although it has been altered – a derivative of the original name or a name that has the same initial is often chosen (some parents even coin a name themselves). Another French form, *Nikolet*, and its adapted version *Nikoleta* have also been used in Bulgaria (Ковачев 1995: 383). There are other names with the same root that are part of the Bulgarian personal naming system, too. The popularity of *Nikol* is probably due to another factor as well – the opposite tendency – the search for **new** and **fashionable** names, a trend that was also active in the 20th century, especially after 1989. N. Kovachev's dictionary includes only names that have a frequency of two or higher (with some exceptions). In the preface he wrote that half of the names used in the period 1891 – 1980 were not included – the names that have a frequency of one (Ковачев 1995: 12). The affinity for rare names of the Bulgarian people is likely to present another reason for the spread of *Nikol* – at first it was rare and it must have been perceived as unusual.

The search for new and fashionable names has resulted in borrowing names, mostly such that are popular in Western Europe and in the USA. Thus, the popularity of *Nikol* in other countries is also likely to have influenced the Bulgarians, so data for the popularity of the name in a few countries in Western Europe and the USA will be presented below. The web site www.behindthename.com provides information about the etymology and popularity of given names. When using information from the site during a previous research I

double-checked it comparing it to official data about the popularity of names in a number of countries and that proved the information in the site was correct. That is why I will use data from the site here as well. However, we should bear in mind that for different countries the site provides statistics for different periods. Here is the available data in short.

Since *Nicole* is a French form, let us start with its popularity in France. In France *Nicole* was a very popular name for newborn girls from the 1930s until the middle of the 1960s. It ranked third from 1940 to 1947. In England and Wales it was quite popular at the end of the 20th century but it has not been very popular since then. The statistics for Ireland are similar – the name was quite popular until the end of the first decade of the 21st century. In Scotland it peaked in 1992 when it was the sixth most popular baby name for girls. In Germany the name was very popular during the period shown in the site (1967 – 1988), from 1970 until 1974 it was the top name for newborn girls! The available data for Austria (for the years 1990 – 2007) show that *Nicole* was very popular there as well. In Italy *Nicole* was very popular for the period of 1999 – 2019 (there is no available data for other periods) (Nicole/top).

The statistics in the web site show that in the USA, Canada and Australia – countries where English is spoken, the feminine name *Nicole* became quite popular in the 1960s. At the end of the decade it was extremely popular in Australia. The peak of its popularity was in 1975 – it was the second most favourite baby name for girls. It was very popular until the middle of the 1990s. In the USA it was very popular until the beginning of the new century. The peak of its popularity was in 1982 when it occupied the sixth position on the list of the names for newborn girls. In Canada *Nicole* was frequently chosen by the parents until the end of the 2000s. It was most popular from 1972 to 1975 when it ranked fourth, and again in 1994. In New Zealand, another English-speaking country, *Nicole* had a changeable popularity from 1971 until 1984, however, in 1987 it reached the fifth place on the list of girl names and it occupied the same place again in 1991. It was still quite popular at the beginning of the new century (Nicole/top).

To sum up, at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, the feminine name *Nicole* was quite popular in Western Europe and in English-speaking countries. Thus, it seems likely that the Bulgarians have had the opportunity to be exposed to the name. The Australian Nicole Kidman and the American Nicole Scherzinger are celebrities who are well-known in Bulgaria.

A useful method for discovering the reasons for choosing the name *Nikol* is to ask the parents themselves. The research on the motives for name choice for my doctoral dissertation yielded the following data. The parents of children born from 2008 to 2017 were asked to fill in a questionnaire in Google forms. The given names of 784 children of Bulgarian ethnicity were obtained – 391 boys and 393

girls. The name *Nikol* is one of the most popular name for those girls and together with *Viktoriya* (*Victoria*) and *Gabriela* it shares the first position on the list. Each of the three names was given to twelve girls. The share of the girls named *Nikol* is 3.05%. The parents were asked what the factors that influenced the name choice were and they were presented with thirty-five factors to choose from. They could list more than one factor. For the name *Nikol* the respondents listed twenty-one of the factors. The most influential ones are: the baby was named after a grandparent; the name is feminine; the name is fashionable.

The most frequent motive is that the girl was named after a grandparent. That was a suggestion I made earlier in the paper – that the frequent use of the names *Nikolay*, *Nikola*, *Nikolina* and *Nikolinka* in the past has conditioned the borrowing of *Nikol*. Today a lot of children have a grandparent bearing one of those names and since a lot of parents observe the tradition of naming a child after a grandparent, they choose the name *Nikol* for their daughters. The choice of the factor “The name is fashionable” is also not a surprise. What is surprising here is that the parents often stated they chose the name because it was feminine! As was mentioned, in Bulgaria feminine names most often end in a vowel and *Nikol* does not. It is typical for the **masculine** names to end in a consonant.

Other important factors for the choice of names are the way a name sounds and the associations it evokes. To research this I designed another questionnaire for my dissertation. It was inspired by an experiment conducted by the psychologist Albert Mehrabian who based it on Charles Osgood, George Suci and Percy Tannenbaum’s semantic differential (Mehrabian 1997: 19–33). A similar questionnaire was designed for the site www.behindthename.com, so their experience was taken into account as well.

A hundred and ninety-six Bulgarians filled in my questionnaire (108 women and 88 men). They were presented with twelve pairs of criteria that describe the top ten masculine and the top ten feminine names for the Bulgarian babies of 2016: *masculine-feminine*, *classic (traditional)-modern (fashionable)*, *mature-youthful*, *formal-informal*, *upper class-common*, *beautiful-ugly*, *strong-delicate (gentle)*, *refined-rough*, *strange (interesting)-boring*, *simple-complex*, *serious-comedic*, *hard-soft*. The respondents had to choose one of the components in each pair.

The results for the name *Nikol* which ranked third for girls born in 2016 are the following:

- masculine: 21.9%, feminine: 78.1%;
- classic (traditional): 17.3%, modern (fashionable): 82.7%;
- mature: 17.3%, youthful: 82.7%;
- formal: 36.2%, informal: 63.8%;
- upper class: 59.2%, common: 40.8%;

beautiful: 85.7%, ugly: 14.3%;
 strong: 39.8%, delicate (gentle): 60.2%;
 refined: 82.7%, rough: 17.3%;
 strange (interesting): 79.6%, boring: 20.4%;
 simple: 75.5%, complex: 24.5%;
 serious: 83.2%, comedic: 16.8%;
 hard: 40.8%, soft: 59.2%.

The results show that the name is perceived as *feminine, modern, youthful, informal, upper class, beautiful, delicate, refined, strange (interesting), simple, serious, soft*. When we compare the results to the results for the rest of the most popular feminine names, we find out that most of them are characterized in the same way. The exceptions concern the following criteria: *formal-informal, strong-delicate (gentle)* and *hard-soft*. Half of the feminine names are characterized as *formal* and the other half are characterized as *informal*. Six names are perceived as *strong* and four names as *delicate*. Six of the names sound *hard* and the way four of the names sound is described as *soft*.

Let us now go back to what was referred to as a phenomenon: we have the pair *Nikola-Nikol* in which the name ending in *-a* is the masculine one and the name ending in a consonant is the feminine one. The second most influential factor for the choice of the name *Nikol*, however, is that the name is feminine. What did the respondents in the second questionnaire think? The share of the respondents who perceive *Nikol* as *feminine* is 78.1%. It is perceived as *masculine* by 21.9% of the people who filled in the questionnaire, i.e. most of them think it is feminine. If we compare that to the results for the rest of the most popular feminine names, however, we realize that out of the ten names of 2016, *Nikol* is one of the least feminine ones. Here are the data for all names (share of the respondents who think the name is feminine): *Raya* – 94.9%; *Viktoriya* – 89.8%; *Mariya* – 89.8%; *Sofiya* – 87.8%; *Yoana* – 86.2%; *Simona* – 85.7%; *Gabriela* – 81.6%; *Dariya* – 81.6%; *Nikol* – 78.1%; *Aleksandra* – 71.9%. *Nikol* is found at the end of the list. There is only one feminine name that is perceived as less feminine than *Nikol* – *Aleksandra*.

I would also like to comment on the results for the characteristic *masculine-feminine* for the masculine names *Nikola* and *Nikolay* (they are in the top ten of the most popular baby names for boys born in 2016, so they were included in the second questionnaire). Here are the data for the masculine names (share of the respondents who think the name is masculine): *Nikolay* – 96.4%; *Georgi* – 94.9%; *Dimitar* – 94.9%; *Kaloyan* – 93.9%; *Aleksandar* – 92.3%; *Ivan* – 92.3%; *Victor* – 90.3%; *Nikola* – 85.2%; *Martin* – 80.6%; *Daniel* – 77.6%. All of the most popular names for boys are characterized as *masculine*. When we

compare the results for *Nikola* and *Nikolay*, we see that *Nikolay* is considered to be more masculine than *Nikola*. In fact, *Nikolay* is the most masculine from all ten names, while *Nikola* is found at the end of the list. There are only two names that are less masculine than *Nikola* – *Martin* and *Daniel*. It is possible that the masculine name *Nikola* is considered to be feminine by some of the respondents because of its untypical ending.

It has been almost a decade since I realized that *Nikol* had become part of the Bulgarian personal naming system. It was as late as 2020 that I started to feel that *Nikol* did not sound as foreign to me. There is no doubt the name is very desirable nowadays but I suspected that other Bulgarians have also considered it foreign and unusual for girls. A questionnaire about newly borrowed names which I did with university students bearing such names gives us a glimpse into the way in which some people have perceived the name *Nikol*.

Here are some of the answers of four students named *Nikol*. The respondents are aged 19–22 years and they are ethnic Bulgarians. Two of them wrote that when they were young, people would call them **Nikola!** One of the respondents wrote that people would say ‘Are you sure your name is not Nikola? Nikol is a boys’ name.’ It turns out that the little girl’s reaction to the name *Nikol* which was described earlier is not an isolated fact – other people reacted in the same way too! However, their reaction is **strange** because *Nikola* is a very common masculine name! It is not likely that before the French feminine form *Nicole* was borrowed in Bulgaria and gained popularity one would think that a girl could be named *Nikola*. In N. Kovachev’s dictionary the name *Nikola* is recorded only as a masculine name (Ковачев 1995: 382). There is a feminine name spelled *Nikola* or *Nicola* (the stress is on the first syllable) that is used in other countries (several Slavic countries, Germany and in English speaking countries) but it seems it has never been popular in Bulgaria. So, the explanation here must be that on hearing *Nikol*, people register the untypical ending, they feel confused and they instinctively add -a without noticing that the result is the common masculine name *Nikola!*

However, with the feminine name *Nikol* gaining popularity, its perception has been changing. According to one of the respondents, on hearing her name, people react in a normal way. When she was younger, the name was considered different but while she was growing up it was becoming more and more popular. She even feels that now *Nikol* is as common as *Maria* (the most common and traditional feminine name in Bulgaria) and sometimes she thinks she would prefer having a rarer name. The third respondent called *Nikol* wrote that she liked her name because it was modern, not too common and also traditional for our country. She was named after her grandmother who was called *Nikolina*. On hearing her name for the first time, people react in a normal way. When asked if she would prefer to have a more

traditional or a more common name, she wrote: ‘No way. I like my name exactly because it is different. It is also important that I was named after my grandmother whom I loved and respected.’

Conclusion

Borrowing names for girls that end in a consonant is not a precedent in our naming system – what is interesting here is that since we borrowed *Nikol*, the Bulgarian personal naming system has had a feminine and a masculine name with the same root, with the feminine form ending in a consonant and the masculine form ending in -a! Nevertheless, both *Nikol* and *Nikola* are very popular. As was mentioned, the masculine name *Nikola* has been common throughout the whole 20th century and during the first two decades of the 21st century. It is clear that the ending –a and the borrowing of the feminine name *Nikol* have not influenced the popularity of *Nikola*. The results from the three questionnaires show that the feminine name *Nikol* is very desirable because people easily see the connection with the traditional names *Nikola*, *Nikolay* and *Nikolina* and at the same time the name is perceived as modern because it has an unusual form – it does not end in the typical -a. It seems that when it started gaining popularity it was perceived by some as not being *feminine* but with time people have adapted to it and now they would not classify it as *masculine* that often. Thus, another reason for the popularity of the name is that it is perceived as *feminine* – an important characteristic of feminine names.

The traditional masculine name *Nikola* and the calendar masculine name *Nikolay* now have a new feminine form – *Nikol*. Although it ends in a consonant, it has become very popular in Bulgaria. At first it was considered to be unusual and masculine. Data show that when addressing bearers of the name, some people would instinctively add the typical ending –a to it, without even realizing that the result *Nikola* is a masculine name. With time, however, people got used to it.

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