

# **The Roma in Post-Communist Bulgaria: Growing Social Marginalization and State Policies**

**Yorgos Christidis\***

University of Macedonia, Greece

## **Abstract**

This article analyzes the growing impoverishment and marginalization of the Roma in Bulgarian society and the evolution of Bulgaria's post-1989 policies towards the Roma. It examines the results of the policies so far and the reasons behind the “poor performance” of the policies implemented. It is believed that Post-communist Bulgaria has successfully re-integrated the ethnic Turkish minority given both the assimilation campaign carried out against it in the 1980s and the tragic events that took place in ex-Yugoslavia in the 1990s. This Bulgaria's successful “ethnic model”, however, has failed to include the Roma. The “Roma issue” has emerged as one of the most serious and intractable ones facing Bulgaria since 1990. A growing part of its population has been living in circumstances of poverty and marginalization that seem only to deteriorate as years go by. State policies that have been introduced since 1999 have failed at large to produce tangible results and to reverse the socio-economic marginalization of the Roma: discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion continue to be the norm. NGOs point out to the fact that many of the measures that have been announced have not been properly implemented, and that legislation existing to tackle discrimination, hate crime, and hate speech is not implemented. Bulgaria's political parties are averse in dealing with the Roma issue. Policies addressing the socio-economic problems of the Roma, including hate speech and crime, do not enjoy popular support and are seen as politically damaging.

## **Key Words**

Roma, post-communism, Bulgaria, marginalization, state policies

## **Introduction**

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\*Corresponding author:  
Assoc. Prof. Yorgos Christidis  
Department of Balkan, Slavonic and Eastern Studies, University of Macedonia, Greece  
Email: [gxristidis@uom.edu.gr](mailto:gxristidis@uom.edu.gr)

Post-Communist Bulgaria has had an admittedly difficult post-Communist transition. Much of the 1990s were politically turbulent, while the economy suffered from a recession until 1996. After 1997, Bulgaria enjoyed, at large, stable political governments, and economic growth that, coupled with its pro-Western foreign policy orientation, allowed the country to join the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) in 2004, and the European Union (EU) in 2007.

Still, Bulgaria remains the poorest EU member-state, facing an array of difficult issues, like fighting corruption and stopping the brain drain that is undermining its future. One of the biggest challenges that the country faces is the demographic crisis: Bulgaria has experienced a steady reduction of its population since 1989: from 8,487,317 people in 1992 to 7,364,570 in 2011 according to the 2011 census (National Statistical Institute 2011). In 2000, Bulgaria had a negative natural growth rate of  $-0.7$  percent and a total fertility rate of 1.1 children per woman. With replacement fertility being 2.1 children per woman, Bulgaria was characterized by what demographers call “lowest-low fertility”, and had the lowest fertility rate of any European country between 1995 and 1997. According to United Nations projections, Bulgaria’s population, which stood at around 7.9 million in 2001, would shrink by 31 percent in 2050, the second steepest decline in all Europe (Ghodsee 2002). Almost twenty years later, the future projections remain dramatic: if the current trend continues, by 2050, Bulgaria will have 38.6 percent fewer people than it did in 1990 (Judah 2019).

In that bleak demographic reality, there is, however, one group of people that demographically seem to be stable if not growing: the Roma. According to official statistics their numbers increased from 313,396 (or 3.7 % of the total) in 1992 (National Statistical Institute 2004 in Pamporov 2009) to 325,343 (or 4.9%) in 2011 (National Statistical Institute 2011). According to unofficial estimates, there is a much higher number of Roma living in Bulgaria. Thus, according to the Council of Europe, the number of Roma living in Bulgaria in 2012 was approximately 750,000 or 9.94% of the total (European Commission 2014), which in practice meant that Bulgaria had one of the largest Roma populations in the EU.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the demographic dynamism of the Roma has not been welcomed in Bulgaria. The Roma population in the country has experienced, since 1990, growing impoverishment, social marginalization, and public hostility. In post-1989 Bulgaria, there have been many surveys revealing widespread negative stereotypes and hostility towards the Roma.<sup>2</sup> A survey, for example, conducted in 2005 revealed extensive anti-Roma stereotypes: Some 86% of the respondents defined Roma as “lazy

and irresponsible”, while 92% said that they had “criminal tendencies” (Petar-Emil Mitev in Shkodrova 2005). In another nationwide survey also conducted in 2005 among 1,112 people, there were similar findings: To the question “Would you agree (would you or would you not accept) to live in the same country with Roma people (Gypsies)?”, more than a quarter of Bulgarian respondents (27%) answered negatively; three-quarters of those interviewed responded negatively to the question of whether they would vote for a candidate nominated by their party if the candidate was Roma; and 82%, 74% and 76% of those questioned would not accept a Roma as a local police chief, an army officer, and a government minister respectively (BBSS Gallup in Cohen 2005).

Anti-Roma behavior is deemed “socially acceptable, tolerated and normalized” (Zahariev 2017), with Bulgarian political leaders, particularly in the far-right, stimulating “in practice negative attitudes towards the Roma by using populist, anti-Roma rhetoric in order to win votes” (Angel Ivanov in Kyuchukov 2012:51). The systematic way the Roma community has been targeted by the political party ATAKA and its leader, Volen Siderov, is well documented.<sup>3</sup> Less-well known is the anti-Roma rhetoric of Valeri Simeonov, leader of the *National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria* and Deputy Prime Minister in the government of Boyko Borisov (from March 2017 until November 2018), and Krasimir Karakachanov, leader of the party VMRO, who following the March 2017 elections became Minister of Defense, in the same government. Simeonov has described Roma as: “... arrogant, insolent, and ferocious pongids”, and Roma women as “stray bitches” (Roma Civil Monitor 2018). During the 2016 presidential election, Karakachanov claimed that “Gypsy families have turned giving birth into a business. They live on social assistance, do not pay their electricity and water, and harass people in small towns”, stressing that he would, “stop Gypsy raids and every day [Gypsy] crime” (Cited in Zahariev 2017:91).

Based on the above background, this article analyzes the growing impoverishment and marginalization of the Roma in Bulgarian society and the evolution of Bulgaria’s post-1989 policies towards the Roma. It examines the results of the policies so far and the reasons behind the “poor performance” of the policies implemented. The article argues that Bulgaria’s successful “ethnic model” has failed to include the Roma. State policies that have been introduced since 1999 have failed at large to produce tangible results and to reverse the socio-economic marginalization of the Roma such as discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion.

### **Who are the Roma in Bulgaria?**

According to the census in 2011, 325,343 Roma live in Bulgaria. However, most unofficial data estimate a much higher number of Roma, around 10% of the total population or between 700,000 to 750,000 people. The geographic distribution of the Roma population within the territory of Bulgaria is relatively even, with half of the Roma living in towns (Todorov 2011).

As most anthropologists who have studied the Roma argue, the Roma groups “are not static with unchangeable social and cultural units” and generally it can be said that they form a specific type of community, “the intergroup ethnic community which is divided into several separate (and sometimes even opposed) endogamic groups, subgroups and metagroup units with their own ethnic and cultural features” (Marushiakova and Popov *n.d.*). In Bulgaria, there are five main Roma groups (the Daskane, the Horahane, the Calderashya, the Kalaydzhes, and the Ludari or Rudari) (Pamporov 2009:8-29), that lack a common language and religion. There are four Romany languages spoken, as well as Bulgarian, Turkish and Romanian (Pamporov 2009:8-29),<sup>4</sup> while religiously the majority of the Roma identify either with Orthodox Christianity or with Islam.<sup>5</sup> There is also a growing number of Roma who have converted to Protestantism since 1990 (Slavkova 2007:206).

There is little “sense of solidarity between the linguistic and religion-based Roma subgroups... the different Roma communities are endogamous and in general, they live segregated from each other in the frame of the neighborhoods (a kind of ghettos in the ghetto) or in a given settlement” (Pamporov 2009:27). Another striking characteristic of the Roma in Bulgaria is the lack of political mobilization, despite their numeric strength. Although some Roma MPs had been elected on the lists of mainstream parties since 1990, as a non-governmental organization’ (NGO) report underlined in 2001, “the Roma community is not represented in proportion to its share of the Bulgarian population, and Roma MPs seldom dare to push for Roma political interests” (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:109).

It has been mainly Roma NGOs that have been striving to represent Roma interests.<sup>6</sup> In 1999, Roma organizations succeeded in their efforts to develop a common platform, “a rare success story in the Roma political participation”, while in April 2002, 11 Roma NGOs established a “Roma Parliament” (Parliament Roma 2003:34-35). However, the Roma have remained politically disempowered as a 2011 report succinctly underlined:

Despite the existence of a great number of Romany political parties and non-government organizations, the political representation of Roma in the Parliament, the institutions of the executive power and even in the local authorities is insufficient. A serious indicator for this is the inability of Romany representatives in the legislative or executive power or even in the local authorities to raise a serious public debate on the problems of Roma economic and social exclusion and to substantially contribute to the implementation of consistent programs for solving those problems. At present, the pressure for the integration of Roma ethnic minority in the Bulgarian society comes mainly from the European Union rather than from the political structures in the country or the civil organizations of Romany people (Todorov 2011:17).

### **The Growing Impoverishment and Social Marginalization of Roma**

It is well-known that the position of the Roma communities in post-communist Europe has been drawing growing attention due to their deteriorating living conditions and their growing social marginalization. A report commissioned by the World Bank in 2003 noticed that “While Roma have historically been among the poorest people in Europe, the extend of the collapse of their living conditions in the former socialist countries is unprecedented” (Ringold *et al.* 2003). In Bulgaria itself, it had become pretty obvious by the end of the 1990s that Roma’s standards of living had sharply deteriorated. Some Bulgarian and international analyses were underlining the dramatic drop in the Roma’s standards of living that took place during the 1990s in all spheres of social life.

With a soar in unemployment and long-term unemployment rates among the Roma, according to a representative regional survey in nine Roma neighborhoods in 1999-2000, unemployment levels were as high as 80%; 26% of the adult Roma had never been employed; 21% had been unemployed for more than ten years; 34% had been unemployed from five to nine years; 11% for two to four years (Tomova 2002:134). According to World Bank data, in 2001, the unemployed among the Roma had reached 70% (*Information about* 2003:26).

An increasingly large number of Roma live in illegally constructed houses, in poor conditions, that had limited access to public services. Based on a countrywide survey conducted in 2000, “approximately 70% of the houses in Roma neighborhoods countrywide were built “illegally”, *i.e.* either outside of the municipal borders or without appropriate authorization papers”.<sup>7</sup> In big urban neighborhoods, the share of illegal construction

reached 80% (*Information about* 2003:6). The tendency of Roma to gather in isolated, segregated neighborhoods since the socialist times<sup>8</sup> was further accentuated.

The anyway low educational attainment of Roma would get even worse. The proportion of children who dropped out of school at an early age or who had never enrolled in school rose from 11.2 % in 1992 to 14.9% in 2000. At the same time, the number of Roma with higher education that was particularly small anyway declined even further, from 0.3% in 1992 to 0.16% in 2000 (Tomova 2002:138). According to a survey in August 2000, of the, at least, 100,000 Bulgarian children of school age who did not attend school, 30% were Roma (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:86). Another survey, in October 2000, put the share of the Roma children who drop out between grades one and seven at 80%. The high drop out rate is a direct cause of high rates of illiteracy among Roma: according to estimates in April 1998, as much as 25% of the Roma population was illiterate”(*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:87). Roma children who lived in segregated Roma neighborhoods attended schools that were poorly equipped and offered pedagogical programs of inferior quality, compared to schools in non-Roma neighborhoods. Moreover, there was an overrepresentation of Roma children into “special schools”: in October 2000, there were approximately 130 such special schools in Bulgaria, with more than 19,000 students attended primarily by Roma (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:88).

Poverty rates in segregated Roma neighborhoods would rise dramatically. According to World Bank data for 2001, poverty among the Roma was ten times as frequent as among the Bulgarians (Tomova 2002:136). As it was aptly described: “A sizeable part of the Roma now live in extreme poverty – in shanties with no access to electricity, drinking water, sewage and heating in winter” (Tomova 2002:135).

The general health of a growing part of the Roma population was deteriorating fast. According to a survey conducted in 1994, 44% of Roma families included at least one chronically ill member and 13% included a disabled member (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:91). Furthermore, “Bulgarian Roma not only suffered from generally poorer health than the population as a whole but also did not enjoy equal access to either health care or social assistance” (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:90). According to a FACT Agency survey, 17% of the Roma households did not have a personal doctor (GP) and 46% did not have a personal dentist (Tomova 2002:139). In addition, reforms introduced in the Bulgarian health system in mid-1999, concerning compulsory health insurance,

made things even worse for the Roma, as the new system required every employed Bulgarian citizen to contribute six percent of his/her income and register with a “Personal Physician”, as Roma were already suffering from widespread unemployment. A growing number of Roma were not present on official social welfare lists, either because they had moved without registering or because they had dropped out of the welfare system altogether. As a result, they are ineligible for any kind of social support, including health insurance” (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:92).

The Roma also faced many other socio-economic problems such as growing dependency on social assistance: a 2000 survey revealed that 63.5% of the Romani households surveyed depended on social assistance to survive (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:92); disruption of family ties: surveys show that more and more young Bulgarian Roma fathers were leaving their families (Tomova 2002:139); growing isolation of the residents of segregated neighbourhoods: “excluded from the labour market, with no access to health care, education and social assistance, the Roma are having less and less opportunities for contacts with the members of “the other” communities. Often a significant part of the women and children do not leave the ghetto for years” (Tomova 2002:139); and deterioration of the social organization in Roma neighborhoods: “the possibilities of the residents of segregated neighbourhoods to cultivate in the young generation strong motivation for education and success, to exercise effective control over the behaviour of their members and especially over youths, and to form positive social attitudes in them, are declining. Conversely, the manifestations of the culture of poverty, with its typical orientation towards survival and neglect of possibilities for development are increasing” (Tomova 2002:139).

There was little doubt, then, that by the end of the 1990s the Bulgarian Roma were suffering from large-scale poverty and social exclusion. Social exclusion “refers to a process of social separation between individuals and society” and can have multiple dimensions: economic, political, socio-cultural and geographic (Ringold *et al.* 2003:18). “In economic exclusion, individuals cannot participate in market activity, including employment, access to credit, and land. Political exclusion refers to limitations on participation in democratic processes, such as voting, participation in political parties and other associations within civil society. Sociocultural exclusion encompasses separation based upon linguistic, religious, and ethnic grounds. Geographic exclusion involves various types of spatial differentiation” (Ringold *et al.* 2003:18).

## **Bulgaria's Policy Responses towards the Roma Predicament: The First 20 years**

The first government initiative concerning the Roma was undertaken in 1994 when the Council of Ministers (*i.e.* the Bulgarian government) decided to establish an advisory body dealing with issues and concerns of ethnic minorities. Thus, in 1994, the Interdepartmental Council on Ethnic Affairs was established by the Council of Ministers (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:113). One year later, in 1995, the new Bulgarian Socialist Party' (BSP) government under Zhan Videnov, established the National Council on Social and Demographic Issues (NCSDI) as an advisory body representing not only ethnic communities but also organizations of the disabled, the pensioners and women. The way NCSDI dealt with problems of the ethnic minorities was criticized as reflecting "the traditional approach of pre-1989 governments to ethnic minority issues in Bulgaria: Problems faced by minorities were regarded as primarily social problems rather than as problems caused by ethnic discrimination" (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:113). On 30 January 1997, the Council published a "Programme for the Resolution of the Problems of Roma" in Bulgaria as an integral part of the "National Programme for Social Development".<sup>9</sup> The program, however, was never implemented as a few days after its adoption, the BSP' government resigned (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:113). During the same period and particularly during Zhelyu Zhelev's Presidency (August 1990-November 1996), a special advisor to the President on national-ethnic issues and religious denominations had been appointed.<sup>10</sup> Judging from the results, his practical significance in advancing solutions for the Roma community must be regarded as doubtful. Thus, until 1999, Bulgaria had failed to develop any kind of policy for dealing with the deteriorating position and living conditions of the Roma community. Any measures that were introduced failed because, among others, "they were not harmonized with the Roma community, who therefore remained indifferent to them" (Yaneva 1999:57).

In December 1997, the new government of Ivan Kostov established the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues (NCEDI) designed to operate as "a body for consultations, co-operation and coordination between government bodies and NGOs, designed to formulate and implement national policy on ethnic and demographic issues and migration".<sup>11</sup> The members of NCEDI included representatives of ten government ministries at the level of deputy minister and of four state institutions represented by their directors. Thirty-two NGOs were also participating in NCEDI, twenty-one of which were Roma.<sup>12</sup> In 1999, NCEDI initiated the formation

of regional councils on ethnic and demographic issues as consultative bodies to the regional governors.<sup>13</sup> An important problem, however, that emerged with the regional councils was that as of October 2001, there was “no law or other regulation providing for their function and powers” (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2003:114).

Besides, by 2003, almost half of Bulgaria’s 263 municipalities had appointed municipal experts on ethnic and demographic issues (“National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues” 2003:6). The most important initiative undertaken by the NCEDI concerned the adoption on 22 April 1999, of the Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society. The program explicitly recognized the existence of discrimination against the Roma<sup>14</sup> and set as a “strategic goal” the eradication of the unequal treatment of Roma: “Elimination of discrimination against the Roma should become one of the main political priorities of the Bulgarian state” (“National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues”:19). The program included some recommendations in various spheres of public life that had to be adopted during a period of ten years (“National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues”:19-24) as follow:

- 1) On discrimination: a) the introduction of effective legislation on Protection against Discrimination and b) the establishment of a Public Authority for the prevention of discrimination;
- 2) On economic development: the introduction of measures on employment, social assistance and land allocation to improve their standard of living;
- 3) On health care: a) tightening sanitary controls and b) intensifying health education programmes;
- 4) On the spatial development of Roma neighbourhoods: the legalization of housing;
- 5) On education: a) desegregation of Roma schools, b) elimination of the practice of sending healthy children of Roma origin to special schools, c) counteracting against forms of racism in the classroom, d) providing opportunities for the study of the Romani language at schools, e) facilitating the enrollment of Roma students in universities, and f) introducing literacy and training programs for adult Roma;
- 6) On the protection of the ethnic specificity and culture of Roma: the development of Roma culture as a specific ethnic culture and, at the same time, as part of Bulgarian national culture;
- 7) On Roma presence in the national media: the participation of both broadcasting of Roma programs and inclusion of Roma journalists in Bulgarian National Television and Radio; and

- 8) On the Roma women: the promotion of culture for their full-fledged individual, social and economic participation in public life.

The Framework Programme undoubtedly represented a positive step forward in terms of government policy. However, as of October 2001, very few legislative measures had been taken to ensure its implementation. Specifically, it was claimed that “there is no corresponding plan for implementation of the Programme and no mechanism for requiring the necessary commitment of staff or resources on the part of different government Ministries” (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:115). Following the formation of the new Bulgarian government of Simeon Saxcoburgotski, in June 2001, a new impetus was given to the policy dealing with the Roma. The fact that Bulgaria had entered into accession negotiations with the EU and that the latter was urging it to alleviate the Roma’ predicament was additional pressure on the Bulgarian government. In its 2002 Regular Report on Bulgaria, the EU Commission was openly critical on the issue of the Roma:

As reported in previous years, Bulgaria has a good Framework Programme on integration of minorities targeted at the Roma. Regrettably, however, this has not been put into practice. There has been very little change in the situation of the Roma minority since the last Regular Report, and there are no significant developments in their socio-economic situation and living conditions to report. Roma continue to suffer from social inequalities due to the accumulation over time of factors that have worsened living conditions... Discrimination, and cases of violence against members of the Roma community continue to be reported. This situation needs to be addressed urgently (Commission of the European Communities 2002:32).

The Report was highlighting the absence of any significant progress made in areas such as employment, legalization of Roma’ housing, health care, and desegregation of Roma education and was urging for the adoption of “comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation” (Commission of the European Communities 2002:32-33). In addition to the need to adopt an effective anti-discrimination piece of legislation, it was also becoming clear that a specific action plan had to be adopted to implement the Framework Programme of 1999. As the new Chairwoman on NCEDI, Filiz Husmenova, appointed on 17 July 2003, pointed out:

The problems of minorities are grave and they are not problems of today or of yesterday but of many years. Unfortunately, the efforts

made so far for their overcoming, though significant, have not led to very encouraging results... There are quite serious problems in the regions where Roma population is predominating... The Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma into the Bulgarian Society adopted in 1999 is a good document but it is of general character... (“National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues”:7)

On 16 September 2003, the Bulgarian parliament adopted the Protection from Discrimination Act, elaborated under NCEDI’s supervision. It was an important step forward in the development of the national legal framework for the protection from discrimination on an ethnic basis by establishing an independent body with sufficient powers to investigate cases of alleged discrimination and to impose sanctions.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, on 6 October 2003, the Bulgarian government with its Decision No. 693 adopted the Action Plan for the Implementation of the Framework Programme for Roma Integration. The Action Plan was elaborated by the government with the participation of the Roma Parliament, an association of Roma organizations established in April 2002. It included some specific measures in several different fields to effectively implement the Framework Programme.<sup>16</sup> In 2004, the government adopted some specific measures in the field of education, which -although were not announced specifically for the Roma school children- were expected to have a beneficial effect also on them.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in July 2004, the Minister of Education and Science approved a strategy for the educational integration of minority children and students while it was also decided to set up a special fund for the implementation of the strategy.<sup>18</sup>

NGOs, however, remained skeptical of government policy.<sup>19</sup> On the eve of the ceremony on the International Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, which was organized in Sofia on 2 February 2005, sixty-three Roma leaders published a declaration criticizing “the government’s formal attitude towards its own promises with regard to helping the Roma minority to overcome discrimination and isolation” (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:15-16). During the following day, there was a Roma demonstration in front of the National Assembly against discrimination, the first mass Roma anti-discrimination demonstration held since 1989 (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:17). On 13 and 14 May 2005, at a conference organized by the Roma NGO, Human Rights Project, 142 Roma experts from the regional and municipal administrations signed an open letter to Prime Minister Simeon Saxcoburgotski, claiming that the Framework Programme for Equal Integration of the Roma “was not being fulfilled”,

calling upon the government “to undertake the genuine fulfillment – rather than just on paper – of this program document, to take steps toward multilateral consultations with the Roma community on Roma integration issues, and to extend real, rather than just consultative, powers to Roma representatives... on ethnic and demographic matters” (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:17).

Just before the national elections in June 2005, Saxcoburgotski’s government announced *Action Plan for Achieving the Goals of the Decade of Roma Inclusion*, adopted in the context of the *Decade on Roma Inclusion*. Although the plan was greeted as containing “many laudable measures... which could significantly ease, if not resolve completely, problems related to healthcare, employment, education, and the hygiene and infrastructure in the Roma neighbourhoods... the great majority of these measures are only good wishes, because the Bulgarian budget’s funding for them is minimal” (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:16). A total of 37,622,000 Euros was envisioned for the entire ten-year period (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:16).

Some additional documents were adopted between 2005 and until 2010: the *Strategy for Educational Integration of Children and Pupils from Ethnic Minorities* (adopted 2004, updated 2010), the *Health Strategy for Disadvantaged Persons Belonging to Ethnic Minorities* (adopted 2005), the *National Programme for Improvement of Roma Housing Conditions for the Period 2005-2015* (adopted 2006), and national programs included in the *National Employment Strategy for the Period 2008-2015* and the *Employment National Action Plan* (Todorov 2011:23).

### **Assessing the Effect of the Policies Introduced during the First 20 Years**

Ten years after the adoption of the *Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society* (April 1999) and with all the other programs announced until 2010, a question naturally arises of their effect upon Roma standards of living: had the processes of impoverishment and social marginalization of the Roma being reversed or at least stopped? The answer is negative. As pointed out, among others, by Todor Todorov in his detailed report on Bulgaria entitled *Measures to Promote the Situation of Roma Citizens in the EU: Country Reports*, commissioned by the Directorate-General for Internal Policies of the European Parliament and published in 2011, the situation concerning Roma hadn’t improved but had deteriorated. Specifically, Todorov (2011:13-16) underlined as follows.

On employment: “The employment decrease with Romany people is incomparable with that of the rest of the population. From the beginning

of the transition in 1989 until now between 37 and 61% of the Roma in active working age were permanently excluded from the legal labor market in the country... (the Roma) are the group, where the employed usually work under a temporary or even no contract and short-time working arrangements. For this reason, Roma are much more vulnerable to the risk of not receiving remuneration for their labor... As a rule, the share of the Romany employed who do not participate in the social insurance system or are insured for a small part of their actual incomes is high”;

On housing conditions: “Almost half of Roma live in dwellings with no water supply, while 75% of the Romany households do not have sewerage in the villages or urban neighborhoods, which they occupy. Waste in Romany neighborhoods is not regularly collected by waste collection companies while the partially built infrastructure and bag hygiene favor the spread of different stomach infections. Over 33% of the Roma population permanently lives in frame-built houses which threatens the health and lives of their inhabitants... An acute problem is the lack of control over illegal construction in Romany neighborhoods – during recent years the illegal building of dwelling extensions, garages, workshops and sheds for firewood on the pavements and part of the streets, which together with the unwarranted fencing makes parts of the neighborhoods inaccessible for ambulances or fire brigades”;

On education: “During the last two decades Bulgaria witnesses an alarming trend of deterioration of the educational status of the young members of the Roma community which further reduces their chances to find a job and will eventually lead to replicating poverty in the following generations... In Bulgaria one in every four Romany adults is illiterate, while the functional illiteracy practically covers about half of the adult Roma population... Another distinctive feature of the Roma community is that it is the only ethnic group in the country where the educational level of women is much lower than that of men. And since women are those who are usually responsible for raising children, their illiteracy and low educational level are of key importance for the educational aspirations and school achievements of children... The quality of education in the Romany schools is very poor, while the level of hidden and open dropping out of the educational system among Romany children continues to be very high”;

On poverty: “Poverty in Bulgaria has been a common phenomenon among Roma since the beginning of the transition period. Within the Roma community poverty is characterized by its widest spread as well as with its greatest depth and duration... On one side of the gap is the predominant part of the community who face misery and poverty, while on the other – 5-10% who are very rich”;

On health: “Despite the relative improvement in their living conditions in the last decade, the number of those Roma community members who define their own health as bad or very bad increases. Based on estimations of medical specialists, the health problems of Roma are particularly acute despite the fact that they are the youngest community in Bulgaria... In the last years, drug abuse has increased in some of the big Romany ghettos as have related infections... Roma are the ethnic group in Bulgaria with the highest share of premature deaths and lowest levels of life expectancy... The infant mortality reaches its highest levels with the Roma community – 25 per 1000 live-born children or 2.6 times higher than with ethnic Bulgarians. The main reasons include the widespread and deep poverty, low hygiene, and frequent child-birth of mothers... The highest levels of premature child-birth are registered with Romany women – 10-12 times higher than with Bulgarian women”;

Lastly, on the continuing ghettoization of the Roma: “The concentration of Roma in isolated neighborhoods has increased during the last ten years in the urban as well as rural regions. At present more than 75% of Romany people live in segregated communities, compared to only 49% in 1980” (Todorov 2011:13-16).

The deepening impoverishment and social marginalization of the Roma in Bulgaria during the 1990-2010 period had been accompanied by growing public hostility against them. In Bulgaria as elsewhere in Europe, Roma “fall into the category of people that ‘everyone loves to hate’ (Avara and Mascitelli 2014:132), where what has been termed as “antigypsyism” had to a large extent become socially acceptable (Zahariev 2017:89). It is illustrating that even “the poverty of many Roma communities contributes to resentment” as Roma were perceived “as dependent on welfare benefits and burdens on the state” (Ringold *et al.* 2003). The events in Katunitsa, a village near the city of Plovdiv, in September 2011 graphically underlined the extent of public hostility against the Roma. On 22 September 2011, a 19-year-old ethnic Bulgarian boy was run over by a local Roma working for a notorious Roma figure, Kiril Rashkov, known also as “Tsar Kiro”. Anti-Roma, mob riots broke out in the village, with the participation of football hooligans, and spread throughout the region of Plovdiv. While in the capital Sofia, ATAKA and VMRO organized anti-Roma protests at the centre of the city (Bulgarian Helsinki Committee 2011). “Most people in Bulgaria saw the case of Katunitsa as a “collective crime of the Roma”, not as a crime committed by an individual. Therefore, the majority of Bulgarian society supported the riots against the Roma” (Ivanov 2012:50). Thus, it came as little surprise that anti-Roma attitudes played a significant

role in the October 2011 presidential and local elections, when “politicians competed to win the votes of those who were against Roma” (Ivanov 2012:51).

### **State Policies since 2010: More of the Same Approach and Same Results**

On 12 May 2010, Bulgaria adopted the *Framework Programme for Integration of Roma in the Bulgarian Society (2010-2020)* “extending the strategic areas and guidelines, laid down in 1999, and establishing the framework for the next steps of Bulgaria in the new EU membership context” (Todorov 2011:22). Following the adoption of an *EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020* by the European Commission in April 2011, which required all member-states to produce national strategies to guide Roma integration (EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020:2011), the Framework Programme was updated as *The National Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria (2012-2020)*<sup>20</sup>, adopted by the Borishov government in December 2011 and also by Parliament in March 2012 – the first such document on Roma integration approved by Parliament (*Civil Society Monitoring Report*:9). The Bulgarian National Strategy explicitly recognized the predicament facing Roma in various areas,<sup>21</sup> setting as its “strategic goal... creating conditions for equitable integration of the Roma and the Bulgarian citizens in a vulnerable situation... in the social and economic life by ensuring equal opportunities and equal access to rights, goods and services, by involving them in all public spheres and improving their quality of life, while observing the principles of equality and non-discrimination”, enumerating a variety of measures in education, healthcare, housing conditions, employment, rule of law and non-discrimination, culture and media (*The National Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria [2012-2020]*).

Soon after, and following a research project that was conducted in the period November-December 2012 in all neighborhoods with predominantly Roma populations in Bulgaria, the *Civil Society Monitoring Report* was published in 2013 that was highly critical of the Bulgarian National Strategy. Dimitrov *et al.* (2013:9) underlined:

The main conclusion of the present report is that the National Roma Integration Strategy (NRIS) lacks synergy, coherence and equal distribution in its envisaged activities, measures and financial allocations. It overlooks major areas such as housing conditions, health care and educational integration... Regardless of the large

number of strategic documents and operational programs that have appeared, it is clear that strong political will to improve the situation of Roma does not exist. The implementation and application of politically stated intentions have not become reality. One of the main obstacles to more significant results in the field of Roma inclusion is the inadequate financial provision of activities for integration.

A European Commission report that was published in April 2014 recognized the “positive steps” that had been taken in the direction of Roma integration in Bulgaria since 2011 in education,<sup>22</sup> employment,<sup>23</sup> health,<sup>24</sup> housing<sup>25</sup>, and anti-discrimination,<sup>26</sup> setting the following priorities for the future:

Further reforms are needed in education, employment, health and housing policy to support Roma inclusion; political leadership of the inter-ministerial working group on the use of EU funds for Roma integration should be reinforced; the overall mandate and resources allocated to the national Roma contact point should be reinforced; anti-discrimination campaigns and communication activities on Roma integration should be developed targeting the entire population (*The European Union and the Roma - Factsheet Bulgaria*).

Four years later, in 2018, a report by NGOs on the implementation of the National Integration Strategy noticed that:

...the period of 2016-2017 does not mark any significant advances in the implementation of the NRIS. Improvements have been observed in the usage of EU funds for Roma inclusion... and for education (especially in reducing early school leaving and increasing participation in different levels of education, although segregation remains a problem). Deterioration is obvious in the fields of governance... and the consultative process with civil society and antigypsyism (with a significant rise in anti-Roma rhetoric, publications and even actions) ... The period of 2016-2017 marked the full collapse of the legitimacy of both the NRCP and the National Council for Cooperation on Ethnic and Integration Issues (NCCEII), which have been fully abandoned by the Roma NGOs and cannot implement their consultative and coordination roles... The added value of the Action Plan was limited by a lack of financial backup for most of its activities (Roma Civil Monitor 2018:7, 9).

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## Conclusion

This article has shown that post-communist Bulgaria's successful "ethnic model" policy has failed to include the Roma. The "Roma issue" has emerged as one of the most serious and intractable ones facing Bulgaria since 1990. A negligible growing part of its population has been living in circumstances of poverty and marginalization that seem only to deteriorate as years go by. The marginalization of the Roma population has been feeding the agenda of political demagogues and populists, particularly on the right-wing, that are constantly targeting the Roma. The Roma have gained the "distinction" of having become a permanent object of hate speech and hate crime.

There can be little doubt that negative stereotypes and widespread discrimination practices have played an important role in Roma's social marginalization in Bulgarian society. NGOs have been particularly vocal in stressing discrimination as a problem for the Roma, something that has also been officially recognized. Since 1999, successive Bulgarian governments have introduced many policy measures, seeking not only to fight discrimination but also to improve the Roma's socio-economic status, taking advantage of the available, since 2007, EU funding mechanisms such as the European Social Fund (ESF), and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). However, state policies that have been introduced since 1999 have failed at large to produce tangible results and to reverse the socio-economic marginalization of the Roma: discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion continue to be the norm.

As to the question of why all this arises, NGOs point out to the fact that many of the measures that have been announced have not been properly implemented, and that legislation existing to tackle discrimination, hate crime and hate speech is not implemented. Bulgaria's political parties, including GERB (Citizens for the European Development of Bulgaria) that has practically dominated Bulgarian politics since 2009, winning each successive election, are averse in dealing with the Roma issue. Policies addressing the socio-economic problems of the Roma, including hate speech and crime, do not enjoy popular support and are seen as politically damaging.

However, the Roma's predicament could be seen also in relation to the post-1989 dominance of the neo-liberal discourse in former Eastern Europe and its economic and social ramifications. Neo-liberalism dominated transition politics from communism in ex-Eastern Europe, including Bulgaria. The state lost its central role for the modernization and development of society in favor of the market. The so-called "Washington

consensus”, with its “holy trinity” of rapid stabilization, liberalization, and privatization became the essence of the reform policies that all former Eastern European states were called to implement. Yet, reform policies proved particularly controversial in terms of delivering a better standard of living and deep economic changes took place that produced a deep socio-economic crisis. While whole social groups like the Roma found themselves impoverished and unable to cope with their predicament, the state was drastically weakened. The state’s weakening has been particularly harmful to the most vulnerable groups in society like the pensioners or the Roma community.

Then, it is not incidental that NGOs and others dealing with Roma issues in Bulgaria have been arguing for a more interventionist state. Such a policy can be exercised primarily by the state. The market cannot substitute the state in its social functions and obligations.

### Notes

- 1 Bulgaria, Romania, Spain and Hungary are the 4 countries with the largest Roma populations in the EU.
- 2 See, for example, the survey conducted among Bulgarians on “attitudes towards people from different nations”. The attitude towards the Roma is the most negative among different social categories (Pupils, Students and the Employed) (Cited in Petar-Emil 1999:14-15). Also illustrating are the results of three surveys conducted respectively in 1992, 1994 and 1997 that registered a high level of prejudice against the Roma (Krassimir 1999).
- 3 ATAKA conducted its first pre-election campaign in 2005, soon after it was established, under the motto “No to Turkification! No to Gypsification”. Its leader Volen Siderov, produced a series of seven programmes on the Roma in the private television channel SKAT TV, claiming that “Bulgarians were the object of criminal “Gypsy terror” – that they were being murdered, robbed, beaten and raped daily by an alien minority in their own country and were not getting any protection from the law enforcement authorities, who had united with the Roma against the Bulgarians because they are the employees of a corrupt anti-Bulgarian ruling class”(Krassimir 2005).
- 4 According to a 2007 study by the Open Society Institute, 60.7% of Roma population in the country declare Romany language as their mother tongue, while 25.3% and 5.4% are self-identified as having Bulgarian and Turkish respectively as their mother tongue (Open Society Institute 2007; Todorov 2011:13).
- 5 According to the 2001 census, 48.6 % of the Roma identified as Orthodox Christians and 27.9% as Muslims (Pamporov 2009:30).
- 6 At the end of the 1990s, two main Roma NGOs stood out in representing Roma’ interests: The Kupate Roma Public Council (KRPC) and the EuroRoma Association. KRPC was established in 1997 and held its first congress on

- 16 September 1998. Its priority was on social policy and employment, and during the tenure of the Union of Democratic Forces' (UDF) government of Ivan Kostov, associated itself closely with the ruling party. The EuroRoma Association was founded on December 12, 1998. It gave priority to the protection of civil rights and settlement of the problems of the Roma and has associated itself with the Euroleft (Christidis 2008).
- 7 In some of the biggest urban neighbourhoods, the proportion is even greater: in the Roma neighbourhoods of Sliven, between 90 and 100 percent of Roma houses are illegal; the figure is 80 percent in Stara Zagora and in Shumen; 85% in Blagoevgrad; 90% in Kurdzhali; and over 80% in Lovech (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001: 94).
  - 8 "According to data from a survey in 1980, "49% of the urban Roma population still inhabited isolated neighborhoods, which were falling short of even minimum standard living conditions" (Panchev 2015:18).
  - 9 "This programme focused mainly on the social problems faced by the community, such as poverty, poor education, bad hygiene, and inadequate housing, without touching on either racial discrimination or deficiencies in the protection of minority rights" (*Minority Protection in Bulgaria* 2001:114).
  - 10 It was Mihai Ivanov, who in 2003 became the secretary of the National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues.
  - 11 Article 1 of the Rules of Organization and Procedure ("National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues: Structure and Functions": 2).
  - 12 All major ethnic groups living in Bulgaria were represented in the Council. Thus, apart from NGOs representing Roma, Turks, Armenians and Jews, one could find NGOs representing Vlachs, Aromanis, Karakachans, Crimean Tatars and Greeks living in Bulgaria ("National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues": 3).
  - 13 As of 2003 there were 22 such regional councils. The councils included regional administration experts, municipal mayors, representatives of territorial units of central government, regional providers of communal services, representatives of non-profit associations and minority nongovernmental organizations employed in the respective sphere, as well as municipal experts on ethnic and demographic issues ("National Council on Ethnic and Demographic Issues":6).
  - 14 "In a socioeconomic aspect, the status of Roma is on the whole drastically lower than the average in Bulgaria: high rate of unemployment, poor housing conditions, high-rate of illiteracy. Those permanent characteristics of the state of the Roma community are external manifestations and direct results of, *inter alia*, discriminatory treatment" ("Framework Programme for Equal Integration of Roma in Bulgarian Society":19).
  - 15 In addition, the Protection from Discrimination Act was "providing a broad definition of the scope of protection" and was "reversing the burden of proof from the victim to the perpetrator" (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2003*:12).

- 16 The Action Plan included 27 specific measures on Protection against Discrimination, five on Social Services and Protection, five on Employment, 8 on Health Care and Sport, three on Housing, and eight on Institutional Strengthening (“Action Plan for the Implementation of the Framework Programme for Roma Integration”:35-40).
- 17 It was decided to provide breakfasts, warm milk and free textbooks to about 300,000 children from the first grade to fourth grade as well as to invest 10 million levs towards improving the level of Bulgarian language skills, providing transportation to the secondary schools and lowering the drop-out rate (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:16).
- 18 A fund that was established by government decree in January 2005, as a majority of MPs had rejected the draft law for the establishment of the fund, on October 6, 2004, “citing populist and even racist arguments” (*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:16).
- 19 According to the *Bulgarian Helsinki Committee*, “only cosmetic changes were undertaken in 2004 to overcome the discrimination and isolation suffered by the Roma community, mostly geared toward making a show of action for the benefit of international organizations. No legislative changes were made for promoting the Roma integration into Bulgarian society. As in previous years, there was practically a lack of any state policy aimed at Roma integration. This minority group’s exclusion from societal processes, discrimination, educational segregation, lack of adequate access to justice, poverty and poor hygiene conditions continued to characterize the position of Roma in Bulgaria in 2004”. Furthermore, the government decree in December 2004 to transform NCEDI into a *National Council for Inter-Ethnic Co-operation* although welcomed in principle it was being criticized as limiting “the opportunities for Roma NGOs to influence policies affecting the Roma community, since NGO representation was sharply reduced on the new council”(*Human Rights in Bulgaria in 2004*:15-16).
- 20 For the document, see [https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/roma\\_bulgaria\\_strategy\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/roma_bulgaria_strategy_en.pdf), accessed 8/2/2020).
- 21 “A serious problem facing the Roma is the increasing spatial isolation of their community. The concentration of Roma in isolated neighborhoods has increased during the last fifteen years both in the urban and rural areas...”; “The Roma people are in a disadvantaged position at the labour market as a result of the structural changes that have taken place in Bulgaria. The changes of the macroeconomic situation in the country have resulted in their exclusion from the labour market and in constantly persisting very high unemployment levels in their community, or employment in only very low-income jobs”; “Observations show that the improvement of the educational status of the Roma community has slowed down during the last 20 years. Another specificity of the group is that functional illiteracy is three times more frequent among Roma women than men...”; “The survey shows that 12.6% of the entire Roma population in the country, including children, has some kind of disabilities

- or suffer from a heavy chronic disease. What is specific for the Roma people is the very early onset of disability and the widespread chronic diseases on a mass scale as early as the middle age. One third of the male Roma population and two fifths of the female population in the age bracket 45-60 have already lost partially or in full their work capacity due to poor health status” (*The National Integration Strategy of the Republic of Bulgaria [2012-2020]*).
- 22 “In three years, a Bulgarian education project has brought down the number of children who drop out of school by almost 80%” (*The European Union and the Roma - Factsheet Bulgaria*).
- 23 “80-95 Roma mediators appointed in local employment offices; Community Development Centers (CDC) promoting the employment of young people and women in marginalized Roma communities were set up in 11 municipalities; job fairs targeted at the most disadvantaged including Roma” (*The European Union and the Roma - Factsheet Bulgaria*).
- 24 “Mobile medical units and mediators in areas where the majority lacks health insurance; X-ray, immunization of children, medical and gynaecological exams, screenings and prevention of HIV and TIB; Health education and awareness raising campaigns” (*The European Union and the Roma- Factsheet Bulgaria*).
- 25 “Launch of an EU co-financed housing initiative to provide quality homes within an integrated approach (addressing also employment, education, and health challenges simultaneously) for Roma people in 4 municipalities (Burgas, Dupnitsa, Vidin, Dnevnya)” (*The European Union and the Roma - Factsheet Bulgaria*).
- 26 “Training for police forces on human rights and minority issues; Local actions include: legal support and information of rights; Encouraging Roma women to participate in public life and the protection of the rights of Roma children through improvement of parental capacity and car” (*The European Union and the Roma - Factsheet Bulgaria*).

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